

A  
WEDDING  
BELLS  
ALPHA  
NOVEL.



*Choose*  
**YOU**

WESTON PARKER

# **I CHOOSE YOU**

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A WEDDING BELLS ALPHA NOVEL #11

WESTON PARKER

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# FIND WESTON PARKER



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## DESCRIPTION



**The ugly duckling from my high school is back in my life and she's all I can think about.**

Unfortunately, she's off limits. Work rules.

Tell that to my naughty thoughts and constant raging desires.

When my dad decides he's getting married, I need a date for the event.

She's the only one I'd want on my arm, in my bed, my lap... you get the picture.

The issue is my twin brother and I used to bully this girl. He's gonna give me so much grief over falling for her now.

And maybe he's right to. Maybe she's not after love, but revenge.

No. There's no way she's *that* brilliant, is she?

Would it matter if she were? No. I'm lost to her now.

I deserve whatever she's up to. She might not have been the one back then, but there's no one else I want now.

**No matter what, I chose her. Whether she chooses me or not.**



## Introduction



Hey! We're missing you over here at the Parker's Insider Group.

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## KADEN

**W**hy did he call us to come over? This Sunday wasn't a holiday. If Dad had any issues about work, he'd take it up with me at the office. He'd always been particular about keeping personal headaches separate from his business ones, and it paid off. The man was filthy rich and hadn't gotten there by luck.

When he'd called earlier to ask if I'd come over, I was curious what was up. He'd been so cryptic about it, and curiosity got the better of me. My twin was no exception. Kody had been summoned the same as I had. After a call with him, I realized he was just as clueless.

*It can't be something bad, right?*

He hadn't given anything away in that call, but I expected no less. That man's poker face was legendary, and he wouldn't let anything slip into his tone either.

As I pulled up to my father's estate, my curiosity was split between dread and excitement. Would it be good news or bad?

Kody turned into the long driveway as I set my SUV in park. I seldom drove it in the city, but heading way out here was always a chance to get it out for a good ride. He braked and parked his truck next to me, and as I stepped out, glancing at the estate, I tried to figure out what could be going on.

No other cars waited out front, but that didn't mean others couldn't be parked along the side.

"Hey," I greeted Kody as he got out and nodded at me in acknowledgment. He headed for the tailgate, which he opened. I followed,

unsurprised he was pulling a six-pack of beer toward him.

“Have you been here long?” he asked.

I shook my head, taking the bottle he offered me. “You think this is going to be a party?”

Our father never invited people over to the estate. It was his fortress away from real life. The few times he ever had guests, they were for holidays, birthdays, and such.

“No. I just need something to take the edge off.” He tapped his bottle to mine, then took a long drink.

I smirked as I brought my bottle to my lips. His idea of something taking the edge off was more liberal than mine. If Dad asked us here to share bad news, I wanted to be clear-headed. Not shit-faced.

“You seriously don’t have any idea why he invited us to come over?” Kody set his bottle on the opened tailgate and leaned against it.

“No clue.” I shrugged. “He doesn’t invite people over often, and—”

Kody scoffed. “And it’s just the two of us.” He splayed his hand out, emphasizing it was just our two vehicles out here. “I’ve been wondering about it all day.”

I rubbed the back of my neck, nervousness coming in quicker. “Do you think it’s anything about work?”

Kody opened his mouth to reply but then closed it, pausing on his words. “Nah. He wouldn’t call us here for that.”

“He has been stressed lately.”

He dismissed me with a wave. “What, you think he’s stressing about that asshole in HR getting busted sleeping with his secretary? That’ll blow over. Office drama—same old.” His brows raised as he grinned, reaching for his bottle. “I sure as fuck hope Dad called us over for good news. To tell us something he wants us to hear first.”

“Like what?”

“Like he wants to announce his retirement. That we’ll be taking over the company.”

Now it was my turn to grin. Kody and I were set to run our namesake—Wagner Industries—sooner or later. Dad wasn’t quiet about his long-term visions for the company. He’d built it, he’d babied it, and when he’d had enough, it would be ours to manage.

“I’ve got my eye on a few new toys I’d like to get.” Kody took another long drink. His gaze was distant, but he smiled as he lowered the bottle.

“Like you can’t just get them now?”

His reply was a shrug and another long drink.

Money wasn’t an issue for us, not really. Dad had done well with establishing Wagner Industries. We owned a successful world-renowned conglomerate, and when Kody and I took over, we’d grow on those earnings and make it better than before.

“Like you *need* any more toys,” I muttered.

“Dad’s got all the money he needs,” Kody argued. “He’s getting old.”

“He’s only sixty.”

“Eh, he’s getting *older*.” He set his empty bottle down and stretched his arms over his head. “He’s been with Margaret for a few months now.”

“Margaux,” I corrected.

“And he’s probably looking forward to slowing down in life. Not work as much, you know? Hard to keep a girlfriend happy when you’re at the office all the time.”

I sipped my drink then huffed a laugh. “Like you’d know anything about keeping a girlfriend happy. They never stick around long enough to *be* a girlfriend.”

He shot me a cheesy finger gun. “You got that right.”

I swatted his hand away. “She seems to make him happy.”

“She does. I mean, she’s all right. It’s weird, though. I never imagined he’d want to settle down again after Mom.”

*Dating for a few months isn’t really settling down.*

I hadn’t considered Margaux a replacement. Our mother passed away so long ago, it wouldn’t be fair to say any woman Dad dated was a rebound or substitute for what he’d lost. Dad never dated much, especially not in the beginning. He’d been too busy and preoccupied building Wagner Industries into what it is today. Now, though, he seemed even more well balanced. Light-hearted and patient.

“As long as she’s not a gold-digger who’s using him.”

I shot my twin a deadpan look. He was quick to assume the worst and be jaded enough to say it while I was always the one to do the simple thing of thinking before speaking—or judging.

“She’s got her own money. She doesn’t need his.” While I didn’t know everything about the woman our dad was dating, I’d paid attention when he’d introduced her. Margaux had been previously married and had a twenty-five-year-old daughter.

She wasn't hurting for income, and she and my father had met in a meet-cute kind of way, nothing related to business. My first impression of the woman remained the same after I got to know her a little better. She was a soft-spoken, sweet lady, not too pushy but not a pushover either. "She makes him happy, though."

"I guess. Are you going to finish that?"

I shook my head and gave him my bottle. "I won't rain on his parade."

Kody nodded as he led the way to the front door. "I won't either. You're right. He's been happier since meeting her."

"It's not like he'd have anything to be unhappy about." A successful business, wealth, a family. He had it made. Sixty wasn't old, but when I considered what my father had, I knew it was what I wanted to do with *my* life, too. Accomplishments in all aspects of my life: work, income, and family.

*Well, not the family part.* I wasn't as jaded about women as my twin was, but I wasn't looking to settle down just yet.

Kody opened the door, and I followed him in. Looking around, I was relieved that everything looked the same. I wasn't stuck in my ways and against change, but the way Dad asked us over for no reason needled at me.

"Hey!" Dad came down the hall. "There you are!"

"Hi, Dad," I said, raising my brows as he approached. He walked too fast, too eagerly, but I put my arms around him once I realized what was happening. Over his shoulder, I caught Kody's bemused expression.

A hug? "Hey," I repeated, slower, as I patted his back. I wouldn't say it was awkward, but, well, fuck, it was awkward.

He did the same to Kody, hugging him and smiling. He was happier than usual, and it was starting to freak me out.

Dad never hugged. He wasn't cold or anything. He was a loving parent but he was not and never had been much of a hugger.

"Geez, Dad." Kody did the same stiff pat on the back as I had done. "A hug? What, are you dying?"

Dad rolled his eyes at his joke as we released him. Still keeping his arm around my brother, he guided us both into the house, past the huge foyer. "No. No. I'm perfectly healthy."

"Are you retiring?" Kody asked.

"What?" Dad slowed enough to smirk at him. "No. I'm far from being done with work. I've got plans to see through yet."

*Then what'd you invite us over for?*

“Already started, huh?” Dad asked, gesturing at the bottle in Kody’s hand as we reached the kitchen. “Kaden, help yourself. You’re just in time for the big announcement.” He released Kody, and I followed them both through the kitchen and summer room to the sliding glass doors that opened to the backyard.

*What big announcement?*

As he slid open the partition and we filed outside, I realized more guests had already arrived and found themselves beverages.

It wasn’t a party. And Margaux wasn’t a *guest*. The term seemed too formal for her since she spent so much time here with my father. She looked like she belonged, relaxing near the pool as she chatted with her daughter. They must have parked near the garages, off to the side, just as I’d thought.

“Here,” Kody said. He passed back my beer and grabbed a new one from the outdoor kitchen.

“What’s up, Dad?” he asked, trailing after him.

He was already ahead, reaching for Margaux’s hand. Her smile was tender. She beamed at him with something that looked less like adoration and more like love.

*If he’s not dying and he’s not retiring, what else could he announce?*

“Hi, Kaden.” The young woman smiled at me, seeming displaced since her mother left her mid-conversation to go toward my dad. “Hey, Kody.” She lost the smile and simply greeted him in a polite tone.

“Hey Marissa,” Kody replied, lifting his drink and putting all the charm in his smile.

I elbowed him hard. “Mercedes.” The guy was such a dick about names. He’d always been terrible at remembering them, but especially so with women. “Hi,” I told her. “How are you?”

“I’m all right but kind of wondering why Mom asked me to come here tonight.” She was quick to smile. “It’s a lovely home, but...” She shrugged.

Her cluelessness made this whole thing even more bizarre. I’d only spoken to her a couple of times—enough to remember her damn name—but it seemed weird that Margaux wouldn’t have given her daughter a reason for tonight.

“Kaden, Kody,” Dad started. He held Margaux’s hand, grinning at her. She cast a quick smile at Mercedes.

“I asked you over tonight to let you know I’ve asked Margaux to be my

wife.” He kissed her hand and lifted it, showing an enormous ring that glittered in the sinking sunshine.

Mercedes drew in a sharp breath of shock.

*What?*

I turned to Kody. He sprayed out the mouthful of beer and his eyes went wide.

My jaw hung open as I stared at the future Mr. and Mrs. Wagner.

*What in the actual fuck is going on?*





BROOKE

**I** *hate Mondays.*

At the first beep of my alarm clock, I trudged out of bed. It didn't matter what day of the week it was or how much I might loathe it, I hauled my ass out of the comfy sheets. I gave up that coziness bright and early six days a week to stick to my schedule.

My "regime" as my mom liked to refer to it.

Or the "obsession" as my BFF Rena would call it. I doubted she'd had the past I suffered through. And I knew my mom was trying to look at the silver lining of her almost OCD daughter for sticking to such a schedule. She'd see it as a sign of planning, not an addiction.

I didn't care what either of them said—and their opinions were the only ones I'd ever care about—but I considered it a "routine" I'd never give up.

First up, spin. I liked to alternate my cardio and strength-training days, but lately, I'd stuck to mixing both up every day, never slacking. I couldn't slack. After a shitty time in high school, I'd learned how to embrace the lifestyle changes that would prevent me from ever being called ugly, fat, or gross again.

After I dressed and grabbed my bag, I headed out to class.

"Hey, Brooke," the creepy dude who frequented this specific session said as I went to the bike near the back. It had the best view of the instructor *and* a good angle to glance in the mirror without anyone else looking at my reflection. I didn't hide back here, but it was the best spot to pedal and check if I looked like too much of a sweaty hog.

*Why does he have to go to that—oh. Thank God.* I smiled at the paper

taped to the bike next to “mine.” *OUT OF ORDER*, it read.

“Bummer,” he whined, not getting a hint. “We’ll ride together next time.”  
*Let’s not.*

Flirting—or rebuffing veiny armed gym dudes who lived and breathed steroids—wasn’t something I cared to do at the ass crack of dawn. I was selective when I did try to hit on a guy, but it sure as hell wasn’t now. It was go time.

I tucked my hair back and situated my headband. Checking my reflection in the mirror, I ensured I didn’t look like an amateur on the bike, and then I began.

An hour later, I headed home to my apartment and showered. I would’ve loved the chance to stand in the luxury of the kneading water soothing my muscles, but my stomach grumbled. And I had to work anyway. I’d never understand how some people adopted a *better late than never* approach. Punctuality was just a standard of humanity.

I turned the dial, bracing myself for the stinging pelt of ice-cold water.  
“*Oh shit,*” I mumbled.

The spray always caught me off guard, even though this was a staple part of my routine. I tensed, holding my breath for a moment at the contrast, but I swore by the benefits of it. My circulation was always improved after this dose of cold. People jumped in ice baths. This was no different, and I wouldn’t change it anytime soon.

It had taken years of practice to reach this level of self-care, and if I deviated just once, I had no idea what would happen. Didn’t they always say the first cheat day was the hardest? Because it led to a pattern of giving up and ditching the plan altogether? I couldn’t. I wouldn’t.

As I thought over the tasks on my list for today, I got ready.

*I need to get some more moisturizer.* I slathered it from head to toe, taking care to really smooth it in and not miss a spot. After I dressed in my panties and bra, I went to the kitchen and prepped my green smoothie and egg whites breakfast. This would be a good start in getting my macros, but dammit, I’d need to get more organic eggs since I forgot them on my weekend shopping trip yesterday. I hated grocery shopping.

I’d already laid out two outfits last night, but I liked to sleep on it. Thinking ahead to how they’d look wasn’t a simple, quick decision. *The skirt fits me better.*

It was decided. Now that I had the clothes picked out, I could figure out

my hair and makeup. After I applied it all and twisted my hair up just so, I checked myself in the tri-fold mirrors I'd splurged on.

"Close," I told my reflection, turning this way and that. To the right, then left, then looking over my shoulders. Every angle needed to be considered. My tattoos weren't anything to hide, but I knew some older employees at the office weren't as contemporary in their ideas of what was "professional." As the head administrator of a paper distribution company, I had to dress to impress, and that included the old-school staff members who might not approve of my artwork that was an important part of me.

The skirt and blouse covered most of them. My sleeve would never be fully concealed, but it would have to do. I nodded, satisfied after my careful steps.

"Good enough."

I sipped my water from my hydrocup on the way to work, ignoring the commuters who participated in the same old daily grind that I did. As one of the millions heading into work in New York City, I fit in and blended with everyone else.

*Well, maybe not that hungover girl over there.* I winced at the sight of the haggard, soulless stare she cast on the rest of the subway. When she heaved slightly, I backed up an extra step lest she puke all over her wrinkled pantsuit and more.

No one spoke at this hour. Small talk was overrated. I used the quiet to listen to a fitness podcast offering tips to increase your calorie burn and not plateau. Even then, I thought ahead to what would await me at work.

When I arrived at the office of Halden Inc., it was a frenzy of so many details on top of what I was already thinking about.

"Hey, Brooke!" my boss's secretary said. "Good morning!"

"Hi, Sandra." I smiled as I strode through the receptionist area of our suite. "Morning."

"Hey, before you go," she said.

I'd already passed by her, counting on her to tack on an addendum. It never failed. Every morning, she'd have a question or favor to ask. Perhaps it was *her* routine, to plan ahead and know she could find a moment with me as I entered.

"Could you sign these?"

I backtracked to her desk, taking the pile of forms. "What are they?"

She rolled her eyes. "The review reports. Todd forgot to sign off and I

need to enter them today. You were the one to do the reviewing, so I figured \_\_\_”

“Yep.” I smiled and nodded. “I can do that.” Todd, the owner of the company and my boss, tended to get forgetful when something popped up at home. His ten-year-old son had broken his arm from a fall at the playground over the weekend, and Todd was just as much of a worry-wart father as he was the head of the company. It came as no surprise to me that he’d be extra scatterbrained right now.

Forms in hand, I headed to my office to unload my purse and water. I set the forms aside, determined to get through the necessities before dealing with them.

First things first, coffee. In Todd’s private kitchen—that he welcomed me to use since I reported directly to him and saw him often—I found my organic creamer and collagen powder. As I waited for my drink to brew, I browsed on my phone.

Rena: *Lunch today? Ruby’s café?*

It had been a while since I had their chili. I quickly texted back.

Brooke: *See you then!*

I took my coffee into my office and made quick work of the necessities to ensure I could look forward to a smooth workweek. Check the schedules—done. Swap a couple of assignments—done. Review the emails from the supervisors who reported to me—done.

I sighed and sipped my coffee, glad I was already this far ahead on tasks. Everything in its place and a place for everything. My mom had instilled that motto in me, and as I arranged the pens on my desk, I enjoyed the satisfaction of being orderly here. I never had to hunt for anything.

When I spotted the pile of review forms, I moved on to those. Keeping Sandra waiting wouldn’t be wise. She had her own duties to tend to, and with Todd so harried, it would take both of us to keep him on task.

“You’re a rock star,” Sandra said when I dropped them off.

I winked at her and tapped her desk in parting. “If you need anything else, I’m here to help.”

Back in my office, I returned to my emails. I’d slotted a chunk of free time to check and read through the replies I’d received late Friday afternoon. A few weeks ago, I’d put out feelers for new clients and partnerships. Hunting around for them was half the ordeal. Reaching out to them and waiting for replies was infinitely harder.

The first two were vague. They were interested but not. They might want to speak again, but *I* could contact them to ask for a meeting.

“Which is what I did in that first email,” I muttered dryly.

I deleted two more that seemed like generic, automatic replies. I doubted a human had even seen them.

The next one, though?

A smile spread across my face.

“Nice,” I drawled the one word out, exaggerating just how *nice* this was. Wagner Industries had replied. I felt like I’d been shooting too far, thinking perhaps a little bit further than outside the box. Wagner Industries would be a unicorn client for the company. They were bigger than big, and a partnership with them would be lucrative. Todd would be ecstatic to have them as a client, and reading through their reply, I mentally patted myself on my back for daring to ask.

*You never know unless you try, right?*

A couple of other companies had also taken the bait. They wanted products from our company, but I kept circling back to the one from Wagner Industries.

I leaned over, ignoring the nagging thought that this posture was crappy for my back muscles. Propping my chin in my hand, I squinted as I read. “Why is that name so familiar?”

I shrugged, sitting back to type in a reply before breaking for lunch.

When I walked out, Sandra beamed at me. “What’s got you smiling like that?”

I paused at her desk to chat. “Oh, just knowing that Todd will be so pleased when he hears about a certain conglomerate wanting to do business with us.”

She raised her brows. “Get out of here. Really? What company?”

“Wagner Industries.”

“Damn, girl. You *are* a rock star. The rock star of this place. He’s going to be thrilled!”

With her praise, I headed out to meet up with Rena. I’d ride the high of a job well done as long as I could. Still, when I reached Ruby’s café, I couldn’t ignore the feeling that my hair was falling out of place.

*Come on. How can it not be up?* I’d used extra spray, but then again, I hadn’t tried this style in a while. Looking at my reflection in the café’s windows, I fixed the stray strands. But while I checked the rest of myself out,

I worried this skirt was sticking to my thighs. A static electricity stickiness, not one that meant *I've got long slender legs of muscles*.

“Whatcha lookin’ at?”

I smiled at Rena’s call as she strode down the sidewalk. “Making sure everything is just right.” I glanced at her.

She rolled her eyes. “Girl, you look like a drop-dead smoke-show. As always.” Instead of teasing me about checking my appearance, she grabbed my hand and pulled me inside to eat.





KADEN

I'd never been one to believe in superstitions and routines. Life was what you made of it, right? Because if this Monday was the indication of how this week was going to go...

"Stop it." I tipped Kody's chair back as I walked by. He was staring—again—at the new receptionist on our executive floor. Only, he wasn't just ogling her. He was damn near drooling. Women fell for his shit all the time. One time at a bar, I asked a former conquest of his how she let herself, a smart woman, be duped by a look. Her reply? *It's impossible to resist those bedroom eyes.*

Bedroom eyes. I rolled mine, glad I'd gotten his attention. He almost fell to the carpet, and his chair banged into his desk with a loud bang.

"What the fuck?" He righted himself, reaching out to punch me. I dodged it, but he was faster, standing and chasing me to pay me back.

"You can't keep pulling that crap," I warned, laughing as he hurried to hit my shoulder. "Ow." I punched him back just as fast.

"I was just looking."

"*Just* looking like every fucking time she walks by. She's going to notice your pervy ass is checking her out."

He scoffed, checking his hair wasn't out of place. We were identical, but that was one of the biggest differences between us. I kept mine longer without product, and he kept his at varied lengths with tons of crap in it.

"That's the point, dumbass." He punched me again, causing me to hit back again.

"That's enough, boys," Pamela, my secretary who was old enough to be

my grandmother, chided as she passed by.

“Women love getting attention and knowing their looks are appreciated.”

I stared at my brother, not believing that he really thought that. “No, they don’t.”

“They do,” he pointed at me, getting in my face, “when they just want a quick fuck. Not *every* woman wants to settle down and get married. Some are like me, looking for fun, which is best served quick and easy.”

“It’s too soon after that idiot in HR got busted with an affair. Just leave her alone.”

Kody shoved at me, with less force now. Pamela wasn’t our babysitter, but sometimes we needed that extra reminder not to horse around so much. “I was just looking. It’s in her hands now. She knows I’m interested.”

“Hands off,” I warned him.

“Off what?” our father said, entering the office.

“Hey, Dad,” I said.

“Morning, Dad,” Kody greeted.

He raised one brow, looking at us both then locking his scrutiny on Kody. “Hands off what?” he asked again.

Kody chuckled. “That hot—” I elbowed him hard again, and he shut up with a hard exhale of pain. “Nothing.”

We’d never really talked about women with Dad much, but now that he was engaged to Margaux, I was confident his views on how to treat women and what they wanted were vastly different from those of a player like Kody.

I glanced behind Dad and checked the time on the clock. “I’m surprised you’re here so early.”

Kody and I liked to goof off here and there. It was impossible not to. We both tended to come into the office earlier than later so we could leave in the mid-afternoon most days, pending any late meetings or events. Dad liked to come in a bit later, so his arrival this morning was unexpected.

He nodded and smiled smugly. “I’ve got a favor to ask, so I wanted to come prepared with a few minutes to spare.”

“Sure, Dad. What do you need?” I asked.

“Well, do we have any postage stamps?” he asked, grinning.

Kody and I exchanged a glance.

“Uh, yeah? Of course, we do,” Kody said.

“We’re shipping things all the time,” I added.

“I’m going to need a *lot* of stamps.”

“Why?” Kody and I asked it at the same time.

“For all the wedding invitations, of course!” He held up a cardboard box, emphasizing his intent.

Kody groaned, and I sighed.

*This is moving fast.*

“Oh, sure.” I shrugged. “I’ve got some time before a meeting.”

A half hour later, we’d only gone through a quarter of them. The cards were printed on a matte paper that was hard to separate from the pile, and the envelopes’ adhesive was pulling the flaps too. I held back from complaining, but Kody had yet to get a censor.

“Why can’t one of our secretaries do this?”

“Because stuffing personal correspondence isn’t what we pay them for.” Dad rolled his eyes. “Stop acting like this is beneath you.”

“There’s just so many of them,” he replied.

“One hundred and fifty,” Dad answered.

“You sure had them made quickly.” I picked up the card to actually look at it. We’d been sorting them together on auto-pilot, and this was the first time I was skimming the fancy calligraphy and inset foil of the decorations on the border.

“I proposed two weeks ago,” he said. “But it was harder than we realized it would be to get all three of our kids together to announce it. We wanted to tell you boys and Mercedes before announcing it officially.”

*Why? To see how we’d react?* I wasn’t sure how Mercedes felt about her mom remarrying, but her gasp clued me in enough. Shocked, she was surprised about Margaux’s engagement. Kody and I were stunned. I wasn’t sure what Kody’s first thought was, but I couldn’t help but wonder about what this meant for Dad to finally move on after Mom.

I frowned, looking up at Dad when I reached the line for the location. “Uh...”

“What?” He picked one up and skimmed it over. “There can’t be a typo.”

“It says ‘to be determined.’ You’re sending out invites, but you don’t have a venue picked yet?”

Dad shrugged, but I knew how to read him. He was slightly uneasy, although he replied so casually. “We’re working on it.”

Kody picked up the next invite. “The wedding is a couple weeks away!”

“No, it’s not. It’s just shy of two *months* away. We’ve got time to find the perfect place.”

*But why get engaged and hurry to marry?* “Well, you can hold off on the invites until you have a place. Why rush?”

“Because we don’t want to wait.”

“So, instead, you’ll hurry up before you’ve got everything figured out?” Kody asked.

Dad shot him a look of exasperation. “We’re not hurrying anything.”

“How are you not hurrying? It’s all happening so fast. You’ve only just met Margaux and—”

He lifted a hand, cutting me off. “I know it can seem like it’s going too fast, but trust me, I feel good about this. For the first time since your mother passed away.” He lifted one shoulder and let it fall, returning his gaze to the invitations. “This feels right. Margaux feels right.”

“And you’re not worried about sending invites to a wedding you don’t have a location for?”

Dad shook his head. “No, we’ll find something.”

Kody and I shared a look. This time I was the one who conveyed the doubt. “Good luck with that.”

“One day, you’ll know what it’s like. You’ll feel it. When you meet a woman who makes your life exciting again.” He looked from Kody, to me, then back and forth again, settling his gaze on me. “Well, you will.”

Kody scoffed. “Got that right.”

He smiled. “Oh, I’m sure you’ll settle one day, too.”

“Don’t bet on it,” Kody argued.

“I wouldn’t,” I added.

“I *hope* you both do.” His dreamy, almost whimsical tone was so unlike him, especially in this conference room we’d chosen to stamp the invites. “I’m just so excited, you know?”

*No, I really don’t.* I wasn’t quite the player Kody was, but I hadn’t thought about settling like this, getting married.

“Margaux is wonderful. And we can’t wait to start our lives together. We’ve got so many plans—and the honeymoon. I’m booking a tropical experience in the Maldives.” He slanted his brows, turning serious. “And I expect you both to manage the company in my absence. I don’t want any calls for emergencies while I’m gone.”

“Sure, Dad,” I replied, done with my stack of invites.

“And let’s hope that idiot in HR can keep it in his pants and not make a mockery of his department, sleeping with his own married employees again.”

“I’ll keep an eye on him when he’s back from leave,” Kody said.

I shot him a look when Dad couldn’t see. Oh, like *he* was any better.

“We’ll keep everything in tiptop shape,” I promised, steepling my fingers together. This might work in our favor, proving to Dad that Kody and I would be ready to take over without a hitch. Perhaps his retirement would be coming sooner than later, especially if he was busy with his new wife.

“And hey, I’ll reach out about a venue for you. Don’t worry about it. Let me handle it.”

“Really?” He jerked his head up and smiled at me.

“Sure.” I patted his back. “I’d be happy to help.”

“Thanks, Kaden. I sure would appreciate that.” When he looked back down at the invites he prepared, Kody leaned back to mouth at me over his back.

*Ass kisser.*

I rolled my eyes. It wasn’t like I’d have to go out of my way. A friend could help me out with that detail.

Since I was done with my invitations, I reached over to help Kody with half of the ones he had remaining in his stack. Before I grabbed them, my phone pinged and I checked the screen.

Nodding as I read, I took in the details of a response to my email. It was good news, and the feeling that I was productive filled me.

“What are you happy about over there?” Kody asked. That twin thing. He was always the first to pick up on my mood.

“I got a reply from a paper distribution company. Halden Inc.,” I told them both as I typed in another reply, this one with a request to schedule a meeting to discuss business. “That was fast.”

“Too fast like it’s not legit?” Kody guessed. “A scam?”

“No.” I explained how someone from their company contacted me. The approach was professional yet somehow personalized at the same time. I’d sound like an idiot to say I sensed the charisma from the sender, but something struck me with the direct yet not pushy email they’d sent. We got tons of emails every day, and so many felt like nothing but solicitation. “I did my research on this one, and it’ll be a beneficial venture.”

Finished with his invitations, Dad stood and patted me on the shoulder. “Good. You can be in charge of the account.”

“Hey, what about me?” Kody asked. “I’m interested. I want to be involved.”

Dad shook his head. “If you want to partake in a new business deal, you have to track it down. Like your brother.”

Kody rolled his eyes. “He didn’t track anything down. They contacted him!”

“Kaden knows how to cultivate a conversation to begin a new deal,” Dad said.

“Cultivate a conversation?” Kody set his hands on his hips. “That sounds like bullshit.”

“Don’t be jealous now,” I teased.

He stood, sloppily stacking his sealed envelopes. “Jealous? Of you? What’s there to be jealous of?”

“I know how to strike a deal,” I taunted, goading him on as we left the room.

“You don’t have a deal yet.”



BROOKE

I woke up Tuesday and diligently did my routine. Today was HIIT on the rower, and I might have pushed too hard. If I could avoid having to use a stapler or even pushing open a door, I'd manage.

*Note to self. Tomorrow can be a lighter day.*

Showered and rocking the dress I got at Nordstrom's clearance sale last fall, I was awake and ready to go. I'd be able to tell Todd about the partnership opportunity with Wagner Industries today. He ended up taking a sick day yesterday. It turned out helping your child with a broken dominant arm was a twenty-four-hour task.

*Poor kid.*

I was the first one in the office, and since Sandra had an appointment, I was the one to prep for the day. As I sipped my coffee and checked over the usual things I needed to review, I tried my hardest not to think about the reply I'd received from Wagner Industries.

*Why is that name so familiar?* I had correspondence with so many people. Our company was one of the top paper distribution companies in the country, and it would be impossible to remember every single client I'd spoken with or emailed.

But Wagner?

I shook my head, unable to clear the persistent thought the name was important.

My social life was meh. Most of the people I stayed in touch with online were tattoo artists and friends from former jobs.

I was in the middle of reviewing schedules when I heard the door



opening. Since Sandra wasn't in, I left my door open to toss out and receive the usual morning greetings. Todd wasn't one of those bosses who shoved pleasantries and kumbaya policies down our throats. It was simply a decent workplace with decent people who genuinely cared about each other—for the most part.

*No such thing as utopia at any job.*

A few did need to be updated on last-minute issues, though, so I sat at Sandra's desk for a few minutes.

*Where's Todd?* He had to handle that meeting about the upcoming partnership. It couldn't fall on my shoulders if I was picking up the slack in Sandra's absence.

"Hey. Morning, Brooke."

"Hi, Todd. How's your son?"

He groaned, dropping his head in his hands. "It breaks my heart. I swear, seeing your kid in pain is the *worst*."

Another employee strode in and nodded as she passed him by, patting his back. "And no amount of telling them to be careful makes a difference."

Todd nodded before he started to walk away. "Thanks for handling it all yesterday," he told me. "You're a lifesaver."

"Happy to help." I exaggerated looking at my watch. "You've got that meeting with Wagner Industries in about five."

He grinned. "Now that's the highlight of the week. Wagner Industries." Whistling and giving me a thumbs-up, he continued toward his office. "Five minutes. I'm on it. Thanks again, Brooke. I don't know what I'd do without you."

An assistant supervisor nodded a hello at me as she walked in.

"Oh, hey," I told her before she headed further down the hall. "Slight change today." I handed her a paper with the highlights of what to adjust for her projects.

She took it with a sigh. "Knew this was coming. Thanks. He's right, you know," she said, pointing where Todd left for his office. "You're a lifesaver for all of us."

"Thanks, girl." I smiled at her as she hurried to work.

As more and more employees filed in, I doubled back to my desk to jiggle my mouse and look for something to check real quick. Mom liked to think I was a perfectionist and that enabled me to be so successful. It was more about saving time. Why do something sloppy and repeat it all when it could just be

done right the first time?

Once I double-checked the schedule and confirmed everything was in place, I grabbed my empty coffee cup and returned to the hallway. As I headed toward the kitchen, I crossed over to the lobby space where I could get there faster. The temp was in, stowing her things at Sandra's station, and I smiled at her. *Whew. One less thing to manage.*

A man's voice stopped me in my tracks.

"Excuse me, is this the correct floor where I can find the office for Todd Ellis?"

I froze mid-step as the connection hit.

*Wagner.*

"I'm here to meet with him. I'm Kaden Wagner, from Wagner Industries."

*Shit.*

That smooth, rich voice hadn't sounded quite that deep in high school.

*Shit. Shit. Shit.* I cringed, my face unfreezing enough to do only that. I never thought I'd see him again.

Kaden Wagner. As in the popular guy from high school.

"Brooke?" the temp asked, having worked here before and knowing who I was.

I spun around, my reactions jerky from the shock of *Kaden Wagner* being here, of all places.

When I faced him, surprise nearly knocked me over. Oh, it was him all right. One of the two identical Wagner twins. Blond, blue-eyed, and he sure had filled in that boyish body. He'd aged well, replacing lanky arms with muscles. Even dressed in a suit he proved to be the picture of health. No, he wasn't just healthy—he was unbelievably *sexy* in such a sinful, wicked way.

"Brooke?" he asked, mirroring the shock I felt. His mouth parted as he raised his brows. "Brooke Ponder. *You're* the B. Ponder who'd sent me that email?"

I nodded, vaguely aware I couldn't just stand there and gawk at him. Clamping my lips shut, I took care of that. But words wouldn't come. It was impossible to speak, to have one of my usual quippy comebacks ready. My mind simply stalled.

*Kaden. Fucking. Wagner.* Of all people.

I caught myself from spiraling to the inferior feeling he used to inspire in me. Before I could wish for a hole to open up in the floor and swallow me, I

cleared my throat, willing my brain to kick into gear.

*He's just a guy. A guy I never, ever thought I'd see again, let alone to do business with, but still, he's just a guy. Come on, Brooke. Speak!*

He snapped his fingers and shook his head a bit. Lowering his gaze, he seemed too stunned to wipe the shock off his face. "I was wondering. That name seemed familiar. Ponder." I wouldn't say he looked bewildered, but his voice had lost that suave, smooth tone.

He rubbed the back of his neck, blinking a couple of times as he furrowed his brow. "I was, uh, wondering if Ponder—"

"You were pondering!" The temp secretary paired her insertion with a too bright smile and laugh. "Get it? Ponder." When she realized the awkward silence would need a wrecking ball to plow through, her face fell. She pressed her lips together tightly and sat.

*I'd like to get out of here.* But I couldn't. I was the utmost professional, not a perfectionist, but a professional. And no one, not even my crush from high school would render me a tongue-tied mess. *Especially* not him, not after what he did to me.

"Kade—" I cleared my throat and swallowed. "Kade—" Nope. One more try to lose that croakiness. I drew in a deep breath for good measure. He could fumble and um and uh all he wanted. I would not. He didn't deserve to see me flustered, even if he had surprised me. "Mr. Wagner."

There. Formal and no funky crack in my voice. "I can escort you to the office of Mr. Todd Ellis. Right this way please."

*Ooh, that's right. Formal and unflustered. You got this, girl.*

I walked closer to pass him, and I refused to think about the way his eyes narrowed. Was he hiding a smile? A smirk? Yeah, a smirk would be more like him.

"Thank you, Ms. Ponder."

I pulled my lip between my teeth, not missing that his smug, confident tone was back. As I led him toward my boss's office, I refused to dwell on the fact he was likely staring at my ass the whole way.

*Dammit. Why the fuck did I ever send out those stupid emails?* I wished I'd never sent a single acquisition message to anyone. If it meant risking a run-in with Kaden Wagner.

*No, not a run-in. We weren't bumping into each other on the sidewalk somewhere. He's here to do business with us.* I inhaled slowly and steadily again. *At least Todd will have to handle him. Not me.*

The silence between us was worse than the awkward fumble of a greeting we'd done when he'd entered. But I wasn't doing this again. I wasn't going to waste my time worrying what he thought. "Here you go." I blurted it, eager to escape. Gesturing at Todd's door, I was too hasty and almost smacked the glass.

Kaden smiled. Not a creepy, leering one, but almost polite. "I hope I get to see you again, Brooke."

*What?!*

I licked my lips, struggling to think of something to say. Nothing came, and I forced my cheeks up, pasting on a quick smile as Todd approached the door. Then I backed away. I didn't run, but I sure as hell wanted to.

*Kaden.*

*That Kaden.*

*Kaden 'the asshole' Wagner.*

"Brooke? Are you all right?"

I slowed just enough in hurrying down the hall to smile at the temp. "I'm fine. Just remembered I need to go for, um, an early lunch."

With that, I bolted, first to my desk to grab my purse and then out the door. As I left the office, I grabbed my phone and texted Rena.

Brooke: *SOS. Are you busy?*

Rena: *There's this thing called work, but no. SOS for what?*

She managed PR for a bookstore, and her office hours were relatively flexible. Or what she did in her office was. It wouldn't be the first time I'd done a pop-in.

Rena: *My door's always open for you.*

I texted back a thumbs-up, which she hated, but she didn't loathe it as much as a simple *K*. If I wanted to piss her off, I'd make it a *K!*

I got there in no time, and as she'd promised, she wasn't on the phone and no one was there to butt in.

"What? What is it?"

"Kaden Wagner." I slumped in the open seat that wasn't covered with stacks of books. "Kaden fucking Wagner."

She leaned against the edge of her desk and held up her hands as she shrugged. "Who's he?"

I'd met her well after high school, so she wouldn't know. "He's at my office representing Wagner Industries. I reached out to them for a partnership."

She rolled her hand, prompting me to get to it. I filled in a few more details, ending with the reason I'd frozen at his voice. "I went to high school with him."

Rena smiled. "Which was, like, how many years ago? Ancient history, right?"

I winced. "I, um, knew him then."

She slapped her forearm over the other. "Imagine that," she quipped dryly.

"In a not-so-good way."

Now she sobered a little. "He didn't take your virginity or anything, right?"

I opened and closed my mouth, hesitant to share all of this with her. Besides, now wasn't the time. I did have to get back to work at some point and this could take a while.

"You dated him?" She hardened her gaze. "Did he bully you?"

"It's awkward, okay?"

She shrugged, glancing at her computer monitor when it pinged. "Look, you said he's there to talk about the deal. Maybe it won't even go through. Don't start stressing about something that might not be an issue."

"Todd can't wait to make this a deal." My retort matched my mood. Glum and resigned.

"Okay, but still. High school was a long time ago. Whatever stood between you then can't matter now. You've changed since high school. We all do. Can't you assume he has too?"

I shrugged one shoulder. "Easier said than done." I rubbed my stomach, hoping to ease the knots there. "Maybe I *should* take you up on that suggestion to go on a vacation."

"Ha." Rena clicked her tongue and shook her head. "I mean, yeah, a workaholic like you needs a break now and then. But no, you need to slay your demons. Give him a shot. Give the deal a shot."

I grimaced at her, tense as stress filled me.

She lowered to my eye level and smiled. "Come on. What's the worst that could happen?"



**O** *f all people.*

“Thank you, Brooke,” the thin, reedy man called out as she left.

Without a word, she turned away and escaped down the hall.

“Mr. Ellis,” I began as I stepped into his office and offered him my hand to shake.

“Morning, Mr. Wagner. Pleased to meet you.” He frowned, pulling his phone from his pocket. A cringe followed his glance at the screen. “It’s my son. I need to take this.”

“Hey, no worries. Family first, always.”

He sighed, relief tugging his shoulders down with my comment. “Of course. That’s what we believe here too. Family first. He fell and broke his arm.” He put the phone to his ear, answering and asking him to wait for a minute. “If you could just excuse me for one moment while I take this.”

“Take your time. No rush.” I sat and smiled at him, reassuring him I would be fine here. God knew I needed a moment to get over the shock of seeing Brooke Ponder for the first time since high school.

*Jesus. It’s been that long? Twelve years.* I hadn’t seen her since.

“Look, Joey. I’m at work. Can’t your brother help with the Nintendo? No, no. Don’t cry. Please don’t cry.”

I frowned at Mr. Ellis’s words as his voice trailed off down the hall.

“Brooke Ponder,” I muttered to myself. I rubbed my hand over my mouth, musing about the woman that girl had grown into.

She was gorgeous. A knockout. All that long black hair running almost down to her ass.

I groaned quietly, shifting in my seat. *That ass.* When she'd led me to the office, it took everything in me not to stare. Not to drool, either.

*Here I was giving Kody shit about this and now I'm just as bad.*

That dress clung to her curves, emphasizing breasts she definitely hadn't had in high school. Her skin was glowing. And those tats? Fucking sexy as hell. All that ink was such a contrast to the girl she'd been in high school.

The Brooke I recalled from high school had been so quiet and shy, always whispering and hanging out with that other equally mousy and nerdy girl whose name I doubted I'd remember after all this time.

I'd never forget Brooke though. She'd stolen my attention enough that I'd gone out of my way to try to make things right for her. Except that hadn't worked out.

The memory of her tears hit me. She'd tried to hold them back, and I'd been so impressed at her stubbornness to stay strong. And the way she'd glared at me after was defiant.

*Hell, she probably hated me after that. She still might.*

Even though our history began so long ago, I wondered how long the drama had clung to her after we'd graduated. It seemed like forever ago, but really, it wasn't that long.

"Thank you again for waiting. I apologize again," Mr. Ellis said as he returned.

I held up my hand. "No problem at all."

He smiled as he sat, happier than he had been when he left to take that call. "I appreciate it."

*And brownie points awarded to me, thank you very much.* It wasn't a lie, though. Kody and I gave each other crap at work every day, but it was all fun and games. We fostered a family-first policy all throughout Wagner Industries, and I hoped every employee truly understood that. From CEO to janitor, their happiness mattered.

"I'll admit I was thrilled when Brooke told me about the details of this partnership she'd approached you with. But now?" He sighed again. "With Joey's orthopedic appointment this week and other details to arrange with the sitter, I don't know what my schedule is going to look like." I felt sorry for him when he rubbed his hand over his face. "Being a single parent is never easy."

"I hear you."

He raised his brows. "Oh? You have young children as well?"



I shook my head. “No. No.” I added a chuckle to make it sound less harsh of a denial. “But my father raised me and my brother on his own after my mom died, and yeah, I know he’s made a lot of sacrifices and tough choices.”

Saying that out loud had me curious if Dad had given up *too* much of himself all that time. He hadn’t dated much, sometimes single for years after we lost Mom. While he’d never voiced any hint of sadness or loneliness, I wondered. He’d put all his effort into work, into the company. Looking back now, though, I considered the possibility he might have done that as a crutch. That he couldn’t be lonely if he was married to his work. In the same way, he’d used his work as a co-partner. Kody and I had started under Dad’s tutelage as soon as we were out of high school. Using our careers as a way to keep us close and in line didn’t sound so farfetched.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

I lifted my hand to dismiss him with a wave. *Oh, it was a long time ago* never felt like the right words to say in reply to condolences. It hardly mattered if she’d passed away thirteen years ago or thirteen minutes ago. That pain remained the same and never fully left me.

“My wife simply left.” He furrowed his brow as he scooted his chair in closer. “Different story. And boy, did we get steered off course.” His smile was quick and polite, a trait I’d recognized in go-getters. “Now. This partnership.”

For the next half hour, we discussed the details of what Brooke had first emailed me about. She was pointed and clear with what she proposed on behalf of Mr. Ellis—call me Todd—here at their company. It didn’t feel like I was fishing for information when I asked more about Brooke, but I kept my questions brief and within the realm of business.

She’d just been promoted to a Head Administrator position, and Todd admitted he didn’t know what he’d do without her.

We covered all the basics. I’d come prepared with notes on my phone, and after I shared them with him, we collaborated on a document we could both share and work off of. At first, I thought he was joking when he said he’d print out a copy for us both to have.

“You can email it to me.”

He shrugged. “Sorry, I’m old-fashioned. I like having the paper copy on hand for some things.”

It wasn’t a deal-breaker by any means, and I liked that he wouldn’t change his ways for a client. He challenged me on a couple of details about

timelines, and I pushed for a clearer explanation of some of their policies about shipment. Wrapping up the meeting, I felt confident we'd mutually impressed each other. He wasn't just a bumbling single dad, but a sharp businessman who wasn't afraid to drive a hard bargain. Likewise, he'd commented several times that he wouldn't have considered something quite the way I had. This was far from my first time negotiating a deal and arranging a partnership. I wasn't looking for validation or compliments, but he had a genuine way of wording himself that struck me.

"It's a deal," I finally said as we both stood.

He shook my hand and smiled, offering to see me out with a promise of getting in touch with me soon.

"Oh, no. You don't have to," I replied, seeing that his phone screen was lighting up from where he'd left it on his desk. According to the ID, *Home* was calling him, and I bet it was the miserable kid who couldn't use his dominant arm to play a game. "And good luck with getting that cast. I'm wishing him a speedy recovery."

I strolled down the hall where Brooke had led me to Todd's office. I didn't want to admit how much I was hoping to run into her, but even with my slowest pace and taking my time, I didn't see her anywhere.

"Excuse me," I asked the older woman at the front. The bubbly young woman who'd tried and failed with her joke was no longer there.

She smiled, peering up at me. "Hi! How can I help you?"

I leaned my forearm on the high counter and smiled at her. A glance at her nameplate told me her name. "Hello, Sandra. I was ponder—" I caught myself, smiling. "I was *wondering* if you might be able to direct me to Brooke Ponder."

"I'm afraid she's out. I would gladly take a message for you, Mr....?"

"Wagner." I tapped my fingers on her counterspace and retreated. "No need. I'll find her later."

As I left, I replayed my words. "I'll find her later?" I whispered on the elevator I had to myself. *Could I sound any more like a damn stalker?*

I hadn't set out to find Brooke, but now that our paths had crossed, I sure hoped I might be able to plan on seeing her once more.

Back at the office, I grabbed a wrap from a deli cart and headed toward Kody's office.

He stood, wrapping up a call. While he spoke with his earbuds in, he stood and tossed a small basketball into a net that hung from his bathroom

door.

I closed the door behind me as I entered. He'd opened it at my knock and wordlessly beckoned me inside.

"Yeah, that sounds good," he told the person on the other line. He rolled his eyes at me and glanced at my wrap. I tried to eliminate the sound of crinkling paper, but it was no use. It was also impossible to not make a mess.

A blob of honey fell but more hung from my lips.

Kody shoved a small stack of napkins at me, then sat in his chair. Rubbing his face, he inserted noncommittal replies of *uh-huh* and the like.

We usually stayed in our own lanes here. He was more the sales guy, and I dealt more with the creative part of the company. I couldn't guess who he was talking to that he wanted to end the call as soon as possible, but when he did finally hang up, he had to suffer through a Midwestern farewell of saying *goodbye* about nine times.

"My God." He rubbed his face again then sat up. "How come you're eating lunch so late?"

"Had a meeting with the paper distribution place." I wiped my face and watched as he got up and went to his bar. He tossed me a water bottle and I caught it. "Thanks."

"And how'd that go, mister smooth talker who claims he always gets the deal?"

"I *did* get the deal, but guess who I ran into there."

He shrugged. "That redhead I brought to our cousin's wedding?"

"Nope."

"Uh, the tall woman I met at Club Vista I had to put a restraining order on?"

I blinked. "Yikes. I hope neither of us ever see her again. Also no." Realizing this could take a while since Kody had a long list of women—mostly scorned—I gave in. He'd never guess, anyway. I'd been so stunned because I never counted on seeing her again.

"Brooke Ponder."

He raised his brows and smirked. "Who the hell is that?"

"Brooke Ponder?" I tried again.

He shrugged.

"From high school. Black hair. I think we had chemistry with her."

"Oh!" He frowned. "The ugly one?"

I couldn't help a grin. "Oh, I assure you, there is nothing ugly about that

woman.”

“Oh?” His smile wasn’t trustworthy. “Did she glow up?”

I shrugged. “I wouldn’t have considered her ugly back then either.”

“She’s hot now?”

I nodded.

“Isn’t she the one we—”

I hated to think about it. “Uh huh.”

He cringed. “Do you think she remembers?”

“Oh, yeah.” I had no doubt she did. Why else would she freeze on the spot like that at seeing me?

“Fuck.” He whistled and leaned back in his chair again. “I’m glad I’m not dealing with that then.” Splaying his fingers wide, he added, “All yours, man.”

“I agree. I’m happy I made the deal.”

I wasn’t pleased on the principle of finding a new partnership. It wasn’t a business win that I could mark as a tally on a scoreboard. Kody and I weren’t *that* competitive. But I was happy it was me in charge of this deal and the account that would follow.

Brooke had emailed *me*, not Kody. While I suspected she hadn’t known who I was when she first reached out, she sure as hell did now.

And I was looking forward to a chance at seeing her again—somehow.



BROOKE

## Twelve Years Ago

Paige and I headed to chemistry together. It was so different from the previous three years. We'd bonded in freshmen year as partners in a bio lab—*nothing like formaldehyde and dissections first thing in the morning*—and we'd been happy to simply know someone else. During sophomore and junior years, we'd had so many classes together that it was all too easy to befriend her.

This year, though, we only had this one together.

"Maybe they wanted to keep us apart so we wouldn't cause too much trouble," she suggested as we entered the room.

"Yeah, that's gotta be it."

We never caused trouble. Paige was on the Dean's List and had already taken all the possible AP classes she could for English. I was just an introvert. Causing trouble was left to the jocks, bullies, and prima donna girls who were too stuck up to even say hello to peons like me and Paige.

"But senior year is going to be a *blast*," Paige said.

A couple of girls snickered as we passed. What, she was too enthusiastic? Did they all assume we didn't know how to have fun? Bullies were so damn vicious.

"Ignore them," I told her as we took seats in the back. "Senior year will be awesome."

I set my Trapper Keeper on my desk and slid it closer to cover it with my arms. I wasn't the *only* student to use them. They were so handy, keeping everything organized and together. Being cool wasn't worth the headache and stress of not knowing where my homework was and worrying about if I'd dropped anything.

Paige and I already knew we'd part ways after graduation. She would head to college in California while I'd start business school closer to home here. I refused to dwell on it. I wouldn't think about drifting from her. We'd stay in touch, and until then we'd enjoy every moment we could of senior year.

"Are you sure we won't look stupid being each other's dates to Homecoming?" she asked as we waited for the teacher to address us.

"No. I don't think so. Lots of people go with a friend. I think Rhonda and Frank are each other's 'dates' and they're brother and sister." I shot her a side-eye. "It's just the cheapest way to go. Buying a couple's ticket to get two people in is a way better deal than both buying their own individual ticket."

She leaned close. "A better deal to spare the anxiety of waiting for a boy to ask them to the dance, too."

I slanted in to whisper too. The teacher had arrived, but he had yet to write anything on the chalkboard, still wiping off what he'd scribbled on there during the last class. "I heard Kristin Dunlap asked Henry Gold."

"No way!" Paige's mouth formed an O in surprise.

I nodded. "That's what I heard."

Paige and I weren't the most diehard of gossipers. Along the halls when everyone dealt with their lockers, a steady stream of rumors and speculations were shared. It was impossible not to catch snippets of juicy news.

Still, we weren't too concerned about who was cheating and which teachers had an issue with certain students. Paige was like me, a bit naïve about boys and not really interested in them. We'd listen in on rumors, but that felt like peer pressure training us to want to care.

I didn't care. Not really. I had my whole life ahead of me to worry about dating, and I didn't have plans to start the torture too early. We preferred to hang out together, just the two of us, usually at my house because we could be alone there when my mom worked late. We escaped the headaches of fitting in, and it suited us fine because we preferred to be reading magazines and listening to music anyway.

I doubted a boy would ask a nerd like me to the Homecoming dance, and

Paige backed up that idea, stating she'd never believe any of the seniors would ask her out anywhere—for a school event or elsewhere. The idea that any of the jocks, fellow nerds, or bad boys would ask one of us to the dance was preposterous.

“We can get ready at my house. I know my mom would let me use her ‘fancy’ perfume,” I told her, air quotes and all.

“I know what you smell like,” Paige teased, rolling her eyes. “No need to get extra for *me*.” She laid her hand on her chest and fluttered her eyelids at me.

“It’s a chance to get all dolled up.” *A chance to pretend I’m someone dressy for a change.* I sure could use a night off from being drab old me.

“All right, that’s enough people,” the teacher said, clapping his hands. “Everyone’s here, so let’s all grab a seat—Oh, well, *now*, everyone’s here. Glad you could make it, boys.” His tone turned sarcastic at the end.

Two boys entered the room, goofing off from the looks of it.

Kaden and Kody Wagner. Blond and blue-eyed twins who looked like they’d walked right off my favorite boy-band posters.

I tamped down the sigh that wanted to slip out. Paige wasn’t so lucky. She watched them saunter in and gave a dreamy little exhale.

“They’re so...”

*Rich? Too full of themselves?*

“Cute,” she whispered.

Even I could admit that. They were *hot*, regardless of the warning bells that went off in my head. Every girl in the room stared as they looked for a couple of seats. Kody elbowed one of the football players, kicking him out of a seat. He gave it up with a roll of his eyes. As soon as he sat, he leaned over to tug on Kristin’s ponytail and grin at her.

“Is this seat taken?” Kaden asked another student. He wasn’t mean about it, but his tone suggested that chair should be vacant to appease him.

“Twice the trouble,” Paige murmured. “Twice the eye candy.” She waggled her brows.

I shrugged, getting my book out to take notes. “Sure. But they’re still different.”

Paige slid her notebook onto the table. “Yeah, but the one thing they share is how popular they are.”

*Way out of our league, that’s for sure.*





AFTER RENA'S PEP TALK, I walked back to the office and tried to slot away all those feelings that were overwhelming me. I hadn't thought about Kaden or his twin since high school. All that time, I worked hard to put the trauma of high school in the past, where it belonged. As an adult, I didn't have to think about popularity contests and if a couple of peers thought I was worthy of anything. Todd facilitated a warm and happy workplace, so bullies weren't an issue. He was a firm believer of no drama, and since I pretty much had no life other than my job, it was safe to say my days were drama free.

Seeing Kaden had thrust me back to a time when I couldn't claim the same. High school with Kaden had sucked, so it wasn't crazy to worry he might still be the same now.

*Then again, maybe the deal won't go through.*

I'd been reaching high when I sent that acquisition email. Perhaps Kaden Wagner was still too much of an asshole to want to bend for Todd. He could be too firm in negotiations sometimes. He had his quirks. So perhaps he wouldn't bend for whatever Kaden needed or wanted out of my proposal for a partnership. It wouldn't be the first time Todd turned down an offer.

Thinking about it not going through bothered me, though. Was I being a bad employee to want this deal to crumble before it started? Getting Wagner Industries as a client would be huge for the company, but for the sake of putting up with the asshole from high school, would it be worth it?

*Stop stressing about it. It won't do me any good.*

I entered the office and headed up to my floor, coaching myself to calm down.

*Maybe there won't be a deal.*

*Maybe Kaden will push for too much and Todd will tell him to get lost.*

*Maybe Todd will handle it all. That's it. If they strike a deal, I can figure out how to best avoid Kaden in the office.*

As the elevator doors open, I frowned. *Avoid? Hide?* I shook my head. No, that was the Brooke from the past. That was high school Brooke. I had no reason to duck and run from that boy—man—anymore.

"Brooke?"

I paused in the hallway at Todd's voice.

*Shit.* Nerves returned.

"Can you come in here for a sec, please?"

I smiled as I stepped into his office. “How’s Joey doing with his arm? That poor kid.”

“Oh, he’s a trooper. Hey, I’m going to need you to start setting up times for the new project.”

My shoulders slumped. *So much for trying to distract him to talk about something else first.*

“I am so glad you reached out to Wagner Industries. Specifically Kaden.”  
*First names already? “Oh, really?”*

“I’m very impressed. You know, such a reputable conglomerate like theirs?” He shrugged. “When you first told me about the email, I’ll admit I was skeptical. I mean, *Wagner Industries*? I expected him to be a hardass and not compromise. I figured he’d be stuffy and full of himself, another greedy, corporate asshole.”

*Isn’t he?*

He sat back in his chair and set his hands on the armrests to swivel. “He’s so polite and patient. Professional and sharp. I’m truly glad you reached out to him.”

“I’m happy to help. I’m always ready to find ways to improve the company’s success.” *But maybe not with him?*

He grinned. “And we can count on plenty of success with the deal we struck.”

I raised my brows. “But...”

“What? I value your input. Tell me.”

“A deal? Already?”

Frowning, he slowed his side-to-side swiveling. “Yes. Why drag it out?”

“Well.” I drummed my fingers on his doorframe. “I sent out a few emails. You never know. We could get another deal, and if—”

“Another deal with someone else? No. Why would we pass on a chance to work with Wagner?”

“Isn’t it too hasty of a decision—of a big decision?” I’d written the proposal. I knew how much we were talking about. “Maybe you could speak with someone else on their team before going ahead.”

His frown deepened. “Do you have a reason you don’t want to work with Kaden?”

I swallowed and hesitated. Wanting to be a team player warred with wishing I never had to see Kaden and spare myself the memories from high school. He stared at me expectantly, and I finally shook my head. “Oh, no,

not at all. I'm all for it."

He smiled as he scooted closer to his desk. "Good. Then you better get cracking on the schedule."

"Me?"

"Yes, you." He chuckled like he was confused by my reaction. "You're the best person to handle this account."

*Oh, sure I am.*



KADEN

**B**y the time Friday came, I was more than ready for the weekend. I only had one more meeting to go to, and I'd been looking forward to it since Tuesday. Brooke had sent me a follow-up email, asking to further discuss the deal I'd agreed to with her boss. Seeing her name excited me, which was bizarre.

I hadn't thought about her—or anyone from high school—for so long. Now that I'd run into her, I couldn't wait to see her again.

She was on my mind more than anything else. I wasn't distracted at work. I got my shit done. But still, whenever I had a moment of downtime, it was her face I saw. For how often I replayed the moment of seeing her so shocked, I couldn't simply dismiss her.

With most of my work done, I pulled out my phone to check off one other item on my to-do list. I scrolled through my contact list, seeking my friend who might be able to help me out in a pinch. Not *my* pinch but Dad's.

At Colette's name, I pressed send and exited my office. Pamela waved at me as I left, and by the time I reached the elevators, I got Colette's voicemail.

*Dammit.* I'd hoped to speak with her, not leave a message.

I'd try again.

Once I reached the parking garage, I called again and got a hold of her.

"Hey, Kaden! What's up?" she answered.

"I wanted to call and see about reserving the manor."

Her family home had been converted to a venue for weddings and parties. When Dad first told me he and Margaux were still looking for a location to hold their nuptials, Colette's place was the first place that came to mind. I'd

recently attended a wedding there, a groomsman for when Colette married my friend Tristan. I knew she was eager to build the manor's profile, and with how elegant Dad seemed to want this wedding to be, Colette's place would be perfect.

If it was available.

"For..." Colette hedged for a long moment. "A party?"

"A wedding."

She gasped. "For *you*?"

I chuckled as I headed toward my SUV. Driving in the city could be cumbersome, but after being at the office all day, I sometimes sought the privacy and comfort of my SUV. Impractical for the city, but it suited me.

A strange sense of solitude welcomed me when I entered the vehicle. Quiet, clean, and empty. When I was but one car among the many on the road, it was easy to feel small. Small, but not inferior, just one of the many. In a weirdly philosophical way, it grounded me, reminding me I was only one of the billions on this earth and no moment was guaranteed. Staying in the office and keeping my mind on work made me lose that connection sometimes, and as odd as it might be, driving my SUV through the busy city helped me find myself again.

*Who the hell am I kidding? I just want to get away for a minute.*

Especially Kody, who'd ignored my advice to keep his hands off the new receptionist. He'd already slept with her, and just this morning, she was giving him a cold shoulder and icy looks. It turned out she wasn't just another pretty face to fuck and had wanted more.

"No, not for me. My dad."

"Didn't he just start dating someone?" she asked. Her question came quick, but I didn't pick up on any judgment from her.

*Sure feels like it.* "They've been together for a few months."

"Oh, that's wonderful."

I waited for a smile to come, but I wasn't feeling it. Like Colette, my initial reaction was surprise. I couldn't shake the hunch that Dad and Margaux were moving too fast, but I also realized it wasn't my call. I wasn't in any position to tell them how they should pace their lives.

"Your family manor was the first place I thought of."

"When are they marrying? Have they set a date?" She giggled. "I'm sure they have a date in mind to be ready to secure a location."

I gave her the date. "They've already sent out invites."

“Oh! Wow. Okay, well, looking through the calendar here, we do have that day available. The whole weekend would be free.”

Now I smiled. I was still on the fence about the rush for Dad and Margaux’s wedding, but I looked forward to helping Colette. She’d converted the manor into a wedding and party venue to keep the building running, and I was happy to be able to help her secure a reservation. Dad confessed that he and Margaux wanted this to be the event of the year. Whatever packages Colette offered, I’d take the top tier. Colette would be able to pad her profile and add great pictures to further boost her manor’s reputation as an exclusive, highly sought destination.

“What if you and your father came out to see the manor next weekend? I’d love to show you the grounds and discuss the options.”

“Sure.”

“We’ve got a wedding on Saturday. It would be a great way to show you the setup and see what we can offer.”

I chuckled, smiling as I joined the traffic that would eventually bring me to Brooke’s office. “No need to sell it.” *So long as you’re available and Dad is satisfied, it’s a done deal.*

“No, I insist. It’s critical to make sure the manor would work or not. For such a once-in-a-lifetime event, it should be as perfect as possible.”

“Well, twice in a lifetime,” I corrected her. “I’ve got it on my calendar for Saturday. Thanks, again, Colette. I’m glad it’s not already booked.”

After I hung up with her, I sighed and turned up the music to relax and prepare myself for facing Brooke again.

*If I even will.*

I couldn’t remember the last time I was this excited and eager to see a woman again.

While I wasn’t the player Kody was, I enjoyed dating here and there. Going for the quick, easy lays got boring after a while. It was fun to find a woman to have fun with for a night, but the thrill of hitting on a woman and getting her naked paled in comparison to this desire to see Brooke again.

*Is it because I knew her before?* She looked nothing like what she did in high school. It seemed like the contrast of what I remembered of her from years ago intrigued me even more.

When did she get all those tats? Why those designs? I’d only gotten a peek of what was revealed at the end of her sleeves, and I wanted to see more, to follow every line and admire what she thought she needed on her

forever.

Another thought clung to the image of her in my head. Each time I thought about what she was like back as a teenager, guilt nagged me. She'd had a shitty experience, and shame bloomed again as I recalled the part I played in the whole thing.

I soon pulled up to their building. Valets were convenient, but now that I was here, I wanted to take the extra few minutes of reaching her floor. I parked myself and headed inside, rehearsing what *not* to do.

If I saw her, I couldn't be struck dumb like last time. No more of that awkward silence and staring while I waited for my brain to catch up. I'd never claim to having the same instant charm that Kody had with women. Secretaries, assistants, and the like—I could butter them up without a problem. Being nice went a hell of a long fucking way to getting people to want to help you out.

But the woman I'd been thinking about all week didn't fall in that category.

Brooke wasn't a staff member. She wasn't a business associate for a company I was engaging in a deal with.

She was something else. I couldn't wait for a chance to get to know how the quiet nerd in high school had become a bombshell who rendered me speechless.

I reached her floor and headed inside. The elderly woman sat at the front receptionist counter again, not the ditzy young girl who couldn't joke.

"Sandra, hello," I said. Unlike Kody, I never forgot a name.

She beamed at me, and the woman who'd been leaning over to speak with her stood up. I stopped myself from staring at her ass again—*fuck me, that skirt was a trap*—and faced Brooke. It wasn't just her skirt. The blouse, the blazer. Every stitch of fabric clung to her, showing off her curves and making me want to peel back the layers to see her tattoos.

Not to see them, but to trace them with my finger and my tongue.

"Mr. Wagner," she greeted, clasping her hands together in front of her. Her back was ramrod straight with perfect posture. Standing like that, her cleavage was even more pronounced.

I was *not* my twin. I wouldn't fucking ogle her, especially given how much she might cling to what happened in high school.

"Brooke," I said. I wasn't going backward with this formal shit. She knew my name, but I had a hunch I'd have to earn the chance of hearing her say it



in that sweet, sexy voice of hers. I put my hand in my pocket, and just as I'd hoped it might, the action pulled her gaze lower.

*Two can play this game, baby.*

She blinked only a couple of times. It was all the break she needed to snap out of checking me out.

*Who is this?*

Last time, she'd been shocked. I had been too. But over the course of a week, she'd found some grit to face me so coolly like this. Like I was any other man who could've walked through those doors.

"It's nice to see you again," I told her, meaning every word. "I'm here to meet with Todd about our deal."

She nodded once, a curt and firm acknowledgment. "Mr. Ellis is unavailable at the moment."

"Oh. Sure. I can wait." *And have a minute to chat with you.* I hadn't missed the secretary eyeing us from behind her counter. *Hopefully somewhere private.*

Brooke shook her head. "He's not coming back for the rest of the day. I will be managing the account. He has asked that I take over this deal, and as such, today's meeting will be with me. From here on out, all points of contact with Halden Inc. will be with me."

She delivered every single word with bold authority. Confident and cool. Almost daring, like she expected to have an issue with me. *I can't blame her.*

I bit my lower lip, hiding a smile. *She's really grown into herself.* Gone was the quiet teenager. In her place was a determined woman who wouldn't take shit from anyone.

"Will that be a problem?" She arched one brow and tilted her head.

"No. No problem at all."



BROOKE

“**T**his way, please.” I gestured for Kaden to follow me down the hall. As I passed the receptionist station, Sandra sat up and winked at me, mouthing *you tell him, girl*.

I had to turn away from him just to give myself a breather from looking at him. He didn’t request to speak with Todd instead. He simply nodded and agreed that it wouldn’t be a problem to handle this account with me.

*I can’t believe I did that!* Kaden wouldn’t have been the first man to hear that *don’t fucking mess with me* tone. Sometime between graduation and now, I’d found my backbone. But standing up to him and projecting authority threw me off. I couldn’t help but feel like an imposter telling *him* how things would go. The last time I’d dealt with him, I’d been in a totally different position, inferior to him and his twin. In high school, I was vulnerable and eager to not make waves to stay under everyone’s radar.

That couldn’t apply now, but I couldn’t ignore the feeling I was faking this tough persona with him.

“We can go over that contract in my office just ahead,” I told him, keeping my tone firm and reminding him I was in charge. No vulnerability here. I was an independent, headstrong working woman, and he’d be a fool to assume otherwise. If he hoped to play any games with me and treat me like the meek ugly duckling he remembered from high school, he had another thing coming.

I glanced over my shoulder to face him as I spoke. He hadn’t said a word since we entered the hallway, and that quiet unnerved me more. He glanced up, caught red-handed checking out my ass. I looked at him before facing

forward.

He had the nerve to smile, not apologize or look away.

*Men.*

“Nice office,” he said as I let him precede me.

I narrowed my eyes as he sat in the one chair that faced mine behind the desk. *What?* I paused while his back was to me, analyzing his words. I did all right here, but the one window didn’t offer a grand view of the city. *Is he mocking me? Trying to remind me I’m less-than somehow?* I was sure he had a whole fucking suite at the Wagner Industries building.

“I have that same mouse.” He pointed at it. “Helps my tendinitis.”

I approached my chair, picking at that extra information he gave me. *Why would he have tendinitis? He looks like he spends plenty of time at the gym and can tend to his fitness. And why do I care?*

“Oh.” I sat, keeping a level gaze on his as I prayed I emulated a fraction of the badass I wanted to be in front of him. “Overused it?”

A blush stole across my face as the first idea of what he could do with his hand hit me.

*Oh, my God. What the fuck? Stop. Just stop.* I schooled myself not to react. I kept my gaze locked on his, but he gave in to a slow, sexy smile.

*Dammit.* He’d had the same damn thought. This meeting was about that contract I’d sent him, and this wasn’t the time for either of us to be thinking about him masturbating.

*Head in the game. Come on, Brooke.* I cleared my throat and straightened my already straight piles of paper.

“From tennis,” he finally replied. “Not sure what’s on *your* mind.”

I couldn’t look at him just yet. That blush warmed my cheeks again and I cleared my throat. Hadn’t I decided there would be no games played here? *Then again, I’d walked right into that one.*

“Thank you for addressing your concerns about the points on page two.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t call them *concerns*.” He leaned back in his chair, crossing his leg so his ankle rested on the opposite knee. “Just ideas.”

I blinked. “I wasn’t aware you were in the mood for debating semantics.”

“Do you want to know what kind of a mood I’m in?”

I didn’t flinch at all. “No.”

His smile fell, and I could have grinned at how good it felt to shoot him down. Maybe now he’d understand this was about business. He didn’t speak again as I addressed each of his flagged comments on the draft. I doubted

they were *his*. He probably had a lackey to do the grunt work for him, in which case, I wondered if I could find a way to avoid dealing with Kaden and instead just speak with his assistant.

“No.”

I looked up and frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Typically *no* means the opposite of *yes*.”

“I am aware. I’ve used a dictionary before.”

“And aced English. Or was that your friend? What was her name? I thought I read somewhere that she’s an author.”

*Paige*. She’d sent me a copy of her first novel, but I was never into horror.

“Mr. Wagner,” I tried again.

“Kaden.” His brows dipped as he regarded me, annoyed. “You know my name.”

“Mr. Wagner, this discussion has been scheduled to discuss—”

He pointed. “You said the same word twice.”

I slapped my pen to the table. “Are you trying to piss me off? Or does it come naturally for you?”

A colleague did a double-take as they walked down the hall, shooting me an *oh shit* expression at my open door.

*Real professional there, Brooke*. I pursed my lips and steadied my breaths. He was *not* going to do this to me. I’d busted my butt to get to where I was and his presence wouldn’t knock me back a step.

“Easy, easy.” He lowered his hand in a *simmer down* motion. “I’ll admit, you’ve thrown me off. I’m not sure what to say here.”

While I was glad to have thrown him off, I wasn’t sure what other option he was looking for here. “Business.” I tapped my finger on the papers old-fashioned Todd insisted on printing out. “We’re here to talk about this contract, this deal.”

*Not this bickering and bantering nonsense you’re trying for*.

He lowered his foot and scooted to the edge of his seat. No longer looking relaxed and easygoing, he seemed driven, narrowing his eyes at me. He was intrigued. “I’d rather catch up. It’s been years.”

I shrugged.

“How’ve you been? Come on, it won’t kill you to make small talk, will it?”

“As I said, the timeline for this product cannot be—”

He groaned, and as he dropped his head back, I watched the cords of the muscles in his neck flex. “I’m curious. Okay?”

“—amended to suit the specifications you’ve set forth here.”

Staring at me mulishly, he waited for me to finish.

“While Halden Inc. strives to accommodate all projects, that date simply won’t work,” I said.

I expected him to try to goad me again. “What date would work?” he asked.

*Well, that was easy.* I told him, leaning in to show the dates I’d scribbled on the margin of the paper.

“Okay,” he conceded.

“Okay?” Again, I was counting on an argument.

“Okay,” he repeated. “I trust what you say. If my proposed timeline isn’t possible for justifiable reasons, then it isn’t.”

*Huh.* The idea that Kaden could be accommodating and pleasant to work with still seemed at odds with what I knew about his personality. He’d impressed Todd quite quickly, but I knew the real Kaden. *From before.* Like Rena tried to tell me, I’d changed since high school, and maybe Kaden had too.

“Now.” He leaned his forearms on the desk and folded his hands together. Slanting toward me like that should have seemed imposing, like he wanted to crowd my space. He only appeared driven and determined to chat with me the way he wanted to. “How’ve you been?”

I screamed internally. “This is a business meeting.”

“Then have a drink with me,” he countered.

I slapped my hand on the desk. “Have you listened to a single word I said?”

His chuckle had me smiling a teeny bit. “Sorry, not sorry. I had to try. Just know that you intrigue me. And I’m not like the seventeen-year-old you remember.”

“Thank God for that,” I muttered.

He furrowed his brow. It almost looked like a pout and I resisted another laugh.

“Now this remark you’ve flagged on the last graph.”

“How’s your mother doing?”

I dropped my pen again. He was winning. I couldn’t handle these damn interruptions, and since he’d changed to asking about her, I softened a little.

What would it hurt to do this small talk and appease him? Then he'd shut up and pay attention. "She's doing well, thank you." When he only smiled, triumphant he'd cracked my guard, I sighed.

"How's your dad?" I asked out of mere courtesy. The crap he'd pulled in high school had me finding my backbone, but I didn't have to be a bitch.

I wasn't expecting the grin that preceded his reply. "He's great. He's getting married, actually."

"What?" I raised my brows and laughed. "Married? I'm shocked your ultra-wealthy dad would risk his inheritance with a new bride."

"I assume there will be a pre-nup, though I will admit Margaux is very sweet."

*But not a replacement for your mom?*

I smiled a sly grin. "Well, you better hope so." A sigh floated past my lips as I set my elbow on my desk and propped my chin in my hand. "I love weddings."

"They haven't finalized a location yet, but it's clear they're excited."

*Are you?*

Knocks sounded on my door, and we both looked up. Sandra poked in, saying, "I'm heading out." She beamed at Kaden, then me. "Anything else you need?"

I frowned, realizing all the back-and-forth Kaden put me through extended our meeting well past when I thought I'd be heading home for the day. "Oh. I didn't realize it was so late. Sorry, Sandra. You didn't have to wait up for me."

"Nonsense. I couldn't figure out my Wordle, so I was stuck sitting there."

"Don't tell me it's got another double consonant." Kaden groaned good-naturedly.

Sandra winked. "Okay, I won't tell ya."

*Who is this nice, charming, normal guy who can relate to our secretary about a simple word puzzle?* I frowned, shaking my head. "No, I'm good. Thanks!"

She turned and called back, "Have a good weekend."

Kaden stood, setting his big hands on the back of my chair. "I'm not sorry I kept you so long."

I rolled. "Gee. Thanks." I hadn't kept an eye on the time either. Saying it had been *fun* would be a lie, but Kaden was starting to wear me down.

He removed a card from his wallet and grabbed a pen from my desk. "I

mean it. I'd like to catch up. It's not every day you run into a blast from the past."

*Especially one you screwed over, huh?*

He finished scribbling on the back of his card. "If there are any other details that need my attention, just send me an email and we'll smooth them out. But if you'd like to get a drink, a dinner, anything." He handed me the card at the same time he set my pen down. "That's my personal number."

No words came to me as he smiled and turned to leave.

I stood there, shell-shocked and uneasy in his absence. After spending an hour trying to fend off his questions and focus on me, not the contract, I was confused.

*What is this?* I couldn't place my feelings as I stared at the doorway. Was I missing him? Wanting to continue talking about anything not related to work? Or was I supposed to be relieved that he was gone with his nosy, pestering questions as he pretended to care about what I'd been up to for years?

As I rubbed my temple, I looked down at the card he'd given me.

"Catch up?"

I shook my head. *Catching up* sounded a lot like *talk about the good old times*. And there were none. Kaden represented the worst part of senior year, and that belonged in my past.

*I want nothing to do with those memories.*

Yet, I had a harder time figuring out if I wanted anything to do with him now beyond this partnership in the office.





KADEN

## Twelve Years Ago

**I** hate chemistry.

I yawned as I shoved my things into my locker and grabbed the biggest, heaviest textbook from the metal shelf inside. *Chemistry: The Central Science* could go suck a bag of dicks for all I cared. None of it made sense. Since Mom died, I could handle most of my courses. Kody had given up until Dad threatened to revoke our allowances. That was a big enough wake-up call for him, since he loved driving that big truck everywhere and it ate up gas. For me, it took seeing Dad late one night, crying quietly into his hands as he wondered aloud how he'd raise us to not be assholes without a partner like Mom.

I hadn't taken it to heart in a self-esteem way. Dad loved us. But after Mom passed, all three of us lost our way and fumbled. Dad worked too much those first couple of months. I assumed he was trying to bottle his grief. Kody was acting up, but that wasn't anything new. He always bordered too close to being an asshole, but lately, he'd been more of a jerk than usual.

And me? I wasn't sure how to behave and what to do. I'd gone numb, but seeing Dad so desperate not to screw up being our only parent sobered me that night. Afterward, I paid attention and made sure my grades didn't spiral any further. I toned down my attitude and stopped the sullen, silent treatment I'd made a habit of, but being aloof wasn't a bad thing. Some people needed

space to grieve. I was one of them.

Chemistry, though, would never be something I'd look forward to.

As I entered the classroom, the teacher glanced up and frowned at my tardiness.

*Take it or leave it. I'm here, aren't I?*

"Kaden, your group will be at station four today, discussing the laws of thermodynamics." He glanced at his paper. "You'll be partnered with Brooke."

I glanced at her, and she looked down at her book. Her short curly hair seemed frizzier than usual, held back with a single gold clip. Just below it, the tip of her ear turned pink. I couldn't think of a single time she hadn't been blushing or shy about being put on the spot. She never raised her hand to answer a question and always spoke too quietly.

Yeah, it would be a blast doing a presentation with her.

I rolled my eyes and headed toward the group I'd been assigned to.

Kody watched as I walked across the room, but I was still too mad at him to look his way. Did he seriously have to take the last order of fries at lunch?

"So, um, Kaden, we each have to do a law," Paige said. I knew she was Brooke's BFF. They were inseparable, even going to the Homecoming dance together. That one pothead said Paige was into ladies, but what did he know? That punk was always spreading rumors for the hell of it.

"We'll take the second law," Brooke hurried to say.

"Is that an easy one?" I asked.

She smirked at me. "It's easier."

I shrugged. *Sounds good to me.* I appreciated that she knew how to avoid the harder work. Once we buckled down to our tasks, I realized it wouldn't be so bad. Brooke didn't stare at me. Or if she did in that annoying way girls sometimes did, she was stealthy enough to hide it well. She didn't ask me a gazillion lame questions, either, pretending that being partnered with me would elevate her status.

I didn't get the whole thing behind her band T-shirts and the weird acronyms and doodles she and Paige had penned on their hands. It was probably all girl talk and inside jokes, and I wasn't interested. That curling line she'd drawn on her hand captured my eye a couple of times, but I was too busy trying to figure out this presentation to think about it.

"It's simple," she said when I erased a paragraph of my responses three times in a row. "Hot goes to cold when they're trapped together."

“You mean like when Kody’s in the janitor’s closet with the principal’s daughter?” one of our group members said. He lifted his arms and mimed making out. “She’s a frigid ice queen.”

Another student giggled. “And Kody’s hawt.” She fanned herself.

“And what, he’s chopped liver?” Brooke joked, pointing her pencil at me. I almost laughed.

The girl’s face turned so hot I wondered if she’d rival a tomato.

“Oh, hey, she’s our live demonstration,” another teased of her blushing.

Someone else leaned in and whispered, “Did you seriously just tell Kaden Wagner he’s *hot*? To his face?”

The girl covered her face. “I said *Kody* was,” she hissed.

“They’re twins!” another said and laughed.

“Okay, okay. Settle down over there.” The teacher clapped his hands. “Thermodynamics isn’t *that* fun.”

“I don’t know,” Kody said from across the room, noticing the girl blushing. “It looks like her face is on fire. I didn’t realize we could do experiments today.”

I shot my brother a tense look. He never knew when to shut up. I loved him, but he could be such a jerk sometimes.

“Okay, people. Ten minutes to go.” The teacher pointed at the clock whose minute hand moved too damn slowly.

I glanced at Brooke. She frowned at the girl who still blushed furiously for not realizing what she said. “Hey,” Brooke said.

“Shut up.” The girl snarled at her. “Like *you* could say anything that would make me feel better.”

I frowned. Girls could be catty and mean and spiteful. I liked that I never had to deal with the psychological warfare girls used at school. Kody and I solved our shit with our fists. Or when we weren’t in the mood to fight, we’d be upfront and direct. As a spectator of teenage girl drama for the last three years, I swore that cattiness had to be exhausting.

Paige shot Brooke a look and frowned.

“Just to clarify, I didn’t even hear what you said,” I said, trying to diffuse the awkwardness.

The girl rolled her eyes, but I saw a smile she tried to hide as she looked away.

“Hot to cold,” Brooke reminded me as she tapped her pencil to my paper, getting back to work. “Like the mood swings of some of our cohorts.”

I grinned, fixing my answer to better match hers.

“Co-what?” another student said. He’d been napping until now.

I copied down what Brooke wrote while also making sure it sounded like my voice, and she kept a lookout for the teacher noticing. We were to work together, not copy and turn in the same thing. It was harder than it should have been because my vocabulary wasn’t as good as hers.

Quiet and smart. I respected that.

Brooke didn’t speak up for the rest of the period. I was quiet too, rushing to finish the assignment for the day. I never would have managed without her steering me away from the wrong answers, and I appreciated her even more for not being so obvious in staring at me. Brooke didn’t seem like someone who worshiped the ground I walked on. Each time we debated an answer, she stood firm to her reply and refused to be swayed to an incorrect one, pointing at references in the big-ass textbook.

After class, I went through the rest of my day without sparing her another thought. We seldom ran into each other this year. Last year, I’d had three classes and a lab with her, but as seniors, we only shared chemistry.

“Sucks you got stuck with the weirdo,” Kody said much later at the end of the day. I’d waited for him at his locker, a sacrifice I had to make since he drove. After school, I was ragged. Every day, no matter how much sleep I got, if I ate well, or whether I had tests, I was exhausted by the time the last bell rang.

As soon as we’d get home, I would zone out. Kody would raid the kitchen for snacks while I sprawled out on the couch and flipped through the channels without pausing long enough to watch anything. Then once my stomach growled, we’d switch. I’d go snack while he put something dumb on.

Dad never gave us a hard time about it. He said he could remember being a teenager himself and wanting to sleep often. Mom used to remark that we simply needed to decompress after being “on” all day, and that made perfect sense.

Dad wanted me and Kody to start working at his company right after graduation. I welcomed the challenge. Without Mom around, it was better to stay busy, not idle—less time to dwell and think. Still, I hoped he’d let us have this siesta hour.

“The weirdo?” I asked. *When was I stuck with a weirdo?* “Oh, in chemistry?”

“Yeah. Brooke.” He snorted and twirled the keys around on his index finger. “Such a weirdo.”

Knowing Kody, that was a tame insult. Still, it was just who he was. One day, I was sure he’d meet someone who’d be a bigger jerk than him and teach him to think twice about his behavior. I loved him, but even I got annoyed with the way he treated others.

“She’s not weird.”

“What’s with those stupid sayings and shit they write on each other’s hand?” He reached the driver’s door and opened it while I went to the passenger door. “It’s dumb.”

“Maybe it’s some kind of code or inside jokes. Making acronyms and stuff.” I shrugged and got in.

“Code?” He slid in and started the engine. “Like, what? They’re kids and need a secret language?”

“I don’t know.” I didn’t care, and I hadn’t thought about it much. To each their own, right? But now that he’d reminded me about those marks of pen ink, I remembered the swirls of the design on her finger. Artsy. It was cool.

“She’s weird,” Kody concluded.

*You think everyone is weird.*

“And what was that Breanna chick doing? She was red as a beet.”

“Deanna,” I corrected.

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah. Her. What was that about?”

I shook my head. I wasn’t going to tell him that another girl was talking about him. He already had too big of an ego. “I don’t know. I wasn’t paying attention.”

“I heard she gives good head.”

It was my turn to roll my eyes. I reached for the radio and turned it on to drown him out.

“Hey, not that again,” he complained. “I’m sick of that song.”

I changed the station, but it took three more arguments to settle on one.

“I can’t wait until we don’t have to share this truck,” he complained.

“I know.” I crossed my arms and yawned as he drove us home.

“One day, we won’t have to.” He nodded, but I couldn’t tell if it was in agreement with me or if he was bobbing his head to the music. “We’ll have our own rides. Anything we want.”

*Big head and a big attitude to go with it.* “That’ll be nice.”

“I worried about Dad for a while, you know?” He shrugged.

“Yeah.” I told him about that night I found him crying.

“I heard him too. Made me realize how much of a jerk I was being.”

*A jerk you were being?* I held back a scoff.

“At least we can count on you to round us out. Dad was a workaholic.”

*Still is.*

“I was a jerk.”

*Still are.*

“And you’re supposed to be the nice one.”





## BROOKE

The Wagner Industries partnership had been big news at work all week. Todd was thrilled, Sandra reminded everyone to pull their weight for the new and promising future, and I'd dealt with the schedule of the account. After that meeting with Kaden, I couldn't stop thinking about him or working with him.

I woke up on Saturday and wished it wasn't a rest day. Burning off extra energy would have helped me get over the constant thoughts that pulled me back to him. I'd made that mistake before, though. Going too hard and ignoring the need for one rest day would strain my muscles and set me back again. I was notorious for working out too hot too soon, but I knew better since the last time I'd pulled my hamstring.

At least my mind circled back to the Kaden who'd barely fit in the chair in my office. That tall blond with piercing blue eyes who'd tried his damndest to steer the conversation to anything but the contract I'd perfected. Dwelling on the *old* Kaden would put me in a glum, pissy mood, and that just wouldn't do. Not today.

It'd been a while since we'd indulged, but today was our girls' day. Rena had texted me last night to double-check we were still on. At first, I worried she was trying to reschedule because she'd found a date. Instead, she'd bombarded me with memes about being excited and counting down time. Her emojis were equally enthusiastic. She couldn't wait to tell me something big.

A promotion? She'd received one a few months ago.

A sale at that artisan jeweler site she liked? But she'd recently decided to downsize her collection. It wasn't hoarding, according to her, if the items

being collected were so small to begin with. But come on. How many pairs of funky earrings did she need?

I didn't know what she was so excited about, but I looked forward to it. Rena had a stubbornly bubbly personality. It was impossible to stay down or confused in her company. She would distract me from thinking about Kaden or work. Plus, it'd been too long since we'd made a day of it.

Lunch, pedi, movie, then ice cream.

At the Mexican bistro we'd chosen because their tacos were heaven, she practically wiggled in her seat.

"How in the hell are *you* here before me?" I grinned as I slid into the booth.

"Guess what?"

"I have been! All night I tried to guess. Ever since your text. You win the lottery or something?"

She beamed, turning her phone around on the laminate tabletop to show me the screen.

Images of beaches and gorgeous architecture slid as I swiped. *Contiki Tour*, one flashy caption read.

I gaped at her. "You didn't!"

"I *so* did." Her smile pulled so tight I thought she'd combust. Booking one of these vacations had been on her bucket list since I met her. Traveling to Spain, Greece, and Portugal was her dream, and here she was going for it.

"Wow!" I raised my brows as I skimmed the images again. All that warm sand, the vendor marts, the cuisine, beautiful hotel suites. "I'm shocked."

She giggled. "Really? I've always wanted to do this."

"No, no. I know." I shrugged, still smiling. "You just booked it?"

"Why not, though?"

"You're going alone?" I glanced up from looking at the images.

"You wanna come?"

I snorted. She'd asked it almost as a dare. A joke. "Well, I mean, yeah, I'd love to, but I can't."

Rena's sigh was expected. "Uh huh."

"Hey. You can book something spontaneous for yourself all you want." *Or maybe it's not that impulsive if she's wanted to do it for so long.* "But I've got commitments."

"Such as?"

"Work." And just like that, the image of Kaden smiling at my lame slip of

the tongue filled my mind. *I cannot believe I teased him about masturbating too much.* I resisted slapping my forehead.

“It’s always work with you.”

I handed her the phone and grabbed a menu. “Yeah. I’m a workaholic. I know.”

“I was watching that one girl on TikTok. Something she said just got to me.”

I arched a brow.

“Burn the fancy candles. Wear the expensive shoes.”

“Go on that dream vacation,” I finished for her, nodding. That philosophy could apply in some cases. “I hear you. But seriously, work is going to be intense for a while.”

“Oooh. You got that client, then? The guy you knew in high school?”

I nodded, but I wasn’t eager to talk about him yet. Rena’s trip was big news. As the expert patient listener she was, she’d drag out a conversation about Kaden until she felt she’d subbed as a therapist. “I’m excited for you. Really, I am.”

She pointed at me and narrowed her eyes. “Objection! Changing the topic.”

“This isn’t a courtroom.” *Is that even a legal thing they can shout?* “I am.”

“Changing the subject?”

“No. Yes. But the trip. This is huge. It’ll be awesome.”

Her inhale had a full-body effect, her shoulders rising and lips smiling. “It will be.”

Envy hit me, just a little. She looked so damn radiant and happy. “I’m proud of you, too. You’re not waiting for someone to go with you.”

She shook her head, browsing the menu. “Burn the fancy candles. Why wait for anything?”

I envied her attitude, wishing it could come so easily to me, too. Heading out on a vacation sounded like a luxury with my work schedule, but I refused to be jealous.

After we ordered, she shared more details with me about the trip. Her excitement only grew, but she was like a dog after a bone. Once our food arrived and we dug in, she reminded me. “Now, you. Your new client. Did the deal go through? I’ve been wondering.”

My news about the Wagner deal didn’t thrill her like her announcement

of the vacation did to me. She paid sharp attention, though. I filled her in on the meeting yesterday. As I'd expected, she cried laughing at my dumb joke.

"It *wasn't* a joke," I argued.

"Of all things to say." She wiped her eyes. "At least he was a good sport about it."

I rolled my eyes then shrugged.

"I Googled him after you mentioned him that day. He doesn't *look* like the kind of man who'd need to take care of himself."

I shot her a stern look and frowned. I wasn't commenting on how sexy Kaden was. He'd been cute in high school but was devastating as a man. "But the way he asked me to get a drink?" I shrugged.

"I thought you said he asked you to dinner."

"Same thing."

"Maybe you should go."

My drink was empty, and I wished for something else to distract myself with. Anything but considering what she said. "How is that the first conclusion you come to?"

Rena held her hands up in a *why not* gesture. "Just see what he's looking for. Why should you stay in limbo over it?"

*You've got to stop taking TikTok videos to heart. They're not philosophers.*

"I'm not interested in that." To hell with what *he* wanted.

"All right, but this could be an opportunity for you to talk things through with him."

"About what he did back then?"

She nodded.

I grimaced, both from her suggestion and the indigestion from the tacos. Why did getting old have to suck? I used to love these so much. "I've moved on from high school. I've put all of that in my past, and I think it should stay there."

I hadn't convinced her. "Okay, but you're clearly thrown off by him coming back in your life now. You've got to see him again. You'll have to talk to him for work. It won't be easy if you're still bothered by him for something that can be buried in the past."

What she suggested was unearthing it all.

Her lips tipped up in a sly grin.

"Well hello there, devil's advocate," I said.

She giggled. “Or you could use this as a way to get back at him for what he did senior year.”

“What, lead him on? Mess with him?” Those appealed to me. Revenge sounded tasty—so long as I didn’t complicate the business end of it.

“Something. Anything. It’d beat you holding on to it and not knowing what to do about him.”

But now that she’d laid it out, I couldn’t dismiss the allure. What if I did hear him out? He could have my full attention outside of the office. No obstacles like needing to discuss a contract would interfere. I’d be all ears. Over a drink or sharing a dinner, he could explain what he did to me. I hadn’t been waiting all these years for an apology. Hell, I’d never expected to see him again. Now that I had, I deserved a reason for the way he’d treated me.

“I do want to talk to him.” If I didn’t, our past would remain wedged between us, fodder for more awkwardness and antagonism. I preferred to avoid both of those on the job.

“Don’t wait to burn the fancy candles,” Rena sing-songed it and winked.

*Time’s a wasting. I get it.* Inspired by her encouragement, I bit my lip and reached for my purse. “Okay.”

“Okay? That’s it?” Rena giggled.

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “What do I have to lose?” Kaden Wagner couldn’t hurt me anymore.

“Damn, you already put his number in your phone?”

I didn’t face her as I unlocked the device and went to my contacts. “I didn’t want to lose the card.”

“Mmm-hmmm,” she teased.

“What should I say?” I asked as I opened a new text box.

“Did you overuse it jerking off?”

I tossed my balled-up napkin at her and read as I typed. “Dinner sounds like a great idea.” After I sent it, I set my phone on the table, screen down. “There. Done.”

“Not the most original greeting, but I’m sure it’ll do.”

“I’m sure he won’t reply. And I won’t be waiting for it.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, the phone buzzed.

She grinned. “Famous last words.”

I picked it up and read, “Giovanni’s. Eight sharp. See you there.”

“Well.” Rena crossed her arms, looking too smug for my liking. “That was fast.”

I frowned. “He’s telling me? What if I don’t like Italian?”

“Said no sane woman ever. Their pizzas are even better than their pastas.” She checked her watch. “And you’ve got plenty of time.”

A hit of nerves had me furrowing my brow. Anxiety was no stranger. It’d been a while since I let it get to me. I picked up my phone to check the time, ensuring I wouldn’t have to rush. A shower, change, and then maybe style my hair to be down. A burp threatened. Ugh. Why did I have to eat smelly, spicy tacos today?

Checking my reflection in my screen as I got ready, I hated to admit I was so nervous. I was no badass. He still got to me. But could I handle him as an adult now, and move on from what he did before?

“Brooke.” Rena pushed my phone down. “It’ll be fine.”

“Am I stupid? Is it really stupid to even care or want an explanation or...” I swallowed, hating how he could unravel me.

*What are you playing at, Kaden?*

“Not stupid. I think it could be a start for, um, closure. Clear the air about the past and then you’re free to work together on this deal like two perfectly normal and accommodating adults.”

I nodded.

But the idea of closure didn’t seem to apply to Kaden.

Not at all.



## KADEN

I chose Giovanni's because it was my favorite place to find decent, original food. It was low-key and not too fancy. Families sat at tables the same as couples on dates did. Knowing the owner didn't hurt because a tournament being held nearby had the eatery packed. Franco would always make sure I had a table.

Kody was more likely to flaunt his wealth and act superior. I didn't, and picking simple, classic Giovanni's for a dinner with Brooke showed that difference.

*I can't believe she texted me.*

I would've had to be blind and fucking dumb to miss her annoyance on Friday. She'd wanted to discuss the contract, but it was the last thing on my mind. When she informed me that she'd be overseeing this deal from here on out, I was elated. Her sassy authority intrigued me, too. We'd be working together, and I doubted a single second of it would be dull.

Seated in her office, I couldn't focus. I had struggled to concentrate on the contract or any pieces of paper she held up with precise highlighted marks. Sure, I remembered to make my points known—and they were minor details, not deal-breaking hard points—but I'd been swept away by her.

It helped when she'd lightened up to chitchat, but I wasn't deluded into assuming I'd won her over.

*Wait.* Was I trying to win her over? We already had a deal between us, but that was strictly business.

I'd asked her out for a drink or dinner because I couldn't put a lid on this curiosity. I refused to believe she wasn't the least bit intrigued about me.



I'd been seated for several minutes, and all the while, I readjusted my glass, lined up my utensils, and shifted from crossing my left ankle over my right and back again.

*Nervous?* I checked myself, acknowledging I was fidgeting. That wasn't my style. I wouldn't admit nervousness, but I was impatient. I didn't mind waiting on others. I made exceptions when the unexpected popped up, like when Todd had to step out to take that call. Life happened.

But the energy coursing through me now was born of excitement. I was looking forward to this date.

*No. Not a date. Just dinner, for fuck's sake.* I doubted she'd sweep our past under the rug. Memories of high school still struck me, and that was a big part of the reason why I wanted the chance to hash this out with her. To catch up, truly, and figure out the best way to move forward now that we'd found each other again.

I was excited, though. No doubt about it, I looked forward to the moment she'd walk that sexy ass up to our table. Realizing just how much I was counting down the seconds clued me in to the fact I hadn't experienced this thrill in a while. I didn't know the last time I'd been this excited to see a woman.

I wasn't sure if I'd ever felt this particular excitement.

As the minutes passed and she didn't show, that feeling evaporated. It looked like she would stand me up. I could hardly blame her for ghosting me. Still, the disappointment hit hard.

I stood, ready to head to the bar and settle my tab, when she showed.

Head high and shoulders back, she strolled in with a confidence that turned me on. No more meek, quiet Brooke here. This woman was bold and sure of herself, not even wincing in regret that she'd kept me waiting.

She'd done it on purpose. I should have hated that she'd made me sweat and wait for her, but dammit, I had to give her credit.

I smiled, putting my hand in my pocket to treat myself to the opportunity to check her out. She wasn't in the smart and almost prim workplace attire I'd seen her in so far. No pantsuits and neutral dresses here. In fitting jeans, bold red heels, and a cut-off shirt beneath a leather jacket, she looked nothing like the consummate professional who'd firmly insisted on discussing the contract.

She looked sexy, dressed down in a raw, hip, and almost edgy way, showing me another layer to her. I had a brief flashback to her in those alt-

rock band T-shirts in high school, and I appreciated that she hadn't lost her style but furthered it into a bold statement.

*Do not mess with me.* That was what she said, but the slow smile on her lips suggested she might welcome the challenge in case I should try.

"Hi." I held out her chair and relished another chance to be close to her. At the office, her perfume had enticed me to draw in deep breaths and commit her to memory. Here, I was surprised to detect a hint of alcohol.

Had she needed something to take the edge off? Was she nervous?

"Hey." Her simple, almost flippant reply didn't sound timid.

Maybe it was only me who was overthinking all of this.

As she pulled her chair closer, I reclaimed mine and struggled not to stare. Workplace Brooke was beautiful and smart. Casual-dinner Brooke was sexy and edgy.

I was fucked either way.

"Hi."

*Shit.* I'd said that already.

She only smiled.

"Thought you might not show."

*Shit!* I had no business being defensive or accusing her. She had every right to come or not. I usually had more finesse than this, cool and charming to break the ice.

"You did?" she asked, picking up the menu and breaking eye contact.

Damn, she really wasn't going to mess around.

"I appreciate you coming. I really do look forward to catching up more."

She shrugged. "I'd rather focus on what lies ahead." Glancing at my glass, she asked, "What are you drinking?"

I'd take her lead. If she wanted to leave the past alone, we could—for now. After we placed our orders, I reminded myself to chill. In her office, she'd softened at the mention of her mom, so I used that as another way to break into the conversation.

It was a good gamble. While the tension between us hung like an awkward cloud, it dissipated. Our drinks came and later the food. Throughout it all, we spoke about what we'd been up to. I told her about college, and she referenced the business school she'd attended. I commented on friends getting married, and she mentioned a best friend booking a Contiki tour. We veered more into talking about work and our jobs than personal things. It didn't feel like an interview, but I wanted to know more.

“Work is good and all, but what else have you been up to? What about your life outside the office?”

She smiled, not making eye contact. Her defiance to not face me excited me somehow. Made her more mysterious and not eager to please me like so many others.

“Wouldn’t you like to know.”

*Yes, I would. That’s why I asked.* But I let her claim that point. I’d get another chance to figure her out. Prolonging the suspense thrilled me. If she wanted to play hard to get, I’d bust my ass off to get her.

After she ordered another round of drinks, I realized how much she’d been relying on liquid courage. That was fine. I’d drive. But until she got too tipsy, I was determined to make the most of this night.

“I’m happy to hear that you’re well,” I said. “Truly.”

She lifted her glass to toast that, and we continued chatting.

She didn’t protest when we agreed to call it an evening. While it didn’t feel like a date, I looked forward to seeing her home. She wasn’t drunk, but she showed me an easygoing side to her I wished I could experience again.

As it turned out, Brooke was a fun drunk, not a mean one.

I drove her home, smiling as she shared more about her time of racing up the corporate ladder at Halden Inc. She was proud of her successes and accomplishments, and I was glad for her. It didn’t sting that she failed to ask about me in return. I assumed the alcohol loosened her enough that she adopted a rambling personality.

It was cute.

She swung over in the passenger seat. Her face was inches from mine, and the hooded-lid gaze might have worked another time. She was drunk, no longer tipsy. And the more she fell under the spell of intoxication, the hornier she seemed to be. “Do you wanna come inside?”

I bit my lip to keep from laughing when her hand slipped on the console. She’d moved so abruptly that she was prone to clumsiness. But she didn’t hold back. Losing the sex-kitten approach and dropping the low, seductive purr, she slanted forward giggling. Giggles turned to laughter, which morphed into hysterics.

I chuckled, helping her sit up. I dodged to the side, avoiding a headbutt. “Yeah, let’s get you inside.”

I helped her out of the passenger seat, offering my hand. She tripped only a couple of times toward her door, sliding against me. The movement seemed

to sober her. I wasn't treated to another invitation to do anything more than see her inside, but she remained flirty as we walked in.

"Do you want—" She hiccupped. "Scuze me. Would you care for a cup of coffee?"

"No, no thank you." I smiled as she stumbled to turn off a light.

"Too bright. Um, a cup of tea?"

I shook my head, helping her around an ottoman.

"You just sit tight. I'm going to head to the bathroom."

Wincing, I watched her head to a door to the left. Was she going to puke? Even if she didn't, a hangover was due. I hated the idea that she'd need *that* much alcohol to handle spending time with me, but she wasn't wasted.

*Looking for a silver lining?*

I'd had fun too, and weirdly, helping her home filled me with satisfaction.

I didn't hear any noises from the bathroom, so I helped myself to taking care of her the best I could. It was the least I could do. To the right, I found the kitchen. A quick search through the cabinets got me a glass to fill with water. I snatched a couple of aspirin too. I set them on the nightstand next to her unmade bed, and I smiled at the idea that a professional woman who seemed like a perfectionist would slack in dragging her linens in place.

She exited the bathroom a few moments later. Sans makeup, she looked clean but tired.

"You sure you don't want," she yawned, "a cup of coffee?"

I stood and approached her, holding her arm as another yawn had her listing to the side. "Maybe next time."

*Next time.* That sounded really fucking good.

She peered at me, and I wondered how much she'd remember.

I headed to the door, glancing back at her confused pout. As I left, I smiled and said, "I'll see you at the office."



BROOKE

I woke to the sensation of hammers pounding in my head. Squeezing my eyes shut tight worsened it, but the blackness behind my lids was infinitely better than that god-awful blinding light.

Groaning, I rolled over and slapped at my bed. That fucking alarm.

“Shut up.” It was a beastly moan that butchered the words, but my pinkie touched the smooth surface. I scooped over to grab it. With a bleary slitted gaze, I focused enough to snooze my alarm.

I *never* snoozed. Ever. My morning routine was an unshakable agenda. But this morning, waking with the mother of all hangovers, *never say never* seemed like a good idea.

*Fuck waking up. Screw working out.*

My head throbbed. My tongue seemed glued to the roof of my mouth, dry. Thirst clawed at me as I flopped to my back.

When my arm fell to the cool softness of the mattress, I relished the freedom to lie here sprawled out.

“Stop!”

Groaning at my phone would have seemed juvenile in any other circumstances, but this morning wasn't ordinary. I didn't drink often. Too many empty calories I didn't need if I wanted to avoid being a fat frumpy fool again. Taking care of my body was a practice I'd perfected, and alcohol simply didn't have enough pros to outweigh the cons.

Last night, though, I sure hadn't followed that logic.

I'd started out strong. Or weak. I'd indulged in one drink to settle my nerves about seeing Kaden. But then at dinner, I found it easier to relax with

another round. And another. Then yet another.

I rubbed my head, embracing the darkness.

*How much did I drink?*

Too much, obviously. I replayed ordering them and sipping them as Kaden and I talked about everything *but* what I should have sought closure for. We didn't mention high school at all, and without that topic, we'd gotten along well.

"Fuck."

I enjoyed myself, and as that realization dawned on me, I worried about how much I'd embraced his company. After the second martini, things got blurry. He hadn't ordered as much, and I knew he drove me home.

I opened my eyes too fast and gasped. Flinging my arm at the mattress, I checked that I was alone. A frantic grope of my body proved I wore the same clothes from last night. My fingers didn't smear makeup when I touched my face, though, so I must have had the foresight to wipe it off before I crashed.

*I did crash—alone—didn't I?*

No, I would know. No sex. No anything, it seemed, but regret and shame mixed together in a potent punch.

*What did I do?* Red flags of alarm sobered me but didn't erase the headache. It worsened it. As I sat up and silenced another clock going off on my phone, I tried to remember. Something nagged me. I'd done something, but what? A tiny flicker of embarrassment lingered, and I worried about what I'd done to warrant it.

Another alarm went off.

"Yeah, hot yoga is *not* happening today." I scowled at the low battery icon and reached over for the cord on my nightstand. As I reached over, I spotted a glass of water and two painkillers. I definitely hadn't gotten those. Kaden?

*He came into my room?* He had to have put those there, knowing I'd be in pain after all that alcohol. His gesture was oddly touching, but I wasn't awake or clear-headed enough to appreciate it.

I plugged my phone in and blinked to focus on the line of texts.

Rena: *Hope the dinner is going well. \*wink\**

Rena: *Don't drink too much. You're a lightweight.*

*Gee, really?*

Rena: *Okay you're not replying to any of these. You either didn't go and chickened out or you're still there and having such a good time you can't*

*peek at your phone.*

Rena: *Are you still there?*

Rena: *Okay. Your map says you're there. I hope it's going okay.*

Rena: *Text me when you're home.*

Rena: *Did you invite him over?*

I suspected I might have. Concentrating wasn't happening yet.

Rena: *You should be on your way to hot yoga by now. Text me.*

That one came in this morning.

Rena: *If you don't reply within the hour I'm coming over to make sure you're alive.*

I took the pills and swallowed them. That water went down fast but I needed more. The effort to get out of bed was too taxing to consider.

Brooke: *Hungover. Pity me and bring food?*

She replied immediately.

Rena: *On it, lightweight.*

I set the phone down and cozied back in to nap. She had a key, and I didn't know how long it would take for her to get here. It seemed pointless to waste the comfort of my bed.

I dozed off for a half hour. The door closing woke me, and she entered my bedroom with a bag of reliably greasy fast food that would lubricate my stomach into feeling human again.

*Thank God I didn't puke.*

"I have two theories," she announced. "A, you didn't go at all and drank at that weird, seedy, artsy bar to avoid analyzing why you ghosted him. B, you went and leaned a little too much on needing liquid courage."

I took the water bottle she held out. "No option C?"

She shook her head and sat on the edge of the bed. "I know you too well."

"Something like B and a half," I admitted after I sipped the water and put the water bottle on my nightstand. Placing it there reminded me of finding the glass and medicine Kaden had set there last night.

It was sweet but I couldn't trust *he* was after our past.

She made a gimme motion with her hand. "Do tell."

As I sipped water and nibbled on the greasy hash brown that I only ate because of my hangover, I told her about the date. I admitted that I didn't remember much, but I was firm that I hadn't slept with him. No funny business at all, but I couldn't pinpoint why I felt like I should be embarrassed about something.



“Will you get revenge on him then?” she asked, that mischievous look in her eyes again.

*On the guy who was nice enough to put water and painkillers out for me?* It was such a small thing, but wasn't it the little details that mattered? I shrugged. “I didn't even have a plan for that. I went to see what he was looking for from me.”

“And what's the verdict?”

“He was looking to catch up. And we did.”

She grinned. “And?”

“And I feel like I want to do it again.”

“Catch up on the same catching up you've already done?”

I rubbed my face. “I feel embarrassed about something. I don't know what. Maybe it's nothing. But I need to address that. I need to emphasize that this is a professional relationship.”

“Is it?”

“It should be?”

She patted my leg. “You don't sound too sure about that.”

“I'm not. I started out so strong.”

“You *are* strong.”

I shook my head. “Last night, I was coy and flirty—a badass. I made him wait almost an hour so he'd wonder if I stood him up. Seeing him again got me thinking I *should* look for an opportunity to settle the score with him from high school.”

“Go for it. Get that closure.”

*Should I?* “But it seems petty. I've moved on. I like to think I'm the bigger person here. But seeing him makes me feel like I'm in high school again. It reminds me of all the insecurities I've fought to overcome and still struggle with.”

Facing him and having his full attention was unnerving. In my office, I could have the persona of not taking shit and getting things done. The professional setting was a safety guard. He would be no different from any other person I had to discuss contracts with. At Giovanni's, it wasn't the same, or I didn't feel the same. It was harder to be objective when we joked about simple, random things like pizza toppings, why baseball was more boring than golf, and if Sandra looked more like Rose or Blanche, although she had the spirit of the one and only Dorothy Zbornak.

Without thinking about our past and disregarding the fact we'd be

working together, it could have been the start of something to build on. Not knowing how to interpret him or the feelings he was causing to come to the surface, I felt unsure about it all.

“I’ve gotten stronger, but Kaden makes me feel...”

Rena frowned. “Less than? Fuck him then.”

I shook my head. “No.” I drank more water while searching for a way to describe it. *Keep it simple and honest.* “He makes me feel unsettled.”

Now she grinned. “Unsettled?”

“He makes me feel like I’m standing on rocky ground.”

She winked. “Sounds fun.”

All I could do was smirk.

“Look,” she said as she stood. Her bangles clinked together as she crossed her arms. Lifting her face sent her beaded earrings swaying. “I think this is a good thing.”

I scooched up to sit and hug my pillow. “To be unsettled?”

“I think it’s good for you to have a little mystery in your life. To have some unexpectedness. You’re so razor-focused on work.” She plowed on despite my pout. “Being a workaholic *can* be good. You’re driven. Determined. Both good things. But coupling them with perfectionism and not knowing when to slow down and take a breather *ever*, that’s risky business.”

“It was unexpected to see him at work. I’ll grant you that, but that’s just it. I *know* Kaden.”

“Back then.”

I nodded and yawned. This topic wasn’t boring in the least but I needed more rest to function like I should. Mentally and physically. Still, I had a point to make. “I know what to expect from him. The old him. And being unable to predict him now is throwing me off. I need to know what to expect from him now to be able to decide how to move forward.”

Rena lifted a shoulder and let it fall. “What are your options?”

“Well, I can’t get out of working with him. Todd was firm that I handle the account.”

“Right. Other than that. What are your options?”

“I don’t know.” I hadn’t thought that far ahead yet.

“You could get your revenge. Settle the score with him from what he did in high school.”

I shrugged.

“You could get to know him as a friend. An acquaintance you happen to

also do business with.”

I nodded. “Sure.”

“Or you could consider he could be a nice guy now. A decent man who ‘unsettles’ you. Someone you might want to do more than catch up with.”

Now *that* was looking too far ahead. Too fast.

“You want my advice?”

Snuggling into my pillow, I huffed. “I have a hunch you’ll give it to me regardless if I want it.”

She smiled and lifted a hand. “Just see what happens. See where it goes. You want to have dinner again, then do it. You want to seek revenge, cool. You want to just say your piece and get closure on that stuff when you were teenagers, also cool. It’s your call, Brooke. Like you said, you’re not the same girl you were in high school. You’re a determined, headstrong, kick-ass woman now, and no matter what happens or what he says or does, nothing will change that.”

I sighed into the pillow. “Thanks, Rena.”

“I think he’s a chance for you to break out of the rut of workaholism. Having something a little different and undecided stirring up your obsessively perfect life isn’t necessarily a bad thing.” She retreated toward the door. “Just look at you now. He’s already affecting you. You’re still in bed. You’re not rushing to the gym. God forbid you sleep in for once when it’s not scheduled.” She mocked me with a woeful expression.

“Pretty sure the alcohol is at fault for that.”

At the door, she paused. “Technically, yes. But still. It just shows that doing what’s not expected doesn’t have to be a bad thing. You’re counting on him to be the guy he was in high school. Consider that he might not be. Deviate from the norm.”

I saluted her as she blew me a kiss good-bye and exited, leaving me full of so much to think about as I closed my eyes again.

*Nap first. Then I’ll think about what I want from him.*



KADEN

**B**etween the third and fourth rep of my curls, I heard my phone ring with an incoming message. Not a missed call. Not an email. Not one of those annoying fucking push notifications for apps I could have sworn I'd disabled several times already.

A text.

All day I wondered if I'd get one in particular. I had no doubt Brooke would be suffering this morning. I hoped the aspirin and water gave her a head start on hydrating and dealing with her hangover.

I set the dumbbell down in the gym and passed Kody as he did his reps.

"Expecting a message?" he teased.

I raised my brows at him as I crossed the shock-absorption mats of the gym where we had memberships.

"You've been glancing at your phone the whole time we've been here."

*I should've just kept it in my pocket and waited to feel it buzz.* We'd started on the treadmills though, and I knew better. My twin had once busted a brand-new iPhone when it fell out of his pocket on a run, and I'd been scared to pull a Kody ever since.

If there was even the slightest chance Brooke might contact me after our dinner last night, I didn't want a broken phone to be the reason I'd missed it.

"You meet someone?" he guessed when I didn't reply.

*Fifteen years ago, yeah.* But the Brooke I'd eaten with last night hardly seemed like the classmate we'd both known so long ago.

I picked it up and read the text. Resisting a wide smile, I debated how to reply to her simple words. Simple? They were anything but, and I needed

another minute to pick at them.

Brooke: *I'm sorry for what I did last night.*

What she did? I replayed the highlights in my mind.

Brooke showing up well past what could have been considered “fashionably late” to the point I figured she was ghosting me.

*I wouldn't have blamed her, though. And she didn't.* That was forgivable. As my brother would claim, I was too nice to ever hold a grudge.

She'd strolled in there looking so fine, so edgy. I recalled the teases of her tattoos she'd revealed. At the Halden Inc. office, she covered most of them, but in that low-cut blouse with short sleeves, I'd gotten more of an eyeful of the art she'd decided to wear forever.

In my mind's eyes, I saw her smiling, giggling, and drinking.

*Is she sorry for drinking too much?* It wasn't like she chugged anything to get wasted. If I had to guess, she'd simply overestimated her tolerance. It made me suspect she might not drink often, and that was nothing to judge—or I wouldn't be the one to judge her for it.

Kaden: *Sorry for what?*

Three dots hovered as she replied. Or not. The bubble with the trio of periods disappeared. Then reappeared. Gone again. Then they remained.

I smiled, enjoying the fact I had her riled up and she didn't know what to say.

I decided to put her out of her misery.

Kaden: *Nothing happened. You have nothing to be sorry for.*

Brooke: *I feel like I did something.*

*Nope.* She'd been tipsy and silly. Flirty, too, but I wasn't confused and thinking she was leading me on.

Now if she was apologizing because she assumed I'd wanted more than just a dinner and she'd gotten too drunk to see that through, that was on her imagination, not mine.

Kaden: *You're ok.*

She replied with a *phew* GIF.

Brooke: *I'm heading to a concert at a local bar tonight. My friend is playing. Would you like to join me?*

“What the hell are you doing?” Kody asked.

His question jarred me, and I realized too late that I'd been smiling the whole time.

“Who is she?”

I shook my head. Mentioning Brooke to Kody was something I wasn't sure how to handle yet. I wouldn't hide it. I didn't care if he knew I'd gone to dinner with her. He was already aware we were speaking for that deal with Halden Inc. But considering a reply for Kody put me on the spot.

We'd had dinner. We were working together. But her inviting me to a concert didn't fall in the category of a shared meal or a contract meeting.

*What do you want, Brooke?*

I wanted to find out.

Kaden: *Sure, that'd be fun.*

She was quick to fire back a reply.

Brooke: *Trust me, I won't have any cocktails this time.*

Kaden: *No worries, you're a cute drunk.*

I deleted it.

Kaden: *Send me the details and I'll see you there.*

"You're not going to say anything?" Kody pressed.

I set my phone down, feeling it buzz with what I assumed was Brooke's reply. I'd look later when my twin wouldn't give me shit about smiling so much.

"Nope." I grinned wide, enjoying a chance to annoy him.

Some things would never change.

A few hours later, I entered the bar Brooke had given me directions to. I'd never been here before, and the exterior didn't suggest that it was a bar. Fleeting, I worried if she'd played a trick on me, suggesting we meet up then ghosting me again. I had no grounds to stress about it. She'd shown up last night. And she was here, too.

"Is this seat taken?" I asked as I approached her at the bar.

By concert, she meant a pair of girls eking out a decent blues cover. And by local bar, she'd meant a hole-in-the-wall. Neither detail mattered. All I cared about was that she was here.

"That's your pickup line?" She turned to arch one brow at me.

"Wasn't sure I had to use one." Being confused didn't suit me, but wording it like that seemed like too much of a question. Like I expected her to label what we were doing here. When she didn't immediately answer, furrowing her brow, I smiled.

"I had fun last night."

She groaned, lowering her head to lightly hit her forehead on the bar top.

I chuckled. "Really. I mean it."

“Are you *sure* I didn’t do anything stupid?”

I held up my fingers in a scout’s honor.

She smirked. “You weren’t a boy scout.”

“I’m sure.”

“That you weren’t a scout?”

I rolled my eyes. “You didn’t do anything stupid.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Did I *say* anything stupid?”

“Nope. You were a joy. Lots of laughter.”

“Hmm.” She pursed her lips at me, clinging to suspicion. “Thanks for setting out that water and pills.”

“Did it help?”

She pulled off a mixture of a nod and shake of her head in the same motion.

Much like last night, we talked and joked. She had a sparkling water with lemon that she sipped. I stuck with a beer and took it slow. The “band” ended, and when louder music came on, we relocated to a booth, sitting side by side to be able to talk to each other and hear without shouting.

Just like she did last night, she wore casual, almost grungy clothes. Seated so close to her, I felt the difference of fabric when her knee brushed mine, the ripped and frayed hole of her jeans noticeable. She seemed to tug at her collar often—a Rolling Stones shirt—and I wondered if she felt like I was leering at her too much. I noticed she touched her hair often, too, perhaps worried if a strand was out of place. If anyone were to ask me, I wanted it mussed up even more. Wild and tousled.

I drew a deep breath, ignoring those thoughts.

While she seemed relaxed, I couldn’t shake the suspicion that she was self-conscious about her appearance. Maybe it was a vulnerability because she woke up feeling like shit? I didn’t know, and I didn’t want to ask. But instead of admiring the tattoos I could see even better with the shorter sleeves, I refrained and simply listened to what she said.

*When did she get them? Why?* She was vague about what her life looked like between high school and now, and I was curious about her story. Not just about the collection of tattoos and the motivation behind them all, but how she got her edge. She was brilliant and sharp business-wise, and I’d experienced firsthand her dogged dedication to detail and tending to the work that needed to be done. She wouldn’t be sloppy with any contract or correspondence on behalf of Halden Inc. Todd was lucky to have a well-



rounded and level-headed employee like her. That part of her didn't shock me. She'd always had a mind for problem-solving and math. Science had been a breeze for her, as I well knew.

I still remembered getting that A on our shared chemistry presentation. Dad had been so proud and Kody had been so pissed and jealous.

Those few months of senior year had been really tough so soon after losing Mom. I'd tried my best, but that one assignment?

*What was it?* It'd bug me. I couldn't ask her, either. I didn't want her to know I was zoning off as she told me about how she'd tried for a grant recently, something for Halden Inc. It was fascinating, but now that the thought struck me about that project we'd collaborated on, I couldn't help but want to remember what it was about.

I couldn't ask her because I wasn't stupid. Our conversations stretched over a broad variety of topics—large and small, complicated and simple—but I hadn't missed how she avoided any mention of high school.

*Thermodynamics!*

She carried on talking, and when she asked what I thought, I replied the best I could. It might have been easier to sound intelligent if she wasn't distracting me. The action seemed innocent, and I bet she didn't realize what she was doing. But her lips wrapped around the straw and her cheeks hollowed as she sucked the liquid into her mouth. Red—no—pink. Whatever color she wore on her lips, I wanted to smudge it. I wanted to ruin her lipstick, not her mascara.

Her tongue peeked out, toying with the top of the straw for a moment.

“And I—” I swallowed. Locked on her lips, I totally lost train of what I was saying. All thoughts fled. “I, uh...”

Then she smiled. Slowly. Sexily.

Dammit. She knew what she was doing, taunting me.

I almost wanted to feel ashamed she'd caught me staring, but fuck it. I didn't care.

I smiled and rubbed my jaw.

This edge she had? It was new. And I liked it.

“Fuck. I don't know what I was saying.”

She grinned, then giggled. *Oh, yeah.* She knew what she was doing, and I had no problem with it. She could tease me all she wanted because I was quickly becoming addicted to the smiles she gifted me with afterward.

Before long, I caught her checking the time. I didn't take offense, and

really, it was getting late.

“I hate to call it a night, but I need to get home and get some sleep.”

She stood with me and stretched her back. As she arched, thrusting her tits out, I cleared my throat, unable to look away. If she knew she was teasing me, why should I act like I didn't notice?

She swatted my arm as she lowered hers. “Me too. I feel like all I did today was sleep, but I've got to get back on my routine tomorrow.”

“Routine?” That seemed like a clinical way to word it.

We headed toward the exit together as she told me a bit about her exercise habits.

Outside, she paused on the sidewalk and jerked her thumb to her left. “I'm this way.”

I pointed at my truck down the curb. “That's me.”

She nodded, but before she could speak, I leaned in for a quick kiss. I tasted the tart hint of lemon and noticed mint too. Her soft lips welcomed mine, returning the gesture as though she was surprised.

I was too. I'd come here hoping I'd have a better idea of where things were going with us, but it turned out there was no need to rush. The fact she'd kissed me back at all was a good first step at testing the waters with her.

She hadn't pulled away when I leaned in to sample her lips, and she didn't flinch or retreat when I backed up.

“I hope I can see you again, Brooke.”

I backpedaled, not wanting to lose sight of her yet.

She hadn't pulled away. That was my first win. And as she stood there speechless, she released a long sigh that suggested I'd left her wanting more.

*Good. Because I do too.*



BROOKE

“**I** hope to see you again.”

Kaden’s parting words stuck with me as much as his kiss had surprised me.

It was dumb. He hoped to see me again? He would. Of course, he would. Unless Wagner Industries planned to cancel our deal, I was guaranteed to see Kaden again. And again. And again. Until the deal between Halden Inc. and his company expired—and I doubted it would—we would be seeing each other often.

I took his farewell as he intended it, though.

He wanted to see *me*, just me. Brooke, the girl he sure as hell hadn’t treated right in high school.

It seemed like he’d laid it out clearly there. His kiss sure did. The gentle brush of his lips against mine had nothing to do with the contract. Nothing at all.

Kaden wanted something beyond the scope of business, but I suspected he was gun shy about it. He wasn’t pushing for anything past my company. To catch up. We were, but we both stayed far away from discussing that one thing that had me still considering revenge.

I hoped visiting my mom might help me stay afloat in those murky waters of indecision. We were close, but it felt like it had been a long time since we’d chatted. Calls and texts didn’t count. Since my dad left us when I was young, it was just me and Mom.

We had a tight relationship, and I seldom kept anything from her. When I was younger, I worried that she would be lonely without my dad around. But

like me, she was an independent soul. She'd never needed a man to be complete, but I'd warred with concern that she could be lonely.

As soon as I was finished with work, I headed to the house I had grown up in. She still lived there, but as she got older, I wasn't sure she should stay. It was a shitty area but it wasn't so rundown she had to bar *all* of her windows. A few younger couples in the area kept an eye on her, so that appeased me. Yet every time I mentioned the idea of moving somewhere better, she countered with two arguments—this small two-bedroom ranch was *home*, and where could she afford to move to anyway?

She hadn't had an easy life as a working single mother, and that was why I did my best to send her as much money as I could.

I climbed up the cracked concrete steps, smiling at the chalk artwork the neighbor's daughter had drawn. I knocked on the door and resisted a frown at the chipping paint.

"Brooke," she answered a moment later. "You silly girl. You don't have to knock."

Didn't I? I never wanted to intrude. Just in case someone was over. Pops weren't cool.

"Hi, Mom."

"I've got dinner in the back."

I winced, stepping inside. "Sorry I'm so late." She ate much earlier than I did, but I hadn't been able to escape the office any sooner.

"Oh, no. No worries. It's so nice outside, I thought we could enjoy the garden."

I wrapped my arm around her back in a side hug as we went through the house. The familiar scents of old carpet and English breakfast tea hit me, and I inhaled a deep breath. *Home*. She was right about that.

Outside on the back patio, I shielded my eyes from the setting sun. While the home was worn, the overgrown garden lent so much charm I hated to think of her living anywhere else. She'd cultivated so many plants back here, and it would be impossible to recreate it elsewhere.

She grimaced as she lowered into a rusting wrought-iron chair across from me.

"Your knee is bothering you again?"

She dismissed me with a wave, getting right to dishing out our salads. "I was weeding and forgot to use the kneeling pad, is all."

I glanced at the bed that looked the least wild. Beyond it, I spotted the

mismatched siding she'd replaced. Even if she didn't move, updates would help.

*Maybe with this Wagner deal, I could get a bit of an advance on a raise?* I could dream.

After small talk and eating the salads and roasted chicken, I couldn't dismiss Kaden lingering in my thoughts.

"Hey, Mom. Do you remember the twins from high school? The boys in my grade?"

She smiled and wiped her mouth. "Of course. Blond and blue-eyed. I always thought they looked like displaced surfer boys."

*With the physique to match.*

"Why do you ask?"

I told her about sending out an acquisition email and ending up seeing Kaden.

"Well, how about that? It's a small world, huh?"

It was amazing it could seem like one in the city, but I nodded. "Sure is."

"I imagine their father is doing well too," she commented. "I read a bit about their company in *Forbes*." She rubbed her fingers together to indicate money and whistled.

I stacked our plates and chuckled. "Yeah. I know." But seeing Kaden again, I hadn't been struck with an image of wealth. I *knew* he had money, but he didn't flaunt it.

I had never told her about what happened senior year. Shame, embarrassment, and plain old humiliation merged into an ugly mood. We were close, and she would have been a good listener, but she was biased. Not only because she was my mother and anything she said would've been supportive and loving by default, but also because she saw the good in everyone. She was a firm believer that not every villain was completely bad the same as the heroes weren't strictly good. At that time, I wanted to avoid having to explain and defend myself.

"Maybe you should look into dating one of those boys."

I rolled my eyes, but my sassy, impulsive reaction wasn't only for the reason she likely guessed. I had never liked being told what to do. Her suggestions to date more often fell on deaf ears. But I already had.

*Right?*

Kaden ending Sunday night with a kiss changed things. That hadn't been a business meeting. It hadn't felt like too much of a date until his farewell.

Yet, I wondered if I'd already blurred the lines too much to keep track of it all.

I'd teased him with that straw. He knew it. I knew it. And that sure as hell wasn't professional. It wasn't strictly friendly either.

"You need a man in your life," she said.

*Since when?*

"You're single too," I retorted playfully.

"That's not my choice. Besides, I'm looking."

I arched my brows. Well, that was new. Where was she looking? "You are?"

She shimmied her shoulders and lifted her nose in the air. "Why do you have to say it like that?"

I giggled and shook my head.

"I'm a beauty, just like you."

*You are.* I had to work on believing that most days. Since my adolescence, I'd learned that *beauty* could come in many different ways. A beautiful mind, for example, mattered to me as much as anything else. And I knew I had a good head on my shoulders.

"Mom, I'm too busy to date."

She sighed. "You're too busy to do much of anything these days. All you do is work and work out."

*That's not entirely true.* I wasn't in the mood for a guilt trip, but I wondered if she might be right—just a bit.

"I ran into Rena the other day. She was telling me all about that Comiki Tour."

I smiled. "Contiki."

"It sounds so exciting. And she said she invited you." She frowned and played with the edge of her napkin, not making eye contact for a moment. "Why don't you go?"

I debated the best way to answer her. "It's not that I don't *want* to go. I have priorities." Rena might be the kind of person to be swayed by trending philosophical lines on social media, but I wasn't.

"I can travel later."

*Screw that crap about burning the fancy candles now.* I preferred organic incense anyway.

I cleared the dishes, letting her tend to a text from her friend. As I carried the plates inside, grateful she let go about the vacation and my priorities, I

headed back and forth. I caught my reflection in the sliding glass door. The glass was smudged, but I winced.

Had I been walking around with a greasy forehead all day? I stepped closer, shifting the plates to one hand to rub at my brow. Upon closer inspection, I cringed at the sight of my smeared eye shadow. While I was at it, my hair. I sighed, my shoulders slumping as I tried to tuck the errant strands back into place. It wasn't humid. I hadn't been working out or doing anything strenuous to look like a mess. My disheveled appearance bothered me on a level I couldn't ignore, and I hurried to smooth my hair back into place.

Mom stepped up, finished on her phone. "Brooke," she began gently. "You look beautiful."

I softened and smiled.

"You always do."

*Of course, you would say that.* It was her job to. She was my parent. She'd claim I looked gorgeous no matter what. I appreciated it, and I never took her love for granted, but they were platitudes, not honest criticism.

"You don't need to obsess about your looks."

"I don't—"

I clamped my lips shut. I wasn't going through *that* argument again. I wasn't obsessed. Just particular, and there wasn't anything wrong with that.

Instead of replying, I stared into the door and saw my teenage self in the reflection. Young and gangly. Awkward and pimply. That frizzy untamable hair and girlish figure.

I felt unlovable as a teen, and it had taken years to find a sense of self-worth.

Mom came up behind me and wrapped her arms around my waist. She rested her chin on my shoulder and stared at my reflection. "Have you ever thought about talking to someone?"

I'd thought about it, but after a couple of attempts of finding a therapist who seemed like a good fit, I'd gone about finding my worth my own way. I was too stubborn not to.

"I wish you could see what I see."

*You see your daughter, who you'd love unconditionally no matter what.*

I was grateful for that.

The smile I pasted on felt plastic and cheap. "I was just fixing my hair, Mom."



But having someone else's unconditional love, someone who didn't have to treasure me by default, was something I doubted I'd ever find.



KADEN

The weekend seemed so far away, but Friday morning came bright and early. I'd woken up before my alarm, as I usually did. But instead of lying there and trying to beat Dad's Wordle stat, I wondered what Brooke was up to. No doubt she was already done with a brutal workout and on her way to her office.

We'd texted every day. It began as work-only messages, which were important. I wouldn't knock her professionalism. If anything, I was impressed by her attention to detail and suggestions for solutions.

But she hadn't asked me out since. I hadn't either, but I felt like that was the natural next step. To leave the ball in her court and let her take the initiative.

A slight fear crept in. *What if she doesn't?*

I refused to believe it.

She'd been too attentive—both talking and listening—to be faking it all. When she'd played with her straw and put the idea of her mouth being somewhere else? Oh, she'd done that deliberately.

Until she reached out, though, I felt stuck in limbo.

At least I had a full day's worth of work to distract me from nonstop thoughts of her. It was time to get up and get ready to head to work.

Kody and I laid off the horsing around at the office. He was eager to go out that night, but I wasn't sure what I would do.

We both had plenty of things to wrap up before the weekend. Regardless if I had set plans or not, I enjoyed the feeling of tying things up and addressing loose threads to avoid having them on my mind over the weekend.

Dad modeled that behavior, and Kody and I followed it almost to a T.

“Afternoon, boys.” Dad approached with a tall steaming coffee. Instead of heading to his office suite, he paused at my door, where Kody and I had been discussing something about a department change.

“Don’t forget about the dinner tonight,” he said as he sat.

*What?* I frowned and scrolled back in the three-way chat we shared. There it was. Kody hadn’t replied. I hadn’t either. It was tucked under a longer text which was why I’d likely missed it.

*Good thing I didn’t make plans then.*

“What?” Kody asked, finally looking up.

“The dinner tonight. We’d like our families to get to know each other better.”

“Shouldn’t you have done that *before* proposing to Margaux?” he asked.

Dad ignored him. “Margaux is bringing her daughter.”

Kody exhaled long and hard, frustrated as he sat back in his chair. “What’s her name again? Mirabel?” He tossed his pen to the table.

“Mercedes,” Dad and I answered in unison. Dad rolled his eyes and I smiled. He’d never change.

“We’re looking forward to both of you being there.”

Kody groaned. He picked up his pen and tapped it. “I had plans to go out tonight. Some buddies wanted to check out this new bar.”

“Then go, just don’t drink much and come after. One drink,” Dad suggested.

“I was hoping to meet some ladies whose names I planned to forget by tomorrow.” He grinned, a slow, rakish smile of sin.

Dad sighed and shook his head.

“*Planned to forget?*” I teased. It took no effort on his part to keep the women in his life nameless.

“Speaking of that.”

I frowned at the scolding tone behind Dad’s words.

“Margaux and I have talked about the wedding.”

*Just not where to have it?* I kept that joke to myself.

“We would both appreciate it if you two could bring dates. We—well, I—don’t want you treating our wedding night like a hook-up retreat.”

Kody groaned again.

“This will be the event of the year,” Dad added. “It will be a wonderful night we’ll treasure forever. I expect my sons to act like the upstanding

young men they are.”

“*They?*” I joked. I quickly dodged my twin’s kick under the table.

“I’m upstanding.” Kody threw his hands out, then hooked them behind his head. “What does having a date have to do with being upstanding?”

“Because if you treat this wedding like you do every other one, you’ll do nothing but chase after every available woman and cause drama.”

Dad grunted in agreement with what I said. “At least you’re not stupid enough to chase after the unavailable ones.”

I raised my brows at him. “Well, there was that one.”

“Hey!” Kody leaned forward in his seat. “I don’t cause *drama*.”

Dad didn’t look convinced. I knew otherwise.

“I like to meet and enjoy a variety of women. There is nothing wrong with that.”

Dad shrugged. “But I don’t want you treating our wedding like a chance to play around.”

Kody rolled his eyes. “That’s ridiculous. No. I refuse.”

*Don’t be such an ass.*

“It’s one night,” Dad said dryly. “I’m sure you’d survive.”

I leaned in to stage whisper. “I think he’s nervous he won’t be able to find someone who’d agree to be his date.”

That time when he kicked and I dodged it, he got Dad’s leg.

“Dammit!”

Kody glared at me and mouthed, *you asshole*.

I smiled. *Nope. That was him.*

“I’m not bringing a date,” Kody insisted. When he crossed his arms, I could imagine him adding on a childish whine of *and you can’t make me*.

When Dad glowered at him, I hurried to defuse the situation. “Hey, I might have someone I can ask.”

“Yeah?” Dad brightened, turning from Kody. “Who?”

I couldn’t tell him it was a work connection. That would complicate it all. Brooke wasn’t *only* someone I knew through business. Sure, it had taken a chance acquisition email to reunite us, but now that I’d spent time with her, I saw her as an acquaintance, a friend, first.

“Uh, someone I know from high school actually.” I rubbed my jaw, not making direct eye contact with Kody. Through my peripheral vision, I noticed him tilting his head and narrowing his eyes in suspicion.

“From high school?” he asked. “Who?”

“Someone.”

Dad wasn't worried about the details. He patted my back. “That's great, Kaden. I'm sure she's a lovely girl.”

Lovely. Sexy. Edgy. Honest. Stubborn. Determined. She'd been on my mind enough that I could go on.

“Who is it?” Kody asked again.

I smiled at Dad, ignoring my brother.

“Bring her to the dinner tonight,” he said.

I gaped at Dad. *I said I might have someone to bring!*

“Tonight?” That was fast. Panic kicked in.

He slanted his brows. “Yes. Tonight.” He seemed to think that would be a natural thing for me to ask of a woman in my life. Already, I'd put my foot in it too far. With that one simple reply, I was invested.

It would help if it didn't feel like a lie.

Of course, it wouldn't be out of the ordinary to ask a woman I was slightly close with to come to a dinner at the last minute.

“Okay?” Dad asked. He peered at me, curious and expectant.

I nodded. “Yep. Sure.” I shot to my feet, eager to escape the room. Kody bored into me with his stare, and I didn't want to have to tell him I had Brooke in mind.

He had to know. He wouldn't remember her fucking name, but he'd know. I'd recently mentioned her. We hadn't talked about anyone else from our graduating class in forever. It was too much of a coincidence that I could have been talking to anyone else from high school.

“I'll be right back,” I said.

“Kaden.”

I ignored my brother and left.

I strode down the hallway until I neared the empty office of the HR idiot who'd started another affair. He was long gone, and his vacant office was an ideal spot to hide.

So much for leaving the ball in her court.

I couldn't wait for her to make the next move—if she planned to at all.

I unlocked my phone and went to our text thread.

Kaden: SOS

I drummed my fingers on my knee as I waited for her reply.

“Please don't be busy right now,” I whispered.

As soon as the trio of dots blinked, I exhaled a long breath of relief.

*Don't get your hopes up just yet.*

Brooke: *Sounds serious.*

Brooke: *What's up?*

I bit my lip as I typed. On my walk here, I'd rehearsed how to word it, but I still went on the fly, thinking it up as I went.

Kaden: *Save me from going alone to dinner.*

Brooke: *Is this a pickup line?*

Kaden: *From dinner with my old man and his fiancée.*

She replied with a thinking emoji.

Brooke: *Tell me more.*

Brooke: *Are we having scrumptious seafood?*

Kaden: *No clue*

Brooke: *Will there be live entertainment?*

I paused and thought about it.

Kaden: *Likely not. Just my company.*

Brooke: *I have become fond of that.*

"Thanks," I quipped. Nice dig to imply she hadn't enjoyed my presence before. *Again, can't blame you.*

Kaden: *Please?*

Brooke: *Oh, now you're playing hardball.*

Kaden: *PLEASE*

I never begged a woman. It was always the other way around. But I sat there smiling like an idiot at her replies.

Brooke: *One more time*

Kaden: *PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE*

Brooke: *I have a condition*

I cringed. Of course, she would.

Kaden: *Okay.*

*Please don't say something impossible.* Banter was fun and all, but a nagging thought in the back of my mind warned me not to be swayed by her. She had every reason to hate me. I clung to the slight worry that she might be messing with me, no matter how much I wanted to believe otherwise.

Maybe that was why I couldn't get her out of my mind.

She was forbidden. Untouchable because we should be enemies.

Brooke: *Well is it a family dinner?*

Kaden: *Yeah*

Brooke: *Will your brother be there?*

*Fuck.* I swallowed and typed.

Kaden: *Yes*

Kaden: *What's your condition?*

"Please don't say you'll only come if he doesn't." I held my breath, waiting on those three dots to be replaced with her reply.

Brooke: *So long as I don't have to sit near Kody, okay.*

That wasn't so bad. I could swing that.

Kaden: *Deal*

Brooke: *Don't make me regret this.*

*I'll try.*





BROOKE

I spent all evening getting ready for this dinner.

Multiple outfit changes. Several overhauls of my hair. Switching out jewelry. My makeup was on point, though. At least that was one thing going right.

After Kaden sent me that SOS message and begged me to come to his family dinner, he must have put his phone down. He didn't reply to my following text asking where we were going. The location was a vital detail. Casual? Formal? Semi-formal?

For an agonizing hour, I had nothing to go on to even know how to begin preparing. I tried to guess if this was a laidback cookout sort of thing or an elegant restaurant affair.

It mattered, but I didn't want to pester and prod and text repeatedly. He'd take that as a sign of nervousness, and I couldn't risk that weakness heading into the night.

I was nervous, though I'd try my best to hide it. Like I told Rena, Kaden unsettled me. My usually formidable confidence took a hit. I was off balance trying to figure the man out, guessing how to fit him into my life. Facing his family—especially his damn twin—would completely throw me off my game.

Before I could sink into anxiety about it and truly become aggravated, he'd replied. Swann's lived up to what could almost be its namesake. *Swanky*. I'd gone to eat there just once. My mom's boss's fiftieth wedding anniversary party had been held there, and I went as her "date."

Suffice it to say I could abort all backyard BBQ ideas and focus on the

fancy.

Despite my nerves and the roiling tension in my stomach, I almost felt like I had to go. This would be my chance. His invitation came out of nowhere. I'd been wondering when he'd contact me after that quick kiss goodbye almost a week ago. If he was waiting on me to make a move and reach out to him, he would've been waiting until hell froze over.

He *needed* someone at this dinner, considering he'd begged. He wanted to bring someone to a family event, and I understood what that meant. This was a big deal to him. Tonight would matter. And that set the stage, so to speak. If I wanted to get back at him, this would be a chance to do so in a lasting way he'd feel well after I showed him what happened when I was scorned.

Perhaps I was several years too late, but still. It was the principle of it.

As I got ready and checked my reflection in the mirror, my worries deepened.

Could I truly say that I had moved on from the hell that had been high school if I still wanted to seek revenge on him and settle the score?

Would this really grant me any sense of closure?

Or was I being petty?

*No.* I was *not* petty. I didn't plan to ruin his life. I wasn't going to cause a scandal. I only wanted to get him back a little bit. Karma dictated it, did it not?

Before he was due to pick me up, I nodded at my reflection one last time. Who was I kidding? The *last* last time. I resolved not to mess this up. And hopefully, once I saw to my mission of getting revenge, I could well and truly move on. Once and for all, I could let it go and see what happened next.

I almost wanted to insist I'd drive myself to Swann's but he was persistent that he pick me up. I wasn't surprised he pushed the point so hard. I'd nearly stood him up.

I hadn't told Rena because she fell under the annoying *better late than never* school, but I almost thought I *had* gotten my revenge on Kaden by almost standing him up. To me, someone who hated to be late or kept waiting, what I'd done that first night was a horrible crime. It had bothered *me* to be so late, but it had been part of my strategy. I wouldn't admit it aloud, but that was why I had that alcoholic drink before I left home. I'd needed to fortify myself for the exaggerated and forced wait.

Right on time, Kaden pulled up in an SUV. It was spotless and looked expensive, but when he stepped out and approached me, *he* looked as spotless

and wealthy. Dashing in a finely tailored suit, he tempted me. The lack of a smile with his greeting unnerved me. Could he somehow be as uneasy about this dinner as I was?

“You look beautiful,” he told me. The admiration in his gaze was genuine, and I scrambled for a reply.

It was the basic thing my mother had told me the last time I visited, but the way he looked at me when he said it, I felt the weight of his praise.

He wasn’t lying. And it took me off guard.

“Thanks. You clean up pretty nicely too.”

He grinned, perhaps charmed by my slightly abrasive retort. I wasn’t playing hard to get, *per se*. Where he was concerned, I *was* hard to get, and he seemed up for the challenge, not discouraged.

He helped me into his SUV and I inhaled the new-car smell. I detected his cologne, too, and I hated that I wanted to get closer to the source.

Him.

Once he was in the driver’s seat, I gasped and gripped his forearm. “Oh, my God.”

He hung his head. “No. Please don’t bail.”

“I came onto you that night, didn’t I?” Being in a vehicle with him somehow poked at that memory from my drunken night.

He chuckled. “Maybe.”

I smirked at him.

“You slipped on the console.” He tapped his elbow to it.

“Clumsy, then.”

“Oh, yeah.” He smiled. “It was endearing.”

“An uncoordinated woman is your type?”

He licked his lips and shrugged, not looking at me or speaking.

*Way to go, Brooke. Smart.* I had no business referencing him wanting me. At least I shouldn’t before I tried to even the score at this dinner.

“Kody won’t be there,” he said as he drove toward the restaurant.

I raised my brows. “Oh?”

“Typical Kody.”

I breathed a sigh of relief, agreeing with his assessment. Kody had been a jerk in high school, and it seemed that trait had remained consistent all these years.

One twin was plenty to deal with, especially given our history.

We made small talk on the way to Swann’s, but it seemed real. It wasn’t

idle chitchat to simply avoid silence. He seemed interested in how I'd been, and he was equally enthusiastic and willing to talk about how he'd been when I returned the same questions back at him on our way to the restaurant.

Swann's was fancier than I remembered. Then again, the one time I'd been there, I was younger. I lacked the adult eye to truly see what distinguished this restaurant as a step above others. It was no family-friendly Giovanni's with divine pizza. It was an upscale eatery that intimidated me.

I knew I had just as much of a right to be there as any of the other guests. I blended in. I had dressed up enough. Still, next to Kaden, I felt like an imposter again, trying to be someone that I wasn't.

Or maybe that was the plan to even the score. Anticipating a scene that I would cause had me feeling like I wasn't just another guest eating out for a family dinner.

"There they are," Kaden said after we entered. He pointed ahead at a couple who walked toward a table. A younger woman followed after them.

I nodded, but he couldn't see me. He turned back, looking at me expectantly, and I realized he probably assumed I hadn't heard him. "They're up there," he said, smiling quickly.

I was out of my element. My worst fear was realized when Kaden seemed to pick up on my anxiousness. I kept an easy smile plastered on my face, but I bet if he looked close enough, he'd notice the expression didn't reach my eyes.

He took my hand, and the simple gesture jarred me. It was affectionate, yet not. His warm fingers closed around mine, almost comforting and grounding me. With the tugging pull he exerted on my hand, I figured he'd only done it to guide me and keep me with him in the bustling, elegant restaurant.

"Brooke, this is my Dad," he said as we reached the table.

I was all smiles, relying on something more like professional politeness. "Pleased to meet you," I said as I shook his hand. Then I was introduced to Margaux, the lady about to become Kaden and Kody's stepmother. The younger woman who stood to the back was her daughter from a previous marriage, Mercedes.

"Nice to meet you," she told me, smiling quickly at Kaden. She exaggerated looking past him. "Are we waiting on Kody, too?"

"No." Kaden licked his lips and forced a quick smile, apologetic. "He won't be coming after all. Prior commitments he couldn't break."

Mr. Wagner grunted and rolled his eyes. “Right. Well, let’s be seated.”

It didn’t escape my notice that Kaden held my hand all the way until I sat. And I had no idea what to make of it.

The dinner was lovely, and the company was pleasant. The more we chatted, the more relaxed I became. Margaux, Mercedes, and I spoke about all sorts of things, while Kaden and his dad split to their own conversation. As such, I forgot about any plan to seek revenge. It would have been a shame, too. The food was delicious. The staff was attentive and kind. And I was having too good of a time to want to ruin anything.

Mr. Wagner and Margaux were sweet, doting on each other without their affection being too much for the rest of us present. It was clear they were a couple who’d founded their relationship on real love. Still, I noticed that Kaden seemed subdued. I wouldn’t say he was aloof, but both he and Mercedes seemed quiet.

Afterward, Kaden led me back to his SUV. He didn’t take my hand, and I felt like I spent much too long trying to figure out why. That led to me wanting to scold myself for wishing he did.

I wanted revenge but also liked it when he gripped my hand? Could I be any more contradictory?

In the SUV, my curiosity got the better of me.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Huh?” He glanced at me. “Sure. Yeah. Why?”

I shrugged. I couldn’t claim to know him well enough that I could read him. Still, I wasn’t blind. “I don’t know. You seem quiet.”

He rubbed his jaw and furrowed his brow. “I’ll admit I’m not sure about my dad and Margaux.”

“They seem like a cute couple.”

He shrugged one shoulder. “Yeah. I guess. And I can tell Margaux makes him happy. I just worry they don’t know each other well enough. They’ve only been dating for a few months, and now they’re rushing into a wedding.”

*How long is long enough?* Kaden and I had known each other for years—back then. He had only reentered my life now, but I couldn’t peg him as a stranger. My problem was figuring out if the guy I knew back then had changed into someone else entirely now.

“It makes me uneasy.”

“I understand that. Regardless of how long you’re in someone’s presence, how can you truly claim you know who the other is in the ways that matter?”

There's no telling when someone could surprise you and show their true nature."

If I thought he was subdued at the restaurant, he was stone-cold silent now. I glanced at him, wondering if he was brooding. He kept his attention on the road, but I noticed the frown on his face. As I replayed the words I'd spoken back in my mind, I almost cringed. Picking at the context, I saw how he could have interpreted my reply as a dig if I applied that statement to him.

"That's the only reason you're uneasy? The short time they've known each other?" I asked.

If he wanted to be moody about what I'd said, fine. I wasn't going to dwell on my words. And there was never any way to take words back.

"No. Not just that." He sighed and pushed the back of his head against the headrest.

"What else, then?"

"What if she's only in it for the money and family name?"

I nodded. "A gold-digger?"

"Yeah."

"Did he date many women? Others who seemed to be after his wealth or name?"

He shook his head. "No. That's the other odd thing. He seldom saw anyone since my mom died until now."

I shrugged and looked out the window. This conversation wasn't making me feel good. Talking about money only emphasized how different we were. He was loaded, whereas I was not. "I don't know what to say. I've never been in the position to worry about someone wanting to be with me for money, or the lack of it."

"He's a damn billionaire. It makes him an easy mark."

"I'm sure he's considered it."

"But he's older."

I laughed, glancing at him to see if he was serious about that comment. "He's not decrepit! I'm sure he has full control of his mind."

"I know but—"

"You act like he's senile or something."

"Let me finish. He's older, and I wonder if it's making him cautious. Or worried about missing out. He's been alone all this time, and suddenly, he has a crisis to want to be with someone he doesn't really know?"

I crossed my arms, relying on my experience with this one. "Hey, if they

want to find a partner, good on them.” If my mom was actually dating someone, I’d be just as guarded as he was. But I would never want to stand in the way of her happiness. “Your dad is very wise. He always has been. He’s successful and knows what he wants, right?”

“Yeah, but—”

“No *but*. Then you trust his judgment.”

He turned onto my street. “Are you this level-headed about your mom?”

I heard the sarcasm in his retort, but it didn’t piss me off. He could put me on the spot all he wanted. I wouldn’t lie about this. “Of course not. Not at all.”

“I can’t believe Kody didn’t show,” he said almost as though he had to avoid that quiet from returning.

“Why didn’t he?”

“Dad wants us to both bring a date to the wedding. And that’s not Kody’s speed.”

I scoffed. “I know that.”

“Look, I’m sorry about what happened senior year. I—”

I held up my hand. Seeing my building out the window, I wanted to just go. Now that he’d broached this particular topic, I wanted to avoid it. “That was a long time ago.”

“But I—”

I shook my head and flipped the visor down, checking my makeup in the mirror. “No. Forget about it. I have.”

I’d intended to get him back. This was supposed to be my chance tonight. Revenge should have been mine. But now—at the very end of the damn evening—when he mentioned it, I couldn’t stomach talking about it or hearing another word.

I hadn’t forgotten about it. And as I sat there and readied to leave, I realized I wasn’t anywhere near forgiving anyone for it either.





## KADEN

I pulled up in front of Brooke's place, mulling over her words. I'd already considered everything she'd advised and remarked about. It was different hearing it from her than from anyone else. An independent party's input was valuable in any tough decision. But this wasn't *my* choice. Dad had already decided to marry Margaux. My only decision was to accept it or not.

Ultimately, if it made him happy, I'd live with it.

What hadn't pleased Dad at all, though, was Kody's no-show. I didn't think my brother would actually bail and go out as he'd planned. When we were younger, both of us pushed Dad's buttons and rebelled. Our disobedience wasn't without cause, but we knew when we were out of line to an unforgivable boundary.

Mentioning Kody to Brooke was a bad move, though. I saw that now.

*Forget about it?*

She'd said it so tersely, so quickly, that I knew without a doubt *she* hadn't forgotten anything.

I wasn't born yesterday. I could take a hint. I wouldn't piss her off any more, but I refused to let this go unspoken forever. Sooner or later, we had to address our damn past.

She collected her purse and sighed. Any second now, she'd dash. I saw it in her eyes, the stubborn lift of her chin, and I heard it in the sharp edge in her tone.

"Thanks for tonight. I enjoyed the dinner."

*All that fire.* She didn't fail to impress me, even when she was mad. Her anger was thinly veiled by her words. She wasn't being sarcastic. It was more

like she wanted to be grateful and polite but hated every second of it right now.

I killed the engine. She arched a brow and glanced at me. “Planning on sticking around?”

*Ouch.* No invite inside. Still, I wasn’t after that.

“You enjoyed it?” I asked, trying to figure out the best way to approach the idea that struck me on the drive when she listened to me about my concerns.

“The food was good.” She eyed me up and down. “The company was okay.”

Fuck, I loved it when she teased me. I slung my arm around the top of my seat to face her directly. “How would you feel about going to a few more of these things with me?”

She’d already opened the door, but I’d caught her. Hesitating with one foot outside, she slumped back on the seat. Her purse plopped in her lap and she stared at me.

“A few? How many is a few?”

I licked my lips, trying to rein in the excitement of getting her there. She was curious. That was the first step, but I had to tread carefully here.

“More than a couple but less than several.”

She rolled her eyes. “Someone sure has read the dictionary before.”

“My father has requested I bring a date to the wedding.” As I said it, I recalled our conversation in her office—her sigh and admission that she loved weddings. This would be too easy.

“Okay.” She stretched those two syllables into five long ones.

“I think you check all the boxes.”

She smirked and crossed her arms. Her foot didn’t lower to the ground. Instead, she propped it up on the doorframe, wedging her in place to hear me out.

*Fucking heels.* I couldn’t resist checking out the slender leg she emphasized with that sexy shoe. And that defiant pose. Damn, did she know how to mess with me.

“You’re kind.” I raised a finger.

She nodded.

“Professional.” Another finger went up.

She preened, lifting her face higher. “Damn right.”

“Unlikely to cause a scene.”

She raised her brows as though asking if I was sure about that.

I chuckled and raised a third finger.

“What else?” she asked. “Cause that’s setting the bar kind of low.”

“You’re beautiful,” I added.

She blinked at me.

Hadn’t she heard me the first time I said it? Or did she not believe me?

“I’d like you to be my date to all wedding-related events.”

Her frown discouraged me, but she hadn’t left yet.

“I’m not looking for a relationship.” She closed all of my fingers and pointed at me. “Especially not with someone I’m working with.”

I shook my head. That wasn’t fair. She could work with me and be professional but she refused to consider something outside of the office?

*That’s it. Keep it “official” and she might agree.*

“No. Not a relationship. Not a real one.”

“Then what?”

“A fake one. A fake date,” I explained. “A placeholder.”

I didn’t fidget as she stared at me, seeming to consider it. Finally, before I gave up hope, she asked, “What’s in it for me?”

I opened my mouth but quickly shut it on the not-so-fake suggestion I almost blurted. I grinned. “What do you want?”

She parroted me, opening her mouth to likely blurt something impulsive. But she shook her head and tried again. “For starters, exclusive business in all things related to paper distribution with Wagner Industries.”

I studied her. She had to lead with that, of all things. Something not quite for herself but for her boss. Was it altruism? I couldn’t tell.

“Fine. Go on.”

She blinked.

“What else?”

She shook her head and looked down. “I can’t think of anything else.”

“How about a signing bonus for said exclusive business?”

She struggled to speak, gawking at me.

“Thirty thousand?”

Her jaw dropped further.

“Deal?”

She slammed her lips shut and swallowed.

“Limited offer. Five. Four. Three...”

Her brow creased as she volleyed her stare between the hand I held out to

shake and my face.

“Two.” *Please.* “O—”

She clutched my hand and shook it. “Deal.”

I squeezed her soft fingers then released her. She didn’t bolt, but she mumbled and shook her head as she wrestled with her purse straps and exited. I waited until she stood to speak. She looked shell-shocked. Stupefied.

“Brooke.”

She turned, holding on to the edge of the open door.

“I’ll send you a list of the events I need you to come with me to.”

Her frown was adorable. “How many, again?”

“A few.”

“A few as in...?”

*As many as I can hope to find.* “More than a couple but less than several.”

She didn’t laugh.

I chuckled, enjoying this too damn much. “I don’t know. Five?”

“Five?” Her brows shot up.

“Is your social life too busy to handle that?”

She shook her head and sighed, not answering. “Is that all?”

“No.”

God, I was having too much fun. “I’ll send you a budget.”

“For what?”

I smiled. “Wardrobe. You’ll need to dress the part.”

“Oh.” That sass returned. She stuck her hand on her hip and jutted her chin up. “I don’t look like your date as I am?”

“You really want my opinion on that?” I dragged my stare from those sexy heels, up her slender legs, over her curves and breasts, and ended on her mouth.

“Fuck.”

I chuckled at her breathy yet matter-of-fact reaction.

“These *are* dates, right? Not hookups?”

Leaning my arm on the steering wheel, I nodded. “That’s what Dad wants to avoid—his sons from treating his sudden wedding as a ‘hook-up retreat.’”

She smiled, then scrunched her nose. “He said that?”

“His words.”

She drummed her fingers on her hip. “So that means no hooking up. Right?”

*Is she worried I’d bring her as a date and then fuck around while she’s*

there? That's ridiculous. "Right."

"And—" She shook her head. "Okay."

"No. What? What were you going to ask?"

Jerking her face up and ditching that coy looking-away nonsense, she narrowed her eyes. "That thirty thousand dollar signing bonus isn't a damned expensive payment for something else?"

I laughed and shook my head, but I still needed a minute to face her without chuckling. "You think I'm paying you for sex?"

"It's not that far-fetched of a connection to make!"

"No. I'm not paying you for sex. I'm not paying you to be my date either."

She squinted. "Yes, you are. Those are the stipulations you're suggesting."

"I'm paying you a signing bonus. For the exclusive business with Halden Inc."

"Which you're giving me in exchange for fake dates."

She didn't want to sell herself. I understood that, but it wasn't even on my radar. If I wanted her, I'd be direct. My priority right now was to secure a date for these wedding things. I paused, measuring out a careful reply. I went with a blurted, uncensored one instead. "Brooke, just to clarify, that doesn't make you a prostitute."

She cringed. "Wouldn't I be, though? Close enough?"

"No." I shook my head. "Just a fake date."

"You said a few. More than a couple but less than several."

"Correct."

Her nod seemed final, as though she had convinced herself once and for all. As she backed up then closed the door, I lowered the passenger window. "We have a deal?"

She nodded. "You know, this is *not* how I imagined tonight would turn out."

"What did you think would happen?"

"For starters," she said, coming back to the SUV and leaning her arms on the open window, "I thought I'd... Never mind."

Was she aware of this pull? That she couldn't just say goodbye and leave it at that? I propped my elbow on the center console, the same one she'd slipped on, and set my chin in my hand. "You thought you'd what?"

I could talk to her all fucking night.

She licked her lips and I tracked the movement of her tongue. This time, she wasn't messing with me and teasing. She looked too pensive for that. "I thought I'd have to suffer through your brother's company, for one thing."

I didn't blame her for dreading it. "He'll be at the wedding, though. Can you face him then?"

*I need to talk to him about her.* I hoped I hadn't jinxed myself by saying she wouldn't be likely to cause a scene.

"Can I handle seeing your brother for a bonus of thirty thousand?"

"And wardrobe expenses," I reminded her.

She shrugged and stepped back. "What brother?"





BROOKE

“Let me get this straight,” Rena said, panting and cringing as she tried to pull off the hardest pose of the class.

“No. You’re *not* supposed to have your leg totally straight.” I glanced at her in the mirror of the hot yoga studio. “Don’t lock your knee.”

“If I don’t lock my knee I’m falling on my ass and I’m *not* canceling my trip for a sprained whatever.” She huffed her hair away from her face. “You know what I meant.”

“Huh?” I blinked hard, screaming internally at the sting of sweat in my eyes.

“Let me get this straight,” she tried again. “He’s paying you thirty grand to go to his dad’s wedding.”

“Uh huh. And other wedding-related events.”

“You don’t have to sleep with him?” she checked.

He hadn’t said that, but reading between the lines of his amused clarification that I wasn’t selling myself like that, I didn’t think so. “Correct.”

The instructor shot us a dirty look as she led the class to the next pose. We were whispering, but still, everyone in here could probably hear us. Hot yoga was my Sunday morning routine—a good sweat to cleanse and prepare for the upcoming week. Last week’s hangover was the exception, and it felt good to be back at it.

Filling Rena in about what Kaden and I had agreed upon Friday night had me thinking I was killing two birds with one stone.

“Just thirty thousand. Period. Done. No questions asked, a lump sum for you.”

“Uh huh.” Oh, this next pose was tricky.

“Upfront?”

I waited until the instructor moved to the other side of the room. All the people in this class had come before. It wasn't like our conversation was interfering with a newbie knowing what to do next.

“I'm not sure. He did give me a card for the wardrobe expenses.”

Rena muffled a squeak as she toppled to the mat. “I'm fine. I'm fine.” She held her hand to prove to the class she hadn't injured herself.

“Wardrobe expenses?” she hissed at me. “Are you serious?”

“Yep.” He'd stopped by yesterday, busy on the phone. It was the quickest interaction we'd shared thus far. I answered the door and found him speaking with someone named Tristan. He smiled at me, handed me an envelope, then mouthed *I'll see you later*. Then he was gone. Once I stepped inside my apartment again, I opened it to find a card and a handwritten note explaining I should spare no expense.

The rest of the afternoon, I texted him for clarification. That thread evolved more into jokes than spelled-out clothing expenses. I now knew he hated plaid—any form of it—and thought purple made my eyes pop.

I was still shocked he was aware I had green eyes.

Rena lightly moaned as we moved into the final pose. “Well, that's settled then.”

I frowned at her. “What is?”

“Thirty thousand? That's more than enough to take a trip now.”

I shook my head. While I loved that she advocated for me to consider my mental health and allow myself to take vacations, I had other ideas for that tidy sum.

“Come to Europe,” she urged. “Pretty please?”

“No. I'm tempted, but no.”

Rena sighed and wiped her sweat away.

“I'm going to give the money to my mom. She can make some repairs on the house or put it toward the mortgage. Her choice.”

“Aw, sweetie.” Rena disliked endearments and thought they were cliché, but I heard the meaning behind this one as she said it. “You're such a good daughter. She's lucky to have you.”

“Thanks.”

“Really. I admire your selflessness.”

The instructor took up position in front of us, and her watchful eyes killed

the mood. We'd have to wait to continue this conversation. After class ended, we lacked the privacy to chat because we showered and changed. Once we were alone, exiting the studio, Rena elbowed me in the side.

"Have you thought more about your revenge scheme?"

I slung the strap of my bag higher on my shoulder. "I thought I'd have my chance Friday night." Meeting his dad and Margaux, though, I couldn't bring myself to ruin the dinner.

"Would you still go through with it? I mean, you're already hesitating."

"Just second-guessing it all."

She waved off my reply. "Same thing. But you're milking him for thirty grand. Would you still *want* to stick it to him after that generosity?"

I frowned as we walked down the sidewalk. "It's not generosity."

Her brows spiked high. "Thirty grand isn't generous?"

"That amount is. Yes, to me and you, that's a solid deposit. But he's not *being* generous. It's mutual. I'm giving him something and he's giving me something. A transaction."

"I'll give you that. Pretending to date is your new side hustle. Okay. But still."

She didn't have to work hard to persuade me to reconsider it all. "I'm not so sure I want to go through with it."

"Why?"

"For one thing, maybe he's not the same Kaden I knew back then. You're right. He's grown since high school. He's changed since then."

Rena snorted a laugh. "It's hard for anyone to remain the same. Twelve years is a long time. When I was in high school, I was a clarinet-playing goody-goody who *never* broke a single rule. I was an angel."

"You?" I teased.

"Uh huh. A private school. It was a whole different world."

"You didn't break a *single* rule. Not even at band camp?"

She playfully glowered at me. "That stupid movie. When will that line die out?"

"Anyway, Kaden seems like a decent guy."

It almost intimidated me how much. We had great conversations, and silence was never weird. He was considerate to leave me water when I was hungover and he was comfortable enough to ask me for help. Not once did he act like the popular kid in high school, that guy I remembered to this day.

I didn't want to be duped, though, so I couldn't lower my guard.

“I’m glad to hear it,” Rena said. “But don’t get caught up with his good looks and charm. Be careful, especially now that you’re talking about money.”

“I know.” I knocked into her then gave her a side hug. “I appreciate you hearing me out. Now how about lunch?”

Her stomach growled, and we laughed at the answer.

Over brunch, we talked about our upcoming weeks. She was excited to work and finish up projects that had been stalling for too long. I told her how excited I was to bring so much work—with longevity to follow—for Halden Inc. Todd would be over the moon, again.

“I’ve already planned to take off PTO too. I’ve got a whole long list of things I need to do before the trip.”

“Like what?” I scribbled my name on the check since it was my turn to treat.

“Self-care stuff. And just odds and ends that I don’t want to rush around doing right before my flight.”

I sympathized with that approach. I only wondered if she was capable of doing it. “Anything I can help with?”

“Hell yeah.” She grinned. “Shopping.”

I furrowed my brow. “For toiletries and travel accessories?”

“Clothes, girl. I don’t have a sugar daddy giving me a blank check of a budget.”

I sneered at her. “Kaden is *not* a sugar daddy.”

“His family’s so loaded he could afford to be,” she teased. At my hard look, she sighed. “Okay. Okay. Just joking. But I do need to get some new things. I was talking with my mom last night. She told me to get a new bathing suit. She’s sick of seeing me in pictures wearing the same one.”

I smiled. “I think you’ve worn that black tankini for six years now.”

“Oh, shut up. I love it. It’s a classic. Why change what works?”

“Apply that fancy-candle-burning theory to it.”

She tapped her chin. “Don’t wait to buy new vacay clothes?”

“Sure. Besides, I’ll need to get some things too. Kaden said the first event is the engagement party. It’s just around the corner, and I’ll need quite a bit of time to decide what to wear.”

“Whatever you get, you’ll be gorgeous.”

I wasn’t sure about that. Like my mom, Rena had a default love for me. Like the sister I never had, she lacked an objective view. I appreciated her

enthusiasm anyway.

It was agreed. We'd hit the stores.

I didn't know what to get when we arrived. Rena bee-lined for the swimwear and summery dresses. I meandered, restless and uneasy.

Brooke: *How formal is this engagement party again?*

I didn't want to claim his whole weekend, but I didn't feel shy about asking either.

A text came instantly.

Kaden: *Fancy but not black tie.*

"That's still a whole range of options." Leave it to a man to not know how to narrow it down.

Kaden: *Just no plaid. That's my only request.*

I scoffed, smiling at the screen. "Oh, you have requests now." Pursing my lips, I scanned the store. I didn't want to dive too deep into figuring out why it was so fun to text him. Or talk to him. Or anything. My life hadn't been overly dull and empty. I didn't need him to complete me, but dammit, I *liked* having him in my life, even as a source of silly messages.

It broke up the day. That was all.

I grinned when I found the perfect item. After I took a picture, I sent it with a caption.

Brooke: *So that's a no on this?*

*Who the hell would buy this?* Bras came in every shape, size, and design. But plaid? It wasn't just the style, it was the fabric too. Coarse wool. I rubbed the checkered garment between my finger and thumb, cringing.

*My nipples would be so damn sore.*

Kaden: *I don't know.*

Kaden: *Might need you to model it for me to decide*

I gaped at my phone. That wasn't something a "decent" guy would say. He was flirting. And it was working. Because as I considered doing just that, my cheeks heated and I felt a thrill of desire.

Brooke: *Model? For you?*

He replied with a GIF of a stylist circling their finger in a demand for someone to twirl.

"Get out of here," I mumbled. I grinned and texted back.

Brooke: *One problem. You're not here to watch the show.*

Kaden: *Send me a picture then.*

Brooke: *Aren't you busy? Don't you have a life?*

Kaden: *You're the one contemplating buying scraps of a kilt for lingerie. Like you're one to talk.*

I giggled loud enough that another shopper glanced up at me.

I wouldn't. Flirting and being silly were fun, but my insecurities ran way too deep to model for him—or anyone else. It had taken me a while to not be one of those girls who requested the lights to be turned off during sex. A self-conscious attitude wasn't something I could flip a switch for and turn off. Being in the mood helped me forget about exposing myself—and being with someone who actually knew how to put me in the mood made a difference too.

“What do you have there?” Rena asked.

I hadn't noticed her approaching, and I jerked a little. The matching panties and bra set fell to the floor, and my best friend wasted no time picking it up.

“Do I even want to know?”

I giggled and shook my head.

But I bought the stupid thing anyway. The panties were too big and the bra was too tight, but I didn't care. It wasn't for me. And Kaden would never see it.

*You never know when you need a gag gift, though.*



KADEN

When I walked into the office on Monday morning, I kept one mission in my mind.

I couldn't put it off any longer. Now that I'd struck a deal—*another* deal, between the two of us—Brooke couldn't be a secret any longer.

I had to talk to my brother.

I found him in the staff breakroom. We had our own office spaces to prepare food and eat, but he didn't seem hungry for anything in the fridge here. Caging in the new receptionist with his hands pressed against the appliance, he clearly wanted a different snack.

She giggled, not seeing me enter with his body blocking her view. Her foot rubbed up along the back of Kody's leg. He answered in kind, shoving his leg between hers and dropping his hand to cup her ass.

*Come on. At least find a closet or something.*

"Ahem."

She squealed in surprise and lowered her leg. Kody turned his neck to face me. His smirk proved that I'd annoyed him.

"What?"

"I need to speak with you."

"Oh." The receptionist slid from his embrace. "I'm sorry, Mr. Wagner. I mean, uh, *you*, Mr. Wagner. Not that Mr. Wagner. But, uh, that report, no, the file, uh, I'll just—" Her trailing ramble followed her out the door as she escaped.

"Was that necessary?" Kody sighed and straightened.



I shook my head and left.

“Cock block.” He followed me down the hall.

“I thought she hated you,” I said, glancing back at him.

“Oh, she changed her mind.” He grinned.

“Uh huh. I also thought I gave you advice to keep your hands off her,” I replied as we reached my office.

“You did.” His smug smile annoyed me.

I shoved him inside so I could close the door behind us. “Didn’t look like it back there.”

“I keep my hands off now, but she—”

I waved him off. “Whatever. Not my business.”

“Damn right, it isn’t.” He slumped in one of the chairs facing my desk. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Brooke will be my date to the wedding events.” I figured coming out strong and honest was best.

He frowned. “Brooke? Oh.” He snapped his fingers. “The one from high school. I knew it! You mentioned her and then acted weird when Dad made up that no hooking up bullshit.” He frowned again. “Wait, are you just hooking up with her there?”

“No. I’ve arranged for her to be my date.”

“You *arranged*? You mean you asked her to be your date?”

*Technically, but no.* “Yes.”

As he rubbed the back of his neck, he grimaced.

“What?”

“That will be kind of awkward, won’t it?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Not for me. For you? Maybe.”

His grimace twisted, and a spike of satisfaction hit me. It felt good to see him squirm.

“Dammit. You can’t find anyone else to bring?”

“Nope.” I hadn’t tried, and I didn’t want to. If I brought someone else, I knew I’d spend the whole time wishing it was Brooke. She was the one I wanted at these events.

“Damn it. This will suck.”

I nodded. “Again, for you, maybe it will.”

“You’d do that to me? You would stoop that low and bring her to the wedding and stuff, what, just to spite me?”

“Consider this, Kody. People make decisions that *don’t* revolve around

you and what you want. Bizarre, isn't it?"

"Why do you want to bring her though?" He rolled his shoulders and scowled. "I know you said she's hot or something now, but why does it have to be her?"

She didn't *have* to be my date. "I *want* her to be my date."

He hung his head so low that his chin rested on his chest. "But it's going to be so fucking awkward. You don't want to cause drama at Dad's wedding, do you?"

I scoffed. Whatever drama or awkwardness that could happen, it would be his fault, not mine. "Maybe you shouldn't have been such an ass in high school."



TWELVE YEARS AGO...

"I'M TELLING YOU, there's no way they're going to state this year. No way." Kody slashed his arm through the air to further make his point.

"They could," I argued, sliding out of the truck and shutting the passenger door. As I followed him to the stadium's entrance, I rubbed my knee. The idiot just couldn't learn how to cruise. He had a lead foot that had already gotten him two speeding tickets. Dad had been livid about those—two within one month!

I'd just be grateful if he could brake smoother so I wouldn't crash my knees against the dash.

We were still sharing the one truck. Kody wanted me out of his truck and I was eager to find my own ride.

Something with more leg room, for sure.

"They're not going to state. I'll be surprised if they get into regionals."

I shook my head, scanning the full parking lot and the fans and students milling near the ticket booth. "That's harsh, Kody."

He made a sound of protest. "Harsh? You want to talk about what's harsh? Expecting the football team to win without Doug. The team won't win without their best quarterback."

"I can't believe he got busted with a DUI," I said, shaking my head.

“He’s damned lucky he didn’t kill anyone,” Kody said.

“I know.” Our classmate and the team’s star player likely wouldn’t walk for graduation now, both because of his DUI and because he’d broken multiple bones crashing into a tree.

Kody quickened his step, looking at the crowd like I had been. “It’s packed. Hope they aren’t showing up just to see Doug play.”

I shrugged. Only time would tell.

It was a great early fall night to be out. The big moon shone down on the field. Cheerleaders entertained with a new routine. All the players maintained a close score despite their star player being out. And the stands were jam-packed with families, fans, students, and faculty. Everyone had turned out tonight, but with that many people, the peace didn’t last long.

Students got rowdy, talking crap with the rival students in the designated visiting-team area of the bleachers. People pushed and shoved, and at least one guy insisted someone had grabbed his girlfriend’s ass in the crowd.

Kody and I stuck together. We usually did because we were both huge fans of the sport. Sometimes I wished we could watch the games at home, on TV, instead of dealing with the crazy crowds.

“Come on, that’s bullshit!” Kody yelled. He exaggerated his frustration with an unfair call. The hotdog he’d been holding flew out of his hand as he raised his arm to flip off the ref.

“Dude, shut up,” I scolded. He couldn’t argue with *every* figure of authority. We were already losing without Doug as quarterback. So we didn’t need refs blaming the whole team for unsportsmanlike conduct.

That hotdog flew through the air, arcing to drop on someone a couple of rows below us.

Brooke stood up and spun to face us. “What the hell?”

Her friend, Paige, got to her feet. They’d been sitting together, and Kody’s accidental throw hit her. Paige spluttered as the ketchup and mustard clung to her face and hair.

“What’s your problem, Kody?” Paige shouted.

My brother glanced over and shrugged. “Oh, don’t be a baby. Just wipe it off.”

“It’ll stain,” Brooke protested, already offering Paige napkins to dab it clean.

“I don’t care.” Kody shrugged. “It’s not like it’s a big deal. You can wipe it off.”

“You’re an asshole,” Paige shouted.

I’d never heard her raise her voice. I winced. Unlike Kody, I knew she was pissed.

“What, you’ve never had a wiener in your face before, Paige?” another classmate jeered. Laughter followed. “It’s like Kody said, whatever you can’t swallow, wipe it off.”

Together, the friends left the bleachers. Paige stomped down each metal level, and Brooke held their coats.

*Damn.*

“I didn’t say that,” Kody argued hotly as the girls left. But he didn’t pay much attention if anyone heard him. His focus was already back on the game. “That’s a foul!” he yelled at the ref.

He hadn’t thrown that hot dog at them on purpose, but I hated that he couldn’t care to check on them. He’d dismissed it to focus on the game, and I knew that wasn’t right.

It wasn’t my job to clean up after his mistakes. As I watched Brooke and Paige leave the bleachers, a gnawing pressure of guilt ate at me.

No one chased after them. Not a parent, not a teacher. They must have come on their own, but still, not a single person could follow them and offer help?

*Then I will.* Dad liked to joke that since I was such a softie, Kody had to retaliate by being that much more of a jerk. A yin and yang sort of logic.

When I was young, Mom used to praise me, reminding me that compassion was an important trait the world would always need more of.

I told my brother that I was going to get another water bottle from the concession stand. If he hadn’t nodded at me, I wouldn’t have known if he heard me, so focused on the game as he was. Instead, I hurried after Brooke and Paige to check if they were okay. My hoodie would dwarf them, but if she needed to cover it up or take her ruined shirt off, she could use it. Kody and I had several at home.

“Paige?” I jogged after them. They stood near the drinking fountain. Brooke moistened napkins while Paige fumed. The long line to the restrooms explained why they didn’t try going there.

I slowed to a walk, reaching them. “Hey, are you okay?”

“Does it *look* like I’m okay?” she snapped.

Brooke frowned at me as she handed over another napkin.

Paige squinted one eye shut and wiped at it. Mustard in the eye. Yeah,

that would hurt like a mofo.

“I just wanted to make sure.”

“Just go away, Kody,” she growled.

*Kody?* I closed my mouth. My jaw dropped at her shout, but this wasn't anything new. Kody and I were identical twins. From their lower spot in the bleachers, they wouldn't have been able to see that I wore jeans while Kody had put on khakis. To lend team spirit, we'd chosen the same school hoodie. Same color, same style, same mascot.

No wonder she'd confused us.

Paige groaned. “My eye.”

“Maybe lean down and rinse your eye in the fountain,” I said.

“Just go away, Kody.” She did as I'd suggested though, craning her neck to get her eye under the stream of water.

“I'm sorry.” *That my brother is such an asshole.* But he hadn't intended to hurt her or make that mess. “It was an accident.” I saw no point in correcting them that I was Kaden, not Kody. They likely loathed me from my close association with my twin anyway. Or they wouldn't believe me. That happened sometimes too.

“You said you didn't care,” Brooke pointed out. “So why bother changing your mind now?”

I frowned at her. She peered at me closely, furrowing her brow as though she was trying to puzzle me out. Did she know I wasn't Kody? Did she care?

I turned away from Brooke's hard, questioning stare.

Nothing I said would change how they felt about me—or my brother.

Without a word and not giving Brooke a chance to speak to me, I left, hating that the guilt-filled annoyance of having Kody as my brother warred with my hope that he could not be such a jerk.



## BROOKE

If Kaden hadn't given me a card to use for my wardrobe, I never would have splurged to go shopping again so soon. His instructions were clear though. I needed to find something perfect to wear to the engagement party.

Rena and I hadn't found what we needed over the weekend. She'd ended up returning half of the things she'd bought, not liking how they looked once she got home. Her admission of being picky made me feel better. Of course, I wanted her to find what she needed for the trip. But the act of her dismissing clothes and being unsatisfied with the way they looked or felt seemed like something she would accuse me of doing.

That was why we both met up to go shopping again after work on Tuesday. We planned to visit different stores, and I vowed to stick to it until I found something that Rena and I agreed was "the one" for this formal-but-not-black-tie party.

She knew when to lay off with comments about my OCD-like need to check my appearance. And she was also the most familiar with what I perceived as my weaknesses or flaws. Knowing me so well, she was ideally prepared to pep talk me in a way I understood. My best friend never ceased being a good, positive influence. When we were browsing through the racks and holding up clothes to consider, she helped me address and overcome my insecurities.

If it weren't for her, I'd never pick anything to try on. I'd be stuck in the indecisive stage for too long.

"How about this one?" She held up a blue gown with too many

rhinestones to be taken seriously.

I shook my head. “Would this make my boobs look too frumpy?” I showed her a strapless romper that looked like a dress.

She rolled her eyes. “You’ve got tits I’d dream for. *Frumpy* need not apply there.”

“You dream about my boobs?” I teased.

She groaned good-naturedly. She came close and checked the price tag. “For that much? No, heck no.”

The color had attracted my eye, but now that I considered the fact it wasn’t on sale, I reconsidered.

“Well, that’s a moot point for you,” she said. “You can afford unlimited charges on Kaden’s card.”

I shook my head. “It’s the principle of it. I can’t splurge like *that*.”

Rena nodded, holding the hanger up higher to inspect it better. She scrunched her face. “Nah. Besides, I think you’re right. Your boobs would fall right out. It wouldn’t make you frumpy.”

“Just flashy?”

She laughed. “A flasher.”

“That’s not the image I think Kaden wants me to go for. It’s at his family estate.”

The longer we browsed and flicked through racks and didn’t find a dress suitable for the engagement party, the more my frustration grew.

“At least we found your things,” I complained. “I’m not holding you up.”

“Oh, shut up. Don’t give up hope.”

“It’d be funny if I could find something to wear over that plaid lingerie.”

She laughed, still browsing. “I can’t believe you actually bought that.”

“It’s perfect for a white elephant gift.”

“Can you imagine, though? Wearing that stiff layer over your nipples?”

I had considered that. “Or down there.”

She groaned and laughed at the same time. “Depending on your pleasure-pain level.”

“I’m all for a good whisker burn to wake me up, but not a thong of sandpaper.”

She gasped, and I almost dropped the hanger I’d picked up. “What?”

“I found the one.” She presented it with a high reach of her hand.

A long, silky green dress fluttered with the motion. With each ripple, I felt mesmerized by it. One strap was sewn in, so I lacked a default excuse of



falling-out-boobs concerns. Rubbing the soft material between my finger and thumb, I sighed.

“It’s gorgeous.”

Rena murmured her agreement. “I love this color.”

I did too. “Is it too dark?”

“Nah.” She glanced up at the ceiling. “Kind of dark in this spot anyway, with those two recessed lights out. I think it’ll be lovely on you.”

The rich forest-green hue would either drown out the color of my eyes or enhance them.

“Ooooh.” She held it higher. “Sexy.” The skirt fell partly over her hand. I reached down to see just how high this slit was. The answer was very high. According to Rena, the higher the slit, the sexier it became.

“That’ll show a lot of skin.” I sighed. “A lot of tattoos.”

“So what?” She thrust the dress at me. “They’ve already met you and saw your ink. You wore a dress to that dinner, didn’t you?”

I nodded.

“And that tree with the roots and flowers that goes along the side of your thigh is my favorite.”

*I wonder what Kaden thinks of them.* I’d caught him looking. Knowing he traced the lines of the artwork I’d had applied to my body was exciting. Planning my tats and the process of getting them was part of my road to self-discovery. I’d recognized and found my self-worth with the expression of the ink I carefully chose. If he disapproved or if it bothered him?

*Then so what?* What mattered was that *I* liked my tattoos. They held significance to me.

“Go on. Try it on.”

A flutter of nervousness filled me. I was excited but apprehensive. The dress was already a beautiful masterpiece on the hanger. Would I do it a service or would I degrade it?

“I doubt the plaid lingerie will work with it,” I joked.

Rena rubbed my back as she walked to the fitting rooms with me. She’d noticed my attempt at a joke to ease my tension. “Then just don’t wear any at all.”

“For shame,” I teased, playing along.

I tried it on, careful to not damage or strain the dress. I had curves, but with my carefully curated routine of exercise and stretches, my body was lean in the right places, too.

While I was in the fitting room putting the dress on, Rena yammered away. I knew she was doing it to distract me, and I loved her for it. Before she could ramble on about why she needed another pair of shoes, I stepped out. The room's mirror was angled weird. Out here in the main space around all the fitting rooms, I could check out my reflection times three.

"Ooooooh, baby," Rena said, lowering her voice to mimic a man's. "Fuck, that's hot."

"You think?" I asked, loving the way the fabric slid over my skin like a caress.

"I *know*." She gestured for me to twirl, and I did. "Oh, yeah."

I tipped my chin at my jeans on the chair in my fitting room. "Take a couple of pictures, please. That way I can debate it later, too."

"Debate?" She grabbed my phone. "There's nothing to debate. That dress looks amazing on you. Allow me to bow to the queen of cleavage." Pulling off a silly curtsy, she drew the attention of other shoppers. One woman giggled, passing by.

I struck a pose for her, following her instructions. I wanted to get a view from all angles to fully see how I looked in it.

"See," she said, holding my screen up to see.

I gasped. "Rena!"

"Oopsie." She winked.

Brooke: *What do you think?*

Rena had texted that to Kaden with a picture of me emphasizing my leg through the slit.

A line of fire emojis showed up as the first reply. After that, his opinion.

Kaden: *You better buy that.*

I checked the price tag and winced.

Brooke: *You sure?*

Brooke: *It feels expensive.*

Kaden: *How does a piece of clothing feel pricy?*

Brooke: *It just does.*

Kaden: *Whatever the price, it's worth it.*

Kaden: *It looks incredible*

Kaden: *I can't wait to walk into the party with you on my arm.*

"Does the man ever work?" Rena taunted. "He just waits around for his phone to ping with a message from you."

I bit my lip then added a picture of the price tag.

Brooke: *Are you still sure?*

Kaden: *Very sure.*

Kaden: *Get it.*

Brooke: *Is that an order?*

Kaden: *No. You'd be less likely to listen to me if I tried to boss you.*

Kaden: *How many pleases will it take this time?*

Kaden was begging *me*. It still felt surreal.

Brooke: *Zero. This dress caresses me like a lover's touch. I might never take it off.*

My phone buzzed, and I jolted at the image of the video call icon.

"Ooooh. He's got the hots for you." Rena wagged her brows and quickly guided me back into the fitting room. "No phone sex, though. I think there are kids in the store."

Her hasty push had me answering the call before I got back in the room.

"Phone sex?" He turned his phone around to show a busy gym in the background. "Please don't. I might get mauled here if all these guys overhear." He wiped his brow off and squinted at the screen, breathing hard. "You're going to get that dress, right?"

I licked my lips, arrested by the sight of him shirtless and catching his breath. An instant image of where else he could be sweaty, tired, and without a shirt hit me at once. Over me. Under me. Inside me.

"Brooke?"

I cleared my throat and nodded. Desire, I could handle. But this potent punch of lust? That was something else.

He smiled, this silence between us not at all imposing. If I didn't know better, I would've guessed that just the sight of me made him happy.

"It's not plaid, so it's a winner."

He laughed once and rolled his eyes.

"Plaid?" a guy said in the background. "Remember that kilt incident?"

"Shut up, Tristan."

I bit my lip, smiling. "What's that?" I said.

"He tried on a kilt back in—Ow—" More jostling of the screen followed and I giggled.

Kaden's face returned as a blur. He shook his head and sighed. "I'll call you later."

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

How was this happening? As the warm feeling lingered inside me after

the call ended, I knew he wasn't the only one who seemed giddy and content for a chance to see me happy. I touched my face, feeling the lift of my cheeks at having seen him.

"A kilt incident?" Rena asked from the other side of the curtain, clearly having overheard it all. "That's a story I'd like to hear."

*Me too.* I set my phone down and dismissed my feelings about him. It was time to change and buy this ridiculously expensive dress.

"What did you say you needed to find?" I asked her.

"Sitting-down shoes."

I grinned. "Why not stick with sandals?" She'd be on the beach.

"Oh, I'll be taking those too. Come on. We're not done yet."

And we weren't. I bought the dress, and then she purchased several "sedentary-appropriate" shoes, though I still didn't understand the difference between those from her other footwear. I also took a chance to try on more clothes for myself. Casual stuff, not just the things Kaden had told me I'd need for these dates. *Fake. They're fake dates, remember?*

Reading, hearing, and seeing the evidence of how much Kaden liked that dress boosted my enthusiasm. He put me in such a good mood that it spiraled. I wanted to cling to that high, and as Rena and I shopped away, I chose more things that showed off my favorite and most intricate tattoos. It wasn't only Rena's positive influence and encouragement. It wasn't just Kaden's appreciative replies. It was me. *I felt good*, and as we wrapped up the night and carried our bags out of the last store, I hoped I would feel this good and confident when I was at the engagement party this weekend.

Knowing I'd be on Kaden's arm was an allure I couldn't stop thinking about.



## KADEN

**E**ver since Brooke showed me that dress, my excitement for the engagement party shot up higher. I was about to wear a permanent groove on my phone's screen for how often I checked the messages. I did it again, smirking as I waited.

Any second now, I should receive a text from the driver I'd hired to pick up Brooke. We'd all grown up outside the city, but it was within the hub of so many people that we'd reunited. The distance between our hometown and the city made for challenging transportation though. I hadn't wanted her to go through the trouble of securing a ride.

It would have been nice to drive her myself, but like Kody, I'd come here hours ago. Dad and Margaux weren't to do a thing. Mercedes handled the entire thing, and I appreciated that gesture. I hadn't talked with the lovely woman much. I definitely wouldn't claim to "know" her at any level that might count as her being a sister. It had always been just me and Kody. Then without Mom, it was just us with Dad.

I never thought I was lacking from not having a sister, but when I was young, I dreamed about it. What it would be like to have someone else in the household to balance out the craziness two twin boys got up to.

Dad and Margaux would be marrying so late in their lives, and their wedding still felt sudden. I wasn't sure how to incorporate a sibling into my life, but what I saw of Mercedes was all right. It was up to her to plan this party, and in a three-way text we'd set up, it became a two-person front. Kody hadn't understood who that unidentified number was, and he admitted at the gym that he thought it was a planner they'd hired. Typical Kody.

Mercedes had done an admirable job of getting the event arranged. My role was in securing everything and seeing that it was set up at the family estate as she wanted. She sure had an eye for the details, and I couldn't help but think of Brooke. She had that same characteristic, and I knew it had to have served her well at work.

Kody was expected to be a host, and I was glad he'd shown up to do that minimal task.

He'd come home around the same time I had, and he promised me with a roll of his eyes that he'd be at the party.

My phone buzzed.

*Finally.* This message wasn't late but it seemed like I'd been waiting for so long.

Brooke's driver alerted me that he was pulling in, informing me just as I'd requested.

I no longer cared where the hell Kody was. He should have been greeting the guests, but knowing him as I did, I wasn't shocked when he wasn't near the front door as expected. Guests were arriving, and I had to have faith that my twin was somewhere around here. But his absence near the entrance couldn't have been timed better.

In fact, this was the very reason why I'd thought ahead to have the driver alert me when he pulled up.

Brooke and Kody's reunion would be tense. At least I hoped it would only be tense and not ugly or catastrophic. I had been telling the truth when I told her that she wasn't likely to cause a scene. She was too chill to do that, but this would be the ultimate test of that assumption.

I tuned out the details as I wove through the mingling guests from where I'd been checking something before the party was in full swing.

Mercedes had asked for my opinion about if the wires from the live band's equipment would be a hazard to anyone walking through the grounds. They had been positioned so far back, I couldn't see any danger. If anyone were to traipse toward the gardens or around the side of the house, sure, they might come upon the wires. But they were covered in a thick rubber strip designed for the purpose of preventing trips.

I didn't linger, aiming for the front to meet Brooke and ensure I could intercept her before she saw my brother. I ignored the twinkling fairy lights strung from the poles. I didn't glance at the glamorous décor my future stepsister had sourced and arranged throughout the outdoor area. The music

didn't faze me as I strode over the glass floor that had been set over the pool. I'd suggested lights floating within the water. When night fell, it would look great.

Dad and Margaux would have a hell of a party.

As I reached the front and watched the driver open the door for Brooke, I knew I would have one hell of a hard time keeping my hands to myself.

She stepped out in that long green dress. The shitty lighting in that fitting room hadn't shown the beauty of the gown. Under the gentle glow of the sunshine just before sunset, it shimmered and slid. The fabric clung to her curves and muscles before it would sway and ease aside with her slow, swaying approach.

I slipped my hand into my pocket and stared at her, looking my fill. I felt her stare on me, but I refused to miss a chance to truly get a good look at her.

She cleared her throat. "Still think it's worth the price?"

I glanced up at her then, noticing the nervousness she fought to hide. But that naughty smile proved to me how much she enjoyed my ravenous stare.

"Every cent of it," I promised. I stayed put, letting her come to me. Once guests swarmed the place, it would be too crowded to appreciate her stunning beauty from head to toe like this. She strutted toward me, a sexy, teasing sashaying of her hips that accomplished exactly what she wanted.

Grabbing my attention.

I wouldn't be able to look away all night.

No one else could compare.

She tugged her lip between her teeth and I bit back a groan at the seductive look she gave me. With each step, her slender, toned leg pushed the slit aside. All those sexy tattoos showed as the silky fabric eased apart. It taunted me. It dared me to wish it was me uncovering and caressing all that smooth skin I wanted to explore.

All I could envision was doing just that. Shoving this dress aside and running my hand up her leg. She'd shiver under my touch. I imagined her breathy sigh when I ripped it off.

"I'm glad you approve," she admitted once she stood before me.

Approve? I was a glutton for punishment. I'd be torturing myself all night trying to keep my mind off these fantasies that took hold of me.

"You're ravishing, Brooke." I straightened and drew a deep breath for composure, but I sensed she needed more than words. Taking a risk and hoping I wouldn't regret it, I leaned in and brushed a quick, light kiss on her



cheek. Close to her like this, I was treated to her alluring scent. Something sweet but not too much. A hint to entice me to want to wrap her in my arms and carry her somewhere where I could explore.

As I retreated, I grinned at the sight of those cheeks turning pink.

Aha. Actions, not words. But it bothered me that she seemed so indifferent and doubtful to spoken praise.

*Something for later.*

I raised my arm for her, indicating she should take it. "Shall we?"

Her smile was sweet and genuine. As she placed her hand on my arm, I reveled in the pride that I was the one to be here with her.

*Even if it's supposed to be fake.*

Kody was the designated host. Mercedes seemed to be everywhere at once, smiling and assisting guests. And I felt like the slacker. My role in this party had been in the preparation and setup. Still, as Brooke and I mingled and went from room to room and outside to the glass-floor dance area, I tried to help the best I could.

The party kicked off with everyone in high spirits. It was a fun, lively gathering. The band didn't hit a single wrong note. All the hired caterers and waitstaff kept drinks filled and finished dishes cleared away. No drama. No scenes. Only good times were had by all.

I introduced Brooke to every guest we spoke with. She didn't leave my side once. We made a good team. Partners. We mingled as a pair as though we'd done it many times. She wasn't just arm candy, either. With that sharp wit and quick humor, she helped me avoid any awkward moments.

I hated to think Kody was rubbing off on me, but the few times I almost panicked, not remembering a guest's name, she came to the rescue and introduced herself to prompt them to share who they were.

"You two are just so cute." An associate's wife beamed at us before we headed outside toward the music.

*Cute* didn't seem to fit. But I wouldn't argue that Brooke and I seemed like a perfect fit.

More than once, it had slipped my mind that she wasn't my date. I treated her like one, getting her drinks and offering a plate of hors d'ouerves to share. She was my date, but she wasn't. It was all too easy to forget that this was a business deal between us. We got along so well that even I could have duped myself into thinking the same as this woman did.

I was glad for the chance to sit down. When it was time to eat, I led

Brooke to our table. She sighed as she reclined in the chair. I raised my brows at her and she smiled sheepishly, reaching down to rub her lower legs.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

She smiled wider and rolled her eyes—more at herself than at my question. “Now, I get it.”

“Get what?”

“The difference between sitting-down shoes and the others.”

I chuckled. “Do I want to know?” Easing the tablecloth back, I glanced at her heels. I pictured sliding her dress back and kissing from the top of those sexy shoes up to everything else.

She cleared her throat. “I don’t attend fancy shindigs like this often. So I can see now that while these shoes are pretty—”

“Mm-hmm.”

She giggled, putting the tablecloth back in place. “They are only to be appreciated when I’m seated, not walking all over.”

I grinned. “I can rub them for you.”

Her teasing expression fell. She didn’t frown, but it was impossible to miss the change on her features as she looked past me.

My offer to massage her aching feet was forgotten.

Kody strode up to the table, reaching for a chair to pull out. I’d spotted him throughout the night among the throngs of guests. Mercedes had too, asking me in passing if he’d brought a date. He hadn’t. Ever the rebel, Kody didn’t bother bringing someone to be his other half tonight.

He glanced at Brooke but didn’t speak.

Other guests around the table looked up, volleying their curious gazes between the woman who was pretending to be my date and my twin.

*Don’t be an ass.* Mere seconds had passed as Brooke and Kody looked at each other, but it felt like an hour of awkwardness. He sat, raising his brows at her but not speaking.

*Silent treatment?* I’d misjudged. I didn’t have to worry about Brooke causing a scene. I should have worried about *him* doing that.

“Kody, you remember Brooke,” I said, testing the waters as calm and neutrally as I could think to.

He tilted his head to the side, opening his napkin to place on his lap. “Book?”

“Brooke,” I corrected through clenched teeth. *You fucking know her name.* I lowered my hand to set it on her thigh but hesitated. Tension radiated

from her, and I wasn't sure if contact would piss her off or comfort her.

His frown irritated me, even if he kept it polite. "I'm sorry, I don't think we've ever met."

Brooke slid her legs to the side, scooting her chair back.

"Excuse me." She didn't ask it. She hurried to stand and walk away.

"You fucking prick." I whispered it so lowly I doubted any guest heard. But I made sure my brother saw my fury in the glare I gave him.

Then I set my napkin down and chased after her.

She hadn't gone far. I guessed those sitting-down shoes were my saving grace, slowing her from a full-out run. I didn't care who watched. My duties fell to the wayside.

I tempered my pace to a walk as I caught up to her in a quiet section of the gardens.

She sat on a bench, her hands closed in tight fists as she pressed them to the stone seat.

She dipped her chin to her chest. All that long, black hair fell forward, curtaining her from me.

I stepped closer, trying to figure out the best course of damage control.

"Brooke?"



BROOKE

**I** *knew I shouldn't have come. I fucking knew it.*

It had taken everything in me not to snap at Kody at the table. The asshole thought he could pretend not to know me? What kind of fucked-up bullshit was that?

I'd almost lost my temper. Kaden tensed up, not missing the tension. It was only because of him that I'd kept a handle on myself and refrained from lashing out. We'd had such a good time until then. All evening, I *felt* like his date. I'd wanted to prolong the illusion for as long as possible.

I'd bitten my tongue and stayed quiet only because of Kaden and the way we'd been having fun.

But he couldn't expect me to sit there and take it, right? There was no damn way I was going to subject myself to Kody's bullshit throughout the whole dinner.

I wasn't proud to run away—*no, no running of any kind will happen in these stupid shoes*—but I just had to get out of there. I needed space, and I didn't care what fleeing made me look like.

“Brooke?”

Kaden's soft voice reached me, and I exhaled long and hard. I wasn't surprised he chased after me. I turned, not getting up, and tried to control a renewed flash of my temper. My face remained tense in a glare as he approached.

It wasn't Kody. I knew that. They were identical but still different in slight ways. His resemblance to Kody was a trigger I had to struggle past.

“What an ass,” I seethed as he sat.

He sighed, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees, then sat back up.

I appreciated that he didn't rush to an apology or deny the fact I spoke.

"But then again, who would remember me from high school?"

I faced forward, zoning out at the bushes that hadn't lost all of their flower petals. I'd researched flowers and vines when I'd first thought about getting ink. I was no horticulture expert, but in the haze of anger, I couldn't even give a shit to know what fragrant plants surrounded us in this nook.

"Who would remember me? I was the ugly duckling. I never spoke up. I never made waves, too scared that if I did, some punk would write rumors about me on the bathroom stalls and one of those girls would tell the football team I was hideous."

I glanced at him, curious if he'd deny it. He didn't. He only gazed at me with a quiet, patient seriousness as he heard me out. The way he was willing to listen encouraged me to vent. He was offering me a safe space to rant and react. I was so mad, I took the chance and let loose.

"I was overlooked. If I didn't try to duck my head and go unnoticed, I worried who would be next in line to give me shit for something that wasn't deemed cool enough."

With each word that spewed out of my mouth, more and more came. It was word vomit at its worst. I no longer bothered caring about whatever I might have said when I drank too much that first time we met up. I was a happy drunk, and with the feeling of embarrassment after that night, it was likely I'd hit on him and was a sloppy, silly flirt. I could live with it.

But there was no stopping the deluge of rants that escaped me in a heated, rapid stream. I'd bottled up these feelings for so damn long. All these aggravations and grievances had accumulated and compounded inside me, but with Kaden listening so calmly and patiently, I was *finally* able to release it all.

I had a chance to bombard all my thoughts about the crap I'd put up with in high school, and boy, did I take it.

Fully explaining the deep, cutting misery of being overlooked and labeled as the ugly one would be an hour-long lecture. There was no simple, clean way to describe the lousy treatment I'd suffered through from so many of our peers back then. But I tried. I shared all my frustrations without a break.

My fire was spent. I'd vented as much as I could. Words jumbled together so quickly that I wasn't sure I'd said anything coherent that could make sense

to him. I didn't yell. I didn't shout. In the back of my mind, I knew better. Mr. Wagner and Margaux didn't deserve to have their engagement party spoiled by my ranting diatribe in their lovely garden.

I expelled a long, hard breath. My shoulders slumped in the aftermath of exploding all those complaints.

Still, Kaden was there. He hadn't tried to butt in and counter. He hadn't left and gave up on me at my worst.

Once more, I blew out a deep breath. Then shook my head.

He put his hand on my thigh. At first, I wanted to lean into him. That simple touch grounded me. He'd proven that I wasn't alone by staying and giving me the freedom to rant. His hand on my thigh offered more proof that he wasn't abandoning me.

"I'm sorry."

Those words? Closing my eyes, I committed it to memory. For so long, I'd daydreamed about hearing them from his lips. Now that they came, though, they seemed misplaced. Kody was the one who'd pulled a stupid stunt of pretending to not know me. Kaden hadn't done a single thing wrong tonight.

"My brother can be an ass."

"He *is* an ass." I was in no mood for him to slide in a contradiction, like suggesting Kody had a good side beneath his shitty personality.

"We can both be asses," he said instead.

*True.* But hearing Kaden admit that right now, after the way he'd doted on me all night as if I were his real date, it rang false. Everyone had a chance to be a jerk. That trait wasn't unique to the Wagner twins. The world was full of assholes.

"I'm sorry," he repeated.

I dragged my gaze to meet his. In his words, I heard the same honesty and sincerity that he'd spoken with before. When he told me that he hoped to see me again after that good-bye kiss at the bar, I'd heard it then. He wasn't playing a joke or talking out of his ass.

He meant it. And that mattered—a lot.

His pinkie shifted. It was the slightest movement, a mere press of his finger against my leg. But it jolted me. The feel of his skin against my bare flesh.

"Everyone at the party tonight will remember you," he promised.

*Everyone?* Right now, alone and locked in his intense gaze, I didn't give

a shit. This wasn't high school anymore. Popularity contests hardly counted. Adulthood was brutal like that—or forgiving.

As I dropped my stare to his lips, I relished the kindness in his words. He spoke them like he believed them.

And I only cared that *he* would remember me.

I broke.

Before I could think or try to pick at my motivation, I turned toward him. His hand slid higher up my thigh as I shifted, and it goaded me further. I reached up to cup his face and pulled him close.

I kissed him.

I covered my lips over his. He stilled but didn't retreat. Still so patient. Still so accommodating and letting me do as I wanted.

I pulled back, stunned at the zing of lust that claimed me at the first press of his warm, soft lips. Panting, I stared at him. Inches parted us, but I needed to know. I couldn't lunge at him without knowing if he wanted this or if he was merely appeasing me after such an emotional outburst. He was that sweet, that kind.

Darting my gaze from his eyes to his lips, I tried to read him. I looked for any indication that he felt this attraction the same way I did. When I looked back into his eyes, that dark, heated stare didn't abate. His breaths came out as choppy as mine did. Locked in this stare-down, I hesitated.

Until his fingers dug into my leg. Higher than they were before, his fingertips pressed into my bare skin. A grip of desperation.

It was all the answer I needed. He wasn't kissing me out of pity. He wanted this. He wanted *me*.

I brought my face to his and closed the distance. His hot breaths mingled with mine until I stole them completely. I wasn't concerned about finesse. I obeyed the pull between us. I sealed my lips to his and fell head-first into the desire that lit me up.

Hot. Hard. Fast.

I couldn't get enough of his lips brushing back against mine. Then his tongue, warm and insistent at the seam of my lips. He slid it in and dueled with mine, and I moaned at his taste.

Every inch of me felt on fire. Thrilling want coursed through me, and I gave in, eager to take all that I wanted.

A kiss was all it took. We didn't break apart as we grabbed for each other. I reached for him, gripping the back of his neck to lock him in place. His



fingers dug in deeper on my thigh, and the idea of his big hand so close to more of my bare skin electrified me.

I rose up on my feet only to pivot my knee on the bench. Facing him, on my knees on the bench, I straddled him. He tipped his head back, craning his neck to keep his demanding mouth on mine, his wicked tongue thrusting in to explore. Above him, I framed his face. My hair fell to the side as I leaned into him.

Pulling back, I gentled my kisses to slow down. I didn't want to stop. I couldn't. Stopping wasn't possible. But I didn't want to rush and miss a single second of savoring this combustion of lust.

He groaned as I sucked his lip into my mouth, and I smiled as I covered them again, wet and warm from our kisses. His hands spread up my thighs, shoving the dress toward my hips. As the fabric bunched, he moved again, taking each of my ass cheeks into his hands and gripping hard.

He groaned, chasing my mouth to kiss me hard.

I grinned, lowering my aching pussy to grind against him.

"I thought you were wearing the plaid," he rasped against my mouth.

I kissed him, holding on as I rubbed against the erection straining beneath his pants.

I could have laughed, but feeling the friction of his big hard dick sobered me. As I teased myself with the hardness of that long bulge pushing against me, I was in no mood for humor.

I wanted him. And I wanted him *now*.

"You're not wearing anything under this, are you?" He dragged his hot hands back to my thighs. Taking advantage of the liberal slit, he shoved his hands back to my ass and gripped my bare flesh hard.

I sucked on his tongue, rocking onto his erection as I kissed him. I couldn't get enough. I couldn't stop this insanity. "Nope." Still clothed, he seemed too damn far away and out of reach.

"Nothing at all?" he asked as he pulled me against him. I felt more than heard the low grumble from his throat.

My reply was to grab his hand and move it. Arching back to grant a little bit of access, I shoved his hand down the top of my dress. He caught on quick, cupping my breast that felt so heavy now. *Ohhh. Just like that.* I mewled as his fingers closed around my tit. When I arched my back again, he repeated the rough clutch again.

"Fuck." He tugged the fabric down to expose my nipple. "Me." His

thumb brushed against the beaded peak and he kissed me with a punishing urgency again.

*I plan to.*



KADEN

**B**rooke lifted her hand and threaded her fingers through my hair as I pulled her against me. The friction wasn't enough, but I couldn't stop. She tightened her fingers, and I hissed at the delicious bite of pain.

She had an edge. I hadn't forgotten.

Now, I'd be able to enjoy it fully.

"Suck it," she ordered, arching back and offering me the breast I'd exposed. The perfect swell of her tit bounced. No bra. No longer covered by the green dress. As she rocked on her knees, grinding against me, her breasts jiggled and swayed.

I usually didn't care about who called the shots. I liked to beg just as much as I loved to hear a woman plead with me. A give or take.

When she arrived, I'd struggled to banish the idea of taking this damn dress off her. Now, I counted on improvising.

So what if *she* commanded me what to do. Today, right now, alone in this garden when a fucking party carried on nearby on the grounds, I'd give her whatever the hell she wanted. After that emotional release she shared with me, and after the shitty way my twin treated her, it was the least I could do.

I held her, one hand under each luscious ass cheek. She squirmed against me as I gripped her, my fingertips so close to her pussy. Already I felt her wetness. Before she could protest the way I kept her still against me, I stood and lifted her in my arms.

"Oh." She leaned into me as I moved away from the bench. Her nipple was so hard, so tempting. It was right there, and I couldn't resist.

I sucked on it. Hoisting her higher in my arms, I lowered my head until I

could close my mouth over the sweet peak.

I circled my tongue around the point. She fisted my hair.

I dragged my teeth and tongue down the globe. She gasped.

And when I nipped beneath the handful of her succulent flesh, she whimpered so loud I worried someone would hear.

“Shhh,” I said against her collarbone as I lowered her into an easier hold so I could walk faster. Between her demanding kisses and my dick so painfully trapped in my pants, I was surprised I could walk at all.

When I opened my eyes, I registered we were almost there. A smaller nook in the garden was my goal. It wasn't private, but the hedges offered slightly more security. Any second now, a guest could walk this way. At any given moment, we could be found and busted.

It only turned me on more. It amped up the urgency. The thrill. The risk.

I hadn't felt this alive in a *long* time. So, yeah. I'd fucking remember her all right.

Reaching the spot I had in mind, I began to lower to one knee in the grass.

I thought faster than the head raging to get free and sink inside her did.

“Hold on.”

She protested with a sweet pout when I set her on her feet. As I removed my jacket, she kissed me again, curling her tongue around mine and moaning that sexy-as-hell sound I was becoming addicted to. Each time she did it, it went straight to my dick.

The dick she hurried to free.

I struggled to get my arms out, not breaking our kisses. At the same time, just as eager, she unzipped me and tugged down my pants and boxers. By the time I tossed my jacket to the crisp, cool grass, she had my dick out in the open air. Her fingers closed around the girth the best she could, and she stroked at a maddeningly slow pace.

*Not enough.* Hell, I doubted I'd ever get enough.

Before my pants fell to my ankles, I urged her to lower herself with me. In my arms again, she held on tight as I carried her to my jacket. Our kisses didn't slow, each wet, hot touch sliding to the next.

Once she was mostly on the jacket, her hair splayed in the grass, she reached for me. Her fingers tortured me, her grip just right and her pace fast. I tugged her dress down, revealing her other breast, and I gave it the same attention as I had the first.

I rucked up her dress, grinning at the convenience she'd considered when she put it on. No panties to deal with. I stroked my finger up and down, gathered up the juices she'd leaked. If she'd worn any underwear, they would have been soaked. My finger slid in easily, and I growled into her mouth as I thrust my finger into her pussy.

She was hot and tight. So wet and ready.

Nothing held me back from lining up the tip of my dick to her. "Fuck."

"Yes." She lifted her hips toward me. "Now."

"No condom," I said before she kissed me hard.

Her shoulders slid beneath me in a shrug. "On the pill."

I planted my lips over hers, savoring her. "I'm clean."

"Me too." This time, when she jerked up, the head of my cock bumped her entrance. "Ohhh."

I'd never forget the expression of desperate longing on her gorgeous features. Framing her face, I pulled her lower lip between mine and nipped.

"Look at me."

She blinked her eyes open and locked her trusting, lusty gaze on me.

I slammed into her in one hard thrust.

Her mouth opened, and I covered whatever loud noise she was about to make with my mouth.

She was perfection. Hot and tight, gripping my dick like a slippery glove. I drove into her. Long strokes in hard, quick succession. I was lost to the moment, too carried away with the need to have her to slow down and gauge how she wanted it.

It seemed she was on par. Her leg hooked around mine. She gripped my hair and sucked my tongue into her mouth. Greedy and impatient. There was no chance for anything slow and tender, and I was all for it.

My orgasm built too fast—so intense. I couldn't. Not yet. I refused to let go until she'd found her release first. I pounded into her harder, and she widened her legs more. Both of her slender, sexy legs draped on either side of me. As I reached my hand back to wedge my arm under her knee, I knocked into her heels.

Those sexy fucking shoes. Sitting-down shoes. No. Fucked-in-the-grass shoes. I dragged my hand from the heel to her knee, pushing her leg up for another angle.

"Yes." She panted faster between our kisses, and it spurred me on to pump faster.

I felt the first waves of her orgasm as she tightened around my dick.

“Kaden!”

I came. She did too, crying out my name. To hear that sweet voice like that?

I groaned, spearing deep into her as my knees shook against the ground. Her thighs quivered as she milked me dry.

*Fuck.*

“What the fuck was that?” she got out between hard breaths.

I sighed, dropping my head to her shoulder as I braced my weight off her. She had to give me a minute to recover.

“I think—” She shot out another large exhale. “I think you broke me.” Her fingers dropped to my back, one hand holding me to her. She flopped her other arm to the ground.

I chuckled slightly. It was all the energy I had to do.

“I like it hard and fast,” she admitted sleepily. “But what the fuck was that?”

I smiled against her and stole the chance to recover in her arms.

“That was me losing my mind after you drove me crazy in that dress all night.”

“Hmm.”

I slipped out of her and reached for my pants. She lay there, spent and too lazy to move. I glanced at her dress, glad that no evidence of what we just did showed on the silky fabric.

She wheezed out another long breath, and I grinned. Thoroughly fucked. It was a good look on her. In my pocket, I found a few napkins I’d stashed in there when I’d spotted a spill near the bar. They came in handy now. I cleaned up the best I could and tried to help her tidy up.

“I can’t go back there with you dripping down my leg,” she said.

*Maybe we can just go.*

“But I don’t want to be disrespectful to your dad and Margaux by leaving prematurely.”

I scoffed. *Yeah. That’s a good point.*

“I’m pretty sure he might disapprove of guests fucking in his garden more than anyone taking off.”

She smiled, shaking her head. “Yeah. We probably should head back soon.”

*More like now.* I bet we’d missed the whole dinner. Food was just food,

but Dad's speech would follow the meal.

I helped her up, and we were both clumsy as we righted our clothes.

She wasn't coy and shy about what we'd done, and I wasn't either. Giggling and chuckling, we removed the grass and pieces of leaves from each other's hair. Once we deemed it safe to return, we hurried back.

*Not talking about it at all. Got it.*

I wasn't sure sweeping sex under the rug was wise, but when we got back to the party, I realized it would have to wait.

High on the endorphins sex could provide, we grabbed cocktails and enjoyed the evening. We'd returned in time to listen to Dad's speech. When he professed his love for Margaux, I could have sworn I heard an *aww* from Brooke as she leaned into my side.

"I'd also like to thank everyone for coming and supporting us as we prepare to start our lives together." Dad raised his drink, smiling at me. "Especially our children. Kaden."

I lifted my drink.

Dad searched the crowd. "And Kody and Mercedes."

I turned to find them, surprised Dad had spotted them at the same time. It made sense why he'd said both of their names so quickly. Kody stood next to our future stepsister. When he winked at her, I knew it was time to do damage control.

If he wanted to ignore my advice of *hands off* at the office, that was one thing.

Trying to hit on Mercedes was out of the question.

"I'm going to freshen up," Brooke told me after the speech.

I nodded, going toward my twin.

"I can show you the gardens," he suggested, leaning in toward her. "To get some fresh air."

*Nope. Not the gardens.*

Mercedes slanted away from him and arched her brow. "There is literally fresh air all over. We're already outside." She laughed, rolling her eyes as she walked away.

"Nice moves," I deadpanned.

He smirked at me.

"Seriously? *Mercedes?*"

He flipped me the finger and walked away.





BROOKE

Waking up for hot yoga the next morning wasn't an easy feat. It wasn't a repeat of two weekends ago, when I ignored the fact I was a lightweight and drank too much. I wasn't hungover on alcohol when I yawned and silenced my alarm. But I felt different. Hungover from sex, maybe.

Before I lost my mind and lunged at Kaden in the garden, it had been a while. All right, a *long* while. It was one of the worst side effects of workaholism.

We'd only had sex the one time. On the grass at his dad's house when many guests were nearby.

"I can't believe we did that."

I couldn't speak for him. Maybe he brought women out there all the time. I wasn't that kind of a risk-taker, though.

*Until him.*

As I lay in bed, procrastinating in getting up, I recalled how taboo and forbidden it all felt.

The cool air on my boob when it hung out of my dress. With the wetness of his tongue and lips on it, it had felt so shockingly cold. Goosebumps spread over my flesh in reaction to the memory.

He'd picked me up like it was nothing, carrying me like a damn caveman to lower me to the grass. I appreciated that little gesture. The small things mattered. His consideration to lay his jacket on the grass was sweet. It had been ruined, which had caused us to laugh. Wrinkled, both of our orgasms, and grass stains. He'd solved that issue with aplomb, hooking the jacket over

his shoulder, dangling it from one finger until he tossed it on the chair at the table I'd run from.

We'd missed dinner, so we had stopped for take-out and had a drive-through dinner.

We had gone from fake dating, to fucking, to eating greasy food in a parking lot like we were old friends.

"And *now* what am I going to do?" I muttered as I got up.

I went to yoga and told Rena all the juicy details. This week's instructor wasn't the same hardass we'd had last week. He was chill, not even glancing at us as we whispered to each other.

She wasn't shocked, which should have concerned me. I didn't sleep around, after all. I was cautious about who I extended a sexual invitation to.

"I saw it coming a mile away," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Does that mean I'm easy or something?"

She shook her head and changed her pose. "No. Just that some brands of sexual chemistry are bound to implode no matter what you tell yourself."

And I had been telling myself that it wasn't real. I'd gone there as a fake date, but every second of his big cock pounding into me was oh so very real. And hot. And addicting. Because as we showered in the locker room, I gasped at the evidence of his love bites on my breasts.

Rena was almost ready to leave for her trip, so I was glad we had the day to share. After yoga and a quick brunch, we'd check off all the beauty essentials on her list. And all the while, I could glean whatever sound advice that I could from her.

She didn't judge, and she was always fun to share raunchy details with.

Haircuts were first. I loved my long locks, so as she got her hair trimmed and styled, I sat in the vacant chair next to hers and chatted.

Mani and pedis came next, and when the girl who was doing my toes had to take a few minutes of a scheduled break to go pump breastmilk for her baby, I almost dozed in the gently swirling hot water.

"I hate those shoes," I muttered. My arches still hurt.

"No, you don't," Rena argued. I'd sent her a picture—per her request—before I left home last night. She knew exactly which shoes I'd worn with the impressionable green dress.

"I do." I relaxed into the massage chair. "This feels like heaven."

"No, you don't. Those shoes did what they're supposed to do." She shot me a side-eye.

“Give me plantar fasciitis?”

“Small price to pay for visiting rights to his big beautiful dick, isn’t it?”

The girl painting her toenails cracked up so loud she swore she’d pee.

After we paid and tipped the girls, we headed to the only place Rena would allow someone to wax her. She was particular about it. I guessed I couldn’t judge that. If someone was trusted near my pussy with a promise of pain in a totally nonsexual way, I’d be choosy too. We could have spent all day at the first salon and had all these things done at once. Rena liked to pick and choose, though, so we’d gone from one establishment to the next.

“You’re putting your nails on the wardrobe account, aren’t you?” She flipped a lock of my hair, teasing me. “It’s part of the look.”

I shrugged. I’d spent *my* money on it, and it wasn’t too bad of a splurge since I had an expired coupon I sweet-talked the girl at the checkout into using.

Her mention of the wardrobe account soured my mood. A reminder that Kaden was paying for anything just didn’t feel right after our romp in the garden. I was the one who’d initiated it, but still. I’d complicated it all now.

Rena, of course, picked up on my mood. “So, what are your intentions with him now?”

I slumped into a seat in the waiting room of her tried and tested waxing salon. Shaking my head, I tried to hedge my answer. But this was Rena. Pretty soon, she’d be Contiki-ing and I wouldn’t have my best friend to count on for advice or a listening ear.

“I don’t have any intentions.”

Rena plopped her feet on the coffee table, waving at the check-in girl. “No intentions at all?”

I crossed my arms, staring dubiously at the informational posters near the potted plant in a corner. I skimmed the instructions and advice, as well as what to expect. It all sounded so violent. I squeezed my legs together. “I had fun with him.”

“Of course you did,” Rena teased.

“Before that, though. Just being his date.”

She was quick to lean close and correct me. “Fake date.”

I winced. “And after the garden, too. He’s not just a big beautiful dick,” I said.

Another woman waiting in the room glanced up from her magazine and raised her brows at me.

“Not my words,” I told her, pointing at Rena. “Hers.”

Rena leaned forward to speak around me. “But her dick. Not mine.”

The woman’s brows shot higher.

“Not *mine* but—” I groaned and shook my head. I turned to face Rena only and ignore this other woman. “He’s not just good for sex.”

“But he can be.”

I shook my head. “No. I can’t do this.”

“What, see him anymore?”

“I’m not seeing him. It’s fake.”

She nodded. “Right. So that’s out of the way. No feelings need to get messy. Just use him for sex.”

*Use?* That word sounded all kinds of wrong in this context.

“I’m hoping there will be a cute guy in my tour group so I can do the same.” She winked.

We didn’t chat again, and I killed the time reading the informational poster.

“Is this all like a *been there and done that* feeling?” I asked. “Once you’ve survived one waxing, you can handle it again?”

“Come on. Try it.” Rena grinned. “Get a wax and surprise your man.”

“He’s not *my* man.”

She rolled her eyes. “Your fake man.”

Now that she’d said it, I couldn’t get the idea of it out of my mind. If we could have another garden tour, would he be shocked? I rubbed the slight whisker burn on my cheeks. He didn’t have a full beard but that just-right amount of stubble that gave such a delicious friction. If he were to rub his face against—

“Ooooh.” Rena giggled, fanning at my face. “I can only imagine what you’re imagining. Come on.”

I winced. “I’m not a fan of pain.”

“And what?” she said, flicking her finger at my tattooed arm. “Are these all temporary stick-on things?”

It was a good point. “Fine.”

Some decisions were best made impulsively.

“Go tell her before I can chicken out.”

Rene shot to her feet and made a grabby hand at me. “The wardrobe card, please.”

I grinned and handed it over.

My nerves rose as the wait continued. After Rena checked me in—lucky me, they had a slot right after her—she tried to distract me with banal chitchat. I heard not a single word of it, running through several different arguments why this was such a bad, bad idea.

But maybe it wouldn't be so horrible. I'd never know unless I tried.

Old, quiet Brooke never took risks. The woman I was today, that bold garden nymph who Kaden had filled his release with, she could try a new trick here and there.

Waiting without Rena was worse. I stood and paced, but then sat, worried that walking would somehow warm me up too much. Should my skin be cold? Hot? I glanced at the informational poster. Another woman who'd come in and sat waiting sighed at me reading it again.

"It's over before you know it," she said in a sage, veteran-of-baldness voice.

*We'll see about that.*

When Rena came back out, I studied her, expecting her to walk like an old western girl who'd ridden on a horse's saddle. Her stride was normal—no sign of pain. She cringed when she sat, but I think that was because she'd gone to Brazil.

No one was trespassing that far anytime soon. So maybe I wouldn't have to worry about *that*.

"You ready?" the tech said.

"Yes," I said as I shook my head.

"Take care of my girl," Rena called out as I followed the stout woman to a room. "She's a virgin."

The tech turned around and raised her brows at me before I spun to gape at my friend.

She rolled her eyes. "Virgin of waxing. Sheesh."

The other woman in the lobby told me it would all go fast. It did. Nerves played with my mind and warped my sense of time. One minute, I was walking toward a chamber of doom. The next, my bare ass was lying on the table.

"First time goes quick," she advised. Her tone was matter-of-fact and dull, like she couldn't wait to go home.

"So I've heard."

I bit my lip as she spread the wax on, and as I stared at the ceiling, I held my breath.

“Breathe. I don’t want another one to pass out on me today.”

I shot her an alarmed look. “Someone passed out here?”

“Get a few every day.” She shrugged. “Part of the trade.”

I was proud I didn’t scream at the first rip. After the second, I blinked away tears.

I wouldn’t agree that it was the speediest experience I’d ever had, but when I walked out to Rena, I made sure I walked normally. If I could have, I would have sprinted out of there, but I had my dignity.

“Not bad, right?” Rena beamed at me.

“I’m never, *ever* doing that again,” I vowed darkly.





KADEN

Brooke didn't contact me after the engagement party. I knew she did yoga on Sunday mornings, and I figured she might want space after we'd been so intimate. Honestly, I hated it. I felt like I had to walk on thin ice around her. Being considerate of what she needed was one thing. But torturing myself by missing her felt shitty too.

*But she's not mine to miss.*

It was too damn easy to forget that what we had and what we did was fake. We weren't on a real date that night. We weren't at the party as a real couple. Every second of slamming my dick into her drenched pussy was very real, but the aftermath of it was a strange, confusing thing to figure out.

I didn't have to call her, but I wanted to.

I had no reason to see her, but I wished I had one.

When Wednesday came along, after three days of debating how I should approach her, I was uneasy.

Tonight, Kody, Mercedes, and I were meeting up at a bakery for a cake tasting, and I'd invited Brooke along. It wasn't an official wedding-related event that Brooke had to attend. Dad wanted me and Kody to have a date for the wedding, but I took it a step further to really show everyone that Brooke was with me—kind of.

She had seemed excited about the cake tasting though, when I told her about the appointment, so I wouldn't burst that bubble of happiness now. I'd mentioned the cake tasting *before* my brother was an ass to her at the party though. Now I wasn't sure how it would go.

Kody had lucked out. He'd traveled for the last couple of nights on a

project. If he had been around before this afternoon, he would have gotten an earful from me.

First, about the way he treated Brooke.

Second, about the hunch I had that he was hitting on Mercedes.

That guy needed a fucking keeper to make sure he toed the line. And it shouldn't have to be me.

Dad and Margaux were supposed to come as well, but at the last minute, they decided to let us "kids" handle it. They trusted our judgment. Okay, maybe not Kody's, but Mercedes and I could agree on a damn cake flavor.

I was under the impression that the bride and groom weren't concerned about the details. Dad wanted this to be the event of the year, but because he'd been married before, he wasn't picky about the finer points. And Margaux wasn't controlling, likely because this wasn't her first time down the aisle either.

At the bakery, I waited for the employee to bring out samples. I'd gotten there first. Mercedes arrived next, smiling at me as she wrapped up a phone call. *What does she do again?* I knew Dad had told me, but strangely enough, Mercedes and I had covered a variety of small talk and get-to-know-you crap that didn't include careers.

*Well, I think she can guess where I'm employed.*

"Hey," Brooke said in a rushed greeting.

I straightened from peering down into the glass cases. Returning her smile, I watched as she entered. Still in her work outfit, she looked like a walking wet dream. If she added glasses to that librarian-like skirt and blouse?

"How was your day?" She came to my side and rubbed my arm.

*Long. Lonely.* What was this pat on the arm? I pulled her into a hug and breathed in the sweet vanilla scent of her shampoo. "You smell good enough to eat."

She blushed, stepping back. "Well, I'm here to taste a cock."

Her eyes opened wide.

Mercedes cracked up.

"*Cake.* To taste a *cake*," Brooke emphasized.

"You sure?" I teased.

She licked her lips and didn't cower from my stare.

I loved this side of her. Teasing, playful, and not backing down. She wouldn't freak out at saying something dumb, and that was a rare trait to

find.

“What’d I miss?” Kody asked as he entered, breaking the spell.

Brooke glanced back at me, sighing. “May as well get started.”

I never paid attention to the desserts at weddings. They were just there. Expected. All were baked with sugar. Each one was decorated and elaborate. It was cake. I was a simple guy. Cake was cake.

Being so simple-minded about the baked treat, I was wholly unprepared for how intensive this spread would be. Fourteen flavors of cake. Seven types of frosting. A variety of icings. It reminded me of the statistics class I’d barely passed in college. Permutations with food.

I zoned out when the baker’s assistant in charge of helping us started to sound like a geometry teacher. Square, stacked, rectangular, tiered. Circles and hey, even custom whatever shapes, too. I didn’t care about its dimensions. Mercedes was prepared with the only vital information we had to keep in mind—to make sure that it would be enough for the guests, the total of which Mercedes had written down.

“Simple,” Mercedes reminded the assistant.

“But not bland,” I added for her.

Between the two of us, we should be able to narrow the options. The woman didn’t seem to understand either of those words though because she continued to show us pictures of ornate towering structures that likely required a machete to cut through.

We’d already gone through the tasting, but some samples were left over.

“Hands down, I vote for chocolate,” Brooke said.

I tried to refrain from reacting to the sexy moans she let out with her lips wrapped around that fork. If she’d slipped and said *cock* instead of *cake* when she arrived, she had to have been thinking about it. And it better have been *mine*. She could have been making those appreciative noises with her mouth on me.

Her mewls of approval and the motions of her lips had my dick waking up way too fast than what was appropriate for a bakery.

“That chocolate will go straight to your ass,” Kody said.

I clenched my jaw.

“Hmmm.” Brooke turned and looked over her shoulder. “This ass?”

She slanted her leg out, and fuck me if it wasn’t a suggestive pose. I grinned, losing that spike of anger at his comment. She wasn’t taking his shit.

“God, I wish I had legs like yours,” Mercedes told her wistfully after

shooting Kody a stern look. “Are you a runner?”

“Rowing and spin. Between those, you target it all.” She smoothed her hand over her sexy ass, rubbing salt in the wound for my brother. He wouldn’t get away with calling her fat now. Kody rolled his eyes.

*Yeah, you look good and you know it. You tell him, Brooke.*

“You liked chocolate in high school too, Brooke,” he said. “Maybe that’s why you had acne.”

Mercedes coughed on her bite of cake. Covering her mouth, she struggled to get it down. Brooke patted her back.

“Is someone choking?” a worker called out.

*No, but he’s about to be as soon as I get my hands on his neck.*

“Kody!” Mercedes shouted, aghast. “You are *such* an ass!”

“Don’t be rude,” I told him.

Kody rolled his eyes at me and shrugged. “What? She’s hot now. What does it matter?”

Brooke pulled her shoulders back, keeping her composure. “Which is it, Kody? Do you remember me or not?”

I was proud of her for throwing it back at him. He had been a colossal idiot at the party, pretending he didn’t know who she was.

Kody laughed, but I knew him well enough that it was his forced chuckle that meant he needed to save face. He had been caught red-handed, and we all knew it.

Mercedes stared him down, either judging him or trying to figure him out. “Let’s just go with chocolate and call it a night.”

“Circles,” I added. “Tiered.”

When the assistant replied with more questions yet, I was grateful Mercedes answered them all.

“It’s still early.” Kody glanced at us. “Why don’t we all grab drinks?”

Mercedes shook her head.

“You really don’t know how to read a room, do you?” I muttered.

“What?” He frowned. “You in?”

“No, we’re not in,” I told him as I wrapped my arm around Brooke’s shoulders.

He wasn’t a quitter. “Are you?”

“No.” Mercedes shot him down as she, too, headed to exit.

We split up, all going our separate ways.

“Let me give you a ride home,” I told Brooke.

She shrugged, and the gesture seemed like a way to get away from me. “Okay. Sure.”

Once we were in my SUV, I hesitated to start the engine. She wouldn’t look at me. Instead, she tugged at her blouse. Her fingers were clumsy, belying her nervousness as she adjusted the hem to cover her hips more. She flipped the visor down and turned side to side to check her makeup. A frown marred her face, but other than that, she was perfect. On point and just so, like she always was.

Not for the first time, I considered the time, effort, and commitment she had to invest to pull that off. I hated to think of her toiling away for the sake of vanity. That night she drank too much, she’d rubbed it all off when she got home. Fresh-faced and without makeup was just as sexy and beautiful as when she’d done it all artistically.

She pursed her lips and dabbed at the corner of her eye, contorting her facial muscles the way one had to in order to check for imperfections on the ever-changing and moving features of the face.

This wasn’t the first time I’d noticed her doing this. Little glances here and there. She’d check herself out often, almost like a fixation with her appearance. When she did, it was with an expression of concentration. She would be focused, not smiling at herself.

And for the first time, I wondered why.

“Are you okay?”

“Can you drive me home, please?” she asked, snapping the mirror shut and flipping the visor up.

I sighed and started the SUV. I didn’t push, and she stared out the window.

Silent treatment. That was great.

*Fucking Kody.*

“I looked over the files you emailed yesterday,” she said after a few moments of heavy silence.

I glanced at her, disappointed she still looked out the window. She would lead with *that*? Business? Of course, that deal between Wagner Industries and Halden Inc. stood. Actually, I was slacking on it. I had to contact Todd to inform him of the exclusive business arrangement.

*And send her the lump-sum bonus.*

But I had missed her enough that I would take the bait and reply.

“What did you think of my recommendations?” I asked.

Talking about work was the last thing I wanted to do. We had office hours to dedicate to those conversations. I would have rather asked her why she blurted *cock* earlier. Or maybe I could have commented about something she'd said at the engagement party.

What I really wanted to do was tell her I missed her. That I'd thought about her over the last few days and wished she'd contact me—even just to say hello.

But she'd opened up by talking about work. The message was clear. She didn't want to mention how we'd fucked in the garden, and I had to assume she regretted it. She didn't want to remark about anything with this fake dating we'd agreed to, and I guessed she wasn't happy about it.

All that remained forefront in my mind was that she wanted to avoid any conversation about *us*—in any other way than what related to business.

*Because she sees nothing between us? Even after the way I'd made her cry out my name as she squeezed my dick? Despite the way she can tease me so easily?*

“Kaden?”

I sighed, glancing at her. Shit. I'd been musing about her and why she tried so hard to resist me that I'd missed something she said.

She frowned, pointing out the window. “You missed my exit.”

*Dammit.* “Sorry. I wasn't paying attention.”

Now that she'd declared this ride a no-meaningful-conversation zone, I didn't want to drag it out and suffer through another minute of it.

Actually, she could give me the silent treatment again.

*That hurts less.*



BROOKE

**A**fter a brutal spin class Saturday morning, I rotated my wrist and retrieved my phone from my bag. I'd leaned on the bars too hard—unused to the bike because that creepy guy took it before I could.

*I've got to find a new gym.* The one I liked was affordable, though, so I'd tough it out a little longer.

*Hmm.* I shifted the straps to my bag a little higher and unlocked the screen. A push notification to my bank app. I logged in and almost dropped my phone as I groaned.

"I thought he said *thirty* thousand," I mumbled as I walked home.

The red dot next to the messages list showed that I'd received a deposit of forty grand, pending approval until nine o'clock. Shaking my head, I tapped on the message icon associated with the notification.

*The extra ten is for dealing with Kody.*

Ten thousand dollars was the cost of tolerating his twin? I'd never understand how wealthy people thought.

I logged out and frowned as I headed down the sidewalk. Walking also helped me to think. Mercedes had asked me if I was a runner at the cake tasting, and I wished that I *was*. The mindless void of cardio like that would clear the troubled thoughts pinging in my head, but I was too flat-footed to be a runner. I'd tried. It didn't stick.

Clearing out these worries and indecisive feelings wouldn't be so easy even if I could run.

For the rest of the work week, I maintained my professional persona when dealing with Kaden. We'd spoken on the phone about the deal, and we



had a meeting with Todd, too.

It was stressful. That was the understatement of the year. Seeing Kaden at work bothered me for reasons I didn't want to acknowledge.

He was kind and professional, not giving anything away that we'd agreed to fake date. Not once did he hint at something funny going on between us. Professional, polite, and charming. That was the Kaden I saw, but I kept wishing for the other sides of him that I now knew. The attentive listener. The sexy, impatient lover who kissed me like no other. The teasing, easygoing joker.

Each time I caught myself wishing I could ask him about something *not* related to work, I stewed in a strange limbo of indecision.

When Todd asked me to arrange dates and project schedules, I wondered if I could manage it. How could a woman be expected to stay sane and in control when facing the man she *wasn't* dating but might want to? How could I keep a straight face and listen to the dry, detailed replies he gave me when I so quickly got stuck staring at his mouth and remembering the sweet torture of his tongue and teeth on my nipple?

I was in *huge* trouble, but it was a mess of my own making.

As I walked home, I decided I'd have to bow out of the fake dating arrangement. It was foolhardy to begin with. Despite what he'd said, I couldn't escape the feeling I was being paid for sex, and that was an awful thought to consider.

*It would be best to keep everything professional only.* The lines were getting too blurred. My emotions were skewed. I couldn't stay afloat in this mind game.

Having sex with him was a mistake. I understood that now even though the admission hurt. It stung because I'd already started to wish it wasn't a mistake, that it was a good thing.

*Well, it was.* The sex was phenomenal, perhaps hotter than anything else I'd done because it was in the open, where anyone could have found us. That public setting factor made it seem more exciting than it might have been if we'd fucked on a bed.

*But it's not worth my sanity.*

It wasn't worth it. Navigating the ethical gray area of accepting money from someone I'd had sex with was giving me a headache. And the fake dates? I'd enjoyed the cake tasting despite those awkward moments, but being invited to the wedding-related events meant I'd spend more time in

Kody's presence. He was a jerk, just like Kaden had been in high school. Now that we were near each other as adults, it was triggering me.

I didn't want to feel that harrowing negativity again. I didn't want to relapse to the crippling self-consciousness that ruled my life when I was a teen.

After I let myself inside my apartment, I set my phone down on the counter near the door. The lock screen of me and Mom smiling from a selfie on her back patio stared at me.

I planned to use that lump sum on her.

*I can't back out.*

It was impossible. She needed that help so much, and it would be a damn shame to toss away the money.



TWELVE YEARS AGO...

I GRABBED the other Gelly Roll pen and pressed the tip to my chemistry notebook. Solid-to-gas equations were so mind-numbing, my time was better spent doodling. The depiction was nearly complete. I was no artist, though I *loved* looking at art and considering what painters and sculptors wanted to convey. But I didn't let a lack of trained skill hold me back from outlining creations that only I would see.

On this page, metallic ink dried in curving lines and corners.

It was a sketch of a dress. *My dress.*

Prom was quickly approaching. It was all anyone talked about, but I had to agree with my peers. *Welcome to the Jungle* was this year's theme for the dance, and it was stupid. We were seniors in high school, not toddlers at a preschool.

The theme didn't matter, I supposed. This would be our last dance as high school students, and I was excited. Paige and I would be each other's dates again. That meant that pothead would resume his dumb rumors about us being an actual couple, but I doubted anyone really listened to what he claimed. The teachers were likely counting down the days until they would be free of him for good.

Mom and I had gone thrifting for my dresses to the other dances before this. The homecoming gown I wore was Paige's cousin's bridesmaid dress from a few years ago. Mom had taken it in and adjusted it, and it hadn't looked bad at all. Not new, not *good*, but it had worked.

This dress that I drew was *mine*. It was the first thing I'd ever owned that truly made me feel pretty. I wouldn't go so far as to say it made me feel like a princess. Princesses were overrated. Like a prince would swoop in and save any girl from a lousy existence.

*Yeah, right.*

I didn't need a dress to make me feel magical. I was a senior. I stopped believing in fantasies well before my dad had left us.

But this dress made me feel truly happy. And pretty. The best thing about it was that Mom was making it for me. All for me. My very own prom dress I could keep forever. I already knew which sneakers to wear with it. No dress shoes for me. I was flat-footed, and the white sneakers would give it just a little kick of a unique look.

*A little kick. Ha ha.* I was hilarious.

I wasn't the only one bored about solid-to-gas conversions. Kody walked up to me at the high-top table, leaning over my shoulder to glance at what I was doodling. He probably wasn't bored. He most likely didn't care to understand the lesson.

"What are you drawing?"

I almost did a double-take at him. He *never* spoke to me, not in a normal tone and one-on-one like this. Teasing me from afar was his style.

"My dress." I narrowed my eyes at him, making sure it was Kody. Couldn't they cut their hair differently? Or get a slight scar on their chin? It was tough trying to remember who was who. Kaden had been so aloof lately, though. I recalled his attitude that day we'd done the presentation together. He wasn't mean, but he'd clearly had an issue with the world that day.

"Cool." Kody nodded, looking at it again. "You have a date?"

Nerves fluttered in my belly. Was he seriously talking to me like a normal person? It was a doodle, not a masterpiece. "Uh, no." I did, but I didn't. Paige and I called each other our backup plan, knowing no one would be asking us anyway.

"Would you like to come to prom with me?"

I lowered my head and raised my brows. "What?" I held my breath.

He gave me a slow smile, charming me in a heartbeat. My pulse raced as

I stared at him.

Kody Wagner, the popular blond *every* girl wanted.

“I want you to be my date,” he said.

*Yeah, right.* I blinked and stared at him. “Why?”

His lips eased into a crooked grin, and I felt my cheeks warming at the impact of his megawatt teenage-heartthrob smile. Just for me. He was looking at *me* with that devilish, charming face. He shrugged. “Why not?”

A question for an answer. How annoying, but I could hardly care. Kody Wagner was asking *me* to prom!

“Um, okay. Yeah.”

He winked, walking away. “Can’t wait.”

*Is this for real?* I tempered my breaths, not wanting to draw attention to myself as I spun to face forward in my seat. *Oh, my God!*

I had to tell Paige. She’d never believe it. I almost couldn’t believe it myself, but he’d asked. I heard him. He asked me to prom.

Paige was supposed to be my backup, but I hadn’t thought I’d need to fall back from a first option, let alone that Kody Wagner would pick me as his date.

*I hope she doesn’t mind.* Paige wasn’t a big fan of the Wagner twins. Ever since that hotdog incident in the fall, she steered clear of them. But I hoped she’d be happy for me. We only had our senior prom once in a lifetime, and now that he’d asked me, I was more excited than ever.

Today was my lucky day. Kody asked me to prom. Mom had a night off from the office for a change. And my dress would be coming along. Life was looking good.

I ran home, skipping the last bus ride because the constant stops were annoying. Mom was surprised when I burst in through the front door. She peered at me with alarm. In an apron and holding a spoon, she looked at me expectantly. “What happened? Are you all right?”

She must have noticed my smile because she relaxed.

“You will never believe what happened at school.”

She beckoned me into the kitchen. “Then tell me! Is it good news?” Her smile was so sweet as she glanced at me, standing in front of the stove to stir the spaghetti sauce. “It sure looks like it’s good news.”

“Someone asked me to prom! This really—” I swallowed, picking through my mind for a good word to use. “This really cute boy!”

Those twins were more than cute. They were dreamy.

Mom set the spoon down and wiped her hands off. “Oh, honey. That’s incredible news. I’m so happy for you!”

I smiled, pressing my face into her as she hugged me tight.

“You’re going to have such a great time.”

“You think so?”

She giggled. “I know so. I’m so excited for you!”

I squeezed my arms around her tighter. “I can’t wait!”



## KADEN

**K**ody was gone all weekend for both business and pleasure. A good friend of his had a birthday party at the casino Saturday, and Kody didn't want to drive back home after drinking. And Sunday, he went to play golf with someone he'd been trying to negotiate a deal with for the company. Not all hours fell within the work week.

I didn't normally keep tabs on my brother but I was eager to speak with him. I wanted a chance to talk to him about his shitty behavior at the cake tasting. All weekend, I stewed about it.

He was an ass for no reason. Even Mercedes had been appalled by the way he spoke to Brooke. Brooke didn't contact me all weekend, and I had a sinking suspicion she wanted space from me because of the way he'd treated her. I had relished the chance to see her at the office last week, but Todd was there. And all she offered me was the sharp, get-to-the-point professional version of her. No flirting. Hardly any smiles.

It sucked.

I came to the office earlier than usual. I hadn't slept well, aggravated about his attitude and also anxious about confronting him. Kody and I butted heads often, but this mattered to me. I'd rehearsed and tried to guess how he'd blow my concerns off.

Well, I wouldn't have it. I refused to let him think he could get away with being such a dick to everyone. *Just what the hell was up his ass to be like this?* It was bullshit.

As soon as I heard his voice on our floor, I headed to his office. He liked to "settle" in before getting his coffee going.

I caught him as he was lowering to his high-back leather chair.

“Hey. What’s up, Kaden?” he greeted.

“What the hell is your problem?”

I intended to start neutrally, but just seeing his smirking face irked me. In the background, not a single person made a peep. Great, an audience.

I returned to the door and slammed it.

“What is up your ass?” he asked.

“You! Where do you get off talking to Brooke like that?”

He dipped his brows together and lifted his hands as if to suggest he was clueless. “When did I talk to Brooke? I’ve been out of town all weekend, dude.”

“At the cake tasting. About the chocolate.”

He blinked lazily and waved me off. “Oh. That.”

“You called her fat. And reminded her that she had acne. Who the fuck does that?”

When he rolled his eyes, I had to remind myself why I shouldn’t punch him.

*Oh, yeah. Because this is Dad’s office. And he’s still the boss—who wouldn’t approve.*

“You were a fucking dick. How dare you say that shit to her?”

“Dude. Listen to yourself.” He shook his head. “She’s just a fake date, right? Why do you even care?”

I did care. I cared a lot. I cared because I thought of Brooke as more than just a work associate I’d paid off to be my date. I’d agonized about this all weekend because I hated the thought of her hurting because of something my insensitive brother said.

Admitting that to him wasn’t on the agenda, though.

“You were mean enough to Brooke in high school.”

Again, he waved me off. “That was years ago.”

“And you have no excuse to still be such an immature ass.” I didn’t care if he glowered at me. He had to hear this. “One of these days, you’re going to have to grow up and get your shit together.”

He shot to his feet. “Oh, like *you* do?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I crossed my arms.

“I’m not the one kissing up to Dad by having a date just because he demanded it. Paying her to be your date? How’s it going keeping that separate from the account you’re in charge of at Halden Inc.?”



“Shut the hell up.” I shook my head. “Dad’s been talking about finding a third party for paper distribution for years.” Still, the way he tried to intimidate me bothered me.

“You’ve got a lot of fucking nerve. Coming in here and acting like you’re the shit when you’re just a liar anyway. Pretending she’s something she’s not.”

“Don’t change the subject. Just stop being such an ass to everyone!”

After I yelled that part, Pamela opened the door. She closed her mouth and ducked her head as she backed right out the way she’d stepped in. “Here we go again,” she mumbled before she shut the door.

“And another thing.”

He sneered at me. “I didn’t ask to hear what you think about anything in the first place.”

“Stop hitting on Margaux’s daughter.”

His groan was full of annoyance. “Seriously? Fuck off. Go worry about your fake date’s feelings and stay out of my business.”

“Mercedes is off limits.”

He strode toward me and got in my face. “That’s not for *you* to decide.”

I didn’t flinch. “She’s going to be our stepsister. Have some fucking respect.”

“I’m not disrespecting her.”

I shook my head. “Hitting on her before Dad marries her mom? You don’t think that’s disrespecting both of them?”

He stepped back and paced. His angry energy was unmissable, but mentioning how he could be disappointing Dad seemed to crack at his stubborn wall.

“I come back from a long weekend and you think you’ve got some kind of right to hand me my ass?”

“Just stop being one.”

He glared at me, pausing by his desk. “Anything else, Mr. Perfect?”

I didn’t react to his jab. It wasn’t original anyway. “You can handle the office today. I need some space.”

He didn’t reply, and I didn’t wait to hear what he might have had to say. I wasn’t dumping a ton of work on him. Dad, Kody, and I all showed wide-open days on the inner-office scheduling program. If anything major popped up, he could put out those fires.

Because I couldn’t stand the idea of looking at him again. Sitting around

in my office didn't appeal either.

I passed my secretary, telling her I was out for the day.

Once I exited the building, I headed to the parking garage to get in my SUV. It usually soothed me. The relaxing mood I felt when I drove through the city didn't strike me. I was too pissed.

I was partly concerned too. He'd thrown me off by putting me on the spot. Yeah, I did care about Brooke, but I didn't appreciate being forced to admit it, even to myself. Because caring about her wasn't a condition we'd considered in our fake-date scheme. Caring about her muddied the waters of the money I'd given her too.

Kody wouldn't tell Dad. He didn't want to upset the old man this close to the wedding. The whole office was abuzz and excited, treating him like a king preparing to marry his queen. Dad was *not* to be troubled, and even Kody understood that.

Still, I hated that he'd called me and Brooke liars about it all.

Because we were. We were totally lying to everyone. Or at least I was. I couldn't speak for her. I wanted to think she cared about me past our deals, but I wouldn't get my hopes up.

I parked at her building within minutes. Traffic was surprisingly manageable, almost as though the world knew I needed a break.

Finding a spot in the garage took longer than the drive over here had, but I snagged a spot and executed too many turns in the tight fit. Compact vehicles only, my ass.

The elevator seemed to take forever. Every minute I waited to reach her seemed like a test.

Sandra's smile widened in surprise when I finally arrived at her office. "Good morning, Kaden. I didn't realize we were expecting you today."

I smiled, or I thought I did. I hadn't figured out a reason to explain why I was here. I just wanted to be near her and forget about the fight with Kody.

"I just needed to see Brooke for something." There. It wasn't a lie. It was vague as hell, but I didn't care to elaborate. I wasn't in the mood to wait for permission.

"Oh." She frowned, seeming confused.

I cranked up the wattage on my smile for her and added a wink as I walked down the hall. "I remember the way."

"Right. Okay," she called out, her tone unsure.

I reached her office within another minute, but I didn't knock. Her door

was open, as it usually was, and I spotted her on the phone.

She raised her brows at me. “Uh huh. I agree. That’s half as much as what should be provided within the specifications Steven emailed me.” Her gorgeous green eyes tracked me as I let myself in.

Furrowing her brow, she swiveled in her seat and held up a finger, asking for a minute.

I sat, leaning forward to rest my elbows on my knees as I waited for her to finish her call. It seemed like one of those tricky ones with no convenient pauses. She frowned, seeming to start but never complete an insertion of *well, I’ve got to go*.

I didn’t mind. Now that I was here and I heard her smart replies and sweet voice, I calmed down a bit.

When she hung up, I stood.

“I need you.”

That was so not what I’d intended to say. I hadn’t rehearsed anything, but that sounded wrong.

She blinked and took in my appearance, instantly becoming worried. “What? What’s wrong? Are you okay?” She stood, and I put my hand out to gesture to calm down.

“Yes.” I cringed, backpedaling. “Sorry. I’m okay.”

She arched one brow. “You sure?”

“I just needed to get away. A bad morning.” I exhaled, already feeling better in her company. “And you’re the only person I want to spend time with.”

No lies. Just the truth. She could interpret it however she saw fit.

“Oh.” She didn’t look at me for a moment, idly tracing her finger in a crescent shape on her desk. “A bad morning because...?”

I shook my head. I didn’t want to rehash it all. I especially didn’t want to explain to her that I realized I cared about her as more than a fake date should.

“Because you forgot to do laundry and the last clean boxers you had were the plaid ones?”

I rolled my eyes. A smile almost won. I appreciated her attempt though.

She glanced at her phone, then her computer. “Well, I do have an errand to run. And I need a ride.”

“Would you like company with that ride?” I dangled my keys.

She hesitated for just a moment before nodding. “Yeah. I would.”



BROOKE

**A**s Kaden drove us out of the city, I caught myself before I reached for him.

He'd shown up like a dark storm, all glum and unhappy. He seemed restless, too. Beneath it though, I sensed that he might be conflicted and hurt. His pain called to me, making me want to pull him into my arms and hug him. It was on the tip of my tongue to offer comfort, but I wasn't sure what I would be sympathizing about. He remained closed-lipped on the walk to his SUV, and the only words we'd spoken since he started driving were my instructions of where to go.

I wasn't sure how to break the quiet, but it didn't seem to bother him. He looked calmer, his grip relaxed on the steering wheel and his shoulders not as tense.

He must have felt me staring because he turned to smile at me. It wasn't a wide grin. More like a simple show of being contented with me.

*"You're the only person I want to spend time with."*

What was I supposed to say to that?

I had heard the sincerity in his voice and I noticed the seriousness in his gaze.

Still, what did that mean? I was the chosen one because he had to get away from others? He sought me out because I could offer him something no one else did?

All I was supposed to bring to the table for him was pretending to be his date. This wasn't a date. Running an errand with me wasn't a wedding-related event where he'd need to put on a show for his dad.

*Because he sees me as a friend?*

I glanced at him again. If he needed me, I wanted to be there for him. Yet, that went strictly against the resolution I planned to stick to.

No more fake dating.

Business only.

But it sounded so hard to consider now.

“I’m sorry for startling you.”

The quiet had grown so loud, I almost flinched when he spoke up.

“For just popping in.”

“You looked so out of sorts that I was worried you were hurt,” I admitted.

“Or that something had happened to someone.”

He took my hand then. One gentle squeeze, and then he released it. “No, nothing like that. I just wanted to see you.”

I cringed. “As what though?”

“What do you mean?”

I watched the scenery blur by out the window. I couldn’t explain it, but I didn’t want to look at him directly when I explained. “You wanted to see me as your fake date? Business colleague? Something more?”

“Just you.” He was totally evading my questions, but I’d let it slide.

I felt wanted when he admitted he’d sought me out. A sense of belonging mixed with importance followed.

*Just me.* I liked that. And I would hold on to those sentiments for as long as I could.

Before long, we reached my mom’s house.

Kaden peered at it through the window. The way he slanted and ducked brought his head close to mine, and I held my breath. This close and treated to his spicy clean scent, I was tempted. It wouldn’t take much to slide my hand along his lean, stubble-covered jaw. I’d urge him to bring those soft, wicked lips closer to mine and show him how much I could reciprocate.

*I want to spend time with you, too.* And there lay the problem. I couldn’t figure out how to justify any right to be with him.

He glanced at me, seeming to realize he’d leaned in that far. “Where are we?”

I inhaled a long, careful breath as he sat back in the driver’s seat.

“Come on.”

Christ, I had to get out of this SUV. Sure, I wanted his company, but I was only so strong.

I didn't wait for him on the cracked sidewalk, but I heard his quick footsteps as he followed me toward the steps.

Mom opened the door on the second knock. She must have seen me coming. She held the door open wide and grinned at me. "Brooke! What a pleasant surprise!

"Hi, Mom." I hugged her back and then stepped inside. Kaden maintained that easy, charming smile as he walked in as well.

"And this is one of the displaced surfer boys," I teased. "Kaden Wagner."

He took her hand and shook it. "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Ponder."

"Oh." She shook his hand and patted her free one over them. "Please, just Nancy. It's nice to meet you. She was just telling me last time about how your companies have engaged in a deal." As she faced me, confusion set in faster. "But I'm sorry I didn't remember this visit."

I shook my head. "It's a surprise."

"A pop-in," Kaden added. He smiled a secret little grin at me, perhaps poking fun at himself since he'd done that not even an hour ago.

"Well, I love surprises," she said.

"You're really going to like the next one."

She tilted her head to the side. "Oh?"

That was my cue to hand her the check.

"What? What is this?" she asked, furrowing her brow.

"Kaden and I arranged for a bonus with our business deal."

Mom grinned, glancing at the check then me. "Oh, Todd must be thrilled! Good job, honey." She held the check out, likely assuming it wasn't for her but for my boss. I pushed her hand back down.

"No, that's for *you*." I pointed at where her name was listed on the check I'd prepared for her. I'd been so thrilled to have the check prepared. I'd run my finger over her name several times, so damn excited to be able to do this for her.

"*What?* Don't be silly. This is too much!"

I shook my head and smiled. "Nope. It's all for you and it's not too much, Mom."

Her fingers trembled as she lifted them to cover her mouth. I'd rendered her speechless.

"It was Kaden's idea to arrange for this bonus. And that's for *you*. We want you to have it for the house." I lifted my hand, gesturing at the living room where a crossword puzzle book lay open on the TV table tray. She must

have been sitting there watching me through the front window. Being on disability, she often had wonky hours of part-time work. I'd taken a risk that she was at home, and I was fortunate she was.

"No. Honey, this is too much. I can't take this."

Again, I gently moved her hand back down. "I insist. Mom, I never would have survived my youth without your support. You spent so long working hard to provide for me. And now I can finally pay you back."

"You're my daughter, honey. There's no such thing as needing to pay me back."

I shook my head. "I didn't say I had to. I *want* to. Let me help you after you got me through the hard times."

Tears glistened in her eyes, and she inhaled a shaky breath. She rotated her arm, palm up, and touched the tattoo on her inner wrist.

I smiled, and my gaze went blurry as I teared up too. I hadn't planned on the waterworks, but I should have known. In the same spot, I had an identical Celtic symbol. I tapped it like she had done to hers, reminding myself and her how we'd been partners for so long, surviving all the hard times we'd faced.

It represented eternity, and we'd chosen it together after my graduation. We'd picked the symbol as a reminder to stay strong, no matter what came our way. It was my first tattoo actually, and getting it with my mom gave it that much more extra meaning. She often teased that she was the one who unleashed the beast. After that tattoo, I was addicted to them.

I'd let her think that. The symbol we shared held a lot of meaning, but all of them did.

Kaden was quiet. He didn't insert himself into the conversation, but I noticed his presence. I noted it and treasured it. His style was to stand back and let me do what I wanted or needed to do. He didn't add anything, following me and Mom through the house.

She offered us drinks. With lemonade in hand, we discussed what she could do with the money. I headed up that conversation, pointing out what I was concerned about, like fixtures that needed to be replaced.

"It's yours to do with as you see fit," I told her once we'd emptied our glasses.

"I still say it's too much," she said. Her protests came quieter, with less enthusiasm. It seemed more like she felt she had to say something, although her will to argue was fading.

After we both hugged her and said goodbye, we got into Kaden's SUV



and he began the drive back to the city.

“That was incredible,” he said once we left her street.

*Oh, thank God.* I wasn’t in the mood for that tense quiet from before. I’d had mixed feelings about bringing him to Mom’s house, and I was glad it seemed to have turned his mood around. He sounded happy. Calm. Excited even.

“I can’t wait for her to put it to good use. Some things were long overdue.” Shame should have hit me with that admission, but it didn’t. The rundown neighborhood gave the area such a glum and lousy appearance overall. The curb appeal was more like a warning than a welcome. Still, she wasn’t living in a hovel. She’d done her best and kept things nice. It was the bigger, unseen things that needed the boost of repairs—behind-the-scene stuff like the foundation, heater, washer and dryer. Or she could just apply it to the mortgage.

“Thank you for bringing me with you.”

I smiled and gestured at him behind the wheel. “I’d say *you* brought us both there. Thanks for the ride.”

“I feel honored.”

I peered at him, not expecting him to say something like that.

“But you gave me all the credit.” He glanced at me, then returned his attention to the road.

“It was *your* money,” I reminded him. Technically, it became mine when he deposited it. And now Mom’s since I gave her that check. Thinking about it soured my mood though. Just the reminder of him giving me anything felt weird.

Knowing I’d taken that money after what we did in the garden made it all cheaper. More gray. He hadn’t paid me for sex, but it complicated how ethical I could claim this to be. Even if sex was out of the equation, it didn’t sit well with me. Whether I liked it or not, our arrangement had changed.

Him being here like this, a quiet support when I was with my mom, didn’t feel like a fake date.

My desire to hug him this morning, when he looked so unhappy and lost to the point I hated him being in pain, didn’t make me feel like I was pretending to be his plus-one.

Now I was involving him with even more. He fit into my work life. He was my fake date. He was also my very memorable lover.

And a friend?

“Would you like to come to my house for dinner?”

I blinked, stunned that he'd asked that, of all things, out of the blue. It looked like he was reconsidering our relationship too. By asking him to come to my mom's, I'd given him the idea we weren't just business associates or fake dates. To know he wanted to put pressure on that crack between us, to splinter this confusion even more, thrilled me.

“Um, when?” I asked.

I'd spent all of last week firmly keeping us in one lane. The lane of him representing Wagner Industries and how I represented Halden Inc. Okay, maybe it was two lanes. Because I'd gone to that cake tasting as his fake date, too.

He noticed. There was no way he hadn't noticed the boundaries I'd put up. I kept it all professional, on the up and up. Having Todd in the meeting helped that effort, but I had no doubt that Kaden had noticed my attempt at keeping things professional only. I'd hated the distance, but when he didn't call or text me either, I started to assume he wanted it to be work only as well.

Until he showed up this morning looking like I would solve his worries.

Until he asked me to dinner.

“Tonight. I'd like to cook for you.”

I smiled, already imagining how that would go. Risky for my business-only goal, but I was excited that he'd ask. “That sounds like a date-date. Not a fake date.”

We made eye contact, and I melted a little at his intense gaze.

“So what if it is?”



## KADEN

I didn't go back to work after I dropped Brooke off at her office. I'd left her there with my address, and she promised she'd be there. When she asked what I'd be making, it became the perfect ice breaker for what felt like an emotionally tense day. Her questions segued into joking about kitchen mishaps we'd both experienced, and I promised her I wouldn't botch it.

"Have faith in me."

She'd paused at the passenger door before shutting it. "Says the guy who admitted he didn't know how to boil water in college?"

I chuckled. "It was the stove," I protested. I never understood how I'd gotten a dorm with a European appliance that wouldn't fit into any US outlets, but that was what I'd had to deal with for a week or so before I decided dorm life wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. Kody and I moved out to get an apartment instead. Needless to say, I hadn't been able to get the stove working to make a damn pot of macaroni and cheese.

I had a state-of-the-art kitchen to rely on now, and that was half of the reason I didn't go back to the office. Avoiding Kody was my first priority. Seeing him would piss me off, and I wanted to hang on to this happy feeling that I'd gotten from being with Brooke.

When she handed that check to her mom, I was stunned. Shocked. And my feelings for her took another nose-dive into something undecidedly not fake. Her compassion and selflessness knew no bounds, and I admired her all the more for it. I was shoved into more shock when she'd given *me* the credit. I'd done my fair share of donating to charity and attending fundraisers. It wasn't like that, not at all. It was seeing Brooke's sacrifice on such a personal

level that touched me so much more. This wasn't an organization or a nameless number in a long list of a charity drive.

This was a mother and daughter looking out for each other, and seeing their closeness hit a place so tender in my heart. It reminded me of my mother, who I'd lost too soon.

I also stayed home and worked remote so I could multi-task and look up recipes. I wasn't a gourmet chef, but I knew how to work with what I had on hand.

As the hours ticked by, I grew more and more excited for her to show. I wasn't in the same boat as I had been in when I first saw her at Halden Inc.. I no longer worried if she'd ghost me or stand me up.

Right on the dot, punctual as ever, she rang the bell.

I opened the door and smiled as I let her in. She still wore the same thing I'd seen her in earlier. Because she had a late call and I'd popped this dinner invite on her at the last minute, she'd given me a warning that she'd have to come right after work.

If she mentioned that as a preliminary excuse for not looking good, she was wasting her time.

She looked hot, and I took my time to eye her from head to toe. Her long black locks were down. Loose and tumbled over her shoulders, she looked laidback and relaxed. She'd lost the blazer, replacing it with a large cardigan she didn't button, and that blue skirt clung to her curves and muscles the same as it had this morning.

I saw fatigue in her eyes, the result of a long Monday. I felt the same. But her gaze glinted with excitement as she entered, and I was glad to be the one to see her now. To be a landing after a rough or long day.

"Come in," I urged her, taking her hand and leading her to the kitchen. I gestured for her to take a seat at the island. "How was your day?"

She sighed, leaning her forearms on the massive counter as I poured her wine. "You saw me for part of it already."

I lifted one shoulder and let it fall before I handed her the glass. "So? I didn't see you for all of it, and I'm curious how it went."

"Didn't you work?" she asked. She held the wine glass halfway to her mouth, and I dragged my stare away from her parted lips.

I scoffed, taking a drink from my glass. "You *know* I did." Rolling my eyes, I smiled and set my glass down.

"Oh, right. Those attachments."

I laughed, giving her my back so I could put the finishing touches on our meal.

“The attachments you swore you sent.”

I grinned. We’d gone back to more of the teasing playfulness, even within the realm of work matters. I’d emailed her something with files, only I’d never attached them. And when I sent another email, I still didn’t have them attached, sending the wrong draft. It had led to back-and-forth texting that consisted mostly of teasing me.

She told me a bit more about work, and I listened as I brought the plates to the table. Over a simple but satisfying dinner, we chatted some more. The topics weren’t *all* about work—our deal or otherwise—and time flew. I hadn’t realized how quickly the hours passed. Before I knew it, the clock showed that it was late for a Monday night.

I set everything in the sink to deal with later. She helped tidy up, too, but since it was just me in this big house, it wasn’t like I had much clutter to deal with. For a dinner of two, we tended to the cleanup with ease.

“Last one,” she said of the drink in her hand.

More like the only one. She hadn’t refilled it over the evening.

We sat on the couch, relaxing into the cushions. She was beat, but she wasn’t bad company. I was exhausted too, but I suspected starting the morning by fighting with my brother predisposed me to feeling more tired than usual. It didn’t matter. We were comfortable, united as soldiers in the fight of workaholism, and I couldn’t help but notice it provided a feeling of domesticity between us.

I rolled my head on the cushion to look at her. She dragged her thumb over the inside of her wrist, the same spot she’d touched when we were at her mom’s house. “Hey.” I grabbed her hand and stroked the soft flesh. “What is this symbol?” I glanced up at her, noticing that she had her gaze downcast, watching me stroke her skin.

I pressed hard, spreading my thumb up into her palm and massaging it.

“Ohhhh.” She closed her eyes and leaned to the side, resting her head on the couch as she turned to face me. “That feels *good*.”

That fucking moan. It was torture hearing that and remembering how she’d made that noise when I was deep inside her.

I grinned and gently pulled her hand. Her eyes popped open as she shifted toward me. With her hand in mine, I massaged her palm and fingers. I traced the line of tattoos as I rubbed her.

“What is this symbol?” I asked again.

She had to say something. Because if I continued touching her warm, soft skin, I’d want to see and feel every inch of her, especially with that dreamy gaze and low moans of approval.

“It’s a Celtic symbol,” she finally replied. She scooted closer, giving me her arm. “It represents eternity. Mom and I got it the day after high school graduation to celebrate. We wanted to get something matching to mark a reminder that we could get through anything together.”

I frowned. She said it matter-of-factly, but the words sounded heavy. “Get through it?”

“High school was torture for me.” She bored into me with her green stare. “There were days I really didn’t think I’d survive.”

I sank under the weight of her words. She said it with a detached tone, like it was in the past. Done and over. But I knew damn well she had to have suffered. High school was a hard time for *everyone*, and I hated that it had been that bad for her.

“Not only that, but we were still dealing with the fallout of my dad. Mom suffered from his abandonment for a *long* time.”

“He left?” I asked. I knew her dad wasn’t in the picture, but I’d never known any details.

She sighed, and I moved my fingers up her toned forearm, massaging.

“He walked out one day. Just like that. I’d just finished seventh grade. Mom claimed he hadn’t been happy for a while, but he gave no explanation. No note. No call. Just gone. It took a long time to heal. I doubt Mom has yet, but we had each other. And we got through it together.”

I could relate, and the reminder of having lived through a loss saddened me. Kody, Dad, and I had survived my mother’s death, but we had closure there. We’d known about her illness and we’d been able to spend time with her before she was gone. It wasn’t an abrupt, voluntary departure like what Brooke’s father had done, but the aftermath was the same.

Left behind and missing a parent.

She hummed as I rubbed near her elbow again, and the sound tore me from the sad reminders she’d evoked.

“Feel good?”

She nodded, nestling into the cushion. “Maybe I need to get a new mouse,” she mused, flexing her fingers.

“Overusing it?” I teased as I dragged my fingers up to her palm again.

Playing on her slip of the tongue about admitting I'd had tendinitis from tennis, I cleared the air from serious topics.

Eyes closed, she grinned. "Shut up."

"What does this one mean?" I asked of the swirling lines over her knuckles. Just like she had doodled in high school.

"A reminder to not get tied to anything negative."

I lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles.

Her eyes popped open. She stared at me as I turned her arm and rubbed up her full sleeve. "What about this one?" I asked, tracing the flowers locked in ice.

"A reminder not to go through life with a chip on my shoulder."

I dragged my hand back down, reveling in the freedom she gave me to touch her. To savor every soft, warm inch.

She twisted and laid her other arm out. "But this one is to remind me to stay resilient."

I moved to the maze of lines, spreading my caress there.

"And this?" I dragged my hand up her arm to her shoulder. Her breath hitched as I lowered the straps of her cami and bra. Revealing the world of color and lines, I refrained from going too far.

She tilted her head to the side, giving me access to trace the design.

I stared at the ink and felt her slight tremble. I was playing with fire here. "What does this one mean?"

"That I'm capable of anything," she said, turning toward me to show how the design trailed over her shoulder and down her back.

I smoothed my fingers over the lines, rubbing into her muscles. "You are," I whispered.

Her hair tickled my arm as she lifted her hand. She slid her fingers along my jaw and turned me for a kiss.

It was firm, wet and insistent, but she drew back too soon.

I took it as the gift it was, but I didn't want to push. She had to call the shots. She had to come to me and tell me what she wanted. After the almost cold-shoulder treatment she'd given me for days, insisting on keeping everything professional, I didn't want to assume anything.

She rested her forehead to mine, and I covered her hand on my face. Dragging my fingers lower, I pulled back and considered the dramatic design of an eye on her forearm.

"What's this one for?" I asked, circling my finger over the beautiful,



detailed work of art.

“It’s to remind me that beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

I frowned. Sure I’d heard it before, but on her arm? Was it a twist on who the beholder was? “What does that mean?”

She scooted back, but I didn’t lose hope. Our fingers remained twined together as she sat back next to me. “I felt ugly for a very long time when I was young.” Her shoulder lifted. “I still do.”

My heart ached at her words and the vulnerability she showed me in admitting that.

“Sometimes my skin doesn’t feel like my own.”

*Before or after the tattoos?* I hadn’t considered the possibility her tats were a mask to hide behind.

I’d heard of dysmorphia but I’d never thought much about it. I suspected it impacted girls and women much more than men, and that was a vicious cycle that would take generations to break.

*Is this why she’s always looking in mirrors? Why she checks herself out with that critical expression?* I thought back to all those instances I’d noticed her inspecting her appearance, and I couldn’t help but wonder if this was why.



BROOKE

**J**esus. *Why did I have to open my mouth?*

I'd felt so comfortable with him. Between the delicious dinner and the warm, soothing touch of his hand massaging me, I was relaxed. Maybe too relaxed to share such deep, personal truths.

*Thank God I didn't drink too much.*

Because I would have surely spilled way too many truths.

Hating my body and being self-conscious about it was something I'd lived with. Acknowledging that flaw was one hurdle to overcome. But telling someone about it? Huge deal. I hadn't been this honest and sharing about this topic with my mom. Rena knew, but here I was telling Kaden.

It ruined the mood. He stared at me intently, and fuck, I hated the idea that he pitied me or felt sorry for me.

"Now, this one," I said, infusing more volume and sass into my tone, "is the *only* one that I can call a mistake."

His gaze dragged down, following my hand as I tugged my shirt up and lowered the waist of my skirt just a bit.

He cracked up, erasing the funky feeling of the serious talk from before. "Is that a Playboy bunny?"

He smeared his thumb over it, and I jerked back, startled by his touch there.

"It was supposed to be. I dared Rena into getting ink and she said only if I did too."

"Let me guess." He grinned at me. "She got to pick it?"

I shook my head. "Not the tat, the parlor. We were out of town on a girls'

trip. A little one-day thing. I wanted to get a Hindu design, but the idiot was just an apprentice. He made a mistake, then tried to fix it, and then—without even telling me!—he ‘covered’ it with something he thought I’d like.”

I rolled my eyes as he looked closer, squinting.

“But why does it have three ears? And a weird nose.”

I looked down at it too, sighing. “Rena thinks it looks like a horse. From my angle, it looks like a damn balloon dog upside down.”

*Whew.* I’d saved the night. He was smiling and laughing once more. No heaviness lingered between us. No secrets darkened the mood.

I sipped my wine again and tried to squash all the thoughts that bombarded me anyway.



TWELVE YEARS AGO...

“CAREFUL. CAREFUL,” Mom warned gently as I pulled my dress over my head. “Wait.” She narrowed her eyes at me and leaned down.

We stood in my room as I tried my prom dress on one final time. It had been years since she’d assisted me with an outfit. I was almost eighteen, for God’s sake. I wasn’t so old that having her see me in my bra and panties bothered me. She was my mom. Of course, I didn’t have to worry about modesty around her. Paige had gone through a phase of wanting *nothing* to do with her parents, but I doubted I could ever allow distance from Mom.

She gasped. “Brooke Marie Ponder!”

I widened my eyes at the full name. It’d also been years since I heard that. And I knew why she’d used it. Belatedly, I slapped my hand over my hipbone.

“What is that?”

I grimaced, sliding my hand from the tattoo of that dumb bunny. “Uh...”

She crossed her arms.

“Paige and I played Truth or Dare when I slept over at her house in the summer, and, well...”

She rolled her eyes.

“It’s not like it’ll be there forever!” I rubbed at the spot, wondering how

long it would take for my seasonal paleness to erase it over the winter.

“Oh, to be young and do stupid things again,” she teased. “I’ve always wanted to get a tattoo myself. Just never knew what to get.”

I grinned. “Well, I wouldn’t ever get *that*. Not for real.”

She helped me zip up and fussed with the fabric. This morning, she’d finished the last of the alterations, and with this fitting, she would decide if the masterpiece was done or not. I hoped it was. Prom would be here soon.

I stepped into my sneakers and looked in the mirror.

Mom beamed, standing behind me as I looked at my reflection.

For once, I didn’t feel like the ugly duckling. The usual sinking feeling of dread didn’t come, the thoughts that yeah, that mess really was what I looked like to the rest of the world.

I didn’t cringe. I didn’t analyze and list all of my flaws that I hated.

Gazing in the mirror, I didn’t notice the pimples I was treating, the way my brows never, ever looked even, or the thinness of my lips. All I saw was me. A pretty girl in the most beautiful dress in the world.

I lowered my hands over the layers, and my smile spread wider. It felt so smooth and soft, and it was so comfortable. Nothing pinched. Nothing strained over the rolls I wanted to hide.

Mom stepped close and kissed my cheek. She smiled at my reflection in the mirror. “You look stunning.”

I fingered the fabric, overwhelmed that this dress was for me. It was mine. And I looked awesome in it.

“Thank you, Mom.”

I doubted she would ever understand how much this meant to me. She doted on me the best she could, and she gave me all she had. But having her make me this dress mattered so much. I’d asked her to make it for me because I knew I would never ever find something in a store that suited my body. But I’d also asked her to make it for me because I hoped it would help her.

We’d had a rough time of it after Dad left. I worried sometimes that she was depressed, and I was helpless if she was. How could I help her? What could I do to make her smile?

She’d dabbled with sewing as a hobby in the past. It fell to the backburner over the years, though. I hoped by asking her to make my dress that it would be a bright distraction from the hardships of life. And it had worked. She’d been so excited to do this for me, and I was overjoyed that I could bring her

out of that gloominess of losing her spouse.

“This boy sure is very lucky to have you as his date,” she said, checking the dress. I couldn’t tear my stare from my reflection, so stunned that was me I was looking at. She inspected the seams and the fit, double-checking the spots she’d wanted to address in the last round of alterations.

“You still won’t tell me who it is?”

I shook my head. “Just a boy.”

She pursed her lips. “He’s not one of those troublemakers, is he?”

Yes. But I shook my head again. “He’s cute.”

She glanced up at me. “Being *cute* isn’t the only thing you should consider.”

“I know. I know.” *But this is Kody Wagner!* If there was ever a real-life example of Cinderella, this would be it. The pauper gets the prince. Or something like that.

“He’s a nice boy?”

I nodded. *I mean, everyone has their moments.*

“He doesn’t drink?” Again, she glanced up at me.

I shook my head. I didn’t know, but I could tell neither of the twins hung out with the potheads.

I smiled, turning slightly as I admired the dress. She poked and tugged, checking it over. This was it. This was the dress I would be going to prom with. I sighed, enjoying this moment with Mom. Like the calm before the storm, I felt ready and excited.

*I can’t believe it’s almost here.*

“He will pick you up himself, right? He’s got a car?”

“Yeah.” Mom had to work that night and simply couldn’t get out of it. I didn’t want to be home alone and get picked up, so I planned to get ready at Paige’s and he’d pick me up there. “It’ll be better that way. I can have Paige help me with my makeup.”

“And her mom will take lots of pictures?” she checked. Standing straight, she pouted. “I hate that I’ll miss it. My baby girl all grown up and going to her senior prom.”

“She’ll be there. I’ll make sure she gets pictures.”

“I’m sorry I can’t see you off,” she said.

I took her hand and squeezed it. “Ouch.”

She giggled and made a *whoops* face. “Forgot a pin, did I?”

I knew she struggled adapting to being a single parent. She did her best. It

was just me and her, and that would be good enough. If Dad hadn't left, he probably wouldn't have wanted to be involved with this anyway.

Still, I couldn't shake the questions from creeping in.

"What's wrong?" she asked, peeking at me in the mirror.

I shook my head. I didn't want to drag her down with a mention of Dad, but she'd always expected me to be honest. I shrugged. "Just wondering what Dad would think if he could see me now."

She pressed her lips together and nodded. "Well." Another sigh halted her. "He would see how lovely you are. A beautiful girl on the cusp of becoming a wonderful young lady."

"Thanks, Mom."

"He would be excited for you to start your classes in the fall."

I grinned. Business school was next for me, and I was eager for the first semester in September. It felt so far away but at the same time too soon.

"Do you think he would be proud?" I asked, hating the timid quietness of my question.

She smiled and came close to set her chin on my shoulder. "Of course. You are a hardworking, strong, smart, and determined girl, Brooke. Never doubt that."

*But I do.* I buckled down and went for my goals, but the worry about my looks dragged me down more often than I wanted them to.

"I love you, Brooke." She pecked a kiss on my cheek.

*I wish I could too.*





KADEN

“**Y**ou never thought about getting a tattoo?” Brooke asked.  
*So, that’s it. No more talking about the heavy stuff. Noted.*  
“Who says I don’t have one already?”

She kept her wine glass pressed to her lips and grinned a slow, sexy smile as she traced her tongue along the rim of the glass. “Well, I guess I wouldn’t know. We hadn’t really bothered to remove many clothes in that garden tour.”

*Tour? That was how she wanted to refer to it? I’d rather tour her.*

“The slit on that dress should be illegal.”

She shook her head, narrowing her eyes. “Nah. I can’t see it. You don’t have any ink.”

“You can check.” I leaned back, putting my arm up on the back of the couch to stare at her.

“You’re too goody-goody. Corporate man and all.”

I frowned.

“Well, you are. I bet if I ask what your plans are for the future, it’ll include doing what you do already, a corporate businessman at your family’s company.” She arched her brows. “Right?”

I shrugged. “Yeah.” I should’ve felt annoyed that she had me figured out, but it wasn’t a lie. “I honestly haven’t thought much about my future. It was set in stone when I graduated. I already knew what I would be doing and where I was going.”

“That doesn’t mean you *have* to stay there.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I want to. I want to continue my father’s legacy

with my brother at my side.” *Even when he’s a fucking asshole I can barely stand.*

“What about you, my fellow workaholic?”

“Same. I mean, stay with my current job. I like working for Todd. I don’t need to have my name on the company or own it. I just want financial freedom and independence.”

That implied she didn’t have it now.

“I don’t want to have to rely on anyone.”

*Why?* I was curious about what could have happened to make her prioritize that. She *was* independent, standing out and remaining unique. She wasn’t a pushover, not that I could see. I thought back again to how she’d stood up to Kody and put him on the spot at the cake tasting.

I didn’t want to press. If she wanted to tell me, she would.

“I’ve made work my whole life for so long, it’s getting harder to step back and just be, too.”

“It’s been a while since you’ve had a chance to get a lousy tat on a trip somewhere?”

She smiled. “I can’t remember the last time I took an honest-to-God vacation. Rena’s getting ready to go to Europe. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little jealous.” She held up her finger and thumb close together, emphasizing the small gap.

“She’s traveling for work?” I hadn’t gone anywhere lately, either. Kody did more than me, but I was a homebody by nature.

“No. A vacation. A bucket list thing. She invited me. I had a chance to go.”

“Why didn’t you?” I asked.

Then it hit me. *The money? She couldn’t afford it?* And still, she didn’t keep anything from that bonus I’d given her. She gave it all to her mom.

She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Not interested in that location?”

She scrunched her nose. “I’ve never really liked the idea of those group tour things. If I could get away, I’d like to meander off the path, see and do what I want, not according to a guide’s agenda of what they thought I *should* experience.”

“I hear you.” I’d prefer the same.

“I do regret passing up the opportunity. Kind of.” She lifted her gaze to me, pairing the mischievous stare with a flirty smile. “But if I went, I’d been

missing out on this.”

“This?” I licked my lips, not missing the coy way she gazed at me.

She sipped her wine, eyes on me as she swallowed then placed her glass on the coffee table. “Yeah.” Her nod ended with a slight tilt to the side. “*This. You.*” She set her hand on my knee. The pressure of her hand on me had me tightening my abs in reflex.

“What, you’re still curious if I have any ink?”

She smiled, sliding her hand up my leg.

I’d told myself I would wait for her signal. I’d let her tell—or show—me what she was in the mood for.

“Nah. I can tell. You don’t.”

Well, fuck. I didn’t. She was right.

“But I haven’t had a chance to explain *all* of my tattoos to you.” She drew in a deep breath, angling closer to me. “If you’re interested.”

I closed the distance, leaning in and capturing her lips. She grunted lightly at the impact, but my eagerness didn’t intimidate her. She wasn’t scared off. Her hands rose to frame my face, locking me to this kiss. From zero to sixty, we went from flirting to surrender.

I hauled her onto my lap, parting her lips and sliding my tongue in for a taste. With her slender legs on either side of me, she pushed closer, thrusting her tits at my chest.

“I’m interested,” I promised as she looped her arms around my neck. Leaving lazy, openmouthed kisses along her jaw, I shifted. Already, I was so hard. My erection strained to get free, and I growled when she realized it. She drove me crazy, grinding down on me as she let her head fall back. It granted me access to her neck, and I sucked on the sweet flesh beneath her ear. Her pulse raced beneath my lips, the rapid beat fluttering fast.

“I want to see every one of them.”

I lifted her in my arms as I stood, and she clung to me.

She smashed her breasts against me, locking her arms over my shoulders. I looked down, staring at her cleavage. Lines of black and red twirled close to the globe, enticing me to look further. To take my time and follow the map of artwork.

I carried her toward my room, impatient to see her sprawled out naked on my bed. All for me to feast my eyes on—and then some.

“I want to trace every line.” I squeezed her ass hard, rewarded when she squeaked and rubbed against me.

“Hell, yeah,” she breathed between kisses. She sucked, she licked, she nipped, and she growled. Every stroke of her tongue made me more desperate. Each press of her succulent lips on mine stole my breath.

In my room—finally—I tossed her on the bed.

She bounced, grinning that saucy smirk as she stared at me with that hooded gaze.

“With my fingers,” I said, grabbing her ankles and tugging her to the edge of the bed. These flats weren’t the same as those fuck-me heels that destroyed me the night of the engagement party. But they fell off with ease as I lifted her leg and ran my hand down her muscles, following the path of what looked like a tree.

I picked up her other leg and brought my hand up toward her hips, leaning down to kiss her. I left her panting, her mouth open as I lowered my face to her collarbone. Dragging her panties down with both hands, I stroked my tongue over the curling shape of the flowers over her shoulder and toward her chest.

“With my tongue,” I growled.

She arched her back, thrusting her hips at me to help remove her panties. It flipped her skirt up, and I slipped my hand lower.

I arched my brow, leaning back from her breasts to watch my fingers caress over her bare mound. All bare. I knew we hurried in the garden, but I was pretty damn sure she wasn’t waxed then.

“I don’t think I could ever get ink *there*.”

“Well this is new,” I teased, rubbing the heel of my palm against her.

She gifted me with mewls and moans, closing her eyes. “Enjoy it while you can.”

I chuckled, shoving her skirt up as I settled on my knees on the floor. “Oh, I fucking will.”

“Because I’m never doing that again.” She gasped as I stroked my tongue over her bare pussy. From her front to her back. Back and forth, quick and slow. I dove right in, setting her on fire as I tasted her tangy sweetness.

I loved oral, and hearing the sexy noises she made spurred me on. She was soaking. Her pussy swallowed my fingers. Her ass clenched. And her clit swelled under my assault.

When I sucked on the bud, she panted faster. If I pumped my tongue into her pussy, she tightened her fingers threaded in my hair.

“Kaden.”

I closed my eyes at the groan of desire. She was killing me here.

Lifting my head, I glanced up at her. She'd unbuttoned her shirt and unhooked her bra. The fabric lay to either side of her as she cupped her breast. Her thumb feverishly worked over her nipple.

"Do you have any idea how fucking stunning you are?" I whispered against her pussy.

She whined, clutching her breast and clenching her eyes shut tight.

*No. She doesn't.* Asking her was stupid. "You're the sexiest." I slid my hand up over her stomach and chest until her other breast filled my hand. "Most beautiful." I squeezed hard as I pistoned my finger into her drenched pussy. "Exquisite." I pinched her nipple and dragged my wet fingers in a circle around her clit. "Woman."

"Oh, my God. No more talking!"

I chuckled, loving how impatient I made her. "So long as you know you're beautiful."

I raked my gaze over her exposed flesh, noticing the flush that peeked out beneath the tattoos.

I pressed my face into her bare pussy and moaned at how much more she gave me of her orgasm.

"Whatever! Yes. All the adjectives in the world. We'll look at the thesaurus later."

I smirked, diving in to tease her more. She writhed and arched, scooting back on the bed as she tried to hold on. I followed her as she moved. Getting off my knees and crawling on to the bed, I chased her.

She whimpered, her legs quivering as I coaxed her to orgasm. Hooking her leg over my shoulder, she trapped me in place, begging nonsensical strings of mumbled words I couldn't follow. I doubted she knew what the fuck she was saying either.

I pushed her other thigh to the bed and lapped at her without a pause. Keeping my fingers on her breast, I pinched and twisted her nipple. Between her tit and her clit, I didn't consider stopping for a second.

My dick strained in my pants so hard it hurt. Sticky spots of my boxers clung to me, evidence of my release as this wild, edgy woman surrendered to my tongue and hand.

"Kaden." My name came out in a broken, sobbed shout.

She squirted as she finally came. Panting and shifting on the bed, she cried out again and again. I stroked my fingers over that soft spongy spot,

dragging out her orgasm. Her smooth walls sucked on my fingers as I felt her ride it all out.

The thigh over my shoulder trembled, and her other knee shook. Gently, I lowered her leg and lifted my face. Her juices coated my chin, and I licked my lips as I watched her open her eyes. She set that bleary but gorgeous green gaze on me as I smiled at her.

I kissed her pussy, then leaned up to press my mouth to the one tattoo she claimed to hate.

And with sweet giggles that proved I'd done my job, she reached for me. Her fingers fisted on my shirt and she tugged, urging me to crawl over her on the bed. I hovered over her, dragging my leg between hers. The friction was too much for her because she moaned and shivered.

“Sensitive,” she warned before kissing me.

She broke the kiss and grinned. Her hand went to my shoulder and she shoved me off of her, sliding out so I could lie on my back.

On her knees, she removed the rest of her clothes and reached for my pants.

“Now let's see what you're hiding under these clothes.”

I set my hands behind my head and grinned, letting her have her way with me.



BROOKE

I wasn't wasting my time wondering what Kaden hid under his clothes. I saw the significant bulge of his erection. I licked my lips, lowering my gaze to his big dick straining to be freed as I unzipped him and tugged at his clothes. At the first brush of my fingers against the evidence of what he was trying and failing to hide, I knew what I wanted.

I didn't give a shit if he was tatted or not. I had my suspicions. He was too straight and narrow to deviate so far to get inked.

And it didn't matter.

All that mattered was getting that monster out of his boxers and getting it in me—however I wanted.

He lifted one hand, stroking it up my side to cup my breast. Even his touch was reverent. His stare was hot and intense, but his voice was gentle. "You're amazing."

"You really are one of those guys who like to talk during sex, huh?" I teased.

I didn't mind it, but if you were doing it right, you shouldn't have the energy and desire to talk, much less think, with good dick. Grunts and groans? Those primitive sounds were enough communication for me. Sure, you had to tell your partner what you wanted and what felt good. I loved it when the guy showed me what he wanted. But it didn't have to be words.

He helped me get his pants off, and I yanked his shirt up, impatient to go slow. I'd already come, but straddling him and getting his hard, muscled body naked warmed me up all over again.

I knew what he was going to say. I'd heard every single word of



compliments he'd given me. But he didn't get it.

I didn't know how beautiful I was because I struggled to convince myself I could be. It had taken me years to get used to not worrying about how dumb my face might look when I came.

Rena helped there. One night after too many drinks, I said I worried about that—and she admitted she did too. Watching porn for research felt silly, but I learned it truly didn't matter. Letting go was about letting go.

I didn't have a praise kink. I didn't need the warm glow of Kaden's words about how he viewed me. That he wanted to fuck me and taste me was enough proof.

He could croon every damn adjective in the world. I had to love myself first to let any of it in my head.

The only kink I thought I could have was this one—him. Kaden and his wickedly talented mouth was my kink.

He growled as I wrapped my fingers around his dick.

His mouth and this massive hard cock.

I pumped his steel length, getting wetter as I watched his face contort on a long groan. That guttural noise shot straight to my pussy. It clenched, and I knew I'd be smearing my orgasm on his leg as I crawled backward on my knees.

He sat up, leaning on his hands to watch me lower my lips to his dick. I kept my gaze locked on his, loving the way he growled and whispered, "Fuck me," in that needy tone.

"I want a taste first," I teased.

I closed my lips over the tip and tongued the salty drop at the slit. His thighs clenched beneath my hand. Knowing I did this to him, knowing it was *me* driving him wild, did something to me. Oral wasn't my favorite. I was greedy. I loved getting it, but my experiences of giving it were lackluster.

Sliding my tongue up and down his thick cock, I wondered if I just hadn't found the right flavor. His. I laved his hardness and swirled my tongue over the head. I couldn't help the moan that left my mouth. Closing my eyes felt natural. If I could tune out all my other senses and sink in the glorious knowledge that I was sucking his dick with abandon, I'd savor it more.

Every vein. Each throb.

I covered him with my mouth and sucked him in. I slowly built my speed, bobbing up and down until my eyes burned with the threat of a gag. His salty taste turned me on more and more, until I lowered my chest toward the bed,

seeking something more to help me get there faster. Dragging my sensitive nipples over the sheets was a sweet torture, and I worried I'd choke on him because he stretched my mouth deliciously.

His fingers speared into my hair, and when he gripped it, thrusting up slightly to show me the rhythm he liked, I smiled the best I could as I sucked him down.

"Brooke." He hissed as I sucked harder, hollowing my cheeks and moaning at the taste of him. "Brooke, stop."

I let go of him with a *pop* and frowned up at him.

"I want to come in you. I want to fill you up."

*Fuck, yeah.* But disappointment hit me that I couldn't finish him off like he had for me.

"Next time," he said, panting as he pulled me over him. He'd already had a foil packet waiting for this moment and ripped it open before rolling it on.

I liked the sound of that. Right now, I listened to something else. His hard breaths and slight growls as I lined him up. Then the slick noise of my juices easing his deep thrust. I sat on him, slamming his long hardness into me in one fierce grind.

My moan was added to the filthy soundtrack.

"Like that. Ride me, baby. Fuck me."

His orders thrilled me. I didn't need his guidance. My hips rocked, and I lifted in a waving, unsteady dance only to slam down on him. Twice? I didn't know if I had it in me to come again so soon.

"Come on, baby. Fuck me."

He groaned as I leaned back, setting my hands on his thighs behind me and spreading my legs wide. It gave us a different slant, and I felt him even deeper.

"Like that." His fingers bit into my hips as he urged me faster. "Come with me. Fuck. I'm close."

I shook my head, trembling from the force of the orgasm I hurtled toward.

"Pinch them." He picked up my hand and shoved it upward until my fingers closed over my tit. I raised the other one, rocking against him to get friction on my clit as I fucked him.

His finger reached lower, and his thumb pressed against my needy clit. I was exposed. Wide open and all his for the taking.

"Come on, baby." He panted at me, his face taut with tension as he waited for me. "Together."

One more hard drop onto his dick. That final piercing thrust. He circled my clit, and as I squeezed my tits, I came.

Grunts, groans, and a sob—mine. “Kaden.”

He replied in a growl, lifting his hips to stab into me deeper. His cock jerked inside me, flooding me with his hot release.

It was too much. Too intense. Too mind-blowing. I felt like flying and falling at the same time as waves of pleasure overwhelmed me.

“Come here,” he coaxed me, his voice low and raspy. He soothed me, folding me into his arms as he pulled me down to his chest. “Come here,” he crooned again as he rubbed his hand down my back.

His name came out as a chant, mixed with gasps and shuddering deep breaths. I hadn’t come that hard *ever*.

Still connected, he lay with me draped over him. My heart thundered fast, but I felt his too, racing beneath me. My legs went limp, and my arms were useless as I lay on him so spent and ragged I could only try to breathe.

“Told you,” he said after a while. He hadn’t stopped stroking his hand over my back once, holding me and comforting me. Or maybe he was just hanging on tight before I bolted.

I lifted my head, so tired and almost asleep that I blinked at him to focus.

“Told me what?” I asked. He shifted me to lie on my side as he slid out of me and got up.

“No tattoos.” He smacked my ass as he walked away, and I grinned like a sluggish, sated fool, nuzzling the pillow that smelled of detergent, soap, and man.

He came back and cleaned me up. I was too tired to resist, and why would I have? It was sweet, and it felt so good to be taken care of.

Back in bed, he helped me get under the covers. I didn’t protest when he spooned me. I did the opposite. I snuggled into him, resting my ass against him as he draped his heavy arm over me.

I was too tired. Too comfortable. Leaving was the last thing I wanted to do, but in the back of my mind, it was the very first thing that I thought I should do.

I had nowhere to go. I had nowhere to run. I gave in to him and lay in his arms. As I drew in a deep, long breath of satisfaction, I tuned out the nagging thoughts. He nestled closer, pressing his face into my hair. His chest pushed against me as he inhaled deeply too, and I smiled, knowing he was a weirdo to sniff my hair.

I was happy in his arms. I hadn't felt like this in a long time. Not even after the best hot yoga sessions did I feel this loose and content.

But with that realization, I felt out of control. Being so sated and at ease with him, I didn't have any sense of self-preservation. He'd knocked down my walls. He'd gotten under my skin. As he hugged me close and caused a head-to-toe warmth to blanket me inside out, I knew that I was in big trouble.

I wasn't supposed to fall for him. I wasn't supposed to experience this deep of a connection with *him*. Of all men I could have met and hit it off with, it wasn't supposed to be him.

Kaden and Kody left me with so many scars. Scars and residual aches that still stung me after all those years. They'd wounded me in high school, but that was twelve years ago. The suffering I'd felt from their treatment lasted in a bone-deep way that I'd worked hard to overcome.

What if he hurt me again? What if this time, even with all the things adulthood had taught me, I was hurt again? I knew better. I wasn't a naïve teenager who didn't have a clue how to handle the headaches and mind games that came with love.

*Whoa. No.*

Not love. I frowned, closing my eyes. That word wasn't happening. I felt like I was sinking under the spell of something, but not that. I couldn't fall for a guy who had the power to hurt me so much, and had before.

If he hurt me again, I would be ruined beyond repair.

His lips brushed against the top of my head, and he sighed. I'd made him feel like that. We'd connected and fit together well, and I didn't bother hiding a smile. He couldn't see it anyway. I could revel in the happiness that I had such an effect on him.

*How can something so dangerous feel so good?* I couldn't understand how I could feel so safe with him. Like I belonged in his arms and never wanted to leave.

But it wasn't too late. *Don't be stupid, Brooke.* I knew better than to trust him with something as gullible as my heart. I'd keep my head on my shoulder and be smart about this.

Love? *Yeah, no.* That wasn't happening. I could enjoy him, though. There was no reason to put an end to this now.

Where was the harm in letting this continue? So long as I remembered that it was all fake.

*Easy.*

I only had to forget about this nonsense, this chance I could ever love him.



KADEN

When I woke up the next morning I almost panicked. Before I was fully with it to know I was in my own bed, in my room, and at my house like I should be, I scrambled to make sense of the things that didn't make sense.

*What the fuck?*

I squinted, seeking out the source of the alarms. As I moved, I realized the second thing that wasn't the norm.

A woman in my arms. Not any woman—Brooke. The incessant beeping came from her watch. She slept through them all, and I smiled as I wondered why she might have rested so deeply.

I couldn't recall the last time I'd had such a mind-blowing orgasm. The entire night felt like a long, sensual delay of letting us have what we wanted, and it was true. Good things came to those who waited.

I carefully pressed the screen to silence the four—no, five—clocks that she'd missed. She could sleep in for a few minutes. If she felt half as hungover from sex as I did, she needed it.

My style was direct. To the point. Without toys—and I was as vanilla as they came—why drag it out? I'd held myself back, determined to see to her happiness and pleasure before I considered mine. But that had been half the fun. Holding back and waiting set me up for a hell of an anticipation. I was surprised I hadn't lost my load in my pants when I ate her pussy. And those sweet, sassy lips.

I licked mine, staring at her as she slept.

When she sucked me off, I felt like I'd go insane to keep myself in check.

But I knew how good it felt to come inside her. I'd thought about it often since the garden. And it was well worth the effort. I came so hard that it overwhelmed me.

So it made sense that we'd needed a good long sleep.

I kissed her shoulder, leaving my lips pressed against her smooth skin. Leaning on my elbow, I watched her doze until it felt creepy. I lowered my gaze, admiring the intricate swirls and designs of so many tattoos mixed together on the tantalizing canvas that was her soft flesh.

Yesterday felt like such a whirlwind, and after all the ups and downs, I felt like nothing would be the same.

I'd woken up so worried about her feeling hurt from what Kody said. Then the stress of confronting him and fighting. After that, the desperate need to see her, and then the high of going to her mom's and witnessing that this incredible woman I cared about was such a sweet soul, so giving and compassionate. And when we ended it with a deep conversation and hot sex?

I kissed her shoulder again and peered at her face.

She'd come to matter so much. She was important to me.

After all these years, I'd finally found something—someone—I cared about more than my career. More than anything.

Seeing her smiling and hearing her laughter had become my priorities, and I considered how rare of a gift that was. I hoped Dad felt like this with Margaux because I knew, even at this starting stage of a relationship with Brooke, this was a crucial bond that would keep two people together no matter the hardships and trials that might come.

Another alarm clock beeped from her watch, and I frowned. She sure liked to set them early, and I thought I started my days at the crack of dawn.

I yawned, silencing it. After one more kiss on her shoulder, I left her to sleep a while longer and went downstairs.

We hadn't planned for her to stay over. I didn't have any products here that she could use, but I did have food. And coffee. The least I could do was offer her my bathroom to get ready, but I'd give her a little more time to sleep first. I cracked open some eggs to scramble but frowned.

"Shit."

I remembered seeing a receipt on her desk. When she'd been on that call yesterday. She seemed to prefer egg whites and some kind of organic smoothie.

I shrugged, improvising. I'd eat all six of those eggs myself if I had to.



But I pulled out another skillet and prepared it without the yolks, in case she wanted an option that was familiar. A quick look through my fridge showed organic ingredients, but nothing that seemed to belong in a green smoothie.

“Best I can do.” I couldn’t cater to her every request, but I wanted to learn more about how I could see to her needs. Adjusting my grocery list wouldn’t be a hardship. And that was assuming I’d have another chance to make breakfast in bed for her.

Once I loaded it all up, I brought the tray to my room. Before I reached the open door, she called out, “I hope you’re Kaden.”

I chuckled. “Expecting someone else?”

“A maid,” she replied as I entered.

She sat up, rubbing her face. A sleepy smile stretched from ear to ear and I wanted to bask in the sunshine of it. “I knew I smelled coffee.” She held her hands out to grab at it. “I wondered if some poor hired help would find me in here looking like a troll.”

I set the tray on the bed and tossed a muffin at her.

“Hey!” She giggled, catching it before it smacked her face.

“Troll? Shut up. You’re gorgeous.”

I realized now, as I leaned over the bed to kiss her, that it wouldn’t be a default thought to enter her mind. The more often I said it—sincerely—it might catch. Repetitions to sink in.

“I feel like a troll,” she admitted, wincing as she slid over for me to sit next to her. “I think I’m glued to your sheets.”

I smiled. “Sorry. Not sorry.”

“Hmm.” She took a coffee. “Me neither.”

“I’m not sure I’ll have everything you usually use, but my shower is all yours.”

She arched a brow. “With your company?”

I growled, diving in for another kiss, but she leaned back. “I have morning breath!”

I cupped her face and dragged her back to me. She softened under a long kiss as I showed her that I didn’t care.

“I would love a chance to play with you in the shower, but I do have to work today.”

She nodded, reaching for the plate. “Since you took off yesterday?”

I smirked at her. “I was working. Kind of.”

“Oh yeah,” she drawled. “The emails with attachments that didn’t stick.”

“Funny.” I handed her the plate I’d prepared for her and took mine. I wasn’t sure where the hell the tray or the domed plate covers came from. I never used them. I seldom had women in my bed to be able to get them breakfast in it the morning after.

She blinked in surprise as she looked at my eggs and toast. “Why make them separate?”

“I noticed you ordered only egg whites. I wanted to make sure you could have what you need. Or want.” It was a small thing, but now that she gazed at me with a look of surprise, I felt kind of stupid.

“Thank you. That’s really sweet,” she admitted before she ate.

As tempting as the idea was to shower with her, I refrained. If I thought I could impress her by making only egg whites for breakfast in bed, I really impressed her when I admitted I’d tossed her clothes in the washer and dryer before I made breakfast. I was nervous I’d screw them up, but she only gaped at me, my sheet around her like a toga.

“You’re something else.”

“Please don’t tell me they have to be dry-cleaned only.”

“No. No. They’re wrinkle-resistant old things.” She shrugged. “I doubt Todd will notice, but Sandra will notice I’m wearing the same thing. But at least they’ll be clean.” She pecked a quick kiss on my cheek and I felt tall.

*Good going there.* I headed to the guest room to shower, giving her space, but I wished we could have conserved water together. We didn’t have time to mess around. I had a meeting I had to get to, and she’d mentioned a call that would start her day. Still, just being with her would have been nice. It would have chased away the feeling that she was distancing herself.

*Or maybe she knows we’d be tempted and can’t risk the delay.*

I was all for a quickie, but I’d prefer to have the freedom to savor her instead.

Once she was dressed and ready to go, we grabbed our things and got into my SUV. It seemed homey, like we were a domestic couple who had a routine. We collaborated seamlessly, and I loved that she didn’t seem awkward on the drive into the city.

At her office, I waited in the no-parking zone to drop her off.

“Thanks for the ride,” she said, hand on the door.

“Shouldn’t that be my line?” I teased.

She smiled and rolled her eyes.

“I’m starting to feel like your boyfriend more than a fake date,” I said.

That pretty blush faded and her expression fell. When she blinked fast, I frowned. I hated that I put that panicked look on her face.

*Fuck. Did I say the wrong thing?*

She looked at her hand on the door, hesitant.

*Fuck!* She wasn't on the same page. And I cringed, realizing she didn't see the same thing I did. That what we had wasn't so fake anymore.

"So. Um." I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel, infusing as much nonchalance into my voice as I could. "Remember we're going to look at the wedding venue Thursday night at six."

She peered at me, biting her lip.

"Just to check it out. My friends own the manor, and I think it'll be fine. Dad needs to take a look at it to make sure it'll work. But it will. It'll be a great place for the wedding."

*Shut. Up.*

I never rambled. But realizing she didn't feel an inkling of what I did hurt. It wouldn't stop me from caring about her, from looking at her as more than just a fake date or a business associate. But knowing she was allergic to the idea of being my girlfriend felt a lot like rejection.

And fuck, did that sting.

"Actually, Thursday?" she said, shaking her head. "Something came up. I'll need to skip that one."

"Are you sure?" I asked. "We can show up late if—"

"Yeah. I can't." She slid out of the passenger seat and tossed me a quick smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Gotta go."

The door slammed shut, and I flinched back at the sound.

Through the window, I watched her as she ran. Not walked, not jogged. She *ran* in those flats as she hurried inside.

Idling for a moment too long, long enough for some asshole behind me to honk, I stared at the door after it slid closed.

She ran from the idea of being with me in a real way.

I frowned as I set the SUV in drive.

Another honk.

"Oh, fuck yourself," I muttered under my breath.

I couldn't help but feel like I just did.



BROOKE

Sandra didn't give me a hard time about wearing the same outfit twice in a row. She always noticed what I wore, claiming she wished she had half the fashion sense I had—if she were younger with a “smokin’-hot body” like mine.

I didn't have to worry about it after all. She wasn't there. Her grandson had to stay home from school, so it was another temp who was stationed at the front-desk area.

*Whew.*

Todd didn't comment either, but he never considered what I wore. He only requested that I not use coconut body spray because he thought that particular fragrance bothered his nose.

As if I would anyway. I didn't want to smell like a bathroom air freshener.

Once I was in the office, I felt more grounded. The familiar setting and tasks helped me to know I was safe here. My feelings wouldn't be conflicted. I wouldn't have to face anything scary like my past and lowering my guard.

Work was a haven, a break from how I'd run from Kaden.

That was my cowardly act of the year. I'd freaked out and ran to avoid looking at him. In hindsight, I knew it had been my only option.

I was grateful that my morning was filled with snafus and little hiccups. Nothing major, but I was required to think on the spot and make decisions for the employees. It left me blessedly no time to think about what I did last night. And it was a handy way to avoid what Kaden said in the SUV when he dropped me off.

I damn well knew what he said. No amount of avoidance would erase it. His words hung between us.

It was the look of dejection, that cringe of *well, fuck* that crossed his face. I didn't want to hurt him.

That truth felt like a sucker punch. I didn't want to hurt him, but I felt like I already had. The guy I'd once plotted to seek revenge on.

*So much for best-laid plans, huh?*

"Hello there, slacker," Rena said when she showed up at lunchtime. We'd planned for her to come to my office for one last meal together. Going out would have been better, but the temp had to leave, so I was sort of standing in for a couple of hours. Instead of meeting at the café, I cleared space on my desk for us to eat the takeout here.

I smirked at her greeting.

"You overslept?" she guessed, looking at me as she tugged the chair closer.

I shrugged.

"Well, something had to stop you from coming to spin this morning." She never did the early classes, but since she was leaving for her trip tomorrow, she wanted to squeeze in one more workout before eating too much on vacation. "I had to suffer through this weird dude talking to me the whole time." She rolled her eyes.

"With glasses and the blue headband?" I guessed as I got things out of the bags. Kaden was so sweet to make me egg whites this morning, but I was famished. Stress eating. It wouldn't be the first time I'd done it.

"Yeah." Rena narrowed her eyes and stood. "Wait a minute." She leaned over my desk and looked at my lap. She jabbed her finger at me. "*Aha!* You *did* wear that yesterday."

I bit my lip. *Shit.* I forgot that we'd FaceTimed when she'd called me to say she'd be at spin this morning. I'd dropped my phone, too, so she saw the whole outfit.

She widened her eyes as she slanted over the desk to whisper. "Kaden?"

I nodded.

She slapped the desk. "What? I thought it was only fake!"

I shook my head. "And for the record. It *is* big and beautiful."

She opened her wrapper and rolled her eyes. "Shut up. Dicks aren't beautiful. They're just there for fun."

"Well, his was pretty enough to sample." I poked my tongue against my

cheek.

She cackled and grinned. “Oooh.” She glanced at the open door. “It was the wax, huh? They *love* a smooth landing strip.”

As my cheeks heated up, I shook my head again and ate. She asked for details, and I didn’t leave any out. Raunchy jokes aside, I told her what happened and concluded with my problem.

“I’m overwhelmed.” Done with lunch, I set my elbows on the table and tucked my face in my hands. Talking it out with her renewed all the messy feelings of this morning. “I’m confused what I should do now.”

Rena sipped her drink then shook her head. “I don’t know what to say.”

*But you always do.*

“He said that word? *Boyfriend?*”

I nodded, miserable.

She blinked and furrowed her brow. “I mean, you didn’t correct him.”

“I ran away. I froze like a deer in the headlights and ran from his SUV. I’m confident that action spoke for me.”

Pursing her lips, she nodded. “Probably.”

“This is just my luck, you know? I go all those years without seeing him—without thinking about him—and *wham!* He’s back and messing with my head again.”

That wasn’t entirely true. When the tenth reunion invites came in the mail and were posted on social media, I went through a phase of going out and drinking with Rena. Kaden was always back there in my mind. He’d hurt me so much, it was impossible to banish him. I had a scar from my experience with him, and it had festered in the recesses of my thoughts.

Out of sight, out of mind only worked so well.

I sighed and dropped one hand to the desk to drum my fingers. I needed to move somehow. This nervous energy bottling up inside me would eat away at my sanity—if I had any left.

“When all this started, when I saw Kaden coming here for that first meeting, I had it in my head that I’d even the score. That I’d sabotage him somehow.”

Rena nodded. “Right.”

“I planned to somehow get back at him for how he treated me in high school. I entertained ideas of getting up at the wedding and venting out some badass scathing speech, you know? When all their family members and friends were there, I’d tell them all about the brothers and how they weren’t

the perfect charming guys everyone thought they were. How their souls are black pits.”

Rena opened her eyes wide in shock, noticing something behind me.

Behind me, Kody stepped in through the open door. “Black pits, huh?”

My jaw dropped. I held my breath, the air trapped in my lungs as I stared at him. I was stunned, and as he stepped in another foot, I snapped my mouth shut.

*Oh, shit.*

He scoffed, shaking his head. “You know, I came here to apologize for being such a dick to you because my brother clearly is catching feelings for you.”

*Catching feelings for me?* I didn’t have it in me to deny it. Kody could be making it up. I knew better than to trust a word out of his mouth. But it went along with my suspicions. I thought I could see that deeper connection in his eyes when he stared at me. I thought I felt it when he kissed me and held me close.

But I didn’t understand how Kody would know that. Unless Kaden had told him.

I swallowed. “One apology won’t change the fact that you are an ass,” I told him, clinging to the last thread of courage I could find.

“And I’m not offering an apology, am I?” He scoffed. “Not anymore.”

“No. You’re just going to stalk me at my office and eavesdrop on private conversations like the jerk you are.”

“I’m going to go.” Rena stood and meekly grabbed the trash.

“Fuck that, Brooke. Yeah, I overheard you talking about us. Talking crap about us behind our backs.”

“Just giving you a taste of your own medicine,” I seethed.

Kody barely glanced at Rena, not seeming to care who heard him or if anyone witnessed our shouting match. “Whatever. I haven’t spent half my life moping about the stupid little shit that happened in high school.”

*Stupid little shit?* I gritted my teeth at his indifferent tone.

“I’m not a dumb teenager anymore.” He jabbed his finger at his chest. “I knew I was wrong. At the cake tasting. I know I said something stupid, and I regretted it. But now I see *your* true colors.” He put one hand on his hip and he pointed at me. “You’re just as immature as I used to be.”

“Don’t you dare compare us. Don’t even think about saying I’m anything like you.”



“At least if I’ve got something to say, I’ll tell it to your face!” He scowled, shaking his head. “You’ve got it all twisted up. You don’t even know what you’re talking about. Kaden was never cruel to you in high school.”

I stood, refusing to be seated as this guy tried to tell me what happened. “I was there. I remember. You’ve got no right to think you can come in here and disregard what happened to me.”

He shook his head, glaring at me with such loathing. “You’ve got two days to call this off with my brother. He doesn’t deserve this kind of bullshit from you.”

“Don’t you threaten her,” Rena warned.

He smirked at her. “Butt out.”

“You want me to call security?” Rena asked me.

I opened my mouth but stalled. Words lagged in my mind as the adrenaline of a confrontation skewed my response time.

Kody stepped closer. After a stern glare from Rena, he retreated to the doorway again. “If you don’t call this off with my brother, I’m going to tell him. I’ll tell Kaden that you only accepted his money and that stupid deal to stab him in the back.”

Before I could say anything, he turned and left.

Rena went to the doorway, glaring as she watched from that post, likely making sure he didn’t come back.

The tips of my ears burned. My stomach roiled and cramped. I rubbed my temples as tension locked in there. Unclenching my jaw, I heaved in a deep breath.

“What a fucking tool.” Rena sighed, rushing over to me. “Just sit. Sit down.”

I swallowed and slumped into my chair.

Confrontations weren’t my thing. I didn’t back down. I’d found my backbone after graduation, and I wasn’t a pushover. But I still didn’t like confrontations like what I just endured with Kody. I simply avoided getting into them, and the easiest way to do that was to not fuck up. To not do anything stupid.

*Like taking money to fake date the guy I used to hate.*

“Oh, shit.” I tried to lower my shoulders and loosen up from the fight-or-flight sensation, but it didn’t help me. “I think I’m going to throw up.”

“No. No, you’re not,” she gently scolded as she rubbed my back. “Just

take a deep breath.” Her hand didn’t stop. “Deep, deep breaths.”

Nausea mixed with the sinking pool of dread I couldn’t escape. My head throbbed, but in my heart, I ached. I shook my head.

“Deep breaths,” she preached patiently.

“I deserved that.”

She smacked my back. “Shut up. You did not.” She spun my chair to face me, and the topsy-turvy threat of puking returned. “You did not deserve a single second of that bullshit.”

I swallowed and frowned at her.

“You are *not* letting that asshole send you spiraling backward. He doesn’t have that power over you.”

I shook my head. He didn’t. I knew that. *Now*, as an adult and wiser than I was in high school, I knew that deep down. But I had the power to hurt Kaden. That was on *me*.

I was the one who’d so stupidly schemed and plotted against him for a stupid thing like revenge.

It would be my fault when he was hurt because of it. I did deserve a scolding for trying to wound Kaden. That *was* my fault, not Kody’s. Only mine.

And there wasn’t a single thing I could do to take it back.

I’d ruined it all.



KADEN

**M**y concentration was shot. It didn't matter how packed my day was or how many people I spoke to—I wasn't focused. I made sure I didn't snap at anyone, but I sure as fuck didn't put one hundred percent into anything I had to do at the office.

After dropping off Brooke and scaring her into running away, I struggled. I was distracted, which aggravated me, and then that drove me back to thinking about her. It was a vicious cycle that wouldn't stop.

I understood now why Dad was always adamant to keep his personal problems just that. Personal, to be dealt with off the clock so he could tend to work issues here.

That didn't mean shit when the image of Brooke running away repeated. It was seared into my mind, rendering me useless.

"I'm not sure where Kody is. He hasn't been himself," Pamela said toward the end of the day. "He came back from lunch pretty upset about something."

I scoffed, taking the papers from her. Probably another scorned woman. We hadn't talked since I fought with him, but I wasn't in the mood to deal with him today.

"I just need this signed." Pamela straightened, glancing down the hall.

*Speak of the devil.*

He scowled, but the expression faded just a bit as he saw us. I could have sworn he stared at me for a moment too long. Maybe it was on the tip of his tongue to apologize and he didn't want Pamela to see him groveling and so vulnerable.

*Yeah, right.* I rolled my eyes. I didn't have it in me to deal with him and his attitude.

"Can you sign this, please?" Pamela took the papers back from me to hand to him. She had only sought me out because one of us had to sign it. Dad had gone home already. It was Kody's department anyway.

Pamela volleyed her gaze between me and my brother. She raised her brows and held up the paper to snap him out of the staring contest he'd initiated with me. "Before five o'clock, if you don't mind?"

He snatched the papers and scribbled his signature.

I turned away to leave. "See you tomorrow," I called out to whoever was listening. I didn't intend to hold a grudge against my twin, but I wasn't ready to try to mend things with him today.

When I got home, I changed and debated between going for a run and drinking. Dinner was a better choice, though. Being hungry never helped anyone, and I felt somewhat more clear-headed when I sat at the island and finished the simple stir-fry I'd made.

Sitting in the chair Brooke had sat in last night brought back too many memories.

"I need to get out of here."

She'd invaded my home. I was too restless in this funky mood. I didn't make dinner often, and two nights in a row was a shocker. I was in that bad of a mood, though, that I hadn't wanted to suffer through ordering out and having to speak with someone who delivered it.

I waited a half hour before I put my running shoes on, and the act of doing that reminded me of what else had escaped my mind.

"Shit."

I scrolled back on my phone for the text I'd received over the weekend.

Tristan: *Gym on Tues?*

Kaden: *Sure.*

I sighed, typing out a follow-up reply.

Kaden: *Something came up. Sorry. I'm going to go for a run instead.*

As I went to leave, I pushed my earbuds in. With the left in but the right in my hand, I heard a knock.

I frowned, opening the door to find Brooke standing there.

"Hey."

It was such a short word but she'd rushed it on a breathy exhale. Her brow remained creased as she gnawed on her lip. She looked off. Concerned

and uneasy.

I was surprised she'd shown up after the way she ran from me this morning. Finding her here and looking so anxious couldn't be a good sign.

"Hey," I replied. "Come in."

"Am I interrupting?" she asked as she entered, looking around.

"No. I was just going to go for a run." I shut the door and led her toward the kitchen. "Want a drink?"

She swallowed and shook her head. "No. That's not necessary."

I arched a brow.

"When you hear what I have to say, you won't want me to stay long."

*Shit.* It wasn't going to be bad. It was going to be terrible.

"Uh. Okay. What's up?"

"When I saw you at that first meeting, I was surprised. And I guess I haven't done a great job of letting go of the past because once I got over the shock, one of my first reactions was to plan to get revenge."

I stiffened but forced myself not to show it.

"After everything that happened in high school, I felt like it would be a way to finally get closure, to even the score with you for all you did to me back then. Petty, but it is what it is. I wanted to have a chance to tell you off, to show the world how crappy of a person you had been to me. And when we agreed to the fake-date stuff, I thought it would be my chance. To stick around and go to a huge public place with your family and friends and epically tell them all. I was bitter."

She glanced up then, but quickly cringed and looked away, taking a deep breath to go on.

"I don't know what exactly I was planning. I didn't think it through. I was going to stand up at the toasts at the wedding or something and tell everyone what you did to me in high school. But I couldn't. Not anymore." She rubbed the back of her neck and found the courage to face me. "Rena came to lunch and we were talking about last night. Sorry, not sorry. I guess I'm a kiss-and-tell girl. And she knew about the revenge stuff. She was asking me if I intended to go through with it. I told her I wouldn't but your brother showed up. He'd come over to apologize for being a jerk at the cake place. And he happened to come right when I was talking with Rena. It doesn't seem like he heard me saying I couldn't go through with it, but he heard me mentioning how I had planned to seek my revenge. Or as he put it, 'stab you in the back.' He threatened to tell you about my plans unless I broke things off with you.

So I'm here to tell you the truth, the whole truth, myself instead of him having to explain it all."

I blinked, stunned.

She stared at me, and I couldn't make myself react. I was locked inside, thinking through all that she'd said. Now I could understand why Kody had been looking at me so weird at the office. It was surprising he'd gotten his head out of his ass to apologize, and that was a huge step for him.

"I'm sorry."

I drew in a deep breath, hearing the tears behind that confession. She didn't let them show, though.

"I will find a way to pay you back that forty grand. I will. Just give me some time. But please, *please* don't back out of the deal with Halden Inc. Todd would kill me. I would lose so much progress I've made at the office. I wouldn't be able to recover from that and I just don't want to let him down—to let anyone there suffer for my mistake."

*And you wouldn't want to disappoint your mom.*

"My career is my life," she admitted. "Just like yours is for you."

I lowered my arms and gazed at the floor.

She'd only gone along with any of it for the sake of paying me back. Out of spite. All those times I'd thought I sensed something else, I'd been wishing for something that wasn't there.

She hadn't wanted me at all. She'd only played me, strung me along and then chickened out when she couldn't go through with her plans.

"I'm sorry."

I lifted my hand to quiet her. "I understand."

She gaped at me, blinking, then shook her head, stunned. "What?"

It was the truth, as much as it pained me to say it. "We were different people in high school, you know. I get where you are coming from. And now?" I rubbed my jaw, hating this gap that widened between us. "Now we've both done things we regret."

But I couldn't tell her the whole truth. I couldn't tell her that Kody was the one who did her dirty in high school. Not me.

This was a perfect chance to explain it all, but I couldn't throw my brother under the bus like that. He deserved a second chance. Who didn't? I was impressed that he'd gone to apologize to her after we fought. And it really touched me how he'd stood up to her and had my back, telling her to think twice about hurting me.

Kody and I had a complicated relationship, but he was my brother, and I'd always love him. Even when he fumbled the best way to man up and do the right thing.

If I let her assume she knew the truth about high school, then I wouldn't have to handle any more issues with Kody where she was concerned. And it would clear things up between me and her.

I was deluded, reading into things that weren't there. She wasn't on the same page as me. Not at all. But now we could move on.

"I forgive you." I swallowed past the lump of emotion clogging my throat. I cleared it. "But now I know where I stand. Where I stand with you."

She huffed out a hard breath, and her shoulders slumped. That sassy edge, that spunk and fiery attitude, were all gone.

I pointed at the space between us, flicking my finger back and forth. "From here on out, this is only a business relationship. No more hookups. No more late nights." *No more wishing what we have is real.* "Just the wedding events and work meetings at Halden Inc."

She frowned. "Are you sure?" She licked her lips. "About the wedding stuff?"

I nodded.

This close to the wedding, I wouldn't be in any frame of mind to find a date—real or otherwise. "I'd hate to let my dad down. And everyone who met you at the engagement party would be curious if I didn't show up to the wedding with you now."

"I'm sure they wouldn't notice."

Again with that damn suspicion that she could be overlooked and forgotten. It was blasphemy, but I knew I wouldn't be able to break past her walls and convince her otherwise.

"Yes, they would. You've already made an impression. Mercedes texted me that she wants your number, to ask what gym you go to. My dad keeps peppering me with questions about—" I sighed, hating how our lies had already spun out of control.

"About what?" she asked cautiously.

"About how long I think it'll be before I propose."

*Never, Dad. The answer is never.*

She flinched. "Oh, uh. Whoa."

I wasn't done. "Margaux called earlier, reminding me to make sure you'll be at the shopping extravaganza at my dad's estate. My cousin's wife emailed



me, asking where you got your tattoos done.”

I bored into her with my stare. *You're unforgettable.*

Just like I'd spend the rest of my life remembering this conversation and hating how it had hurt.

“You're sure?” she checked again.

I nodded, not having the heart to lie to her with words.

*No.*



BROOKE

I thought I'd struggled to focus yesterday when Kaden slipped and said he felt like he was my boyfriend. I had. But that was nothing compared to what I felt now.

Today was infinitely worse because, in hindsight, I realized how I would never hear that word out of his mouth again.

And that sucked. Big time.

If Sandra hadn't shown up, I would have been in trouble. All day, I felt lost and distracted. I kept thinking about Kaden. Like a record on a loop, the memories hit me and pounded me further into a dark, bitter mood.

I'd slept like shit too, which predisposed me to a lousy day. I woke up from too little sleep, and after my rowing workout, I felt sluggish and in need of a nap, not energized.

The dejected expression he wore when I told him the truth. That aloof, almost indifferent way he'd told me why I had to still come to the wedding events. They hurt.

I had no respite from those memories assaulting my sanity. But they weren't as bad as the other ones. I'd expected the guilt. It swept in and claimed me from the moment Kody stormed out of this office. Knowing I'd hurt Kaden guaranteed I'd have a boulder of guilt weighing me down.

I expected it to eat at me. But there was more to it.

The way he smiled when he offered me those egg whites.

Each time he laughed at my silliness

All those occasions I'd caught him checking me out and fanning my desire.

How he'd held my hand, knowing I'd wanted his support.  
I *thunked* my forehead on my desktop. "I am such a fool."  
I missed him. That hurt the worst.

Last night, after I spilled the truth, he stared at me like I was a stranger, and that caused a hard ache to swell deep down inside me.

It wasn't fair that this would hit me *now*. Fate was playing a wicked, twisted, and cruel joke on me. It was after the fact that I had to acknowledge I had feelings for him. I'd feared that I was falling for him when I snuggled into his hold in his bed. I'd suspected it could happen. But even then, it was already too late. I'd already fallen for him.

And now I'd gone and imploded something that could have been amazing.

When my phone buzzed, I let it vibrate and dance across my desk. Honestly, I didn't care who it was. I didn't want to be cheerful and talk to anyone. *He* wouldn't be calling me.

But I sat up anyway and looked at the screen.

Rena.

I sighed and answered. "Hey, girl."

"Just wanted to say goodbye," she said. "My flight for Spain is about to leave and I didn't want to text."

"Have fun," I said.

*God, that was lame.* I didn't sound enthusiastic at all.

"Hey. What's wrong?" Background noise of the airport sounded from her end. "I didn't call. I figured you were busy and I was packing last-minute stuff."

"Nah. It's fine. I'm fine."

She snorted. "Uh, the hell you are. Did your conversation with Kaden go badly last night?"

I frowned, clamping my lips together. I already felt weighted down by the guilt with how things went with Kaden. I didn't want to feel lousy about being a bad friend to her, too. She didn't need to hear about my issues. I didn't want her to worry while she was on her dream trip.

I cleared my throat and smiled, hoping I could force some pep into my voice. "Hey, no. I'm fine. Really. All is well."

"You sure?"

"Of course. Listen, I want you to have the best time. Meet new people. Be as present as possible."

She giggled. “I expect you to like every single picture I post.”

“All of them,” I promised. “And please be safe.”

“I will. You too, girl.”

*Too late for that. My heart is shattered.* “I can’t wait to hear all about your trip when you get home.”

She hung up shortly after that, and when I set my phone on my desk, I exhaled a ragged breath. No longer having to put on an act for her, I slumped right back into my shitty mood.

“Hey, hey.”

I perked up, pasting a quick smile on my face as Todd knocked then poked his head in. “Need something, boss?”

*Tone it down.* No need to sound like a hyped-up chipper idiot.

He frowned for a moment and shook his head. “Uh, yes. Yes, I do. Are you busy?”

*Yep. Busy missing my biggest mistake.* “Nope. Whatcha need?”

“Just a quick favor.”

I smiled—a normal one, not too forceful. “Anything.”

“I need you to head over to Kaden’s office.”

I clenched my teeth to maintain the smile. *Anything but that.* “Oh.”

He held up some papers. “I need his signatures on these before the end of the day and”—he shook his head when I opened my mouth—“I know. I know. We can always do signatures virtually and not everyone will be accommodating of my old-fashioned preferences of ink and paper.”

I giggled.

“But his secretary said their building is having issues with the wi-fi routers or something.” He shrugged and rolled his eyes like the Luddite he tried not to be. “Something. We can’t use the docuSign backup. Can you take these over and get his signature?”

I licked my lips. “Yep. No problem.”

*It is most definitely a problem.*

“Great.” He handed them over and smiled as he left my office.

*End of the day?* I glanced at the time, calculating just how many minutes and hours I had to put this off.

It was no use. He was already plaguing my every thought. The guilt wouldn’t lessen. I couldn’t be creative *at all* in penning some personalized thank-yous to clients. I was a mess.

When my work number rang with an unidentified number, I answered,

too ingrained not to answer when it could be any given number from an extension. “Brooke Ponder. How can I help you?”

“Hi!”

I flinched, lifting the phone from my ear at her loud, peppy chirp of a greeting.

“Hello.”

“This is Polly,” she said, introducing herself as a sales rep from the store Rena and I had gone to.

“Our rewards members information tells me you made a purchase recently.”

I curled my lip and rolled my eyes. Rena must have signed me up when I was changing. She knew how I hated these spammy things. *At least she used my work number and not my personal.*

“I just wanted to let you know we’ve received new products of the line you enjoy. If you’re enjoying the *backcountry dream* lingerie set, we now also have—”

*Click.*

I pressed my lips together and held in a scream.

I did *not* need yet another reminder of Kaden.

“Fuck it,” I muttered. I closed out of my emails, locked my computer, and stood. Hating the position I’d put myself in, I grabbed my phone and the file of documents Todd asked me to get signed.

May as well get it over with now before I drove myself crazier.

It would have been quicker to jump on the bus, but I figured the exercise of walking would help clear my mind. My shoes weren’t ideal for a walk, but I made do, taking a slow pace to reach the Wagner Industries headquarters.

I zoned out as I walked, not focusing on Kaden. Or that was my goal. I tried any and every technique I had in my repertoire.

When I was enrolled in business school at the local community college near where I’d grown up, I had to attend at least one public speaking commitment that related to community growth for my social psychology course. In other words, listen to anyone ramble and talk about any old thing.

The first one I planned to go to was canceled. The next one I found out about was rescheduled. By that point, I’d begun to lose hope I’d ever cross off that criterium for my grade. When Mom suggested a free seminar thing about hope, I figured it was just another religious recruitment sort of thing. It wasn’t. I’d broken down in tears by the end of the motivational speaker who

shared her tale of overcoming abuse. She'd reached me and inspired me to change. To not dwell in the past. To be positive. All of it. That speaker jumpstarted my makeover from my high school hell, and I still remembered those tricks that I'd relied on when faced with nerve-wracking situations or when I was drowning in too many big emotions.

None of them worked. Counting my breaths. Counting my steps. Measuring the force of my footfall and imagining the kinetic energy from the ground up. I couldn't calm myself down.

Square breathing failed me too, and I supposed that was likely more effective when sitting down and trying to relax, not striding quickly down a sidewalk and preparing for a horrible confrontation.

I ran out of time to put it off though. I was there. Just a block ahead, and I'd be there to see Kaden after he'd tormented my every thought.

*Maybe it'll help?* If I saw him and stood strong. It could be a practice-makes-perfect situation. The more I subjected myself to the torture of seeing him, my heart would harden again.

*God. Did I really say that? Their souls were black pits?*

I shook my head, looking down as I approached the entrance to their building. Construction barriers and cones were set up every which way, detouring foot traffic to accommodate whatever big project they were jackhammering half of the damn road for.

When I was sure I was near the steps, I glanced up.

And stalled, doing a double-take.

*It's not him.* I tried to calm my heart, but they were so damn similar, I needed a moment to chill.

Kody stood at a street vendor parked outside the entrance to their building. He turned, coffee in hand, just as I happened to look up and spot him.

*Shit.*

I drew in a deep breath and regretted it immediately. Hacking and coughing at sucking in a lungful of the dusty construction air, I climbed up the steps.

Fate sure was in a bitchy mood today because Kody approached the entrance at the same time.

*Of course, he did.*

I ignored him, even as he matched my steps up the stairs to the entrance. I didn't give him the satisfaction of looking at him once, although I felt the

burn of his gaze on me.

“You sure had balls going to his house. Telling the truth like that.”

Only then did I turn and face him as I climbed the steps. I’d kept a fast pace—damning my shoes—but he simply kept up by taking them two at a time. I maintained a blank expression, refusing to give him anything.

“It surprised me,” he admitted.

*Whoopity-fucking-do.*

At the lobby’s entrance, he shouldered the door open for me and leaned against it, letting me in. I didn’t buckle under his stare. I no longer could care what he thought of me. I was the enemy—message received.

“You’re not the same girl you were in high school.”

I scoffed, brushing past him. Knocking my shoulder into his didn’t make me feel bad either.

He didn’t deserve anything else from me. I left him behind me, continuing on my way to Kaden’s office.

I knew I wasn’t the same girl I was back then. I’d grown. I’d matured. I’d learned some hard life lessons to become the woman I was today. And ruining what I could have had with his brother was the hardest lesson yet.





KADEN

**B**etween the jackhammering outside, the constant complaints in the office and the wi-fi and even the electricity being screwed up from the construction, I suffered from a bitch of a headache all day.

Drinking all that bourbon last night hadn't helped.

After Brooke left, I got liberal with a couple of drinks. Fuck that run. I had needed something stronger. I was two glasses in when my brother FaceTimed me by accident. But while I had him on the phone, I told him all about what Brooke came over to tell me. He was surprisingly quiet, just having gotten done with dinner.

He didn't say much, maybe because I was past buzzed but not drunk. Maybe he pitied me, because he looked really pensive as he listened. At any rate, it was a nice gesture when he stopped in my office this morning—without a word—and left a bottle of water and painkillers with me.

It hardly took the edge off, and it wasn't until Pamela sighed at me after lunch, asking if my dog died, that I knew the culprit for my shitty mood.

I furrowed my brow. "I don't have a dog."

She rolled her eyes. "I *know* that." She crossed her arms. "What is it then? A woman?"

That sobered me up. She might mention it to Dad.

I shook my head. "Nope. Drank a little too much last night."

She smirked. "And with all that noise outside." She patted my shoulder and left the room.

It was a woman though. Brooke. My head hurt, yeah, but my chest felt tight with a damn ache that wouldn't go away anytime I thought of her.

I finished the rest of my water bottle and lowered my gaze to the papers in front of me when a knock sounded on my door.

“I left those papers on your desk, Pam.”

Wrong person. Brooke stood there.

Hands behind her back, she encouraged my gaze to focus on her tits with her shoulders back. I fought the urge to look, forcing myself to meet her eyes.

I’d stared into them when she rode me. Those dark green pools of desire locked on me as she gyrated on my dick.

*Shit.* I swallowed, forcing the errant image away.

“Hey.”

There. I’d left zero emotion in that word. I couldn’t afford to spend any more on her. I’d used it all up in my mind as I thought back again and again about how I’d missed the signals. She’d never been into me. She’d only wanted revenge.

Fuck, did it hurt to be used—or almost used.

“What’s up?” I cursed the catch in my voice.

“Todd wanted something signed.” She lowered her hand from behind her back and showed me a file with documents.

“Right. I suggested we try the e-documents going forward.” I’d noticed she hadn’t argued that when I’d emailed that to Todd and carbon copied her. I wouldn’t renege on the deal with Halden Inc. Wagner Industries would benefit from them. But it didn’t hurt to cut down on the reasons I had to see her in the office.

“But I guess that’s not happening today,” I said, gesturing for her to enter.

“Sorry about the inconvenience.” She stepped forward, holding out the file.

I shrugged. “It’s not your fault.”

She pursed her lips and looked away.

It wasn’t *one* thing to sign, but a stack. *Of all days for the wi-fi to be messed up.*

It was on the tip of my tongue to suggest she sit and make herself comfortable, but I couldn’t risk it. Her sweet vanilla scent already hit me, and I didn’t want to subject myself to any more torture.

I flipped through the pages, penning my name on each indicated line.

*What a waste of paper.* Maybe that was why Todd insisted on using it—his company distributed it. Job security? Or resistance to technology?

The rambling thoughts didn’t distract me. I knew she was there, walking

around my office as she waited. I appreciated the way she strolled away from my desk, perhaps sensing from my curt personality that I wasn't in the mood for entertaining her.

But I was aware. I fought not to track her through the room, admiring her sexy ass in that tight-as-fuck skirt and the way the green blouse made her eyes pop.

When she lingered at the shelves of the built-in bookcase, I held my breath. My graduation picture was up there. Would that trigger her to think back to that year again?

She picked up a framed photo, and I glanced up, pausing my pen as I watched her peer at the image captured in time. My uncle had snapped it of me, Kody, and Dad. We'd gone fishing, and instead of bragging and competing about who'd caught the biggest one, it turned into razzing each other for catching the smallest.

"That was the first summer we went back there after my mom passed."

She flinched, like she'd been caught red-handed. Her hair fell over her shoulder as she reached back to set it down again. "Looks like a pretty location."

"It is, especially in the fall. Our summer cabin in Maine."

She raised her brows. "*That's* a cabin?"

"Not a rustic one," I admitted. It was practically the same size as my house.

"Looks like you were having a fun time," she said.

I drew in a deep breath. "It took all three of us a lot of effort to go back to her favorite place without her."

She opened and closed her mouth, stammering. "I meant—it's—you looked like you were enjoying each other's company."

I nodded and lowered my gaze back to the stack of papers. Only a few more. *Thank fuck.*

It wasn't my intention to make her feel like she'd said something out of turn. That was the reason why my uncle had taken the picture. Because for a brief moment, we'd found a spot of lightness in the darkness of grief. After I considered what I shared, though, I wanted to kick myself. *Why am I sharing anything personal with her?* She clearly doesn't care.

"You must miss her," she said, still keeping a healthy distance from my desk.

"Every day." I looked up a moment later, handing her the forms.

“Thanks.” She dropped her gaze to them, seeming slow to react.

I picked up the file she’d carried them in and handed that over too.  
“Here.”

She nodded, chewing on her lip.

“I appreciate you taking the time to sign them.”

I shrugged. “Sure. It’s not a big deal.”

“Mm-hmm.” She sighed, stuffing the documents back in the folder. She made no move to back up or turn around. Her reluctance stretched into not making eye contact, too.

I didn’t need her to say it. I could sense it. She wanted to linger. To talk. Something. But my company was no longer hers to manipulate. I forgave her. I did. I meant it when I told her that. At the same time, I simply couldn’t put myself back out there. I didn’t want to welcome more pain of missing her. Her rejection still stung.

“Do you need anything else?” I asked, steepling my hands together.

She opened her mouth quickly and lifted her gorgeous green eyes to mine. Her tongue peeked out as she licked her lower lip, but with the way her brow furrowed and her shoulders rose on a quick breath, like she prepared to say something, I knew she wasn’t trying to mess with me. This wasn’t the same coy, sex-kitten look she’d used on me before.

*I won’t repeat the mistake of falling for that again if she tried.*

She closed her lips. “What?”

*You fucking heard me the first time.*

“Do you need anything else?” I asked.

She looked down and shook her head. “Nope. That was all.”

I kept my tone terse, but I made sure that I wasn’t mean. I forgave her, but I wasn’t going to backtrack on what I said. Business only.

*And the wedding.*

“If you could, please remember to plan for your attendance this weekend.”

*My God. Stop being a dick.* That formal crap wasn’t necessary. She arched her brows.

“The next wedding event is this weekend.”

She nodded. “Yep. Which thing is it again?”

“Shopping extravaganza at my dad’s estate,” I replied.

“You’ll be there, won’t you?” Dad asked as he entered my office.

Brooke flinched at his voice, just slightly, but she turned and smiled at

him. "Sure. I'll be there. Thanks for inviting me."

"Oh, of course." He set his hand on her back in a quick pat. "You'll be up at the head table after all." He winked at her, then beamed at me.

I forced a smile, refraining from making eye contact with her.

She shrugged, smiling sheepishly. "I'll admit I've never been to one before."

"Oh, you'll love it. It was Margaux's idea."

"What do I need to do?" She glanced between Dad and me.

"Several designers will bring wardrobes of clothes for special guests to choose from. The bridal party will be there, as well as groomsmen."

"Oh." She held up her hand. "Please don't go to any fuss to include me."

"Nonsense," Dad said jovially. "I insist, or rather, Margaux does. Mercedes will be there, along with other close friends. It's not *just* the wedding party, so don't worry about that."

"Oh." She smiled. "Sure. That sounds lovely. I'll see you there."

I nodded. "Have a good rest of your afternoon."

*Get out.*

Her smile faltered, but she caught herself from frowning and smiled at Dad.

Dad beamed at her as she left my office, and I looked down at the papers I'd been looking over before she arrived.

"You all right, Kaden?" Dad asked as he sat.

*Shit.* He was settling in. I wouldn't get off light here.

I never minded talking to my dad. He was a great guy. I wished I could have had more chances just to talk to him at the office. Now that he'd be married, I bet I'd see even less of him.

"Yeah. Sure." I shrugged and looked at him.

He rubbed his chin, peering at the wall. "You seemed a little off."

*Really? That's funny. I feel way off.*

"Look, is she bothering you?" he asked.

*Fuck.* "Brooke?"

He frowned. "What? No. Why would I ask if your girlfriend was bothering you? She's a sweetheart."

*Girlfriend. Ha. Rub salt in the wound, why don't you?* "Then who?" I asked.

"Margaux. Is it bothering you that I'm marrying her?"

I widened my eyes, considering his direct question. I shook my head. "It

doesn't matter."

He furrowed his brow again, leaning forward. "The hell it doesn't. You're my son."

"No, no, no." I licked my lips and thought fast. "No. I meant it doesn't matter that you're marrying her." I sighed. "It's just a piece of paper, right? You've already let her into your life these last few months, dating her. And now, making it official is just a formality. On paper."

He blinked and sat back, clearly not expecting that answer. "That's how you feel about marriage?"

I shrugged.

"That's something I'd expect your brother to say."

I chuckled. "I'm not jaded or anything"

*Liar.*

"But it's not..."

He tilted his head to the side. "Come on. What is it?"

I frowned. "Why are you asking? Why are you asking *now*? If my opinion mattered, why not check before you proposed and started planning?"

"Because I worry you might think I'm trying to replace your mother." He lifted his lips almost in a smirk. "Margaux and Mercedes talk about the details and planning. Well, it's more Mercedes. Margaux and I don't want to handle it all and Mercedes seems to enjoy it. But I don't *want* to deal with the details. It reminds me of when I married your mother, and I suppose I've been thinking about it lately."

"No, Dad. You can't replace her. I'd like to think—no, I know—she would want you to be happy. And that's why my answer doesn't matter. I want you to be happy. And if Margaux makes you happy, either as your girlfriend or your bride, then I'm happy for you."

His smile was slow but heartfelt. "Thanks, son. I appreciate that."

I nodded, having told the truth. It had taken me a while to reach that confidence in his choice, but there it was. "Really, I'm happy for you."

He stood, grinning. "Now only if your brother could have the same attitude."

"He'll come around," I said as he left.

At least I always hoped he would.

Even if he was the catalyst in making Brooke come clean about her botched plans of seeking revenge.





BROOKE

If Mr. Wagner hadn't come in the room after I got Kaden's signatures, I would've eventually found the courage to just be honest and upfront with the guy. I craved his company, but I thought it was best to maintain some distance until I had a better grasp of how he was feeling after I dropped that bombshell last night.

*Why? Why did I ever think about getting revenge on him?*

His short, blunt answers didn't warm me up. And he'd all but told me to scram.

When I returned to my office, upset and sinking under the weight of it all, everything went to shit. Todd asked me to write someone up, even though I hadn't been present for the incident causing the write-up. That employee got lippy with me. Another coworker flipped out at my suggestion that she turn her music down. I wasn't a supervisor but a head figure that Todd relied on to do these things.

Today, I felt like a harried babysitter, unable to keep anyone else in line because my life was a scattered, morose mess.

If I'd ever had any reason to be emo, it was fucking today.

After countless other stupid little things that went wrong—simple issues that normally wouldn't bother me—I prayed for the end of the day to come.

As I left finally, I debated what to do. While going home for dinner then crawling in bed appealed to me, it felt like a paltry thing to do. I was restless, and with that energy, I didn't want a simple, toned-down night at home.

Rena was gone, and I missed her so badly that I debated calling her. I didn't want her to worry, so I talked myself out of it.

*Maybe I can hop on social media and doom scroll? Find one of those blogger wannabe philosophers to tell me when to burn a damn candle?*

Instead, I resorted to my only other option. I headed to the one place where I could always be myself with no judgment. Mom was a good listener, too. Going home to visit her was my best bet.

“Hi, hon.” Her smile fell and she ushered me in, knowing immediately that something was wrong. “Oh, honey, what happened?”

I wasn’t crying, but it seemed I *looked* emo enough that she knew.

“Do you have anything to drink?”

Her brows shot up and she sighed. “A six-pack.” She shrugged. “Or tea?”

This was more of a numb-my-brain-liquor night, but I sighed and remembered the last time I drank too much. I didn’t want the headache of a hangover again. “Never mind,” I muttered as I entered the living room.

She muted the game show she’d been watching as I slumped onto the couch. Instead of resuming her seat in the armchair that gave her better light to knit by, she slid down next to me, wrapping her arm around my shoulders. “Talk to me.”

I heaved in a deep breath and did just that. Taking my time, I told her about it all. She already knew about the time I met Kaden, and she saw him when he drove me here that day, so I mostly filled in the blanks of what happened in between and the recent downfall. Well, *my* downfall. Kaden hadn’t done anything except decide I was the person he wanted to spend time with.

There was no need to belabor *all* the details. She smiled and made a slightly goofy face when I glossed over the sex bits. I made sure she understood that we’d been intimate, and that was enough. She got the point. By the end of it all, I did feel slightly better. Dumping all that information was cathartic somehow, like speaking the words aloud released them from the trapped tension I held in my chest and head all day. I didn’t have a rosy feeling of hope, but I wasn’t bottling it all in anymore.

“Please say something.” I grimaced as I faced her. Like Kaden, she was a patient and attentive listener. She hadn’t interrupted once, but I knew she was following along.

“Well.” She hummed. “I think you know the first thing I’d like to say.”

“I’m an idiot?”

She patted my knee. “You did an idiotic thing. But you’re not an idiot. You are a wonderful, smart woman.” Her fingertip gently tapped my temple.

“But when it comes to matters of the heart?” She laid her hand over her chest and shrugged. “Then you’re just as much of a dumbass as the rest of us.”

I smiled and almost laughed. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Am I disappointed in you?” She bobbed her head. “Yes. Your original plans for revenge were petty. Cruel, even.”

I swallowed, wishing I’d taken her up on one of those drinks. My mouth was dry from all that talking.

“I know. I agree. It was petty.”

Mom shook her head, frowning at me.

I hated to ever hear her disappointment. “But, Mom, those guys tortured me in high school.”

She crossed her arms and shot me a *say what?* look. “Kaden?”

I nodded. “Both of them.”

“How? When? I never heard about any of this.”

“Kaden is the one who jerked me around at prom.”

She furrowed her brow. “What?”

I hated that I had to relive it and explain. But it was time. She’d never understand if she didn’t have the full picture.

“Kaden posed as Kody and asked me to prom. Then the day of the dance, he pulled the rug out from under me and bailed.”

“Just like that?”

I nodded. “He ended up taking one of the most beautiful and popular girls to the dance instead. I was so humiliated. I went with Paige, like we’d planned to. But I barely left the table. I didn’t dance at all. I didn’t get up to have my picture taken with anyone. I sat there until you came to pick me up.”

Mom’s frown was sad. She sighed and shook her head. “You know, I wondered. I thought it was strange when you’d called me from school and asked me to pick you up. I figured your date would take you home. And when I picked you up?” She furrowed her brow. “I could tell something was up. But you seemed so happy and normal.”

“I faked it. I didn’t want you to be upset about it.”

She hugged me, shaking her head again. “You sure fooled me.”

“I had never felt so unwanted.” Tears burned, and I sniffled to hold them back. “The feeling reminded me of how hurt I was, how I’d ached when Dad left.”

“Oh, Brooke.” She wrapped both arms around me and hugged me tight. “You are *always* wanted. Never, ever doubt that.”

I clutched her shirt and drew a shaky breath. “I know.” I did, truly. I had my mom. I had Rena. And one day, I hoped I’d have a man to count on sticking around.

“I wish you would have told me all of this back then.”

I sat back, wiping my face of the tears that had slipped out. “I wish I had too.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I didn’t want you to feel bad. You weren’t too happy yourself, and I didn’t want to bog you down any more after Dad left.”

She cupped my face. “You are an angel. And I love your compassion. But it wasn’t your job to take care of me, to put my feelings first.”

I nodded. “But it was. And I just felt so humiliated, I was scared to even speak about it. It cut deep.”

“I see that.”

“Carrying it around with me all these years hasn’t been very smart either. It hasn’t done me any good. In fact, it’s done me so much harm.”

She slanted her brows and shot me a stern look of worry.

“No, not physical harm. But I became obsessed with staying in control of my looks. It became an addiction. I’m terrified of my own reflection.” I lifted my arms toward her. “My tattoos aren’t just reminders for me, Mom. They’re not visual reminders of the things I’ve overcome. It’s also camouflage.”

“Oh, honey,” she said.

I swallowed again, struggling. Between all that talking and then the threat of crying, my mouth was dry and my throat felt raw. “Can I have that beer now?”

She sighed and stood. “I’ll make us tea. Tell me more, honey.”

I followed her into the kitchen and did just that. With her gentle patience and open ears, she listened to me describe my struggles.

She didn’t argue a single thing I said. Like the best mother in the world, she listened to me until I was worn ragged and exhausted.

“Why don’t you stay the night, honey?” She rubbed my shoulder as I laid my head on my arms on the table. “Call off tomorrow. Todd will understand.”

She guided me from the table to the couch. “You never take sick days, and you’re entitled to one. A mental health day.”

I felt like I’d need a mental health week or two.

Unleashing my burdens on her had taken a toll on me. I smiled and

nodded as I sat. “Thanks, Mom. That sounds like a good idea.”

“Everyone needs a break sometimes.”

I snorted. “And today was definitely a long, hard day.”

“I imagine. Especially having to see Kaden, too.”

“Very. The way he spoke about his mom just broke my heart, too.”

“I remember when she passed. It was such a tragedy to lose her.” She left me yawning on the couch as she went to the hall and grabbed a spare blanket and pillow.

“And I’m sure he’ll come around. It all just feels raw right now,” she mused, opening the blanket and flapping it to unfold it. “Maybe a little space will help. A step back to think about it all, and when you see him next, both of you will have had time to let the hard feelings settle into place.”

*I won’t hold my breath.* If he kept up that coldness, that distance, I wasn’t sure I could be a good enough actress to convince anyone he was my date.

“You’re a smart, resilient woman, Brooke. And this too will pass,” she said and tapped the tattoo on her wrist.

I lay back, more than ready to close my eyes. “I love you,” I told her.

She leaned down and kissed my forehead. “I love you, too.”

As I closed my eyes, I considered her advice and hoped she was right.



KADEN

**T**hank you for reaching out to me. I am out of the office, but should you need immediate assistance, please contact Ms. Sandra Pellen.

I frowned, once again looking at the notification that showed in the email. The wi-fi had been restored early this morning, but it must have redirected a route to the Twilight Zone.

Brooke was out of the office?

*Why? What's wrong?*

It had bothered me all day.

She was a workaholic, and her drive to go, go, go almost rivaled mine. Something big had to have happened for her to take a spontaneous day off. That auto out-of-office reply bounced into my inbox when I sent her a file—actually attaching it—first thing in the morning.

It was Thursday, so she would have had a spin class today. My thoughts veered toward worrying if she'd harmed herself on the bike. Or pulled a muscle.

*Stop. Just stop.* I had to force myself to dismiss it. But I hadn't. I couldn't. All day, the same auto-reply box hovered over her work contact, and before I left the office, I gave in and called Sandra. She was charming and perhaps too loose to share information about her coworker, but her reply was innocuous.

“Oh, she just needed a girl's day.”

*How?* I frowned. *I thought Rena just left for her trip.*

“I swear,” Sandra crooned. “Brooke is such a sweetheart.”

I bit my lip and held back a sigh. Yeah, a sweetheart with a side of

revenge—almost.

“The way she dotes on her mother is just so precious. She sent me a picture of them at lunch before catching a matinee. I wish my daughters could visit more often.”

I hung up, feeling marginally saner. Knowing she wasn’t wounded or hurt made me feel better.

*Fuck.* I had to stop thinking about her.

“Hey.”

I jerked my head up, finding Kody at the door to my office.

We hadn’t really shared many words today at the office, but things seemed to be smoother between us. Even Pamela had commented in passing, “Oh, good, the boys aren’t trying to strangle each other again.”

“Do you want to ride together to this wedding house?” he asked.

“Manor.”

“Same thing. I’ve got someone I want to meet up with later, so the sooner we can get this over with, the better.”

“Gee, tone down your enthusiasm.”

“It’d be faster if you drive.”

“So you can race back for what?”

He made a crude gesture of humping something. “What do you think?”

I closed one eye and tilted my head to the side. “Do you really want an answer to that?”

“No. So, we’ll ride together?”

I shrugged. “May as well.”

He nodded.

Many years ago, we’d both lamented that we *had* to share one truck. Out at the estate, away from the city, driving was relaxing. When I finally got my first car, we’d both cruised around with no care about wasting gas or time.

Unlike me, Kody hated driving in the city. I didn’t mind.

On the way to Colette’s manor, Kody broke the silence again. I didn’t have the heart to speak up first, and I was curious what he’d say since we were alone in my SUV with time to kill.

“So Brooke,” he said.

I glanced at him but said nothing.

“You’re done with all that?”

I shook my head. “She’ll come to the wedding stuff. And the deal with Halden Inc. is too good to consider aborting it.”



He scoffed, stretching out in the passenger seat. We both still wore our suits from the office, but he somehow managed to look more rumpled.

“Why? Why keep up the charade?”

“Because Dad wants us to have dates.”

He laughed and shook his head. “So what? He couldn’t have been serious when he said that.”

“I think he was.” I shrugged. “Besides, Brooke has already made an impression on him and the others.”

“And you?”

I turned onto the highway. “What about me?”

“She’s made an impression on you?”

She’d done more than that. She’d burrowed under my skin and possessed my thoughts.

“You’ve been kind of mad. So I wondered…”

“What did you expect?” I glanced at him again, finding him staring out the window.

“I don’t know. To be happy? I would have been grateful to escape a scorned woman like that.” He swatted his hand at my arm without looking. “You’re welcome, by the way, for having your back.”

I chewed on my lip, wishing I could laugh. He had *my* back? Was that really the way he saw it?

“Now you’re free to pick up someone at the wedding.”

“I just told you. I’m bringing Brooke. We’ve already gotten this far. It’d be more awkward to explain why she wasn’t there if I didn’t go along with it now.”

“Sucks to be you.”

I glowered as I stared out the windshield. *Yeah, my thoughts exactly.* But only because I missed her so damn much. Rejection was a bitch.

When we arrived at the manor, I didn’t see Dad’s car.

“Oh, that’s great,” Kody said, looking at his phone.

I’d had mine charging on the drive and hadn’t noticed I’d received a text. Dad had contacted us both, saying something came up.

After his confession about the wedding planning details reminding him of when he married Mom, I wondered if he was staying away because of that. If he was, fine. I was already ninety-nine percent certain the wedding would be here.

“Hey,” I told Kody as we headed out to find Colette. “You’re okay with

Dad marrying Margaux, right?”

He shot me a side-eye. “Little late to be asking that.”

“Have you talked to him about it?”

He smirked. “You’re better with all that emotional shit.” He lifted his shoulders and let them drop, then waved when he spotted Tristan and Colette walking toward us. “What does it matter to me? It’s his life to live. If she makes him happy, whatever.”

That was what I said, give or take. It reassured me to know Kody would still have our father’s best interests in mind.

“Has he given you a hard time about not having a date?”

He glowered at me. “Daily. You’ve always gotta be the ‘good’ one. Kissing up and being the obedient one.”

I smirked. “Sure. Because I’m only paying a woman to pretend to be my date. A woman who wanted to use the wedding as a chance to tell everyone how much of an asshole I am.”

“Yeah, that is kind of fucked up.”

“Why don’t you just ask someone?” He wouldn’t have a hard time finding someone.

*Or maybe he would. He’s probably slept his way through the city already.*

“Because I don’t want to. I’ll hook up with someone at the wedding.”

I shook my head, giving up on the subject as Colette and Tristan reached us.

“How are you doing?” Tristan asked after we greeted each other.

“Been better,” I admitted.

Kody snorted and Tristan looked at him, confused.

*Enough about me.* “I can’t wait to see what it looks like inside,” I told Colette.

“It’s a bummer you couldn’t make it when that wedding was going on,” she replied. “Much easier to picture it all and figure out what you’d like for placement.”

Kody rolled his eyes but smiled as he retorted. “Aisle in the middle, guests on the side. Easy.”

I shot him a look.

“Easy.” Tristan scoffed. “Right.”

“I’m sorry we missed it,” I said of our previous appointment to check out the place.

“No worries.” She leaned to see past me. “Are we waiting on your dad,

then?”

“Nope. Just us,” I said.

We entered the historic house and I marveled at how large it was. I knew it was a big building, but looking at the front, I wondered if it would seem cramped inside. The space was deceptively generous with high ceilings. I stood in the front foyer, admiring all the details that seemed to have fallen out of style. Crown molding, scrollwork on trims, antique chandeliers. Craftmanship was evident here, giving the place a classic appearance.

“Where can I take a piss?” Kody asked Tristan. He was already bored.

I saw the potential at once. Colette was thorough, pointing out the rooms, their capacities, and the amenities they had to offer. Outside, I scanned the reception space that was often preferred over the ballroom inside. I honestly could see both being used, regardless of the weather. Fall was quickly approaching. Some days, I needed my jacket, and on others, I wanted to turn the AC back on. Who knew what the weather would be like for their wedding, but it would be nice to have options.

If this was to be the event of the year, I voted to go all out and rent the entire property.

“I think Dad and Margaux will love it,” I told Colette.

She grinned at me, pressing her hands together as she lifted her shoulders. “Really? Oh, I can’t wait.”

Kody and Tristan returned, cracking up. They’d split up, lingering at one of the many bars as Kody asked detailed questions about those offerings. Colette and I stood waiting for them, finished with the tour.

“Why have I never heard about this kilt story?” Kody asked.

I slanted Tristan a hard look. “Dude.”

“They had some Irish shield or something hanging in the second-floor bar room.” Kody was still chuckling. “And he said—”

I shook my head and waved my hand for him to settle down. “All right. That’s enough.”

“Kilt?” Colette asked, amused. She flicked a finger at my hair. “A blond, blue-eyed guy like you in a kilt?”

“Enough,” I warned, but I kept a smile on my lips.

We all walked outside, and Colette asked about how the wedding planning is going.

“Mercedes is handling most of it,” Kody said.

I raised my brows.

“What? She is. I mean yeah, you’re scouting out this place and all but she’s doing most of it.”

“No. I’m just impressed you finally remembered her name.”

He smirked at me.

“Who’s this?”

“Our future stepsister,” I replied. “In fact, I’ll send you her number. I’m sure she’ll be able to answer more questions you might have.”

She smiled. “Perfect.”

“Are you two needing dates?” Tristan asked. He glanced at his wife.

“Oooh. Yeah. I know a few eligible ladies,” she said with a wink.

Kody puffed his chest out and stood up taller. “Hell, yes, I do.”

Tristan frowned to tease him. “Hmmm. On second thought.”

Kody elbowed him. “Give me their numbers in order of hottest to least hottest.”

I rolled my eyes. *At least he didn’t say hottest to ugliest.*

Colette arched a brow and grimaced at him. “I’ll rescind that offer.”

I laughed.

“What about you?” she asked me.

I shook my head.

“He has a date.” Kaden smirked.

“A ‘date’?” Colette air-quoted it.

“I have a date.” I nodded. “Sort of.”

“You sort of have a date?” Tristan checked.

“A neutral one,” I said.

Colette shook her head and shrugged. “What does that mean?”

Fuck. I had no clue what to call her now.

“He’s got a fake date,” Kody blurted.

I punched him.

“What? It’s true.”

Tristan whistled. “Oh, boy.”

Colette cringed. “A *fake* date?”

“She’s someone I know from work. A work associate. We went to high school together, so she’s not *just* a work associate.”

Kody stepped closer again, rubbing his arm. “But we’ve got a past with her. And, uh, she hates his guts.”

Colette raised her brows while Tristan narrowed his eyes.

“I don’t think she *hates* me,” I told him. *She just doesn’t feel anything*

*more than tolerating me for forty grand.* “She just wanted to get revenge.”

Her brows shot higher and Tristan laughed.

“But she’s civil,” I said, remembering that night I counted off the boxes Brooke checked. “And beautiful.”

Colette smiled.

“She is hot,” Kody confirmed. “Now. She’s hot now.”

I punched him again. “And she’s not likely to cause a scene.”

“Except she wants to exact revenge?” Colette asked.

“No. Not anymore.”

Kody shrugged. “She just thinks our souls are black pits.”

I rubbed my forehead, wishing this could sound better.

The couple glanced at each other, dubious.

“Well, okay,” Colette said carefully.

Tristan patted my back. “Good luck with that.”



BROOKE

Saturday morning, I went through my usual routine and tried not to think about my plans for the day. Because I knew it would be a challenge.

Talking things out and spending the night at Mom's helped me immensely. And taking off Thursday to relax and talk with her more furthered that good feeling. But Friday came, and while I didn't have to deal with Kaden, he was on my mind.

I knew, deep down, that the coldness he showed me in his office would return at this shopping thing. Maybe it would be even worse. I agreed with what Mom said. Perhaps a step back would help us both chill. There was also the chance that his anger would deepen.

He told me that he'd forgiven me. I appreciated that, but I hadn't been ready to be cut out of his life in every other way, like a stranger.

All through Friday, my apprehension took a stronger root. I had to face Kaden and pretend we were together. And then there was my bone-deep fear of this clothing thing. I had a hard enough time trying on clothes in a store, in a fitting room. At some rich people's shopping party? Parading around clothes and jewelry like those wild people in the *Great Gatsby* movie? That wasn't me. It would be so much worse.

"Just get it over with." That was the pep talk I settled on as I got in the car Kaden had hired. He probably assumed I'd bail and hired a ride for me. If I hadn't fucked everything up wanting revenge, maybe he would have picked me up himself.

*Just get it over with*, I reminded myself again as I mentally started a countdown until I could come back home.

Once I arrived, I no longer had any time to freak out. With a slight detour, the driver took too much time getting me there. I was late—a cardinal sin in my book—and that set the stage for nauseating stress.

I just had to go with it—alone.

Kaden was cool with his greeting, and he made sure to stand apart from me. It almost could have made sense. Tailors and designers tended to the men while a horde of more designers corralled us women to the other side. Boys there and girls here. Still, I saw several couples meeting in the middle while they waited their turns.

It was, in short, terrifyingly insane.

I'd never been part of an outrageously wealthy event like this, and I quickly felt overwhelmed, like I didn't belong. Mercedes was my only hope of keeping my cool. She'd sneaked a look at a price tag and mouthed *holy shit*. But she didn't seem like she was floundering. As the maid of honor, she had the bridal party to hang out with.

Expensive clothes were hung everywhere, and I was too nervous to touch them, thinking *if you break it, you buy it*. Boxes of jewelry sat out, sparkling fortunes I didn't approach. Why would I? I was only here to fake it.

Designers hurried from one rack and one person to the next, snapping out orders and recommendations I couldn't keep up with. *Would I be quizzed on this?* Some guests sat back and sipped champagne, but I knew if I tried to relax with alcohol, I'd become a stumbling lightweight.

From the moment I entered the enormous room, I felt like an imposter, a pauper in the palace. It reminded me of a slight resemblance to the story of Cinderella, which deepened the vise grip of anxiety and insecurity that had a chokehold on me.

*Just breathe. And get through it.*

I fought to stand steady and not show how nervous I was as the designers held measuring tapes up to me and inspected me clinically with so many people around.

*Just breathe.*

"Yes, Brooke, this one," the designer said as she thrust a dress at me. I'd avoided actually having to try anything on, but they'd deemed it was my turn. These events didn't allow for lurkers.

"Go on." The designer clapped her hands as I took the dress. She shooed me to go behind a curtain, and with trembling fingers, I changed.

Kaden wasn't treating me like a date at all. As I changed, I thought back



to the gorgeous green dress with the slit, comparing the easy closeness we had then and the huge separation we had now. He wasn't treating me like he had at the other events. The distance between us—figurative and literal—had me aching for him to notice me.

I didn't dare look at my reflection in the mirror. I couldn't risk that mental warfare. I didn't feel like myself and hated that the times I'd spoken up about what *I* liked, since I would be the one wearing the garment to the wedding, I was dismissed and talked over like I didn't have a voice and my opinions didn't matter at all.

Nope. They'd just shoved a dress at me and I was expected to obey.

I stepped toward the curtain but paused.

*How much is this thing anyway?* I slapped my hand over my mouth to hide my gasp.

I was wearing more than a damn mortgage payment. I prayed that I wouldn't sweat in it and ruin it.

*Please. Please.* I opened my eyes, trying my best to shove down my nerves as I walked out. *Please, please notice me. Just for a moment.*

I locked my gaze on Kaden as I entered the mayhem. All eyes fell on me. Everyone looked at me in this shimmery silver dress. I'd never felt so exposed, and I swallowed, hoping I wouldn't trip.

"Oh, my *God*," Mercedes gushed. "You look gorgeous!"

I breathed a little easier, tearing my gaze from Kaden when he glanced at me from the men's side of the room. Indifferent. His face didn't change at all before he faced his mirror again.

"This is the one. Oh, this is totally the one," Mercedes exclaimed as she approached me. "You look incredible."

"I like it," one of the bridesmaids agreed, nodding. She pushed up her boobs. "Makes your tits look spectacular."

Kody looked up from pulling a jacket on. He raised his brows with an appreciative expression. I expected him to catcall with that look. "Damn, Brooke. You look hot enough to—"

"Kody," Mr. Wagner scolded.

"Sweetheart, you look absolutely lovely," Margaux said. Her maternal tone was so sweet and tender, I couldn't help but think of the way my mom complimented me.

I murmured my thanks to them all, but before I returned to the changing area, I glanced back up.

Kaden hadn't said a word. He adjusted his cufflinks and looked at himself in the mirror.

"Thank you," I told the designer, hurrying to get back in my clothes.

*I'm such a fucking fool.* Tears threatened, but I pressed my fingertips to my cheeks and fought them back.

I was the last one of the women, and as the men hung back to chat and joke, I followed the bridal party outside to the back. I accepted a flute of champagne and faked sipping it just so I wouldn't stand out. I didn't know anyone well enough to seek refuge with. Well, Mercedes was nice, but she knew all the bridesmaids and I didn't want to intrude on their conversations.

I wanted to run. I wanted to leave and hide. I didn't belong here, not as a fake non-date or anything else.

After a while, the men joined us on the back patio near the gardens. Cocktails were poured. Appetizers were picked up. Mingling and chatting, they all moved around as one big crowd that I had no way to merge into.

*God. I can't do this.* Kaden didn't approach me once, and I tried to smile and look calmer than I felt. My skin seemed to choke me, so itchy and not right. Even though we were out in the open, I felt claustrophobic.

Anxiety gripped me, and before my fingers shook so badly that I dropped my flute, I set it down. Using both hands, I made sure it was steady on the closest table.

I looked up, finding Kody staring at me from across the table. He said not a word, looking at my clumsy fingers that wouldn't stop trembling.

*Shit.* He'd say something. He'd crack a joke. Or something. I couldn't take it.

I stepped back, almost knocking into a potted plant that probably cost more than my rent. Catching the ceramic container, I made sure it wouldn't fall, then picked up my speed. I hurried inside, frantically trying to remember where a bathroom was.

I just needed to hide. Only for a moment.

"If you're looking for the restroom, it's down there," a bridesmaid said as she pointed down the hall.

I nodded my thanks and ran for it.

Once I found it, which wasn't anywhere in the direction she'd pointed, I closed the door and locked it. Leaning my back against the panel, I drew in short breaths and tried to calm the fuck down.

*Just breathe. Deep breaths.* I swallowed hard and pushed off the door,

feeling too antsy to stay still. I just needed a breather. A chance to regroup. Then I could go out there, tough it out, and hopefully ask Kaden if I could leave. I didn't see why I couldn't. If he didn't want to be near me, then what was the point of any of this?

I paced, trying to shake off the swarm of heavy feelings. Each time I passed the mirror though, it called to me. It taunted me to look and see.

I stopped, leaning my hands on the sink to peer at my reflection.

I stared, zoning out as I tried to calm down with another pep talk.

*I'm more than my looks.*

I winced, wondering why I looked so wan. The orange lights made me look hideous.

*I'm more than my looks.*

I drew in a deep breath.

*I'm more—I'm a self-made woman.*

I tugged at my collar, wishing the edge of the fabric wasn't as frayed.

*I'm a self-made woman.*

I remembered the price tag, feeling like a fraud for even trying it on.

I sniffled, resisting the burn of tears. "Dammit." I blinked quickly.

*I'm worthy.*

*I'm kind.*

*I'm loved.*

A strand of hair slipped out of the once-sleek ponytail I'd spent an hour perfecting this morning.

Knocks sounded on the door, jarring me. I hoped I didn't actually gasp out loud.

I froze, my skin tingling as I panicked.

Another knock.

*Shit.* I swallowed and stared at the door. *There's got to be twenty fucking bathrooms in this mansion. You have to pick this one?* "Please go."

"Brooke?"

I closed my eyes, feeling the sting of tears at his voice. It was Kaden.

I'd yearned for him all day. All those hours, I wished he'd just look at me once. Some small token of support. A little reminder that I wasn't alone and unwanted here.

But no. I'd never get that ever again. I'd ruined anything we could have ever had between us.

He knocked again. "Brooke? Open the door."

“No.”

He knocked harder. “Brooke. Let me in.”

I sniffled and blinked quickly. Fanning my face as I paced back and forth, I drew in a shaky breath. I didn’t want to face him like this. I didn’t want him to see me breaking apart. I’d never felt so vulnerable as I did at this moment. I felt small and mean, and so damn foolish.

*Ugly. Poor. Fat. Cheap. Frumpy.*

I shook my head, trying to shut out the criticism.

*I’m worthy.* But he’d made it clear. I *wasn’t* worth anything to him anymore, not even as a fake date.

I couldn’t face him when he despised me. When he treated me like I was invisible.

“Let me in.”

I gripped the doorknob and turned the lock. If I didn’t let him in, someone would likely hear him. Drawing more attention to myself wouldn’t help anything.

I opened the door and stepped back, sniffing one last time.

He stepped into the bathroom, closing the door behind him.



KADEN

**S**omething is wrong.

As soon as I stepped into the bathroom and she turned away from me, I knew it. She sniffled, and I felt like an ass, wishing she would look up at me.

I suspected something was up when I saw her escaping into the house. All day, it took every last fucking ounce of my willpower to ignore her. If I gave in to this ache of missing her and looked at her during that shopping ordeal, I wouldn't have been able to look away. She pulled me to her, and I wasn't strong enough.

I was weak when it came to her. I didn't know how to do this. I thought it would be simple. Keep it business only. Nothing personal. No feelings. But I was already screwed in that department. My emotions were all jacked up from her. Missing her. Worrying about her. Wanting her. She made my head hurt. My dick ached. And this pain that clawed at my chest, this concern that she might be hurting, destroyed me.

I watched her step away from me as I stayed by the door. "Brooke?"

Fuck. I couldn't have it both ways. After she confessed her plans and apologized, I locked down behind walls, refusing to consider a chance of letting her affect me. I firmly told myself nothing could happen, and she got to me anyway, reminding me of all the ways I wanted her.

And how stupid was that? She showed me that she didn't care about me and only wanted to be here for money, and I *still* couldn't help myself. My eyes were drawn to her. My hands itched to feel those soft, sexy curves and lean muscles. I ached to fill her, to drive into her so deep I didn't know where

she began and I ended.

I wanted her with an unholy, stubborn need that I had to resist.

If I'd gone to her during this event, I would have been tempted to cave. And where would that leave me when I remembered she didn't care about me?

Destroyed. Fucking miserable.

I couldn't stand to look at her in the sexy dress and know she couldn't be mine. But I tortured myself anyway, glancing over when she couldn't see. Committing the image to memory, I saw just how gorgeous she was in that glittering, fitted gown I wished I could rip off.

Fuck me, it had *two* slits.

I suspected she wasn't holding up when I noticed her running into the house. When I saw that she'd last been standing at a table across from Kody, I grew curious. He'd been frowning after her with too much curiosity on his face. And as he faced forward and found me staring at him, he'd smirked.

I worried he'd said something, but I stayed put. It was just another way I wanted her, against my best interests. I longed to be with her, and this was just an extension of that pull.

I had to be strong.

But when minutes passed and she didn't return, I had to look for her.

"Brooke."

She sniffled and lifted her face. The sound cut through me, and I frowned as I looked at her. She wouldn't turn around and face me, but in the full-length mirror in the back of the room, I saw her reflection.

She was crumbling, shoulders low and her head hanging down. She was falling apart with a wretched agony. Her lower lip trembled as she blew out a long breath. Staring at the floor, she shook her head and told me, "I'm fine."

I wouldn't have believed her even if she said it without that wobbly, weak tone.

"You're not."

She looked up then, locking her gaze on my reflection. "I'm fine," she repeated, even weaker as she faced me directly for the first time since she put that dress on earlier. Her beautiful green eyes shone with unshed tears, and she gulped back a sob. "It's okay."

"No, it's not." I may hate myself for wanting her and missing her, but her hiding in a bathroom in tears would never be okay. Ever.

I stepped toward her and she tucked her face to the side, refusing to look

at me this close.

“I’ll be okay. I just needed a minute.” She wiped at her face, delicately dragging her fingers under her eyes.

Fuck, she couldn’t give up. Even as she crumbled, she’d try to be strong and not break.

“I just couldn’t handle changing and having to stand in front of everyone and let them see me when I wasn’t sure if I looked all right. It made me nervous. And I felt ugly. Like the ugly fraud who didn’t belong to begin with.”

I lifted my hand to touch her arm, but I dropped it, thinking twice.

“I felt so ugly and unprepared and alone.”

She lifted her face to me and drew in a shaky breath. At the first tear that fell, my heart ached for her. It was my undoing. I broke down the walls I built up since finding out she wanted to sabotage me.

“Brooke.” I licked my lips.

“I’m sorry I hid. I just needed a minute.”

Another tear fell, and I couldn’t fight it. I didn’t want to resist it anymore. I reached up and cupped her face with both of my hands, tilting her to look at me. I wiped my thumbs over her cheeks, smoothing away her tears. “Please don’t cry.”

My words had the opposite effect. More fell, and I wiped them away. “You’re beautiful.”

She clenched her eyes shut and only opened them when I stepped closer.

“You are beautiful, Brooke. I wish you could see what I do.”

She blinked quickly and her lips trembled. “You don’t. You don’t see me because you won’t even look at me.”

I shook my head. “I have. I can’t help it. I will always be drawn to you.”

She looked down again, and I brushed my thumbs over her cheeks again. “Because I see who you really are. You are beautiful.”

I tipped her head so she would look at me. Those watery eyes broke me.

“You are beautiful because you are so resilient. And courageous.”

She sniffled.

“Kind. Honest. Selfless.” I stepped closer, boring into her with my stare. “And that ass?”

I finally won a smile from her with that joke.

“Please don’t cry,” I repeated.

“I’m sorry.” Her gaze darted away before she frowned at me. “I can’t do



this wedding thing anymore. I can't do it and be here when you hate me."

I growled but tamped it down. "I don't hate you."

"You can't even look at me."

I lowered to be more at her eye level. "I can't keep my eyes off of you."

"Out there," she said. "You can't stand to be near me and it hurts so much. To miss you." Another tear fell. "To want to be so close when you hate me."

"I don't hate you," I repeated. "And I don't want to keep going like this either."

She gazed at me, vulnerable and so hopeful. "You don't?"

Fuck no. I hated every minute apart from her. I loathed how I'd try to push her out and avoid feeling anything for her.

"Can we hit a reset button?"

She licked her lips and frowned in concentration.

"Let's go back to before you told me you were trying to get revenge."

She parted her lips but quickly closed them, hesitant. "Can you do that?"

"Yes." All I wanted was another chance to have her. To hold her and show her again and again how much I treasured her. I would beg her. Even though I was the one who shut her out, I needed her to understand my need for her.

She lifted her hands to smooth them over my forearms, holding me to her. I cradled her face, and she let out a soft sigh. "I'd like that."

Her words hit me in a punch. Relief quickly followed, and I showed it by lowering my face to hers.

She whimpered at the first touch of my lips brushing hers. I didn't devour her. I didn't crash into her like I wanted to, so empty without her radiance brightening my days. I needed her like a drug, but I tempered myself. Keeping my lips tender and light, I tested out if she truly wanted this—wanted me.

The burn of her rejection lingered in the back of my mind, and I hesitated once more.

I backed up, staring down at her as her breaths mingled with mine. Her eyes remained closed until she registered that I'd paused. She opened them, blinking to frown up at me, confused.

"Please." She said it with the same soul-deep desperation that I felt for her. And that was all the answer I needed.

I lowered my mouth to hers once again, sealing my lips over hers. She

whimpered, parting for me, and I wasted no time sliding my tongue in to taste her again. At the first slide of her tongue along mine, I groaned and fell into the addiction of her touching me after what felt like forever. Framing her face, I kept her in place with me so I could smother her with wet, demanding kisses. I wouldn't let go until I showed her how much I needed this, how much I needed her. I feared forever wouldn't be long enough.

My dick hardened at the instant bolt of lust she ignited. My heart swelled, racing as we reconnected, and I tried to grip my sanity before I got carried away.

Her sweet lips rose up so insistently as she kissed me back just as brutally. Every time her tongue dueled with mine, I thrust it into her warm sweet mouth and was rewarded with her pulling closer.

She grunted in frustration and released my arms. Instead, she wrapped her hands around the back of my neck before looping them over my shoulders and holding on tight.

I pulled back and removed my hands from her face to caress her neck, her collarbone, the swells of her heaving breasts, until I dragged my greedy grip over her sides to haul her to me. She let out a hard breath at contact, our bodies flush. I panted as I lowered my gaze to her.

"Please," she repeated, leaning up to press a slow, openmouthed kiss of a plea to my lips. "I've missed you." She lowered her lids, then peered up at me with such a woeful need that I growled. "I want you."

I picked her up in my arms and she wrapped her legs around my waist as I lifted her higher yet. She lowered her face to mine, kissing me again. Still, I refrained from losing myself in her breathy sounds. I held off from surrendering to her sweet breaths and the wicked thrill of having her in my arms again. I retreated as I carried her.

She gazed back at me with such a smoldering intensity, I had to taste her again.

"I need you," she confessed, her lips wet and swollen a breath away from mine.

Admitting it wasn't easy for her, but hearing her say it once and for all, I was a goner.

I rested her back against the door, pinning her in place as I kissed her. I needed her more than I needed air. She nipped at my lips when I backed up.

Her red lips glistened as she pouted.

I lowered my hand to flick the lock on the doorknob. At the sound of the

*click*, I dove in to kiss her as I ground her against the door.



BROOKE

**C** lick.

My breath caught at that sound.

I wanted Kaden so much that I couldn't think straight. I needed him with a brutal ferocity.

*Beautiful. Resilient. Courageous.* He claimed I was all of those, and in his arms, I saw the evidence of what he felt. His huge, hard body trapped me against the door. His ravenous gaze locked me under the heat of seduction.

All I cared, though, was that I could be his again. That he would take me and keep me.

He covered my lips with a punishing kiss that left no room for doubt.

Kaden wanted me. And now that he'd seen to our privacy, I prayed he'd follow through and prove it.

"You missed me?" he asked. His words came out in a throaty rasp of a growl.

I sucked on his lip as he dragged his body against mine. Pinned against the hard surface of the door, I had nowhere to go. I couldn't squirm out of this possessive focus he dished out on me. All I could do was surrender. I let my head drop back to the door, willing to do just that.

"Yes," I replied.

He lowered his mouth, nipping and kissing all along my jaw. Propping me up against the door, he freed his hand to tug down the top of my dress. He didn't stop there, forcing his fingers under my bra and pushing that aside too. My breasts fell out, heavy and sensitive under his gaze.

He licked his lips, gazing at them. His hands scraped over my sides until

he hooked them under my pits. The tips of his fingers grazed my breasts, too light of a touch to withstand. I shivered under the wicked intent of his stare as he lifted me higher against the door.

Crouching, he shifted me up until the beaded peaks of my nipples were right there. Right at his mouth, and he lowered with an agonizing slowness to kiss the top of one.

“You missed this?”

I closed my eyes and let my head thump back to the door again. His lips slid lower until he captured my nipple and sucked it into his mouth.

“Oh fuck.” I grimaced, worried I was too loud. He switched, giving the same worship to my other aching nipple, and I cried out without a thought about who might hear.

Back and forth, he tortured my breasts. His tongue and teeth sucked, licked, and tugged. But it wasn't enough. My pussy ached. My panties felt wet. And I couldn't reach for him, held against the door.

I sobbed at the intensity of his wicked mouth. He lowered me roughly, but he caught me in his arms. Kissing him as soon as I could reach, I tried to crawl up into his hold. I needed more. I needed friction. I needed to be stretched and filled.

He growled against my lips, backing me up to the counter. I didn't break the kiss, too scared to lose a second of touching him. As we hurried across the floor, I reached for his zipper.

I didn't have a chance. He pushed me against the edge of the vanity. My ass hit the ledge so hard that I raised my hands to his chest to grab his shirt before I could fall back on the counter. All without breaking the hot, wet, sloppy but sinful kisses we couldn't get enough of. Air ceased to matter. Only devouring each other did.

He slid his hand into my hair and gripped hard. I arched back as he dominated the kiss, but I moved too far, knocking into a soap dispenser. It clattered to the surface, breaking to send shards of ceramic everywhere.

*Oh, shit.*

He picked me up again, turning me in his arms to get me away from the mess.

Then he stopped, standing before the full-length mirror.

He stood behind me, his arm banded over my stomach as he kept me close. With his chest bracing my back, I leaned against him and met his stare in the mirror.

His eyes were closed as he nuzzled my neck, placing tender kisses along my jaw. I watched, panting in the throes of lust as he cupped my bare breast and massaged it in a firm, possessive hold.

Watching him turned me on. I couldn't look at my face, my hair, my makeup and worry about it. I didn't care that my mascara had run or that my skin was blotchy from crying. All I could look at was his big hand on me, his tan skin such a contrast to my paler tone covered in ink.

He flicked his thumb over my nipple, and I sagged against him, overwhelmed at how hot this was. How sexy he was. How small and vulnerable I felt with him looming over me.

As he sucked at my neck and played with my tit, he dragged my dress lower, shoving it over my hips until I stood there in my panties. I shivered, both from the cool air on my exposed flesh and the wicked heat of his hands and mouth on me. He was fully clothed, and the contrast thrilled me even more.

"You missed this?" he asked, sliding his fingers under my panties to slip them along my slit, stroking back and forth as he parted me open.

"Oh, God." I reached back to thread my fingers in his hair as he dipped his fingers into my entrance.

"You're soaking wet," he growled into my ear.

I shuddered as he twisted his hand, ripping my drenched panties and letting them fall. He hooked his foot around a stool and dragged it close. The feet scraped against the tile floor as he positioned it to the side. His fingers left trails of stickiness as they left my pussy and urged me to lift my thigh.

Shivering as I watched him, I lifted my foot to rest on the stool.

Overwhelmed with the need to come, I whimpered and covered his hand with mine. He parted me, showing how he thrust his finger in so deep.

He shushed me, kissing along my neck, then my shoulder.

"I missed you too, beautiful." He opened his eyes and stared right at me. "This is what I see."

I shuddered, urging his fingers to go faster. I couldn't decide where to look, wanting to see it all. I was so exposed. All for him. I watched his fingers disappear into me. I caught a glance of my breasts hanging out for his hand to grip so tight. I stared at his mouth on my skin.

And his eyes. Those wicked, sinful eyes locked on me.

"I see a sexy, strong woman."

I gasped as he moved his thumb around my clit.

“I see a beautiful, sassy lover who knows what she wants.”

I ground my ass into him and he growled.

“I see a smart, determined workaholic who’s going to come for me.”

I did. I came undone. His words and his touch combined in a sucker punch of too many sensations. I cried out and he turned my head so I could muffle the sound with a kiss.

Trembling and shivering, I rode out the waves of pleasure. I kept his face close, sealing my lips over his and twining my fingers in his hair. He steeled his arm around my waist as he dropped his pants and freed that massive erection. Kaden was already tearing open the condom and had it ready before I came down from my orgasm. It prodded at my ass, and I lifted my leg higher with my foot on the stool to see him enter me in one long, slow drive.

“Oh, fuck.” He uttered it against my lips as he broke the kiss.

“You missed this?” I teased, staring at him in the mirror.

“Yeah. Yeah, I did.”

If I thought watching him get me off with his mouth and hands was hot, this was even hotter.

My breast jiggled as he pumped into me from behind. His fingers dug into my leg as he hoisted it higher to curl over me.

I gasped, both of my hands over my head as I fisted his hair. He dropped his hand to play with my clit as I watched his dick slide in and out of me. It glistened, shiny with my juices.

I sucked in a hard breath as he drove in faster. “I missed you too.”

He grunted as I squeezed, my pussy clenching on him so hard I thought I’d fall over. I lowered my arms unsteadily, caressing his face as his features tightened.

“Fuck.” He muttered other incoherent bursts of words I couldn’t follow, too depleted from the tension releasing in a blissful climax. His dick jerked in me, flooding my pussy, and I held him close.

He hugged me as we caught our breath, and I knew he’d brace me if I fell.

Eventually, he sighed and kissed my shoulder, looking at me in the mirror with less of that frenzied lust.

I licked my lips and slowly smiled.

“What?” A grin took over his face as he rubbed his hand over my hip.

“Your hair.” I reached up, giggling at the reflection of his messed-up hair. He arched his brows, unashamed.



“We’ve got to stop hooking up in semi-public places,” I teased, grinding my ass against him.

He jolted, wincing with that smile still lingering. With a sigh, he pulled out of me and helped me clean up. I had no grounds to be modest, not after that full-frontal everything.

“Do you think anyone noticed we were missing?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Kody?” he guessed.

I held back a cringe. Yeah, he’d notice. He’d noticed me freaking out earlier, too. I wondered if he’d told Kaden and that was why he sought me out.

“But I think we can escape,” he said. Checking that I was tidied up—sans my shredded panties he kept in his pocket—he nodded. “Ready?”

I took his hand and moved toward the door with him.

Before he opened it, he kissed me long and tender. No one stood outside, and the coast seemed clear. Guests milled out front, half of them departing and the others still hanging out on the patio.

“I’m starving,” he admitted. “You work up an appetite in me.”

I glanced at him, smiling. “Then why are we going to the front? The patio had some food.”

He grunted and shrugged. “Not in the mood for little stuff.”

“Me neither,” I teased.

He shot me a dirty look and groaned.

“There you are! Are you heading out as well?”

I flinched and turned with Kaden to the sound of Margaux’s voice.

“Yes,” Kaden answered.

She smiled as she approached, pointing at a stack of boxes on a table near the front door. “I packed up that lovely silver dress for you, Brooke.”

*Shit. I need to pay rent though.* And I’d already dropped off that wardrobe card at Kaden’s office. I’d sneakily slipped it on his desk when he was signing those forms. “Oh, that’s not necessary.”

“I insist. Please.” She took my hand and squeezed it. “My treat. It would be a crime for you not to wear it. You looked so lovely.”

Kaden put his arm around my shoulders and kissed my temple. “You did.”

“I’ve also added some shoes.” She smiled.

That was the only part of the clothes business I’d almost enjoyed. I’d never been self-conscious about my feet.

“Mercedes and I selected some jewelry and accessories for you, too. Again, my treat. I’d love for you to wear it to the wedding. It would mean so much to me.”

“Thank you.” I shook my head, smiling and feeling so damn cherished, tears threatened again. “I’m stunned. Seriously, thank you.”

She squeezed my hand once more, then left us to gather the items.

Kaden went first, propping his butt against the door as he carried the packages.

“This day has been surreal,” I admitted as I unlocked the back door to his SUV.

“It has. So what do you say we relax and come back down to reality? We can get a pizza.”

I shivered at the chilly breeze that reminded me it truly was autumn now.

He’d noticed, of course, although he was busy setting the boxes inside.

“We can warm up in the hot tub and talk.” He shrugged. “Or something.”

I grinned, latching on to the promise of that *or something*.



KADEN

**B**rooke volunteered to order the pizza on the drive back to my house. She browsed for quite a while among the different places and their menus. I didn't care what we ate. I wasn't picky. Food was food and I loved it all. But the longer she kept her gaze glued to her screen, I wondered if it was something other than indecision.

Was she worried about gaining weight? Nitpicking and fussing with comparing calories and some intensive calculation of what she could "afford" to eat? Kody had dated a super health-nut girl before. He'd brought her to the lake house for a Fourth of July weekend, and every single time she was offered food at the potluck the neighbors did with us, everyone within earshot received a lecture about macro nutrients, percentages of vitamins, and ratios of digestive benefits.

*Hell, maybe she was a nutritionist.*

"Find something?" I asked.

She hummed in acknowledgment, glancing at me. "Maybe?"

"Is the connection bad?"

"No. It's fine."

*Then what's taking her so long?* After the combusive way we came together in the bathroom, I was treading carefully. I didn't want to overwhelm her any more than I already had. Sexually, at least.

It would be a long while before I'd forget the look of her crumbling and breaking down when I came in there. She'd been uncomfortable trying on clothes. She'd told me about that dysmorphia. But then I hadn't helped by not supporting her, trying to keep my distance for the sake of protecting myself

from being hurt more.

Had I known she *did* feel something for me, none of it would have spiraled to the state that it had reached. I would've been right there with her, including her throughout the clothing nonsense.

I wondered when she'd realized that she missed me. When she'd come to acknowledge her feelings for me—whatever they actually were.

Friends with benefits?

Was I her boyfriend?

I had every right to ask, but I held back, waiting. I would bask in her presence and take what I could while I could.

More than anything, instead of asking her to label what she felt for me, I wanted to address what had forced her into hiding in that bathroom. I hated to think of her suffering, and if I could help, I would.

I took her hand, and when she smiled and twined her fingers with mine, she sighed such a sweet, happy sound of contentment.

And I grinned.

“Sorry it’s taking me so long,” she admitted.

“Can I help decide?”

“Hey, you said I could pick.” She cleared her throat.

“Do you have specifications? Like the egg whites?”

“Yes and no. I try to watch what I eat but I know better than to be too rigid. It’s too easy to fall off the wagon when I limit my choices too much.”

That didn’t sound *too* restrictive.

“I’m allergic to onions,” she admitted.

“You are?”

“No. I just hate them. So I order with the note that I’m allergic so there is a better chance of them following my request.”

I chuckled.

“And I’m in the mood for meat.”

I glanced at her and thrust my hips up. “Road head?”

She rolled her eyes but smiled. “Oh, quiet. I need to give my vagina a break.”

“I said road head. For me. To satisfy your craving for meat.”

She shifted in her seat. “Fine. But when I get my mouth on you, *I* get too turned on.”

“Fuck.” I shook my head, trying to focus on driving. “You’ll be the death of me.”

“I hope not. Other than *la petite mortems*. Many of them.” She sat up. “Here, this one sounds good. I found a place that sounded good, but then it had tons of bad reviews. I switched to looking for a *good* place to order from and that’s time consuming.”

“Whatever you want,” I said, and I meant it.

Once we finally grabbed the food, we suffered through the remainder of the drive with the potent aromas of garlic and cheese in the SUV.

I parked in the garage and left her boxes in the back. She carried the food in and I followed her inside like a famished beast. I was—for the food and her. Her comments about road head might have been shared flippantly, but it stayed on my mind. Sex, I realized, would always be damn near at the forefront of my mind where she was concerned.

My concerns about her having an eating disorder on top of dysmorphia faded once we set up in my kitchen. She ate pieces of everything we ordered, moaning those sexy sounds every so often, I swore she did it just to drive me crazy.

When she pointed at my face, indicating I had sauce on my face, I leaned in for her to wipe it off. It would have been sexy if she traced her finger over it and licked it off her fingertip. But the way she crawled over to me and licked it straight off the corner of my lips then kissed me hard was even better.

I held her in place, growling when she retreated. “I thought you said your vagina needed a break.”

She giggled. “Not *that* long of a break. I had to suffer enough of a drought since I told you about my stupid revenge plans.”

I tilted my head in the direction of my hot tub. “I’m sure a good soak will help.”

“I always end up soaked when you’re near.” Her flirty smile fell. “But I don’t have a suit.”

I arched my brows. “Don’t think you need one.”

She shook her head. “It’s an outdoor one, isn’t it?”

I understood that someone possibly seeing her body was a nightmare for her. *We’ll work on it, baby*. I tipped my chin at her. “You got a bra.”

“But my panties are in tatters in your pocket.”

I shrugged. “I’ll find you something.”

The only thing I had was shrunken boxers. They hung from her small frame. The bright orange basketball print of my boxers and the white fabric

of her bra didn't match at all, but she'd look sexy no matter what.

I held her hand as we headed out to the hot tub, and I noticed she covered her stomach with her hand.

"I've got a privacy fence up," I pointed out, although she couldn't see it in the dark.

"I know, but... you know." She shrugged.

"I don't," I told her as we stepped in. My skin tingled at the heated swirls of water, and we moved lower to sit together. "Tell me."

"Last week, I talked with my mom about it too. She had a cousin who struggled with dysmorphia, and she said it sounded like what I struggle with."

I nodded. "I thought the same when you first mentioned it."

"It's more common than I think anyone can imagine."

"And there are options for help," I said gently, taking her hand and massaging her palm.

"You help." She peered at me. "I mean, in front of the mirror..."

I chuckled. "Have you considered therapy? Or talking with someone who specializes in it?"

"Yes and no. My health insurance was never the greatest for quality therapists. Rena suggested it before, and I tried." She shook her head. "But it wasn't for me. But now that I've thought about it, maybe I was too stubborn."

"Or you haven't found the right person to talk to."

"Have you tried therapy?"

"Of course." I nodded. "We tried our best after losing Mom, but Kody and I both went to grief counselors."

She laid her head on my shoulder.

"When did it all start?" I asked.

"High school."

I gritted my teeth, feeling like shit. I felt terrible to know she'd suffered back then. And my anger grew hotter than the water we soaked in as I knew Kody was the one who strung her along for shits and giggles.



TWELVE YEARS AGO...

“ARE you sure you don’t want to go?” Dad asked me after dinner.

I shook my head. I wasn’t in the mood to go to prom. A dance sounded like a punishment. Loud music. Too many people in one place. At the last grief counselor appointment, the woman said I shouldn’t become anti-social.

Why the hell couldn’t I? If I wanted space, I should go for it. Boundaries were important, and prom sounded like a total breach of them.

“It’s your senior year.”

I stood from the table, cutting off Dad’s protest. “It’ll be the same as the prom last year. I’ll be fine skipping it.”

He didn’t push, but still, I didn’t want to hear about it anymore. I emptied my scraps and rinsed the plate before I set it in the dishwasher. *Mom would be proud.* She’d taught me and Kody to clean up since we were young. A kitchen, she used to always preach, was not just a woman’s domain.

I sighed, missing her something fierce as I headed to go upstairs. The sound of giggling stopped me in my tracks. Kody was ready to go in a tux and tickling a girl in a pink gown. She curled toward him, trying to stop his fingers on her side.

“Hey, have you seen Dad?” he asked when he spotted me. “I wanna get these pictures over with.”

“He’s in the kitchen,” I said, confused.

“I’m going to check my hair,” our classmate said before she left the room.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Kody tilted his head. “Uh, prom?”

I furrowed my brow. “I thought you were taking that girl from our chemistry class. Brooke.” I knew he was. I saw and overheard him ask from a seat in the back of the room.

He frowned, pensive, then cracked up. “Oh, yeah!” Shaking his head, he smirked at me. “Well, she couldn’t have believed I actually meant it. She had to know it was a joke. Why would I take her when I could bring someone like Tiffany instead?”

The girl walked back in at that moment, beaming at his compliment.

*Shit.* I felt terrible. My shoulders slumped as I headed upstairs to get away from my immature twin. He was such an ass. I remembered the way she lit up when Kody asked her.

*I can’t let him do this to her.*

I didn’t want to go. I wouldn’t. But I couldn’t stand the thought of him standing her up. She didn’t deserve that.



I'd only had my car for a week, but it was long enough for me to feel confident in speeding to school. Dad would be pissed if I got a ticket, but I had to hurry.

Brooke stayed at school late on Fridays. I wondered if it was because she didn't have a ride and her mom worked so much. Maybe she was just nerdier than she seemed and liked the library. Either way, I knew she'd probably be there. I could run in and tell her.

*Dammit.* I didn't see her.

"Come on," Paige said around the corner. "We've got to get ready, Brooke."

"I'm hurrying. I'm hurrying." Brooke grumbled near the next row of bookshelves. "Who assigns a report due over prom weekend?"

I drew in a deep breath and stepped forward. Paige had headed out already, and it was just me and Brooke.

"Oh." She smiled, surprised to see me.

*Or not me.* I flicked my hair back in that annoying way Kody did. "Hey."

She frowned, confused, but then grinned. "What brings you to the library, Kody?"

*Good, she thought I was him.* "I can't take you to prom tonight."

Her expression fell. The tips of her ears turned red and she dropped her gaze to the floor. "Just... just like that?" she asked, her voice trembling.

I watched her withdraw as she looked back up at me posing as my asshole of a twin.

She was humiliated, and my anger grew. He had no right doing this to her. But I couldn't think of anything to say. I was posing as Kody, and he never apologized or offered excuses for why he was such a jerk.

I turned and left. Saying nothing had to be better than continuing this lie.

But I felt marginally better knowing she wouldn't be waiting all night for someone who'd never come.



BROOKE

“Hey,” I said gently.

Kaden blinked, raising his brows as he came back to me.

“Where’d you go?” I asked, smiling as he softened his expression from one of blank musing.

“Just thinking.” He cleared his throat. “About what you said.”

I frowned. *Which part?* He’d looked so upset and bothered by whatever memory or idea had struck him.

“High school.”

*Ugh.* I almost succeeded in holding back a cringe. He’d noticed it though. His hands eased through the water, pulling me onto his lap. I went willingly. I’d always go to him. I doubted I could get tired of being in his arms or having his hands on me. No. I *knew* I wouldn’t. In those few days of missing him, when I’d come to understand the depth of my feelings for him, I’d gone through the worst sensation of withdrawal.

As I settled on top of him in a hot, slick hug, I frowned even more. He wasn’t hard. This wasn’t a frisky playful time. I was so addicted to his big dick that I wanted it nonstop.

I just hated that he was so down. When Kaden was in pain, I hurt right along with him.

I reared back, straddling him but with space between us. “What’s wrong?”

He shook his head.

*His mom.* He had to be missing her something fierce.

“We were such immature idiots in high school,” he admitted.

“Everyone was.”

He furrowed his brow. “You weren’t.”

I shrugged. Okay, I hadn’t caved to peer pressure and picked on anyone for the sake of trying to be cool and fit in. I’d been too busy trying to stay under the radar of the bullies and survive. “I... had moments. Paige and I kind of bickered.”

“My brother and I were jerks. We’d bicker with each other—all siblings do. But to everyone else, we were jerks.”

I nodded, not necessarily in straight-up agreement but to show I was following what he said. It was hard to reconcile the two versions of him. The guy who’d jerked me around for a prom date and this sweet, caring man who said I was the one person he wanted to spend time with.

Back then, he hadn’t wanted to spend time with anyone. After his mom died, he’d closed in on himself.

“You were just distant,” I said, noting that was probably why it hurt so much more at the shopping extravaganza. He was aloof in high school and had practiced it enough to do it as an adult too.

He scoffed. “Dad likes to remind me I was auditioning for emo boy of the year.”

I smiled.

“We were jerks, though, because, in part, of my mom dying,” he admitted. “That’s no excuse, but grief can change you.”

I smoothed my hand over his cheeks, warm from the spray and mist of the hot tub. “Being a teenager changes you, too. All those hormones and adapting to adulthood.”

He took my hand and kissed the palm. “But it’s no excuse.”

I shrugged. “I understand it though.”

He arched his brows. “You do?”

“I thought about it over the years, and I’ve been thinking about it more recently.” I leaned in to give him a soft, quick kiss. “You’re a good man, Kaden. At least I’d like to think so. Good people don’t hurt others for the hell of it. Usually they’ll strike out when they are hurting. And you and your brother were.”

“You were collateral damage. We needed our mother, but she was gone. And yeah, it hurt. It still hurts to know she’s not here.”

He stroked his fingers over the lines of my flowery tats, and I shivered under the caress.

“It was a long time ago, though.”

He glanced up at me and shrugged. “It doesn’t erase the fact that we were jerks.”

“But it’s about time I move on,” I admitted.

It seemed like I hadn’t convinced him yet. I leaned in to kiss him, long, slow, and sweet. His hands spread over my back as he held me to him, letting me take the lead and kiss him how I wanted to. I chose to prolong it, infusing as much compassion into it to prove it wasn’t just sex between us that I’d moved on to. I cared.

When his dick hardened and I felt his erection prodding at me, I grinned against his lips.

He smiled too as he leaned back. “Baby, this mouth is potent.” As he dragged his thumb along my lower lip, he breathed faster. His gaze locked on my mouth and I bit the corner.

I eased back, crawling and floating as I retreated. He frowned at the distance, confused, until I gripped the band of his swimsuit and tugged.

He smiled, lifting his hips to let me remove them as I sank toward the floor of the hot tub.

“What are you doing?”

I went under, stroking his dick that grew harder and longer with every stroke. Under the water, his cock was lubricated, and I lowered my lips to the head.

His knees jerked at the touch, and I spread his legs apart.

Holding my breath the best I could, I covered him. Licking him was harder, and sucking on him was tricky.

I burst up to the surface, drawing in air.

I didn’t get much. He slammed his lips over mine as he dragged me over his chest.

I pushed off of him and sank back down again.

His hand coiled in my wet hair. He didn’t grip it to take over. Instead, he seemed to shift it to the side, further from the jets.

Once more, I rose for air. He stole a shorter kiss from me, not caring at all that he could taste the flavor of his impending release in my mouth.

I dove back under, sucking harder and faster to the point I could tell he was pushing up into me. Gagging underwater would be scary, but I tested myself, taking him all and sucking every hard, throbbing inch of his dick into my mouth.

Just before I needed air, I moved my hand from his balls, where I'd been massaging them, and gripped the root of his shaft. He jerked, and as tangy, salty ropes of his orgasm shot into my throat, I swallowed and moaned. Only once I was sure I'd sucked him dry did I surface.

He groaned as I gasped in air.

"I guess you didn't need to hold your breath for very long since I came so fast," he growled. He sat up and kissed me, picking me up and spinning me in his arms.

"Let's see how wet you are." He lowered me on the wooden decking that the hot tub was sunken in to. His fingers clutched the baggy boxers that had billowed in the water.

"Of course I'm wet," I said as I lay back, resting on my elbows to watch him as he knelt on the seat he'd been sitting in. "We're in a hot tub."

"No." He licked his lips, tugging my naked body toward the lip of the tub. "Your claim about getting turned on when you suck me."

I spread my legs, inviting him in. Cold air chilled me. Goosebumps coated my flesh. But with my legs in the water, the mist filling the air, and his hot smolder as he dragged his fingers up and down my entrance, I was super sensitive and too hot.

He grinned, playing with me with one hand as he reached up to undo my bra. "Soaked."

Then he showed me just how much he liked it. He lowered his face to my pussy and ate me without a break. His tongue licked everywhere, from my back to my front. With just the right pressure to the sweet peak of pain, he sucked my clit in. His fingers stretched and stroked. And those bites? God. I didn't care that there was a privacy fence blocking us back here. The neighbors had to be calling somewhere about a report of a rabid animal screeching.

His stubble burned against my thighs, furthering the sting of pain that heightened all the sensations that took over me.

"Kaden," I moaned, gripping his hair after I lay back all the way.

I kept his face to my pussy, and when I tightened my fingers in his hair, I felt his grin against my thigh as he hissed. "Fuck, baby."

"Please."

He chuckled a sinister, gravelly sound and lowered his head again, sucking my clit to the point I screamed. I was so close. Too close. God, I wasn't close enough.

“Please.” I screwed my eyes tight.

I held his head there and lifted my feet to the edge of the hot tub. Once I found purchase, my soles on the slippery hard rim, I thrust my hips up at his mouth, and he groaned.

I came too soon, crying out and shaking as the ecstasy filled my entire being. Every nerve felt frayed and sizzled. My pussy tensed, and my clit throbbed. The muscles in my vagina felt so swollen from all of the overwhelming sensations. I was ragged, drawing in heaving breaths of air as I came down from the high of yet another soul-crushing orgasm.

He didn’t stop. Stroking and licking, he delayed the final peak, prolonging the pleasure until I felt certain I’d cry.

He lifted his head, his fingers caressing me still.

“Sensitive.”

He chuckled, that filthy, sexy sound of satisfaction. “Oh?” Bending down, he kissed my bald pussy.

I jolted at even that chaste, quick press of his lips. When I squeezed my legs together, almost trapping him there, he laughed and yanked my thighs apart so he could stand.

Looming over me, he raked his gaze over my naked body.

I whined, flapping my forearm over my eyes.

He could look his fill. I didn’t mind him staring at my body on display. But I meant what I said.

After too long of not getting any, I was sensitive to the point I was sore.

“Don’t. Don’t look at me.”

He leaned down, gently pulling my arm off my eyes.

“Baby.” He frowned. “You’re beautiful.”

I slid on my side to reach the water and splashed him. “I said I’m sensitive,” I said around giggles. “I can’t handle you looking at me like you want to eat me for dessert again.”

He grinned, scooping me into his arms. “But I’m addicted.” He kissed me as he carried me away from the hot tub. “You taste so sweet.”

“I never would have figured a ripped guy like you would have a sweet tooth.”

“Only for you,” he said as he brought me inside. “I say we should shower and take this to bed. And by then, I’ll want another snack to tide me over until morning.”

*He can’t be serious.*

I smiled, so damn happy, happier than I'd been in a long time. I'd play along. I draped back in his arms, flinging my arm out to mock a dramatic woe as I covered my brow. "Mercy. I cry mercy!"

He dipped his head to nip at my boob that I'd exposed by flinging my arms out.

I squealed and squirmed to be put down. He laughed and chased after me as I ran to his bedroom.





## KADEN

I woke up the next morning with my arms full of a warm, sleepy, and sated Brooke. We'd finally showered together, and other than tender kisses and sensual touches, we *only* showered. I washed her hair, and she'd kneaded my soapy loofah into my back and shoulder with so much pressure that it felt better than any professional massage I'd ever paid for. Her hands were magic on me. Whether it was her fingers stroking me in delicate traces, wrapped around my cock and pumping me, or cradling my face as she kissed me with a soul-deep need. I'd never tire of her getting her hands on me, and I cherished every time she reached out.

After everything that happened yesterday, though, it seemed we'd temporarily met a quota on explosive sex.

Tired, perhaps more so from the emotionally charged events than the physical, we fell into bed and slept. If the deeply relaxed blankness on her face was any indication, she'd rested as well as I had.

It felt so cliché to think I slept better with her in my arms. But I did. Missing her since her confession had left me restless and tossing and turning.

Now knowing she was on the same page as me—

*Wait.*

I lay there awake, not wanting to bother her yet. But I wondered if we were on the same page now. She'd admitted she wanted me and needed me. With tears, she told me how badly she'd felt after I'd pushed her away and kept things business-only between us.

I'd asked her for a reset. I'd proposed we go back to the way we were before she'd owned up to wanting revenge.

But what did that mean? We weren't business-only, not after the way we'd fucked and flirted. We weren't cold and distanced either.

*Is it just sex?* I didn't want to think it was. Brooke wasn't fling material. She was something more. I felt it when I wanted to show her that I thought she was beautiful—inside and out. I felt it when she held me in the hot tub when I was sad. Something more than frantic fucks was simmering between us, but I was nervous to ask and put it on her to label anything.

The main thing that held me back from asking for more, or to ask her to tell me what she saw in me and wanted from me, was our past. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her I wasn't the one who strung her along. I so badly wanted to spill the truth that Kody played that cruel joke on her, not me.

But Kody was my brother. My twin. I felt like I had to protect him. Brooke may have had a tricky journey to overcoming her past, and it seemed to still impact her today. I didn't know how she would take the news about him though.

How would it work if she knew he was the one who'd hurt her, not me? How was that a solid foundation for starting a relationship? She could want me and enjoy riding my dick, but she'd loathed my brother—who was very much a part of my daily life? It couldn't work. It would be too complicated, and I'd forever be torn between appeasing her and then him, as they constantly remained enemies.

I felt stuck keeping the truth from her. It festered in me like a rotten bomb about to explode and stink up everything. Yet I couldn't figure out a way to explain it all that wouldn't leave her feeling worse than she already still did about it. More than anything, I had to be delicate and tread carefully because I worried that telling her the truth would trigger her to experience more pain.

She woke then, rolling over to cover me with her sluggish, slender body. With an arm and a leg draped over me, she smiled against my chest and nuzzled me.

I had my hands behind my head, but I lowered one to stroke her back.

"You're so warm," she drawled. "This is way better than hot yoga."

"Oh, yeah?"

She sighed, snuggling close. "Rena and I usually go every Sunday morning. Except when I'm hungover or she's on vacation."

"Have you heard from her?"

She nodded, propping her chin on her hand that rested on my chest. Peering at me, she smiled. "Yeah. The standard vacation posts. The tour

group got roped into a Greek wedding somehow. I guess the more the merrier.”

“I can’t believe my dad’s getting married in two weeks.”

“Still unsure about it?” she asked.

I shook my head, playing with a strand of her silky hair. “Nah. As long as he’s happy.”

“What else is there to do? For planning and events and such?”

I sighed, considering it all and worrying that was all she saw me for. Once our fake dates were done, then what? “Just the bachelor and bachelorette parties.”

“That’s right.” She scrunched her face. “Mercedes invited me. But I won’t go. I don’t know anyone in the bridal party.”

“Dad’s having his at the lake house.”

“The same mansion-cabin in that picture in your office?”

I shook my head. “No. Something closer. It’ll just be his friends and a few guys my age. But it’s a really cool place. Perfect for getting away from it all.”

She smiled, and I stroked her cheek. “I’d love it if you came.”

“To a bachelor party?”

“Well, to go there with me.”

*So much for not asking for more.*

“I would like that too. Or anything of a break or a getaway. I’m long overdue. My career is my life, but…” Her finger tickled me in those slow back-and-forth traces she drew on my chest. “Well, work isn’t *all* I can live for. I should use Rena’s burning-the-fancy-candle advice more often.”

“Huh?”

“She was the one who encouraged me to text you for that first drink. She said why wait to do the stuff you avoid or put off.”

“Like not taking a day for granted and living in the present?”

“Yep.”

I lowered my head to kiss her. “Well, tell her thanks.”

She crawled up to kiss me back.

“For getting you to come back into my life.”

She smiled, resuming that tickling trace. “I did that. Sending that acquisition email and not connecting the dots that Wagner meant *you*.”

“A lot has changed these last few weeks.”

She looked up at me. “Would you say for the better?”

I slid my hand over her ass and squeezed. “Definitely for the better.”

Her grin was slow and sexy. “I’m really glad we started working together.”

I schooled myself not to frown. I couldn’t let her see how much that statement hurt. She only saw me as someone to work with. Not anything past it. It was still fake. “Me, too,” I agreed.

“And I hope…”

I stilled, waiting for her to finish what she was going to say.

“I was hoping…”

I grabbed her ass again and rubbed the rounded perfection.

“Stop.” She giggled, squirming against my side. “I can’t think when you’re like that.”

“Still sore?” I teased.

“Not really. But I was hoping—” She drew in a deep breath.

I brushed her hair out of her face to see her better. “What?”

“I was hoping you might want to come to my mother’s for dinner tonight.” She grinned quickly, and the nervousness on her face charmed me.

I raised my brows. “Tonight?”

She nodded.

I didn’t want to get my hopes up. “That isn’t something a fake date does.”

Her tongue peeked out and traced the seam of her lips. “Maybe the whole fake-date thing has run its course.”

*Thank fuck.*

“Don’t you think?”

I grabbed her ass again, pulling her thigh higher over me. “Yeah.”

She looked down at her finger tracing lines over my chest. “Then maybe we can consider this morning our first date?”

“Sounds good, baby.” I pulled her up to cover me. Her legs draped over either side of mine, and her breasts pushed up against my chest.

“Yeah?” She smoothed her fingertips over my pec. “You’re okay with making this official?”

I kissed her, leaving her lips with a loud smack. “I am.”

“So much that you’d put it right here for everyone to see?” She grinned, shifting into a playful tone as she traced her finger over my heart. “A big ol’ tattoo.” She drew a heart. “With my name in it.”

I chuckled, capturing her hand and kissing her fingertips. “You’re really excited to try to talk me into getting ink, aren’t you?”

“Maybe.” She kissed me. “Sort of.”

I dragged my hand down her back until I rested it on her ass again.

“You are such an ass man.”

I growled, squeezing both cheeks. “How about just *your* man?”

“So you’ll get it then. Classic sailor’s heart with cupid’s arrow. A curly, fancy *B*.”

“Maybe I’ll get a balloon dog puppet somewhere instead,” I teased.

“Funny.” She kissed me and nipped my lower lip. “But really, haven’t you ever thought about getting a tattoo? Something to make you different from your brother.”

I froze for a second. “I *am* different from Kody.”

“I know that.” She rolled her eyes. “But I can just imagine it. When you two were toddlers running around with crazy boy energy and driving your parents insane. If your mom ever got you matching clothes.”

“Every Christmas.” I chuckled at the memory. “This family portrait thing.”

And Kody and I had loved tricking people back then. Mom and Dad always knew who was who, of course. The appeal died out for me in second grade. I’d forgotten to turn in a project, too busy playing video games. When the teacher handed out the marked papers, I lied and said I was Kody, hoping I could cross out his name to show our parents he’d slacked and I hadn’t. The idiot got a D on it, so I was screwed anyway. My eight-year-old mind understood the implications of tricking people on our identities then, and I never tried to do it again.

Until I pretended to be Kody and tell Brooke she didn’t have a date to prom after all. To spare her from being stood up.

“Are you afraid of needles?” she asked, jarring me out of the memory.

“Nah.” I sighed, grateful to leave the past where it belonged.

*I need to tell her.*

I took the easy out, pulling her thighs up higher on me. She peppered my face with quick, soft kisses, and I rubbed my hands over her delectable ass.

“Maybe one of these days,” I told her.

“I’ll hold you to that,” she said.

“Right now, I’d rather you hold on to me.” I gripped her hips and rubbed her over my dick as it started to harden.

She bit her lip then lowered to kiss me. “Me too.”



BROOKE

I'd invited Kaden to dinner at my mother's house on impulse. Talking about weddings had led me to think about what else would be left for Kaden to invite me to for his dad's.

He'd already mentioned the rehearsal dinner being a no-go because his dad didn't want the fuss so close to the wedding. Mr. Wagner was lax with this wedding, and I thought it was kind of sweet. He was secure in his relationship with Margaux and he didn't need to fret about the little stuff a first-time bride or groom might.

Secure in his relationship unlike I was with Kaden. If we *had* a relationship.

He'd asked for a reset. We sure as hell reset the sex. But I'd come to feel more for him. When it seemed like he was sticking with the plan of the fake date, I worried I'd misread him.

Hope was restored when he mentioned wanting to get away with me.

*For sex, though? Or something more?*

Asking him to my mom's for dinner was the best I could think of. I didn't want to ask him over to my place because it was so small. I didn't want to go out in public, like getting drinks or a movie. I wanted to be selfish with him for a while.

My plan didn't backfire, though. He seemed uncertain at first, wanting a clarification of if we were still faking anything. It stung that he'd think we were. I'd laid myself bare for him—several times—so, I felt silly in assuming we'd evolved beyond “fake.” I'd stopped pretending with him days ago.

After he dropped me off at home, he agreed to pick me up and take me to



my mom's later that evening. We'd enjoyed a lazy day of the hot tub and sex, so by the time I walked inside my apartment, I had to scramble to prepare.

First, I called Mom to tell her that I was bringing things to make dinner at her house.

*Thank God she didn't have plans.* She didn't seem shocked, only confused.

Then I hurried up and made an order to be delivered there. It seemed easier than picking up groceries here and toting them over. I oddly fantasized about what it would be like to go to a store and meander with Kaden. Something simple and domestic. It shouldn't have sounded like an adventure to look forward to one day, but even that mundane errand would be a new experience to share with him.

*I've lost my mind.* I *hated* grocery shopping, but here he was, changing my attitude about it.

I glanced at the clock and chewed on my lip, debating what I should hurry and do next. It seemed like it had been so long since I'd been home, toiling away with my routine. I'd need to start bringing a bag with me if I would be staying at Kaden's so often.

"Argh." I covered my face with my hand. "First grocery shopping together. Now I'm daydreaming about moving in?" I shook my head. "Slow your roll, girl."

*Okay. Now what?* I didn't have time to go to the gym, but the idea of a spin class sounded unappealing anyway. I wasn't so sore I was walking around like I needed to slip ice packs in my panties, but I wasn't eager to have to touch that narrow seat.

"Oh." That reminded me. I grabbed my phone and put in a notification for another wax. I grinned, blushing even in the privacy of my apartment. Rena was right. It did make a difference. *But I'm not going to Brazil.*

In the end, I killed time by catching up on laundry and doing some yoga poses in my living room between loads. While I was at it, I reached into my closet to grab the sweatshirts and fall clothes I'd stored from last year. Sweater weather would be here soon, if it wasn't already, and I may as well be ready.

In the first bag, I found the perfect thing to wear tonight. I grinned, eagerly anticipating his reaction.

By the time I finished cleaning up and tidying my place, I was waiting for Kaden to pick me up.

“Long time, no see,” he drawled. Dressed down in jeans and a button-down, he looked good enough to drag him inside for an appetizer before going to my mom’s house.

I slid my hand down his shirt, reveling in the dips and peaks of his muscles. This big strong man was all mine.

He caught my wrist and turned to cage me against the side of his SUV. I leaned my back against the surface. My heart raced in excitement, and I tried not to grin too wide.

Narrowing his eyes, he lowered his head toward mine.

*Why? Why is it so damn sexy when they put their arm up like that and lean in?*

“You wore that to tease me, didn’t you?”

“What?” I blinked, feigning innocence as I dragged my fingers over the edge of my shirt. I’d left the top three buttons undone.

*“Plaid?”*

I grinned as he growled and opened the passenger door. He hoisted me up into the seat, following me in to kiss me hard. I panted when he backed up an inch.

“I can’t wait to rip that thing off you later,” he growled.

*Oooh.* He shut the door on that promise and I smiled harder before he got in.

The drive to my mom’s was flirty but casual. I loved to play with his fingers, holding them and tracing over his knuckles. We chatted a little bit about work, but mostly we joked about what kind of tattoo he could get. The more ridiculous, the better.

“What is the big deal about plaid?” I asked, goading him to tell me. “The design? The colors? A life-long repressed fear of golf pants from the seventies? What?”

“It’s more to do with kilts,” he mumbled.

I giggled, shaking my head. “Yeah, that makes me *more* curious.”

He shot me a close-lipped glare, pretending to be mad.

“Please?”

He shrugged. “Maybe one day.”

*Oh, challenge accepted.*

“Anyway. You know what I was thinking about when I came to pick you up?”

I’d let him change the subject. “What?”

“Getting away. Would you really be able to?”

“Considering I never take time off, yeah.” I shrugged.

“You took that day off to hang out with your mom.”

I whipped my head to face his profile. “How did you know about that?”

He frowned for a moment. I’d taken that day off when we weren’t speaking much.

“Todd told me.”

I arched a brow. “I didn’t tell him I was with my mom.”

He sighed. “Okay. I called Sandra and asked where you were.”

A silly spike of a thrill went through me. “But that was when you hated me and wanted to keep it business-only.”

He took my hand. “I never hated you. I was just hurt. *Was,*” he emphasized. “When I saw that out-of-office reply in an email, I got worried that you were wounded or that something bad had happened.”

*Something bad had happened. I’d almost ruined it all with you.*

I considered the possibility that maybe he was telling the truth. Maybe he hadn’t hated me. How could he if he’d still wanted to make sure I wasn’t hurt?

“I called Sandra and she more or less told me.”

At the next red light, I leaned over to kiss him hard. Only once I got a low growl from him did I back up.

“That’s not fair,” he complained lightly, adjusting his pants. “On the way to your mom’s?”

I giggled.

“What was that for, anyway?” he asked as he drove once more.

“Just because you’re you.”

Once we arrived, we behaved. Mom and I set to preparing the meal, and Kaden kept us entertained, chatting about anything and everything. The mood was light and happy and relaxed.

Mom seemed all too happy to have him there, and I was giddy that she approved of him despite what I’d told her, that he’d pranked me with an invite to prom.

“This sure is a nice change of pace,” she told me after he’d excused himself to go to the bathroom.

“It is,” I agreed.

She sighed. “To know my baby girl has found a man who worships the ground she walks on. I’m so happy for you. I told you it would all turn out

okay, didn't I?"

I nodded, but something still held me back from assuming all was well.

"Talking it out helped," she guessed.

"It did." *And the sex didn't hurt either.*

He returned, joking about something again, and we carried on with getting the meal ready as a group.

Kaden wasn't shy about helping. I already knew he was a generous and considerate man. He didn't sit and act bored. He participated. Chopping veggies for the salad, rinsing vegetables, setting the table, and cleaning up after. He was no idle guest, and each time he stepped up in such a natural way, I realized it wasn't for show. This was no grand scheme to impress and flatter me. He'd been raised that way, likely from an early age. *Probably his mom's influence.*

It should have been surprising to see him so involved and competent doing the simple things in the kitchen. For as wealthy as he and his family were, they could have been living a life of luxury. Hired drivers were an exception, but living in the city but still needing to travel to the area we'd grown up, near Mom's house and his father's sprawling estate further out, paying someone else for transportation was a common way of life, not a sign of the elite living large.

Still, I didn't get the sense Kaden—even Kody—*acted* like a pompous rich person someone with their wealth might. Mr. Wagner liked to dote on his sons. Margaux, too, had been overly generous by treating me with that silver dress and the items that went with it. But none of them exuded a barrier for me to fit in.

My only issue was in keeping that forty thousand. It didn't feel right.

Kaden was more down to earth than someone of his status might be, and it only charmed me even more.

"I insist," he said as he took the plates to the kitchen to wash them. He'd volunteered to handle it all. "You catch up with your mom." He pecked a chaste kiss on my cheek, and I sat back and sighed next to Mom on the couch.

"Is he groveling?" she asked.

I burst out laughing. "What?"

"Is he? For doing what he did to you with prom night?"

I shook my head. "I've moved on past all that. It's buried."

"Well, he's just so affectionate. And sweet."

I smiled, glancing at him putting soap in the sink. We didn't even have the appliance to do it for him. He'd stubbornly signed up to *hand* wash them. Enchiladas weren't that messy in and of themselves, but burned cheese took some elbow grease to clear off.

"He is," I agreed.

"You've hit jackpot, honey," Mom said. "He's such a gentleman."

"I know." *But I'd feel better about where we're headed if I didn't have this sinking suspicion some things were still left unsaid.*

Mom leaned in and elbowed my side to whisper. "What is it that you like so much about him?"

It should have been a trick question that required lots of time to consider.

As I watched him scrub a dish. I thought back through the past weeks. I let out a dreamy sigh. "I like how I feel when he looks at me."

She patted my knee.

"When he looks at me, it's like I'm the whole world. His greatest gift."

Kaden gazed at me like that because he wanted to, not in default as a relative.

And that wasn't something I could say about anyone else.



KADEN

The last time I went to the lake house, I'd gone on an SOS mission. Kody had taken a girl there, but she was mad when she realized he was only interested in sex. Apparently she was one of the rarities who *didn't* want a one-and-done and he'd miscalculated. She ended up leading him on and locking him outside the house naked. Then left.

It was my sorry ass who drove out there in the middle of the night to let him in.

*Idiot.* He'd never learn.

But it had been funny because it poured that night.

This time, heading there for Dad's bachelor party, I tried to stay positive. I'd rather be with Brooke, and I didn't care if that meant I was pussy-whipped already. What we had was new, and with that newness, she was all I wanted.

Since she'd talked about her friend going on a trip, the idea of getting away with her sounded amazing. Right now, it would be impossible. Dad was marrying Margaux, and after the ceremony, they'd be honeymooning in the Maldives. Kody and I would have to run the company. We could, without a hitch, but it would require more of my attention to be on work, not Brooke or planning a trip anywhere.

*Maybe once they're back?*

I fell into daydreams on the drive to the lake house, thinking about where we could go and what we could do. It would be perfect, not only because she was perfect for me but also because we were so similar. She was as married to her work as I was to mine, and I imagined we'd both struggle with letting

go and knowing it was okay to put something else first for a change.

I had a hunch I'd already put Brooke before anything else, such as this bachelor party. While I wanted Dad to be happy, I knew he wanted the same for me—and she completed me in a way I'd never felt with a woman before.

*It's one weekend. Get over it.*

I'd see her soon enough, and it wasn't like I hadn't gotten my fill of her—or filled her pussy—before I drove out of the city.

At the lake house, I would do my best to enjoy myself in her absence. I arrived late, having delayed giving Brooke one last kiss goodbye. Most of the men hanging around were Dad's friends. I knew them all, and some were acquaintances I dealt with through work. I had grown up knowing these men, and I preferred that. The anti-social phase I went through as a teenager wasn't something I planned to repeat any time soon, but I liked surrounding myself with people I trusted and had vetted. It was simply easier.

Kody was there, as well as a couple of friends and distant cousins. It was a good crowd, and we had plenty of vices to consider.

Fine liquor, fishing, playing pool, and generally horsing around. Dad had even planned for a chef to offer decent food to soak up the copious alcohol we drank.

“When do the strippers come?” Kody asked.

Dad shot him a look. “They're not.” He rolled his eyes at my uncle, who laughed.

“Then it's not a real bachelor party.”

Dad shook his head. “I'm not even a real bachelor. I'm a widower. And I don't need strippers here.”

“Neither do you,” my uncle teased Kody.

“The hell I don't!” Kody retorted, laughing.

Brooke had asked me if I thought there would be strippers. I told her there wouldn't be, assuaging what I assumed was a flare of jealousy. And when I asked if she'd strip for me instead, she had. Or she'd tried to. I couldn't always be that patient. As soon as she was topless, I jumped on her.

Friday night had passed well, but spending all day away from Brooke wasn't fun. At first, I thought maybe a little space would help. Absence to make the heart fonder and all that crap. It didn't. I couldn't stop thinking about her, and it wasn't helped when the men who'd met her at the engagement party asked about her too, reminding me of her even more.

I couldn't believe I had ever worried that she could be forgettable or



overlooked. It was a different scenario in high school, I knew that. But as an adult? She carried such a bright energy it was impossible for someone to overlook her.

At the end of Saturday, though, I watched Kody and got hooked on a certain thought. I tried to stay away from him when he was rowdy, and he'd been goofing around with a couple of friends most of the time. Still, hearing his voice and cracking crude jokes, I struggled to not think about the predicament he'd put me in with Brooke.

I couldn't go on hiding the truth about that prom date. It ate at me, and the only thing holding me back from explaining was not wanting to ruin things even more with the jerk who'd shared a womb with me.

Kody sat out there on the dock, drinking beer and halfheartedly fishing. It was too late to catch anything, well past dusk. The poles were just props, I assumed. Everyone was on their way to getting drunk, but I tried to limit myself, not wanting a hangover for the whiskey distillery scheduled for tomorrow. It had been a long time since I'd gone to sample drinks, and I was looking forward to it. Something different to do.

It was almost too warm to be out here. I remembered how cold the water was when we'd gone out on the boat earlier. This close to fall, the body of water got cold enough at night to hold the chill through the sunshine. Now, though, it felt balmy. No breeze lifted off the lake, and the bugs were coming out no matter how many candles we burned. I felt uncomfortable, but it probably wasn't just the environment. I preferred not to engage him when I knew his hotheadedness would likely come to full force. Confrontations sucked at any time, but facing off with someone known to lose their cool and not pull any punches was worse.

When conversation hit a lull and he sat there alone, I approached him.

"Hey, Kody," I said when it was just me and him at the end.

"What's up?" he asked, tipped back in his fold-out chair.

"I've been thinking."

"Oh, great. Hear that, everyone? The 'good' twin," he air quoted with his bottle between his fingers, "has another mighty opinion about something."

*Yeah. This was going to go over well.*

It might have made more sense to wait until he wasn't drunk or buzzed. He likely would be all weekend, and the office wasn't an ideal place to initiate this conversation either.

*Just say it.* There was never a better time to deal with him. He was

consistently a jerk, even to me.

“I’d like you to apologize to Brooke the next time you see her.”

He scoffed. “What the hell for? I already did, remember?”

He had. He’d taken me by surprise that he did say he was sorry for the shit he said at the cake tasting. It was the one thing that gave me a twinge of hope that he wasn’t truly that horrible of a person, that he could see his faults and make up for it.

I shook my head. “About prom.”

His jaw dropped.

“I think it would go a long way, and I don’t like lying to her about who really dropped her on prom night.”

“Prom?” He rolled his eyes and tipped his beer back, draining it. “Seriously? This again? It’s been over a decade!”

That didn’t matter. Those scars ran that deep.

“How is she still hung up on this?” He stood, tossing his empty bottle to the bucket where we were collecting them for recycling.

Brooke claimed she *wasn’t* hung up on it, but I could tell it lingered in her mind. It likely always would.

“It’s about doing the right thing.”

He sneered at me. “You’re such a self-righteous prick, you know that?”

I ground my molars together, trying to hold on to my temper.

“You actually give a shit about something from over ten fucking years ago?”

I glared at his indignant tone, like I was being ridiculous. “It doesn’t matter how long ago it was. I care.”

He grunted. “Yeah. I know you care about her or whatever. But this is stupid. It was in the past. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“It does matter!”

He got in my face. “Not to me!”

I shoved him back as my anger grew. “It was your fault. Your idea. I shouldn’t have to own up to it on your behalf and explain.”

He smirked. “Then fucking don’t. Let it go.”

“You should own up for it!”

One of our uncles shouted from the deck. “Hey. Easy, boys.”

Neither of us cared. I wasn’t in any mood to back down right now. Kody never was. So, we were shouting. It wouldn’t be anything new. Maybe if I yelled even louder, I’d get through Kody’s thick fucking skull.

“I don’t have to own up to anything.” Kody lifted his chin, daring me to argue. “Especially not some stupid high school shit.”

“It wasn’t some stupid shit.”

He shoved at me, and I snapped. I couldn’t help this protective surge that took over me. I hated to think of Brooke being hurt. The way he blatantly disrespected her now was the last straw.

He scowled, righting his shirt from being ruffled from my push back. “I don’t care.”

“Boys!” another uncle hollered from closer to the house. “Break it up!”

“I’m done apologizing to her,” Kody swore. “Because I don’t care.”

I pushed him hard. When he stumbled and fell into the lake, I was breathing hard from the adrenaline. I tugged my shirt back in place from being yanked around in our argument.

He surfaced, spitting out water and shaking his head to fling a spray from his hair. “You asshole.”

I pointed down at him. “*You* are the asshole. Maybe this will cool your ego down.”

I stormed up the dock and hurried for the house, ignoring each of my dad’s yells. He didn’t deserve to have his party ruined, but I would let the guilt creep up on me later.

“Help him up,” someone called from behind me. “He’s probably too mad to even see that damn ladder.”

“Damn, that water’s gotta be cold now.”

“Hey, what happened out there?”

I tuned them all out. I ignored the way Kody snarled at those who’d watched him reach the dock’s rope ladder.

*The hell with him.*

“Kaden!” Dad yelled. “What’s going on?”

The screen door to the house *thwacked* as I hurried through to the kitchen. Pausing only long enough to open the fridge, I grabbed a water bottle on the way to my room. Then I slammed and locked the door. If anyone came to bother me, they could fuck off. I was in no mood to talk to any of them, least of all my brother. I planned to sober up and leave as soon as I could.

*Self-righteous prick?* I scowled, setting my phone on the nightstand.

It wasn’t the first time he’d called me that. Many names had been slung my way all my life. It wasn’t fair that I had to get used to the abuse. And that particular jab burned.

Because I was trying to do the right thing. Because I did want to make sure amends were made, even if I hadn't done anything wrong in the first place.

I couldn't stay there. There was no fucking way I was facing him until he learned some damn respect.

Kody and I swore to never let a girl come between us.

I flopped on the bed and glared at the ceiling.

*So much for that.*



BROOKE

Going to hot yoga by myself wasn't the same without Rena. I hadn't been counting down the time until she returned, but I knew it was soon. Not soon enough, though. I saw each of her posts because I set my notifications to alert me, and it looked like she was having a great time.

I went to class because Kaden wasn't home. It would have been easy to feel like the one who was left out. All alone and stuck at home while my best friend and boyfriend were out somewhere fun.

*Boyfriend.* I grinned as I switched poses, enjoying the secret thrill I had at that very word. Sure, I'd had a couple before, but they were fleeting and short term, so limited in duration that they felt like flings, not previous significant others.

Kaden Wagner was my boyfriend. And I didn't care who saw me smiling like a damn fool here. I glanced up to look at my grin in the mirror.

"No, no. Concentrate. You need to elongate your back, like so," the instructor said, correcting me.

I rolled my eyes as I dutifully dropped my head and lowered my gaze to the mat. This wasn't my first class here. I knew how this went. Go figure the time I felt confident in my skin—my sweaty, red-faced, oh-my-God-it's-hot-in-here skin—someone would tell me not to smile and look away. It didn't matter. I knew what I saw. A woman falling in love.

I tilted, hurrying to correct my stance before I fell.

Fell to the mat, that was.

Not falling in love.

Nope. This thing with Kaden was just fake.

*It's not fake.* Which implied it was the opposite. It was real, but it was also really complicated. My feelings were aiming in that direction, but I couldn't shake the suspicion something was wrong or might go wrong. I supposed that could happen to anyone at any time. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I picked up on little things when I was with Kaden. When he might go still or hesitate to say something. I wasn't usually prone to paranoia, and the funky feeling held me back from diving all the way in to that risky L-word.

With ten minutes to go, my phone rang. I'd left it on the shelf off to the side, not in my locker, and I widened my eyes at the FaceTime trill that cut through the quiet of the yoga studio.

*Shit.*

The instructor glared at me.

I lowered my leg and hurried over to answer. "Hey."

"Good afternoon, my fellow fair lady!" Rena practically shouted it like a circus carny.

Clenching my teeth, I winced. "Yeah, hey." She probably didn't realize what time it was here. Or forgot.

"You interrupt class when she's here and you still manage to do the same on the phone." The instructor crossed her arms.

I scowled at her. "Oh, shut it."

"Yeah. Shut up," another person said. "You act like it's some holy grounds in here if we make a peep."

"I miss the other lady," another student said.

"Hey, Rena!" the first one shouted, smiling. "How's the trip?"

I shook my head and grabbed my water bottle and mat to hurry out of there. I headed toward the locker room, sick of that instructor.

"Hey, sorry," she said.

"No. No worries. But you know, time differences and all." I grinned.

"We need to find a new yoga place," she said. "As soon as I get back, we'll look."

"Never mind that woman. How's it going?" I smiled as she showed me the beach. It was raining, but still. A beach!

"Hey. I'll call you back in like ten minutes. Go shower real quick and I'll find somewhere dry to call again." She winced. "Sorry!"

We hung up, and I sped through a shower to be dry and dressed in time for her call. I left the studio and strolled down the sidewalk. She called

fourteen minutes later. Close enough for her.

“Where are you?” I asked, peering at the dark interior. “A museum?”

She frowned. “A library, I think.” She glanced at a paper, frowning. “I don’t know. All these places kind of blend. It’s on my list. Oh, Brooke. It’s so authentic here! Everything is so old.”

“Ancient?” I asked.

“That too.” She beamed, setting her phone on a table and adjusting so she stayed in the screen. “It’s been a blast. Other than the rain, but can you believe it? It has only rained once! Imagine that luck.”

“That is good luck.”

She frowned as she looked at someone out of the screen. “Uh. English. I don’t understand.” She shrugged and shook her head. “English.” She pointed at herself. “Me hablo English. Shit, no, that’s Spanish. We’re in Greece. Um.”

“You can’t use your phones in here in the library,” someone said in a quick, snappy statement in the background. A hand showed on the screen, pointing to the right. “Over there. In that room.”

“Ah. Okay. Merci. Gracias. Um. Thanks.” Rena shot me a *whoops* face and moved. “Anyway, it has been so much fun. I can’t believe I’m on the last stretch of it.”

I grinned as she settled into some kind of study room.

“I hope the reception holds here.”

“All clear from me.”

“It’s been wonderful. I’ve seen so many things.” She pointed. “I see you liking every single one of my pictures. And I’ve met incredible friends. I’m so happy I booked this trip. No romance.” She shrugged. “But hey, there’s more to life than dudes. Right?”

I smiled and then squinted one eye. “I suppose.”

She gasped and slammed her hand on the table. “You got yourself that big beautiful dick, didn’t you?” She immediately winced, looking off the screen. “Sorry. I’m so sorry, Father.” Her end went off balance as she got up and moved to another study room cubicle. “Whoopsie.”

I was too busy cracking up to reply.

“You did, didn’t you?” she asked again.

“Yeah, but you know, there’s a *man* connected to the big and beautiful,” I looked around for a PG pedestrian, “dick.”

She crossed her arms. “And is the accessory to that BBD behaving and



treating you right?”

“He is.” I shot her a mock stern look. “His name is Kaden. And he’s not an accessory.”

Rena grinned. “Well, tell me!”

“We hooked up.”

She frowned and tapped the screen. “You there? Did you freeze?”

“I’m here.”

She squinted at the screen. “That’s all I get? I just spoke of the phallus in front of a priestly man for one little line of details. I’m going to hell already, now tell me!”

After I stopped laughing, I cleared my throat. “It’s a lot to tell.”

“Give me the TLDR.”

“Okay, uh, I told him about the revenge plan that I couldn’t go through with. Stupid of me, really.”

She winced and nodded. “In hindsight, yeah.”

“Then he said he forgave me. Thanks for the heads-up. Let’s keep it business-only.”

“Wow. He really couldn’t just find a date?”

I shrugged. “I impressed his fam. So then an eternity of feeling like a guilty sack of shit about it. He’s aloof. And I realize I like him.”

“Of course.” She nodded sagely. “After the fact, of course.”

“Then I went to some shopping party thing at his dad’s estate.”

“Hey, I think I saw that posted on TikTok.”

I opened my eyes wide. “Um. Great.” *Shit. I didn’t see anyone with a phone recording.*

“Like the designers were showing the racks of clothes.” She cringed. “That must have been hell for you.”

I nodded. “Hellish hell. I tried to hide and sort of broke down. Then he came and found me.”

She rubbed her hands together and cackled. “Ooooh. My girl got naughty, didn’t she?”

“He asked for a reset too before I told him about the revenge plan. Then, you know.”

*God, that mirror.*

“Okay. I asked for the TLDR.” She nodded. “I’ll subscribe to your OnlyFans later. Then what?”

“More of the same. And then I invited him to my mom’s for dinner. We

agreed we're dating for real. And tada!"

She beamed. "And they lived happily ever after."

I raised my brows. "I hope!" *I think.*

"I am so damn happy for you, girl." She clapped. "Over-the-moon happy. But we'll catch up when I'm back, okay?"

I agreed and wished her a safe flight home. By the time I hung up, I was at my building. I didn't put my phone away, though. As I closed out the FaceTime screen, I saw my missed call log.

I frowned. Three missed calls from Kaden?

I dialed him back right away, and he answered after one ring.

"Hey! How's the weekend going?"

"Terrible."

I slowed my step on the stairs. I'd kind of been miserable missing him, but it was thrilling too. To know my feelings remained as strong or stronger. And when he came back, it would be a hot, torrid reunion.

*Will we still have this excitement when it's not so new?* I hoped so.

With the way he said that, it sounded like he was *really* unhappy.

"What happened? Did the whiskey distillery tour not pan out?" He'd been looking forward to it. "Shouldn't you be there by now?"

"No." Wind rushed in the background, like he was driving. "Yes. Uh, things kind of got out of hand."

I winced. "Kody brought strippers, didn't he?" I suspected he might pull a stunt like that when Kaden told me that his dad didn't want that traditional element of his bachelor party.

"No." He grunted something that sounded like a dark laugh. "I left."

I arched my brows, reaching my door. "Whoa."

"I'm almost home now."

I cleared my throat, worried something had really gone wrong. "Do you want me to come over?"

"Yes."

No hesitation. No pause. Straight to the affirmative. He said it so certainly and quickly that I wondered if I'd beaten him to the punch. If he'd called to ask me just that.

"Do you need anything?"

"Just you."

Awww. I mentally swooned. "I meant do you need me to bring anything?"

"No. How quickly can you come over? You just left yoga, right?"

I swallowed and dropped my bag to my floor as I turned to close my door. “Yeah. I did.”

*Let’s see. Uh, change, pack a little bag just in case, and get a ride. “Twenty minutes.”*

“Perfect. I’ll see you there.”

After we hung up, I got ready, worried about what could have happened. I knew he was upset about not being able to spend time with me, but he had sounded a little excited about going to that lake house. Lots of manly, outdoorsy crap to do. Honestly, he almost sounded like an excited little boy being granted permission to go play in the woods with his friends.

I stashed my things in a bag. It was presumptive of me to assume I’d stay. The man might be mad, not sad or hurt. In that case, maybe he wouldn’t want my company for that long.

“Who knows?” I muttered to myself as I locked my door again.

I hoped that I could cheer him up and help him through whatever it was.

“Wait a sec.” I hurried back up the stairs I’d already gone down and went back to my door. I passed the out-of-order elevators and checked my hair as I went by.

Habits were hard to break, but even still, I barely registered if my ponytail was messy now.

I let myself back in and headed toward my closet. The bag from that shop was tucked way in the back of my shelving unit. I doubted I’d ever actually use it.

I held up the plaid lingerie, wincing again at the coarseness of the fabric.

“Just why?” They couldn’t even sew a soft liner on the inside?

If there were ever a time to use a gag gift to cheer up my man, I imagined this would be it.

*Worth a shot.*



KADEN

Nineteen minutes after I got off the phone with Brooke, I opened the door to find her standing there with an iffy smile. She didn't greet me and seemed uneasy with a questioning gaze. More like an amateur solicitor than my girlfriend, she hesitated without a word.

I imagined my terse phone call freaked her out. I hadn't given many details—more like none—and she was probably envisioning all kinds of worst-case scenarios.

But she'd come. Regardless of any doubts or worries, she'd hurried to me.

A duffel bag's strap was slung over her shoulder, but in her hands was a pint of ice cream.

I did a double-take. Yeah, that was ice cream all right.

I arched a brow. "What's with the ice cream?" I stepped back, urging her to come inside.

She exhaled and stepped in. "Whenever Rena and I have a bad day, ice cream makes things better. I don't know what makes dudes feel better, so I stuck with what I know."

The tension in my shoulders loosened as I laughed.

"If ice cream does not appeal, I do have a backup idea, but it's, uh, unconventional."

I crossed my arms. "Now that'll pique my curiosity."

She shook her head and held out the ice cream. Mint chocolate chip, my favorite. She sure paid attention and took notes. "No ice cream?"

I took it. "The ice cream will do. For now."

*For now?* I had no right to be joking around. I had no doubt that her “backup” idea involved something either incredibly sexy or outrageously silly. Both of those had to wait until I talked to her. To really talk to her. Kody had flat-out refused to own up to what he’d done to her, so it fell on my shoulders. Enough was enough. I couldn’t stand this idea that I was hiding anything from her. I was too damn eager to move forward with her, and I had to clear this before that could be possible.

“I did *not* have the foresight to also purchase sprinkles though.”

I stopped her hands. She’d busied herself in getting spoons out to break into the ice cream right now.

“Let me guess.” She tucked her hair behind her ear and peered at me. “The sprinkles aren’t a deal breaker.”

I shook my head and set the ice cream in the freezer. “No. They’re not. I want to tell you something.”

She grimaced. “Maybe *I* will need the ice cream now.”

Several minutes later, with two bowls of mint chocolate chip ice cream sans sprinkles but laden with potentially expired whipped cream, we sat across from each other at the island. Neither of us picked up our spoon.

“Kody and I had a disagreement.”

“Oh.” She narrowed her eyes. “Is that all?” She slid her bowl closer. “You were freaking me out that it was something bad.”

“A disagreement about you.”

She slid the bowl back away. “Okay.”

“Kody was the one who asked you to prom. Not me.”

She furrowed her brow.

“I sat in the back of chemistry that day, catching up on my sleep.” I shrugged. “If you sat in that second seat from the wall in the last row, the teacher could never see. I saw Kody walk up to you and ask you to the dance. I heard it all. Then the night of the dance, that other girl was at the house getting pictures with him and stuff. I asked him what happened, that he was supposed to be taking you. He said it was a joke.”

She huffed out a hard breath. Her lips remained in a firm line.

“He never intended to take you. I felt bad, thinking you’d be sitting around all night and be stood up. So I drove to the school and pretended—”

She jabbed a finger at me. “That was you!”

“I pretended to be Kody and said I was bailing.” I frowned. “You knew it was me?”

“No. Not until just now. Kody did his annoying little hair flip thing.” She did it. “But now that I’m thinking about it I’m positive that *you* did it toward the wrong side. I could have sworn something felt off about that.” She sighed. “But I was kind of...”

“Humiliated. I hated what he was doing, but I didn’t want you to sit and wonder and hope.”

“I was going to end up in a shitty mood either way.” She shoved her spoon into her ice cream, stabbing it as she nodded. “That makes sense. Kody would do that.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You know, you *really* need to get a tat. Or one of you needs to walk into a wall and earn a little scar. *Something* to tell you apart. I mean, not now. I can tell the difference, but still.” She shrugged. “I wouldn’t put it past him to frame you for a murder he did.”

I scoffed.

“So it was him.”

I nodded.

“He asked me to prom with no intention to take me.”

Again, I nodded.

“Not you.”

“Nope.”

“That does make sense. You weren’t interested in those things. You didn’t go to any dances. Or any social things.”

I shrugged. “It wasn’t really my scene. And I did go to the junior prom. Once was enough.”

She gagged. “Junior prom? You mean when half of us got food poisoning from the appetizers? Ugh.”

I smiled. This was Brooke. Resilient, strong, stubborn Brooke. She could handle the truth, but she sure was taking this much better than I thought she might.

She frowned, making me think she might not be okay with this revelation after all. “How come you waited so long to tell me? After we started seeing each other.”

“I didn’t know how.” I took her hand and rubbed my thumb over her palm the way she liked. “Here I am, starting a relationship with you. We are good with each other. I’m optimistic about us. But he’s my brother. I can’t avoid him. He’s in my life and always will be. So it would have been

awkward for me to tell you this and you'd hate him."

She shook her head. "I guess I understand. That's a tough situation."

"That's what happened at the lake house. I confronted him. I wanted him to come clean and apologize."

"And what, he balked and said it was dumb?"

I nodded.

She turned her hand over to stroke her fingertips over my knuckles. "Did Kody ever tell you about when he apologized *after* prom?"

"No." *What the hell is she talking about?* "Never."

"Kody came up to me the Monday after the dance. He told me that *he* wasn't the one who'd asked me to the dance. He said it was you, posing as him, that you'd done it just to get a laugh."

My jaw dropped. I froze, horrified he'd do such a thing.

"Kody never told me that," I said, fisting my hands. "I can't believe he'd throw me under the bus like that."

She uncurled my fingers and rubbed her flattened hands over them. "I wondered if it was all a game of switcheroo. But in the end, I knew that one of you had screwed with me in such a hurtful, humiliating way. I assumed you were both in on it."

"He's such an asshole!"

My temper flared, and I didn't want to sit still any longer. I wanted to yell. To punch something. To lash out at the jerk of a brother I had to put up with.

I didn't do any of those things.

Brooke stood and crawled into my lap. The high-top seats that tucked under the island's counter weren't ideal for holding someone with you. She crawled up and sat on the edge of the marble, draping her legs on either side of me.

"Hey." She set her hand on my chest and smoothed it down. "Look at me."

I raised my gaze to her, clenching my jaw.

She rubbed along my face, coaxing me to relax. "I'm over it."

I closed my eyes and shook my head.

"Hey!" She tugged my shirt. "I said I'm over *it*. Not over *you*."

Gazing up at her, I considered the confidence behind her words. *Are you, really?* I didn't want our past to ruin our future.

"For the first time ever, I can truly say that and mean it. I'm so over it."



I rubbed my hands up her thighs, caressing her.

“I don’t care what Kody did.” She lifted her shoulder and let it fall, and the loose-necked sweatshirt drooped lower, baring her shoulder. “I don’t even care what Kody thinks of me now.” Her hands cupped my face. “Because everything that happened led me right here to this moment with you.”

As I leaned in to kiss her, she slid her hands back until her arms draped over my shoulders. I covered her lips with mine and breathed in her scent. I licked and nipped, quickly sliding into the spiral of desire that she always stoked in me. I tasted her, caressing her tongue, and relished her sweet moan.

“And that’s all that matters to me. That I have you.”

I kissed her again. Standing up, I leaned in to her to drown in her sweet taste and even sweeter promise.

“You do,” I told her. “You do have me. All of me.”

She grinned, slipping her fingers through my hair to tug it and hold me close for another kiss. We remained like that, sucking and nipping at each other’s lips. The intense, hurried frenzy wasn’t driving us now. A slower, sweeter intimacy ruled us. Taking my time, I relished every gentle warm touch of her lips against mine. She mewled and crawled closer to me, hooking her arms around my neck, and I kept my hands off her tits. I didn’t reach under her clothes to seek her warmth and to see how wet she was for me.

This was a delicate connection, fanned with easing sparks instead of racing to be consumed at once.

Sex could come later. This lulling sense of comfort and security was all I needed right now. To know she was *mine*. In my arms, under my lips, and in my hands.

Her ass. It was my kryptonite, and I held it.

“Whoa!”

She’d scooted too close to the edge and slipped off, and I caught her. I sat with her on my lap as she giggled.

She sighed, not kissing me again. That drop had broken the moment, but it hadn’t changed the mood. Tucking her hair behind her ear, she nestled closer and rested her forehead on mine for a moment as we caught our breath after making out.

“Have you talked to your dad since that fight with Kody?”

I shook my head.

The tilt of her head amused me, but the knowing smirk on her face made

me want to groan. “You have to talk to him.”

It was inevitable. Kody and I both wanted Dad to be happy. And us fighting and glaring at each other at the wedding would not be a great situation. Knowing Kody, it would be up to *me* to reach out to him and make amends.

“I know.”

She pecked my lips. “Before the wedding.”

I nodded, hating that she was right.

“You have to make peace with him.” She hugged me. “And I’ll be right there with you to support you through it.”

It was the sweetest offer, but since she was the object of what had spawned such a gap between me and my brother, it would be best if I tackled this on my own.

“I know.”

I could face him. I could swallow my pride and face him because knowing Brooke would be waiting for me afterward was all the incentive I needed.

Kody and I might never get along for long.

But so long as all was right with Brooke, life would be good.



BROOKE

“G od.” The stylist shook her head and scowled at me. She lifted my hair, fluffing the long black strands as she examined them.

I raised my brows, watching her expression in the mirror. Rena swore by this woman. She claimed she was a goddess of everything to do with hair, wigs, and scalps. A master of anything that adorned a human head, this stylist was the best.

She leaned closer, wincing as she rubbed a few tresses between her finger and thumb, then scoffed. “I would cut a bitch to have hair like this.”

My eyes went wide. She’d come highly recommended, but she was gruff.

“You, quiet girl of a million tats, have *the* best hair I have *ever* laid my hands on.”

I smiled quickly. She was dry and blunt, her facial reactions more like something I’d expect to see if I had lice and rats burrowing up there. She looked disgusted, but I relaxed, understanding she was only annoyed in a jealous way.

“You hear me?” She patted my shoulder. “The prettiest fucking head of gorgeous locks I’ve ever seen.” Spinning me around to face her, she plastered on a bright smile that made her look more like Harley Quinn than a strip mall hairdresser. “It would be a delight to work with your hair.”

I wasn’t so sure now. She kind of creeped me out. And I bet I could style it enough myself and wear it down. Kaden sure liked access to it, especially when I sucked him off and he wrapped the long locks around his fist.

“Okie dokie.” I hopped off, unsure if I’d stick with the appointment I’d set with her.

The wedding was just a week away, and I'd made sure to speak with this so-called genius of hair well in advance with a basic consultation.

Rena had just flown home late last night. I was on my way to meet her for lunch, and I would seek a second opinion from her in person.

At the café we frequented near my office, she came inside as a jet-lagged but smiling woman laden with a lot of bags.

"Rena!" I got up to hug her, careful of her bags. "I'm so glad you're back."

"I missed you!" She whooshed out a breath as she slid into a booth. "And I am so glad I'm meeting up before I forget what is what."

I raised my brows as she set the many bags and packages on the table. "I already ordered for us."

She nodded. "Thanks, girl. I'm starving for breakfast." Pausing, she narrowed her eyes. "Lunch?"

I nodded.

"God, I hate time zones. Okay."

She launched into a spiel of all her "best" memories, and I was sure it was only the tip of the iceberg of all her tales. Throughout the highlights, she bestowed me with the souvenirs.

"How did you fly back with all this?" I blinked. "And not pay a ton for luggage."

She grinned. "Oh, I got creative." She produced a pair of wooden bowl-like things attached to a string.

"Coconut bra?" I guessed. "For a size negative A?"

She winked. "Flamenco castanets from Spain." Clapping them, she gave me a solo performance before tapping her breasts. "Snuck them in there."

I nodded and accepted them. "Right. So close from the heart, Rena."

"Exactly." She grabbed another pair out of a bag. "Here, I got a second pair for you to give Todd. For his kid with the broken arm. That'll preoccupy him."

*And drive Todd insane.*

"A Barcelos rooster." She yanked a massive statue from a bag. Eyeing it critically like she wasn't sure what to make of it, she frowned. "From Portugal. I thought your mom might like that one."

*So long as it doesn't come alive.* "That's some big eyes it's got there."

"Uh huh. Speaking of eyeballs." She rummaged into another bag. "This is a mati evil eye." She slid a large painted glass disc of an eyeball toward me.

“From Greece. For good luck, I think.”

“It’s so smooth,” I said as I stroked the glazed surface and admired the artful skill in each brushstroke. “Thanks, Rena.”

“Hey, you could wear it at the wedding.” She winked and giggled.

“Already done there. Remember the glitzy shopping thing with designers where I freaked out?”

“Hmmm.” She sipped her water. “I do. I do. When I know what day and time it is, I shall ask for more details.” Waving at her bags, she added, “I’ve got more. Candies and booze and rice and—Fuck, I don’t remember. I was picking up stuff all over. Whatever caught my eye.”

I arched a brow. “Burning the fancy candles?”

She brightened. “Oh! I *did* buy you some candles. Some little artisan thing at a vendor mart outside Athens. Said it was a love potion stick.”

I cracked up. “Is it even a candle? That sounds more like a dildo.”

She busted up laughing too, and my heart felt so full to have my dirty-talking, get-real friend back home.

“Well, how are things going with BBD?”

I slanted her a stern look.

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. Kaden.”

“Things are going well with him.”

“So well you wouldn’t need a love potion stick that may or may not be a sex toy?”

I nodded. For the first time, I admitted it out loud. “I’m falling for him.”

Rena grinned. “You gotta wait until I’m out of the country to do an epic thing like fall for a man. Seriously?”

“I think I already have.” I frowned. “I’m not sure.”

“Well, you either know or you don’t, right?”

I shrugged. “Have you ever fallen for a man?”

She pursed her lips and shook her head. “Nope. They all failed in the first couple of qualifying rounds. But I imagine when you know, you know.” Setting her hands together and propping her chin on them, she grinned. “You can be my tester and report back with your findings.”

“I just wish it wasn’t so confusing.”

She blinked. “Quite frankly I’m stunned. I mean, the guy started out as your enemy and now?”

“Yeah. And now...”

“Well, what are you going to do about it?”

I bit my lip, so grateful she was here to discuss it with me. I'd debated talking about it with Mom, but I worried talking about love would sadden her because she'd lost that in my dad when he left. Sure, it was years ago, but I was living proof of old scars lingering far past the incident that caused them. Sandra was my next bet to share a little girl talk. You wouldn't know it looking at her because she was so deceptively *Golden Girl* sweet, but she'd been dealing with raging fits of menopause lately. If I were to ask her for advice, she'd be more likely to advise I chop his dick off and be a spinster to save myself from the headache.

"What should I do?" I asked.

She sat back and spanned her hands through the air, looking up dramatically. "Hire an airplane that'll fly one of those banners. It'll say BBD, I heart you. Have it soar the message on the day of love at the wedding."

I raised my brows. "So I should tell him, huh?"

She gave me a *duh* smirk. "How else would it go? He'd read your mind?"

I cringed. "I'm not saying he shouldn't know, but I want to *know* know."

She pointed at me and wagged her finger. "And that is a *no no*."

"Why?"

"Let me ask you this. Do you think he is falling for you?"

"I hope so. I think so. He got in a fight with his brother-slash-best-friend over me. That's not nothing, right?"

"That's something all right." She grinned and waited to speak further until all of our plates were delivered. "Did he at least get a bruise or something and you had to nurse him back to health?"

I shook my head, remembering the sweet kisses on his counter, though. That sounded better than him getting hurt and having me take care of him. Honestly, I didn't want Kody to be hurt either. Their father was about to get married. Now wasn't the time for them to be acting up and cause more issues so close to the date.

"Are you hesitant to tell him that you've fallen for him because you're not entirely sure that's what is happening?"

"Or has already happened," I clarified.

"Or are you hesitant to tell him because you're gun-shy of admitting it before he has?"

"Yes."

She rolled her eyes. "That was an *or* question."

I nodded. "I'll just do what you said."

Her sandwich waited before her mouth. “Hire the airplane and fly the banner? That shit has got to be expensive.”

“I’ll tell him at the wedding. Like, speak to him without the assistance of aerial demonstrations and acronyms that should only belong in texts between the two of us. Or not at all.”

She chewed and swallowed her huge bite then smiled. “You know you’ll do this when I meet someone someday too.”

“Yeah.” I narrowed my eyes, thinking. “When you and BBB fall in love.”

“BBB?” She fought laughing with a mouthful of food.

I nodded. “Big burly balls. But that’s it. I’ll tell him at the wedding and hope he feels the same. I’m pretty sure he will.”

“Go get him.” She set her sandwich down and pouted. “Too bad Kody is such a jerk. I could be his date to the wedding.”

“Rena!” I scolded her. “The man refuses to settle with *one* woman for the duration of the night because it’ll cramp his style. No way. I wouldn’t want you to get hurt by his asshole tendencies.”

She slitted her eyes in a smirk of determination. “Oh, I bet I could handle him.”

*Actually, you probably could.* Still, I shook my head. “No, I’ve got hope for you. You’ll find someone who’s not a jerk by default.”

She shrugged. “I’m kidding. I’m not interested in him after the way he yelled at you in the office. I just wish I could go to a fancy event at the estate.”

I shook my head. “Kody’s company isn’t worth it. Besides, it’s not at the estate.”

“Oh?”

“It’s at a manor. Kaden says it’s really nice. Very big with lots of life.”

“The manor, or his—”

I giggled. “Oh, my God. You’re incorrigible.”

“Where are you supposed to go after?” she asked. “They have rooms there?”

I frowned. “You know what, I’m not sure. I know Mercedes likely has it planned out or something. She’s Margaux’s daughter. Kaden’s done a fair share of planning. Kody’s done none. But I think Mercedes likes it.”

“I imagine she’ll be glad when it’s over, though. Once you hop on those wedding trains it’s full freight speed ahead.”

“Oh.” I almost forgot. “This Vivian you recommended.”



“She’s wicked, isn’t she?” Rena laughed.

“Can I trust her with my hair?”

“Very. Once you get used to her, uh, brand of humor, she’s not so bad. I wouldn’t let you go somewhere I wouldn’t trust.”

“Thanks.” I still missed my former stylist who’d moved away—an Army wife.

“And speaking of hair appointments.” She grinned. “Shall we book you another visit for a wax?”

I laughed, then pursed my lips as I considered it. “What the hell. I’ll go to Brazil this time, too. He sure likes to have his ‘favorite dessert’ as he likes to call it.”



## KADEN

All week long, Kody and I avoided each other at work. I managed to head out of the office when he came in, and he was wise enough to avoid speaking to me, using Pamela as a go-between.

“You better get yourselves settled,” she scolded me before I left the office at the end of the day on Friday. “Don’t you dare think about bringing this drama nonsense to your father’s wedding.”

I had no intention of doing that. Kody would likely sulk and brood and continue to be a pain in the ass, but I knew better. I told Brooke that I’d be out tonight, speaking with my dad and then Kody. She replied that she wanted to get a “head start” on some paperwork and would be taking her laptop home to do it.

Still, she knew I planned to smooth this mess out—or at least try to—and she promised to be ready to hear how it went in a goodnight call.

I got into my SUV and began the long drive to the estate. Dad had left the office earlier. He had to be home already. As I was stuck in rush-hour traffic, I had more than enough time to think and rehearse the best way to approach it.

Dad wasn’t hard on us. He was lenient. The way I’d stormed away from him when he’d shouted after me on the dock wasn’t cool. The fact I’d left the bachelor party early had to bother him too.

When I arrived, I was grateful Kody’s truck wasn’t parked there. Instead of assuming I was the only one stopping by, I walked to the side near the garages and ensured I wouldn’t be interrupting anything. I let myself in, seeking him out.

“Dad?”

His footsteps sounded on the marble floor near the lounge. It was a smaller receiving space than where we’d set up for the shopping extravaganza, but it had always been one of his favorite places to relax and unwind after work.

As I strode in that direction, I passed the bathroom where I’d found Brooke breaking down. I raised my brows, glancing inside the empty room as I passed, and a wicked sense of satisfaction filled me as I recalled how fucking sexy she had been unraveling in my arms.

“In here,” he called out as I headed toward him. The double doors were open, letting him see me as I approached.

He sat in a worn leather chair that I doubted he would ever consider giving up. A tall, wide bulwark of a chair, it showed its abuse. Wear and tear was evident in the scratch marks from the cat Kody had wanted but then ended up rehoming because our housekeeper was allergic. Then there were the sharpie marks from when Kody and I went through a permanent marker phase as toddlers. We drove our parents crazy, leaving caps all over for them to freak out where we’d gone with them and how we’d found them to begin with. Patches of brown had faded to a lighter tan and then whiter beige. He loved that chair, and he often rested in it with a glass of whiskey.

As he did now.

“Hello, Kaden.”

His greeting wasn’t cold but he wasn’t his warm, jovial self. Knowing he was keeping himself reserved with me hurt.

“Hi, Dad.”

“I wondered when you’d come talk with me,” he admitted. His glass was empty. He’d already sipped his habitual one glass of whiskey. It rested on top of the coaster he had ready for use, and he rose to his feet.

“Margaux had a suspicion you’d come by after work.”

I arched my brows. How could she know?

“She’s a smart one. Talking with Pamela, working behind the scenes. She wants me to be happy when we marry, not stressed about my kids.”

I opened and closed my mouth, but no protest would come. He was right. So was she. I was glad he’d found a woman who’d go to such lengths to make sure he was happy. Instead of replying, I watched him get a couple of cigars from a small humidor case on a bookshelf. He nodded his head, indicating I should follow him outside.

We left the lounge to go to the patio.

“As such, she’s made herself scarce,” he said. “It’s just you and me, son. Your brother’s never been great at coming to his senses.”

Outside, he cut the cigars and sparked them up. He handed me mine, and as he blew out smoke from his, he looked at me expectantly.

“I’m sorry for the way I behaved at your bachelor party.”

He grunted and shook his head. “I feel silly even calling it that. I just wanted an excuse to get out of town.”

I smiled. “I shouldn’t have confronted him then.”

“There’s never a good time. He’s always prone to losing his temper. What happened?”

I hadn’t wanted to rat him out to Brooke, but to our dad, I didn’t hold back with the truth. “When we were in high school, Kody asked Brooke to prom as a joke, never intending to take her. When I realized he’d done it as a prank, I went to the school and pretended I was him.”

He groaned, hanging his head. “Not that damn swapping identities crap again.”

“I told Brooke she didn’t have a date. I hated to think of her being stood up and all. I wanted him to apologize to her because that prank really hurt her. Gave her issues with her body image to this day.” I didn’t feel right telling him all her secrets. That was personal stuff. Nor did I want to explain the way I’d met her—through the Halden Inc. deal. And he definitely didn’t need to know about the fake-date arrangements. Hell no was I going to tell him that.

“And he didn’t want to apologize,” he guessed.

“That’s what we butted heads about at the bachelor party. I like Brooke a lot. She’s something special. I didn’t want to have that past incident standing in the way of a solid future together. I wanted it all cleared.”

He stewed on that, quiet as he puffed his cigar.

When he finally spoke, he didn’t scold. His tone was understanding.

“Kody has always had a bit of a selfish edge to him. Your mother used to always blame it on you.” He smiled. “You were born two minutes before him and he was always trying to be number one.”

I rolled my eyes. “I guess.”

“I’ve been hoping he would meet a nice girl who would knock some sense into him. A nice, smart, ball-buster of a woman who wouldn’t take his crap.”

“Dad, it’s not some poor girl’s job. Kody needs to be better because he chooses to, not to appease someone else.”

“I know what you mean. I do. But I also know what the power of a woman—the right woman—can do. I was a lot like Kody before I met your mother. She had the patience of an angel, putting up with me and sticking around. Before I met her and fell in love with her, I was just like your brother.”

“Well, we know where he gets it from, then, huh?”

He smirked at me. “But when I fell in love with your mother, she changed me. She didn’t set out to. No one should try to manipulate or change anyone else. But her spirit, the love we shared? That made me want to be better. I didn’t want to be an ass, I wanted to be a man she’d be proud to be married to. I didn’t want to be selfish.” He coughed a single laugh. “I was. I was selfish to want her to be mine. But in having her, I understood what a gift she was. And treasuring her taught me that I had no room for selfishness in my life.”

He didn’t need to spell it out. Every word he spoke resonated. What he described was the same phenomenon I felt with Brooke.

“Your mother challenged me and didn’t tolerate my bullshit.”

I grinned, thinking of Brooke’s edgy sass.

“Don’t you know?” he asked, his tone gentler and not at all teasing. “Doesn’t Brooke push you to do better, to be better?”

I nodded.

“Securing your woman’s happiness is the greatest thing you can do. And with that focus and motivation all that other nonsense fails to matter.”

“And you think there’s a patient woman out there who’d be strong enough to put up with *his* bullshit?”

He chuckled. “I’ll keep praying on it.”

“More like wishing for the impossible.”

“I’m not making an excuse for him. He was in the wrong, and I have faith he’ll come around and know that. I didn’t raise you two to be assholes, and deep down, I don’t think he is at heart.”

I thought back to the discussion I had with Brooke in the hot tub, where she explained her theory—that all people could be good, and even the good ones had the capacity to do bad. And someone good usually struck out when they were hurting.

“All I’ll ask is that you exercise more of the same patience that I know

you have. The same patience I use with him.”

I sighed. “Yeah.”

“I’d appreciate it if you could make things right with him. Before the wedding, I’d like it if you could speak with Kody and figure out a way to get past this.”

“I already plan to.”

He grinned, his cigar between his lips. “I know. You’re a good man, Kaden. You both are, but I hope you know that I recognize and admire your character, your ability to always be as compassionate and considerate as possible.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I patted him on his back.

“All I want is for you to make amends before the wedding. That’s the only wedding gift I need.”

I smiled. “Good, because it’s the only one you’re going to get, you rich bastard.”

He chuckled, shaking his head.

“Were you actually expecting a gift?”

He arched a brow. “I don’t know. Maybe some grandkids sooner or later.”

I gaped at him, almost dropping my cigar straight out of my mouth. “Jeez. Don’t pull any punches, Dad.”

“I’m not getting any younger.”

“You’re only sixty,” I argued.

“And you’re already thirty,” he shot back playfully.

Before I saw Brooke in that office, settling down was the last thing on my mind. That might have changed in the course of these few weeks as we managed the roller-coaster of ups and downs of falling in love. *What the fuck?*

“Oh, don’t give me that.” Dad chuckled, patting my back now. “You don’t have to look so alarmed.”

*Love.* I loved Brooke.

“I was just teasing. You live your life how you want, that’s all I ask. I just want you boys to be happy.”

And I was. I was happy and fucking in love.

Thinking about settling down had always seemed like a faraway concept. Something to consider someday. Later, after I’d focused on my career and accomplished whatever I thought needed to be done.

Back then, the idea of settling down sounded more like a punishment or fate.

Now, when I slotted Brooke into the equation of a long-term relationship as true partners in life, I wasn't met with the feeling of fear or the need to procrastinate.

As I let the idea sink into my mind, I was smacked with the realization that I loved her. That, if I were to make the ultimate commitment to a woman, she was the only one I wanted.





BROOKE

**K**aden: *Leaving my dad's now.*

Brooke: *Fingers crossed it went well.*

Kaden: *It did. I'm going to head to Kody's now.*

Brooke: *Good luck.*

Kaden: *Thanks, baby.*

*Baby.*

I smiled and set my phone down, feeling giddy and warm at his endearment. It wasn't the most original term he could think of to call me, but I liked it. Even though it was just a small thing, it charmed me in a classic, age-old way.

I knew he was going to be busy tonight, tending to the rifts that had wedged in between the three men. So I thought ahead to get ahead. With my laptop idling with a generic screensaver, I settled in against my pillows to knock out some tedious paperwork for Todd.

I tapped the screen and resumed drafting an email to Todd.

Once I ensured it was ready to go—double-checking that the attachments were there and I didn't pull a Kaden—I sent it.

I got an instant reply. It didn't come from my laptop but from my phone.

Todd: *You're a workaholic. I wasn't planning on getting that until next week.*

Brooke: *Just getting ahead before the weekend gets busy.*

Todd: *I forgot. The big wedding.*

I'd only just told him about the wedding, and as harried as he was as a single parent, I wasn't hurt or shocked that he'd forgotten. He noticed and

remembered the important things, like when Kaden and I stepped into his office last week and told him we were dating.

I'd been nervous leading up to that announcement. I knew it needed to be said, but still, my career was my life. Or it had been my life before I met Kaden and he merged into it all. I was scared about screwing up a good gig I'd worked so hard to succeed at. I didn't want to leave Halden Inc. I didn't want to upset my boss.

His reply stunned me.

"I kind of figured," he said calmly and glanced at Kaden. "When you dropped her off at work yesterday and yelled out the window to her that there was no point to make your bed when you'd just mess it up all over again."

My cheeks heated at the memory of that conversation.

It was such a silly little quarrel, my nitpicking him to make his bed and him roguishly teasing me that it was pointless. The topic only came up because he seemed to hint at living together since we spent so many nights as a couple.

It had outed us as a pair, though, and Todd hadn't seen an issue with it.

Todd: *Shouldn't you be out at a rehearsal dinner?*

Brooke: *Nah. They skipped it. Not the first time around. So I'm catching up on some things tonight.*

Todd: *I thought you said getting ahead.*

Brooke: *Whichever.*

Todd: *You never need to catch up on anything. You're always ahead of the game*

I replied with a curtsy GIF.

Todd: *Because you're a workaholic.*

I smiled, knowing that part of me would never change. Having a purpose, having a meaningful career, meant so much to me.

Brooke: *I have been thinking about taking a vacation*

Todd: *Go. Do it. Sandra and I can cover your workload while you're out.*

Todd: *You deserve it*

"Thanks," I murmured.

Todd: *Just so long as you or your friend never brings a souvenir home that resembles a small clapping cymbal ever again.*

I winced. "Whoops."

Brooke: *I believe it's a flamenco castanet.*

He shot back a GIF of a guy shaking his head.

I was surprised by his support and encouragement to take time off. That wasn't to say he was an awful boss or anything. He was a great guy. It was more a matter of me struggling to let go and feeling like I was abandoning anyone at work, anyone who might need me since I was such an involved person in the daily running of Halden Inc.

I closed out my email and went to the browser to look up a Contiki tour. Rena had yet to stop gushing about her trip, and I knew her praise was a solid recommendation. If she had a good time, then damned good times were to be had.

The internet connection on my laptop was slower than my phone, so I gave up and searched on my phone. I settled back against my pillows and browsed. Photos of beaches and bistro eateries excited me, and I lost track of time scrolling.

When my phone buzzed with another text, I glanced at the time.

*Shit. So much for getting ahead.*

Kaden: *I hope you're having a relaxing night. Stuck in traffic.*

Brooke: *I am. Sorry about the traffic.*

Brooke: *I thought I'd do a little research. What would you think about something like this someday?*

I sent one of the screenshots I'd snapped. Idyllic beaches and warm sunsets suggested tropical utopia. I sighed.

Brooke: *Imagine me riding you somewhere like this*

Kaden: *All that sand gets in the wrong places.*

I giggled.

Brooke: *I think it would be fun to go on a trip with you.*

Kaden: *We can make that happen.*

Kaden: *Wait up for me. I'm coming over as soon as this conversation with Kody is over.*

I bit my lip, feeling daring.

I closed my laptop and hurried to change into that gag gift. Once I had the plaid lingerie on, I lay back in bed and stuck my phone on the flexible holder I used when watching TV in bed.

“Oh, my God, this crap is scratchy.”

I giggled, posing on the bed and then sending the most provocative one.

Brooke: *I'll be waiting up. Just like this.*

Kaden: *Don't tell me that's fucking plaid*

I cracked up, changing out of it once more. I slipped on my robe. That

had to be better than that itchy fabric.

“What is this damn story behind the plaid?” I wondered aloud, too curious.

I replied with a GIF of a kitten shimmying while wearing a kilt.

He FaceTimed.

“Hey.”

He grinned, shaking his head. “I thought you said you were working.”

“I was.” I shrugged.

He narrowed his eyes. “What are you wearing now?”

I licked my lips. I saw the hunger in his gaze and decided this would be my chance. “Wouldn’t you like to know.” I shifted my phone so he’d only see my head.

His groan was such a sexy sound of need. “Yeah, I would like to know.”

I slanted the camera to show more of myself, just my shoulders where the robe wasn’t pulled together. “Then you tell me what the deal is behind plaid, and I’ll do this.” I pulled the robe back more, showing more flesh.

“Fuck, Brooke.” He shifted in his seat.

“You hate plaid because...?” I dragged the robe over more, almost to reveal my nipple.

“What am I supposed to do? Rub one out in my vehicle?”

I giggled. “You hate plaid because...?”

He shook his head, growling. “I wanna see it all. You hear me? I want to see everything.”

I nodded, dropping the robe over my breast.

“Pinch it.”

I gawked at him but obeyed.

“Fuck.” He rubbed his hand over his face. “It’s stupid. One time Kody and I went down to Florida on Spring Break.” He jerked his face up, frowning. “Shit. Traffic’s moving.”

“Okay. Be safe.”

He groaned, shaking his head. “I better find you just like that. See you soon.”

We hung up, and I grumbled. I was so close.

*But he said Kody was there.* His twin had to know the story, too, but we weren’t on speaking terms. Although if Kaden went there and they had a good talk, maybe I could ask him one day if Kaden refused to tell me again.

I sighed and wrapped my robe up tight to get back to work.

“At least finish reviewing those contracts,” I scolded myself.

*Then I can look at the trips again.*

Kaden: *Talk about bad timing*

I shook my head.

Brooke: *I know!*

Kaden: *You really don't mind waiting up for me?*

He was too damn sweet, always checking with me.

Brooke: *I would be happy to spend the night before the wedding with you.*

The contracts didn't take me long. I even tackled more emails, too. I really was a workaholic if I stuck to it this late into the night, but I had no idea how long Kaden would take to talk to Kody. Or if Kody would even hear his brother out.

I hoped they figured out a compromise. Kody seemed impervious to that concept, but Kaden would try his best. I hated to come between them but I had faith. Kody had come to apologize once, and I took that as a sure sign that he *did* know the difference between right and wrong. Given enough push, he could come around and own up for his wrongdoings.

Done with work, I returned to lying back and scrolling on my phone. The options seemed endless, and going through the ratings and reviews seemed disjointed. So many travel apps, so many rating scales, and so many business review systems.

I just wanted to know where something decent might be. I didn't want to look at junky resorts with bed bugs, but then I didn't want to overdo it at a ritzy place.

I shifted to my side, reaching over to set my laptop on my nightstand. I was as done as I could be with work tasks. As I settled back against my pillows once more, my thumb brushed up too far on the screen. The browser window minimized, and with it smaller in a row of recently used apps, I saw half of an image of myself in the camera app.

I swiped over to it. Staring at my risqué DIY photoshoot, I scrolled back and forth among the shots I took.

I used to cringe at the idea of pictures being taken of me. School portraits were always hard. Knowing you were one in a line of hundreds of other kids didn't allow for many last-minute opportunities to check your hair or that food wasn't stuck between your teeth.

Posing for a camera was a challenge. I always felt like I clammed up. Or I smiled too forcefully and made my cheeks rise up like a chipmunk. The few

photos that I loved of myself were all candid shots. When I didn't have to look at a camera or even know the lens was facing my way, I looked all right.

Since Kaden had come back into my life, all those previous hang-ups fell further and further to the wayside.

He'd held me against him while he played with me in that bathroom, treating me to a full view of how he could wrangle such soul-deep and shattering orgasms from me.

He'd lured me out in the open air of his backyard on the hot tub decking, exposing me so he could go down on me with that wickedly talented tongue of his.

And tonight, I'd taken the initiative to show him what I looked like in weird lingerie. Taking that risk was thrilling because it was for him and with him. Kaden was a safe space for me, and I knew I could trust him. He had proven time and time again that he would accept my flaws where my perception of my body image were concerned. He'd shown me with such calm patience that he would ground me until I could take baby steps one at a time to overcome it all.

I swiped back and forth through the images, knowing that I liked each one because they represented how happy I was. How comfortable in my own skin I was.

Kaden was a huge help in my journey of growth. Just in sending him silly flirty pictures, I'd learned to shed my insecurities. I was moving forward, no longer terrified of what I looked like to others.

I'd gained so much confidence and felt good in my skin.

He'd done that. He'd shown me how to be a better version of myself and overcome the scary struggles.

And as I waited for him to come to me, I hoped I could be able to offer him the same and help him be the best man he could be too.

It sounded like a tall order—he was already perfect.





## KADEN

Once traffic started moving, I paid attention to the road and tried my best not to get hard. One look at Brooke would always make my dick turn to steel, but now wasn't the best time. Not only were idiots displaying road rage and damn near causing accidents left and right, my nervousness scaled higher again.

“Dude, just merge into the lane when you see the fucking signs.”

I hated it when people tried to speed ahead then cut over last minute.

People trying to hurry to their destination and escape their workplace put me in a tense mood. With each minute that passed after I hung up with Brooke, the glow and thrill of her little strip tease faded.

Knowing I was heading into war also didn't allow that happiness to last. After what Dad said, I was calmer. I wasn't alone with this frustration about Kody's behavior. Dad admitted that it was expected. He'd offered me his best explanation for *why* my brother was such an asshole. His hope for a solution sounded like wishing for the impossible. None of it actually prepared me for going over to his house. Nothing Dad said gave me confidence that this conversation would go well. All he'd granted me was the burden of doing it, of manning up and being the bigger person to initiate this talk.

So, no. I wasn't in any position to hang on to the good way Brooke made me feel.

*Just do your best and get home to her.*

That was my reward. The idea of heading into her arms forced me to stay on task. I could handle these idiot drivers and I could manage one simple conversation with Kody.

*Simple.* I wasn't that deluded. Nothing about this would be *simple*.

I pulled into his driveway much later than I thought I would. It had taken me twice as long to get there. If I had to suffer through this amount of traffic to get in and out of the city, I would've been madder at the world in general. Putting in a roundabout was all well and good. But having multiple construction zones to implement four of them in a row? They should've just put out signs that advertised it as a lazy man's carnival ride. Like Disney's spinning tea cups, only with orange barrels to impede the way.

It had been a while since I'd gone to his house. Despite our fights, we always managed to make up and be close. I suspected it was impossible for us to ever lose the closeness we were born with, but as twins, knowing each other so damn well to predict how the other would act worked against us. Siblings could bicker and argue, but with our twins' intuition, Kody and I had elevated warfare at hand.

The last time I'd hung out at his place was before I met Brooke. It sobered me for a moment, realizing how much this woman was changing me. For good, like Dad had said. Love would make a man wizen up and want to please his lady. I did. I wanted to make Brooke happy, and seeing her smile and laugh was my greatest accomplishment. At the same time, I knew I couldn't sacrifice everyone else in my life. After Kody and I saw eye to eye and got past this, I'd make sure to spend more time with him.

In my grief-stricken hard times in high school, I dabbled with social anxiety plenty. I was aloof then and still to this day didn't like being around many people or too many that I didn't know. Knowing that flaw—or weakness—about myself had me thinking ahead to make sure I remained well-rounded and didn't distance myself from anyone important again.

And Kody was important. He always would be.

I knocked on his front door, entertaining wry thoughts that he might be a dick and just not answer. I had my key, but I didn't want to force my way inside to make him talk and listen. It was small, but I held hope he'd let me in and be willing to acknowledge my presence.

No such luck.

He didn't answer. I sighed and lowered my head, shaking it.

*I promised Dad.* The wedding was tomorrow. I didn't have any more time to put this off. And I didn't want to prolong it. I had a warm, naked woman waiting up for me. Now that I realized I loved her, I couldn't wait to show her.

I got my keyring out and slotted it into the lock. “You bastard—”  
“Breaking in now?”

I turned, finding Kody slowing to a walk up his driveway. Although his truck was here, he hadn’t been home. The running shorts and sweat-drenched Henley suggested he’d been out for a run. The laced shoes and earbuds he removed proved it.

“Oh. Didn’t know you were out for a run.”

He shrugged, walking up to me with a hard look. “How would you know? We haven’t said a single word to each other all week.”

I nodded, stepping back to let him reach the door. “I wasn’t *breaking in*.”

“You might have a key, but you’re still trespassing.”

I gritted my teeth. Things weren’t off to a good start.

“Here I thought I could vent on a run.” He opened the door and I followed him in as he wiped his shirt over his face, removing the sweat. “I’ve got to go through a damn circus just to get home. And now *you’re* here. So much for a high from the endorphins.”

I closed the door behind me and slowly headed toward the living room.

He pulled his shirt off, still not facing me as he left me there, calling out as he walked toward his bedroom. “I’ll be out in a minute. I’m sure you’ll use the time to rehearse another lecture.”

*At least he wasn’t trying to just kick me out.*

As I killed time in the living room, pacing, I reminded myself of how Brooke had put it. Good people did mean things when they were hurting. Good people could be bad because they struck out when *they* were vulnerable. It was Psych 101. I understood that equation, but I struggled not to see it as an excuse. Whatever made Kody act like an asshole wasn’t my damn fault. Dad had been teasing—Kody didn’t loathe me because I was the first one born. It was a classic twin joke.

Whatever bothered or wounded Kody wasn’t my responsibility. I knew my flaws, and I fucked up too, but I always owned up to those instances.

Like I was doing now.

Looking at Kody like he was the victim wouldn’t sit well forever. His issues wouldn’t grant him lifelong permission to just be an asshole to everyone—most importantly Brooke.

By the time he returned, rubbing a towel over his hair wet from his shower, I felt like I’d talked myself down from too much anger.

“I’m not apologizing for stupid shit that happened over ten years ago.”

He came out with that, and I sighed.

*Stay cool.*

“And you had a lot of fucking nerve pushing me in the damn lake.” He set his towel down on the counter then grabbed a water bottle.

“I didn’t intend to push you *in*.”

“I dropped my fucking phone in there.”

*Shit.* But a laugh threatened to slip out. He’d lost *another* phone?

“I’ll replace it.”

He paused drinking water and tipped his chin toward a brand-new device.

“Too late.”

“Sorry.”

“I had a new number on there. Now I’ll never be able to call her.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m sure you’ll survive.”

“I’m not apologizing.”

My anger flared, but I held on to it. I crossed my arms. “Why?”

“What do you mean why?”

“Why wouldn’t you apologize?” I shrugged. “If it’s just some ‘stupid shit’ from years ago, what’s so scary about apologizing now?”

He set his water down so hard it splashed out. “Scary?” He scoffed. “I’m not fucking scared of her. Or saying I’m sorry.”

“Then what’s the big damn deal?”

His sneer didn’t bother me. “You tell me. You tell me what the big damn deal is about me apologizing. It’d be too little, too late. Why does it matter to you now?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do.” He opened his mouth to argue and I held my hand up to silence him, keeping my tone calm. “Because it wasn’t some stupid little shit. She struggles with body dysmorphia still to this day, rooted to the crap she had to put up with in high school.”

“*Dis* what?”

“Body image issues.”

He cringed. “All chicks have that.”

“Not like this. And that’s no excuse. You remember how fucking bad it was. High school is hard for everyone. You know how people teased and made fun of her. You did it yourself. And pulling that prank on her asking her to prom was a hard blow for her.”

His reply was to say nothing. He stared at me with his lips pressed together.

“Think back. Remember that one asswipe? Always making up shit about girls and how he got that one teacher assistant to sleep with him?”

“My God.” He shook his head. “I hated that prick. Thank fuck he got what he deserved. Did you know he was arrested for child porn a couple of years ago?”

“And all those catty cheerleader types, spreading rumors?”

He sighed.

“Remember when you tripped on the steps freshman year?”

A smile curved his lips. “And you beat the shit out of that senior who made fun of me?”

I chuckled. Dad had been so mad that day.

“All right. You’ve got a point. High school is universally guaranteed to be a shitty experience at one point or another.”

It didn’t matter the circumstances. Those four years changed a person. All the bodily adaptations of leaving behind childhood. The emotions and hormones morphing your personality. Adolescence was a warzone. Kody and I had been privileged. We weren’t poor and we’d gotten our good looks from Mom and Dad. We hadn’t struggled in any other socioeconomic ways, but we hadn’t been spared any hardships. We’d lost Mom. We’d struggled through grief.

You never knew what someone else was going through, and I appreciated that Kody could maybe see that.

“But all of that—anything we had to put up with senior year—is old news,” he argued. “In the past.”

I shook my head. “That doesn’t mean you’re off the hook. I expect better from you.”

He shook his head laughing. “Fuck, does she have you wrapped around her little finger. Why does it matter?”

“Because I know you’re not the asshole you pretend to be.”

He arched a brow.

“And because the girl you owe an apology to is the woman I love.”

Damn, it felt really fucking good to admit it. Not a single hesitation had me pausing. Clear and loud. Putting those words out there felt like a victory cry. I didn’t regret it, and I didn’t feel a blip of dread. I wouldn’t freak out at voicing such a deep commitment like that.

I loved Brooke. And the whole damn world would know it. I’d shout it from the fucking rooftop.

Kody blinked at me in surprise. “Love?”

I nodded and set my hands in my pockets.

“I thought...” He scowled in frustration. “What the hell happened to her being your fake date? I mean, I could tell you had some feelings for her and all. But love?”

I nodded again.

“Shit. First Dad. Now you.”

I chuckled. “You’ll be next.”

He rolled his eyes at me. “Careful what you say.” He approached me, hand out to shake. “Look, the wedding is tomorrow. I don’t want to ruin the day for Dad.”

I took his hand and shook it. “I’m sorry. For losing my temper and pushing you into the lake. I’ll pay for the phone.”

He shrugged, pulling me close for a man hug. “Eh. The other one was old anyway. And I’m sorry. I’ll...” He sighed. “I’ll make sure to chat with her tomorrow and clear the air. If it matters that much to you.”

It did. “*She* matters that much to me.” And I would always do everything I could to see to her happiness.



BROOKE

I was tired, but I didn't doze while I waited for Kaden. I slept best when I was with him, and it was a damned big motivation for me to consider the idea of living together.

"Little too fast there," I mumbled to myself.

I didn't want to rush anything, but he'd admitted it too. He woke up more rested after sleeping with me—both in the dirty sense and in slumber.

A grin stretched across my face. Almost every night, he'd want his "dessert in bed." Oral had been hard for me before because it was a challenge to let go enough, knowing that a guy was *right* there, seeing me so up close. That hangup was part of my issues with my body, and it had sucked that it held me back from so much pleasure.

And I was the luckiest woman on earth to have met a man who truly enjoyed eating me out. I wouldn't complain.

I was tired, and lying in bed should have made it too easy to fall asleep. It was late, but I was still on my phone.

After my failed attempt to hear the reason why he loathed plaid and what a kilt during Spring Break in Florida had to do with it, I fed those ideas into my vacation search. I fell down a path of searching tourism sites about Florida. Beaches and gators. Oh, and Disney World, but I'd gone as a kid with a Girl Scout thing and nearly puked after the tea cup ride. No thanks. Been there and done that.

The more I browsed pictures of beaches, I thought back to what he'd said. Getting sand everywhere? It would be torture. And knowing us, we'd be tempted to screw on the beach somewhere.



*Maybe somewhere else.*

I Googled *world's biggest kilt selection* just to be silly, and that was how I fell down the rabbit hole of researching places to visit in Scotland. Ireland. The UK. All kinds of tours existed, and it was an enormous undertaking—especially so late at night—to organize anything of a travel plan. Or goal.

*Maybe I should talk with Rena about this.*

She'd researched and booked her vacation, so she had practice with it. It felt like an assignment, and I knew I wouldn't be an impulsive vacationer. I'd need time to organize it. Maybe a new planner just for listing out the options. *Ha!* Todd was turning me into a Luddite, wanting to write down everything.

It was annoying though, how many freaking pop-ups and ads cluttered the screen when looking at vacation things. Tourism sure depended on solicitous approaches.

When I accidentally clicked on the very tip of an ad box, I was rerouted into a cycle of more and more ads and my phone locked.

“Shit.”

I pulled my laptop back out to search how to unfreeze it and remove what had to be a virus. I hadn't plugged it in though, so that was why I was bending down to grab the cord when Kaden smacked my ass.

“Ahh!” I screeched, not hearing him come in.

I spun into his arms as he laughed and caught me.

I punched him, not hard enough to hit but just to vent out my fear. “You scared me!” I waited for my heart to slow down, racing in that moment of surprise. Squished in his arms, I removed my earbuds. “Freaking ninja stuff. You know, I was so excited in such a silly little way to give you my spare key, but now that I know you like to do a horror-movie stunt of scaring the crap out of me?”

He finally stopped chuckling, pulling back to smile at me. “I called. And texted. I told you I was heading over.”

I groaned and shook my head. “That explains it.”

“I figured you were asleep when you didn't reply.” He rubbed his hands over my ass. “Not bending over and offering me this lovely view.” His fingers clutched my robe, dragging the fabric up so he could smooth his big warm hands over my cheeks.

I smiled. “No. I got a virus.”

He frowned. “You were sleeping because you're sick? Damn. Right before the wedding?” He pressed his hand to my brow.

I giggled, taking it and kissing his palm. “No. On my phone. I think I fucked it up. I was going to plug in my laptop and look up how to factory reset it.”

“You got a virus on your phone?” He grinned. “What, you didn’t want to wait for me to come over and checked out porn?”

I laughed. “No! I’d rather watch it *with* you, not instead of seeing you. I was looking at vacation sites and all those stupid pop-ups got in the way.”

I shook my head. Why was I talking about this? I gripped his shirt and kissed him quickly. He seemed to be in a good mood. “How did it go? Did you talk to Kody? You guys figure everything out?”

He slowly smiled. “Yeah. We’re on the same page. We had a good talk.”

I kissed him, just a quick peck. I was so relieved. A warm feeling of satisfaction spread through me. My heart felt so full that he wasn’t suffering from all that drama anymore. I was so glad I could burst.

“Oh, thank God.” I lunged up to hug him.

His arms locked around me as he walked me over to the bed.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

He shook his head and kissed me hard. I gasped, opening my lips to his. He swept his tongue over them, drugging me with the warm, wet stroke. His tongue sought mine, and we both moaned at the same time as he sealed me in a pussy-aching, heart-racing lip lock.

Hard and fast. Soft and slow. We volleyed between those paces on any given day. But tonight, right now, he was demanding and urgent. He didn’t let up with these punishing kisses, licking and sucking my lips until they were swollen and stinging. It was like he couldn’t get enough of me, worried he’d lose a chance of kissing me for even one second.

“Hey.” I framed his face, sliding my hands up his lean jaw until I threaded my fingers in his hair. He rested his forehead on mine and sighed, hugging me closer.

“You okay?” I asked. He was so raw, so demanding, that I wondered if he was reacting to something.

His lips lifted in a sure smile, slow at first then wide. “Yeah. I’m more than okay.”

He slipped his fingers under the collar of my robe. With an agonizing slowness, he pushed the soft material over my shoulder and let it fall. Goosebumps skated over my skin at the chill, and I held my breath as he pressed his lips there. I shivered at the tender touch. Gone was the urgent

demand. He stared at me intensely, slowing down to a damning drag of desire.

*Oh.* I panted, reveling in this heady sensation of being under his full focus.

He wasn't distracted by anything, his hands and eyes on me. All of me as he lurked so close. The heat of his body radiated to me. It excited me. He fired me up. And I was ready and willing—and aching—for him to stoke the flames of fire even hotter.

He slid his fingers under the robe on my other shoulder. The material hung only off that shoulder, and as the fabric swayed behind me, feathering against my ass and the backs of my thighs, I was super sensitive to the whisper of a touch.

Pushing further, he coaxed the robe all the way off. It stuck at my hand. The sleeve stopped at my wrist where I held my hand low against my side.

He reached down to take my hand. The fabric fell, fluttering to the floor. I looked down and my breath hitched as he eyed my fully nude and inked skin. My nipples hardened into peaks as my chest heaved in hard breaths. Each inhale and exhale pushed them against his shirt, and flutters of need coursed through me.

Holding my hand, he used his other to pull his shirt off and toss it to the floor. He pressed my hand to his chest, laying it over his heart where it raced in a furious tempo.

I sighed, knowing I wasn't alone. I reveled in the knowledge that he was just as affected by this teasing, slow touch. I watched as he removed what was left of his clothes and put a condom on, ready to get down to business.

I liked it fast or slow. But my god, I was about to explode or melt. One or the other. I was quickly becoming a writhing mess of need.

He lifted my hand to kiss and suck each fingertip. He spread his thumb over my palm in that drugging massage he often gave me. That wasn't all. He wasn't done. With his fingers and mouth, he caressed me and kissed me, leaving a scorching trail of heat from my hand, up my arm, over my shoulder, and along my neck. Walking around me, never taking his hands or lips off me, he regarded me in an all-encompassing reverence.

“My beautiful, sweet girl,” he crooned.

I shuddered, feeling every hit of that praise. The possessiveness of his tone had my pussy clenching. Rubbing my legs together, I squirmed and wished for friction to ease the tension that built and built.

Already I knew this would be an orgasm to make me soar. I'd crash and burn.

"All yours," I agreed, reaching out for him. I couldn't understand this slow, worshipful stance he was determined to maintain. I didn't want any games or tricks. His deep, probing stare showed me that he wasn't just after sex here. He wanted all of me—heart, mind, and soul.

I reached for him, and it snapped him out of this intimate spell. He growled as I slid my hands up his pecs and over the bunches of muscles in his shoulders. "So have me." I kissed him, sucking on his lower lip before I let him go. "Take me."

He urged me back onto the bed, following me down. I clung to him and widened my legs as he crawled up over me.

"I'm not going anywhere," I promised.

He grinned, kissing me with a brutal ferocity that had me dripping even wetter. I didn't need him to play with me. Those heated stares were all the foreplay I needed.

As his hard dick brushed along my thigh, I tried to push against it.

He dragged his hand down my side to grip my leg. His fingers dug into the underside of my thigh as he lifted my leg. Up and over, he held me and pushed me open wider. Then he rose up. I looked down, the same as he did, to watch his long, thick cock slide into me.

A slow, dragging thrust.

"Kaden," I begged. It was so filthy but so right, the sight of him plowing into me and stretching me so good. He kissed me as he thrust into me with measured, long strokes. This was no teasing buildup. I was ready to explode and suck that dick deep into my pussy. The muscles in his neck strained as he tried to control himself from letting go too soon.

No teasing.

He was savoring me.

With one more hard drive, he growled, jerking and throbbing as he spilled his orgasm into me. His fingers bit into my leg, and hearing his hard rumble of satisfaction, I careened into an orgasm. The tension snapped. My climax punched into me so hard that I cried out.

And as we calmed down, catching our breaths, I felt a tear slip over my cheek.

A tear of joy.

A tear of gratitude that I'd found the only man I could ever love this

deeply.



KADEN

**I** *should have told her.*

Last night after I made love to Brooke, I should have told her that I loved her. I'd never come that hard, and I knew it had to be the way I felt about her. Addicted and so complete. She'd fallen asleep, and I gave in and did too. We both needed to rest before the wedding.

And now, standing in this crowded room, getting ready with the others, I felt like I hadn't gotten nearly enough sleep.

Dad had wanted to have breakfast with me and Kody. One last meal as just the three of us, he'd said. I'd only gotten a few hours of rest. Kody hadn't looked any better—a late date, he said.

Dad was alert and smiling, excited for this big day. Kody liked to say I was the emotional one who had a soft side, but when Dad told us both how proud he was of us, my brother looked damn near tears.

“It'll always be us together against the world, boys,” he said. “But now, it's time to let a little more love into our lives.”

I already had. I wasn't the groom, but I could share in his words of wisdom. I'd let love in all right, and as soon as I could get a moment alone with Brooke, I'd tell her.

A moment alone with her seemed like an impossible feat. Instead of going back to her place or her coming to mine to get ready, she was already on the go. She did her “routine” of a workout and healthy breakfast. Then she had a hair appointment with a woman she seemed slightly intimidated by.

I shook my head, inspecting my reflection in the mirror. I couldn't even remember all of it. The girls had a whole itinerary of things to do, and I only

hoped she wouldn't experience any anxiety about it. The hairdresser thing seemed comical, not a true worry about her looks. But the rest—the makeup and getting ready stuff—I hoped she could hold on to the confidence to know she was beautiful, inside and out.

I noticed little hints and signs of her coming to love her skin, to appreciate her own worth. And I wouldn't stop. I would make sure to remind her of her beauty and worth every single day.

We'd get there. I'd never quit on the work in progress.

I smiled, wondering if Kody was right. If I might be next. I paused to look around the room, knowing most of these men would be doing this all over again if I were to get married.

My uncles would be in the pews waiting to watch the ceremony, not stand in here putting on their ties. The cousins over there, adjusting their cufflinks, might be my groomsmen, alongside Tristan and a couple of other friends. And Kody.

I glanced at him as he winced. Pamela adjusted his boutonniere, seeming to stab him with the pin by the grimace on his face.

"If you'd just hold *still*," she scolded as I approached them.

He'd be my best man, no doubt.

*Don't get ahead of yourself.* I smiled as I watched him roll his eyes.

"I am standing still."

Pamela sniffed and wiped her eyes as she stepped back. "Oh. If your mother could see this."

I pulled her into a side hug. She'd been with Wagner Industries since the beginning, and she'd been more a member of the family than an employee.

She urged me and Kody to stand side by side, crying softly. "I guess I know she's looking down on you two fine men."

"Fine men?" I wagged my finger between me and my brother. "*Both* of us?"

She smiled and rolled her eyes, dabbing beneath them.

"Hey." Kody pretended to punch me as he released me from a side hug.

"None of that now," Dad said as he came toward us. "No horsing around before the ceremony."

"But after is fine?" Kody checked.

Dad rolled his eyes but he could tell my twin was teasing. "Stand back like that."

We put our arms around each other again and smiled as he took a picture



with his phone.

“I know I won’t remember to take a picture through it all.”

“That’s why Mercedes hired the photographer,” Kody said.

I raised my brows, surprised he’d known a part of all the behind-the-scenes work she’d put into this day for her mom and our dad.

“And a videographer,” I added.

“I know.” Dad shrugged. He looked dapper, fit and trimmed, ready to go in his tux. He risked rumpling it up though as he came between us and slung his arm around both of our shoulders. “Before the day and night get away from us, I wanted to take a moment to tell you something. I forgot to mention it this morning. That was more the father-to-son bit I wanted to share.”

Kody and I shared a glance.

“And what’s this then?”

“A boss-to-employee thing.” He grinned. “Margaux and I were thinking. We’d like to extend our honeymoon.”

I laughed. “It hasn’t even started yet!”

He chuckled. “But it’s almost here, and we’d like more than the stay in the Maldives. I’m going to leave the company in your hands.” He looked at me, then Kody. “Consider it a trial run for how you’ll deal with my retirement.”

Kody grinned at me.

*Holy shit.*

“Are you sure?” I blurted. “I mean, when you told us you were getting married, you said you had no plans to retire anytime soon.”

Dad shrugged, letting us go. “I changed my mind. As this day came closer and closer, I realized how lucky I’ve been to have found Margaux. I want to spend my days with my new bride. Not stuck in the office.”

Kody patted his back. “You are one lucky bastard,” he said playfully as he slugged his arm around me, pretending to put me in a chokehold. “Don’t worry.” He slapped his hand to my chest. “I’ll keep an eye on him.”

Pamela rolled her eyes.

Dad smirked. “Right. I said a *trial*.”

I shrugged out of Kody’s hold, shaking my head. He was goofy and happy—his usual self. It seemed he felt lighter after the burden of our fight no longer stood between us.

As we filed out of the room, we headed down the hallways of Colette’s family manor.

“Hey,” I told him. Even though he seemed to be in a good mood, I felt a word of caution was due. Also true to himself, he remained a rebel. He hadn’t brought a date. “Be on your best behavior.”

“You know, you were born like seconds before me.”

“Two minutes.”

“It’s not like you’re an older brother I need to listen to.”

I rolled my eyes. “Just behave.”

At the doors to lead outside, he turned to me and winked. “I can’t make any promises.”

Outside, everything was decorated and set up with a mix between earthy rustic and elegant gold. Mercedes had outdone herself arranging the décor. It was gorgeous out here, and I knew Dad admired it as he strode out for the aisle, smiling as he took in the scene for the first time.

Colette paused in fussing with a vase of dried and fresh flowers, smiling at us as we headed to the aisle.

I slowed to grab her elbow and squeeze. “It looks beautiful,” I told her in gratitude. Kody shook Tristan’s hand and patted his back in greeting.

“Hurry!” she urged us. “You don’t want to be late!”

I chuckled but Kody grimaced. “It’s not like either of us are the groom.”

“Not yet,” she teased.

Kody shook his head as we caught up to Dad.

We stood beside him, both of us together. Sharing the title of Best Man, I thought back to Pamela’s teary comment. I glanced up and smiled.

*We miss you, Mom.*

And I knew she’d be beaming down on us, glad that we were all happy and living the most fulfilled lives that we could.

“I swear she stabbed me with that thing,” Kody grumbled, fidgeting with his boutonniere.

I furrowed my brow at him and Dad shot him a look.

Margaux looked lovely, smiling so serenely as she came down the aisle. But I couldn’t watch. I kept seeking out Brooke in the crowd, and once I spotted her, I couldn’t look away. She beamed at me, then winked. Looking like a vision in that silver dress, she was the most beautiful woman in the whole audience. In the world.

I only had eyes for her. She looked incredible, and as I stared, my heart so full, I considered myself the luckiest man to have found my way to her.

*Turn around.* She mouthed it to me, raising her brows and spinning her

finger in the air. I remembered making that same gesture at her to twirl for me and show off the green dress with the slit that should've been illegal. This time, she did it as she held in a giggle.

Kody elbowed me too, and I realized I hadn't been paying attention. We were supposed to have shifted and turned to watch the bride and groom. I'd zoned out watching Brooke as Dad and Margaux stood together, holding hands as they said their vows.

"For fuck's sake," my brother said under his breath, amused.

I grinned. *Whoops.*

A moment later, they kissed, and the officiant announced them as the new Mr. and Mrs. Wagner.

White rose petals flew through the air as they left down the aisle to the applause and cheers of everyone gathered.

I ducked my head in the blitz of white pieces falling.

*There.*

"Hey, man." Kody frowned at me as I veered off from the aisle to beeline for Brooke. "We gotta go stand in the receiving line and go get the pictures."

I tuned him out, rushing toward Brooke.

She grinned at me but seemed surprised. "Kaden, aren't you needed?"

I grabbed her hand and she giggled as I coaxed her to run with me.

"Where are we going?"

I ran, and she hurried along with me.

Tristan stood out in one of the many halls inside. He frowned. "Aren't they doing pictures?"

"We need a moment."

He rolled his eyes and pointed at a door.

I grinned and opened it. A storage room. It'd do. I closed the door behind Brooke.

"What's going on?"

I slammed my lips over hers, sating the burning need I had for her.

As we made out, I was careful not to ruin her makeup or her hair that she'd suffered through having styled. I ravished her, kissing her while keeping my hands mostly to myself.

I knew I wouldn't have many chances to be alone with her once we started the marathon of pictures. Being best man wasn't an idle gig.

*Tell her.*

But I couldn't. Not yet. Just another taste. Another kiss.

She giggled, running her fingers down my cheek. “We have got to stop hooking up like this.” She contradicted her words by lightly stroking me. “You can’t have Kody trying to keep *you* in line now.”

I groaned and rested my brow against hers, hating that she was right.

She told me last night, and I believed her.

She wasn’t going anywhere.

I’d tell her the next time I could steal her away for a moment.



BROOKE

I'd always been a fan of weddings. The magic of the night. The food. The dancing. The overall bonhomie of friends and family members coming together to celebrate the joy of a couple in love. It was everyone's ultimate goal. To find and celebrate love.

Now that I'd found mine, now that I'd taken the chance on Kaden and had found my love for him, this wedding seemed even more poignant.

The entire ceremony had gone smoothly.

*Almost*, I corrected myself as I sat next to Kaden at the head table. The reception was well underway, and I looked forward to it continuing. He hadn't been able to take his eyes off me, forgetting to turn and face his dad and Margaux when they'd shared their vows. I giggled along with several others when he'd realized he was staring.

It was cute.

He was charming. And his fixation on me went a long way toward negating any chance of being overlooked or forgotten.

The venue was spectacular, with so many flowers and smart décor in every nook and cranny. From the outdoor tented area where the ceremony had taken place to the guesthouse where the pictures were taken, and in here, this enormous ballroom where we'd wine, dine, and dance the night away. Colette's family manor was a grand masterpiece of a building, and I couldn't help but feel like it was a fairytale getaway, removing us all from our ordinary lives to celebrate Mr. Wagner and Margaux starting their lives together.

They were such a lovely couple, all smiles and sweet looks just for each

other.

As they stood up for their first dance, I sniffled, so overwhelmed by the perfection of it all. My heart could burst, it was so full.

“I know,” Pamela sobbed, handing me a tissue as she dabbed under her eyes.

Kaden grinned at me and smoothed his hand over my thigh before taking my hand in his.

When the emcee invited other couples to join the bride and groom on the dance floor, Kaden stood. He looked at me with that all-compassing love and devotion in his eyes.

His hand lowered toward me, and I smiled as I reached up to take it.

He led me to the floor where other pairs had come out to move and sway under the sweet song declaring true love was all that mattered. It was and I knew it now more than ever as Kaden and I danced together for the first time.

This was the moment. I didn’t need an airplane with a banner flying overhead. I just needed to speak from my heart and tell him how I felt. But not just yet.

Under the twinkling lights of the chandelier, I felt taken back in time. I hadn’t had the guts to stand on that dance floor at the school’s gym, but this one was perfect. Resting my cheek against Kaden’s hard chest, I sighed and was taken back. In my mind’s eye, I saw myself in the mirror in my room. My mom stood behind me, smiling as I took in the final look of my beautiful prom dress. I’d felt like a princess then, but now, I knew it wasn’t so cliché after all. In Kaden’s arms at this lovely wedding, I felt like it again—and more. I was the princess and he was my prince.

He kissed my temple, and the brush of his lips on my skin brought me back to the present.

“What are you smiling about?” he asked softly.

“Because I feel brave for once.”

He cocked his head to the side, raising his brows slightly.

“I’m in love with you.” The admission that I’d kept so close to my heart came out in a rush. No finesse, no gentle sweetness. I just needed to voice how deeply I felt for him.

*So, so much.*

I nodded. “I love you.”

Each word rang true to my ears. And I waited with bated breath for his reaction.

A smile spread across his face, almost lazily, but I realized it was more a sense of awe. He grinned, and in his eyes, I saw the adoration that never disappeared when he gazed at me. He lit up, and when he exhaled a whoosh of air, I realized he'd been holding his breath.

"I love you, too." He lowered his face and brushed his lips against mine. I closed my eyes again, relishing the sweet pressure of his mouth and the daring hint of alcohol and mint on his breath. I wanted to devour him, but this tenderness was just as good—and likely all we could do out here around the others.

"I love you, Brooke." He moved our joined hands, bringing them closer to our chests flush together. Raising my hand as he rubbed his down my forearm, he stared into my eyes with a burning glint of love. He rotated my wrist, revealing the large, dramatic eye I had inked there.

Beauty in the eye of the beholder.

His lips touched the design. "I love you and all your beauty." He kissed it again. "Inside and out."

I swallowed, choking back the tears that threatened. He was too sweet. Too gentle. He remembered what I told him about that tattoo, and with his kiss there, I understood.

In his eye, according to what he saw, I was beautiful. Not only in my looks, but who I was as a person. His love wasn't conditioned to only the physical desire for me. His love was complete and whole, and it filled the gap in my heart that I feared would always be empty.

I kissed him and committed this moment to memory. For the rest of my life, I would remember this. This song. This dance. This supreme comfort and sense of belonging that being in his arms offered.

I'd never need to wonder if I belonged. I wouldn't fear being overlooked or forgotten. As long as Kaden had my heart and I had his, I would never be lost like that again.

"Excuse me."

I glanced up from resting my cheek against Kaden's chest. When he told me that he loved me back, I felt like my heart would burst. He'd felt the same, it seemed, because he didn't let me go. Not once, not even when the song changed to another.

Now, we both parted a bit to look at his brother.

Kody stood there. I didn't see a smirk or suggestion of a scowl that might indicate he was in the mood to be a jerk or cause trouble. He simply stood



there and looked from me to Kaden, then back to me.

I didn't speak, curious about what he wanted. Kaden raised his brows.

"Can I cut in?" he asked. His tone wasn't timid. I doubted this man could ever be. He didn't demand or sneer.

"Please?" he added.

Wow.

Kaden looked at me, his brows even higher as he asked me without words if I was okay with that.

I nodded. "Okay."

Kaden kissed me as he let me go, and I drew a deep breath as his twin replaced him.

He moved smoothly, more used to dancing perhaps than Kaden was. I looked at him, too curious to break the silence. I didn't know what was on his mind, and mine raced anyway.

They were identical, but not. Knowing every inch of Kaden's body, I could notice the differences. Kody's arms weren't as defined, and Kaden's hair was longer. Slight lines creased around Kaden's eyes, laugh lines, whereas Kody's face seemed tanner. Their hair wasn't the same cut either.

Outwardly, they probably couldn't pass as each other so easily now. They wouldn't be able to pull off as much of a switcheroo as adults. They'd both been hardened and changed in life since their teenage-heartthrob cuteness, and as adults, their uniqueness stood out even more.

Mostly, though, I felt not an iota of the love that filled my heart to the brim when I was with Kaden. I wasn't tugged into a fierce desire. I didn't sigh in the security of love.

He wasn't Kaden. I knew that, but I also could tell this man was no longer my enemy.

As we danced, he looked around and hesitated. I could tell by the tension of his arms and hands. But at last, he broke.

"I'm sorry."

I didn't reply.

"I'm sorry, Brooke." He paired the repeat with a hard whoosh of air, like he was expelling the last vestiges of that burden.

"It feels good to say that, huh?" I asked.

He shrugged, which turned into nodding. "Yeah. But I am. I'm sorry for how I behaved in high school."

"It's—" I caught myself from saying it was okay. It wasn't. I'd struggle

with my body image beyond this day, but I knew that with Kaden at my side, I could overcome it. The way he'd treated me wasn't okay, but I could forgive and move on. I already had, secure in Kaden's love. "I've moved on. It was years ago."

"And I'm sorry for how I continued to behave now."

"At the cake tasting?"

He nodded. "I apologize for all of it. And in the future, because I don't have much of a censor and I guarantee I'll make more mistakes and say something stupid again."

He shrugged, honest about it.

"We all make mistakes." I arched a brow. "Like thinking up dumb ideas about revenge."

He chuckled. "You know, I can see why you did. After the way I treated you and made you think Kaden had done it all. I get it now."

"I'm just glad you overhearing me was the impetus to make me come clean about it all. So, I'm sorry too, for even thinking about wanting to do something like that."

"I forgive you," he said sincerely. "I know my brother definitely has."

I smiled. "I think I've got room in my heart to forgive you too."

His shoulders lowered with my words. It felt good to let him have that relief.

"And I mean it. Really, I do." He cleared his throat and lifted his chin. "I want to change." His gaze drifted toward the side of the ballroom near the head tables. It wasn't the first time he'd looked that way. I thought he kept directing his gaze there because that was where his dad and brother were. But when I glanced, I saw the guys weren't alone. Mercedes sat there too.

"I want to change," he admitted, his stare locked on her.

I laughed, knowing all too well what that smoky look meant. Kaden smoldered at me just like that, with wicked intent in his gaze. Mischief. And desire.

"How about you start changing right now? Stop checking out Mercedes."

He scowled, looking at me before glancing away.

"She's your stepsister now!"

As the song turned to a livelier one with a coordinated dance behind it, he groaned and stepped back. I let go of him too. Despite our many differences, we shared a dislike for the Electric Slide.

"I thought I told the DJ to limit these things," he grumbled.

I laughed, walking off the dance floor. We headed toward the table where Kaden waited for me, but I didn't want this moment to end.

"Hey," I said.

"Yeah?"

"What's the deal with the plaid? Why does he hate it so much?"

He cracked up. Laughing so hard, he garnered the attention of several guests who couldn't help but smile, his amusement infectious, even though they couldn't know what we were talking about with the music so loud.

"He said you guys were off on Spring Break one year."

A strong arm banded around my waist, cutting me off. Kaden growled, pulling my back against his chest in a hug.

"No. No way."

Kody still laughed as he straightened. "We went to this beach party—"

Kaden stepped forward to chase him away. "Shut up."

Kody retreated and shook his head. "I'll tell you later," he promised.

I giggled and grinned at Kaden, who groaned good-naturedly. "Maybe it's not a great idea if you guys get along." He rubbed his face. "All the embarrassing shit he'll tell you."

I kissed him quickly, seeing his dad and Margaux approaching and seeming to look for him. "I'll love you no matter what kind of stories he has to share." I winked, excited for all that was to come.



## KADEN

**A**s the night carried on, I danced, talked, and ate with Brooke. I realized this wedding was our first real date. Okay, maybe she wanted to consider that dinner with her mom our first official date. I felt more like that had been a meet-the-parent inspection check with the way her mom quizzed me and watched me interact with her daughter. I passed.

This wedding was supposed to be the finalization of our arrangement. Brooke was supposed to have been here with me as my fake date, concluding the charade. Instead, it marked the beginning of real dates, and I couldn't wait for all the others to follow.

At the end of the party, we lingered among the few remaining guests who had yet to part. The music was winding down to slower, calmer songs. Dishes were still being cleared away. And Colette's staff began the process of tidying the room as best as they could in preparation of everyone heading out.

Dad and Margaux said goodbye one more time. They'd stuck around the longest. I almost thought they'd leave early. If anyone could have the freedom to just take off, it would've been them.

I did *not* want to let the idea of their wedding night into my mind. Nope. I wasn't going there. But they'd stayed. Instead of the need to kiss and hug and cling to each other, they'd treated most of the reception as a big party, talking and chatting with so many friends.

At last, they left, yawning and smiling as they climbed into the back seat of the limo I'd arranged for them.

Brooke sighed as she sat back in the chair of an abandoned table near the dance floor. She set her arm on the tablecloth then lifted it with a wince.

Frosting from the cake had been smeared on the linen, and she dabbed it off with a napkin.

“Let me guess.” I sat and lifted her feet into my lap. “These are not the right shoes.”

She moaned as I removed her heels, and the sound shot straight to my dick. Tired or not, I would always react to those sexy noises.

“But they’re so pretty,” she pouted. She eyed the silver shoes as I set them on the table.

I dug my thumbs into the soles of her feet. “Pretty, but not stand-and-dance-in-them-for-hours shoes?”

She shook her head and sighed dreamily. “Oh, that feels so good.”

I sat there massaging her feet for a few moments, watching Colette and Tristan dance in the background. I smiled, seeing how much their love was still going strong, and I knew that would be me and Brooke. Happy for good.

“Are they flying to Maldives in the morning?” she asked.

I shook my head. “No, tonight.”

She whistled. “They’re going to be so tired. That’s a long flight.”

I chuckled. “You know how long of a flight it’ll be?”

“Kind of. I’ve been looking up vacation things in general lately. Todd seems eager to have me take a break. Doesn’t want me to burn out and lose me.”

“Were you serious about it? Traveling?”

She nodded. “Yeah. With you.”

I grinned. “It’s been on my mind too. I was thinking maybe we could try to plan it for after my dad is back from his extended honeymoon.”

He said it was a trial, but I wanted to treat the time Kody and I had to run the company as a real test.

She shook her head. “You know what. I’m not sure about that.”

I frowned.

“Planning it.” She rolled her eyes. “I’m still mad that stupid site gave my phone a virus. But the little that I had been looking at destinations and tours and flights and all, I was overwhelmed. There are so many options. So many places to choose from.” She shrugged. “I was starting to think it might not be so bad to just wing it.”

“Wing it?”

“Yep. Let’s be impulsive and just go. The less planning, the more spontaneous of an adventure it would be.”

I considered it. “We could spin a globe and stick a pin in it.”

“And go wherever it stops.”

“Except the ocean, in the middle of nowhere.”

“Hmmm. I don’t know. Think about it. A private yacht, at sea. All alone.”

I frowned. “What about if we get seasick?”

She smirked. “Okay, but a cruise sounds like—”

“It could be fun,” I said at the same time she grumbled, “A horrible idea.”

“You don’t like cruises?”

She scrunched up her face. “No. Not those packaged places. Reminds me of Disney World.”

I gaped. “You don’t like Disney World?”

“What, are you ten?”

I chuckled. “It’s the happiest place on earth.”

“So they say. Maybe we can save that for later. With k—”

I tilted my head to the side. “With what?”

My heart raced. *Was she going to say kids?* I could have sworn she was about to say that. I wasn’t eager to settle down *that* fast. I saw my future with her. Hands down, I was eager to be with her in a fully committed relationship. But kids? A family?

We both had to break out of our workaholicism a little bit better. And why rush? Practicing for making a family could be a long and fun time. Brooke might be the most selfless person on earth, but I wanted to be greedy with her. I wanted her all to myself for a while.

Forever, actually. But I could be patient to start a family.

“I was thinking more like Scotland. Ireland.”

“Where they wear kilts?”

She slapped the table. “Oh, come on. It’s not that bad of a story. Funny, though.”

I sighed, having too much fun playing with her even at my expense. It wasn’t really that big of a story, but I was annoyed that Kody had told her earlier when I found him checking out the bridesmaids. That snitch.

“But we’ll go? Somewhere?” she asked.

“Absolutely.” I couldn’t wait. “First, I need to stay focused on the company in Dad’s absence.” Kody had joked that he’d keep an eye on me, but everyone knew it would be more like the opposite.

“Hey.” I looked around, frowning.

*Speaking of.*

Brooke frowned. “Where’s Kody?”

I groaned. The last I saw of him, he’d been trying to schmooze with the bridal party. Dad hadn’t seemed too annoyed with Kody not having a date. It seemed like he was always more lenient with Kody. Since our talk, I wondered if Dad was easier on him because he saw so much of himself in him. No one in our family ever favored one of us more than the other. No choosing sides. But Dad had only rolled his eyes when he asked who Kody had brought as his date.

“No one,” he’d replied. “I told you I wouldn’t have one.”

*At least he stayed true to his word—defiant as it might be.*

Although in my brother’s defense, he hadn’t been his usual self, chasing women left and right. He hadn’t treated this wedding as the “hookup retreat” like Dad had feared it might be for him. Kody had danced and talked mostly with friends and relatives.

*And apologized.* I smiled at Brooke, who still scanned the room for my brother.

She told me that he’d apologized when we ate our slices of cake. At that news, I felt like everything was right in my world. I didn’t have to worry about keeping anything from her, and I didn’t have to wonder if he’d be a jerk to her.

“The last time I saw him was when we were waiting for the cake to be cut,” she said.

“Yeah. Near the bridal party.” I groaned. “He’s probably hooking up with a bridesmaid or something.”

She snorted a laugh. “Yeah, probably.” She lowered her feet to the floor. “Although he seemed tame tonight.”

“I think he was trying to behave. At least until our dad left.”

She frowned. “Left and returned.”

I turned to see what she was frowning at. Dad jogged inside, shaking his head.

“What’s wrong?”

“I forgot my phone!” he yelled, running toward the table where he’d left it.

I grinned. “What do you need it for? You’re going to be on your honeymoon.”

“In case of emergencies,” he said once he walked back toward the exit, scrolling on it. “Emergencies you and your brother won’t have while I’m



gone.” He glanced up at us. “Right?”

“Right.”

“Here, let me get a couple of pictures of you two.” He held up his phone. “I told you I wouldn’t get any all night.”

“The photographer did.” I pulled Brooke into my lap, and she giggled as we smiled up at him.

“Brooke, you look lovely tonight.” He grinned and turned the phone to vertical for a portrait pose.

“Aw, thanks, Mr. Wagner.”

“What am I? Chopped liver?” I teased.

Brooke kissed my cheek.

“I know you look fine. You take after me,” he joked, puffing out his chest and winking before he headed off again.

Brooke didn’t make any move to get off my lap. She gazed at me, playing with my hair.

“I’m proud of you,” I admitted.

She tilted her head to the side.

“All these pictures all night. I don’t think you’ve even thought about checking your reflection.”

Her smile was sweet and knowing. “I’m working on it.” She kissed me near my ear to whisper. “Thanks to you.”

I shivered at her sexy voice and slid my hand up her leg. I missed the slit in that green dress, but this one let me explore a bit too. “Yeah?”

“I like the way you look at me.”

I slid my fingers further up, glancing around the room to see if anyone would notice if I fooled around.

“Especially when I’m naked.”

She tugged my earlobe into her mouth and sucked.

My dick jerked.

She tensed at my grip. I’d slid my hand all the way up her leg and held her ass in my hand. Her *bare* ass. My fingertips were near her slit, and I eased one closer, brushing back and forth to reach her pussy.

“You’re not wearing anything at all under this?” I asked, feeling a sense of *déjà vu* with those words.

“Nope,” she said, easing her legs wider apart.

Already I could feel her wet.

“I thought you said we had to stop hooking up like this,” I teased, dipping

my fingertip between her folds.

“No.” She kissed me hard. “Never.”

I sucked on her lips, tasting the one drink of whiskey she'd allowed herself. As she moaned into my mouth, I moved my thumb toward her clit.

“Okay. Okay,” she said, panting. She practically fell off my lap as she clumsily shot to her feet. “Let's go.” Grabbing my tie, she pulled me toward the exit where a line of hired drivers could take us home.



BROOKE

“**A**hem.”

I bit Kaden’s lip as he parted, breaking the kiss that I never wanted to end.

“*Ahem.*”

He squeezed my knee as he reached into his pocket. “Baby, we’re here.”

I wrenched my eyes open, realizing he was right. We’d made out and groped at each other the whole drive to his place. We’d stopped, and the driver awkwardly sat in the front, looking anywhere but in the rearview mirror.

“Oh.” I heaved in a deep breath, willing my heart to calm enough to get out of the backseat and into Kaden’s house.

“Thanks.” Kaden tossed bills at the driver and helped me crawl out of the car. He didn’t wait to see if the guy drove off before he framed my face and kissed me hard. Backpedaling toward his door, he didn’t let up the strokes of his tongue as we headed inside.

He’d given me his tux jacket, and he used the lapels to pull me inside with him once he locked the door.

“I love you.” He wrenched the jacket off and yanked at his tie as he kissed me so hard I slammed against the door.

I reached for his pants. “Me too.”

“And I love the way you make me feel.”

I arched a brow, licking my lips as I focused on unzipping him. “Yeah. Me too.” I did. I loved the way he made me feel about myself. Wanted. Loved. Treasured.

I dropped to my knees, shoving his pants and boxers down as I went.

His erection sprang out, tapping my cheek as I almost fell.

I closed my lips around him and he groaned.

Right there at the doorway, I laved and licked his thick cock. His fingers threaded through my hair and he wrapped the long lengths out of the way so he could gaze down at me.

I moaned, gripping his ass to secure my mouth over him. I slid him all the way in, sucking hard as my nose brushed into his pubic hair.

“Fuck!” His hips jerked as I continued the long, deep bobs back and forth.

“Take your dress off,” he said, out of breath as his dick throbbed within my mouth. I didn’t care if he was close. I knew he’d take care of me too. I loved it when he came inside me, but I was too addicted to his taste.

I fumbled, groping for my silver dress as he held my head still and fucked my mouth. I didn’t want to rip the dress. It held so much meaning for me. That was the day Kaden and I had our reset. The day Margaux helped welcome me into their family by gifting me this lovely gown that made me feel so beautiful.

With a growl, he pulled out of my mouth and lowered to pick me up so I could stand. He kissed me hard as he finished removing my dress at the same time he stepped out of his pants and shoes.

I wrenched at his shirt, then squeaked in surprise when he hauled me over his shoulder.

The trip didn’t last long. He smacked my ass and rubbed it before he lowered me not too gently on the couch. It was the closest horizontal surface, and I didn’t care.

“You know I wanna come inside you,” he growled as he lowered himself over me. “I’m clean and haven’t been with anyone but you.”

Every inch of his hard, hot body seared me, and I arched up to him and into his kiss.

Before I could loop my arms around his neck, he gathered me in his arms and rolled us. He lay on his back and moved me up, encouraging me to crawl up his chest.

“And you know I’ve been dying for a taste all night.”

I grinned when I realized he wanted me to straddle his face. “But I wanted a taste too. By the way, the only person I’ve been with is you, so I’m clean too.”

I didn’t protest any further, moaning at the first stroke of his tongue. He

didn't stop once, making me whimper with each suck of my clit between his teeth.

I arched back, gripping his dick to pump it behind me.

His hums of approval drove my desire hotter. I would burn. I knew it. He would incinerate me at this rate, and I didn't want it to be over yet.

I stopped humping his face and moved.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked, his huge hands on my hips to help me from tumbling to the floor.

I answered him by presenting my pussy to him. I lay over him and closed my mouth over his dick, sucking him in deep.

He groaned, resuming the teasing licks and soothing pulls on my clit. Rocking back against his mouth, I bobbed up and down on his length.

And when I came, I feared I'd choke on his dick. I moaned, not letting go. My cheeks hurt and my chin was slick from my saliva. At the first wave of pleasure that coursed through me, I dropped onto his mouth so he could carry me through the blinding orgasm.

I didn't have a chance to finish him. Still pulsing, my pussy so sore and throbbing, I felt off-kilter as he shifted away from me. His hands guided me as I caught my breath, and I leaned into him as he propped me up over the couch. Against the back of the sofa, I lay limp and shaking. My arm hung over the top, and I turned my head into the cushions. He parted my legs with his knee and slid into me with a desperate, hard thrust from behind.

The furniture moved with his hard drives into me. I rose up onto my hands as I felt the building tension of another and even harder orgasm. I hurtled toward it, stretched so full with his big dick spearing into me. He wrapped my fingers over the edge of the couch's frame, encouraging me to hold on. Then he dragged his hands up my arms to grab my breasts.

*More.* I whimpered, carried away by the heat of it all.

He thumbed my nipples as he bent his head.

He bit my neck, sucking the pain away, and with one more hard piston into me, he groaned.

I clenched around him, wheezing at the relief of coming so hard. Finally. *Finally.* I cried out and hung my head low as he thrust twice more as his cock jerked and pulsed so deep within me.

He heaved his chest against my back, catching his breath as he held me to him.

"Fuck."

It was a panted exhale, and I couldn't agree with him more.

Limp and spent, I smiled lazily and sighed as I straightened to rest my head on his shoulder. I had enough energy to turn toward him and return his kiss. Closing my eyes, I treasured the way he told me the one thing I'd never tire of hearing.

"I love you."

He slipped out of me and turned me to pick me up.

"I love you too."

We recovered in the shower, rinsing away the sweat and bodily fluids, then also my makeup from the wedding. I didn't have the stamina for much more than standing there, and when his stomach grumbled, I laughed.

"Worked up an appetite?" I teased.

He gave me a slow onceover. "For you? Always."

"Do you have any leftovers?" I asked.

"No. I need to go grocery shopping."

I grimaced as he shut the water off.

"What?"

"I *hate* grocery shopping."

He smiled and reached for a towel to dry me off. "Me too."

"Although I think I'd like doing it with you."

"Grocery shopping?"

I nodded as he grabbed a towel for himself. "I think you could make anything more fun and interesting."

"Then it's a date."

*One of many.*

We didn't bother getting dressed, wearing the towels in the kitchen where we finished off that mint chocolate chip ice cream for a late snack.

I paused, shivering at the chill, and peered at him. "So that day. When I brought this over."

"Yeah?" He stared at the slow lick I gave my spoon. I grinned. It was too damn much fun teasing him, and I loved to do it when I knew he'd return the favor.

"What *do* guys like when they're not having a good day? If not ice cream."

He pointed at my spoon. "That."

I licked the tip.

"Yeah. That." He stood and dropped his towel, naked in the kitchen.

“Already?” I laughed and shook my head.

“Are *you* ready?”

With him? I’d be ready for anything.

“For?” I asked playfully, eyeing his dick that was getting harder as I stared. Tension built as I ached for him again.

“The hot tub.” He smirked at me. “To warm up after the ice cream.”

*Ooooh*. That did sound good. And I bet it would get me tired enough to sleep after the adrenaline of the whole day.

I stood and reached for my towel but paused.

So many windows. His house was enormous, and all this space made it seem like I was just so exposed, although it was only the two of us.

“I can get you something,” he hurried to say.

*Nah*. I reached for the knot I’d tied and loosened it, letting the towel fall to the floor like his had.

His smile softened as he stalked up to me. My skin tingled from the contact of his bare body flush with mine. When he kissed me slow and deep, I felt the love behind it.

“You are the bravest woman I know.”

It wouldn’t be an overnight solution. I’d always have moments that could creep up on me. Insecurities would resurface.

“The most resilient badass.”

I sighed into his kiss. “Because of you. Because you inspire me to be better and try harder.”

He picked me up and carried me to the hot tub.

“That’s what you do to me,” he argued. “You make me want to be the best man I can be.”

“You already are.”

We cuddled, sliding into the heat of the hot tub and embracing the heat.

“My goal, my mission,” he promised with a kiss on my temple, “is to make you smile, laugh, and love yourself the same way I love you.”

“You’re ambitious,” I teased.

“I don’t care.” He stroked his fingers up around my tattoos, both caressing me and admiring the artwork. “You’ll always come first, Brooke.”

“So?” I asked playfully, content in his vows. “Do you love me enough to get a tattoo?”

He laughed. “You’re really determined, aren’t you?”

“A little. It’s addicting.” I told my mom that I’d gotten my tats as



camouflage. To hide from myself. But now, especially with the way Kaden stroked his fingers over them, I loved them even more. They didn't *hide* me. They were part of how I expressed myself. Boldly. Proudly. With color and edge.

"You're my addiction," he replied.

"It's just that you're so perfect."

He chuckled. "Yeah, right."

"No." I turned to face him fully on his lap. "In high school. You were every girl's crush. The golden boy. Blond and blue-eyed heartthrob. You were so popular and good, it was sickening."

He laughed harder. "Not buying it."

"Oh, come on. You knew it."

"Kody had the big ego. Not me."

"Still." I narrowed my eyes at him and grinned. "You can admit you're the good twin. You like being the good boy."

He jumped me in his lap. "I'll be bad for you anytime you'd like."

"Good." *As long as you're mine.*

His kiss curled my toes.

He spread his fingers over his chest. "How about your name here?"

I rolled my eyes and smiled.

"And my name here." He rubbed his fingers along my ass.

I cracked up and kissed him until we were both pruned from the water and ready to sleep together—in *our* bed.



## KADEN

Everyone at the office took a long weekend off. Dad had left me and Kody in charge. Letting employees have Monday and Tuesday off probably wasn't setting the best example. We had a close group at the company though. So many had been at the wedding. It didn't seem extreme to let others rest until Wednesday.

On the first day at the office, Kody and I remained consistent.

Within an hour, we were arguing and scowling at each other, but I didn't take it to heart. I doubted he did either.

"Just keep your hands to yourself," I reminded him.

He crossed his arms. "That's not your call. I will do what I want with my life, and you'll do what you want with yours."

"Fine." I threw my pen to the desk. "However, when what you choose to do with your life—sleeping with any woman you see—can cause issues like this?"

He rolled his eyes. "But I *didn't* sleep with *that* one."

Which was true. We'd come to the office to find out an employee had accused Kody of knocking her up. She'd come prepared, storing documents and statements from employees who'd witnessed him hitting on her. She'd even saved text logs of him hitting on her. Kody denied it all. Well, he admitted to trying to get in her pants but didn't follow through.

This was nothing like the prank he'd played on Brooke in high school, though. This time, he'd intended to sleep with the junior accountant but he'd gone out of town, and when he'd returned, she wasn't interested at all.

Instead, as it turned out, she'd gotten back together with an ex, and that

one-night stand had resulted in a baby. When the ex didn't want to be involved with the baby on the way, the girl tried to pin it on Kody, eager for unlimited financial support as a single mom.

His only saving grace was that he hadn't been in town when she claimed they'd hooked up. Irrefutable proof remained in the form of his flight and hotel stays.

"Still. Your reputation precedes you," I warned him. "You got lucky."

"This time," Pamela said as she came in to drop off a form then leave again.

"But in the future, hands off."

He rolled his eyes. "Look, just because you're determined to settle down with Brooke doesn't mean you can preach it to anyone else. I'm happy to be—and remain—single."

And there she was. Smirking at Kody's comment, she shook her head as she entered the office, files in hand.

"Hands off at the office," she advised dryly.

I'd already told her about it all before she called to let me know she was stopping by. Texting or calling, we were always in touch in those brief moments of downtime during our busy days.

I gestured at her. "Exactly. Hands off at the office."

He volleyed his gaze between us, skeptical. "Sure. Like that's what you're here for."

She playfully sneered at him, holding up the file. "I'm here to go over a long list of contract points to finalize." She raised her coffee. "Hope you're ready."

I stood, heading toward her and taking the files to toss to my desk. "You know what, Kody? I think I can handle this meeting on my own."

He groaned and shook his head. "I'm going. I'm going. Put your damn out-of-office reply up."

After he shut the door, I took the tall coffee Brooke had arrived with and put it on a side table next to the chairs that faced my desk.

"I mean it. I know we stayed up late last night, but we need to address these last points." She lifted her head and narrowed her eyes at me. "What are you doing, locking that door?"

I stalked back to her, loving the way her eyes lit up in excitement.

"Making sure no one interrupts."

She crossed her arms. "Interrupts our meeting?"

I nodded, retreating to the windows to close the blinds on the door, too. I didn't need anyone looking in and seeing how I'd make a hypocrite of myself. I had no plans to keep my hands off her. Or my mouth.

She rolled her eyes. "You have a one-track mind."

"Yeah. Brooke. On repeat."

She grinned, propping her butt to the edge of my desk.

I groaned, sinking in to one of the chairs. "Do you have any idea how many times I've fantasized about you spread out right here?"

"We're at *work*," she reminded me primly. She hopped back to sit and spread her legs wide.

I dropped my head back and groaned. "You fucking tease."

"Hmmm-mmm." She traced her finger over the low cut of her collar. "You love it."

"I do. I love it and I love you." I loved everything she did. But when she teased me like this, it only amped up my desire.

"I waited twelve years to get you," I told her as I stood. "Waiting makes the rewards all the more better."

"Yep." She crossed her legs but eyed my crotch. "And we can wait until we're in the bedroom for that kind of a lethal smolder you've got going on there."

Dammit. She just had to look there. I could see it now. Eating her on this desk. Her sinking to the carpet right here. Pounding into her.

She whined and shook her head. "We're at *work*," she repeated.

"But I'm the boss."

Her brows shot up. She perked at the challenge in my tone.

"Who's going to discipline us?" I asked as I set my hand on her leg. I leaned in to kiss her cheek. "Who's going to catch us?"

She cleared her throat and shook her head, jerking out of the chemistry sparking between us. "You're not the boss *yet*."

I dragged my hand along her thigh to get a hand on her ass.

"You're not the boss until the end of the year," she reminded me, although she scooted closer and set her hands on my chest.

"You're not the boss until your dad retires."

I pulled her all the way to the edge of the desk, parting her legs.

Her gasp followed the move, and I dove in to capture her parted lips. When she mewled and sucked on my tongue, I wondered if she would be quiet enough.

“Don’t obsess over the details,” I whispered.

She licked her lips. “Please, can we just do this meeting and then save this for at home?”

I dragged her panties down and shook my head.

“Todd’s going to wonder where I am. He needs this document finalized.” Her lids fluttered closed as I dipped my finger into her wet heat.

“Baby,” I said. “I’m your boss right now.”

She shuddered, gripping my chin to turn me for a hot kiss. “Is that so?”

I nodded, loving the way she grinned and pushed into my hands.

“What would you like me to do, *boss*?”

Fuck. Me. I pistoned my fingers in her as I leaned toward her ear. “I want you to get my dick out of my pants.”

Her fingers trembled as she obeyed, unzipping me and pulling my hard cock out. She rolled her thumb over the tip, spreading the liquid there.

“And I want you to be my beautiful good girl,” I whispered.

She panted against my mouth, her breaths coming fast and hot.

Knocks sounded.

“Kaden?” Pamela called out. “I’ve got something for you to sign when you’re free.”

Brooke widened her eyes at me, alarmed at getting caught.

“Sure. I’ll be out in a couple of minutes,” I called out to my secretary.

“A couple of minutes?” Brooke taunted in a sexy murmur.

I nodded. “I want you to be my beautiful good girl,” I repeated before I kissed her. “And be quiet.”

She disobeyed immediately, whining as I flipped up her skirt.

She tugged my cock toward her entrance. Watching her slim fingers on it would never fail to arouse me. We both stared as she lined me up. I thrust my hips forward, impaling her slowly.

“Oh,” she breathed.

“Shhh.” Back and forth, I rocked my hips into her. I didn’t have time to worship her. That would have to come later. As it did every night.

She coated my dick in her juices, and I made sure to drag it through her clenching grip. All the way out, then in to the hilt.

Two minutes was more than enough. I knew my girl and how to play her. Like an expert, I drove her to a hard orgasm. She milked me dry, biting her lip to stay quiet.

She shuddered after I pulled out, and I held her hand, helping her off the

desk. In my private bathroom she waited patiently—drowsily—as I cleaned us both up.

Three and a half minutes later, we sat across from each other at my desk.

“Now.”

She hummed, a sleepy sound that made me want to cuddle her instead.

“Those contract points.”

She arched a brow. “What contract points?”

I licked my lips and smiled.

She pointed toward the door. “Shouldn’t you unlock it? Open the blinds?”

I gave her a roguish grin. “Like they don’t know what we were doing already.” But I got up and went to the door anyway. I flicked the lock to open, then tended to the blinds. I even opened the door for good measure if it would alleviate her concerns.

She gazed at me as I sat back down. “Have you always been this possessive?”

I shook my head. “But with you?” I shrugged.

Her sigh was a happy one. “Don’t ever stop.”

*I don’t plan on it.*

# **EPILOGUE**



BROOKE

### Three Months Later

**W**hile Kaden showered, I stood on the balcony of our suite. It was freezing out here. They sure weren't joking about the winds being so harsh close to the cliffs and the sea. Scotland was majestic despite the bite in the air.

Kaden and I had been here for one week so far, and I doubted I'd ever tire of finding something new to marvel at every day. At least, when we went sightseeing. I'd say it was fifty-fifty. When we weren't making love, we were out seeing all the sights.

Staying at a castle hadn't been the first idea we had, but on a late night out with Rena, she told us that she was going to buy a plot of land so she could officially call herself a lady. That led to talking about royalty, then castles, and well, here we were.

I sighed, drawing in a deep breath and burrowing into my coat. I might have looked like a lunatic standing here in the cold, but I knew that when I went back inside, Kaden could warm me up in front of the massive fireplace. Making love on a plush rug had to be better than any stretch of sand.

Since we'd taken off, we'd splurged on this romantic, exciting getaway. Traveling with him might become my new hobby.

Rena teased me, saying I'd inked myself so much I had to move on to a new expensive activity. I doubted it would ever take. I still worked for Todd

at Halden Inc. Kaden still ran Wagner Industries with Kody.

When their father returned from his honeymoon with Margaux, he'd taken a very relaxed position as the boss. After all, it wouldn't be long until he retired anyway. He was a placeholder until Kaden returned with me.

Our original, exclusive business contract still stood. It was amazing that one little chance email I'd sent out had resulted—ultimately—in this grand vacation in a remote castle with a hunk like Kaden loving on me so thoroughly.

Maybe I should have given more credit to the fake-date arrangement we'd hatched. Without that, I might not have ever taken it this far with Kaden. Or worse, we might have never connected the way we had. In hindsight, I doubted I would have ever sought revenge on him. I simply wasn't that kind of a mean person. My soul wasn't a black pit any more than Kaden's or Kody's ever could have been.

Kaden's soul was sweet and ever-loving. Kody? Well, he wasn't much of a jerk anymore. I could give him credit where credit was due.

"Are you out there?" Kaden called out through the glass door I'd left cracked open.

"Yeah!"

"They said it's going to snow!"

I shrugged and inhaled a biting cold lungful of air. Which prompted a coughing fit.

"Come back in!" he yelled, laughing. "You'll freeze."

*Okay, maybe I will.* Shivering with my teeth chattering, I slipped back inside.

He was warm with his hair still damp from his shower. Steam trailed out of the bathroom behind him, and I wished that we were back at his house and able to get in his hot tub.

No, not *his* house. *Our* house. I'd started to move my things in, and once my lease was up next month, it would be official. We'd been official for three months. Some days it felt like it had only been days, and other times, it felt like we'd always belonged to each other.

He chuckled as he rubbed his hands on my arms. "I understand you want to see it all, but baby, hypothermia isn't worth it."

"Then thaw me out."

He shook his head, helping me out of my coat.

"I wanted to see the sunset," I explained.

“Then we’ll see it. Through the window.”

After I grabbed a hot drink from the room service delivery order he’d thought ahead to place, I moved back to the balcony doors.

“Did you call your dad back?” I asked.

He grunted a laugh. “Yeah.”

“Was it an emergency? With work?”

He shook his head. “No. Just wanted to see how the vacation was going.”

I smiled. I’d wondered for a while if he and Kody would struggle to adapt to Margaux and Mercedes in their lives. I was happy to see that they hadn’t hit any obstacles. Kaden and Kody hadn’t lost their dad at all.

“And to ask again if we could count on any grandkids soon.”

I giggled. If it wasn’t his dad asking, it was my mom hinting.

She was so busy with renovations on her house. Every time I spoke with her, she was happy and content. According to her, with a safer and updated house and the potential for grandbabies, her life couldn’t be any more perfect.

“Maybe next time we can plan to go somewhere like this in the warmer months,” Kaden said.

I shrugged. “We hadn’t planned this, remember?”

He nodded, wrapping his arms around me as we watched the sunset in the distance. “The first impulsive trip of many.”

I grinned and rubbed his arm over my waist. “Have you been thinking about where we might go next?”

“Kind of. Have you?”

“I’ve got ideas of where I’d like to go.”

*As long as it’s with you.*

I turned in his arms and kissed him. “I’m looking forward to the future.”

I certainly wasn’t stuck in the past.

“If there was a sparkly ring in the future, would you say yes?”

I batted my lids at him, suddenly bashful. *Oh, my God!*

“Of course, I would.”

He dropped to one knee, holding my hand as he pulled a ring box from his pocket. Against the flickering flames, the diamond sparkled in a brilliant show of glimmers. “Brooke, would you do me the honor of making me the happiest man alive and be my wife?”

I leaned down and framed his face. As I tipped his chin up, I brought my lips toward his. “Yes, Kaden. I would love to be your wife.”

He kissed me and wrapped me in his arms. I squealed at the tilt of the

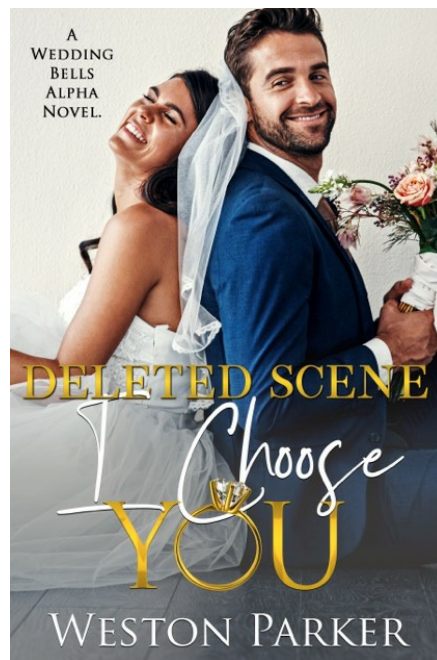
room as he curled me to the side and lowered me to the plush rug. Before the roaring fire, he slid the ring onto my finger then kissed my knuckles. “Perfect fit.”

I gazed at him. “You are. *We* are.”

As he hovered over me, angling in for another hard kiss, he paused at my lips and grinned. “Looks like we have another wedding to plan for.”

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Did you fall in love with Brooke and Kaden? I’ve got a special deleted scene just for YOU! [Get your copy HERE!!](#)



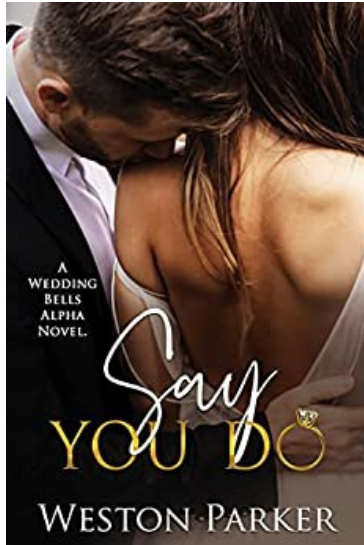
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Check out book 1 in the Wedding Bells Alpha Series called [Say You Do!](#)

**My brother is an idiot—he's getting married.**

And I'm in charge of getting things together



since our folks are gone.

Lucky me. The guy who thinks love is for the birds and worn-out 80s songs.

I honestly don't have time for this drama. I run a billion-dollar company, have women to entertain, and am working on my plans to rule the world.

No, seriously.

And yet, when you least expect it, life kicks you in the balls.

The beautiful, snarky woman that runs the flower shop is perfect to help me pull off this wedding.

Just seeing her sends my head spinning with possibilities.

She's perfect. To play my fake wife for an event I have coming up as a side deal.

My ex-wife will be at the event, and I sure could use someone to show her how well I've done since she ripped out my soul.

So my curvy new friend gets my ring and a chunk of my wallet before agreeing to the deal.

Funny thing is, I'm not so interested in taking it back by the end of the adventure.

I'm willing to go all in on what might be the best decision of my life.

And I'm demanding the same of her. No maybes. No I-don't-knows.

No fear of what might be or might not be.

Open your pretty pink lips and utter the words.

**Say you do.**

[I gotta have this!](#)

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Weston Parker*  
EVERY *good girl* DESERVES A *bad boy*

Hey there. I'm Weston.

Have we met? No? Well, it's time to end that tragedy.

I'm a former firefighter/EMS guy who's picked up the proverbial pen and started writing bad boy romance stories. I co-write with my sister, Ali Parker, but live in Texas with my wife, my two little boys, my daughter, a dog, and a turtle.

Yep. A turtle. You read that right. Don't be jealous.

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## **I Choose You**

A Wedding Bells Alpha Novel #11

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