

I should've
You're not
I promise
If we ever
I'm sorry
Nobody else
They all know
I love the way you
travel the
with

I am scared of the fall
and I wish I could come
to better and be the
meet again it will be
every song is about

He's their celebrity crush.

And my worst mistake...

*P.S. I'm still
yours*

ELIAH GREENWOOD

P.S. I'M

STILL

YOURS

ELIAH GREENWOOD

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Warning: This book contains topics that might be triggering to some readers; gun violence, mentions of abuse on minors, grief, foul language. It also contains detailed adult scenes. Proceed with caution.

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For the people who think their dreams are too big...
I hope you chase them with everything you have.



HADLEY, 16

You weren't wearing a tie.

Of all the things I could've been thinking about in the middle of my brother's funeral, *that's* what stood out to me.

Never mind that I was standing in front of the whole town, choking on my grief as I tried to finish my twin's eulogy. My brain chose to focus on you.

You, Kane.

You who'd just stumbled into the church with your almost seven-foot-tall bodyguard. I can still see it so vividly. Your brown hair was a perfect mess, and I mean the "I'm not sure if he spent hours on this look or if he rolled out of bed ten minutes ago and called it a day" kind.

You were wearing big *I'm famous* black shades, a tailored suit I'm sure cost more than my family home, and a white dress shirt with the first two buttons undone. Oh, and don't forget the alcohol flask in your hand.

You told your bodyguard to wait by the doors as you stuffed the flask in your pocket and staggered down the center aisle. Anyone with eyes could see that you were drunk as you

plopped down next to your mom a few rows from the lectern, ignoring her disapproving glares as you did.

That's right, you were *wasted*.

Like showing up thirty minutes late to your oldest friend's funeral wasn't bad enough.

Your mom said something beneath her breath, but you ignored her.

Then you looked straight at me.

At least, I'd like to think you did.

Your sunglasses were too dark to know for sure, but I swear I could feel your eyes on me, watching me, drinking me in for the first time in years.

Something broke in my chest in that moment.

But it wasn't my heart.

Hell no.

It couldn't be.

I considered looking away, but I wanted you to know that I'd seen you.

That I hated you.

I hated you for leaving us behind, but mostly, I hated that it took Gray getting murdered for you to come back.

I held your gaze as I wrapped up my speech. I held your gaze until you couldn't hold mine. You looked down at your hands, shame oozing out of you, and it felt good to see you squirm.

You felt like shit for a second there.

In spite of the money.

In spite of the fame.

In spite of your new life and your adoring, screaming fans.

You. Felt. Like. Shit.

And that meant you were still human.

Even if just deep down inside.

I stepped away from the stand and retook my seat next to my mother, unaware that a bunch of men with cameras were fifteen minutes away from bursting through the doors and crashing my brother's funeral just to get a few pictures of you.

I can still hear your mom's apologies as your bodyguard led you out of the church and into a car waiting out front. Just like that, you were gone.

Again.

I should've been used to it. After all, it wasn't my first time watching you leave. But it still made me think of the countless summers we'd spent together.

I thought of the first time I ever heard you sing. The nights we'd spend catching fireflies at the beach house. Back when you were just a boy with a broken guitar and I was a naïve girl in love with her brother's best friend.

My mind brought me back to the start.

And for the first time since you left...

I let it.



Before he left...

HADLEY, 13

“**W**ill you hurry the hell up? We need to get to the video game store before it closes!” My twin brother pounds on the bathroom door for the tenth time in five minutes—and when I say “pounding on the door,” I mean it sounds like he’s trying to drive his fist through it.

He didn’t even knock that hard the day he went through an entire cheesecake at my cousin’s wedding, only to find out he’d become lactose intolerant overnight.

Yes, that can happen.

“Calm down, I’m almost ready.” I set my hair straightener down, unplug it, and give myself a once-over in the mirror.

I really shouldn’t have gone for a swim right before the party—my hair was already frizzy from the humidity, so once I got it wet, my straightener didn’t stand a chance.

We need to go to the store to pick up a few last-minute items for tonight. I’m only tagging along because Mom promised we’d stop by the art store afterward.

I wasn't able to bring all of my painting supplies to the beach house, so Mom promised to get me a few things to get me through the summer.

Gray pounds on the door again. "What are you doing in there? Naming your pubes? Get out, you dildo."

I roll my eyes at my brother's request.

Gray might be the oldest since he was born a few minutes before me, but that doesn't make him the mature twin. We're thirteen, soon to be fourteen, but I swear sometimes he acts like he's *ten*.

We're about to start high school, for God's sake.

I know he's only nagging me because Evie, Mom's best friend in the entire world, agreed to stop by the video game store on our way back. She even promised to buy Gray a new game for no reason other than to make him happy.

That's Evelyn Wilder for you.

She's the best godmother my brother and I could've ever asked for. Although, looking at the time, I doubt we'll be able to stop by the art store *and* the video game store before they close.

"Grayson, no dildo talk!" Mom scolds from the kitchen. That's been his go-to insult since he learned what the word meant. "We'll be waiting in the car, okay, honey?"

"Okay," I shout.

My brother lets out an irritated growl before walking away. It isn't long before I hear the front door close in the distance.

I run my hand through my wavy red hair with a sigh. This is the first time Mom's *ever* let my hair get this long. She said I'm old enough to take care of it now. It stops inches above my belly button, although I barely ever wear it down.

I *always* put my hair up, leave two strands out to frame my face, and call it a day.

My heart swells with joy when I stroll out of the bathroom and scan the beach house.

God, I love this place.

I've always loved it here.

Nothing sets my heart on fire quite like vacationing in Golden Cove.

Whenever the end of the summer rolls around, I catch myself wishing time would slow down. I know summer can't last forever, but I sure hope this tradition will.

We've been spending the summer at the Wilders' beach house for as long as I can remember. It gives our families an excuse to meet up at least once a year seeing as Evie, her husband, and their son live in New York the rest of the time.

It's the only vacation Mom has all year. She's been running the convenience store my grandparents left her since Gray and I were born, and the only way she can afford to come with us during the summer is to work nights, weekends, and holidays.

She says it's all worth it, though.

Not only is the beach house gorgeous, it's located in a gated community with a tennis court, access to a private beach, and a bunch of other cool amenities.

Like Evie's husband, most of the people who own houses around here are millionaires who spend the year traveling and only come back for the summer.

I'll never understand how anyone could *willingly* leave this place ten months out of the year.

If it were up to me, I'd stay forever.

Saying goodbye to the beach house means saying goodbye to the ocean, colorful sunsets and sunrises, marshmallows by the fire, but most of all... saying goodbye to Golden Cove means saying goodbye to *him*.

Kane Wilder.

Evie's son and the real reason why I just spent half an hour fixing my hair. I've had a big fat, embarrassing crush on Kane since, well, *forever*.

There's just something about this boy that turns my brain into mush.

Maybe it's his emerald-green eyes, his tousled brown hair, or the fact that he's always been nice to me—well, *nicer* than Gray and his dumb-ass friends. Or maybe it has to do with him calling me *Hads* for as long as I can remember.

The worst part is this crush is the definition of unrequited. Kane is fifteen, two years older than us, and I'm pretty sure he only sees me as Gray's annoying twin sister.

How could he not? I only recently stopped following them around like a lost puppy.

This summer is going to be different, though. I'm not a kid anymore. I'm supposed to be starting high school in September, which means I need to get over my silly crush *stat*.

You hear that, me?

Your days of swooning over a boy you'll never have are over.

I should have no problem moving on now that Kane's hit puberty. He's not the same person anymore. He's different. And not just because he's gotten taller and his voice is deeper.

He's moody, for one.

Quiet, too.

He's barely left his room since we got to the beach house five days ago. It's gotten to the point where Evie has to bring him food to make sure he's eating, and on the rare occasion that he does leave his room, it's only to use the bathroom or shower.

Oh, and his smiles seem forced.

Like he's dead inside.

Note to self: look up 'Does puberty make you dead inside?'

He didn't want to go shopping with us today. He said he had a headache and he was going to take a nap. Evie didn't question it, but I could tell she was worried.

I'm halfway to the front door when I realize I left my phone in the bathroom. I retrace my steps, grab my phone off the counter, and shove it into my pocket. Just as I'm about to walk out of the house, I hear something.

Singing.

The sound is distant, faint, and I spin, wondering if my mind is playing tricks on me. A familiar melody reaches my ears, and I set out to follow the music.

I find myself at the bottom of the staircase before I know it.

It's coming from upstairs.

Maybe Kane is playing music on his phone?

They're waiting for you, a voice in my head reminds me, but my body refuses to cooperate.

One step.

Two steps.

Three steps.

I tiptoe up the stairs against my better judgment, seeking answers like I'm compelled to uncover who the voice belongs to. I track the music all the way to a room I've only ever been in once before.

The sunroom.

The door is ajar, allowing me to see the grand piano sitting in the center of the space and the two-person bench placed next to it.

The walls are covered in floor-to-ceiling windows, but the curtains are drawn, blocking out the light. The closer I get, the clearer the voice becomes.

It's raspy.

Warm.

Captivating.

I inch toward the gap in the door, and my heart somersaults in my chest.

I was wrong.

Kane isn't playing music on his phone...

Kane *is* the music.

He's sitting on the white couch in the corner of the room with his head hanging low and his brown hair dangling in front of his eyes. There's a guitar on his lap.

Only then do I recognize the melody floating around the room.

The song is "Iris" by the Goo Goo Dolls.

I've heard this song before.

Plenty of times.

But it has *never* sounded like this.

God, his voice...

I glance down to see my forearms covered in goose bumps. I didn't even know Kane could sing. Or play the guitar—if you can even call the piece of crap on his lap a guitar.

The paint is chipped, and two of the strings are broken. Anyone would sound bad with a guitar like that, but not Kane.

Somehow, he pulls it off.

I can't move a muscle, eyes glued to his lips as they create magic. Every note is a breathy gift from the universe, and I fight the urge to close my eyes to soak it all up.

He seems new at playing the guitar. I know because there's a slight pause every time he alternates between chords, but it doesn't take away from his talent in the slightest.

I must stand there, watching him raise the bar for any of my future crushes way too high, for over two minutes. He hasn't once looked up from his guitar, pouring all of his energy into getting the chords right.

Something in my chest aches when the song comes to an end. I should leave, but I'm rooted in place.

That's when my phone chimes with a text.

Kane's head snaps up, and he immediately spots me staring at him through the gap in the door. His eyes grow, but I don't wait for him to call me out on my stalker behavior, turning to leave.

"Hads," I hear him say.

But I'm already charging down the stairs.



I WAS REALLY EXCITED ABOUT THE PARTY.

Of course, that was before I found out I wasn't allowed to invite Jamie, my friend from Hillford. Apparently, the cocktail party is "exclusive to Golden Cove residents."

In other words, *no normal people allowed*.

I thought maybe Vince would show up and I'd have at least one person to talk to, but he ditched the party to hang out with Jamie's brother, Callum.

Vince is Gray's friend and the only person our age in the gated community. His parents bought a vacation house in Golden Cove when we were seven.

You best believe Gray, Kane, and I spotted him from miles away. We went up to him his first day here, excited to have a new friend to play with.

Vince introduced us to Callum and his sister, Jamie, the following week—his parents are friends with their dad—and we've all been inseparable ever since. Although I must say I'm much closer to Jamie than the guys.

I scan the backyard and fancy people drinking champagne. Evie said her husband wanted to throw the party to *network* and *talk business*, which makes no sense, considering Mr. Wilder doesn't even work.

Kane's dad was born into wealth, and Wilder Enterprises, the family company, has been passed on from generation to generation.

The business is currently run by Kane's uncle, while Mr. Wilder does whatever the hell he wants, eating at the finest restaurants and living off the fortune his ancestors worked their entire lives for.

Like it wasn't bad enough that he let his wife organize the entire party on her own, the staff he hired is *useless*.

Evie's been killing herself, making sure that nobody runs out of champagne or appetizers since the party started. I spend the next hour waiting for dinner to be served and call it a night as soon as I'm done eating.

Maybe if Kane was here, I'd have a reason to stay, but he hasn't come down *once* since the party started.

I wonder if he's mad at me.

I didn't mean to spy on him. It just happened. And if I'm being honest, I don't regret it. I'd spy on him a thousand times if it meant I got to hear him sing again.

I reach the top of the stairs a few minutes later and make a beeline for my bedroom. I can't help eyeing Kane's closed door as I make my way down the hall.

I'm seconds away from opening my bedroom door when a deep voice cuts through the air.

"You worthless piece of shit. Get up!"

My body goes rigid.

"I knew I'd find you in here playing your little tunes."

It's coming from down the hall.

"I'm sorry, sir."

I recognize his voice instantly.

Kane.

The man with him lets out a cruel laugh. "You're not sorry."

There's a beat of silence.

"But you will be."

Maybe I should pretend nothing's wrong, mind my business for once, but the noise that follows seals the deal. What sounds like a hard slap makes my blood run cold.

Then I hear a loud thud.

“Look at me when I'm talking to you!”

I have no control over my body as I creep down the hall, my pulse wilding out in my neck. I realize I'm holding my breath when the scene comes into view.

Kane.

On the ground in the middle of the sunroom.

Holding his jaw.

His dad is towering over him. I can only see Mr. Wilder's back from where I am, but I have no doubt his face reflects the hatred in his voice.

“I said fucking look at me!” Mr. Wilder seethes, picking his son off the floor so violently he rips the fabric of Kane's collar in the process.

I can feel my heart disintegrating in my chest, the broken pieces turning to dust when I see Kane's busted lip, the absence of emotions in his eyes, and the small cut on his cheek.

He looks so *empty*.

He seems determined not to give his father the satisfaction of seeing him break.

Is that why he's been acting so different lately?

Oh my God.

The reason why he seems dead inside is because... *he is*.

Mr. Wilder uses the grip he has on his son's clothes to jerk him closer. “Do you seriously think this family got to where it is today by *singing*? Take a fucking look around, kid. We wouldn't have this life if we'd wasted our time on nonsense. I won't have my son humiliate me like this.”

Kane doesn't make a sound, glassy eyes pointed at his father. It's clear he's been here before. He's used to it by now.

Do I intervene?

Do I go get someone?

Maybe Mr. Wilder will stop if he sees he has a witness.

The monster's grip is so tight Kane's feet rise off the ground. "Music won't get you anywhere in life. And your ancestors didn't bust their fucking asses so you could become a starving artist."

My heart racing, I move closer, stepping from the shadows. My body weight causes the floor beneath me to creak, and thankfully, Mr. Wilder doesn't notice.

Kane, however...

The air stalls in my lungs the moment his gaze captures mine.

He's still a prisoner of his father's rage, but life spills back into his gaze when he spots me standing in the doorway. He goes from emotionless to scared in a single second.

"Do you?" Mr. Wilder insists when Kane doesn't answer right away. "Answer me, you little shit."

I'm about to get involved, but Kane seems to know exactly what I'm thinking because he gives me a frightened, pleading look.

Don't, his eyes scream.

Mr. Wilder releases him with a push, his gaze landing on the old guitar Kane was playing earlier.

"Where'd you even get this?" He quickly grabs Kane's guitar off the couch.

"I... I found it in the attic," Kane stammers.

His dad pauses, glaring at him like he's not convinced.

"You're lying. Did you waste my money on this piece of shit?"

"No, Dad, I—"

But Mr. Wilder's already smashing the guitar to prove a point. The instrument shatters into a thousand fragments, pieces flying in every direction as he pummels the floor with what's left of it.

"Dad, stop!" Kane's words fall on deaf ears.

Mr. Wilder only stops once the guitar is ruined and Kane's eyes are bloodshot.

"Don't give me that fucking look. You made me do it. You gave me no choice," Mr. Wilder accuses.

He starts charging at Kane again. He's just grabbed hold of Kane's shirt when I gather every drop of courage in my body and shout, "Leave him alone!"

Mr. Wilder spins, dark eyes growing in size when he sees me standing there.

Maybe I'm delusional, but I pray for him to be embarrassed. I pray that he'll back down out of shame. Today must be my lucky day because he releases Kane immediately.

"Everything's okay, sweetie. We were just having a little chat. Run along now." Mr. Wilder forces a nervous smile, smoothing down his son's wrinkled shirt.

"Hadley, do what he says," Kane orders, but it sounds like he's begging me.

I fold my arms over my chest. "I think I might stay."

Mr. Wilder's patience runs out. "I said go back to the party. *Now*, Amy."

"My name is Hadley," I correct, shaking on the inside. "And like I said, I'm good here. Why don't *you* go back to the party?"

Kane's mouth drops open at my response. Something tells me he's never stood up to his father in his entire life.

I can't believe *I* did.

It isn't long before Mr. Wilder understands he's not going to win this one and pins me with a look so vile it makes my

skin crawl. Without a word, he glares at his son one last time, his fists rolling into tight balls.

“We’ll finish this later, boy.” His promise to Kane twists my stomach into a knot.

Air returns to my lungs as soon as he walks out of the room. Kane and I make eye contact when we hear his footsteps rumbling down the stairs.

No one speaks for at least five seconds.

I scan Kane’s beautiful face, focusing on his busted lip and the purplish wound on his cheek. I almost think I’m imagining things when he exhales a deep breath and moves closer.

He’s taller than me, so I have to stretch my neck to look at him. He opens his mouth, but I don’t give him a chance to speak, throwing myself at him before my brain can object.

I wrap my arms around him, pressing my cheek to his chest and holding him close. My eyes well with tears when I think about all the times no one was there to stop his dad.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Kane breathes, and call me crazy, but it sounds like he’s saying thank you.

I expect him to reject my embrace. Any second now. But he never does. He rests his chin on top of my head and circles my waist with his arms, his tall build swallowing me whole.

I’m hugging Kane.

Kane is hugging *me*.

Either I’m dreaming, or the fruit punch they were serving at the party wasn’t punch at all.

“I’m sorry,” I choke out.

“It’s okay, Hads.”

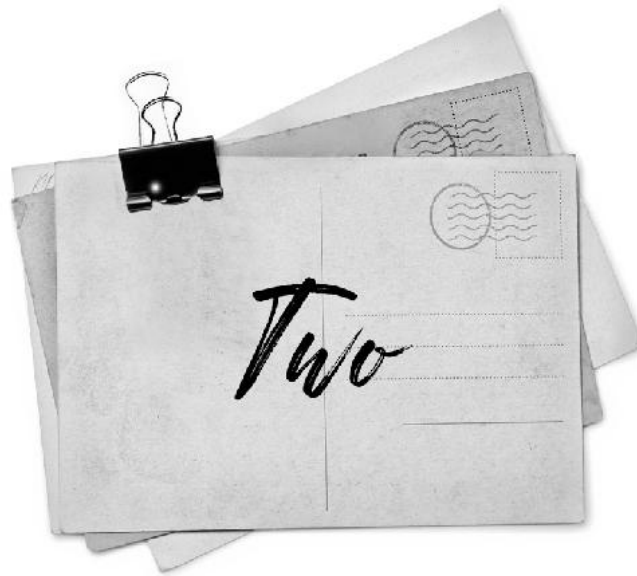
Images of his dad being violent toward him, mocking him for wanting to play music, burn before my eyes, and I wish for something so awful I’m pretty sure it goes against *all the rules* for making wishes.

For a fleeting moment, I wish Mr. Wilder would disappear.

I wish for a world where Kane's father doesn't exist.

Little did I know...

My wish would soon be granted.



Two months later...

HADLEY

“Kids, can you come down here for a second?” Mom’s request carries across the house like the walls are made of paper—I wish I was exaggerating.

Mom is watching the news downstairs, and I can hear every word the reporter is saying all the way from my bedroom on the second floor, even with the door closed. But hey, what else can you expect from a seventy-year-old house?

“Coming!” I push off my bed.

I stop at the door, glancing around a bedroom I barely recognize.

I can’t recall the last time my room was this clean. It took days, but we finally managed to make the house presentable for our guests.

Mom made us go through every nook and cranny of the house—seriously, we cleaned spots I didn’t even know *existed*—in expectation of their arrival today.

It’s like she thinks Evie and Kane are going to walk through the door and immediately start combing the place for

dust.

I jog down the stairs, the past two months looping through my mind like a movie. Suffice to say, nothing about our stay in Golden Cove went according to plan.

We were having lunch on the patio, just two days after the cocktail party from hell, when Evie got the call telling her that her husband had died.

They said he was on his way back to New York when a suspected “*mechanical failure*” claimed his life.

We later found out that the pilot flying his private jet had a major drinking problem and was going through a particularly nasty divorce. Throw especially strong winds and thick fog into the mix, and you’ve got all the makings of a tragedy.

Mom said Mr. Wilder’s death was what the police call an “open-and-shut case.” A perfect example of pilot negligence. The investigation was over before we knew it.

But Evie and Kane’s nightmare was just beginning...

I can still see Evie’s face when she heard. There were no tears, no screaming, not even a sliver of pain in her voice as she spoke to the man on the phone.

Just shock.

I figured she needed a moment to wrap her head around it. I thought surely, once the initial shock wore off, she’d show sadness, but she never did.

I get that her husband wasn’t the nicest guy and all—okay, he was a total dickwad—but her reaction made me wonder why she married him to begin with.

Kane’s reaction to his dad’s death was a completely different story. He skipped right over the denial stage and went straight to worrying about his mom.

He refused to leave Evie’s side afterward. He seemed to think she’d break down at any given moment, and I got the sense he was focusing on her so that he wouldn’t have to face his own feelings.

And it *worked*.

He didn't cry once.

At least not while I was there.

And if he did cry at some point, we didn't stick around long enough to see it.

Mom, Gray, and I were gone by 7:00 a.m. the next morning.

Mom refused to fill us in on the details. She just said Evie and Kane needed time to process, and we were going home earlier. Just like that, we left the beach house and a decade of memories behind.

Gray and I tried to pry more information out of her, but she keeps saying we're too young to be exposed to such heavy matters. I know she's just trying to protect us, but being kept in the dark is slowly driving me crazy.

In the beginning, I'd stay up all night wondering what Mr. Wilder's death meant for Evie and Kane's future. I even tried to text Kane once.

When he didn't reply, I tried calling him, but his number seems to have been disconnected.

Then I heard Mom on the phone with Evie.

It was late at night. Mom was sitting on the couch after closing up the store, and I snuck downstairs to eavesdrop.

At one point, she said something about Mr. Wilder's *will*, and it kept coming up in the conversation. I'd heard that word before, but I wasn't sure what it meant.

That sick bastard. He can't do this to you, Evie. We won't let him, Mom argued.

It sounded like Evie was sobbing on the other end. Mom followed up with a promise to get Evie in touch with a friend of hers who takes "pro bono cases."

More words I didn't understand.

I went back up to my room, grabbed my phone, and looked up every detail I could remember from their conversation.

A little while later, I figured it out.

Evie needs a lawyer.

For what? I don't know.

It wasn't until two weeks ago, when Mom sat us down and told us Evie and Kane would be moving into our house, that I understood just how bad the situation really was.

Evie and Kane are broke.

It makes no sense, but they are.

And I'm guessing *that's* why Evie needs a lawyer.

Mom is sitting at the table when I enter the kitchen. She gestures for me to take a seat, her hands joined together in front of her.

A pit forms in my throat. "Is everything okay?"

She gives a small nod. "Of course, honey. We just need to have a quick chat before Evie and Kane get here."

A few seconds elapse before Mom's patience runs out and she calls for my brother. "Grayson, any day now!"

A low groan erupts on the second floor, and Gray's bedroom door creaks open.

Heavy footsteps thunder down the stairs just seconds later. Gray barely ever leaves his room since he put a TV in there. All he does is play video games these days.

I can't believe we've only got two weeks of summer left before we're officially freshmen at Easton High, the local high school, and *this* is how he chooses to spend his time.

I intend to spend my last days of freedom painting in the shed Mom and I turned into my art studio.

My grandparents had this old shed installed in their backyard a few years before they left the convenience store they owned to my mom.

Well, technically, they left her the store *and* the family home. Both are located in the same two-story building, and the store takes up part of the first floor while the rest is all habitable space.

We've only ever used that shed for storage. Until Mom decided that I needed a place to focus on my art—which isn't easy to do with my brother constantly blasting music and blowing up zombie brains.

We emptied out the shed, cleaned it from top to bottom, and filled it with my canvases and the few supplies I'm able to afford because of my babysitting on the weekends.

Mom even called a guy she knows to wire the shed to the electrical panel.

She might not be in a position to pay for all of my painting supplies, but she was determined to support my interests in any way that she could, and for that, I'm grateful.

She's a single parent, and it's not like she can turn to my dad for help.

That would require us *having* a dad.

Mom says she knew what she was signing up for the day she turned to a sperm bank to have a family, but sometimes I wonder if she would've done things differently if she'd known she was going to have twins.

Gray breezes into the kitchen moments later, wearing black sweats and one of his signature quote T-shirts. This one reads, "Can't spell awesome without *me*. Coincidence? I think not."

I snort at his appearance. "Nice hair."

Every strand of my brother's red hair is pointing in a different direction, some falling in front of his blue eyes, some aimed toward the ceiling.

He also looks like he hasn't showered in a while, and I'm pretty sure he's been wearing that T-shirt for two days straight.

"Aw, thanks, baby sis." He gives me a wet willy right before sitting down.

“*Grayyy!*” I bleat, guiding one hand to my ear and punching him in the shoulder with the other. “You’re disgusting.”

“Love you, too, brat.”

Oh, and remember when I said he looked like he hadn’t showered in a while?

He also smells like it.

I crinkle my nose. “When’s the last time you showered?”

“What was that? You want a hug?” He has me in a headlock before I know it.

Our proximity makes the smell ten times worse, and my gag reflex kicks in. He starts ruffling my hair, and I just know he’s enjoying every second of my misery. My ponytail is a mess by the time I manage to slip out of his hold.

“Kids, please,” Mom calls us to order, and we quiet down, although I’m mentally plotting my revenge. I just might have to reconsider the *Nair cream in his shampoo* idea.

Mom clears her throat. “Evie and Kane have been through a lot these past few months. Their lives changed overnight, and I’ve tried to keep you out of it for as long as I could, but there are things you should know before they get here.”

It feels like the air just got sucked out of the room.

“Do you know what a will is?” Mom’s question causes my anxiety to spike.

Gray shrugs. “Isn’t that the thing people write before they die?”

Mom nods. “And do you know what happens if someone leaves you out of their will?”

My mouth falls open.

“Not really,” Gray admits.

Mom exhales a deep breath. “If someone doesn’t put you in their will, you get nothing when they pass.”

Wait...

Mr. Wilder left Evie *nothing*?

I figured he'd left them a small amount at the very least, but not a dime?

This *has* to be why they're moving in with us.

Evie didn't work in the fifteen years she was married to him. Mr. Wilder wouldn't allow it. He claimed Evie getting a job would make it seem like he couldn't provide for his family, and women shouldn't want to work, anyway.

"That's what happened to Evie," Mom explains. "Mr. Wilder gave most of the money in his trust fund to his brother and donated the rest to charity, which means Evie has to figure out how to feed and care for Kane."

Charity?

I'm supposed to believe the man who beat up his own son gave his money to *charity*?

Anger soars in my chest. "He can't do that!"

Mom's eyes tell a different story. "Unfortunately, he can."

My mind is racing. "And Evie can't do anything to fight back?"

"There are things you can do to contest a will, especially when minors are involved. None of which you need to concern yourself with, but I promise you Evie has been doing everything she can to challenge it."

"How long are they going to be living with us?" Gray asks.

"Evie needs to get a job so she can get back on her feet. Once she's in a better situation, she and Kane will get their own place. But I'm not going to lie to you, it could take a while."

Realization hits me. "What about school? Does that mean Kane will go to Easton High with us?"

"No, he'll be doing online schooling. His old school agreed to let him finish the year since it was already paid for." Mom turns to Gray. "Grayson, you'll be sharing your room with Kane like we talked about. I found a bunk bed at a

clearance sale last week. It should be getting delivered soon, but in the meantime, he's going to have to sleep on a blow-up mattress."

"All right," Gray grumbles, and it's obvious he doesn't like the idea of sharing his space, but he also knows he can't let Mom down on this.

Mom's focus darts to me. "Hadley, Evie will be staying in the guest room, so I moved a few boxes we put in there to your closet."

I give a small nod, and Mom rises to her feet. "Evie and Kane need us now more than ever, and we're not going to bombard them with questions or do *anything* that could add to their burden, understood?"

"Yes," Gray and I agree.

"Good. Now, let's all try our best to make them feel at home."

Gray heads back up to his room after telling Mom to call him once they get here, but me? I'm cemented into place, counting down the seconds until I see him again.

A knock rattles the front door a half hour later.

Mom hurries down the hall, calling for Gray as I follow her, my stomach churning at the possibility of seeing two strangers on the other side.

There's no way they're the same people they were at the beginning of the summer. No way that their world getting turned upside down didn't leave them in shambles.

Mom opens the door, and my breath gets stuck in my throat.

A much skinnier version of Evie stands on our porch, wearing a long-sleeve shirt and faded jeans. Her blonde hair is damp, as though she just stepped out of the shower, and her face is bare.

I analyze her thoroughly.

No makeup.

No jewelry.

Not a trace of the woman I call my godmother.

Whoever *this* is, she's nothing like Evie. For starters, Evie has never looked so... normal. I barely recognize her without her fancy dresses and high heels.

"Oh, Eve, come here." Mom opens her arms as soon as her best friend comes into view. Evie doesn't waste a second, marching into my mom's embrace.

"I'll never be able to thank you enough, Lil," Evie whispers.

That's when my eyes land on him.

The boy who stole my heart before his father broke his.

Kane stands a few steps behind Evie, the strap of a gym bag thrown over his shoulder—is that all he brought?

He's lost weight, like his mom, his cheeks hollower than I remember and his jawline sharper than a knife. His green eyes are rimmed with dark circles, and his short brown hair is uneven, which tells me Evie probably had to cut it herself.

Even then... he looks incredible.

"Hey, Hads," he says in a low voice, and it takes every drop of restraint in my body to stop myself from hugging him.

"Hey," I say right back.

I missed you, a voice in the back of my head whispers.

"Dude, get in here." Gray's voice startles me, and I spin to see my twin brother walking toward us. "Dude, what the fuck? When'd you get so *tall*? Got me looking like a fucking Oompa Loompa over here."

Mom scolds my brother for his colorful language, and Gray cracks a smile.

I step aside to let Kane in. He gives Gray a quick handshake paired with a bro hug. Evie separates from Mom soon after and wraps her arms around my brother and me, the air thick with questions we're not allowed to ask.

Everything about her is different.

She even *smells* different—probably because she can't afford whatever expensive perfume she used to wear before.

“Welcome home,” Mom tells Kane as she squeezes him into a tight embrace, and call me crazy, but I think I see him wince in pain. He doesn't say anything, though, slapping his poker face back into place in no time.

Gray gestures to the stairs with his chin. “Come on, I'll show you your room. Well, *our* room.”

Kane's gaze catches mine before he takes off with my brother, and the vessel in my chest tightens. Two months ago, I thought he was broken because he was faking smiles.

But now?

He doesn't smile *at all*.

The spark in his eyes is gone.

And there's one thing I know for sure...

I'm going to get it back.



MOM

Had to drive Evie to her job interview. There's pizza in the fridge.

MY EYES SKIM OVER MY MOM'S TEXT AS I PAD TOWARD MY house with my keys in one hand. My best friend, Lacey, and her stepdad just dropped me off a few minutes ago.

I should've known when Lacey suggested that we have a slumber party this weekend that there wouldn't be much sleeping involved.

We stayed up all night, stuffing our faces and talking about how nervous we are for our first day of high school, which is

less than a week away now.

I text Mom a simple “Okay” as I trail to the front door and unlock it. Gray’s blaring music grates on my ears from the second I enter the house.

I don’t know how Kane puts up with it. He’s been sharing a room with my brother for a whole week now. If it were me sharing a room with Gray, I’d become deaf and murderous.

Kane doesn’t seem to mind the loud music. But then again, we haven’t said a word to each other since he moved in, so *what do I know?*

Kane spends most of his time in Gray’s bedroom, playing video games and bickering with my brother. I guess I was stupid to think that living with him would give us an excuse to spend more time together.

I cringe when the bass of the techno song makes the walls of the house shake. I was hoping for a quiet Sunday afternoon.

I could always go pound on Gray’s door and demand that he turn his music off, but knowing my brother, he’d turn it up just to spite me.

I decide to save my breath and head straight for my art studio in the backyard.

My mouth curls into a smile when I spot the white shed in a corner of the yard. Mom and I gave it a new coat of paint last week, and it looks *so* much better like this.

I’m a few feet away from the shed when a low, melodious voice stops me in my tracks. I think it’s coming from the inside.

There are no instruments playing.

No guitar or piano.

Just Kane.

Singing a cappella.

What is he doing in my shed?

I move closer to the door. I can't hear the lyrics he's singing, the words blurring together. I don't recognize the tune either.

I press my ear to the door without a sliver of shame. It doesn't do much, but I'd be an idiot not to jump at the opportunity to hear him sing again.

I notice he stops himself every once in a while, pausing for a moment and then starting again. He replaces a few words in each sentence like he's testing them out, trying to decide if he likes the way they taste in his mouth.

I think he's writing a song.

Why else would he stop constantly, switch up melodies, and alternate between lyrics?

This goes on for a few more minutes, and I eat it up, listening to him drum up lyrics with a fluttering heart. Then his singing halts abruptly.

"Whoever you are, you're not slick."

My breath catches in my throat.

How did he know?

"I can see your shadow under the door," he elaborates.

I consider running away.

Whatever.

He's already busted me.

I push the door to the shed open, owning up to my lack of manners. First thing I see is Kane sitting on the old couch Mom let me borrow with a notebook and a pen on his lap.

There are crumpled balls of paper scattered all over the floor, which tells me he's been at it for quite some time.

The only light in the shed originates from the small window above the door and the old Christmas lights I hung on the wall.

Three of the green ones are burnt out, though, and it's barely bright enough for me to spot the voice recorder resting

next to his notebook.

This is probably what he's been using to remember the melodies he comes up with. Most fifteen-year-old boys would use their phone, except that Kane doesn't have one anymore.

Mom wanted to add him to our family plan, but Evie refused. She insisted that she'd get a job and pay for the phone herself.

Kane pins me with a look of shock when he sees me, and I need a second to gather my thoughts before I can apologize for spying on him.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"Don't apologize. I'm the one who shouldn't be here." He closes his notebook and pushes to his feet. "I just needed to get away from all the noise."

I know he means Gray's music.

The words spill from my mouth so fast I startle myself. "Please don't stop."

Kane's green eyes lift to mine.

I clear my throat. "I just mean... you can finish what you were doing. I'll leave."

I'm about to walk away when Kane shrugs. "It's fine. Not sure it's worth finishing, anyway."

He picks up the crumpled balls of paper on the floor and tosses them into the trash can by the couch. I'm hit by the urge to tell him how much I disagree. His song might be in its early stages, but it's *definitely* worth finishing.

"For what it's worth, I think it sounds amazing."

He doesn't accept the praise, his features twitching with irritation.

"I don't need your pity compliments." He continues to throw his lyrics into the trash.

Does he think I'm just saying that to be *nice*?

He really thinks I'm complimenting him because I feel obligated to and not because people all over the world would pay a lot of money to listen to him sing.

I step inside the shed. "They're not pity compliments. I mean it."

He scoffs out a laugh that makes it clear he's not buying it. God, his dad's bullying runs deeper than I thought. It's like he has no confidence in his talent.

His dad shattered his self-esteem and managed to convince him that his music was something to be embarrassed about.

"Your dad was wrong. You know that, right?"

He pins me with a look so cold it feels like my body temperature just dropped by a thousand degrees. "Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't go there."

I don't heed his warning. "He was wrong when he said your music was a waste of time. Wanting to sing is nothing to be ashamed of."

He clenches his jaw. "I didn't ask for a pep talk."

"You didn't ask for a shitty father either, but hey, you still got one."

I think I see a small grin stretch his mouth.

"Anyone ever tell you you're stubborn?" he asks.

"Only about the things that are important to me."

Like you.

You're important to me.

Of course, I keep that last part to myself.

"Look, all I'm trying to say is you're talented. Like, *super* talented. And you need to believe in yourself. Also, your dad was a freaking twatwaffle."

I make myself cringe.

I have no idea what *twatwaffle* means. I'm not even sure where I heard that word, but I know it's not a good thing, which is weird since it has the word "waffle" in it, and waffles are delicious.

Kane doesn't say a word, and I worry that I've offended him, but then he lets out a laugh.

It was a small laugh, and it was quiet, but I got him to *laugh*.

He's smiling now, and I wish I could snap a picture in case it doesn't happen again.

"Noted."

Kane throws the last of the paper into the trash and grabs the notebook he left on the couch. I wonder how many songs are in there.

I surrender to curiosity. "How long have you been writing songs?"

He shrugs. "About two years. Give or take."

If he's been writing songs for two years, it means he's also been *singing* for two years—if not longer. How come I didn't know about this until this summer?

Might have to do with the fact that he waited for everyone to leave before playing his guitar when we were at the beach house. He must've been careful to hide it from people since he knew his dad didn't approve.

That would also explain why Evie doesn't know her own son is a prodigy. Her knowing could've led to Mr. Wilder finding out Kane was still playing music, and he didn't want to risk his dad leaving a fist print on his face.

"Can I hear?" I push my luck.

I pick up the voice recorder on the couch, seconds away from pressing Play when Kane stops me by swiping the recorder out of my hand.

"Not happening."

I try to steal it back. "Come on, I just want to hear *one*."

He uses our height difference to his advantage, stretching his arm to keep the recorder out of reach. “Forget it, Hads.”

“What’s the big deal?” I push off with all my strength, trying to steal the recorder.

He shoves it into his pocket. “I’ve never shown my songs to anyone. Just drop it.”

“What if I show you something *I’ve* never shown anyone?”

He raises a brow. “Like what?”

“Paintings, sketches I didn’t finish, stuff like that. I’ll show you my work if you show me yours.”

He doesn’t seem sold, so I throw in a little something to sweeten the deal. “If you want, we could share the shed, too. You would get it the first half of the week, and I’d use it the other half. Think about it. You could work on your songs. Get some quiet when it’s too noisy in the house.”

My pulse speeds up when he stops to think.

He’s actually considering it.

“We could even meet up here once a week and show each other the progress we’ve made. Getting an outside perspective never hurts.”

I’m aware that I probably sound desperate, but this is the longest conversation we’ve had since he moved in, and I’d like it very much if we could *keep* having conversations.

“Once a week, huh?” he asks.

I give a small nod.

“And I’d get the shed to myself the rest of the time?”

“Yes. Well, except for when I’m using it.”

“And all I have to do is show you what I’m working on?”

“That’s the idea. We can meet whenever you want. As long as it’s after school.”

“My mom’s going to be wondering where I am. I can’t have her looking for me. I don’t want her to know about this.”

It makes no sense to me. Why doesn't he want her to know he loves music? I have to bite my tongue not to ask him about it.

"I heard my mom say Evie would only be working afternoons and evenings if she gets the job at the bank. That way, we can meet, and she doesn't have to know. So, what do you say?"

He pauses for a moment.

"Okay. But I'm not singing my songs for you. You can read the lyrics. *That's it.*"

Did he just agree?

Be cool, Hadley.

Be. Cool.

I gesture to the paper in the trash. "You want to tell me what that was about? Maybe I can help."

He hesitates.

"Come on, what's the point of meeting every week if we're not going to help each other?"

He drops onto the couch with a sigh. "I don't know what to do with the bridge of this song. I've been stuck for days. Everything I come up with sounds like shit."

I sit cross-legged on the couch and gesture to hand over his notebook. "Let me see."

Kane chews on the inside of his cheek, his reluctance a wall I'm determined to knock down.

"You've probably been staring at it for too long. Even the best can use a pair of fresh eyes sometimes, you know?"

He caves a moment later. "One condition."

"Anything."

"Don't ask questions."

Weird request, but I'll agree to anything at this point. The wait is killing me.

“I promise. Now, *gimme.*”

Satisfaction swells in my chest when Kane hands me the notebook. It's like I'm holding a part of his soul in my hand. Like he's letting me into a corner of his brain no one's ever explored before.

My gaze shoots to the title of his song.

Golden Cage.

I can't explain the painful lump forming in my throat.

*Protector of my life
Saved me from the cold
Protector of my smile
Shackled and controlled
Might as well suffer with style
For me, you sold your soul
Pretty house you built on lies
But it was never yours
Money over happiness
Hurt yourself so I'd be safe
Count the bruises on your face
A golden cage is still a cage
Money over happiness
Lived in fear so I'd be brave
Count the wounds and scars he left
A golden cage is still a cage*

I thought I was ready for his words. I thought he'd be writing about heartbreak or love. I expected many things, but not *this*.

Not for a second.

I devour his lyrics, finishing the second verse of his song in no time and swallowing my emotions like a pill that refuses

to go down. *This* is what's going on inside his head.

Count the wounds and scars he left.

This song has to be about his dad. I knew his dad was abusive to him, but was he also abusive to his mom? Unless they're metaphorical wounds?

Might as well suffer with style.

Kind of sounds like he's a bit resentful toward Evie.

Like she knew what was going on and she was being abused, too. I want to ask him about it so bad. But then I remember what he said.

Don't ask questions.

I shove my curiosity to the back of my mind, pretending like his song didn't just rip my bleeding heart out of my chest.

"It's beautiful."

I swear his shoulders release pressure when the words leave my mouth.

He seemed scared for a minute there. I get it. This is the first time he's ever shared his songs with anyone.

"So... you don't think it's shit?"

I almost laugh.

"Are you kidding? This is the best song I've ever... *read*?"

His mouth twitches, his dimples deepening.

His smile is warm and big and perfect, and *how* am I supposed to function after this?

"Thank you." His voice is tinged with joy.

We stare at each other for a moment, and it should probably feel uncomfortable, but I'm too busy counting the specks of gold in his eyes to notice.

He breaks the silence. "Any ideas?"

"Mm?"

"For the bridge?"

I snap out of it. “Oh, right. Yeah, I think I might.”

We spend the next forty minutes brainstorming lyrics and moving lines around. I’m surprised at how natural it feels. We work surprisingly well together, bouncing ideas off each other like we’ve done it our whole lives.

I’m fascinated by how Kane glows when he’s writing. You can tell he’s in his element by the sparks in his eyes, the soft crinkle on his forehead as he puts every ounce of his focus into it.

We finish the song an hour later, and I get to see this whole other side of Kane. The one that’s actually *excited* about his music rather than ashamed of it.

“This is great,” he rejoices once we reach the end of the song. “God, you’re fucking amazing.”

I only realize how flustered I am when Kane releases a dark chuckle. “Are you blushing?”

“No,” I blurt out, and his laughter grows in volume. I respond by angling my head away from him so he can’t see my scarlet cheeks. “Shut up.”

He doesn’t stop, but I don’t let him mock me for long, driving my elbow into his stomach.

And it works.

He stops laughing.

Only, he also stops *breathing*, wincing in pain at the contact. He reacted like I just shoved a knife into his ribs.

“Did I hurt you?”

His jaw flexes as he twists and shifts on the couch, looking for a position that’ll make the pain bearable. “I’m fine.”

“What is it?”

He gives me the same reply, but his voice is colder. “I’m fine.”

I’m gripping the hem of his shirt and lifting it up before I know it.

That's when I see them.

The dark bruises on his ribs.

A gasp spills from my mouth, my gaze drifting from his oblique muscles to his chest.

"What the hell?" Kane screeches and pushes off the couch in a single bound, smoothing his shirt back down.

I follow his lead, rising to my feet. "What are those? What happened to you?"

Color drains from his face as I amble closer to him.

Pain is noticeable on his face, and I'm reminded of the way he reacted when my mom hugged him the first day he got here. He had those bruises before he moved in.

"It's nothing," he lies through his teeth.

"Screw that. Either you tell me what happened to you right now, or you can forget about sharing the shed." I'm hoping that'll scare him into confessing.

He doesn't answer right away.

I can't wait any longer. "I said, what happened?"

He blows out a breath and says, "Our landlord. That's what."

I need a few seconds to take it in.

"We had to move into this shitty studio apartment after my dad died," he adds.

"Wait, so you got into a fight with your landlord?"

He seems reluctant to tell me more.

"Kane." It comes out as a warning.

"Yeah," he admits, his voice thick with shame.

The worst-case scenarios multiplying in my head are giving me a migraine. "But... why would he attack you?"

"He didn't attack me. I attacked *him*."

"What? Why?"

He curses beneath his breath and drops back down onto the couch, propping his elbows on his parted knees and burying his face in his hands. “It doesn’t fucking matter. It’s over.”

I sit down next to him. “It matters to me.”

“Look...” His eyes find mine. “All you need to know is, he was an asshole with wandering hands.”

“I don’t understand.”

My confusion makes him snap. “He wanted my mom to fuck him. *Understand now?*”

My heart cracks.

“Oh.” I bite down on my lip so hard I hurt myself.

“She couldn’t pay the rent and...” He can barely bring himself to say it. “He told her to pay him a different way.”

I’m going to puke.

“It’s why my mom moved us out here.” He runs a hand through his brown hair, shoving it out of his face. “That’s what I get for thinking I could take on a dude built like a tank.”

My entire being aches at the thought of him throwing himself at a grown man to protect Evie.

“To make shit worse, we don’t have insurance. My mom’s so deep into debt from my hospital stay, there was no way we could have kept the apartment. If it weren’t for your mom, we’d be on the street right now.”

I scoot closer to him, needing to comfort him in any way that I can. I barely realize what I’m doing when I rest my fingers on top of his, and he glances down at our hands.

Embarrassment slams into me, and I withdraw.

“Back to ponytails, huh?” he asks.

The topic change surprises me. “Oh, um, yeah.”

I didn’t put my hair in a ponytail once in the last week. I just thought I’d try something different before school started.

“What happened to letting your hair down?”

Truth be told, I couldn't stand it. My hair kept getting in my face, and I'd end up putting it back up, anyway.

"It just didn't look good on me."

I catch his smile as he reaches for one of the strands of red hair framing my face and twirls it around his finger.

Holy crap on a cracker.

"Bullshit," he disagrees. "Everything looks good on you."

I must look like an idiot, with my lips parted and widened eyes, but I'm not in control right now. My lifelong crush just told me everything looks good on me. It's not like I'm about to die swooning or anything.

Then, like he just realized what he was saying, he pushes off the couch. "Anyway, thanks for helping me finish my song."

A part of me is desperate to keep him here, but the other doesn't want to seem clingy. He's at the door now, seconds away from walking out of the shed.

He stops and shoulder-checks me a few seconds later.

"I'll text you so we can pick a date for our next meeting."

I barely manage an answer. "O-Okay."



HADLEY

“Did you guys see what Aveena Harper was wearing in gym? Girl looked like she raided a hobo’s closet.” Brie’s mocking comment is nothing but background noise as we drop onto Lacey’s bed an hour after school ended.

Brielle Randall, everyone.

This girl is the definition of a snake.

She’s the girl who smiles to your face and talks about you behind your back. Lacey and I have known Brie our entire lives—small town and all—but we didn’t hang out much growing up.

Until Lacey had to go and get all chummy with her on our first day of high school two weeks ago.

I hate her.

But I like Lacey.

Therefore, I’ve learned to tolerate Brie.

“Hobos don’t have closets—they’re *homeless*. That’s the whole point,” Lacey counters, and I snicker, scrolling through my conversation with the Craigslist seller I’m meeting later.

Brie rolls her eyes. “I’m just saying she looks like actual shit with those oversized clothes.”

I fight the urge to tell her that not everyone is as comfortable with wearing skintight clothing as she is.

Brie is a crop top and skirt kind of gal. Meanwhile, Aveena is one of the *many* girls in our grade struggling to adapt to her new curves and the changes happening in her body. I’m not surprised that Brie’s running her mouth about Aveena’s.

The poor girl has been Brie’s punching bag since middle school. All because Xavier Emery, Brie’s crush, said Aveena was prettier than her while playing twenty questions.

That’s all it took for Aveena to become a target for Brie’s mood swings and cruel remarks.

I had every intention of skipping her bitching tonight, but Lacey insisted that we meet up at her place before they head out to a party at Finn Richards’s place.

I can still picture the look on Lacey’s face when I told her I wasn’t going to the party.

She kept hounding me, asking what could be *so* important that I’d ditch our first high school party, and I made up a story about needing to help my mom with the store.

I could hardly see myself telling her that I have a date *that’s not really a date* with my childhood crush tonight.

Just like I couldn’t tell her that I’d rather bail on a thousand parties than miss *one* of my brainstorming sessions with Kane.

Kane and I have been meeting in the shed every Friday for a month now. We both started new projects, which we want to finish before sharing, so we spend most of our meetings talking and cracking jokes.

My phone chimes when Lacey starts gushing about Theodore Cox—she’s been obsessed with him since we were kids. They made out in the woods next to the school yesterday, and she’s hoping to kiss him again at the party.

I unlock my phone to check my new message.

I figured it would be the Craigslist seller, but it's not.

It's Kane.

I'm *so* glad Mom finally convinced Evie to add Kane to the family plan. She gave him Gray's old phone since they had to sell his old one after Mr. Wilder died.

KANE

See you tonight?

I have to chew on my bottom lip to hide my smile.

HADLEY

Absolutely. But I might be a little late. I got to take care of something.

His response lights up my screen a minute later.

KANE

You mean you have a life outside of our meetings? HOW DARE YOU?

A quiet chuckle rips from my throat.

HADLEY

I know. Scandalous, right?

I assume we're going to leave it at that until he texts me again.

KANE

I'm almost done with my song.

Excitement soars in my chest. He's been working on the same song for the past month, but he refuses to show me. All I know is the title.

I'm Still Yours.

HADLEY

Does that mean you're finally going to show it to me?

KANE

It's not ready yet.

HADLEY

I swear you've been saying that for like a century and a half. At this rate, I'll STILL be begging by the time my birthday rolls around next week.

KANE

Well, then, maybe it'll be your birthday present.

HADLEY

OR you could show me now.

KANE

Easy there, Little Miss Impatient. Last I checked, you won't show me your new painting either.

He has a point.

In all fairness, the painting I'm working on is very special to me. It's the first time I've ever attempted to paint a person instead of an object or scenery. And it's not finished—not even close—but it inspires me.

Kane inspires me.

I can only hope that he won't be weirded out once he realizes the person I'm painting is *him*.

I've kept the painting covered up until now, but I'm always afraid he's going to look at it when I'm not there.

HADLEY

Fine, I'm sorryyy. I'm just so impatient.

KANE

Don't be. I'm impatient, too.

HADLEY

About what?

His next message makes my heart skip a beat.

KANE

Seeing you tonight.

Two words.

Two stupid words and he's got me overthinking everything. Does he mean it in a romantic way?

KANE

You were right about needing a fresh pair of eyes. It really helps. I've finished more songs since we started brainstorming than I have in my entire life.

His comment draws the biggest smile out of me.

Then he sets my illusions ablaze with a one-way ticket to the friend zone.

KANE

You're a good friend, Hads.

Ouch.

“You think that's bad? Louise's never even *kissed* a guy. It's kind of pathetic, if you ask me. We're almost fifteen.”

Brie's snicker draws my focus back to the conversation I've been paying no attention to.

Lacey's eyes shift to mine, her gaze loaded with pity.

I know it's dumb, but being the only person in my friend group who's still a kiss virgin makes me feel like I'm repulsive or something.

Lacey got her first kiss out of the way when she made out with Theo the other day, and I'm pretty sure Brie kissed at least four guys last summer.

I'm aware it doesn't define my worth for a second, and I probably wouldn't care much if it weren't for Brie constantly making fun of other girls for it, but bring up something enough times and it'll eventually start to stick.

"Wait." Brie catches on when she notices Lacey's pitying expression and turns to look at me. "Have you never..."

"Who cares?" Lacey stands up for me. "It's not a competition. Plus, Hadley's younger than us. She started school a year early."

Brie doesn't speak, but the way she bites back a scoff says plenty.

"B, don't be mean," Lacey scolds.

Brie shrugs. "I'm not being mean. I'm just saying, it's kind of lame that no guy's ever been interested in you."

Right.

Because *that's* not mean.

Lacey cuts in. "Actually, Seb Stein asked me for her number last Wednesday."

He did?

I'm not sure if she made that up because she feels bad for me or if it really happened.

I'll admit I'd be flattered if it were true. Sebastian is *cute*.

A new message coming through on my phone stops me from asking Lacey if she ended up giving him my number. It's

the Craigslist lady letting me know she's waiting for me at the café a few blocks away.

I shove my phone into my pocket and push off Lacey's bed. "I've got to run."

I'm out of Lacey's house and getting onto Gray's bike before I know it. He never uses it anymore, and I figured until I'm old enough to have a car, this is the easiest way to get around town.

I enter the café five minutes later, and a woman in her thirties comes up to me to conclude the sale of the black guitar she posted online.

I'd be lying if I said riding my bike home while carrying a guitar on my back was easy.

It turned out to be much heavier than I thought, and I almost swerved off the road a few times, but I manage to make it to my house in one piece fifteen minutes later.

I never would've thought that spending three weeks' worth of babysitting money on something that's not even for me would make me this happy, but *here we are*.

Never mind the fact that I'm going to be flat broke and struggling to buy myself more painting supplies for a while. I don't care if I have to babysit every day.

As long as Kane gets to play the guitar again.

I'm so excited to show it to him that I almost trip over my own feet on my way to the backyard.

My heart is hammering in my chest by the time I reach the shed. Kane's in there. I can hear him humming melodies on the other side of the door.

Normally, I'd hold off for a bit, wait outside and soak up every beautiful note his vocal cords produce, but the anticipation is killing me, so I don't waste another second and swing the door open.

He's sitting on the couch when I come in, his focus directed to the lyrics he's tweaking and his phone on his lap.

“About time, Hads,” he says, so engulfed in his writing process that he doesn’t spare me a glance.

I grin. “Sorry, I had to stop and get something on the way.”

Then he looks up.

And his face goes blank.

I wait for him to say something. Anything to help me translate the thoughts behind his eyes, but he doesn’t make a sound. He just stares at the guitar case I’m carrying without blinking.

Is he having a stroke?

On autopilot, I undo the case and pull out the black guitar I spent my last hundred dollars on, hoping that showing it to him will earn me some sort of reaction.

He pushes to his feet but says nothing.

Shit, what if he thinks I got him a guitar out of *pity*?

Or that I see him as a charity case?

What was I thinking?

I step closer. “I know what you’re going to say. You never asked me to get you a guitar, and maybe I’m overstepping, and I completely understand if you’re mad at me, but I think you’re amazing, and it would be such a shame for your talent to go to waste, and I—”

I can’t finish my sentence.

Because his arms are around me.

Holding me.

Suffocating me.

His embrace feels like more than a hug.

It’s like he’s afraid that I’m going to disappear if he doesn’t squeeze me hard enough.

I feel light-headed, and it isn’t long before I start to wonder if asphyxiation by hugging is a thing.

The warmth of his body transfers onto mine, and I wait for him to speak.

Still, he says nothing.

He just hugs me.

Seconds elapse before my brain reboots itself, and I return his embrace. I wrap my arms around his body, resting my cheek against his chest.

His heartbeat is a dull thud echoing in my ear.

I wish we could stay like this forever, but Kane peels his body off mine the next second, backing away and clearing his throat as though the decision to hug me wasn't his own.

Our gazes meet, and the reflection in his eyes has me in a chokehold.

He's getting teary-eyed.

He blinks a few times to chase the tears away, and his voice cracks. "I just... Thank you."

I want to tell him that I'd do it a thousand times over just to see that look on his face, but I settle for a simpler, less embarrassing reply. "Don't mention it."

Neither of us knows what to do after that hug, so I take it upon myself to break the silence. "Want to try it?"

His face lights up. "Are you kidding? Yes. *Fuck yes.*"

I'm smiling so big my cheeks hurt when he drops onto the couch with his new guitar.

I snatch the spot next to him, and he begins alternating between chords.

Problem is, the guitar hasn't been played in a while, and it needs a good tuning. Kane proceeds to tune the guitar by ear like it's the easiest thing in the world, and my chest is so full of joy and admiration it's uncomfortably tight.

"Not one broken string," I point out, referring to the old, lousy guitar he was playing at the beach house, and he laughs under his breath.

The piece of crap was missing two strings, and Kane still managed to create magic with it. I can't imagine what he'll do now with a proper guitar.

“Shit, Hadley, I don't know how to repay you.” He improvises melodies, strumming several strings at once.

I know exactly how to answer that. “You could sing a song for me.”

I brace myself for the rejection ahead.

Kane shocks me by saying, “One. That's it.”

I blink at him, convinced I imagined that.

Did he just say yes?

“That works for me.”

I pull my phone out of my pocket. “One more thing.”

He knows immediately. “Not a chance.”

“Come onnnn.” I join my hands together and beg like a five-year-old who doesn't want to get sent to her room without dessert. “I won't show anyone. It'll be just for me, I promise.”

“I said no.”

I scoot closer to him on the couch, batting my eyelashes and pouting, which lures a small smile out of him. “It's just one video. I won't share it, I swear. Please, please, please.”

He's quiet for a while.

Then he shoves his hand through his brown hair, exhaling a deep “Jesus Christ, *fine*.”

I squeal. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

His grin deepens, and he shakes his head like he knows better but he doesn't have the willpower to turn me down.

I point the camera at him like a total fangirl recording her favorite artist. He pins me with a look that's thick with disapproval, but his smile is unwavering. “Any requests?”

My answer is a no-brainer. “Could you sing ‘Iris’ again?”

This is the first song I ever heard him sing, and months later, I'm still not over it.

He answers with a small nod.

Then I press Record.

Please let this be real.

And it is.

It's as real as it gets.

The way he plays the chords so effortlessly. The shy little glances he casts in my direction as he starts to sing for me.

I proceed to stare at him with my mouth agape for the next five minutes.

This boy is going to change the world one day.

I know because he's already changed mine.

My entire body yearns for more when the last note sounds through the air.

I end the recording, and just like that, it's over.

I must sound like a broken record at this point, but I have no idea how else to describe the masterpiece I just heard. "That was... unbelievable."

He doesn't thank me, but he also doesn't reject the compliment, which I take as a good sign.

Kane glances down at the guitar on his lap and flips it over in order to study the details of the body. He seems as fascinated by the guitar's anatomy as I am by him.

"Wow," he says like it's just dawning on him that the guitar belongs to him. "If there's anything else I can do for you, just say the word. I mean it."

I didn't get him a guitar so he would do something for me. I did it because he's talented.

So then... why do I feel compelled to ask him for another favor?

I clear my throat. "Actually, there might be something..."

“Name it.” He seems sincere.

“I was wondering if you...”

Deep breaths.

“If I what?” he presses.

“If you could be my first kiss.”

I figured one of two things would happen after I asked him. One, he’d call me crazy and tell me to forget it. Or two, he’d get mad at me for even suggesting that he break the bro code.

I wish someone had prepared me for option three.

The awkward silence option.

Kane raises an eyebrow, studying me for a long moment before saying, “Why?”

He’s not shocked or pissed that I’d make a request like that. If anything, he seems intrigued.

“Well, um... because I’m sick of being the only one who’s never kissed a guy before. All my friends have done it.”

He nods, and then he resumes his strumming on his new guitar.

“Kane?”

“Mm?”

“Yes or no?”

He looks up and stares me dead in the eyes. “Yes.”

It’s a wonder I don’t audibly gasp when he says that.

“Really?”

“Hell no. Are you on drugs?”

Should’ve seen that one coming.

“Why not? You’re like the only person I trust enough to ask, and I... I wouldn’t tell anyone if that’s what you’re worried about.” I make myself cringe.

I’m that girl, aren’t I?

The girl trying to convince her brother's best friend to make out with her.

"You can't ask me that." He rests his guitar next to him on the couch. "You're just a kid, Hads. And you're my best friend's sister."

If I had to make a list of the worst things people have told me in my life, *this* would be number one.

"I'm only two years younger than you!" I fire back. "And I'll be fourteen soon."

He shrugs. "Doesn't matter how old you are, you're still Gray's sister. Take it from me, kissing's overrated, anyway."

I swallow the emotions clawing at the inside of my throat.

Kane's kissed girls before.

Of course he has.

"My first kiss sucked." He's so casual about it, completely unaware that he's holding pieces of my broken heart in his hand. "She used way too much tongue, and her breath smelled like fish."

I crack a laugh, much to my disbelief.

He cringes. "And her lips... Drier than the desert."

I chuckle, making a mental note to go stock up on ChapStick because *you never know*.

"Look, all I'm trying to say is, it's not all it's cut out to be. Not unless it's with the right person."

The last part of his sentence resonates with me.

I feel that way about him.

"You never held up your end of the deal, by the way."

Green eyes bore into mine, and I mull over his statement.

"What deal?" I ask.

"The one we made the day you suggested that we share the shed." He's off the couch in a heartbeat, strolling to my painting station in the right corner of the shed.

All I remember from that day is how desperate I was for him to agree to my proposition.

“You said if I showed you my work, you’d show me yours. Paintings you’ve never shared with anyone. I haven’t seen anything yet.”

He’s right. I did say that.

Sirens blare in my head when he comes to a stop in front of my latest painting.

The one of him.

It’s covered with a cloth and nowhere near finished, but that’s not the real reason why I spring to my feet.

Would he be freaked out?

Flattered?

Would he love it, hate it, be *indifferent* to it?

I’m not ready to find out.

“Not that one,” I blurt out seconds before he rips the cloth off the canvas. He swivels to look at me, confusion gleaming in his eyes. “It’s... it’s not done.”

I thank my lucky stars that he doesn’t question it, answering with a nod. “You got any finished ones to show me?”

I stop to think.

Truth is, I haven’t finished many paintings in my life. Never mind, that’s not true. I’ve finished paintings, but I haven’t *kept* a lot of them.

Every time I finish one, I look at it until I hate it.

I try to quiet my thoughts. “Sure. I have one in the garage, I think.”

Kane raises a brow. “Only one?”

“Yeah, I’m kind of my own worst critic,” I admit as I walk to the door.

I'm back with the painting just minutes later, and I might not show it, but my hesitation has ascended into full-blown dread.

It takes everything I have not to run the other way when I find Kane sitting on the couch, waiting for me.

Clutching the canvas to my chest so that he can't see it, I make my way over to him. This particular painting is of the sun setting on the beach in Golden Cove.

Now I understand why he was so hesitant to show me his songs. Sharing your work with others is *nerve-racking*.

I drop onto the couch next to him, my lungs compressing the little oxygen in them. "So... before I show you, you should know that I'm not a professional *by any means*. Everything I know, I've taught myself or seen on YouTube, and I—"

My heart leaps forward when his hand swallows mine.

I look up at him, failing to process the sensation of his fingers on my skin.

Our hands are touching.

Our. Hands. Are. Touching.

"*Hads...*" His voice comes out as a whisper, and he gives my fingers a small squeeze.

The contact has the effect of a bulldozer charging into the protective walls I built around myself.

"Just show me," he says quietly, his voice empty of judgment and expectations.

I flip the painting over, baring a part of my soul to him.

He doesn't make a sound.

He hates it, doesn't he?

But then...

I realize he's not saying anything because his mouth is open.

He just stares at the painting for long seconds, soaking up every stroke of my brush.

“You...” he starts to say. “You’re so talented.”

My throat closes around a painful lump. “You mean it?”

“Yes. It’s amazing.” He peels his hand off mine, much to my disappointment, and grips the small canvas, bringing it closer so he can take a better look. “I can’t believe you did this.”

His mouth curls into a smirk. “You better send me some sick art for my house when you’re a famous painter.”

I snort. “Only if you send me postcards from all the cool places you visit when you’re off being a famous singer.”

I think I see a glimmer of hope flare in his eyes.

I’ve told him how talented he is, but I never really bothered to ask him if he would even be interested in a career in music.

But now, I know he does.

The hopeful look on his face makes that clear.

As though he’s just come to his senses, Kane shakes his head and bites back a scoff. “Yeah, right.”

“Hey,” I breathe.

Our gazes lock together so tight I’m afraid it would hurt to look away.

“No one gets to tell you you’re not good enough, you hear me? No one. Not me, not your dad, not even yourself.”

He digs his teeth into his bottom lip. “No point in getting my hopes up. It would be impossible to—”

I cut him off. “It’s only impossible if you don’t try.”

Kane wrestles a grin. “You give some damn good pep talks, you know that?”

I chuckle. “I try.”

We spend the rest of the evening working on our own craft and bickering the way we usually do. But something feels off.

For me, at least.

While Kane was off kissing girls in New York, I was at home obsessing over him. How many times is he going to have to spell it out for me before I take the hint?

He *doesn't* like me.

Just one of the many reasons why, when my phone pings with a text from Sebastian Stein a half hour later, I decide to reply.

SEBASTIAN

Hey, it's Seb. Lacey gave me your number. I was wondering if you'd like to go out sometime? Maybe go see a movie?

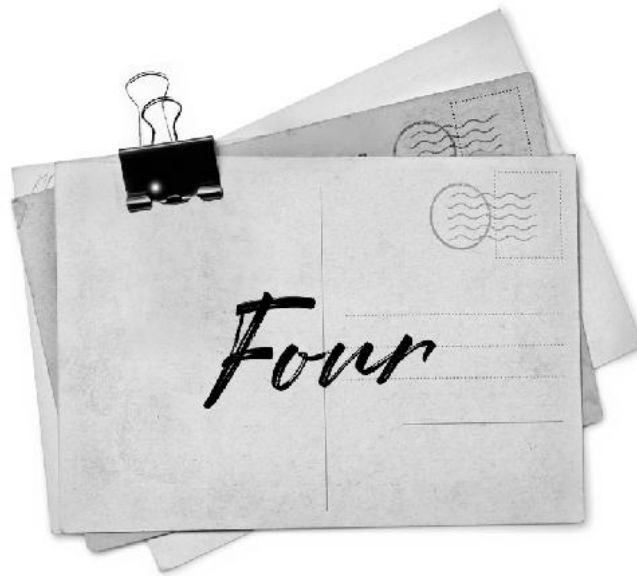
Kane's not going to be my first kiss.

He's not going to be my first *anything*.

It's time I accept that.

HADLEY

A movie sounds great.



HADLEY

A week has gone by since I stopped feeding into my illusions and denying what's right in front of me—although if I'm being honest, it felt more like a month.

Turns out getting over your crush is hard. Especially crushes you've had since before you even knew how to spell the word *crush*.

In any other situation, moving on would be simple. All I'd have to do is distance myself from him and hope that whoever came up with "out of sight, out of mind" was onto something.

But nothing about this situation is simple.

How do you distance yourself from the guy who lives in your house?

It's 8:30 by the time I get dressed and walk out of my room. School is out today, and I've been meaning to tell Kane I have a date tonight, so I won't be able to make our meeting.

I make a beeline for the bathroom but realize that someone's already in there when I find the door locked and hear the sink running.

I'm about to knock when the door opens.

I spin to see Kane standing in the doorway. “Sorry. All yours.”

“No worries,” I say.

He flashes a small smile and walks out.

I enter the bathroom but don’t close the door, seizing the opportunity to tell him, “By the way, I won’t be able to make it tonight.”

He stops dead and turns to look at me. “Why not?”

I’m a bit thrown off by his response. I thought I’d get an uninterested “okay” at most, and call me crazy, but I hear disappointment in his voice.

“I, um... I have a date.”

I start to close the door. At least, I *try* to, but the next thing I know, Kane’s palm is smacked against it, blocking it.

“You have a what?” A raw edge of irritation bleeds through his words.

“A date?” I repeat, but it sounds like I’m asking him.

“With who?”

I give a shrug as if to seem unbothered. “Some guy from school.”

His glare merely intensifies when I say that, and I word-vomit to fill the awkward silence. “He asked me out last week. Maybe if I’m lucky, I’ll finally get my first kiss out of the way.”

He doesn’t answer, the muscles in his jaw twitching.

I assume our conversation has run its course and begin to close the door. Only, Kane stops me again, driving his palm against the door and holding it open.

“It shouldn’t be like this.”

I hear the words he’s saying, but I don’t understand them. “What are you talking about?”

He pins me with a look that makes me shiver. “Your first kiss. The way you think is bullshit.”

He shocks me by pushing past me and slamming the door behind him, trapping us together in the bathroom.

My lungs constrict the air in them, squeezing tighter and tighter the closer he gets.

I raise a brow. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means your first kiss shouldn’t happen because you’re trying to prove something to your shitty friends. It shouldn’t be something you want to *get out of the way*, and it sure as hell shouldn’t happen with some guy you just met.”

I’m shocked by his outburst.

“If not some guy I just met, then who? Maybe I could ask my friend Kane.” I fake gasp. “Oh *wait*, I already did.”

“That’s not...” He exhales a breath. “Look, all I’m saying is it should be a bigger deal. Fuck what your friends think. Fuck what *everybody* thinks. Their opinions don’t matter.”

The last part of his sentence irritates me.

“Their opinion don’t matter? Pretty ironic coming from the guy who’s too scared to share his gift with the world, don’t you think?”

He smacks his mouth shut at my comeback.

“You’re lecturing *me* about not caring what people think when you can’t even tell your own mom you love music. Why can’t you just stop hiding?”

His jaw clenches. “I... Don’t change the subject.”

I know this isn’t fair, but I’m so mad I can’t think straight. Kane’s dad basically rewired his brain into thinking singing was a waste of time.

Years and years of abuse made Kane think that wanting to play music was pathetic and that writing songs would never get him anywhere in life.

I can’t blame him for needing a second to believe in himself again, but reading his lyrics and hearing him sing knowing that he might *never* do anything with that voice makes me want to scream.

I know in my bones that Kane was put on this earth to be an artist. Why can't *he*?

"What are you so afraid of?" I can tell this is a sensitive topic by the way he glares at me. "If I were you, I'd be sharing my talent with everyone."

"Well, then, it's a good thing you're *not* me."

"You didn't answer my question."

He plays dumb. "What question?"

"What are you so afraid of?"

"It's none of your business."

"Isn't it? Because as your *friend*, it is my business whether or not you're—"

"Stop," he warns.

I keep pushing. "Are you going to let your dad ruin the rest of your life?"

That's when he erupts. "I said it's none of your business. For fuck's sake, Hadley!"

He swings the bathroom door open and storms off before I can answer. I shouldn't have gone there, but listening to him lecture me about being a people pleaser when he has a bunch of issues he needs to resolve himself is pushing my buttons.

His words echo in the back of my head, taunting me until I snap and make a decision I can never go back from.

I open the YouTube app on my phone and click the Upload button.

Then I select the video I took of Kane singing "Iris."

If he can't share his talent with the world...

Then I'll do it for him.



HADLEY

By the time next Friday rolls around, I'm wondering if Kane and I even live on the same planet.

Less than week ago, I was doing everything in my power to avoid him, and now?

He's the one treating me like I have cholera.

My birthday's tomorrow, and he hasn't deigned say a word to me since our fight in the bathroom. He doesn't even know that I ended up canceling my date with Sebastian because I didn't feel like going.

I know that I overstepped, but I figured he'd be over it by now. Of course, there's always the possibility that he's mad about something else...

Something that's been watched over two hundred thousand times on YouTube.

I wish I could say that I was surprised. That the video of Kane going semi-viral in a week came as a shock to me, but truth be told, I didn't expect anything less.

That's how talented Kane is.

I woke up the day after our fight with a heart full of remorse and a clear plan of action. I remember grabbing my phone, intending to take the video down before Kane found it.

But then... I saw the view count.

Seven thousand people had already watched it.

In one night.

And the comments were worshipping the ground Kane walks on.

A voice in my head kept telling me that I was wrong for breaking my promise. That I was betraying Kane's trust in the worst way, but as my guilt grew, so did the views.

Seeing so many people agree with me made me feel a little less awful. It made me think that maybe Kane would be able to forgive me if he saw how many strangers were in awe of his voice.

Maybe he'd finally stop feeling like an imposter.

So, I left the video up.

He didn't have to find out. At least not right away. Before I knew it, the video had fifty thousand views.

Then a hundred thousand views.

And then... two hundred thousand.

All in one week.

I step off the bus and go straight home. I can't keep lying to him anymore. I know he's going to hate me either way, but I would prefer if he didn't find out from somebody else.

I have to tell him about the video.

Tonight.

I snatch my house keys out of my bag and unlock the door. I check Kane and Gray's room but find it empty. I know Gray caught a ride with his friends since there's a party tonight. I figure Kane's in the shed, working on another masterpiece.

I slow down as I approach the shed, listening in to make sure Kane isn't in the middle of a song, but I don't hear

anything. I don't think he's in there.

He had the shed to himself yesterday. Maybe he decided to take the night off.

The inside of the shed is pitch-black. And there's a strong smell of paint in the air.

Normally I wouldn't think twice about it, but I haven't used the shed to paint since Monday, and the smell shouldn't be this overwhelming.

I activate the flashlight on my phone to see where I'm going as I amble to the Christmas lights and plug them in.

The lights come on...

And my jaw drops.

In the corner of the shed is the painting I've been working on for *weeks*.

The one of Kane playing the guitar with his head hanging low. The one I kept covered so that he wouldn't find out that I was painting him.

It's completely ruined.

Covered in holes.

It also looks like a bucket of black paint was dropped on top of it. And that's not even the worst part.

There are two words, written in red paint in the center of the canvas...

You Promised.



HADLEY

Kane, I'm so sorry.

HADLEY

I don't know what I was thinking.

HADLEY

I should've never posted the video.

HADLEY

Please talk to me.

HE HASN'T ANSWERED ANY OF MY MESSAGES.

It's been *hours*.

He didn't eat dinner with us tonight. Nor did Evie. Mom just said they'd gone out to grab a bite because they had important things to discuss. I tried to pry more information out of her, but she wouldn't tell me a thing, vague as can be.

I retreated to my bedroom a half hour later and spent the rest of the evening impatiently waiting for Evie and Kane to pull into the driveway.

There's a pit in my stomach—a big one—but I still manage to drift off to sleep at around 10:30 p.m., only to be woken up an hour later by my phone buzzing.

I half expect it to be a wrong number or Lacey drunk-texting me about a boy but the sender is none of the above.

The sender is *Kane*.

I can't believe he texted me.

I was sure he'd never want to talk to me again.

KANE

Meet me in the shed in five.

My heart drops.

He sent me that message over ten minutes ago.

But that's not the *only* message he sent.

KANE

Please don't be asleep.

KANE

I really need to see you.

KANE

Fuck, Hadley. You have to wake up.

I climb out of bed so fast I nearly fall.

I don't waste a second, throwing on a large hoodie and slipping out of my shorts. I stuff my legs into a pair of leggings before checking myself in the mirror.

My hair is a mess from sleeping like the dead, and I pull it up into one of my signature ponytails, leaving out two strands to frame my face.

Then I tiptoe out of my bedroom and down the stairs, texting Kane as I do.

HADLEY

I just saw your texts. I'm on my way.

I can hear my pulse racing in my ears as I step out of the house through the back door and book it to the shed.

The air seems to be thinning with each step I take, and I give myself a solid pep talk before swinging the shed door open.

I notice the Christmas lights on the wall are turned off from the moment I walk inside.

That's when I see him.

And tears immediately flood my eyes.

I blink a few times to restore my vision and drink in every inch of him.

He's standing there, in the middle of the dark shed, with his black guitar in his hands and his guitar strap looped around his shoulder.

There's an old projector placed on a table on his right and a white sheet hanging on the wall behind him.

"What's all this?" I close the door.

Kane's mouth curves into a smile, his hair covering part of his green eyes. "I owe you a song, don't I?"

The conversation we had in text messages returns to my mind. I told him his new song wouldn't be finished before my birthday, and he said it could be my present.

Kane presses a button on the projector and begins to strum his guitar.

I have no idea how he managed it, but as soon as he starts singing, the lyrics are projected onto the wall behind him.

They say only kids believe in magic.

But I've never been more convinced of magic's existence than I am when I hear the chorus.

You're not mine

And that's okay

But I'll still care

From far away

You're not mine

And that's okay

But I'm still yours

Now and always

Not only are the lyrics emotional, but he looks at me like he wrote this song *for me*, and it shatters what's left of my walls.

I know he didn't write this song about me. Kane wouldn't write a song like that about his *friend*. But I still let myself dream.

I let myself believe that Kane Wilder could care about me the way I care about him.

The next thing I know, I'm bawling my eyes out.

By the time the song comes to an end, I'm a complete mess, choking on a sob. Kane exhales a sharp breath as he removes his guitar strap from his shoulder and tucks the guitar inside its case.

The projector illuminating the white sheet in the background is the only reason I'm able to see the torn expression on his face as he makes his way over to me.

I can't help word-vomiting. "I'm so sorry I shared the video. I should've never broken your trust like that. What I did was wrong and you have every right to be upset."

Kane doesn't reply, his mouth twitching into a grin. I continue to ramble until he shuts me up with one move.

He grabs my face with both hands.

Slowly, he swabs my tears away with his thumbs, and I can't help leaning into his palms. He has this look in his eyes. A look I'm not sure I've ever seen before.

"I forgive you," he says quietly.

He does?

But what I did is *unforgivable*.

I broke his trust.

He was mad enough to destroy my painting just yesterday, but now everything's peachy?

What could've possibly happened between yesterday and now to change his mind?

His thumb travels downward and lands on my mouth before I can argue. He draws the curve of my bottom lip with his finger, his green eyes shadowing the movement.

His touch is gone the next second, and I'm left with nothing but this insatiable need to feel it again. We stare at each other for a moment, and I can no longer deny the tension pervading the air.

"Thank you for everything you've done for me, Hadley. I'll never forget it." There's a hint of sadness in his voice, maybe even a drop of remorse, but I don't know how to translate the true meaning of his words.

I flush. "You don't need to thank me. It was just an old guitar."

His jaw muscles flex. "Trust me, it was more than that."

I open my mouth to ask him to elaborate, but an alarm goes off on his phone the next second.

Kane flashes a gorgeous smile, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

Then he flips it over to show me the screen.

It's midnight.

I'm officially fourteen.

What he says next makes my heart swell with joy.

"Happy birthday, Hads."

I gesture to the projector and the sheet he anchored to the wall. "All this... getting to hear your song..." I get choked up midsentence. "This is the best birthday present anyone's ever given me."

"That wasn't your birthday present."

I blink at him. "It wasn't?"

"No."

He pauses.

"This is."

Then he does the one thing that ensures I'll never be able to look at another guy.

He cups my face, tips my chin forward, and crashes his mouth against mine so hard my knees nearly give out. It takes me a solid second to realize what's happening.

Kane is kissing me.

Not some girl from New York who smells like fish.

Me.

I've imagined this moment before. Obsessed over it. But I never thought it would actually happen.

His mouth is soft.

Soft and warm and addictive. It's moving against mine with the perfect amount of pressure and urgency. You'd think we're on the clock and he's trying to make the most of the little time we have.

My focus shifts to his hands clutching my face until one of them abandons my cheek and cups the back of my neck to jerk me closer.

His grip on me is so firm it's as though he's afraid I'm going to slip through his fingers. As though he thinks I'm going to put an end to our kiss.

I startle myself by gripping the fabric of his shirt and pushing to the tip of my toes. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I try not to overthink it. I return his kiss with twice as much ardor and then move away from him just long enough to inhale a shaky breath.

And it's not just my breathing that's shaky. My entire *body* is trembling—at least that's what it feels like on the inside. I don't think he can tell because his mouth is back on mine before I know it.

A noise I've never heard before rips from his throat, and it ignites something in me. Something unfamiliar. It starts in my chest before skittering down to my lower stomach.

“Hads,” Kane breathes against my mouth.

I part my lips without even realizing it, and the next thing I know, his tongue is slipping past my teeth. He takes his time at

first. Then he goes all the way, his tongue tasting mine, and I swallow a gasp.

I have no clue how to do this, so I surrender all control to him. We're both clumsy in the way we explore each other, and I love that we're figuring it out together. I kiss him until I can't anymore, and it takes all of my willpower to separate from him.

Only, as soon as I do, fear grips my insides.

What if he regrets it?

My shoulders drop with relief when I catch a glimpse of his face. For what it's worth, he doesn't seem horrified.

He even smiles at me.

But... his smile is tarnished by guilt.

Probably because he made out with his best friend's sister, but I couldn't care less about my brother's rules right now. This is the happiest day of my life.

"Thank you," I croak.

After all, I asked him to kiss me as a favor.

That's probably all this is.

A favor.

He catches on right away. "Wait... you think I..."

I lower my gaze to the floor.

My admission makes him cringe, and he shakes his head, grabbing my face to force our eyes to meet. "Don't thank me. That's not why I did it."

A tear rolls down my cheek.

Kane notices and draws me into his arms for a hug. The kind you lose yourself in. I return his embrace without hesitation. He whispers something when he buries his face in the crook of my neck, and it gives me pause.

Call me crazy, but it sounded like...

Goodbye?

I pull away. “Did you say something?”

“No.” I think I hear his voice crack before he jerks me back into his arms.

I wish I had known then...

That I wouldn't see him again until the day we buried my brother.

FIVE YEARS LATER...



HADLEY, 19

“You better text me as soon as you get settled.” Maggie throws her arms around me, squeezing the breath out of my body for the third time in five minutes.

“Cross my heart.” I return her embrace, the laugh in my throat morphing into a painful lump.

Shit, I'm really going to miss her.

She pulls away from me. “I’m serious. You keep me updated about our pact, or I will selfie-bomb the shit out of you—*don’t think I won’t.*”

I knew that pact would come back to bite me in the ass.

We made it at the End of Semester party Maggie dragged me to after finals week. She’d just been dumped by her douchebag of a boyfriend, and I was feeling down in the dumps about my nonexistent love life.

We were tipsy and feeling sorry for ourselves when Mag suggested that we put ourselves out there this summer.

Maggie’s on the rebound, but I want something different.

Something real.

I've never had a *real* relationship in my life. Sure, I've had some college flings here and there, and I dated a guy named Ben on and off during high school, but I've never had a relationship exceed the one-year mark.

Let's just say dating didn't rank very high on my priority list after what happened to Gray.

But that all changes now.

"Remind me again why we made that stupid pact?"

Maggie points a finger at me. "Shush. You should be thanking me for getting you back in the game before your *hoo-ha* goes on strike for negligence."

I snort. "Classy, Mag."

"Now, are you going to get yourself laid, or do I need to continue with my pussy synonyms? 'Cause there's a lot more where that came from. *Lady garden, punani, vulvarine*—"

I let out a chuckle, throwing my hands up in surrender. "Okay, okay. You win."

She smirks in satisfaction. "Good call."

If there's one thing I've learned from sharing a dorm with this girl for the past two years, it's that first impressions can be misleading.

I didn't like Maggie when I first met her.

Couldn't stand her.

I remember thinking she was a spoiled rich girl. It just seemed to me like she saw the world through privilege-colored glasses, and she *does*, in a way, but it's not like she had a say in the matter.

Maggie's parents have been saving to put her through college since she was a baby. She's an only child with a CEO mom and a dad who just made partner at his law firm.

Oh, and her parents take her on a family trip every summer—last year was France, this year is Italy. *Need I say more?*

At first, I hated her for it.

I hated the fact that all of her expenses are paid for while the rest of us are barely getting by and racking up loads of student debt, but now?

I realize that was just my jealousy speaking.

And it wasn't so much about the money—although that part did leave a bitter taste in my mouth—as it was about the *easy* life Maggie had led so far.

No tragedy.

No murdered brother.

No grief.

It was like a part of me was so focused on hating everyone who *hadn't* been through hell that I never thought to try to get *myself* out of it.

Years of therapy later, I learned to accept life for what it is.

Now, I'm not saying I forgave the universe for taking Gray away from us, but I found a way to accept that he's not coming back.

Because he's gone.

Because he's *dead*.

I know I'm never going to stop wondering what really happened that day.

I'm never going to stop lying awake at night, thinking about the masked man who came into the store while Gray was working. I'm never going to be able to understand why he thought the few dollars in the cash register were worth more than my brother's life.

But after years of obsessing over his murder, begging the police to dig deeper and give me and my mom some closure, I had no choice but to come to terms with the fact that we'll never know who did it.

So, I let go.

I moved on.

I accepted Gray's death so that it wouldn't kill me, too.

As soon as I started working on my issues, Maggie and I became inseparable. We're even getting a new dorm next semester. It has a fully functioning kitchen and a bathroom—which is a *big* step up from the one we've shared so far.

It's safe to say that Maggie is my closest friend.

Fine, she's my *only* friend.

I completely lost touch with my high school friends since moving to Boone for college.

Not that I miss them.

I'll always remember the way Brie gave me shit for quitting the cheerleading team to help my mom with the store. Or the way Louise told me I was depressing to be around just two days after we put Gray's body into the ground.

Lacey was the only one I considered to be a true friend out of all of them, but she became her stepsiblings' legal guardian right out of high school, essentially assuming the role of a single parent at eighteen.

We drifted apart over time, but I don't blame her for neglecting to text me back.

She obviously has a lot on her plate.

My phone chimes with a message from my mom, and I don't even need to open it to know she's waiting for me outside.

"My mom's here." I pull Mag into another hug. "Enjoy your trip and a hot summer fling with an Italian guy, okay?"

She laughs. "Oh, I plan on it."

I grab the handle of my suitcase and glance around our dorm one last time before walking out. I spot my mom's car parked out front the second I exit the dorms.

My mom hurries out of the car when she sees me and pops the trunk with her key fob. I'm greeted by one of her bear hugs and an interrogation I should've seen coming.

Once we've established that I haven't forgotten anything in the dorm—it only took Mom listing every single item in my

suitcase to make sure I packed it—I haul my luggage into her trunk and climb into the passenger seat.

I notice the back seat of her car is brimming with boxes as we hop back onto the road.

The trunk was packed, too.

She just recently vacated the apartment she'd been renting for two years. She said she wanted to live closer to me—even though her old apartment was less than fifteen minutes away from the dorms—and found this lovely condo right off campus.

She was supposed to get the keys to her new place a week ago, and if there's one thing you need to know about Lillian Queen, it's that she hates moving. She usually starts unpacking right away to get it over with.

I slide the window down to enjoy some fresh air. “Why do you have all that stuff in your car? I thought you'd be all moved in by now.”

She clears her throat. “About that. There's been a slight change of plans.”

I can practically see beads of sweat forming on her forehead when she says that.

“What happened?”

“I talked to the landlord, and, um... we won't be able to move in just yet.”

I stiffen in my seat. “Why not?”

She keeps her gaze fixated on the road. “A pipe burst in the condo above mine.”

You have *got* to be kidding me.

“Can we still live in it?”

“That depends.”

I can't stand how vague she's being. “On what?”

“How much swimming you want to do this summer.”

Shit.

“The owner said the flooding is manageable. Out of all the units that were affected, mine sustained the least damage, but it’s bad enough that they’re going to need a few months to fix it.”

She continues before I can answer. “Look. I know it’s not ideal, but the landlord’s been really accommodating about it. They’ll be covering three months’ rent and the cost of the storage unit for my furniture.”

If you ask me, it’s the least they can do.

I heave a sigh. “How long is it going to be?”

“It should be ready by the end of the summer.”

“The end of the summer?” I shriek.

If I had known about this sooner, I might’ve been able to work something out with campus housing to stay in my dorm until next semester. Granted, it would’ve been pricey, and I would’ve had to take a few summer classes, but anything’s better than being *homeless*.

“But... where are we going to live?”

She blows out a breath. “Now, before I tell you, I need you to promise that you’ll keep an open mind.”

I have a bad feeling about this.

“Mom, just tell me.”

“Remember when I said Evie and I had reconnected?”

My heart hurts a pinch.

I remember a time when the thought of Mom and Evie drifting apart would have never crossed my mind. But the truth is, they’ve barely spoken these past few years.

It was a gradual thing.

They kept in touch at first but life and distance eventually got the upper hand.

Evie moved to LA the day after my fourteenth birthday while Mom stayed in Silver Springs until I graduated. Mom

mentioned Evie had reached out to her a few months ago, wanting to make up for lost time.

“Yeah?” I feel like I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Mom pauses, the dread in her eyes unmissable. “She’s invited us to stay at the beach house for the summer.”

Did I just hallucinate?

“Wait, *the* beach house? As in…”

Mom nods. “That’s right. The one in Golden Cove.”

“What? But how? I thought it was sold after Mr. Wilder died.”

“It was. But the new owners went bankrupt. It pushed them into foreclosure.”

The news leaves me speechless.

“I didn’t want to impose at first, but she insisted. She said I should think of it as a thank-you for taking them in after her husband died.”

Talk about a full-circle moment.

A million questions leap to the front of my mind. “Hold on, are you saying Evie bought a seven-million-dollar beach house? With what money?”

Sure, Evie is comfortable. She purchased a gorgeous ranch in Colorado three years ago, although, technically, it wasn’t with *her* money.

That’s when it all makes sense.

“Kane bought it for her, didn’t he?”

One look at her face, and I know I was right.

Kane bought the beach house for his mom.

Of course he did.

You’d think I would’ve learned not to be surprised by anything this guy does anymore.

It feels like not too long ago, he was taking my first kiss while knowing damn well that he was leaving the next day.

I can still see it.

Fourteen-year-old me, walking downstairs the next morning, a big dopey grin on her face, only to find out the boy she loved had left her.

On her birthday, of all days.

Kane and his mom had boarded a plane to LA earlier that day, off to chase a dream we'd built together. Then I never heard a peep from him again.

He didn't text, didn't call.

He just... *vanished*.

I later found out that Kane had been approached by a talent manager for one of the biggest record labels in America.

I remember thinking it was weird that Kane and his mom hadn't come home for dinner the night before Kane disappeared from my life. Well, it turns out they were having a business meeting with Joshua Caldwell.

He'd stumbled upon the video of Kane singing "Iris" and fallen in love with his voice. He made the trip to Silver Springs solely to see Kane and his mom and convince them to fly out to LA at his expense.

The deal was that he'd pay for their food and hotel while doing everything in his power to get Kane's name out there.

It wasn't long before Kane started fascinating people all over the world. Not only was he gorgeous and talented, he was under the management of the industry's most influential man.

Joshua is known as the brain behind Hollywood's biggest celebrities. Story has it, every artist he's ever discovered has made it big, and he has a special eye for untapped potential.

The first single Kane released was "I'm Still Yours."

It debuted at number fifteen on the charts, which was unheard of for a new artist. Less than two weeks later, he was number one. It almost seemed like the universe was playing a joke on me.

I spent the next few months killing myself to avoid any radio station I knew was playing his song on repeat, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't outrun him.

Or his lyrics.

You're not mine.

And that's okay.

But I'm still yours.

Now and always.

Ten months later, Kane was coming out with his first album. It was a pop album, consisting of fourteen tracks with catchy melodies and cheesy lyrics that sounded nothing like his songwriting.

The way I remember it, Kane's songwriting was deep.

His lyrics made you *feel* something, and yes, "I'm Still Yours" was about love, but I know for a fact that most of his other songs *weren't*.

Kane wrote about his trauma and regrets when we were kids. His songs explored a variety of topics, but there wasn't *one* song on his first album that wasn't about meeting a girl and falling in love.

His fans ate that shit up, of course, but I knew the truth.

No one knows what kind of artist Kane really is.

Not even his mom.

Now, that's not to say Evie didn't do her best.

She quit her jobs, packed her bags, and followed her kid halfway around the world in order to make his dreams come true, but it doesn't change the fact that she didn't even know her son was a talented musician until the day Joshua came calling.

My mom said Evie did everything she could to shield Kane from the drug and alcohol abuse of the music industry. At least until Kane turned seventeen.

That's when he bought her the Colorado ranch and asked her for some space.

He said it was because he wanted to learn to navigate his career without his mom constantly looking over his shoulder. After all, she'd been tagging along on all of his tours since he got his start. Evie respected his decision and left him to face the industry alone.

It all went downhill from there.

Alcohol.

Drugs.

Hooking up with random women.

He's done it all.

And it's not like I check up on him.

I don't go out of my way to find out what he's up to, and I don't stalk his socials, but even *I* heard about the clusterfuck his life has become in the past year.

Though nothing compares to the scandal that took place two weeks ago.

The headline almost broke the internet.

Kane Wilder attacks manager Joshua Caldwell and puts him into a wheelchair.

Maggie, who's a big fan of Kane, wouldn't stop talking about it after it happened.

She has no idea that Kane and I were friends in another life, and no matter how many times I've told her that she doesn't need to share the latest Kane Wilder gossip with me, she just can't help herself.

I remember being woken up by her screaming the day she found out. I asked her what was going on, and she showed me the video going viral on YouTube.

It was recorded inside a club Kane rented out for one of his band member's birthday party.

The video was recorded from the second-floor mezzanine, overlooking the bar area downstairs. No one knows who caught it on camera, but the tape shows Kane and his manager arguing next to a large door.

We couldn't hear what they were saying because of the loud music playing, but Kane was obviously livid. Meanwhile, his manager seemed like he was going to shit himself.

Can't blame him.

Kane's a whooping six-foot-three now and much more imposing than he was at fifteen.

Halfway through the video, Kane gripped Joshua's suit and yanked him closer to say something inches away from his face.

Joshua's reply seemed to set him off because Kane went apeshit on him the next second, cocking his fist back and crashing it into Joshua's jaw.

Joshua dropped to the ground like deadweight. I could tell the crowd was starting to notice as people began to gather around them. Kane wasn't done, though. He pulled Joshua back to his feet and hit him again twice as hard.

The door behind them opened at the exact same time.

Little did Kane know it led to a set of cement stairs...

The force of Kane's punch sent Joshua flying straight into the open door. The woman who opened it stepped aside, but Joshua didn't manage to steady himself.

He fell down the stairs.

The music stopped abruptly, and gasps ran through the crowd as Kane stood there.

He seemed to be in shock because a guy with black hair and a muscular build ran to him and gave his shoulder a shake as if to bring him out of a trance—turns out it was his drummer, i.e. the guy Kane threw the party for.

His name is Oscar something.

People rushed toward the stairs to check on Joshua.

Then the screen went black.

There have been many rumors and theories going around. Articles have been popping up all over the internet, claiming to know *why* Kane flipped out that night.

One article said Kane has a crippling drug problem that causes episodes of blinding anger, another one said he'd broken up with his supermodel girlfriend, Tate Zimmer, a few minutes prior, and he just happened to take it out on his manager.

No one knows what really happened, but one thing's for sure: this isn't going to go away anytime soon.

Joshua's been in the hospital since then with a concussion, broken ribs, and a spine injury, the latest being the most serious. The prognosis came early this week.

Joshua Caldwell will never walk again.

Translation: Kane's career is over.

"Hadley?" Mom requests my attention.

I snap out of it, transported back into the car. "Sorry, what?"

"I said, isn't it great? Going back to Golden Cove? I know how much you used to love the beach house as a kid."

She's right.

I did love the beach house.

But that was before Mr. Wilder's accident.

Before everything changed.

I don't know how I would feel going back after all these years.

Does it even matter? my broke student college brain interjects. As long as it's free and I can get a summer job somewhere close to it, I'll be able to save up tons of money before school picks up again. Plus, what else am I going to do? Couch surf for the rest of the summer?

I'm about to accept Evie's invitation when I realize...

“It’s just going to be the three of us, right?”

Her skin pales at my question, and my stomach drops on cue.

I know instantly.

Then she says it.

“Kane will be there, too.”



HADLEY

“Are you going to be okay?” Mom’s voice cuts through the emotional turmoil her news unleashed on me.

I sure as hell am *not* going to be okay.

But I can’t tell her that.

I’m too busy trying to process what she just said.

“He...” I clear my throat. “I thought he was supposed to be on tour.”

Last I heard, his US tour is kicking off in June. I know because it’s all Maggie could talk about these past few months. She spent seven hours queueing up to snatch tickets to his Charlotte concert next fall, but it was sold out within minutes.

She nods. “He was, but the tour’s been canceled.”

“Really? Why?”

“I’m not sure. Evie mentioned he got dropped by his record label. Maybe that has something to do with it?”

Kane got dropped from his label?

That’s how you know shit is getting serious.

“That still doesn’t explain why he’ll be at the beach house.”

“All I know is, his mom wants him out of the spotlight for a while. She thinks reconnecting with his roots might help him get his act together.”

I can’t imagine how disappointed his fans must’ve been when they heard the news. It isn’t long before I surrender to my curiosity and pull out my phone. I enter the key words “Kane Wilder tour” into the search bar.

The first thing that comes up is an article with an attention-grabbing headline.

Kane Wilder cancels tour and announces hiatus after assault on Joshua Caldwell.

I tap the link, my eyes skimming over the article.

Kane Wilder’s new management put out a statement early this morning, informing the singer’s fans of his US tour’s cancellation. Fans all over the United States are heartbroken at the thought of missing their idol’s concert and begging for any scraps of information as to when they can expect Instagram’s Most Followed Male Artist to return to the stage.

My gaze drops lower to the excerpts of the statement that was shared on his social media.

Kane deeply regrets what happened and wishes to present his sincerest apologies to Joshua Caldwell and his loved ones. He and his family have deemed it for the best that he take some personal time to reflect on his actions.

Kane is willing to do whatever is needed to improve and make up for his mistakes, which is why he will be going on hiatus while he faces the consequences of his actions and works on taking back his life and sobriety. All tickets to upcoming US shows will be refunded within seven days. We ask that you respect the privacy of all parties involved during this trying time.

I click the link at the bottom of the article, and it takes me to Kane’s Instagram account—more precisely, to the statement

his team posted.

I scroll to the comments section. There are already fifty-seven thousand comments despite the fact that the statement was posted less than six hours ago.

@sckmydick290: Y'all are making a big deal out of nothing. It's not like he died. So what if he's in a wheelchair. At least he's loaded. He can afford help unlike many of us.

Then I spot a comment with over thirty-three thousand likes.

@sierrastrauma: Apology not accepted. Joshua better sue #canceled

Looks like the majority agrees.

The rest of the comments section mostly consists of hateful slander, gossip, and love declarations from his fans.

@wildersbitch: Is it wrong that I'm even more attracted to him now? GO OFF, DADDY.

@raynas_sk: You guys, he found Tate making out with his drummer right before it happened. No wonder he was angry.

@ixdontxcare: Are you shitting me? I waited in a queue for ten hours to get those tickets!

“Look, I know you and Kane didn't part on the best terms, but I think this could be a great opportunity to fix your relationship.” Mom requests my attention, and I shove my phone back into my pocket. “Come on, honey. What do you say?”

Part of me wants to tell her to drop me off on some random street corner so that I can Uber home.

Except... I don't have a home anymore.

The only home I've ever known is in Silver Springs.

And it belongs to someone else now.

I'm not saying I blame Mom for selling the house and the store after I graduated. She did what she had to do to protect her sanity.

The question is: what do I have to do to protect *mine*?

I guess I could rent out a room somewhere, but then there's no way I'd be able to pile up enough money to cover next semester's expenses.

And even if I *did* get a full-time job, rent and utility bills would take up most of my paychecks, and I'd just end up right back where I started.

"It's okay," I lie.

Her features twitch with worry. "Are you sure? Because if you're not comfortable with this, we can figure something out. I think there's a place I could rent near my condo. It's a bit pricey, but we can—"

I muster a fake smile. "It's fine, Mom, really. It'll be great to see Evie again."

She smiles back, but she doesn't seem convinced in the slightest. Unspoken words descend over us, memories of the day Kane left sucking the air out of the vehicle.

Mom knows how much it hurt me.

How much *he* hurt me.

It would've been impossible for her not to notice how depressed I was after he skipped town. She'd ask me about it, and I'd slap on a smile, promising that everything was fine.

She never pushed me for answers, but I think she's always known.

She knows I loved him once.

And she knows I hate him now.

What kind of daughter would I be if I told her to turn down Evie's offer? Especially knowing how much money she's going to save that way?

Her entire life has revolved around me since we lost Gray. It's like after he died, I became the only thing she stayed alive for. The only thing keeping her going.

I didn't mind it. Back then, I needed her just as much as she needed me, but the difference is... after years of grieving, I managed to go back to the person I used to be.

She *didn't*.

She's been overcompensating for years now. She moved miles away from her hometown and friends, just so that she could get a place near my school.

You'd think she'd want to enjoy her freedom now that she doesn't have a store to run and two kids to take care of, but it's like all she does is wait for me to come back for winter and summer breaks.

We reach Golden Cove two and a half hours later. There's something surreal about being here and driving around the gated community where I spent so much of my childhood.

It forces me to remember the girl I was. Little Hadley, crushing on a boy she'd known since she was born, completely clueless as to how easily he would abandon her.

If you'd told me I'd come back to this place a month ago, I would've thought you were on something.

A *strong* something.

The more miles we cover, the harder it is to suppress the flashbacks rolling in.

We pass the park where Gray, Kane, Jamie, Vince, Cal, and I used to play. Our moms would have to come drag us home for dinner, and we'd still find ourselves right back here as soon as we were done.

The private portion of the beach vastly differs from the rest of the coast. Mainly because it's clean and not littered with trash, unlike the shore in Hillford, the nearest town.

I wonder if Jamie and her brother still live in Hillford. We completely lost touch after Mom, Gray, and I stopped coming to the beach house.

"Here we are," Mom announces as she pulls up into the driveway.

I blink a few times, disappointment crashing into me. The beach house looks so different I almost ask my mom if we're in the right place.

They painted the windows and front doors black, for one. I'm guessing the previous owners wanted to give the house a modern feel, and it might've worked if it weren't for the gray bricks they added to the façade.

They went overboard with the dark shades, making it feel uninviting. Not to mention it sticks out like a sore thumb, being the only dark house in a neighborhood *full* of coastal-colored mansions.

Mom seems to share my train of thoughts because she says, "Don't worry. Evie's renovating the whole thing at the end of the summer."

I only realize my fists are wrapped into tight balls, my nails digging into my palms, when she kills the engine.

Why am I so nervous?

I glance around the driveway and spot another car parked by the garage. It's a white Tesla, with lilac tire rims and a bumper sticker that says, *Please let me merge before I start crying.*

It draws a smile out of me.

If that isn't the most *Evie* thing I've ever seen.

"Good. Evie's already here," Mom says before climbing out of the car.

I unbuckle my seat belt and swing the door open. The warm summer breeze sweeps over my face as soon as I get out of the car, and I exhale a sharp breath.

Mom and I are standing on the porch with our luggage in no time. Nausea knots my stomach when she rings the doorbell.

Footsteps can be heard on the inside, and I stiffen up, dreading the person I'm going to see when the door opens.

“You made it.” My nerves settle the second I hear Evie’s voice.

The joy surging in my chest quickly trumps my anxiety. I haven’t seen my godmother since Gray’s funeral my junior year of high school.

Her dirty blonde hair is darker. Longer, too. She’s wearing light makeup and a comfortable-looking blouse with trouser pants.

This.

This is the real Evie.

She probably doesn’t feel the need to dress up for her husband’s approval anymore. The man loved his suits, and he requested nothing less than fancy dresses and heels from Evie.

She looks radiant.

Free.

Her skin is sun-kissed and laugh lines are starting to form around her eyes.

I wish I’d gotten to know that version of her sooner. Not that I’m blaming her for being absent from my life after her son took the music industry by storm.

I get that she had a lot to juggle between traveling with Kane full time and attending a bunch of court hearings to contest her late husband’s will.

To think she ended up dropping the whole thing after Kane got famous. She and Kane didn’t need that man’s money anymore.

All in all, I think Evie did the best she could, considering the circumstances. She sent me and Gray presents and called us every year for our birthday.

She’d also FaceTime us on Christmas and send us cards filled with love and promises to come visit soon.

But then Gray was murdered.

And while it should've brought us closer, it had the opposite effect.

I think Evie felt guilty about not being in his life much after Kane became a singer, and deep down, I think Mom resented her for it, too—although you'd have to torture it out of her.

Funny enough, looking at the smile on my mom's face now? You would never suspect a thing.

"Come in, come in." Evie steps aside. My mom's barely stepped foot inside the house before Evie traps her in a hug. "I'm *so* happy you took me up on my offer, Lil. Thank you so much for coming."

"Of course. Thank *you* for inviting us," Mom replies, returning Evie's embrace.

I should be focused on the adorable reunion happening before me, but all I can do is glance around the foyer.

Everything is different.

The color of the walls, the chandelier, even the floors. They installed purple wallpaper and replaced the gorgeous wood flooring with carpet.

Oh, and a lot of the home decor and furniture are purple, too—the sofa in the corner, the vase on the nightstand, the wall art.

So. Freaking. Purple.

If Evie were to tell me they'd torn the house down and built another one from scratch, I'd probably believe her.

"Oh, Hadley." Evie's eyes become misty when she turns to look at me. "You look so beautiful, honey. Come here."

My godmother's arms are around me before I know it.

"God, I've missed so much," Evie whispers mid-hug, and my heart constricts in my chest.

Yes, you have.

I keep my thoughts to myself, withdrawing from the hug before she does.

Okay.

Maybe I'm a little mad that she wasn't around.

I mean, it's bad enough that Kane completely ghosted us the day he boarded that plane, but Evie disappeared from our lives, too. Sure, she called us every once in a while, but it wasn't the same as seeing her in person.

I would've been satisfied with just *one* yearly visit, but she was always too busy. I even wondered if she'd find the time to attend Gray's funeral at one point.

Evie gestures to the first floor. "Would you like a tour of the world's ugliest beach house?"

Mom and I chuckle.

Evie taps the purple wall. "Let me reassure you, this atrocity of a wallpaper will be gone by the end of the summer."

She starts by showing us around the common areas, and I'm relieved to find the kitchen and dining room untouched. It's a wonder the last owners didn't put up purple kitchen cabinets to match the foyer.

The living room is mostly the same, too, except for the carpet. As for the downstairs bathroom, it's covered in zebra-print wallpaper with, you guessed it, *purple* tiles on the shower wall.

Evie suggests that we go drop our luggage in our rooms before dinner, and I'm relieved to see that mine is exactly the same as I left it.

It's obvious the owners didn't get around to renovating this room because they kept the old furniture—the one that came with the house after Mr. Wilder's accident.

If anything, the room seems like it hasn't been used in years. Crazy to think I might've been the last person to sleep in here.

I jog down the stairs a few minutes later and amble down the hall toward the kitchen. I scan my surroundings as though I'm afraid of running into Kane at any moment.

Chill, he's not even here.

You would've seen him if he were.

Call it wishful thinking, but I'm hoping there was a last-minute change of plans and Mr. Superstar will not be joining us after all.

I'm about to walk into the kitchen when I hear Evie say, "He was supposed to get here tonight, but he had things to take care of in LA. He's flying in tomorrow morning."

Never mind, I guess.

"His drummer is coming with. Bless his soul. He's going to help me keep an eye on Kane these next few months."

His drummer?

Wait, I'm pretty sure they were celebrating his birthday the night Kane went apeshit on his manager.

His name is Oscar.

I hear a phone chime, and a few seconds later, Evie adds, "Good. Drea's coming, too. I don't trust this Tori girl to keep him in line for a second."

"Who are they?" my mom asks.

"Drea's his publicist. She's been with him since he started. She's like family to us."

He's bringing his *publicist*?

I'd be willing to bet the main reason she's tagging along is to do some damage control. She's here to salvage what's left of his career.

"And the other girl?"

"Tori's supposed to be his new sober sponsor. His shrink thought she might help get his drinking under control." A sigh spills from her lips. "I don't know where his management is

finding these people, but he's already gone through four of them in the past two weeks. *Four.*"

She pauses as if to get a hold of her emotions before resuming. "His drinking's getting worse, too. He's going to need to get his act together before the trial."

"What trial?" Mom asks.

She proceeds to tell my mom that Joshua and his family are suing Kane for the assault. Something that's been kept out of the press so far, but I have no doubt it'll be making headlines soon.

Mom picks up on Evie's anguish. "Evie, look at me. It's going to be okay. Kane's a good kid. He's just going through a rough patch."

"That's what I thought, too, but I don't know what to do anymore. The fame... it's changed him. Some days, I barely recognize my boy." She sniffles, a mixture of worry and pain bleeding through her voice. "I've never seen him like this."

"Yes, but that's precisely why you asked him here. To help him."

"I asked him here because I didn't know *what* to do. He refuses to go to rehab. I figured the beach house was the closest thing he had to a connection to his past. Seeing you... seeing Hadley... I'm hoping it'll help him remember who he is."

"It will," Mom says.

My stomach screams at me, and I have no choice but to put an end to my eavesdropping before I get *hangry*.

Evie's features light up from the second I turn the corner. "There she is." She wipes her eyes quickly and clears her throat. "Now, what are we feeling for dinner?"

"Anything. As long as it's wine," Mom jokes, but I know she's only half kidding. Mom hasn't had an actual vacation in *years*.

I thought she'd slow down after she sold the store, but she went right from running it to becoming an event planner, on

top of working as a virtual assistant on the side.

Evie laughs, opening the wine cooler built into the kitchen island. She grabs the only bottle in there. “Might as well enjoy it. It’s the last one you’re going to find in this house for a while.”

I catch on quickly.

She’s *Kane-proofed* the house, hasn’t she? Alcohol is definitely going to be scarce around here.

“About dinner,” Evie says as soon as she’s poured us both a drink. “Are we feeling takeout, or should I make something?”

I plop down onto a swiveling stool. “You still cook? I kind of figured you’d have a personal chef on speed dial now.”

“Oh, I do, but Kane insisted on getting his own chef here from LA. Sue’s supposed to arrive Monday.”

I was kidding, but okay.

I’m not sure why this surprises me. This is technically nothing new. Evie and Kane had a private chef back when Mr. Wilder was still alive, too, but then he died, and they reverted back into normal people.

For a little while, at least.

Jesus. We really live in completely different worlds now.

Mom and Evie spend the next fifteen minutes trying to agree on a meal, only to end up ordering seafood pizza from Sandy’s, our favorite restaurant in Hillford.

Once she’s put in the order, Evie brings up the country club that just opened in Golden Cove. Word is it’ll be one of the nicest clubs in the state. But here’s the real kicker: Evie’s already secured memberships for both herself *and* my mom.

Of course, Mom’s first reflex is to turn down her offer and say she can’t accept such a generous gift. Only, Evie is not taking no for an answer, and Mom ends up caving two glasses of wine later.

“Did they say how long the food was going to be?” I ask when the hunger pangs get unbearable.

Evie pours herself another drink. “She said it’d be at least an hour. They’re swamped.”

An hour?

I might eat the purple wallpaper before then.

I push to my feet, fighting a yawn. I spent all of yesterday and today packing up the last of my dorm. “Is it okay if I go take a nap while we wait? I’m exhausted.”

Evie gives a nod. “Of course. We’ll call you when the food’s here.”

I dash up the stairs toward my room, trying—and failing—to wrap my head around how quickly I went from never wanting to see Kane again to having absolutely *no* choice in the matter.

Just this morning, I thought I was going to spend the summer in my mom’s new condo, swiping on dating apps and focusing on my art whenever I’m not at work, and now?

I’m back in Golden Cove.

Forced to share a house with a Grammy-winning, controversial superstar. The words Mom said earlier pop into my head as I swing my door open.

I think this could be a great opportunity to fix your relationship.

What she doesn’t understand is that there’s no relationship left to fix.

Kane Wilder is nothing but a book I didn’t finish. A story collecting dust on my bookshelf. He’s a chapter I’ve long since erased from my memory.

And if he’s stupid enough to hold his breath for a second chance...?

You best believe I’m going to let that boy suffocate.



THREE CONSECUTIVE KNOCKS JOLT ME AWAKE.

What the...

My senses spill back in one by one.

I groan and flip onto my back. “Maggie, could you get the door?”

The loud thumping doesn’t stop.

And Maggie doesn’t answer.

“Maggie?” I call again.

That’s when I remember.

Maggie’s not answering me because I’m *not* at the dorms anymore. I’m in Golden Cove for the summer. I sit up straight, rub my eyes, and glance around my bedroom.

How long have I been asleep?

I listen for another knock. It comes straightaway.

I drag myself out of bed with a yawn. Must be my mom coming to tell me the food is here. I can’t explain the anxiety stirring in my chest as I rest my hand on the knob.

My breathing stalls when I open the door...

...and come face-to-face with a blast from the past.



HADLEY

I blink repeatedly, as if to make sure my half-asleep brain isn't deceiving me. "Jamie?"

An infectious smile curls on her face. "Bitch, how could you not tell me you were back?"

I've missed many things about the beach house in the past five years—lazy afternoons on the beach, skipping stones at the docks with the guys, eating double my body weight in pizza at Sandy's—but *nothing* more than I've missed Jamie Torres.

I pull her into my arms. "I'm sorry, I didn't even know I was coming back until a few hours ago. How did you find out I was..." I withdraw from the hug, giving her a once-over. "What are you wearing?"

This isn't the right question.

The right question would've been, *why* are you wearing a uniform from Sandy's? I'd recognize that salmon-pink, short-sleeved button-up shirt anywhere.

I put two and two together. "Do you work at Sandy's?"

She nods. "For three years now."

I can't believe she still lives in Hillford.

Growing up, she couldn't stop saying how eager she was to get out of this town. I'm guessing her extended stay has something to do with her dad—he got diagnosed with Parkinson's a little before Mr. Wilder died.

Knowing Jamie, I wouldn't be surprised if she'd put her life on hold to take care of him. She's always been so grateful to him for raising her and her brother all on his own after their mom bailed.

I circle back to my initial question. "How did you know I was here?"

"I knew someone had bought the house, but I didn't know who. You can imagine what went through my head when I heard we had a delivery for this address. Under Evie's name, no less. Then I rang the doorbell, and your mom opened the door. I thought I was hallucinating."

"Girl, it's been *ages*. We have so much to catch up on."

She grins. "Well, then I guess it's a good thing you're staying for the summer." She must notice the question marks multiplying in my eyes because she adds, "Your mom told me all about her flooded apartment."

I have to admit I thought seeing her again after all these years would be awkward, but it's like nothing has changed—well, apart from Jamie's new eyebrow piercing and her haircut.

Her hair used to be much longer. Not only is it shoulder-length now, but she also dyed it light brown with amber highlights. It sure is a big change from her natural blonde hair.

I'm not sure where to begin. "So, how's everything?"

"You know, same old, same old. My life's pretty much all work these days. I'm starting college at the end of the summer. I was supposed to enroll earlier, but I had to defer to take care of my dad."

"Right. How *is* your dad?"

Color drains from her face.

Shit.

“He, um... He passed away three months ago.”

Nice going, Hadley.

“Jamie, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“What happened?”

“He had a stroke. Although, if I’m being honest, his quality of life was declining super fast by the end. He couldn’t walk. Or swallow. He told me when he first got diagnosed that if it ever got to that point, he’d want to go, and, well... he got his wish.”

I ache for her. “How are you holding up? Really?”

“Some days are harder than others, but I’m getting there. It’s Cal I’m worried about. He’s been in denial since it happened. He went away to college and missed the last years of Dad’s life, and I think he hates himself for it. He just got back for the summer, and he won’t even *acknowledge* Dad.”

“Hold on, you mean he took off while you stayed to take care of your dad all by yourself?”

Sounds a bit selfish.

She nods. “Yeah... but I understand why he did it. He knew if he stayed, he’d break. We couldn’t both break at the same time.”

Memories of Jamie’s brother, Callum, return to me.

Gray, Vince, Cal, and Kane used to be this inseparable quartet growing up—granted, Jamie and I tagged along everywhere they went, so it was more like a *sextet*. The little shits couldn’t go a day without landing themselves in trouble.

“I was actually thinking about that time Gray dared Cal to lick that guy’s bald spot the other day, and...” Her words trail off. “Oh my God, *Gray*.”

Realization seems to slap her in the face.

“Hadley, I... I’m so sorry we couldn’t make it to the funeral.”

I shake my head. “You and Cal were all alone and taking care of your father. Don’t worry about it for a second.”

She cringes. “Still. I wish I could’ve been there for you.”

“I know.” I flash a grateful smile. “I appreciate it.”

“Did they...” She pauses, carefully choosing her words. “Did they ever catch the guy?”

Anger rises in my chest. “No.”

In all fairness, they didn’t have much to go on.

You’d think the fact that we had outdoor and indoor cameras recording the whole thing would’ve made for an open-and-shut case, but it was night when the murderer’s van pulled up, and the quality was so bad we couldn’t even make out the license plate.

I can still see the passenger-side door flying open and the masked man jumping out before booking it inside the store. He was packing a gun under his jacket.

To make things worse, the cameras my mom had installed didn’t have audio. Maybe it wouldn’t have made a difference. Or... maybe it would’ve changed everything.

For all we know, we would’ve recognized the killer’s voice. Or been able to trace it back to him based on the conversation he had with Gray.

The footage inside the store shows the dirtbag running his mouth while pointing his gun at sixteen-year-old Gray, who stood behind the counter with his hands in the air and gut-wrenching panic on his face.

My mom didn’t allow me to watch the rest—because it fucked her up emotionally and mentally—but from what she told me, the bastard got Gray to dump the content of the cash register into a large bag.

After that, he rushed to the door to leave, giving the impression that the nightmare would end there.

That's when Gray said something under his breath, a look of shock and realization plastered to his face.

It was a few words, at most. No one could tell what, thanks to the blurry, pixelated footage, but it made the guy stop dead.

The shitbag didn't move for a few seconds.

Then he turned around.

And shot my brother in the head.

Gray died instantly.

I remember my mom's desperate cries late at night. The way she would call his name and beg for her boy to come back when she thought I was asleep. When she wasn't asking for her son back, she was asking for answers.

And we got some, but nothing of real substance.

The detectives later found the van from the surveillance tapes abandoned in a ditch, and after running the plates, it came up as stolen. They did pull fingerprints from the car, but none were registered in the database, making them useless.

Mom wound up hiring a private investigator once it became clear the cops weren't going to solve the case. She worked day and night behind the very counter where her kid was murdered just so she could afford the investigator's services, but nothing came of it.

Whoever killed my brother is still out there, walking free while Gray is rotting away underground.

"That's fucking horrible." Jamie's features twitch with a hint of rage, but I refuse to match her reaction. I almost drove myself mad with anger. I'm not doing it again.

I quickly change the topic. "Can you believe the last time I was here, Gray and your dad were still alive?"

She lets out a bitter laugh. "And Kane wasn't a famous asshole. Did you know he ghosted all of us?"

My jaw goes slack.

"Wait, he ghosted you, too?"

“Oh yeah. Well, he ghosted the guys. Didn’t even answer *one* of their texts. Such a dick move.”

I can’t help the scoff shooting from my lips. “Preaching to the choir, sister.”

“I swear if I ever see him again, I might have to sucker punch him in his moneymaking face.”

I pause.

She has no idea, does she?

“My mom didn’t tell you?”

She raises an eyebrow. “Tell me what?”

“He’s moving back for the summer. His mom wants him to lay low for a while.”

“He what?” she blurts out, earning herself a chuckle.

“I know.” I share the sentiment. “Oh, and get this. It’s not just him. Dude is bringing his whole team with him. His drummer, his publicist, his fucking private *chef*.”

Her eyes widen. “Holy shit.”

“Holy shit indeed.”

“Have you seen him at all since he kissed you?”

Jamie’s the only person, apart from Lacey, I told about our kiss in the shed. I texted her the second it happened.

She’s known about my crush on Kane since we were kids. I didn’t even have to tell her. It was *that* obvious.

“Nope. Unless you count the time he showed up to Gray’s funeral, completely shit-faced.”

Her jaw drops. “No way?”

“Yup. He could barely walk.”

“Damn... And you’re sure you’re ready to see him again?”

Am I ready to share a house with the guy who stole my first kiss and ripped my heart to shreds on my *birthday*?

Hell no.

“Whatever. It was a long time ago.”

My bedroom door opens the next second, and Mom pops her head into the gap.

“Sorry to interrupt, girls. Hadley, your food’s going to get cold.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Mom closes the door and jogs back down the stairs.

“I should probably get back to work,” Jamie says.

I trap her in a parting embrace. “It was so good to see you. Thanks for stopping by.”

She squeezes me a little. “You too.”

She’s halfway to the door when she halts and shoulder-checks me.

“You got any plans tomorrow night? My friends and I are having dinner at my place. Just something low-key with cocktails and takeout.”

“Nope, no plans. You, Cal, and Vince are the only people I know around here. About that—do you know if Vince’s parents still vacation here?”

She nods. “Yep. Every summer without fail. He messaged the group chat just this morning, actually. He’s getting back into town tomorrow night.”

There’s a group chat?

I’m a little hurt, even though I get why I wasn’t included. After all, I stopped visiting Golden Cove years ago while Cal, Vince, and Jamie continued to get together.

Jamie’s obviously gifted with telepathy because she adds, “It’s not that we didn’t want to include you. It’s just... we didn’t want to spam you with messages, and it had been so long.”

“You really don’t owe me an explanation.”

“I know. I just don’t want you to think I didn’t want to talk to you anymore, because I did. I should’ve reached out more

often. I—”

I cut her off. “Jamie, it’s okay. Really. No hard feelings.”

We’ve barely spoken these past five years, so absorbed by our own lives and tragedies that we inevitably drifted apart, but now that I’m seeing her again, I wish I’d tried harder to keep in touch.

It’s just one of those situations where it’s no one’s fault.

Her shoulders drop with relief. “Anyway, I’m going to add you real quick.”

She unlocks her phone to do just that, but then she notices the time. “Shit, now I *really* have to get back to work.” She trails to the door. “See you tomorrow, my place? Six o’clock?”

I nod. “Sounds good. It should give me enough time to go drop some résumés around town.”

If I’m going to be stuck here all summer, I might as well make some money out of it. Getting a job would also give me an excuse to stay out of the house and avoid Kane.

Jamie’s eyes light up with interest. “Wait, you’re looking for a job? Because we have an opening at Sandy’s. This girl I used to work with got knocked up by her mom’s boyfriend, and they shipped her off to boarding school.”

I fake gasp. “How scandalous.”

She laughs. “Please. This is nothing compared to the shit I hear on a daily basis. I’m telling you, the *tea* gets so hot it almost makes up for having to wear this shit.” She gestures to her pink uniform. “I might even be able to get Fred to pay you a few dollars above minimum wage. He’s been working for two since Trudy got sent away. Poor guy is desperate.”

“Is Fred your boss?”

“Yes.” Her eyes grow in realization. “I have to ask, do you have any waitressing experience?”

I cringe. “Not really.”

Doubt flashes in her eyes, her smile waning.

“But I worked at my mom’s store in high school, so I’m good with people. And I’m a fast learner. Plus, I have nothing going on, so I’m free anytime. Days, nights, weekends. Doesn’t matter.”

Her smile is back in an instant. “See? Selling yourself already. Let me talk to him, and I’ll get back to you about an interview.”

I give her a grateful smile. “That would be great. Thank you so much.”

She shoots me a grin over her shoulder and walks out.



I GO TO BED EARLY THAT NIGHT.

I figured I’d toss and turn, but I was certain I’d manage to quiet my mind after a while. It would seem I failed to take into account that I’m not just *nervous* about what’s going to happen tomorrow.

I’m fucking *scared*.

Scared to see Kane again.

Scared that I’ll look him in the eyes and see a stranger.

Or worse.

That I’ll recognize him.

The boy I knew.

The boy who once threw himself at a guy three times his size to protect his mom.

That boy had broken ribs, a broken guitar, and an even more broken soul, so it should come as no surprise that in the end, he was the one to break my heart.

I’ve been drifting in and out of sleep for hours now. I’m exhausted, but I can’t get my thoughts to stop racing long enough for my body to relax.

Oh, and I have to pee.

I have to pee so freaking bad my bladder might explode if I don't go soon. I should've known better than to down three of Evie's famous margaritas with dinner.

It's a little after 5:00 a.m. when I roll out of bed and make my way to the second-floor bathroom.

The house is dark, bordering on creepy, as I rub my eyes and slink down the hall.

I'm so out of it I only notice the light peeking underneath the door once I'm a few feet away. I realize the shower is running in the background and stop dead.

That's when I hear him.

"Are you deaf? I told you to leave."

Holy shit.

Kane?

"You had a long flight. Let me help you relax," someone answers.

It's a woman's voice.

I'd say she's in her twenties.

No one speaks for the next few seconds, but the sound of a zipper and the sharp breath leaving Kane's lips tells me Mystery Girl is not the quitting type.

"Get your fucking hands off my cock if you want to keep your job."

Her job?

Wait...

She *works* for him?

I remember Evie mentioning he was bringing a few of his employees with him.

There was his publicist.

And his sober sponsor.

“Stop bitching. I know you want me.” The girl ignores his threat.

“Look, Tori... *Tori*, is it?”

Her name is Tori.

That’s his sober sponsor, I think.

“How do I put this in a way your tiny fucking brain will understand? I *don’t* want you.”

I assume it’s going to end there until she says, “Even if I do my hair like her?”

Like her? Her who?

There’s a beat of silence.

“Get on your knees.”

What the fuck?

Not even a second ago, he was kicking her out, and now he’s into it?

I hear what sounds like someone dropping to the floor.

“That’s right, baby. I can be whoever you want me to be.”

He groans. “No talking.”

I wish I could see through doors when silence fills the air.

“Like this?” Tori asks.

“Make it higher.” I’m guessing he’s commenting on her hair.

“What about now?”

“Better.” I cringe all the way to my bones.

Why am I still here?

I should go back to bed or sneak downstairs to use the bathroom instead of listening to the first boy I ever loved get a sloppy blow job from his employee.

“Same as last time?”

Just fucking go, Hadley.

“Deeper,” he instructs.

I hear his pants fall to the floor, his belt clinking against the bathroom tiles.

“You’re so big,” Tori moans.

“Last warning,” he spits. He’s asked her to shut up twice now.

She doesn’t comply. “I can make you feel so much better than she can.”

That’s what does it for him.

“Fuck this.”

I understand he’s shoved his pants back on when I hear his zipper being pulled up.

“Wait, I’m sorry, I—”

“I’m only going to say this once, so I’d listen if I were you. I’m going to go take a shower, sleep for like fourteen hours, and *you* are going to get your shit and get the fuck out of my house.”

“Are you... firing me?”

He gasps. “So, you do have a brain.”

“You can’t do this. I’ll tell everyone what we did!”

His laugh chills me to the bones. “You do that and I’ll sue you out of every fucking cent you’re ever going to earn in your miserable life. You signed an NDA, remember? And a foolproof one, at that.”

Tori huffs an indignant “You’re an asshole.”

It doesn’t faze Kane one bit. “No shit. *Bye now.*”

The door swings open before I can even think of hiding.

I’m frozen.

No, I’m a goddamn ice statue at this point.

The first person I see is this Tori girl. I drink her in, analyzing her freckles and hairstyle.

Then my gaze lands on him.

The most hated celebrity on the face of the earth.

He's shirtless, leaning back against the bathroom counter with his messy brown hair dangling in front of his eyes. He looks like a fucking god, I can't even lie.

His jaw is sharper than a knife, and you would think his body was designed by the world's best sculptors—although credit probably goes to his personal trainer and crazy-strict diet.

I zero in on his tattoo. He has a bleeding rose with thorns wrapped around a guitar on his shoulder, the ink stretching over to his right pec. He's nothing like the boy I remember.

He's a man now.

The most attractive man I've ever seen.

And no one's more bitter about it than I am.

He hasn't noticed me yet. But Tori doesn't hesitate to remedy that.

"Who the hell are you?"

Kane's green eyes lift to mine in a heartbeat, and I'm faced with my worst fear.

Everything else is unfamiliar.

But his eyes...

I know them.

I know *him*.

Kane doesn't look like a stranger.

He just looks like an older, toughened-by-life version of himself. However, *I* must look very different because color spills from his skin the second we make eye contact.

"Hadley?"

I thought when we saw each other again, he'd show little to no reaction. But the way he said my name—with utter

disbelief—makes me wonder if he knew I'd be spending the summer at the beach house.

Did Evie forget to tell him?

He starts to say something, but he can't finish his sentence.

Because I'm already racing down the stairs.

I can't help picturing his sober sponsor on my way down, the similarities between us impossible to ignore.

She's a redhead, just like me.

But the craziest part?

She had her hair in a ponytail...



KANE

“**W**here the fuck is it?” I bang my fist against the top of the minibar I know for a *fact* should be packed with booze—seriously, there should be enough to last me a decade.

I’ve checked everywhere.

Every cabinet.

Every nook and cranny of the beach house.

There’s nothing.

I thought I was prepared for this.

Put together a plan from the moment my mom waltzed into my hotel room the day after the Josh disaster and announced that she was dragging my ass back to Golden Cove for the summer.

I even got one of my minions to fly in ahead of time and stock up so that I wouldn’t have to worry about getting through her little intervention *sober*.

Looks like my mom wasn’t fucking around when she said she was done watching me destroy myself.

I’m guessing she thinks not giving me easy access to alcohol will force me to quit.

Although, if that's her endgame... someone should probably tell her that bringing Hadley Queen into my house is the definition of counteractive.

If anything, seeing her again last night made me want to drink *more*.

When I saw her standing there in her pj's... with her pouty, parted lips, cute freckles, and wild red hair...

Fuck.

It felt like someone had reached inside my throat, squeezed my heart into a tight grip, and *pulled*. She hasn't changed one bit, and yet, everything about her is different.

Her hair is longer. It stops at her belly button now, and that body... it's a curvy masterpiece. Nice rack, hourglass figure, sexy little ass. She's got it all.

Not that I expected any less.

She was always beautiful, in a delicate, innocent kind of way. But now? She looks like she was put on this earth to torture and test the shit out of me.

It's as though the universe threw together everything I like in a woman, and it spit out Hadley Queen.

I could hear the devil on my shoulder taunting me as I realized...

This is what I gave up five years ago.

She was sixteen the last time I saw her, but I was so fucked-up the room was spinning, and all of my energy had to go into *not* projectile vomiting in the middle of the church.

Then the paps crashed Gray's funeral like the worthless pieces of shit that they are, and I had to bolt out of there. I didn't have time to truly drink her in that day, but last night...

Last night only reinforced what I've known for a while but refused to admit.

Every fantasy I've had for the past five years has been about this girl.

I couldn't have her when I was a hormonal, fifteen-year-old little shit because of the age difference and the fact that she was Gray's sister, but my cock never forgot that she was the first girl I ever craved.

Just another reason why I need her out of this house, this town, and my fucking life as soon as possible.

I don't want to find out what I'm going to do if she stays.

"Of course you'd be going through the minibar at the crack of dawn." My drummer's voice makes me cringe.

I usually like this guy, but right now? I can't stand him.

Not only is Scar one of my best friends, he's also the first member the label ever hired for my band.

We've been touring together for five years, but that doesn't mean I want him breathing down my neck for the rest of my sentence—sorry, the rest of the *summer*.

My mom insisted that I need to be surrounded by loved ones and friends right now, which is also why she invited Drea, my longtime publicist, to tag along.

She says Drea's coming so we can figure out a game plan to save what's left of my career, but I know the reason she wants Scar and Drea around is because she needs backup.

She probably thought it'd be easier to keep an eye on me with a whole damn village reporting back to her.

She's convinced herself that forcing me to spend some time away from the spotlight is going to fix everything. Little does she know, I've only made it this far *because* of the spotlight.

Without the interviews, recording sessions, and back-to-back shows, there's nothing to keep my mind from wandering. I'm scared that without my hectic schedule, I won't be able to run from my demons anymore.

I realize I still have a mini Bacardi bottle from the plane a moment later and sprint to the foyer with Scar on my tail—I dumped my jacket on the one-seater by the door when we got here this morning.

I shove my hand into the pocket of my leather jacket and pull out the liquor I saved for later. “Score.”

I uncap the bottle, but just as I’m about to down it, Scar swipes it from me, earning himself a murderous glare.

He scoffs. “I don’t know how much they’re paying this Tori girl, but she better start cutting me in if I’m going to be babysitting your ass all fucking summer.”

He’s halfway to the kitchen sink before I can take back what’s mine.

“Don’t—” I start, but he’s already pouring the liquor down the drain with a shit-eating grin on his face.

Fucker.

“Where’s your sober companion, anyway?” He snorts, setting his forearms flat on the kitchen island.

A bitter laugh rips from my throat. “Fuck if I know. I sent her packing hours ago.”

“Wait, really?”

“Yup. She’s gone. Got in a cab early this morning.”

Conflicted, Scar rounds the island and tosses the bottle into the trash. “Does your mom know about this?”

His reaction is not what I expected. “That’s it? I thought you’d be throwing me a fucking parade.”

It’s no secret that Scar can’t stand Tori.

Out of all the people my new management’s hired to keep my drinking under control, she was by far the loudest, most aggravating one.

The girl just wouldn’t shut up, and she thought acting dumb made her look cute. She was hot, I’ll give her that, but no one’s hot enough to pull off being *this* fucking annoying.

“Don’t get me wrong, she was a major pain in the ass, but all that’s going to do is make them send someone else. You know that, right?”

Unfortunately.

“Then I’ll fire them, too.”

“Or you could, I don’t know, admit that you have a problem and let someone help you before you drive yourself into the fucking grave at twenty-one?”

I hate when he does this. I already have enough people on my case—try three hundred million people—without my friends lecturing me.

I’ve been beating myself up over what happened for weeks now. And sure, I was wasted when I went apeshit on Josh, but I didn’t crash my fist into my manager’s jaw because alcohol told me to.

I did it because he deserved it.

Scratch that, he deserved *worse*.

I shrug, ignoring his concern. “Where’s the fun in that?”

I trail to the fridge and swing it open.

I’m fucking famished. I skipped dinner last night, and my chef’s not getting here until tomorrow morning. I’d kill for a stack of Sue’s pancakes right now.

“Hold on, it’s like—” Scar pauses to check the clock on the wall. “—ten in the morning. When did you even fire her? We crashed immediately after we got here.”

“*You* crashed immediately,” I correct him, digging through the fridge for food. “*I* needed a shower, and Tori snuck into the bathroom to suck my dick. She got canned instead.”

And then we found out we had an audience.

I’d pay good money to know what went through Hadley’s head when she first saw Tori.

Scar sits down at the breakfast nook. “Damn. Turned off a BJ. You’re better than me.”

I take a seat at one of the stools around the kitchen island. “Thank fuck I did. Hadley was right outside the door, listening to the whole thing.”

I only realize what I've said when his face falls. "Back up. Hadley's here? Your childhood best friend with the dead brother *Hadley*?"

The dead brother part of his sentence makes me cringe.

I nod, grabbing an apple and taking a bite. Other than eggs and milk, fruit is all we have. I'm guessing Mom left the grocery shopping to Sue. "One and only."

Scar sags into his seat, a drop of shock bleeding through his gaze. "Fuck me."

"Tell me about it."

"What the hell is she even doing here?"

"I'm guessing my mom invited her?"

Ironically, my mom pads into the kitchen as soon as the words are out of my mouth, a big smile on her face.

She's wearing open-toe sandals and a long sundress. A beach bag with a bunch of shells on it droops from her shoulder, an oversized pair of sunglasses resting on top of her head.

I'm guessing today's beach day.

"Morning, boys," she singsongs, walking over to me to place a kiss on my forehead. She's pulling a coffee mug out of the kitchen cabinet when I rise to my feet.

She's in a good mood.

Too bad I'm about to take a metaphorical dump in her coffee.

"You should've told me Hadley was here," I confront her.

She stops dead.

She drags out a sigh and spins to face me. "I was going to tell you about them today."

I cock an eyebrow. "Them?"

"Hadley and Lillian. I've invited them to come live with us for the summer."

The hell did she just say?

“You what?” I spit.

After I saw Hadley last night, I convinced myself that my mom had invited her over for the weekend and she’d be gone first thing Monday morning.

But the whole fucking summer?

“Look, I know I should’ve told you, but it was a last-minute thing. Lillian called me two days ago and mentioned that she was looking for a place because her condo’s flooded. You had so much to take care of back in LA, I figured it could wait.”

Either she’s messing with me, or we’re going to have a serious problem on our hands.

“And you didn’t think to ask me first?”

Last I checked, this is still my fucking house.

Yes, I bought it for her because I remembered how much she loved the beach house, but legally, the place is mine.

“Would you have said yes if I’d asked?”

She’s got me there.

I would’ve shut down the idea faster than my career went to shit.

“They’re not staying,” I state.

Normally, there isn’t much I wouldn’t do for my mom.

Everything she’s ever wanted, I’ve given her.

But there is no *goddamn* way I can share a house with Hadley Queen for two months.

“Honey, please. Be reasonable. It’s only for the summer. Lillian and I are going to be spending a lot of time at the club, and Hadley mentioned she was going to get a full-time job. You’ll hardly ever see them, anyway.”

“I don’t care. I want them gone.”

My use of the word “them” isn’t really justified here.

I couldn't give a rat's ass about Lillian staying for the summer. I like the woman. She's my godmother and Mom's best friend. It's her daughter I'm worried about.

Spending this much time stuck in a house with the girl that got away is just *asking* for my self-control to snap.

"Kane..." My mom rests her hand on my shoulder. "Do you remember the first few months after your father died?"

Shit.

She's going to go *there*, isn't she?

"How helpless and desperate we were after we moved out of our apartment? How relieved and grateful we felt when Lillian opened her home to us?"

A pang of guilt flickers in my chest.

"She took us in, no questions asked. They were there for us. What kind of people would we be if we didn't return the favor?"

I clench my teeth so hard my jaw aches.

Forget what I said before.

There is *nothing* I wouldn't do for my mother.

I let out an irritated groan. "Jesus Christ, fine."

Satisfied, my mom draws me into her arms. "Thank you, honey."

"Yeah, yeah."

She's just retreated to the other side of the kitchen when Scar coughs into his fist. "*Mama's boy.*"

And he's right.

My mom's all I have in this world.

She could ask me to take in a bunch of hobos for the summer, and I'd say yes in a heartbeat. *By all means, take my room.*

"You guys hungry? I was thinking I'd make some eggs," my mom asks after she's inserted a coffee pod into the

machine.

“Starving,” Scar chimes.

I spend the next fifteen minutes trying to figure out how the hell I’m going to avoid Hadley for the next two months.

Granted, this is a big house, and she’ll be at work most of the time, so it shouldn’t be too hard during the day.

But at night... I might just have to ask Scar to tie me to my bed so that I’m not tempted to sneak into her room and finish what we started five years ago.

“Morning.” Drea ambles into the kitchen just as my mom is making me a plate.

I open my mouth to answer, but my voice leaves me the second I realize that she’s not alone.

Hadley’s with her.

My eyes rake over her body, and I’m probably being super obvious, but I can’t bring myself to give a damn.

She’s wearing an oversized hoodie and jeans, and while the baggy clothes do a decent job of hiding her curves, the perfectly rounded hips and perky-looking tits her pajamas clung to last night are ingrained into my memory.

My cock gives a jerk when her eyes lift to mine. Social conventions tell me to look away, but I couldn’t take my gaze off her if I tried.

“Look who’s up,” Mom chirps, making a beeline for the girls and embracing them one by one. “I’m making eggs. Would you like some?”

Hadley cracks a timid smile. “Sure.”

Drea matches her answer.

My mom gestures to the breakfast nook, where Scar is already seated. “Sit, relax, I’ll take care of everything.”

Hadley thanks her before sliding onto the bench right next to Scar. Drea follows, careful to avoid making eye contact

with Scar, but he's already got that covered, staring at his hands linked on his lap.

Good Lord, this shit is awkward.

Things have been weird as hell since Drea and Scar shagged in my bunk on the last day of my European tour.

I'm not judging. I've done despicable things on that tour bus, but walking in on my drummer plowing into my publicist from behind sure made me pause.

These two have been at each other's throats for five years now, and it never occurred to me that maybe their constant bickering was because they wanted to fuck each other.

"I'm Drea, by the way." Drea turns to Hadley once they've settled around the table. "Kane's publicist."

Hadley flashes a bright smile. "Hadley. Nice to meet you."

I plop down next to Scar, who's still avoiding eye contact with everyone. Hadley directs her attention to him, waiting for some sort of introduction.

I elbow him under the table, and he snaps back to reality. "Right, sorry. I'm Scar. Short for Oscar. I'm Kane's drummer."

"Hadley," she introduces herself again.

I almost laugh.

Scar knows who she is.

And he doesn't just *know* her.

He knows everything about her.

My mom stops in front of the table and hands Hadley and Drea their breakfasts before walking back to the stove to make me and Scar some eggs.

She comes back with our food a few minutes later, snatching the last free spot on the bench. "You didn't have to wait for me. Come on, dig in."

Everyone does.

Except for me.

All I can do is stare at Hadley.

She notices right away, obviously uncomfortable.

Like a shot of courage just tore through her body, she looks up and returns my stare.

She pins me with a look that screams “What’s your deal?”, defiance gleaming in her blue eyes, and *holy hell*, the confrontational side of her does something for me.

She’s different than I remember.

Confident in a “do no harm, but take no shit” kind of way.

When it becomes clear that I’m not going to back down first, she peels her eyes off me and turns to my mom. “Evie, do you happen to know where my mom is? I couldn’t find her this morning.”

“She told me last night she wanted to go for a morning walk on the beach. She should be back soon.”

Hadley answers with a small nod.

My mom realizes something’s wrong not even five minutes later. “Where’s your sober sponsor?”

She glances around the kitchen as though she expects Tori to materialize in the doorway.

I shrug. “Gone. I fired her this morning.”

3, 2, 1.

“What? *Again?*” she blurts out, the wrinkles between her eyebrows deepening as she glares disapproval-laced bullets at me.

“She wasn’t a good match.” I take a bite of my eggs, ignoring her exasperated sigh.

“You’ve said that about every single person your management’s sent. You can’t keep doing this, honey. You need to—”

“What I *need* is to relax,” I cut her off, leaning back against the wall the large bench is pressed to. “Take some time

off. Isn't that what you wanted? All these people riding my back around the fucking clock aren't exactly making it easy."

Her glare intensifies at my cursing, but I don't think twice about what I say next. "I don't fucking need them. I'll figure it out on my own. Plus, you've already cleared out every liquor cabinet in the house, so it's not like I have any other options."

This will be the second time she's lectured me in less than an hour. The first was when she guilt-tripped me into letting Hadley stay, and now she's suffocating me with her motherly concern.

I know she's just worried, but if there's one thing she should know about me by now, it's that telling me *not* to do something only makes me want to do it more.

She doesn't say a word, disappointment oozing off her as she pokes at her eggs.

Great.

Now, I feel bad.

"I'm working on it, okay? I promise."

My mom gives a small nod and clears her throat, changing the topic before it gets awkward. "What are everyone's plans for today?"

Scar says something about wanting to go surfing. I think? I can't listen for the life of me, still staring at Hadley.

Mom nods along with a smile before shifting her focus over to Hadley. "What about you, sweetheart?"

Hadley finishes her bite and says, "Oh, um... Jamie got me a job interview at Sandy's later."

Jamie.

I haven't heard that name in a hot minute.

I was never friends with Jamie, but I wonder if her brother's around for the summer. Couldn't hurt to catch up.

"What a wonderful idea. I'm sure you'll get it," Mom rejoices.

I *need* her to get it.

And if it's not at Sandy's, I need her to get hired somewhere else. It's the only way I'm going to make it through this summer with Hadley living under my roof.

"Shit," Drea says just as my mom begins clearing the table.

I glance at her. She's staring at her phone with an open mouth and shock pasted to her face.

"What?" I ask, and she lowers her phone, nervously chewing on the inside of her cheek.

"Before I tell you, I need you to promise to stay calm. It's not even confirmed yet. It's just hearsay."

My fists clench. "What now?"

She releases a breath. "It's just... word on the street is... the girl you almost pushed down the stairs that night at the club is thinking of suing."

It takes me a second to place her.

She's talking about the nightclub waitress who opened the door leading to the stairs when I was getting into it with Josh. She was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

She happened to be standing behind Josh when I decked him in the face. But she didn't even get hurt. She moved out of the way just in time while Josh tumbled down the cement stairs.

"Are you shitting me? On what fucking grounds?"

Drea cringes. "Emotional distress."

This is bullshit.

Just another lowlife trying to get some money out of an unfortunate situation.

I already have Josh and his entire family suing me. Now I have to worry about the club staff coming after me, too. It was an accident. I didn't even know there was a staircase behind that door.

Man, I can't catch a fucking break.

I drop my head against the wall behind me, forcing air in and out of my lungs to compose myself.

Then I notice Hadley eyeing me from across the table.

“NDA” is the first word out of my mouth.

Is Hadley the most beautiful girl I've seen in my life?

Yes.

Do I trust her with secrets that could blow up my career to the point of inhalation?

Fuck no.

If she's going to be around while we discuss important things, I need to make sure she's going to keep her mouth shut—no matter how tempting that plump little mouth might be.

“Oh, I hardly think that's necessary,” my mom interjects. “You've known Hadley your whole life.”

“Doesn't mean we can trust her not to run her mouth to the media,” I counter.

Hadley's face twists with irritation, and I gather that I've offended her.

Good.

It's better if she hates me.

That way, she'll stay away from me.

Mom glares at me, clearly embarrassed by my lack of manners. “I really don't think—”

“She can sign it or leave.” I'm adamant.

There's a beat of silence—the kind that's so heavy it crushes every bone in your body—but I don't waver, keeping my eyes on Hadley as though I'm waiting for her to crumble under my gaze.

She doesn't return the eye contact this time.

“It would be a good way to make sure everything that happens in this house *stays* in this house,” Drea backs me up.

Conflicted, my mom offers her goddaughter an apologetic smile. “Would you mind?”

Hadley doesn't argue. “Not at all.”

We've just migrated over to the kitchen to put the dishes away when Drea excuses herself to her room to grab the paperwork.

Hadley and I don't say another word or even look at each other again for the next ten minutes. Well, *she* doesn't look at me, but mentally, I'm all over that ass.

Once Drea comes back with one of our standard NDAs, Hadley asks for some time to read it over before she signs it. She's careful, I get it, but she's going to have to sign it one way or another.

The last thing my reputation needs is my childhood crush giving the press exclusives about me.

She goes through the whole thing, signs it, and retreats to her room a little after we've cleaned the kitchen. I pick up the contract, flipping the pages to make sure it's signed properly.

My mouth stretches into a grin when I see the name she put down above her signature.

Hadley Fuck-You Queen.

A scoff leaves my lips.

Someone's feisty.

Scar announces that he's going surfing a few minutes later, and Drea, who's sitting at the kitchen table with her laptop, addresses him for the first time today. “Hey, Cahill, if you see a shark, don't forget to swim *toward* it.”

“Appreciate the tip.” Scar flips her off seconds before he walks out.

Glad to see these two are talking again.

I think back to Hadley's ponytail swaying in every direction as she raced out of the kitchen. Her ass bouncing as

she jogged up the stairs like she was in a hurry to get away from me.

This is supposed to be a *break*.

A vacation from the shitstorm my life has become.

But vacations aren't supposed to feel like torture.

And that's what living with Hadley Queen is going to be...

Fucking *torture*.



HADLEY

“HOW'D IT GO?” JAMIE MAKES A BEELINE FOR ME FROM THE second I amble out of the office her boss led me into not even ten minutes ago.

The interview lasted seven minutes. *Seven minutes*. I barely had time to introduce myself before Fred, the restaurant owner's son and Jamie's manager, thanked me for my time and walked me out.

“It was... quick.” I give the crowded restaurant a quick scan. I knew Sandy's was a hit around here, but I didn't think it'd be this packed during rush hour.

What's weirder, the restaurant is a decent size. Although it sure doesn't look that way when you're struggling to wedge yourself in between tables to reach the door.

She swats my shoulder. “You know that's not what I meant. Did you get it or not?”

I don't answer right away, keeping her in suspense, which she clearly doesn't appreciate because she lets out an impatient “*Come onnn*” just seconds later.

I put her out of her misery. “I got the job.”

A big smile spreads over her face. “You did?”

“We're officially coworkers.”

Jamie squeals, pulling me into a celebratory hug that draws a chuckle from my lips.

“You weren’t lying about the desperate part,” I say mid-hug, and she laughs.

Her boss was so fed up with working for two, he didn’t even look at my résumé or ask me if I had any waitressing experience before hiring me. Pretty sure he would’ve hired *anyone* who wanted the job. Not that I’m complaining.

She withdraws from the hug. “I knew you’d get it. When do you start?”

“In two days. I have to come pick up my uniform tomorrow.”

“Girl, you are in for a *treat*.” She gestures to the salmon-pink uniform she’s wearing.

I snort. “Bring it on.”

The sooner I start working, the sooner I can get the hell away from Kane.

God, what a dick.

I still can’t believe how obnoxious he was at breakfast.

He just wouldn’t stop staring at me—I’m talking smoldering, intense, unwavering stares. The kind that make you want to shrink into your seat, *Alice in Wonderland* style.

Not only did he stare so hard the weight of his scrutiny almost gave me a fucking backache, but he didn’t say a word for most of the meal, just boring through my soul without a sliver of shame.

I couldn’t figure out what he was trying to pull.

Did he want to get a rise out of me?

To make me so uncomfortable I’d pack up and leave?

Either way, it was a critical fail. His borderline-stalkerish stares didn’t make me feel *nearly* as uncomfortable as they should have.

On the contrary...

It felt like his eyes were lighting matches all over my skin, leaving a trail of electricity and goose bumps in their wake. Don't ask me why. My body better get its shit together before I hit that bitch with a *cease and desist*.

I shouldn't find him attractive. The asshole essentially called me a snitch and said I couldn't be trusted, which is grand coming from the guy who betrayed my trust by hopping on a plane the day after he took my first kiss.

I looked him dead in the eyes at one point, hoping he'd take the hint and lay off the ogling, but it didn't faze him one bit. If anything, it only made things worse.

"Damn it, my break's over," Jamie declares after glancing at the clock on the far wall. "We still on for girls' night?"

"You know it."

She looks back at me over her shoulder as she walks. "Don't forget to bring your appetite. My friend Brooke's making her famous guacamole."

"One last thing. Would it be okay if I invite someone? There's this girl who works for Kane, and she seems really—"

She interrupts me. "Say no more. If you like her, I like her. I'll see you two tonight."

I offer her a thankful smile. "Sounds great. I'll see you then."

I've just walked out of the restaurant when my phone pings with a notification from the group chat with Vince and Cal. Jamie added me as soon as she left the beach house yesterday.

Most of the conversation consists of the guys blowing up each other's phones with memes, but it's been great getting to talk to them again. We're all supposed to hang out later this week, just like old times.

Of course, it'll never be *exactly* like old times. Gray is gone, and Kane is obviously way too cool to hang out with us mere mortals, but we're not going to let that stop us from having the summer of our lives.

I check out the boys' messages as I climb into my mom's car. I'm hoping I'll be able to borrow it for the rest of the summer as she's supposed to be riding with Evie.

I check the time on my phone before starting the engine. I have four more hours before I have to be at Jamie's for dinner and cocktails. Plenty of time to get myself to look presentable to meet her friends.



I PAD INSIDE THE BEACH HOUSE TWENTY MINUTES LATER, THE dread sinking into my stomach overpowering the excitement I was feeling just seconds ago.

I drop Mom's car keys into the bowl by the door before kicking off my shoes and beelining for the kitchen.

It's empty.

So is the dining room.

I assume everyone's stepped out to enjoy the sun until I hear what sounds like an argument in the distance.

"Motherfucker, you're not going to win this one."

I halt my steps.

"Watch me." I recognize Kane's voice.

They're in the living room.

"Stop cheating!" The other voice belongs to Scar.

I don't miss a beat, spinning and walking away. I'm not in the mood for Kane's blunt remarks and rude staring. Although, I did want to ask Drea if she'd like to come tonight.

She seems nice, and I figured it couldn't hurt to have an ally in this house. Might help me get through the summer.

I debate on going through the house to find her but quickly talk myself out of it, deciding to head upstairs to try and hide the dark circles under my eyes instead.

I'm afraid even my best concealer won't be able to mask my exhaustion. I couldn't go back to sleep after seeing Kane and his sober sponsor in the bathroom this morning.

I just kept staring at the ceiling, replaying the moment when they caught me eavesdropping.

He seemed shocked to see me.

And judging by the small snippet of conversation I overheard this morning, his mom had neglected to tell him she'd invited us to live with them for the summer.

I want them gone, he told his mom, dead set on kicking us out.

Good thing Evie knew just what to say to change his mind.

As much as I hate sharing a house with Lucifer, my mom deserves this vacation with her best friend. And I can't afford to drop a few hundred dollars on a room when I should be saving up for school.

I was hiding out in the hall next to the kitchen when Drea came up behind me and caught me listening to their conversation.

She didn't say anything or ask me what I was doing, but the amused smile dancing on her lips told me I was busted.

My growling stomach leads me back downstairs an hour later. I haven't eaten since breakfast, and I'm going to need a snack to hold me over until dinner.

The guys are still bickering in the living room, but I easily tune them out, checking myself in the hall mirror on my way to the kitchen.

I went a little overboard, I'll admit. I usually apply a few coats of mascara and call it a day, but I wanted to make a good impression, so I did winged eyeliner.

I'm hoping my laid-back outfit balances out my makeup. My skinny jeans and washed-out T-shirt are as casual as you can get.

I smile when I scan Gray's *Star Wars* T-shirt in the mirror.

It says “*Who Da Man? Yoda Man.*”

Mom donated most of Gray’s things a few years back, but I kept all of his funny quotes T-shirts.

Every single one of them.

I’ve just entered the kitchen to fix myself a snack when Drea’s voice cuts through the first floor. “Okay, now *that* was definitely cheating.”

She’s here.

This is my chance to ask her.

I waltz into the living room and find Scar and Kane playing foosball by the electric fireplace—I have no idea where that foosball table even came from because it definitely wasn’t there yesterday.

Drea is curled up on the large sectional, alternating between watching the guys and scrolling on her phone. Her face lights up when she sees me. “Oh, hey, Hadley.”

Kane’s head whips in my direction as soon as my name is uttered.

His smile dies down instantly.

It’s as though I sucked all the fun out of the atmosphere just by being here.

I ignore him. “Since when do we have a foosball table?”

“Since *His Majesty* decided he wanted one.” Scar gestures to Kane with his chin. “Sent me all the way across town to get it. What am I, your fucking servant?”

“Can’t have people knowing he’s here, remember?” Drea interjects.

“And? I didn’t sign up to be his errand boy.”

Drea chuckles. “Hate to break it to you, but you’re kind of the errand boy by default. His name is literally the most searched name on the internet right now. We need to keep him out of the public eye until the dust settles.”

“Why can’t you go? And how do you know people won’t recognize *me*? I’m part of the band, too, aren’t I?” Scar argues.

“Because I’m working. And yeah, people might recognize you, but no one actually cares because you’re not the star. If you were to quit tomorrow, we could get another drummer, but we can’t find another Kane—*no offense*.” Drea tops it off with a shit-eating grin, and it makes me like her even more.

I stop paying attention to their bickering and chance a glance toward Kane. Sure enough, he’s still staring at me.

Only now, he seems angry.

“Whatever,” Scar grumbles, glancing back at Kane. “Let’s finish this shit.”

Kane doesn’t even look at him. “Nah, I’m going back to bed. I’m beat.”

On that note, he storms out.

It takes me a moment to realize what just happened.

Did he just run out of the room at the mere sight of me?

Is this how it’s going to be for the rest of the summer?

Like I have no say over my own actions, I spin and follow him. I won’t tolerate being treated like I have the plague every time I walk into a room.

“Hey!” I call seconds before he reaches the stairs.

Kane stops but doesn’t turn around.

I slow down next to him, but I don’t wait for him to look at me before I blurt, “What the hell is your problem?”

He spins to face me, his fists rolling into tight balls as he stares daggers at me. “What problem?”

I almost laugh.

“Are we really going to pretend like you didn’t just bolt out of the room to avoid me?”

He shrugs, his green eyes pools of darkness. “Who says I’m avoiding you?”

And now he's acting dumb.

I move closer, my confidence dwindling when his tall frame towers over me. "I haven't done anything to you. And I sure as hell don't deserve whatever *that was*."

I think I see a drop of guilt shooting across his gaze, but he chases it away too quickly for me to be sure.

"I get it, you don't want me living in your house. Well, guess what, superstar? I don't want to be here either, but that doesn't mean I'm going to treat you like anything less than a fucking human being."

God knows I should treat him like dog shit after what he did to me. He made young Hadley's wildest dream come true before ripping it away.

He didn't have to kiss me the day before he left. Especially when he *knew* there would be no tomorrow for us.

He didn't have to set my heart on fire and watch it burn.

But he did.

Still, I'm going to be cordial with him. I'm going to smile when our moms are in the room, and I'm going to pretend like I don't wish the earth would open up and swallow him whole.

"From now on, you're going to treat me with basic human decency, you got that?"

He doesn't answer right away, his glare hinting at the shock he's trying to snuff out.

He scans my face, zeroing in on my mouth for a split second, and plunges his gaze back into mine. "Fine."

Then he disappears up the stairs.

A clapping sound startles me. "Okay, you have *got* to show me how you did that."

I glance over my shoulder and find Drea gaping at me from the doorway. How long has she been standing there?

"How I did what?"

She makes her way over. “Do you have any idea how *hard* it is to knock some sense into that jackass? Kane Wilder doesn’t listen, and he sure as hell doesn’t admit when he’s wrong.”

“Technically, he didn’t say that,” I point out.

“Yeah, but he didn’t argue either. He just stood there and took it. I mean, shit, girl. Are you a wizard?”

Her question makes me laugh.

“I wish.” If I were, I would go back in time and stop Gray from going to work that day.

She gestures to follow her to the living room. “Come on, I need to pick your brain.”

Scar is sitting in the one-seater, scrolling on his phone, when we come in, but I catch him eye-fucking Drea when she’s not looking. The heat in his eyes is impossible to miss.

Drea and I spend the next forty-five minutes making small talk, and I find out that she’s the furthest thing from an open book.

She’s vague in the way she answers my questions, and humor seems to be her go-to whenever she doesn’t want to talk about something, but I still manage to learn a few things about her—like the fact that her full name is Andrea and that she only got the job as Kane’s publicist because his old manager, Joshua, used to date her mom.

She makes that Josh guy sound like such a good guy.

What kind of saint would help out his ex’s daughter?

And why do I get the feeling that his nice-guy persona is a load of shit?

From the few articles I’ve read online, Joshua Caldwell is known as a generous, compassionate man who donates tons of money to charities every year.

I can’t help thinking that if he *was* a saint, Kane wouldn’t have gone off on him like that. He wouldn’t have attacked him unless he had a reason to.

Or maybe I'm wrong.

Maybe I don't know who Kane is anymore.

The conversation shifts to our interests, and I almost squeal when she mentions her favorite show. Turns out she's a reality TV lover just like me.

I've been hooked on this show about a house full of exes that went through horrible breakups. I mean the "block-you-on-all-socials" type of breakups. We end up promising each other that we'll watch it together from now on. They put out a new episode every week.

My phone chimes with a text from Jamie not long after.

JAMIE

Got off early. Come over whenever.

I shove my phone into my pocket and wonder if I should ask Drea after all.

There's a reason I only have one friend in college. I've grown wary of female friendships after seeing how shady and backstabbing some girls can be. But then again, just because I've been burned in high school doesn't mean every girl is Regina George the Second.

"Hey, so, I'm having dinner and drinks with some friends tonight. Want to come?"

Her features twist with hesitation. "That sounds great, but I'm supposed to be working on a game plan to get this troublemaker—" She points to the second floor, obviously referring to Kane. "—back into Hollywood's good graces."

"Go," Scar intervenes. "You've been busting your ass to keep his career afloat since the accident. You still have two months to get him out of trouble. Just go. I promise you can take *one* night off without the world ending."

She stops to think.

Scar's comment seems to do the trick because it isn't long before Drea brings her focus back to me, a smile dancing on

her face. “Fuck it, let’s go.”



“THERE’S NO WAY!” MY VOICE TRAVELS THROUGH JAMIE’S backyard as I stumble down the creaky deck stairs, clutching a bottle of rosé.

I’m not going to lie, I’m buzzed. Hell, I might even be a little drunk. Knowing me, I’m going to have to slow down before I start laughing for no reason.

Worst part is, I promised myself I’d keep the drinking to a minimum tonight. But then Jamie introduced us to her delicious mojitos, and, well... I got a little carried away.

We finished eating a few minutes ago, and Jamie suggested that we head outside to enjoy a nice fire. We plop down onto the patio chairs forming a circle around Jamie’s stone firepit a moment later.

“I swear on my life. She went to those AA meetings for a *year* just because she had a crush on one of the guys there.” Jamie exposes her friend Brooke.

Drea gasps. “An entire year?”

“But you barely even drink.” Shay, another friend of Jamie’s, calls her out.

Brooke covers her face with her hands. “In my defense, I was going through a major dry spell.”

I chuckle. “Was he really *that* hot?”

She starts fanning herself dramatically. “Oh Jesus, yes. He was like sex on a fucking stick, with tattoos and muscles. Hottest guy I’ve ever seen, hands down.”

“Did something happen, at least?” Drea asks.

Jamie erupts into laughter as she rises off her chair to get the fire started. “She wishes.”

“He had a girlfriend back home,” Brooke shamefully admits.

Drea’s mouth falls open. “Wait, so, you spent a year going to AA meetings when you don’t even have a drinking problem for *nothing*?”

“I have no regrets.” Brooke sticks her hands up, making the five of us laugh harder.

This night is going even better than I thought it would. Brooke and Shay are hilarious, but I shouldn’t be surprised, considering they’re Jamie’s friends. Of course they’d be just as funny as she is.

Shay is a gorgeous, tanned, short-haired brunette with a shy personality. And it’s not just her hair that’s short. I’d say she’s five-foot-two at most.

Brooke is the polar opposite.

She’s loud, opinionated, and the kind of girl who pretends to have a drinking problem as an excuse to get close to a guy. Although something tells me she doesn’t usually have a hard time finding a date.

The girl is a stunner with her long blonde hair, slim figure, and piercing blue eyes. She’s also tall enough to be a model, but she wears heels anyway. As a way to flush out the *shorties*, she says.

She mentioned she always wears stilettos on first dates to make sure the guy isn’t shorter than her. Basically, any guy under six-foot-something gets blocked and ghosted.

“Okay, we’ve been over *my* embarrassing guy stories. Somebody else go.” Brooke laughs before glancing around our circle. “Jamie, got any embarrassing *girl* stories?”

Jamie laughs. “Where do I start?”

Jamie’s got more stories than anyone I know. Might have something to do with the fact that she came out when we were very young.

We couldn’t have been older than eleven when she first told me. I remember the day it happened perfectly. We were

hanging out at the park in Golden Cove when she jumped down the monkey bars, looked at me, and said, “I think I like girls.”

Mom has a good friend, Lena, who’s married and has three children with a woman. Girls liking girls was nothing I’d never seen before, and I honestly couldn’t have cared less.

In response, I nodded and said, “Okay.”

Then we went on with our day.

Jamie proceeds to tell us all sorts of hilarious stories about the girls she’s dated. Drea follows suit, telling us stories that make me laugh so hard my stomach starts to ache.

Apparently, some guy she was dating asked her to save all of her used tampons and ship them to his house. Something about wanting to cherish every part of her.

And they say romance is dead.

Brooke eventually asks Drea if she’s got some sex stories to share, and I figure she’s going to end it there.

Until she casually says, “My boss walked in on me getting railed by my coworker.”

My jaw drops.

She was very careful with the words she chose.

My boss.

My coworker.

Jamie and I are the only ones who know she works for Kane. I have no doubt Jamie would never talk to the media—she’s never even told Brooke and Shay that she knew Kane as a kid—but I understand why Drea didn’t give them names.

We don’t know who we can trust.

Not without an NDA, anyway.

“Holy shit. By who?” Brooke asks.

Drea’s cheeks flare. “Just... some guy.”

I bet it’s Scar.

I see the way he looks at her.

Like he wants to pin her up against the wall and devour her. Holy shit... that would mean Kane walked in on them while they were fucking.

Or maybe she's talking about someone else, and Scar is just checking her out because he has *eyes*.

Drea is a rare beauty, and that's putting it mildly. She has butt-length, dark purple ombre hair, porcelain-pale skin, and big hazel eyes. She's that girl who can pull off any hair color, and from what I've seen when I stalked her on Instagram—I was curious, sue me—she changes hair color often.

I'm having so much fun I only realize how late it is when my eyes begin to water from my constant yawning. I'm still a little drunk, and we've been talking nonsense for so long, it's almost one in the morning.

I'm supposed to go pick up my uniform at Sandy's early tomorrow, and I was hoping to spend my last day of freedom on the beach. If I don't go to bed soon, I'm just going to end up sleeping the day away.

I ask Drea if she wants to head home and she nods.

We say our goodbyes shortly after.



DREA AND I ARE DRAINED BY THE TIME WE GET BACK TO THE beach house.

I was worried she was going to fall asleep at the wheel for a second there. Had to select the most upbeat playlist I have on my phone and blare music the entire ride home.

“Thanks for the invite. I'm glad I said yes,” Drea tells me as I'm unlocking the door.

“Of course,” I say mid-yawn.

We exchange good-nights, and Drea races up the stairs, as if in a hurry to doze off. I'm right there with her. All I want is my head on a pillow.

Too bad my tolerance is shit, and I just know if I don't chug a gallon of water right now, I'm going to wake up with a headache.

The house is dark and quiet as I glide down the hall toward the kitchen. I open the cabinet and pull out the biggest glass I can find before heading for the sink.

Right as I begin filling up the glass, I hear something.

At least, I *think* I do.

I twist the water off to listen.

Someone's playing the guitar.

I notice the kitchen window is cracked open, probably to let the night breeze inside.

I scan the backyard and large deck through the sliding glass door, trying to figure out where the noise is coming from.

It's pitch-black outside, save for the glow of the moon and a few night-lights in the pool. I step outside without even realizing it, drawn closer to the music.

That's when I hear him.

Kane's raspy voice is close to a murmur, but the lyrics he sings wrap me up like cashmere. I feel them everywhere, soft and warm despite the chills covering my arms.

*There are words I just can't say
But know you need to hear
Scared you'll see me the same way
I've seen myself for years
Monsters don't live in the dark
They share the air we breathe
One day you'll stop and realize*

The real monster is me

It feels like someone's constricting my lungs and replacing the air in them with pain. My sight adjusts to the darkness moments later, and I find Kane sitting on one of the pool loungers, a guitar on his lap.

He hasn't seen me yet, his back turned.

I'd give up all I have

To go back to the start

A time where I didn't wear

My mistakes like a scar

Break you like a promise

Your love I couldn't keep

One day you'll realize

The real monster is me

There's something so raw and heartfelt about the way he sings. Years later and nothing has changed. Scratch that—*everything* has changed, but not this.

Not his gift.

He's still incredible, although his voice has matured.

It's deeper, rippling with warmth and confidence. He's not the same apprehensive, self-conscious kid he was when he was fifteen. Back when his father made fun of him for his love of music.

I'm surprised I didn't realize how much progress he's made when Maggie made me listen to his albums. His new songs don't show off his voice nearly as much as this one does.

They don't make you feel like someone just jabbed a knife into your chest and pulled it out so brutally it ripped your heart in two. His new stuff is commercial, soulless trash compared to this.

The song comes to an end a few seconds later, and I regain control of my body, turning away before Kane catches me.

“Some things never change, do they, Hads?” His voice stops me in my tracks.

Has he known this whole time?

He rests his guitar on the lounge and rises to face me. He seems to be waiting for me to explain myself because he doesn't speak after that.

“I'm sorry, I was just...”

A sexy smirk tugs at his mouth. “Eavesdropping? Yeah, I gathered.”

That's what he was talking about when he said some things never change.

My eavesdropping is the only reason I even found out he could sing five years ago. It all started here. In this very house. In the sunroom where I caught him singing “Iris” by the Goo Goo Dolls—how ironic that it also happened to be the song that kicked off his career.

Sometimes I wonder what would've happened if I'd never posted that damn video.

Would Kane still be one of the most famous male artists in the world?

Would he still be making music?

Would we have ended up together?

“I see sticking your nose where it doesn't belong is still your MO.”

I decide to own up to it. “Looks like it.”

He seems a bit startled by my response. I think he's going to say something. Until he shakes his head and turns to leave.

“Why don't you put out more songs like this?” I blurt out.

He halts. “Songs like what?”

I may not be a fan of Kane Wilder as a person, but I can't deny that I'm a fan of his music. I mean his *real* music.

The words are out of my mouth before I can close it. “Songs that sound like the real you.”

He stares at me for a moment, his expression unreadable. “Meaning?”

I tilt my head as I analyze him. The moon’s glow highlights the side of his jaw, the sharp curve even more prominent like this.

God, this boy fascinates me.

Artistically.

He fascinates me *artistically*.

“Meaning your other songs don’t have a soul. This one does.”

My comment irritates him. “No offense, but you don’t know shit about what makes a good song.”

Maybe he’s right.

But it doesn’t stop me from saying, “I know I haven’t heard you sing with this much passion in years.”

My words seem to flip a switch in his brain because he responds by taking slow, intentional footsteps toward me.

He doesn’t stop until his scent tickles my nostrils and he’s so close to me I can feel my heart pumping adrenaline into my bloodstream.

His cocky smirk irritates me. “So, you’re a fan? Is that what you’re saying?”

Of course he’d rather take a jab at me for having listened to his music than consider I might be right.

“My *roommate’s* a fan,” I correct him. “She thinks your songs are the best thing since sliced bread.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “And you don’t?”

“Honestly? No.”

I think I see pain flash in his eyes.

Maybe that was a little harsh.

His other songs aren’t *terrible*. People obviously like them, or he wouldn’t be this successful, but I just know they’re

nothing compared to the amazing tracks he'd come out with if his label let him express himself as an artist.

"I like 'I'm Still Yours,' but the rest just... don't do it for me."

I expect him to get mad after that last comment, but he doesn't, walking back to the lounge to pick up his guitar.

"Tell me about it," he mutters.

Intrigued, I follow him, intending to keep the questions coming, but my voice leaves me when I get a good look at the guitar in his hand.

It's no secret that Kane is loaded.

He's been working nonstop for the past five years, and he's so famous most people's grandmas know who he is—*that's* how you know someone's made it.

I'm sure the seven million dollars he spent on the beach house didn't even make a dent in his bank account. So, someone tell me why in the ever-loving hell does he still have the guitar I bought him when he was fifteen...?

The black guitar gives my heart a squeeze.

This thing is old.

Like *old* old.

It was already old when I got it off Craigslist with my babysitting money five years ago, which means it's practically a relic now.

"You still have it," I whisper.

He waits for me to elaborate.

I point to the guitar in his hand. "You... You should have another one by now. A nicer one."

"Says who?" He shrugs and throws open the case on the floor before sliding his guitar inside.

Odds are he has a bunch of them and he only uses this one when he's playing for fun. Either way, he most definitely didn't keep the guitar because *I* gave it to him.

I push the thought aside, clearing my throat. “Do they not let you write your own songs?”

He throws the strap of his case over his shoulder, eyes darkening as he grits out, “Why would they do that when they have an entire fucking village of songwriters with a thousand hit songs under their belt, just waiting to pop out a catchy tune?”

That’s bullshit.

Surely, they know Kane is a gifted songwriter by now. “I’m Still Yours” stayed in the charts’ top ten for months and months after it released.

“They let you put out ‘I’m Still Yours,’ though.”

“Yeah, but only because it matched my brand.”

I have to admit his other songs are much darker. Like “Golden Cage,” for example. He wrote it when we were kids. It mentioned his dad’s abuse and how he resented Evie’s decision to stay with him in spite of it all.

There’s also the one I heard earlier.

The one talking about how the real monster is him. How he feels guilty and his sins are haunting him. I’m not sure what this one is about, but it’s not exactly the type of song you would expect from America’s heartthrob.

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m a fucking product, Hadley. I’m a *puppet*. I exist to fill a bunch of old fucks’ pockets. Doesn’t matter what I want to sing about. If people want love songs, then they’re going to get some fucking love songs.”

That’s what it all comes down to, isn’t it?

What the public wants.

Young girls are his target audience, and most of them want romance. They want to feel special, like they’re being serenaded by their celebrity crush. His label probably thinks no one will relate to what he’s been through.

Realization finds me.

Didn’t his label let him go after the Joshua disaster?

“I thought your label dropped you?”

“They did,” he says matter-of-factly.

“Isn’t that a good thing? It means you’re free. You can sing about whatever you want now, can’t you?”

He scoffs, looking at me like I’m a child who needs to be reminded how the world works. “It’s not that simple.”

On that note, he sets off toward the house. I’m certain that’s the end of our conversation until he stops and looks back at me.

“Hads?” The nickname sends shivers crawling up my spine.

I hate that nickname.

It makes him sound like the boy I used to know.

“Yeah?”

His voice comes out in a low rasp. “You were right earlier. When you said I was avoiding you. I *was* being a dick.”

A normal guy would follow that up with an apology, but an admission is all I get before he disappears inside the house. He didn’t apologize for disrespecting me. Not even close. But he did admit to his wrongdoing.

It’s not much.

But I’ll take it.



HADLEY

Everybody knows first days at a new job tend to be stressful.

But you know what's even more stressful?

Starting said job while running on two hours of sleep—I'm sorry, did I say hours? I meant *minutes*. At least that's what it felt like when I dragged myself out of bed at seven this morning.

The icing on the cake? None of this is my fault. There's only one person to blame for the dark circles under my eyes, and that's *Kane*.

I made the mistake of looking him up last night.

Call it a mix of curiosity and boredom. I hadn't been able to quiet my thoughts since I'd found him singing by the pool the night prior, and I needed to put my questions to rest once and for all.

Anything I've seen of Kane's in the past five years, I've only seen because of Maggie. I've heard most of his songs, sure—it was hard not to with every radio station playing them on repeat—but I never let myself fall into a rabbit hole like this.

I searched his name online and wound up watching his music videos, interviews, fan edits. All the shit I'd been avoiding for ages. I even checked his song credits on Spotify.

Just as I suspected, he hasn't written *any* of the songs on his last albums except for "I'm Still Yours."

He's been singing other people's words for five years now. The thought pissed me off to no end.

What a waste.

But that's not even the craziest part.

I stumbled upon one of his live performances and found out that Kane is one hell of an entertainer. He has this presence onstage. This... *magnetism* I can't explain. He owns every show, exuding so much charisma and talent it's impossible to look away.

I thought surely, he couldn't knock me on my ass any more than he already had. That's when I clicked on one of his *acoustic* performances.

And realized that I was wrong.

I was certain Kane played a thousand different guitars onstage, but... the only guitar he's playing is *mine*.

Well, the one I gave him.

He plays it at every show.

Every. Single. One.

I must've gone through a hundred clips to make sure it wasn't a onetime thing, and it doesn't matter if the video was filmed off a fan's phone or by a professional crew, I haven't found a single clip of him playing another guitar.

Not one.

I put my phone down shortly after that.

Problem is, sleep was hell-bent on eluding me.

Why did he keep it this long? Why would a millionaire keep a hundred-dollar guitar I got off Craigslist when he can afford the best instruments ever created?

It just doesn't make sense. I've gone years assuming that he forgot all about me as soon as he stepped foot on that plane, but could it be...

Could it be that he *didn't*?

"Hadley? You still with me?" I'm transported back into the crowded restaurant in a microsecond.

Shit, I spaced.

Again.

"I'm with you." I force my focus back onto Jamie. She's been trying to show me how to operate the register for the last ten minutes.

Her mouth curls into a smile. "Liar."

I'm lucky she's the one training me instead of Ania, another waitress. Ania had to call in sick, but she'll be continuing my training as soon as she's back, and from what Jamie's told me, the woman *hates* having to repeat herself.

I shake my head. "I'm sorry, I'm focused. *Totally focused.* Carry on."

"It's cool. It's just me. But word of advice, don't get distracted with Ania. Patience isn't her strong suit."

I give a nod. "Hear you loud and clear."

"Now, where were we?"

By some miracle, I manage to keep my mind from straying for the next few hours. I write down as much information as I can, nearly filling out the notepad I brought with me.

I'm grateful that Fred said we should start with a few short shifts to avoid overwhelming my newbie brain. It's already jam-packed with information, and I haven't even been here for an entire day.

Thirty minutes before I clock out, Jamie asks me to handle payment for a customer with a to-go order.

"What customer?" I ask, examining the empty restaurant. It's 2:00 p.m., and the place is dead save for an older couple

and their grandkid.

“We have an order getting picked up in a bit,” she explains before ambling over to the kitchen and returning with two takeout bags.

The door opens just seconds later, and two guys walk in. My chest inflates with joy, disbelief, and nostalgia from the moment I recognize my childhood friends.

It takes me a solid second to dissociate the two good-looking guys in front of me from the fourteen-year-old shit stirrers they used to be.

Vincent Park was always cute, with his tanned skin, baby blue eyes, messy blond hair, and surfer vibes, and yes, he might be taller and more muscular now, but apart from the stubble on his jaw and the ink snaking down his neck, he still looks like the guy I grew up with.

Cal, on the other hand...

He looks like a whole new person.

Cal was always shorter than the rest of the guys—Gray, Kane, and Vince used to give him so much shit for it. He was the skinny guy who got picked on and friend-zoned by every girl with a heartbeat.

But now... *shit*...

Not only has he gotten tall, but his T-shirt looks like it can barely contain the muscles underneath it. He’s still a few inches shorter than Vince, but he looks like a man now.

Growing up, he always had a buzz cut, which explains why I never knew his brown hair had curly potential. I swear he looks like he just spent an hour at the hair salon.

Vince flashes a dimpled grin. “Just picking up an order for Park.”

“I don’t even get a hi?” I say, rounding the counter and making my way over.

Vince’s arms open on cue, and I walk into his embrace without hesitation. I have no idea why I thought this would be

weird.

I guess I always thought that since the boys were as thick as thieves with my brother, *we* weren't really friends, but it doesn't change the fact that we spent every summer together growing up.

"Holy shit, how long has it been? Like a decade?" I chuckle when Vince wraps his arms around me, lifting me up and spinning me around.

The last time I saw Vince was at Gray's funeral, which makes it three years ago.

"More like a century. *At least.*" Vince puts me down, and I need a second to steady myself from all the twirling he had me doing.

I turn to Cal as soon as Vince and I separate, and my breath gets stuck in my throat. His eyes are so dark and deep I can't see his pupils. Almost makes me wish I could tell if they were dilated—I have no doubt *mine* are.

"Pink look goods on you, Queen," Cal teases, and I know he's talking about my hideous uniform.

Cal stretches his arms out for a hug, and I don't miss a beat, moving into his embrace.

He smells good.

Good hair, smells good, rocking body.

Nice one, puberty.

"Damn, Hadley, you look..." Vince pauses. "Different."

I let out a nervous chuckle, pulling away from Cal. "Is that a good or bad thing?"

Jamie snorts. "Trust me, that's a compliment in Vince's world."

Cal throws an arm around Vince's shoulders. "I think what the dumbass is trying to say is that you look good." He gives me a once-over, and I'm pretty sure I see his eyes flare. "Really good."

My cheeks heat up. “I could say the same about you, *Doctor.*”

Am I seriously flirting with Jamie’s brother right in front of her?

Who am I?

“How’s medical school?” I add as if to make them forget I just shamelessly hit on Cal.

I feel his smirk deep in my stomach. “Kicking my ass. What about you? Do you still paint?”

I’m surprised he remembered that. “Not really. I’m so busy with school. But I’m hoping to start back up this summer.”

I’m usually not a fan of small talk, but the conversation that follows keeps me invested all the way through. I come to find out that Vince’s working on opening his own business—surfing related, of course—and he just started dating this girl in college.

I wrestle with the urge to ask Cal if he’s seeing anyone, but I figure it would be too obvious.

It isn’t until Fred walks out of the back office fifteen minutes past the end of my shift and asks me what I’m still doing here that I remember the guys haven’t paid for their order.

Jamie walks me through the process one more time, and I ace her test, making the boys pay for their food without looking at my cheat sheet once.

Cal checks his phone. “Hate to cut our reunion short, but Kane’s waiting for us.”

Kane?

They’re going to see *Kane*?

I had no idea they were talking again.

Cal offers me a panty-dropping smile. “Good seeing you again, Hadley.”

“You girls are coming to my pool party tonight, right?” Vince asks as they’re walking to the door.

“There’s a pool party?” I ask.

My ignorance seems to amuse Jamie. “Don’t you check the group chat? It’s all these assholes have been talking about.”

I haven’t.

Not since two days ago.

I’m not very active on social media. I must have two posts on Instagram, tops, and I rarely ever use Facebook. Plus, I had to mute these clowns before my phone exploded.

Worry sinks into my stomach like a rock. “Who’s going to be there?”

They tell me they’ve invited Brooke, Shay, Jamie, me, a few guys I don’t know, and that they’re planning on asking Kane.

I almost tell them there’s no way Kane is going to attend without everyone there signing an airtight NDA, but I decide against it. They’ll find that out soon enough.

“You should invite Drea. She’s fun,” Jamie suggests.

There’s a good chance she’ll say no since she already took the night off yesterday, but it can’t hurt to try.

“Is that okay?” I ask.

Vince shrugs. “Sure. The more, the merrier.”

“So, you coming?” Cal chews on the inside of his cheek, an adorable, hopeful glimmer in his eyes.

I don’t think twice. “I’ll be there.”

They head out a few minutes later. Jamie nudges me in the ribs with her elbow as soon as they’re out of sight.

“Am I crazy, or is there *hella* tension between you and my brother?”

I want to dig myself into a hole at her question.

“I don’t know. Maybe? Would it would be so horrible if there were?”

She laughs. “Are you kidding? I’ve been waiting for a girl to come around and make him realize there’s more to life than school. Even better if that girl’s you.”

So, I have Jamie’s blessing.

Good to know.

I saunter out of Sandy’s fifteen minutes later and get into my mom’s car, an overwhelming amount of pride surging in my chest.

There I was, worried about my old feelings for Kane ruining this summer.

Kane Wilder who?



KANE

“SO, THIS IS YOUR LIFE NOW, HUH?” CAL ASKS AS HE DROPS onto the L-shaped sectional in the corner of my backyard.

Vince sets out in the opposite direction, plopping down onto the hammock on my right, and it’s like he just clocked me in the face with déjà vu.

We used to hang out here all the time as kids.

Vince would continuously swing the hammock like he was trying to knock the thing off its anchors, and my mom would almost have a heart attack every time his ass went flying.

“What is?” I sit in the armchair across from the guys, kicking my feet up on the coffee table in front of me.

“Making people sign paperwork just so they can talk to you,” Cal elaborates.

Doesn’t take me long to understand he’s referring to the NDAs Drea practically shoved down their throats when they

walked through the door.

She skipped the pleasantries, jumped right to the ultimatum, and told them they weren't getting anywhere near me unless they signed it.

I know she's just doing her job, but I also get why it can seem like overkill to people that are unfamiliar with the industry.

If they think NDAs are bad, I can't imagine what they'd do if they knew I had to use an app on my phone to hit them up from a fake number.

Can't have them knowing my real number. The only people that have it are my family members and people I'd trust with my life.

I learned my lesson the hard way when one of my backup dancers posted my number online for fifty grand when I was just starting out.

Then again when some model I hooked up with managed to get into my phone and call herself so she'd have my number. She went on to share it with her two-million-something followers.

My phone didn't stop ringing for forty-eight hours straight. I had to shut it off so that I wouldn't chuck it out the window.

Granted, it's not that big of a deal, but having to change my number every few months was getting to be fucking annoying. Phone numbers are linked to a bunch of things like your bank account, social media, and email address, just to name a few.

I'm not dealing with this shit again.

"Must be weird as hell," Vince comments.

I shrug, slouching into my seat. "Meh. You get used to it. If you ask me, it's getting followed everywhere you go that sucks balls."

Cal cringes, the pity in his eyes making me sick to my stomach. "I bet. How do you even go anywhere?"

I scoff. “I *don't*.”

I just buy big-ass mansions with gyms, tennis courts, and a fucking water park so that I never have to leave my house. Although something tells me saying it out loud would make me sound like a douche.

The truth is, most of the properties I own are at least three times the size of the beach house. I only bought this place for my mom because I know how much she loves it here.

I buy big houses to help me get over the fact that I'm basically a prisoner of my life. It helps, but I still have those moments where I forget who I am and want to go for a walk around my neighborhood like a normal person.

“What happens if you break an NDA?” Cal asks, and my blood begins sizzling.

I stare daggers at him. “Why?”

Cal pauses, taken aback by my accusatory tone, but he doesn't get offended.

His voice is calm as he says, “Dude, will you just relax for five minutes?”

I hate to admit it... but he's right.

I'm on edge.

To be honest, I *have* been on edge since I texted them yesterday and asked if they wanted to hang out.

I wasn't sure if they'd be pissed about me ghosting them for the past five years, but they answered right away.

We're guys.

We don't hold grudges.

Or if we do, we keep that shit bottled up and live in complete denial until we can't take it anymore.

“We knew you when you were eating sand, bro,” Vince reminds me.

Every muscle in my body unwinds.

“We were there when you and Gray were having ‘who can piss farther’ contests. We watched you throw up in your mom’s flowerpots on the Fourth of July,” Cal adds.

Ironically, the mention of Gray makes me feel ill all over again. It’s as though I could puke everything my stomach contains at any given moment.

“You know us, man. We’re not going to talk to the media or sell your fucking pictures,” Cal guarantees, and to my own surprise, I believe him.

We haven’t seen each other in five years, but I trust these assholes. I trust them a hell of a lot more than any of the vipers I’ve met since I moved to LA.

Vince snorts. “Although, we would make mad *bank* on those pictures of you and Gray bawling your eyes out that time you got stung in the ass by a jellyfish.”

The memory makes me laugh.

The guys had dared us to go skinny-dipping. It was the middle of the night, and we couldn’t see shit. Gray almost got stung in the dick, and I got stung in my left ass cheek.

Shit, I miss Gray.

Even though I’ve spent the last three years trying to block out any memories I have of him.

Cal and Vince were my friends, sure, but Gray was my *brother*. We shared a house every summer until I was fifteen. We even shared a goddamn bedroom.

I always suspected he didn’t want me sleeping in his room when we moved in with them—the feeling was mutual—but he didn’t let it show. He knew my mom and I had nowhere to go, and it wasn’t about him.

We were two teenage boys with raging hormones. Neither of us wanted to share a bunk bed while in our “jerking off until my dick falls off” phase.

In the end, I liked sharing a room with him more than I thought I would. We’d stay up late making knock-knock jokes, playing video games, and talking about girls.

Well, *he'd* talk about girls—mostly cheerleaders he wanted to score with—while I listened, wondering if I should tell him about the girl I really wanted.

I never did.

I was too fucking ashamed to tell him about all the nasty things I was doing to his sister in my head.

I push thoughts of Gray into the darkest corner of my mind. “Sorry, it’s just... I’m fucking paranoid these days.”

Cal nods. “It’s cool. Can’t be fun having people shove cameras in your face every second of every day.”

He has *no* idea.

I can’t recall the last time I wasn’t on high alert when I left my house. I’m always checking my surroundings, waiting for the paps to jump out of a bush and rob me of my privacy.

They have no boundaries, no respect for the people they photograph, and no concept of compassion.

They crashed Gray’s funeral, for fuck’s sake.

What kind of monsters crash someone’s funeral for a fucking picture?

“You know what you need?” Vince rises off the hammock. “A night off. You need to unwind, have a shot, take a break from being Mr. Celebrity Guy.”

As good as that sounds, my mom’s right.

I need to get my drinking under control before I can even think of getting my career back on track.

This is the first day in God knows how long that I’ve woken up without a killer headache and nausea. It felt good. I felt like a human being for once.

“I don’t drink anymore,” I tell them. “Especially not strong liquor.”

Cal leans forward, resting his elbows on his spread legs. “You sober?”

I blow out a sigh. “Trying to be.”

“How come?” Vince questions.

“Last time I drank the strong shit, I put a guy in a wheelchair.”

They look so shocked I immediately know that they had no idea.

On one hand, I’m surprised they didn’t hear about it, considering it’s all everyone’s been talking about lately. But on the other, I’m glad they didn’t know.

“Oh,” Cal says.

“No drinking, then.” Vince resumes talking like I didn’t just tell them I ruined someone’s life.

They don’t seem to think I’m a horrible person.

That’s good.

“I’m throwing a party tonight. My folks are gone for the weekend. You should come.” The invitation is as tempting as it is unfeasible.

“Can’t.”

“Why not?” the guys ask at the same time.

“It’s too risky for me to go to a party full of strangers. Too many phones and witnesses. If word gets out that I’m here, I’ll have the paparazzi camping outside my house before the day’s out.”

“What if everyone there signs one of those NDA thingies?” Vince brainstorms.

I’m not a fan of the idea. “Eh, I don’t know. Sounds like a lot of work for one night.”

“We could take everybody’s phone at the door?” Cal suggests.

“Look, guys, I appreciate the effort—”

Cal cuts me off. “We’ll make them sign the paperwork *and* only invite people you know, how’s that?”

If I were to say yes, Drea would definitely insist on tagging along to watch over me. Scar, too. The guy has never

turned down a party in his life.

Cal takes my hesitation as a sign to keep talking. “I can uninvite everyone you don’t know personally. It’d just be us and the girls. Come on, man.”

The girls.

Does he mean...

Don’t ask.

Don’t fucking ask

I lose the battle against curiosity. “Define *girls*.”

“My sister and Hadley.”

I just had to ask, didn’t I?

“Speaking of Hadley, did you see her? Girl got hot. Like real hot,” Vince says.

“Hey, I’ve got dibs, motherfucker!” Cal interjects.

He’s got *what*?

“Since when?” Vince asks.

“Since you have a girl back home?” Cal mocks.

“Oh, that? It’s not serious.”

Meanwhile, my brain’s still stuck on the dibs thing.

He thinks he has *dibs*.

The asshole thinks he can just call dibs on a girl like Hadley Queen and that makes her his? He thinks he can claim her and we’re all just going to sit back and accept it?

“Hadley’s mine. Deal with it,” Cal declares, flat-out ignoring Vince’s protests.

Fuck that.

Hadley’s not his.

Not in his wildest fucking dreams.

Cal turns to me. “So, you in?”

I’m going to show him just how wrong he is.

“Fuck yeah, I’m in.”



HADLEY

I didn't think this through.

Just one of the things that crossed my mind when I jogged down the stairs and found Kane, Drea, and Scar waiting by the door for their ride to Vince's party.

Jamie, being tonight's designated driver, offered to pick me up at the house. Little did I know, she and Drea have been texting, and when Drea found out Jamie was picking me up, she asked her if she had room for three more.

Jamie couldn't bring herself to say no, and, well, here we all are, squashed like sardines in her fifteen-year-old car.

The apologetic look Jamie gave me through the rearview mirror when I slid into the back seat made it clear that she didn't mean to trap me in a car with Kane.

In all fairness, I was crazy to think I could avoid him by staying out of the house twenty-four seven.

We have the same friends. We're going to get invited to the same parties, whether I like it or not.

I might not be able to stay away from him, but that doesn't mean I plan on getting close to the guy. Although, seeing us

now, you might think otherwise...

I barely had time to sit down and buckle up before Kane dropped into the back seat next to me—as in, *right* next to me.

He could've sat in the passenger's seat or waited for Drea to get in so he could have the window seat, but nope. He just had to sit so close to me I can feel his body heat radiating against my thigh.

He did that shit on purpose.

I know he did.

I just can't figure out why.

I threw on a pair of jean shorts and a tank top over my bikini, but I'm starting to regret it. I just know Kane saw the goose bumps spreading over my skin when his hand brushed against my thigh earlier. He removed his hand like he didn't mean to touch me, but his cocky smirk didn't get past me.

Also... his hands...

They're resting flat on his spread legs—because we all know guys don't know how to sit normally—and *Jesus*. I hate that even his hands are attractive.

They're big and tanned, and he's got those long guitarist fingers. Not to mention a few defined veins snake up his wrists, hands, and knuckles, making me feel some type of way.

He's also got black rings I'm sure cost more than anything I own on his pointer and ring fingers.

Kane Wilder has always been gorgeous, but now?

He's dripping with sex.

His good looks didn't affect me in the same way when we were kids.

My mind rarely ever wandered past kissing, but now? I'm thinking about what it would be like to have that hand wrapped around my neck, choking me a little while he—

“Just look at this fucking place.” Scar's voice snaps me out of it.

I stretch my neck and catch a glimpse of Vince's driveway through the windshield.

Scar has a point.

The place is gorgeous.

In fact, Vince's beach house is nicer than ours. Scratch that —their beach house is nicer than *all* the houses in Golden Cove.

"Are all your friends loaded or something?" Scar glances at Kane from the passenger seat.

Jamie snorts. "Look at the car you're sitting in right now."

Scar shuts his mouth, catching her drift. Jamie's car needs a lot of work. It could use a paint job, new brakes, and a new windshield. She also smashed one of her side mirrors while trying to parallel park two months ago.

I practically race out of the car from the moment she pushes the gear into park. I tense up when Kane climbs out after me, that sexy fucking smirk still dancing on his lips. Why does he look like he's *enjoying* seeing me squirm?

"Who's coming again?" I ask as we tread to the front door. The driveway is empty except for two cars I'm pretty sure belong to Vince and Cal.

I'm not sure why I thought the place would be packed. It sounded like Vince was planning on inviting most of Hillford earlier.

"Just us, Cal and Vince," Jamie says as we step onto the porch. She rings the doorbell the next second.

Wait, so, it's just going to be the seven of us?

Not exactly the making of a *rager*.

"What about Brooke? And Shay? Weren't they coming?"

"No strangers allowed." Drea fills in the blanks.

It takes me a second to understand she's talking about people *Kane* doesn't know.

The girls aren't strangers to us, but they are to him. *He's* why this party turned into a small gathering. I'm guessing Mr. Controversy can't be out partying with people he doesn't trust when the whole world wants his head on a pike.

"Why don't you make them sign an NDA?" I ask.

"Not worth it. It's just one night," Kane says dryly.

"It doesn't have to be one night. They could hang out with us for the summer if—"

He cuts me off. "I said, it's not fucking worth it."

Well, damn.

"Excuse me for asking. *Jeez.*"

My response makes him pause, and he inhales a sharp breath, turning to face me. "Sorry... it's just... I'm on edge. The more people know I'm in town, the more chances the media will find out and hunt my ass down. I'm not risking it, NDA or not."

As much as I dislike the way he expressed himself, I get why he's scared right now.

He probably feels like the whole world's out to get him, and he's already playing with fire by leaving the house and having a somewhat normal life.

He's supposed to be lying low, not partying with his friends, and I can't blame him for having his guard up. But that doesn't mean I'm going to let him talk to me like that for the next two months. I'm only giving him a pass because he apologized.

If I'm being honest, I'm surprised Evie even allowed him to come to the party. I'm guessing Drea and Scar tagging along to watch him played a big part in her decision.

The front door opens a heartbeat later, and Rejean, the Parks' longtime butler, stands on the other side.

I can't believe Vince turned out the way he did, considering his upbringing. He's this chill surfer guy with

neck tattoos and a taste for adventure, but he grew up in a house with a fucking *butler*.

“You must be Mr. Park’s guests. He and Mr. Torres are waiting for you in the backyard.” Rejean gestures to come inside.

I don’t know if he’s just pretending not to remember us or if he’s just getting old and officially at that point where he starts to forget his own address.

I could see him faking his amnesia as payback. He always hated us. And with good reason. The guys used to make his job a living hell every time we hung out at Vince’s place as kids.

We’ve just stepped foot inside the house when Kane turns to Drea and gestures to Rejean with a flick of his chin. Drea seems to understand what that means because she nods.

Drea shoves her hand into the beach bag she brought with her, pulls out a stack of paper, and makes her way over to Rejean. “Do you know what an NDA is?”

I bite back a scoff.

Just another day in the life of a superstar.



I WAS CONVINCED I WOULDN’T HAVE FUN TONIGHT.

I told myself there was no way I’d be able to truly unwind in Kane’s presence.

Until shot number four, that is.

Shot number four fixed all of my problems—or, at the very least, put them on pause.

The five rounds of flip cup beforehand might’ve also contributed to my newfound *I-Don’t-Give-A-Fuck* attitude.

We’re all pretty much gone by now. Well, except for Kane and Drea. Kane’s been drinking water, while Drea’s sipping on

a mocktail she must not like very much, considering she's been at it for four hours.

It's clear that she takes her job very seriously, and she's not here to enjoy herself but to make sure Kane doesn't do anything stupid. As opposed to Scar, who's had too many drinks to count. He and the guys hit it off immediately.

I can tell it's pissing off Kane.

He probably wants nothing more than to say *fuck it* and join in on the fun. I was worried that we were being insensitive drinking in front of him, but Drea told me she'd warned him several times that tonight might be triggering for him, and he *still* insisted on coming.

My guilt faded away just as quickly as my sobriety did. The next thing I knew, I was hitting on Cal.

We've been flirting all night. I wasn't sure how I felt about his seductive smiles and glances at first—being friends with his sister and all—but then I remembered Jamie gave me her blessing.

Plus, I promised Maggie I'd put myself out there this summer.

“Do you want to be with me?” Cal's voice comes out as a rasp.

My eyes widen as he swims toward me, his curls soaked and pasted to his forehead. He stops inches away from me, propping his arm on the structure of the pool.

I glance around the backyard, as if to check if someone other than me is seeing this, and my gaze lands on Scar, Jamie, and Vince. Scar is sitting on a lounge, scrolling on his phone, while Jamie and Vince talk shit in the pool.

I whisk my head toward Kane and Drea, chilling by the firepit. I take that back. Drea is chilling.

Kane is *not*.

His body is tense, his jaw tight as he stares invisible bullets at something in the distance.

He looks beyond intimidating like this—shirtless, powerful, *untouchable*. A strand of brown hair falls in front of his green eyes, and his fists are clenched so tight his rings are probably cutting off the blood flow in his hands.

He's been in a mood all night, sure, but we're past that now.

Now, he looks furious.

And then it hits me.

He's glaring at us.

“Hadley?” Cal brings me back.

“Sorry, what?”

He flashes a gorgeous smile. “I said, do you want to be with me? On my team, I mean? The guys want to play floating beer pong.”

I clear my throat. “Oh, um, sure.”

He inches closer, our breaths mingling as he stares at my mouth. “Maybe afterward, we could—”

“Cannonball!” I see Scar running from the corner of my eye but only realize what's happening when he throws himself into the pool right next to us.

His body meets the water with a loud splash, and Cal and I back away from each other to avoid the worst of the spatter.

Looks like now wasn't a good time to be gaping at Cal because water gets in my mouth and nose, sending me into a coughing fit.

Cal goes off on Scar as soon as he resurfaces. “Dude, what the fuck? You couldn't do that shit on the other side of the pool?”

Scar shrugs. “Sorry.”

“Are you okay?” Cal diverts his focus over to me.

I can't even reply, coughing my lungs out.

He tries to move closer to me, but I step back, gesturing to give me a second. Everyone asks me if I'm okay at least once

before I manage to breathe properly again.

Once I'm done choking, I excuse myself, getting out of the pool. I grab my shorts off one of the loungers and beeline toward the house to get myself a glass of water that's not ninety-eight percent chlorine.

I end up stopping by the bathroom afterward and take the opportunity to dry myself and put my shorts on before I freeze to death.

Damn it, I forgot my shirt in my bag.

I make sure to grab one of the canned peach-lemonade seltzers I brought out of the fridge before I head back outside, but what I see when I turn the corner drills me into place.

Kane and Scar are talking by the foyer, the loud music emanating from the backyard making the walls shake.

Then Kane slips Scar some money.

He tried to be subtle about it, too. Tried to pass it off as a handshake, but I know better than to fall for that shit.

Why is he paying him?

“Now, what do we say?” Scar taunts him.

“Fuck off.”

“You know how much I hate getting my hair wet. Least you can do is thank me.”

Wait...

Did Kane *ask* Scar to jump in the pool?

Kane snorts. “You’ll live.”

Don’t overreact. Don’t overreact. Don’t overre—

“What the hell?”

Kane and Scar spot me instantly, and I curse the universe for making Kane’s poker-face game so strong. He doesn’t even flinch when he sees me. He doesn’t look shocked or embarrassed that I caught them in the middle of a sketchy transaction.

Scar, on the other hand...

Guilt is written all over his face.

“Did you fucking pay him to cockblock me and Cal?” I slur.

The choking incident sobered me up for a bit, but not permanently. I still had way too much, and it’s starting to catch up to me.

Scar looks so guilty he’s already given himself away. “Hadley, hey. We were just—”

“Get out,” Kane tells his drummer, his face an unsolvable enigma.

Scar doesn’t argue, walking out into the backyard.

“I asked you a question,” I press as soon as we’re alone.

In response, Kane dips a hand into his jeans and pulls out something. A lighter. I drink him in. He’s wearing a black T-shirt now, his muscular body filling it out perfectly.

“What the fuck is the matter with you? Why would you ask your friend to do something like that? Why would you...” My voice trails off when he sets off toward the front door. “Hey, dickface, I’m talking to you!”

He doesn’t care, though, because the next thing I know, he’s swinging the door open and walking out onto the front porch. I stand there for a few seconds, trying—and *failing*—to process what just happened.

I eventually snap out of it and follow after him. I find him leaned back against one of the house pillars, smoking a joint like he doesn’t have a care in the world.

His indifference is aggravating. The breeze runs across my damp body, and I shiver. It’s getting chilly out, and I’m only wearing a bikini top with my shorts.

I park myself in front of him. “Did you pay Scar to cockblock us, yes or no?”

I already know the answer, but I want him to admit it.

He pulls the joint from his lips, exhales a thick cloud of smoke, and throws his head back against the pillar before saying, “Damn right I paid him.”

His bluntness knocks the breath out of me.

“What? Why?”

Still as unaffected as it can get, he shrugs. “Because Cal’s not the guy for you.”

I grind my teeth at his response. “Excuse me? You have got some nerve getting involved in my life when you—”

“When I what? Kissed the shit out of you the day before I left town?”

My jaw drops.

I hate that he’s acting like he didn’t do anything wrong. It makes me want to clock him in the head with the can I’m holding. I glance down at the unopened seltzer in my hand and realize...

Maybe it’s not that I’m too drunk.

Maybe it’s that I’m not drunk *enough*.

Under Kane’s scrutiny, I open the can and guide it to my lips. I start slow at first, but before I know it, I’m downing the alcohol inside. I can tell Kane doesn’t approve by the way he frowns, but I don’t give two shits what he thinks.

I’m almost done with the drink when he groans. “That’s enough.”

“You’re not answering the question,” I stop my chugging to say. His eyes are still packed with disapproval, but he’s staring at my chest now. I look down and realize a few drops of booze escaped my lips and are coursing down my breasts.

He brings his gaze back to mine. “Gray would’ve wanted me to keep an eye on you.”

“You’re not seriously pulling the *Gray* card right now. You ignored him for years, Kane. *Years*. He had to get shot in the fucking head for you to remember he existed!”

Kane's poker face slips off for a second, and beneath it?

There's pain.

Maybe even guilt.

He slaps his emotionless façade back on. "That's beside the point."

This is useless. We're just going around in circles.

"Want to know what I think?" I move closer. "I think you did it because you know I used to have a crush on you, and your fragile little ego couldn't handle the fact that I don't anymore."

He fake gasps. "Wait, you had a crush on me?"

Dick.

"You're such a narcissist, you know that?" I drive my index finger into his chest, poking him.

He raises an eyebrow. "A narcissist, huh? Is that what you've been telling yourself to sleep at night?"

My confidence shrinks.

"It is, isn't it? You cling to that bullshit story because it's easier to tell yourself that I left because I don't care about anyone than to accept I just didn't care about *you*."

Okay, *that* hurt.

"Fuck you," I spit, turning to walk away and almost tripping. I manage to steady myself just in time, but right when I'm about to open the door, Kane snatches my wrist and pulls.

He spins me around, his tone authoritative and demanding as he says, "We're going home."

"Are you crazy? I'm not going anywhere with you." I try to take my wrist back, but he doesn't allow it.

He swipes the seltzer from my hand. "I'm taking that, too."

"Hey!" I protest, but he's already crushing the near-empty can in his grip and tossing it on the lawn.

"You're drunk," he states.

“Am not!”

He grits his teeth. “Start walking. Now.”

“You don’t even have a car,” I argue.

“I’ll just take Vince’s.” Before I know it, he’s opening the front door and grabbing Vince’s car keys from the key rack mounted on the wall.

“I want to stay.”

“Tough shit.” He presses a button on Vince’s key fob, and his car makes a beeping sound.

I cross my arms over my chest like I’m a toddler. “I said I’m not leaving.”

I think I catch his focus dropping to my breasts again, but he doesn’t linger for long, getting so close to me I can feel his breath crash against my mouth. “Get your ass to the car before I make you.”

I don’t back down. “Suck my dick, Wilder.”

“Fine.”

Nausea rolls through my stomach when my feet lift off the ground. He just fucking tossed me over his shoulder.

“Put me down. I’m not a child.” This upside-down situation isn’t helping with the queasiness.

“I wouldn’t have to treat you like a child if you didn’t act like one.”

We’re halfway to the car when my stomach gives me a warning I’d be stupid to ignore.

“Kane, wait, I don’t... I don’t feel good.”

Something in my voice must reflect how panicked I am because he puts me down immediately.

I don’t know if the booze is making me see things, but I swear there’s a hint of worry in his eyes. As soon as my feet touch the ground, Kane clutches my waist with both hands to steady me.

Then I throw up all over his shoes.



KANE

I'VE HAD MANY GIRLS THROW THEMSELVES AT MY FEET IN MY life. I've even had a few girls kiss my shoes like hygiene wasn't a thing and I was blessing the ground by just standing on it. Despite all of that, I've never had a girl *throw up* at my feet.

And that's not to say I haven't had my fair share of experiences with vomit.

A pregnant fan once puked all over herself when she saw me. I still gave her a hug because I felt bad she'd spent seven hours waiting in the pouring rain outside of my hotel.

There was also that time a fan brought a hat for me to sign and puked inside of it just as she was next in line for my meet and greet.

Spoiler alert: I still signed it.

I felt bad for these girls.

Of course I did.

But when I saw Hadley get sick?

Jesus, I would've set myself on fire if it could've made her feel better.

"Can you please get out?" Hadley begs for the eighth time in a matter of minutes.

"No." I tell her the exact same thing I've told her the last eight times she asked.

We got home an hour ago, and I immediately led her to the bathroom. She's been nonstop vomiting since.

It's a miracle she managed not to hurl inside Vince's car on the drive home. Although his driveway might need a good cleaning.

“This is disgusting,” Hadley says, shame dripping from her voice as she claws at the toilet seat, sitting cross-legged on the bathroom floor.

I laid a towel down so that she wouldn’t have to sit on the cold tiles, but she’s still shivering like crazy. Probably because she’s only wearing her bikini top and shorts.

I twist her red hair tighter around my fist, holding it out of the way like I’ve been doing for an hour now. “I don’t give a shit.”

Does it smell good? No.

Does it bother me? Not even a little.

“I’m serious. Go. *Please*,” she pleads. I get that she doesn’t want me to see her like this, but what she doesn’t get is that I’m a stubborn motherfucker, and I have no intention of leaving her alone.

I promised myself I’d stay away, but right now, I want to be there. Even if just for one night. Then I can go back to avoiding her.

The puking eventually stops, and I wait another five minutes just to be sure she’s done.

“Drink.” I drop to my knees next to her and drive the glass of water I got her close to her face.

She waves it away, leaning against the wall behind her and huddling her legs to her chest. “Just leave, Kane. That’s what you’re good at.”

A scoff rips from my throat.

She has no fucking idea how wrong she is about that.

I’m good at many things, but *leaving* isn’t one of them.

I change the subject. “You need to stay hydrated.”

She ignores me, hugging herself and rubbing her palms up and down her arms.

“Hads?” I press when she doesn’t answer.

“What?” she snaps.

“Drink the fucking water.”

“I’m fine. See? I’m not—” *Hiccup*. “—I’m not even throwing up anymore. You can go.”

Am I crazy, or are her lips turning blue?

I don’t think twice, rising to my feet and booking it to my room. I come back a few seconds later, a black hoodie in my hand. Hadley’s features twist with exasperation as soon as I walk in. She probably thought she’d finally gotten rid of me.

Too fucking bad I’m not leaving her side.

I hand her the hoodie. “Put it on.”

She refuses to take it. “I don’t want your stupid sweater. I’m not even cold.”

Is she for real?

Her body’s shaking like a fucking leaf, and she expects me to believe that?

I’m done playing nice. “Put the fucking sweater on, or I’ll do it for you.”

She pins me with a defiant look, her blue eyes calling my bluff. I can’t even be mad at her right now. Her headstrong personality has always been what I like most about her.

I can still see her ripping my dad a new one after she’d caught him whooping my ass in the sunroom when we were kids. I remember how terrified she looked and how brave I thought she was when she didn’t let her fear take over.

“For fuck’s sake.” I go ahead and slide the hoodie over her head before she can argue.

I hear her bitching but don’t give it another thought as I guide her head into the collar and sweep her hair out of it.

My fingers brush against her neck as I do, and a sharp breath blows past her lips, the sexy little sound making me smirk.

Her arms are pinned down on each side of her body, and despite her annoyance, she gives in, sliding her arms inside the

sleeves.

Color floods back onto her skin, and I sigh in relief. She's looking better already.

"Now, drink." I lift the glass to her face again, and she opens her mouth to say no. I seize the opportunity, taking the glass to her opened mouth and practically forcing her to drink.

She groans in disapproval but allows the room-temperature water to spill down her throat. My hand flies to her chin, and I tilt it back, coaxing her into taking several small sips.

She looks up at me, big blue eyes examining me as I do.

Fuck.

Everything about this girl turns me on.

"Let's get you to bed." I kill my hard-on before it tears through my jeans, placing the glass on the counter and pushing off the floor. I've just helped her up when she lets out a mocking laugh.

I snake an arm around her waist, digging my fingers into her side to keep her upright. "What?"

"You're being awfully nice for a guy who never cared about me."

I don't know why I said that earlier. She just got under my skin with all that talk about me being a narcissist.

Mostly because she's right.

I *am* a bit of a narcissist—it's damn hard not to when you have millions of women worshipping you—but I didn't always use to be. I wasn't one the day I kissed her.

And I definitely wasn't one when I texted Gray after I left and asked him not to tell her that he and I still kept in touch.

Hadley thinks I ghosted him up until the day he died, but the truth is, he's the only one I *didn't* ghost.

"I didn't mean it," I admit so quietly she doesn't hear me. I debate on repeating myself but decide she's better off not knowing.

I lead her into my bedroom shortly after, and she almost trips over her own feet. I tighten my hold on her waist at the last second, and her hand jumps to my shirt for balance.

Then she sniffs me.

Well, she sniffs *my shirt*.

I don't bring it up, though, fighting a smile.

"Careful," I say before I help her onto my bed.

"I wasn't sniffing you!" she blurts out like I just accused her of manslaughter.

I chew the inside of my cheek to hold back my laughter. "I didn't say you were."

Hadley sits her pretty ass down on the edge of my bed and slurs, "Good. Because you smell stupid."

Goddamn it, don't smile.

You're supposed to hate her, you brainless fuck.

"I smell stupid?" I go along with her nonsense.

She nods and drops onto her back. "Real stupid."

"Will try to remember that." I cut across my room and turn the light off.

"That's not my bed," she realizes when I reach her side.

"Well, aren't you observant?"

I start by removing her shoes and turning on the lamp on the nightstand.

"But I want to sleep in my bed," she protests. I don't reply fast enough for her liking because she adds, "Did you hear me? I'm not sleeping here."

"And I'm not leaving you alone to choke on your own vomit," I counter.

She's had way too much for me not to watch over her for the rest of the night. That and the thought of her sleeping anywhere *other* than my bed makes me want to peel off my own skin.

I spin on my axis, intending to go get her more water, but her hand grips my wrist, stopping me.

“Where are you doing?” she slurs.

I don’t bother correcting her. “To get you some water. Change while I’m gone.”

She lets go, and I make my way to my dresser. I pull out a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt, because I doubt her bikini and shorts are comfortable enough to sleep in, and put the clothes next to her.

I’m back with her water minutes later. I find her lying on top of the covers in my T-shirt and sweats, with her cheek mashed against my pillow and her pouty mouth open.

There’s something addictive about seeing Hadley in my clothes.

Shit, I could get used to this.

“Under the covers, Hads,” I command, but she’s too far gone.

I struggle to get her body under the duvet for a few minutes, but she doesn’t make a sound or wake up. I figure she’s down for the night, and I could probably get in a quick shower.

I’m about to walk back to the bathroom when a quiet, breathy voice tugs at my cock. “Kane?”

I turn to see her looking at me through tired eyes, her arm held out in my direction.

“Yeah?”

“Will you stay until I fall asleep?”

I don’t reply right away, and she seems to think I’m going to say no because she adds, “Please?”

I wasn’t going to say no—I don’t think I *could* say no even if I tried—but I still play it off like I’m doing her a favor.

“Okay.” I climb into bed behind her but keep a good amount of distance between us.

I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do. So, I just lie there and wait for her breathing to become regular.

A few seconds elapse.

Then she backs herself up into my pelvis.

Jesus Christ.

She doesn't stop until I'm spooning her. She's under the covers, and I'm lying on top, but I'd be surprised if she didn't feel my swollen cock against her ass.

She doesn't say anything, though, and I make the mistake of enjoying the moment.

I sag into her, press my chest to her back, and rest a hand on her stomach, clutching her to me. I selfishly hold her, nestling my nose into her hair as my cock drifts back to sleep.

I'm all good and collected until she shifts in my arms, rubbing over my crotch again.

My hard-on is back in an instant.

Not now, my man.

"You still smell stupid," she whispers under her breath.

I can't smother my grin at her drunk words.

I don't just smell stupid—whatever that means.

I *am* stupid.

I'm a fucking idiot for not telling her the truth.

She may think she hates me now, but that's *nothing* compared to how she'd feel if she knew what really happened that night.

I wait until she's asleep and reluctantly separate from her. I've just walked into the bathroom and started the shower when my phone pings with a text.

It's Scar.

SCAR

Hey, fuckface. Where'd you go?

He double texts me.

SCAR

Never mind. Vince told me you're with Hadley.

At first, I wonder if I should deny it, but I decide there's no point in me lying.

I texted Vince that I took his car to take Hadley home and I'd get it back to him first thing in the morning. He said it was cool. Probably before telling everyone at the party that I left to take care of the girl I claim to hate.

I decide not to answer him. I'm sure he'll lecture the hell out of me when I see him in person, anyway. And he can't say anything to me that I don't already know.

It isn't long until he sends me a third message.

Here comes the lecture.

SCAR

Not trying to tell you what to do, but... you sure getting close to her is a good idea?

I'm not.

Not for a fucking second.

All it took was one asshole hitting on her for me to break all of my rules. I thought I was going to push Cal's thick head underwater and drown his ass earlier.

For a fleeting moment, I let myself forget that I can never have this girl.

Tonight, I let myself forget what I did...

Never again.



HADLEY

My first week as a waitress goes by in a flash.

By the time my day off rolls around, I'm exhausted in every sense of the word. All in all, I like working at Sandy's, but Ania, my coworker and the lady training me, just might be my *least* favorite part about the job.

She expects absolutely *nothing* short of perfection, despite the fact that I'd never waitressed in my life less than a week ago. I'm a fast learner, sure, but I'm still a human being.

She seems to assume that because she's shown me how to do something *once*, I won't have any questions or require her assistance with it ever again.

Having Jamie around does help balance out the bad, though. If it weren't for her, I'm not sure I would've made it through my first week.

She reminds Ania to take a chill pill whenever she goes off on me for not mastering every part of the job. Even my boss had to say something. I just might have to ask him if Jamie can train me instead.

Lying in bed, I stare at the ceiling and reflect on all that's happened since I moved in.

From eavesdropping on Kane and his sober sponsor in the bathroom, reconnecting with my childhood friends, to waking up alone in Kane's bed the morning after Vince's party. It's been an eventful first week, to say the least.

It must've taken me a solid forty-eight hours to even look Kane in the eyes after I threw up all over his expensive shoes.

There was something particularly vulnerable about waking up in his bed half naked and realizing I was wearing his clothes—well, technically, I was wearing his T-shirt and my panties.

Apparently, drunk me got hot halfway through the night and thought it would be a good idea to strip.

I wish I could say I didn't remember a thing when I woke up. That the booze wiped my memory clean, but the truth is I remembered every embarrassing moment.

Every nice thing Kane did when I had my head in the toilet. How attentive he was to my every need. The way he held my hair while I was puking.

I even remember backing up into him, his hands clutching my body as he pulled me in, the warmth of his chest on my back.

God, I'm such an idiot.

Kane was nowhere around when I woke up, so I did what any sane, mortified person would do. I grabbed my clothes off the floor, threw them on, and ran to my bedroom before Kane came back.

We haven't said a word to each other since.

I considered thanking him for taking care of me—once the initial humiliation wore off—but he's been treating me like I'm see-through ever since that night.

There has been no more intense staring at breakfast, no more conversations in the backyard, and *definitely* no more cuddling. He went from tucking me into bed and holding me until I fell asleep to leaving the room as soon as I walk in.

It's getting to be a running gag around here.

Everyone, and I mean *everyone* in the house, has noticed. Scar even made a joke out of it. Something along the lines of “*Legend has it these two have never been seen in the same room.*”

Normally, I’d be annoyed.

After all, I told him I wouldn’t tolerate him treating me like I carry a deadly virus, but I was so exhausted from trying to meet Ania’s expectations all week, all I wanted to do was crash into bed when I got home.

On the bright side, Kane ignoring me ensures that I’ll continue to see him for who he really is rather than the nice, *hold-your-hair-back-while-you’re-sick* version of him.

I refuse to even entertain the idea that he might be a good person.

He looked me in the eyes and told me he’d never cared about me. One decent gesture doesn’t change the fact that his insides are so rotten his heart is probably coal black.

I decide I should probably get out of bed a half hour later. I need a shower, for starters. I was so tired last night I fell asleep the second my head hit the pillow.

I’m quick to select an outfit and walk to my bedroom door. I’ve just swung it open when the door to the room across from mine opens, too.

The bedroom is Drea’s.

But the person coming out of it is *Scar*.

Well, well.

Look who finally acted on all that tension.

Scar is shirtless, his black hair is a tousled mess, and his blue eyes are so small he looks like he’s been up for twenty-four hours straight.

He, Drea, Kane, Jamie, Cal, and Vince were supposed to hang out at the docks in Hillford last night.

We used to do it all the time as kids, except that now, instead of just watching the stars and skipping stones, the guys

pass a joint around and drink themselves into a coma.

I was supposed to go, but I got off work late, and I wasn't in a drinking mood. Although, I take it from Scar's walk of shame that he and Drea were in the mood for something entirely different...

Scar and I make eye contact instantly, but he seems too tired to give a shit about getting caught while trying to sneak out because he flashes a smile, quietly closes the door, and dashes down the hall toward his own room.

I'm hopping into the shower ten minutes later. I was thinking I'd go shopping for painting supplies today.

I miss painting more and more each day, and I may be flat broke right now, but I figured I could pay off my credit card once I get my first paycheck.

I'm jogging down the stairs shortly after. The smell of bacon makes my mouth salivate, and I make a beeline for the kitchen, excited to see what Sue's got planned for breakfast.

I thought Kane and Evie were extra for taking their private chef everywhere they went, but I have to admit it's been nice coming downstairs in the morning and finding a hot breakfast waiting for me.

My pulse stills when I turn the corner and find a shirtless Kane sitting around the breakfast nook.

He seems to be the only one who's up, and I assume my mom and Evie are already at the club.

Kane doesn't notice me, staring at something on his phone.

"Good morning, miss," Sue greets me with a radiant smile. "How would you like your eggs this morning?"

I debate on telling her that she doesn't have to call me *miss*, but I've told her five times this week and it clearly hasn't stuck.

Kane's head snaps up, the worry etching his face twisting my stomach into a knot.

Something's wrong.

I want to ask him about it, but he closes himself off to any sort of interaction, diverting his focus to his phone again.

Okay, then.

I return Sue's smile. "Scrambled, please."

She nods, finishing up the plate on the counter before bringing it over to Kane. She places the food in front of him. "Your breakfast, sir."

He's so absorbed into whatever he's looking at he doesn't even hear her.

Inhaling a breath through my nose, I make my way to the breakfast nook and take a seat across from him. We don't have to be friends, but we can at least eat at the same table like two civil adults.

Only, Kane seems to disagree because his eyes dart to me from the second I sit down, and he jumps to his feet in a knee-jerk reaction.

"I'll eat later," he drawls, and poor Sue doesn't argue, clearing the table. "If my mom asks, tell her I'm in the gym."

Right.

Because the beach house has a *gym*.

I don't think I'll ever get used to this.

Kane's gone before I know it, and my blood sizzles with annoyance. *What the hell is wrong with him?* I should be the one avoiding him after everything he's done.

Does he realize that the more he acts like he can't stand to be near me, the more I want to follow him everywhere he goes *just* to spite him?

I've just told Sue to give me Kane's untouched breakfast instead of cooking a new one when Drea walks into the room, her left hand smacked against her forehead.

"Please tell me we have aspirin," she groans.

I decide to put her out of her misery before I start interrogating her about Scar. "I think I saw some in the

cupboard over there.”

She doesn't miss a beat, walking over and throwing the cupboard open. She's gotten herself a glass of water and downed the pills in no time. Sue asks her how she'd like her eggs, and Drea gags, the thought of food making her nauseous.

She's barely plopped down onto the bench on the other side of the breakfast nook before I pin her with a look that says, “I know what you did last night.”

She picks up on it right away, raising an eyebrow. “What?”

“Nothing.” I dig my fork into my eggs and take a small bite. “What time did you end up rolling in last night?”

“I don't know. A little after midnight?” She sounds like she's asking me.

“Really? Because Jamie posted an Instagram story around two, and you were in it.”

The story was of Vince and Scar trying to light fireworks in their mouths. I'm pretty sure I lost a few brain cells just watching that.

She shrugs. “It must've been 2:00 a.m., then.”

I raise an eyebrow.

“Okay, 4:00 a.m.,” she admits, a guilty smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

I'm starting to know Drea.

Probably because we've been spending a lot of time together lately. We get together in the home theater most days after work and watch our favorite reality TV show together. It's really helped us bond.

She even confirmed my suspicions about her and Scar. I was right; he *was* the guy in her story. She and Scar got down and dirty on the bus the last day of Kane's European tour.

Kane walking in right as they were getting to the best part kind of ruined the mood, to say the least.

Nothing else has happened between them after that.

Although... judging by what I saw this morning, that might not be the case anymore.

“What’s with the interrogation?” she asks.

“Just curious. What about Scar? Do you know when he came home... or if he came home with anybody?”

Drea avoids my gaze. “I wouldn’t know.”

I can’t conceal my grin. “I see.”

She can barely hide her own smile. “Don’t even start.”

“What? I’m just asking.”

“You’re one to talk, *Miss Kane Wilder held my hair while I was throwing up.*”

I grab a grape off my plate and throw it at her.

That’s what I get for telling her about my history with Kane. She confided in me about Scar, and I figured the least I could do was tell her about the embarrassing crush I used to have on him. I might’ve also told her that I threw up all over his shoes.

It took her a *while* to manage to stop laughing, but once she did, she told me she’s never known Kane to be the caring type. “But then again, he’s been doing all sorts of things he’s never done before when it comes to you,” she added.

It sounds good on paper, and I might even feel special if it weren’t for the fact that I know him coming to my rescue probably had nothing to do with me.

He told me my brother would’ve wanted him to keep an eye on me, which is just another way of saying that he feels guilty for losing touch with Gray and treating him like a stranger for years before he died.

My best guess is he didn’t help me because he cares. He helped me because he knows *my brother* would’ve cared, and he thought the good deed would help ease his conscience.

My cheeks flare. “Nice try changing the subject. I’m not the one we’re talking about here.”

She gives me a smile that says two can play at this game. “I’m just saying, that was awfully nice of him. Does he do that often? Do nice things for you? Like in a *horizontal position*, maybe?”

I stick my hands up. “Okay. Message received. No more questions.”

We leave it at that, discussing *everything* but the guys as I finish my meal. It isn’t until Drea checks her phone and color drains from her face that I know my intuition was right.

I thought something might be wrong when I saw the look on Kane’s face earlier. He was staring at his phone, too.

“No, no, no. *Fuck.*” Drea scrolls through what seems to be an article.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, but she’s already out the door.

I hear her say, “I need to find Kane,” before booking it up the stairs.

Curiosity overtakes me, and I pull my phone out of my pocket. I type Kane’s name into the search engine, and the first headline that pops up reads:

Kane Wilder’s girlfriend Tate Zimmer lets us in on their tumultuous relationship.

I read the title a few times.

Tate Zimmer.

I’ve heard that name before.

No, I’ve *read* that name before.

In the countless articles speculating about why Kane lost it that night at the club.

She’s an Instagram model. Redhead, tall, slim. The girl is known for her bikini pics and owning a makeup brand. She’s not nearly as big as Kane, though. I’d say she has around two million followers, a far cry from Kane’s two hundred and eighty-seven million dedicated fans.

She and Kane were rumored to be dating after they were spotted together in New York two months ago. Although, as far as I can tell, it was mostly speculation.

I couldn't find a single picture of them kissing. One of the articles said she and Kane had broken up just minutes before Kane attacked Josh, and he lashed out at the first person he saw.

I don't believe that for a second, but it doesn't matter what I think. All that matters is whether or not the *world* believes it.

I tap the link, my eyes skimming over the article.

Let's see what this Tate girl has been saying.

My jaw drops when I reach the third paragraph.

Oh, this is bad.



I SPEND THE REST OF MY DAY OFF HOLED UP IN THE SUNROOM, working away at what might just be the darkest painting I've ever done.

It's a little after midnight when I realize that I haven't had anything to eat since breakfast, so engrossed in my painting that I didn't notice the hunger pangs gnawing at my stomach.

It's a good thing Mom was having dinner at the club, or she would've dragged me downstairs by my hair and forced-fed me whatever meal Sue whipped up for dinner.

I almost wish she would've.

My body definitely didn't appreciate being ignored because it skipped the growling stomach and jumped straight to the hunger headache and shaky hands.

I take a step back for a broader shot of the raging storm on my canvas.

Thick clouds are rolling in above an empty field at nighttime and a flash of lighting is striking a tree that's shaped

like a heart right down the middle.

I didn't plan on creating something this depressing, but there was a sale on dark colors at the nearest store, and I wasn't trying to max out my credit card, so I grabbed whatever I could afford and headed home.

I set up my easel near the grand piano in the center of the sunroom and, after looking for a tall enough seat, grabbed a stool from the upstairs bar.

I've been at this for over eleven hours, and while I do like where the painting's heading, I can't shake the feeling that it's missing something.

In all fairness, that's how I've felt ever since I started painting again. I'm never satisfied with my work. Probably because, deep down, I think my skills should be further along by now.

I could've been good.

With practice, time, and effort, I might've even had a shot at this. I might've been able to actually sell my paintings and make a reasonable living from them.

Now, I know being a full-time artist is not the most realistic goal, but I like to think I would've beat the odds if I hadn't stopped painting.

Maybe *then* I would be doing what I love now instead of trying to major in communications. Maybe I would've had the guts to make it a double major and study art as well.

Maybe.

The hunger tremors in my hands spread to my arms, and I figure I should call it a night.

I begin gathering my brushes to wash them.

"Anyone ever tell you the human body needs food to survive?" His voice makes my pulse accelerate.

I whisk my head back and see Kane leaning against the doorway, one of his arms propped up against the frame. His

all-black outfit, intimidating presence, and the cunning smirk on his lips send confusing signals to my brain.

He's talking to me again?

Because this morning at breakfast, he couldn't have been more eager to get me out of his sight.

I'm also surprised he noticed that I didn't eat. I figured he'd be too busy trying to clean up his PR disaster to pay attention to what anyone else is doing.

"I wasn't hungry," I say flatly.

Because my stomach's timing is the *worst*, it makes an extra-loud growling sound the next second.

He raises a brow at me.

I think it best to specify, "I am *now*."

Kane gives a nod, pushing off the doorway and venturing into the sunroom. He stops three steps in, taking in his surroundings as though he's never been here before.

"Shit," he breathes, memories swirling around his demon-ridden eyes. "I haven't been in this room since..."

We exchange a look packed with shared trauma.

The last time we were in this room was the day I walked in on his dad beating the shit out of him.

It was the day I wished Mr. Wilder would disappear from Kane's life.

And then, he *did*.

I turn away from Kane, continuing to gather my things. I don't know what's gotten into him or why he's acting decent all of a sudden, but I'm too exhausted to care.

"What are you working on?" His breath slides along the side of my neck, and I jump, flicking my head to see him standing way too close to me, looking at the painting over my shoulder.

The only light in the room originates from the night sky, the stars' glow invading the space through the windows

covering the walls.

The moonlight hits the left side of Kane's face, gliding along the curve of his jaw and casting an aura on his godlike features.

My throat dries at his proximity, and I have to force myself to stare ahead before he notices me ogling him.

"That's... depressing," he comments on my work.

I gesture to the tubes of paint next to my plastic palette. "I didn't have much of a choice. I could only get dark shades."

My comment piques his curiosity. "Why?"

"Not everyone's loaded, remember?" Venom drips from my voice, and I try to lessen the blow by adding, "They were on sale. I grabbed what I could."

Sometimes I wonder if he can even recall what it's like to be broke. The only time Kane didn't live a luxurious lifestyle was during the first few months following his father's death.

Back when his mom couldn't afford to get him a phone and he'd lost a bunch of weight from skipping two meals a day.

Kane nods, distancing himself from me and dropping onto the bench in front of the piano.

My lungs fill with relief, the tension in my shoulders easing the second he walks away.

He starts tinkering on the piano with one hand. "Is that why you stopped painting? Because of money?"

I raise a brow. "Who says that I stopped?"

He looks up, staring right at me. "I don't know, maybe the fact that you're in school, majoring in communications, instead of a famous artist selling your paintings for a fuck ton of money?"

How does he even know what I'm majoring in?

I snort. "Like that would've ever happened."

The frown on his face tells me he disagrees, but he digs his teeth into his bottom lip as if to stop himself from arguing. “Did you even try to put your work out there?”

Shame taints my cheeks. “I was going to. My junior year of high school. I even bought a domain, but... let’s just say it wasn’t the right time.”

He nods, showing more understanding than I thought he would. “What? Did life just get in the way?”

I wish I could say none of the above, but it’s a little bit of everything. “Gray got murdered, for one.”

The reminder seems to cut him to the bone, a shadow descending over his beautiful face.

“By the time Mom and I managed to come up for air, it was time to send out college applications. I had to start thinking about the future and getting a real job.”

“And you don’t think painting could be a real job?”

“I used to,” I say, my voice just above a whisper. “But I wasn’t being realistic. I’m fine with it just being a hobby.”

“Why?” he says bluntly.

I glance at him. “Why what?”

“Why are you fine with it? If you want to paint, just fucking do it. What’s stopping you?”

I almost laugh. “And what? Starve? Live on the street? Maybe I could live in a dumpster. Looks comfy.”

I don’t think he’s aware of how rare what happened to him is. He became a worldwide sensation overnight. One video is all it took for his wildest dreams to come true. Not everyone’s this lucky, and certainly not everyone’s as fearless as he is.

My cynical remark doesn’t faze him in the slightest. “Play a game with me.”

His request catches me off guard. “What kind of game?”

He props his leg up on the piano bench, lacing his tattooed arm around his knee, the vicious smirk on his lips facing me

with a challenge I'm too stubborn to turn down. "The Fuck-Being-An-Adult game."

My lips curl into a grin.

I drop onto the stool next to my canvas. "What are the rules?"

He shrugs. "Easy. You pretend anything's possible. Forget about bills and having to pay for shit. Forget about doing the grown-up thing. I want you to imagine you're free to do whatever you want."

"Okay. And what if I told you I'd be doing exactly the same thing as I am right now?"

I feel his smirk deep in my stomach. "Then I'd call you a fucking liar."

He'd be right.

"Fine," I cave, pondering my answer. "If I were free to do anything... I'd pack up my dorm." I look at my canvas from the corner of my eye. "I'd get into my car, drive to a gorgeous cabin in the middle of nowhere, and paint until my hands fell off."

A victorious smile flashes across his face. "That's my girl."

His girl?

Shut up, Hadley. You know that's not what he meant.

"Oh, and I'd get a dog. And a horse named Jolene. Can I get a horse?"

He laughs, the deep, familiar sound comforting. "Fuck yeah. It's your dream life. You can get anything you want."

I join in, laughing at his ridiculous game. Our laughter fades out around the same time, and the silence that ensues gives way to a more serious atmosphere.

Reality comes trickling in, but I'm not ready to face it just yet. I'm about to ask him about his dream life when a low rasp cuts through the air. "Hey, um... I'm sorry about Gray. I never got to tell you in person."

I want to scream, “*Whose fault is that?*” but I stop myself.

If he had really wanted to, he could’ve reached out. He also could’ve, I don’t know, *not* shown up to Gray’s funeral drunk off his face.

“It’s not your fault,” I say.

It’s no one’s fault, except for the masked scumbag who killed him.

“Although, the disappearing act before that? Kind of your fault.” I try to pass it off as a joke, but he doesn’t laugh.

He looks dead inside, playing a melody I don’t recognize on the piano, and it feels like a rope is tied around my waist, jerking me closer with each note. I can’t fight it, cutting across the room until I’m standing next to him.

He doesn’t look up, his fingers roughly pressing the keys.

“Are you okay?” My mouth expresses concern my brain doesn’t approve of.

I shouldn’t give a flying shit if he’s okay.

So what if his career’s going up in flames?

He still doesn’t look up. “Fine.”

“Are you? Because after the day you’ve had, I wouldn’t blame you if you weren’t.”

Goddamn it, Hadley. Why are you so invested in his well-being?

“You heard, huh?”

I sit next to him on the piano bench, earning myself some eye contact. He looks surprised that I sat down but doesn’t question it.

“That I did. Your girlfriend’s got quite the imagination.”

He barely lets me finish before saying, “She is *not* my fucking girlfriend.”

That’s when it hits him.

He looks up, staring at me in shock. “Wait... you don’t believe her?”

“Not even a little.”

A bitter scoff rips from his throat. “Well, that makes you the only one.”

I’m not going to lie, things aren’t looking good for Kane. This Tate girl has been going around giving interviews to everyone and their mothers, talking about how Kane once put his hands on her.

How his extreme jealousy and possessiveness did their relationship in.

She basically implied that Kane lashed out at Joshua because they’d gotten into a fight a few minutes prior, and he couldn’t accept that she wanted to break up.

She painted him as an abusive boyfriend and an absolute dick overall. If dragging someone’s name through the mud was a career, Tate Zimmer would be employee of the fucking month.

The media ate that shit up, creating scandalous headlines full of clickbait to make Kane look like an unredeemable monster.

I’ve known this guy since I was in diapers. He’s not perfect, but he wouldn’t just go around attacking people because he had a fight with his girlfriend.

And I’m pretty sure he’d rather eat a jar of toenails than lay a hand on a woman. He had to watch his mom get verbally abused by his father for years, and that’s assuming the bastard didn’t also assault her physically.

Fifteen-year-old Kane once threw himself at a grown man, knowing he was going to get his ass handed to him, all because he wanted to protect his mom.

I believe he would die for Evie, no questions asked. No way in hell is he capable of doing what this girl is claiming he did.

“Let me guess. Crazy ex-girlfriend gives exclusive for her five minutes of fame?”

A low curse leaves his lips. “She wishes.”

I wait for him to explain.

He cringes as though he hates the story he’s about to share. “Tate and I fucked. *Once*. We were at the same movie premiere in New York. I got shit-faced at the after-party, and the paparazzi caught us getting into a car together. They followed us all the way back to my hotel and parked their asses outside until she came out the next day, wearing the same clothes. From there, people lost their fucking minds.

“Josh was adamant that I keep my dating life out of the media. He said my fans wanted me single, and I was free to do whatever the fuck I wanted behind closed doors, as long as the world thought I was available. He seemed to think it would affect album sales or some shit. I managed not to be seen with women for the first four years of my career. Except for that one time.”

Of course, one time was all it took.

“Thing is, when the news came out, album and ticket sales didn’t plummet like he thought they would. They fucking exploded. The dating rumors earned us so much attention that Tate gained a million followers overnight, and I gained three times that.”

“I bet Tate liked that very much.”

“She fucking loved it. The media kept reaching out, asking to speak with her, and her makeup brand started selling out. That’s when she turned into a next-level clinger. She started entertaining the nonsense, playing the part so that she’d get more brand deals. It was a fucking nightmare not being able to say anything, but Josh insisted that it was great exposure and that instead of denying it right off the bat, I should let people run with it for a while.

“I told her when she showed up to Scar’s birthday to leave me alone. I’d had enough of lying to my fans, and she told me I was making the biggest mistake of my life before storming

off. At least, I *thought* she left. We found out through a few of the guests that she's the one who recorded and posted the video of me punching Josh."

Holy shit.

Tate posted the video.

"We confronted her about it, but she said we didn't have concrete evidence. I was hoping she'd back the fuck off after the video went viral because of the bad publicity, but of course, she found a way to make herself look like the victim."

Man, I almost feel bad for him.

Sleep with a girl *once* and you just might lose everything.

"Drea wants to put out a statement saying that we were never dating at all. Best-case scenario, because I never confirmed it myself, people will turn on Tate."

"And the worst-case scenario?" Knowing how harsh the internet can be, the first one isn't likely to happen.

"Worst-case scenario, they accuse me of trying to cover my own ass and lying because why would I wait this long to come out and say it?"

Damn.

The timing *is* pretty suspicious. How convenient that he would tell the world they never dated right as shit is hitting the fan.

The saddest part is he had no control over it. His management *wanted* everyone to think he was dating some model and practically forbade him from coming clean.

He throws his head back with a low, irritated growl. "Jesus Christ. Sometimes I just want to say *fuck it* and run."

"I get it, but you can't give up on your dreams."

He snorts. "Says the girl who gave up on her own dreams."

My lips part.

That came out of nowhere.

He seems to agree because he stiffens. “Fuck, I’m sorry... I didn’t mean—”

“No, you’re right. I *did* give up.”

“Because your brother died. Not because you wanted to. I shouldn’t have... That was a fucked-up thing to say.”

“Still. I’m in no position to tell you what to do.”

There’s a beat of silence.

“Can I ask you a question?” The words roll off my tongue so quickly I couldn’t stop them if I tried.

For some reason, we’re acting like friends right now.

Or at the very least, we’re being *friendly*. I fully intend to go back to hating him tomorrow, so I might as well find out all I can tonight.

He gives a nod. “Shoot.”

“Why’d you really go off on Josh?”

His features twist with uncertainty, the muscles in his jaw twitching as he thinks his answer through.

“It’s...” He pauses for long seconds. “...*complicated*.”

Then he laughs.

I’m taken aback until I realize he didn’t laugh because he thinks it’s funny.

It’s a self-deprecating laugh, full of guilt, hatred, and shame. “Want to know the worst part? I don’t regret it. Not for a fucking second. I’m glad the motherfucker’s never going to walk again. And I’m glad I got to be the one to stop him from...” He halts himself before he can say too much.

“From what?” I press.

“Doesn’t matter. Out of all the things that could’ve ended my career, I’m glad it was this one. That way, at least, it was worth it.”

I shouldn’t encourage him. What he’s saying is awful, but I can’t help thinking that whatever this Josh guy did, it had to be twice as bad.

“Are you ever going to tell your fans what he did? I’m sure if they knew, they’d be on your side.”

Disbelief fills his green eyes. “That’s it?”

“What do you mean?”

He scoffs. “You’re just going to assume I had a good reason? Just like that? You don’t even know what he did.”

I shrug. “I don’t need to.”

I’m guessing I’m one of the first people to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“I might’ve just lashed out for nothing, you ever think about that?”

I shake my head. “You didn’t. I know you didn’t.”

He’s silent for a while.

“*Fuck me*. Five years later and you still have faith in me.”

It *is* laughable.

I should demand his side of the story, but I feel like I know him. Even if he didn’t care, even if he left Gray and me behind for years, I know his heart. Regardless of the fact that he didn’t want *mine*.

“You’re too fucking nice to me, Hads.”

I chuckle. “Do you want me to be mean? ’Cause I can be mean.”

“Hate to break it to you, Queen, but you don’t have a cruel bone in your body.”

I hate that he’s right.

He hurt me, but I still wish him well.

I don’t want him in my life, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want him to be happy either. It was easy to paint him as a monster when all I saw was this reckless famous guy on the other side of a screen, but now that he’s here? In front of me?

I realize he’s still a person.

“You never told me what you really want?” I issue a question I’m scared I might regret.

My breath stalls when his gaze locks onto my mouth.

He leans in just a tad. “Like in general or... right now?”

I was talking about *his dream life*, asking him the same thing he asked me, but it’s like he punched me in the throat with a single look, and I suddenly can’t form a sentence.

It makes no sense.

We’re not friends.

And we’re definitely not on good terms.

So why, oh *why*, do my thighs clench together when he inches forward, invading my space like it’s the easiest thing in the world, and says, “Because I know exactly what I want right now.”

Mayday, Mayday.

I feel like I should have a panic button or something.

He continues to lean in, looking at me like he’s daring me to stop him.

Our lips are about to touch.

Just a few more inches...

That’s when the loudest stomach growl I’ve ever heard cuts through the air.

I swear it sounded like my body was calling me names, spewing out threats to get me to feed it.

The noise snaps me right out of whatever trance was holding me prisoner.

What the *hell* just happened?

Was Kane seriously going to *kiss* me?

More importantly, was I going to *let him*?

I barely have a chance to process it before Kane pushes off the bench, reaching for my wrist and pulling me to my feet without an explanation.

“W-Where are we going?” I stammer as he drags me out of the sunroom.

“To put some food in you.”



HADLEY

I wouldn't say that I'm a great cook.

By no means am I a pro in the kitchen. I know the basics, sure, but *any* recipe that requires more than thirty minutes of cooking is a no-go for me.

I thought my skills needed work, but it turns out, compared to Kane? I could open a fucking *restaurant*.

The guy only knows how to cook two things: a grilled cheese and an omelet.

That's it.

After he dragged me down to the kitchen, he went straight for the fridge. Too bad Scar already munched his way through the leftovers Sue put in there.

I started to feel light-headed, and it quickly became clear that if I wanted to eat, I would have to cook something.

Problem is, Kane is way too stubborn to allow *that* to happen, and he's been telling me to sit down for ten minutes, searching the internet for a recipe easy enough to whip up in the middle of the night.

I wasn't going to say anything, but I'm this close to entering "hangry" territory, and he seems completely overwhelmed by the recipes on his screen.

"It doesn't have to be a gourmet meal."

"Yes, it does." He squints at his phone, zooming in on the ingredients for whatever fancy meal he wants to make me.

I catch myself smiling at how determined he is.

"Why don't you just make me an omelet?"

He hesitates for a bit but eventually comes to his senses. "I'd argue, but I don't have a fucking clue how to make—" He checks his phone once more. "*—scallops on buttery parsnips with caviar.*"

A laugh leaves my mouth. "Good. Now, *chop, chop* before I eat my hand."

The shadow of a smile spreads across his face as he makes his way to the fridge to grab what he needs.

The time on the stove reads 12:49, and I should be sleeping like the dead by now. I work at eight in the morning, and the last thing I need is Ania telling me to *look alive* while she's lecturing me on all the things I'm doing wrong.

Not that my lack of sleep will make much of a difference. She'd find something to complain about even if I were the most rested woman on Earth.

It doesn't help that I'm wide-awake and more stimulated than ever. Not even an hour ago, I thought I was going to fall asleep if I closed my eyes for too long.

Then Kane showed up, and my energy levels rose like I'd just downed a thousand shots of espresso.

I sit on the counter behind me, watching Kane grab a pan out of the kitchen island's drawer. "So, tell me, *Chef Wilder*, how come the only things you know how to cook are grilled cheeses and eggs?"

He had it right earlier.

I'm being *way* too nice to him.

Maybe because he's acting like the guy I used to know right now. Or maybe because I needed a night off from hating him. That shit is exhausting, and work is draining me enough as it is.

I'll just go back to hating his guts tomorrow.

"It's what the guys and I would make on the bus after a show," he says, probably referring to his touring band, and cracks two eggs into a mixing bowl. "You want cheese in it?"

"Sure."

I scan the food he's gathered on the counter. Tomatoes, spinach, pre-shredded cheese, and mushrooms. I figured he'd give it to me plain, but I appreciate that he's making an effort to make it good.

I watch as he gets to work, analyzing the ink on his tanned forearm. It's a continuation of the bleeding rose tattoo on his shoulder, and fuck, there's something... strangely attractive... about the way the muscles in his arms flex as he whisks the egg with a fork.

Did I just think that?

I get that I've been going through a dry spell, but I did not just get turned on by a guy whisking eggs.

What the fuck, Hadley?

I tear my eyes away, the urge to run for the hills building with each passing second. I don't like what being around this guy does to me.

I feel like little Hadley all over again, fantasizing about the one guy she shouldn't want, and I will not allow myself to get back into that headspace.

I need to get away from him.

"Hey, on second thought, I'm really not that hungry." I try to slide off the countertop, but his arm flies out to stop me.

He doesn't look at me, though, keeping his eyes glued to the task at hand as he holds out his arm in front of me to block

me in. “You’re fucking shaking, Hadley. You’re not leaving until you eat.”

I glance down at my fingers, the familiar tremor in my hands unmissable. This crap happens every time my blood glucose drops too low.

Doesn’t stop me from planning my escape. “I’m okay, really. I’ll just grab a granola bar or something.”

Every nerve in my body springs to life when his large hand wraps around my knee. I zero in on his rings, swallowing hard when his fingers dig into my flesh, holding me in place.

“Not a chance.” His irritated growl sets my skin on fire.

Need. To. Leave.

Now.

“But I—”

His head snaps up, and he levels his gaze with mine. “I practically forced water down your throat when you were drunk. Do you really want to fight me on this?”

I read him loud and clear. I’m not getting out of this room until I’ve eaten that entire omelet and he’s watched me do it.

And if I won’t do it, he’ll *make* me.

How can he be so sweet one second and so damn demanding the next?

I never know which version of him I’m going to get.

The nice, friendly Kane or the Kane who looks at me like he wants to devour me from the inside out and would gladly take me over his knee if I were to *dare* disagree with him.

I curse myself for wishing he’d mark my thigh with his fingertips, but not as much as I hate how quickly he pulls his hand away.

I decide trying to leave again wouldn’t be a smart move and I have no choice but to wait for him to finish cooking.

The tension slips away as the minutes tick by, and relief washes over me. I can breathe properly again, and it’s *because*

I can breathe again that the smell of burnt food immediately tips me off.

“You need to flip it,” I tell him.

He doesn’t listen, shrugging off my advice. “I have it under control.”

“I’m serious! Flip it, or it’s going to burn.”

It isn’t long before I take matters into my own hands, leaping off the counter and pushing him out of the way with my hips so that I can take his place.

That he lets me do, but not without regaining his position in front of the stove. Standing a few steps behind me, he cranes his head to look over my shoulder. I swipe the spatula out of his hands and flip the omelet myself.

Just as I expected, the other side is burnt, but not so burnt that I won’t be able to eat it.

The dark chuckle fanning the nape of my neck tells me I just made a mistake. “Well, shit. I can’t even make an *omelet* right.”

My legs seem to weigh a thousand pounds all of a sudden, and I keep my eyes straight ahead of me, poking at the omelet with the spatula.

My pulse rises when Kane moves forward, the feel of his chest against my back making me question *everything*. I can feel his body heat envelop me from behind, and I try to play it off like I didn’t even notice.

His breath crashes along my neck once more, and I stiffen up. *Now, you listen up, you good-for-nothing body. Don’t you dare shiver, or I’ll—*

Stupid idiot.

It’s his delicious smell, his presence, the feel of him against me. The mix is too much to handle, and my arms break into goose bumps, my upper body shaking... and it’s not because of hunger.

It's getting harder to pretend nothing's happening, and when he reaches out to push my red hair off my shoulder, I wonder if I should call him out on it.

I open my mouth, but the only thing that comes out is a sharp gust of air as he presses himself into me.

I feel something.

Something *hard*.

And I'm officially off my rockers because I don't recoil or push him away, heat settling into the lower part of my stomach.

He doesn't say anything, but his hand curls around my hip and applies pressure, pushing me against him so that our bodies are molded together.

I expect him to release my waist, but he doesn't. His grip is almost painful, but I don't want him to let go.

And when his cold hands slide under the hem of my shirt, little zaps of electricity shoot through my spine.

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

Do something.

Because it's on a mission to ruin me, my body complies. But it does the opposite of what I had in mind. Like a fucking monster took hold of my senses, I start to rub my ass against him.

The pressure is subtle but definitely noticeable because a sharp breath hisses between his teeth.

His fingers begin slithering up the bottom of my stomach, and while his hands are warmer than before, they're still ice-cold and torturous as they draw little circles on my skin.

I continue to rock against him, owning it, and the blaring voices in my head call me every name in the book.

He answers by shifting his hips, pushing into me, and I gasp, his cock driving forward until I feel it swell against my

ass.

I almost think I'm going to realize my mind concocted the whole thing and none of this is real until he puts his mouth to my ear.

"Hads..." He sounds like he's mad at me, his voice thick with anger and repressed urges. His mouth grazes my neck, ever so slowly and delicately.

That's when I do the one thing I shouldn't.

I angle my head back to look at him over my shoulder, our gazes locking with so much force it's paralyzing. Kane's eyes immediately dart to my mouth, and I swear something unnatural is at play here. I don't know how else to explain how quickly we both lean in.

Kane's hand jumps to the back of my head, his fingers sliding into my hair and gripping my scalp so that he can tilt my chin back. He stares at my face for long seconds, the low grunt he expels fanning my lips.

He makes a play for my mouth, inching forward.

Then the fire alarm goes off.

You'd think a powerful entity just yanked us apart.

"Fuck," Kane blurts at the smoking omelet on the stove.

It's completely ruined, both sides blackened and carbonized.

The alarm kicks me into action, and I grab the drying towel by the sink. I hop onto a kitchen chair and wave the towel in front of the fire detector before it wakes up the whole house.

There's no way Mom, Evie, Sue, Scar, and Drea don't hear that. And it shouldn't be too long before they roll out of bed to make sure the house isn't burning down.

Meanwhile, Kane takes the pan to the trash, dumping the charred omelet into it before twisting the water tap to soak the pan.

A sigh of relief escapes me when the alarm stops, but the one in my head isn't going away anytime soon.

I almost kissed Kane.

Not once, but twice in the same night.

His eyes find me across the room, and we exchange a look that can only mean one thing.

What. Just. Happened.

"I, um... I'll just make myself some toast or something," I choke out.

He seems to pick up on my panic because he clenches his jaw, barely saying, "That's probably a good idea."

More silence.

I think I see his Adam's apple bob before he gives me a final glance. "Anyway, good night."

"You, too" is the last thing I say before he walks out.



I WISH I COULD SAY EVERYTHING WENT BACK TO NORMAL after the burnt omelet incident.

Unfortunately for me, our almost kiss opened up a whole new can of worms. I've been on this hamster wheel of thinking about Kane, getting all hot and bothered and hating myself for it ever since.

That night opened my eyes to the sizzling attraction I *still* feel for him.

I want him.

Just physically, but still.

And I take it from the way his cock strained against his pants that he wants me, too. Even if just for one night. I've done a pretty good job at pretending like what happened didn't faze me, and Kane?

Kane did what he always does.

He went back to avoiding me.

Five days have gone by, and believe it or not, I've found Ania's critiques to be a nice little distraction from reality. I welcome the long shifts now. I've even agreed to fill in for Jamie, who has a dentist appointment next weekend. Anything to stay out of the house.

The first floor is empty when I unlock the front door at around 8:00 p.m. I can hear Mom and Evie laughing uncontrollably in the backyard.

They've been having the time of their lives reconnecting, going to the country club and going on all sorts of adventures—they're already planning a trip to Virginia to visit a bunch of vineyards next summer.

I may not be a fan of sharing a house with Kane, but I'm happy for my mom. I can take a couple months sleeping down the hall from the boy who broke my heart if it means Mom gets her best friend back.

I take the stairs two at a time on the way to my bedroom. I was hoping to do a little painting before bed. I haven't finished the one of the storm.

As much as I hate to admit it, the way Kane's mouth felt grazing my neck isn't all I've taken away from that night. I've also been thinking about what he said.

About me giving up on my dreams.

After giving it a lot of consideration, I've decided to publish my website and give my dream a *real* try.

I've been sitting on the domain I bought for years, and I intend to get it up and running once I figure out how to complete the website design.

I pad down the hall toward the sunroom. I've pretty much claimed the room as my painting studio in the past two days. Although, I'd have no problem moving if Kane wanted to use the piano.

But that would require him playing music, and his mom let slip that he hasn't been writing as much since he got here—something that's highly unusual for Kane.

She's worried sick about it. The guy supposedly pops out at least four to five songs a week, but lately? He hasn't even wanted to touch his guitar. Or a piano, for that matter.

I get that he's supposed to be taking a break from the industry, but his mom never would've thought he'd want a break from music, too.

I turn the corner a few minutes later, push the door to the sunroom open, and flick the light on.

I gasp when I see the supplies.

There are paint tubes, canvases stacked against the wall, and brand-new sets of paintbrushes laid out on the table.

I could never afford so many supplies.

Not even in my wildest dreams.

I approach the table and notice there's a piece of paper on it.

I immediately know who's behind this.

Because I've said those exact words before.

And I've said them to Kane...

It's only impossible if you don't try.



HADLEY

I knew my new job would have its downsides.

Downsides like dealing with angry customers, putting up with Ania's mood swings, and watching my coworkers get prioritized just because they've been working there longer.

What I didn't expect was my boss putting me on deliveries during one of the *busiest* weeks of the summer.

Today marks the start of Hillford's annual sailing races. Around five hundred people are expected to visit from out of state, which usually earns Sandy's a massive influx of customers.

The problem? Our delivery guy is down with the flu, which means, as the new girl, it's on me to pick up the slack and miss out on some *great* tips.

I wasn't in a position to complain since all waitresses have filled in at least once, but I haven't been able to stop thinking about the small fortune Jamie and Ania are going to be taking home when this is over.

I'm on my fifth delivery of the hour when I make it back to the restaurant. Sure enough, we were hit with a bunch more

orders while I was gone, and I'm back in the company car in a flash.

I take the time to check the addresses on the takeout bags and boxes in my passenger seat before igniting the engine. The address on the pizza at the bottom of the pile makes my stomach sink like a rock.

This order is going to the beach house.

And it's under Scar's name.

He got the extra-large Italian Delight, one of our most popular pizzas, but without the anchovies. That simple detail tells me he's not just ordering for himself.

Kane *hates* anchovies.

Coincidence? I think the hell not.

I'm guessing the order is under Scar's name because Kane couldn't use his own. Can't risk people knowing he's in town over *pizza*.

Shit, I hope Scar is the one who opens the door.

I haven't seen Kane since I walked into the sunroom and saw he'd raided the art store and gotten me more supplies than I could ever need. I also haven't spoken to him since we got *way* too close in the kitchen.

I wasn't sure what to say when Mom and Drea asked about the fire alarm going off at breakfast the next day. It wasn't even on for a full minute, leaving everyone in the house to wonder if they'd imagined it.

Kane was in the gym that morning, so it was up to me to make up a story. I wound up telling them that I was starving *and* exhausted, which resulted in me nodding off mid-cooking and almost burning the house down.

I kick the gear into reverse and pull out of Sandy's parking lot. I got this job precisely to avoid Kane.

Pretty ironic that *my job* is forcing me to see him now.



MY HEART IN MY THROAT, I JOG UP THE STAIRS LEADING TO the beach house. I've been driving around Hillford for over an hour, fulfilling every order before this one.

Fred texted my phone to tell me Scar had called the restaurant to ask what was taking so long, and while I'm sure my boss told him we were completely swamped, that didn't stop him from telling me to *step on it*.

I ring the doorbell and wait.

Three minutes go by with no answer.

Should I just go in? Something tells me I might be waiting a while if I don't.

I know my mom and Evie are having dinner with Vince's parents tonight, Drea has back-to-back meetings with "industry people"—at least, I think that's who she's meeting with; she didn't specify—and the boys are most likely in their man cave.

Fuck it, I'm going in.

It'll give me a chance to pee. We're definitely going to have ten more to-go orders by the time I get back to the restaurant, and my tiny bladder won't make it another hour and a half.

I enter the combination on the electronic keypad and push the door open. I amble to the kitchen and scan the common areas.

Not a soul in sight.

I drop the pizza onto the countertop and race to the downstairs bathroom. I walk out shortly after, needing to find Scar so he can pay for his food.

"Nice uniform." A deep voice startles me.

I swivel to find Kane leaning against the kitchen counter with wet hair, no shirt, and his well-defined arms folded over his chest.

He's wearing a bathing suit, and he's dripping wet, water running down his tattooed body. I take it he and Scar were in the pool, and that's why they didn't hear the doorbell.

A devilish grin curls the corners of his mouth when we make eye contact.

There's no way he meant that, but I still go with it, cracking a small smile. "I know, right? It looks like a flamingo puked all over me."

He laughs and pushes off the counter, cutting across the room to meet me. "How much do I owe you?"

He stops a hair too close to me, not giving a flying shit about the puddle gathering at his feet.

"Hold on." I grab the pizza off the counter and double-check the price before telling him the total.

He nods, grabbing his wallet off the counter, and comes back with a hundred-dollar bill before handing it to me.

"I'm all out of change. Would you mind using a card? We can do Apple Pay or—"

"That's your tip."

I blink at him.

"That's like a seventy-dollar tip."

He shrugs. "And?"

I should just say yes, take his money to make up for all the tips I'm missing out on, but the thought of it doesn't sit right with me.

"I'm good. I owe you enough as it is."

He raises a brow. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Is he serious?

"The art supplies?" I remind him. "It'll take me weeks to pay you back for everything you bought."

Realization flashes in his eyes. “I don’t want you to pay me back. It was a gift.”

I’m about to argue when he invades my space, dipping his hand into my front jeans pocket and pushing the hundred-dollar bill inside, diffusing warmth through my entire body.

I’m wasting my time, aren’t I?

He’s not going to let me leave without that tip.

But that doesn’t mean I’m going to accept those supplies.

“I don’t need your pity gifts,” I spit.

He looks at me like I’m bonkers. “Are you fucking with me? You’re *actually* mad right now?”

“I’m not mad, I’m just... I hate owing people.”

He inches forward. “You don’t owe me shit. Consider it my contribution to starting your business.”

“I never *asked* you to contribute,” I fire back.

“So? I want to do it. I was even thinking of giving you a shout-out on social media once your store goes live. You know, just to get the ball rolling.”

“Absolutely not!” I protest.

“Why not? There’s nothing wrong with letting a friend help you out.”

A friend?

Did he just call himself my *friend*?

A bitter laugh escapes me. “It seems we have some wires crossed here, so let me clear things up.” I fill the space between us, craning my neck to get a good look at him. “I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression that night in the sunroom, but you and I? We’re not friends. We *were* friends. But then you left and made it clear you didn’t give two shits about me. You think you can just go around throwing money at me and I’ll forget that you went radio silent on me for *five* years?”

My outburst seems to irritate him, his jaw clenching as he nods. “Fine. We’re not friends.”

I expect our back-and-forth to stop there, but he shocks me by moving closer, crowding my space and positioning his mouth next to my ear. “But we’re *something*. Or did you already forget the sounds you were making when you were rubbing your ass all over my cock?”

His words siphon the air out of my lungs.

His breath tickles my earlobe, sharp and hot as it brushes against the side of my neck. “You can hate me, Hads. You can call me selfish and arrogant and every fucking name you can think of, but you don’t get to deny the way your body reacts to me. *No fucking way.*”

Oh.

My.

God.

“Y-You’re delusional” is all I manage to say.

“Some friendly advice—don’t lie to me. I promise you’re not going to like what I do to get the truth out of you.”

I open my mouth, my brain concocting a scathing response, but he steps back the next second, looping his wet arm around my waist and clutching my body to his.

His wet chest soaks the front of my uniform, but the freezing water isn’t enough to put out the tiny fires igniting on my skin.

“Nothing is ever going to happen between us, you got me?” I spit out defensively, and I’m relieved that my mouth is still operated by my brain. My body surely isn’t. If it were, I’d have pushed him away by now.

He lets out a low, raspy laugh, staring me dead in the eyes as he says, “Fuck, am I going to have the time of my life proving you wrong.”

Another gasp falls from my lips when he slowly drags the backs of his index and middle fingers up the side of my arm.

I'm not sure I like this version of him.

The one who knows what he wants.

Not so long ago, he was acting like getting anywhere near me would be the end of the world. But now? It's like whatever was holding him back went up in flames when we had that... *moment*... in the kitchen.

“What happened to the guy who runs out of the room to avoid me?”

His tongue peeks out to wet his bottom lip. “He got tired of running. Now he's ready to chase.”

Well, fuck.

“Dude, what the hell? Why didn't you tell me the pizza's —” Scar's voice trails off.

I push Kane off me almost violently, as though I'm hoping that the distance between us will erase the closeness we experienced seconds ago.

Too bad the wet spot on my uniform won't let me forget.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Scar says.

Kane doesn't even acknowledge him, still staring at me.

I smooth down my shirt nervously. “I have to get back to work.”

I spin to leave, speed walking to the door.

“Oh, and, Hads?” Kane's voice is like a thick root, emerging from the floorboards and wrapping around my legs.

I stop, glancing back at him.

“I'll send you the bill. You know, for your *pity gift*.”

All I can do is stare daggers at him.

I'm about to swing the door open when my phone goes off in my pocket. My first thought is that it must be Fred calling to tell me to get my ass back to the restaurant pronto.

But it's not.

The person calling me is *Cal*.

Hesitant, I press Answer and lead the phone to my ear.
“Cal?”

Cal’s voice erupts down the line. “Hey, Hadley. Hope I’m not catching you at work.”

Technically, he is, but I’m way too curious to tell him that.

“It’s okay. I have a minute to talk,” I lie.

“So, um... I had fun at Vince’s party. It was great hanging out with you, and I was wondering if maybe... you’d want to do it again. Just the two of us, this time?”

I just know Kane and Scar are hanging on to my every word, but I can’t move a muscle. Maybe because I want them to hear.

Especially *Kane*.

“Oh, um... like a date?”

I swear I can feel Kane’s gaze boring holes through the back of my head.

Cal doesn’t take my hesitation as a good sign. “Only if you want to. Or if you want, we can invite the others and—”

“No, no, I want to.”

Do I?

I don’t even know at this point.

It couldn’t hurt to put myself out there. Maggie’s been blowing up my phone, asking for updates, and according to the hottie on her Instagram stories, she kept up her end of the deal and is having a hot summer romance as we speak.

“Great. I was thinking maybe we could get dinner.”

“I’d love that. When?”

“How does tomorrow night sound?” he suggests.

“I have to work tomorrow, but I get off at seven. I’d need an hour to shower and get ready after. Is that okay?”

“Absolutely. I’ll pick you up at home whenever you’re ready.”

“Awesome,” I say, fighting the urge to turn around and catch a glimpse of Kane’s reaction.

Is he jealous?

Annoyed?

Indifferent?

I have no idea how I manage to resist looking at his face.

“It’s a date,” Cal jokes.

We exchange goodbyes a few minutes later.

Then I’m out the door.



THE NEXT DAY ROLLS AROUND IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE—might be because I’m still filling in for our delivery guy, and I haven’t had a second to breathe since my shift started.

Ania asked me to close the restaurant for her tonight, and not only did I have the courage to say no, but I actually had a valid reason this time.

I have a date, I told her. She wasn’t too happy about it, but she wound up getting Jamie to cover for her. I check myself in the bathroom mirror one last time before racing down the stairs. Cal should be here any second now.

I’m halfway to the first floor when my phone pings with not one but two messages.

To my surprise, the sender isn’t Cal.

It’s an unknown number.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

Cancel the date.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

I mean it.



HADLEY

I knew something was wrong from the moment we got to the fancy restaurant Cal picked out an hour ago...

And at the risk of sounding like a total cliché, it's got nothing to do with him.

It's all me.

I went from drooling all over him at Vince's party to seeing him in an entirely platonic way.

And it's not like I don't notice how good he looks. I *see* his loose curls, sharp jaw, and dimpled smile. I just don't feel any type of way about them anymore.

At first, I thought the stress of starting a new job and moving to a different town was the reason for my libido being all out of whack.

It's only been a few days since our shameless flirting in the pool. What could've possibly caused my feelings to change so fast?

My phone lit up just as our waitress was asking us if we wanted dessert, and the message on my screen knocked the wind out of me.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

Get the cheesecake. I heard it's killer.

I happened to be sipping on water when I saw the text, and I'm surprised I didn't choke it out.

My first instinct was to glance around the restaurant, half expecting to see a creep hiding in a bush with binoculars through the window.

That's when another text came through.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

You look so fucking good when you're playing detective.

The waitress brought my attention back to her by repeating herself, and I told her I wasn't feeling dessert. I scanned the restaurant again and typed a quick reply.

HADLEY

Whoever you are, stop texting me.

The next message came seconds later.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

You should've canceled the date when I told you to.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

This one's on you, Hads.

No one calls me Hads.

No one but *Kane*.

Fucker.

Why was he trying to ruin my date?

I ignored his messages and asked the waitress for the check.

I paid for my half before Cal could blink. He protested a little, but I didn't want him paying the whole thing. Especially considering that I don't see this going anywhere.

The stars are sparse by the time Cal drops me off at the beach house. I've been on edge since Kane's texts. Even Cal noticed, asking me if everything was okay.

Part of me was expecting to find Kane holed up in a car with tinted windows when we walked out of the restaurant.

Only, there was no trace of him.

It got me thinking that maybe he was never there to begin with.

What better way to ruin my date than to make me think I'm being watched?

For all I know, he was fucking with me and hoping my paranoia would push me to cut the evening short.

I spent most of the drive home crushing my body to the passenger-side door, putting as much distance between Cal and me as I could. The last thing I wanted was for him to try and take my hand or grab my thigh.

Cal's car comes to a slow stop in the driveway of the beach house, and we make eye contact.

I flash a small smile. "Thank you for tonight. It was nice catching up."

Cal returns my smile, kicking the gear into park. "Sure."

Do I let him down easy?

Just bolt out of the car and hope he won't ask me out again?

Cal's a smart guy, which is why I'm sure he's noticed that I'm not feeling it, but I'm afraid not saying anything might create ambiguity.

My courage is drained from my body when he zeroes in on my lips. “I’m really glad you came back for the summer.”

Please don’t go in for the kiss.

“Same. Anyway, it’s getting late. See you,” I blurt out before climbing out of his car.

I make a beeline for the front door, expecting him to drive off, but he doesn’t, following me instead. “I’ll walk you to the door.”

I give a small nod, speed walking to the porch.

Cal joins me the next second, doubt plastered all over his face. “Hey, um... is everything okay? You’re acting different.”

I blow out a sigh. “I know. I’m so sorry. Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t think this is going to work out.”

God, I feel like such an asshole.

Cal’s a good guy. A *great* guy, even. But I don’t want to lead him on and pretend like I’m not ridiculously drawn to Kane.

I’m not even sure what this stupid attraction means—and I have no intention of finding out—but it wouldn’t be fair to keep dating Cal when I know there’s no way he could make me feel half the things Kane does.

His features twist with disappointment and irritation. “Can I ask why?”

“I just... I’m not in the headspace to date right now.”

Lame answer, I know.

I couldn’t bring myself to tell him that there’s no spark between us. Let alone that I feel that spark for someone else, even though I’d rather die than give myself over to those feelings.

He nods, failing to hide the drop of sadness melting through his voice. “All right. Thanks for telling me.”

I cringe. “I’m so sorry. Are we good?”

He doesn't look me in the eyes as he says, "Yeah, we're good."

"You sure?"

My phone chimes before he can answer.

"Just a second," I whisper and pull my phone out of my pocket.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

Hate to interrupt, but we're going to have a serious fucking problem if you let him kiss you.

My throat dries at Kane's warning.

"Sorry about that... I guess I'll see you around, then."

"Yeah" is all he says.

We exchange good-nights and go our separate ways.

Well, that was awful.

I walk inside, and the silence pervading the air informs me that everyone's already in bed.

I debate on answering Kane's ominous message. Something tells me he'd love nothing more than to have me track him down and demand answers.

I decide not to indulge him and race up the stairs toward the second-floor bathroom.

I've been eyeing the massive jetted tub since I got here, and I can't think of a better way to release some of the tension that's been building in my shoulders and, *ahem*, other parts of my body.

I haven't had a second to myself, and if I'm going to be living in a mansion for the rest of the summer, you bet I'm going to enjoy everything it has to offer.

I walk in, locking the door behind me.

The tub is half full by the time I get inside, and I let out a gasp when the sizzling hot water envelops me.

Just the way I like it.

I start by washing myself, letting each and every one of my muscles unwind as I run my loofah up my arms.

Then, because my brain strictly refuses to let me have any form of relief, I start to think.

Sorry, I start to *overthink*.

I think about how quickly my plans changed.

How hard I'm finding my new job. How difficult it's been to take care of myself...

And I don't mean *emotionally*.

I'm barely aware of my hand sliding down my stomach. I didn't even have to think about it, my fingers falling to the sweet spot between my legs.

Am I really doing this?

The answer seems obvious when I start touching myself, the tip of my index grazing my clit as I sink deeper into the water.

Yes.

Yes, I am.

I dig my teeth into my bottom lip, throwing my head back as I rub myself in quick circles.

Until my fingers aren't enough.

The images that invade my mind when I grab the showerhead built into the bathtub and direct it between my legs somehow increase the sensation by a million.

In my head, the person touching me is *Kane*. In my head, he's in this tub with me, jerking me onto his lap and playing with my clit while his teeth nip at my neck. He spreads me apart, his waiting cock stiff and ready as he—

A moan cuts through the air, and one of my hands jumps to my mouth to lock it up tight. I've always known how to take care of myself, but I usually need a toy to help me get there.

Except... the thought of Kane's dirty mouth next to my ear, whispering unholy promises and dirty secrets, seems to be doing most of the work because pleasure swells in my stomach at an alarming pace.

I inch the showerhead closer to my pussy and hate myself for how fast my orgasm rips me apart.

Jesus Christ.

My hand never leaves my mouth, drowning out my moans as my eyes roll back, my knees quaking as I picture Kane lifting me up by my waist and working his cock inside me.

This is wrong.

So damn wrong.

But I come all the same.



IT WAS A ONETIME THING.

That's what I've been telling myself since I snuck down the hall into my bedroom a half hour ago.

Shame replaced my orgasm from the moment it drained from my body.

To the point where I wondered if I should take a shower to wash the remorse off my skin. I can't believe I touched myself while thinking of Kane. But mostly, I can't believe how hard I came while doing it.

My sudden lack of interest for any guy other than him should've tipped me off. I should've known he'd done a number on me.

My phone lights up on my nightstand before I can scold myself some more.

It's a message from the same unknown number. I add Kane's number into my contacts.

KANE

You going to see him again?

I don't allow myself to text him back, resting my phone on my bed.

Problem is, the fucker is persistent.

He double texts me right away.

KANE

Don't ignore me, baby. Hurts my feelings

HADLEY

Fuck off.

His answer comes immediately.

KANE

Come on, Hadley. I already know the answer. I just want to hear it from you.

HADLEY

Hear what?

KANE

That you're not going to see him again.

I have to force myself to put the phone down.

Stop answering him.

KANE

Why would you go out with a guy who can't satisfy you, anyway?

KANE

I know what you want, Hads. And it's not him.

All of my willpower goes flying out the window.

HADLEY

What's that supposed to mean?

KANE

It means I heard you playing with yourself in the bathroom like the dirty fucking liar that you are.

I think I'm going to flatline for a second there.

He heard me?

I wasn't being that loud, was I?

Unless... he was *trying* to listen.

KANE

I figured it could only mean one of two things.
Either Cal didn't finish the job.

He resumes typing, and I can't take my eyes off the three dots at the bottom of the screen.

KANE

Or he didn't even start it.

KANE

Which one is it?

I let out a bitter scoff.

HADLEY

You should know considering you've been stalking us all night.

KANE

I wasn't. I just wanted you to think that I was.

I knew it.

He wasn't even there. He was trying to mess with my head to make sure I didn't enjoy myself too much.

KANE

You should be thanking me. Gray's gone, so it's on me to make sure you don't go fucking some guy he wouldn't approve of.

Is he serious?

I can't believe he's *still* trying to make this about Gray when we both know his jealousy is caused by his oversized ego.

He's so full of himself he doesn't want the girl who always put him first to forget about him.

He'll ruin my life so that I don't kick him out of it. Not because he cares. But because he loves that *I did*.

Not to mention Gray always liked Cal. Therefore, his argument makes no sense.

HADLEY

Let me make myself clear. Who I fuck is NONE of your business.

He double texts me in a matter of seconds.

KANE

Now let me make myself clear.

KANE

If I have to spend the rest of the summer scaring off every miserable fuck who's dumb enough to go near you, then that's what I'll fucking do.

I type a message I know I'm going to regret.

HADLEY

Even you?

He doesn't answer for a while.

KANE

Especially me.

This guy is an enigma. Just a few hours ago, he was saying he was ready to chase me, and now he's acting like he won't even allow himself to get close to me.

This back-and-forth is driving me insane.

HADLEY

Why?

KANE

Because if I can't go after what I want, you can be damn sure no one else will.

I have no idea what happened after Scar walked in on us earlier, but his hot-and-cold behavior tells me he's fighting an inner battle.

There has to be a reason why he won't let himself act on the tension between us. We're obviously attracted to each other, but he makes it sound like he's not allowed to want me.

HADLEY

What are you so afraid of?

I see him start to type, but the moving dots vanish from my screen as quickly as they appeared.

I wait and I wait, but he doesn't answer, leaving me on Read.

Oh, hell no.

I rise off my bed in one go and throw on a jacket over my pj's. I don't care if he's done with the conversation. I'm *not*, and I'll be damned if I let him ghost me again.

I slip into my slides and speed down the hall toward Kane's bedroom.

I swing the door open and find the room empty.

Where the hell is he?

I go through the first floor of the house at warp speed, my anger losing momentum with every room I check.

Memories of that night I found him singing on the patio resurface, and I charge toward the sliding glass door, turning the patio lights on before stepping outside.

Venturing into the backyard, I comb through the barbecue, sitting, and pool areas with no luck. I'm about to text him to ask where he is when an idea pops into my head.

I make my way to the edge of the patio, stretching my neck and squinting to see the floating dock and gazebo by the beach. Mom, Evie, Gray, Kane and I used to watch the Fourth of July fireworks in there every summer.

Solar lights hang from the roof, illuminating the otherwise pitch-black area, and I strain my eyes for *any* sign of Kane.

That's when I see movement in the gazebo.

At least, I think I do?

Couldn't hurt to look.

Maybe I'm wasting my time. He might not even be there, but I've come too far to turn back now. I reach the bottom of the creaky stairs a minute later, following the only source of light on the deserted beach.

I'm afraid my anger will be gone by the time I find him. But then I see a shadow inside the gazebo.

I'm embarrassingly out of breath when I stop in front of the floating dock, my heart beating twice as hard as it normally would. Victory creeps into my chest at the sight of him.

Kane's sitting on the gazebo's built-in bench. My satisfaction dies down when I spot the half-full bottle of whiskey in his right hand.

I thought he stopped drinking?

When did he relapse?

He doesn't notice me until I'm standing inside the gazebo, a few feet away from him.

His green eyes widen in surprise, but he doesn't get a chance to speak before I blurt out, "Next time you try ghosting a girl, maybe don't pick the one living in your house."

He scoffs, avoiding my gaze. "Did you come all this way just to tell me that?"

"I get that you're not familiar with the concept of good communication, being a professional *ghoster* and all, but usually, when someone asks you a question, the polite thing to do is answer it."

He gives a shrug, the picture of indifference, and takes a swig from the whiskey bottle before saying, "I wasn't ghosting you."

"I'm sorry, are we talking about *now* or the last five years?"

We've been beating around the bush since I got to the beach house.

He's done a great job at pretending like he didn't completely shatter my heart the day he left, and *I've* done a great job at pretending like I haven't been dying to find out why.

But I've had enough of this game.

Time for the truth.

His vicious mouth curls into a smirk. “So, that’s what this is about.”

He really doesn’t care about the pain he’s caused me, does he?

“All right, then.” Kane pushes to his feet, pinning me with a look so raw and unapologetic it makes my blood boil. “Let’s get it over with.”

Let’s get it over with?

He must notice my confusion because he adds, “You clearly have some shit you need to say to me. So, go ahead. Say them.”

“I don’t have anything to say,” I admit.

He doesn’t answer, raising a brow like he’s calling bullshit.

“But I do want something from you.”

“And what might that be?” he asks.

I swallow hard, collecting every drop of courage in my system to say, “An apology.”

The cocky smile slips off his face.

Why is he looking at me like I just suggested that he do coke on Instagram live?

I’m not backing down. “You heard me. I want you to look me in the eyes and *apologize*.”

He says nothing.

“Look, I’m not asking for a lot here. I just want you to show me a crumb of decency and admit that you fucked up. You kissed me on my birthday, and then you left, never to be heard from again. It was a dick move. You know it, I know it—now, apologize.”

He seems conflicted at first, a million thoughts swirling around his gaze until he severs the eye contact and turns away from me, staring at the ocean in the distance.

“It wouldn’t change anything.” It comes out as a rasp, barely there, but also so poignant it cuts me a little.

“You don’t know that.”

“I can’t give you what you want, Hadley.”

“Why not?” I snap. I’m literally begging him to apologize to me so that little Hadley can stop hating herself and wondering why she wasn’t good enough for five seconds.

“Because I fucking can’t.” He matches my tone, on the brink of losing his temper.

“No, you know what? I changed my mind. I *do* have something to say to you.” I stomp over to him.

He turns to face me, and his cold exterior destroys the walls I put up around myself.

“I’ve been holding on to this anger for *five* years. Meanwhile, you forgot all about me the second you got on that plane. You made me feel like I was worthless. When Gray died, I was stupid enough to think you’d come back. Maybe ask me how I’m doing or check on me. But you never did. And now I’m asking you for the bare fucking minimum, and you can’t even give it to me.”

His jaw twitches, but he doesn’t speak.

I just poured my heart out to him, and he still can’t make an effort to acknowledge what he did.

Why am I wasting my breath?

“Fine.” I turn to walk away.

I’ve barely taken a step before he erupts.

“You want an apology?” His voice is rough and laced with disdain. “I’ll give you a fucking apology.”

I keep my back turned to him at first, but he doesn’t seem to like it because he grips my wrist and spins me around in one move.

“I’m sorry,” he breathes.

I wait for him to finish his insincere apology.

“I’m sorry I had to leave before I started caring too much. I’m sorry I walked away so that I wouldn’t spend the rest of my life chasing a girl instead of my dreams. I’m sorry you made leaving so fucking hard that I had to cut all ties with you.

“I’m sorry it was the only way to make sure that I wouldn’t drop everything and come running back the second I heard your voice. I’m sorry, Hads, I really am... But if I hadn’t left when I did, I wouldn’t have left at all.”

My chest hurts, my lungs hurt, my entire body hurts, and I don’t know how to make it stop.

He stares me dead in the eyes. “*Your turn.*”

I can barely form a sentence, let alone an undeserved apology. “W-What?”

He invades my space until I can feel his breath hit my mouth. “Now you apologize to me.”

“I don’t have anything to apologize for.”

A hateful scoff slips from his lips, his tone accusatory as he spits, “You ruined fame for me. I should’ve been on top of the fucking world after I left. I should’ve been spending every waking moment reveling in my new life, enjoying the money, the attention, the fans, but all I could do was think about you. Did I kiss you and bail? Yes, but you have to know you fucked me up more than I could’ve ever hurt you.

“You ruined my life by not being in it, Hadley. So, yes, fucking *apologize* to me.”

My heart is pounding uncontrollably.

I sure as hell didn’t expect that.

“I’m... I’m sorry.”

“Yeah?” he asks, darkness trickling into his gaze as he leans in and rasps, “Prove it.”

I part my lips to ask him how.

Only, I don’t get a chance.

Because he jerks my head forward and crushes his lips to mine.

There are kisses...

And then there are *make-the-earth-shake* kisses.

It doesn't even take me a second to know this one falls under the second category.

My hands shoot up to his shirt from the moment our mouths slam together, grasping at the fabric as if to keep from collapsing.

Sure enough, my knees nearly give out, but Kane's hands drop to my waist, clutching my body in a tight grip as he pries my teeth apart with his tongue.

This isn't happening, my pride screams, but my body's already answered his call, and when a noise I can only describe as carnal tears from his throat, I put my voice of reason in time-out.

His lips are soft, but his kiss is ravenous, all-consuming, and painfully addictive, making our first kiss in the shed look like a mere preview of the real deal.

We're not kids anymore.

There is no mistaking the desperation in the way his mouth slides against mine. Our tongues tangle together, and any ounce of resistance is drained from my body.

Kane's tongue thrusts deeper, owning every secret and lie to have ever escaped my mouth.

"Are you sorry?" he growls against my parted lips.

We're already chasing the next kiss, the next touch, and I trap his hair in my fist, pulling on the brown strands.

"I'm sorry," I pant, but it sounds like I'm begging him, and the low growl sounding in his throat mixes with my plea.

Am I?

I don't know.

All I know is I don't want this kiss to end, and if it means I need to hog the blame for ruining his life, then I'll do what I have to.

"Fuck. Again," he commands before trapping my bottom lip between his teeth and releasing it.

"I'm sorry," I repeat.

My apology seems to destroy his resolve because he pulls back instantly, his mouth attaching to my neck and sucking on the skin under my ear. "You better fucking mean it."

I only realize he's branding my body when the nip of his teeth makes me wince.

But it doesn't mean I don't let him finish what he started, too wrapped up in him to think about the consequences of sporting a giant hickey.

I think he's done when his mouth disconnects from my neck, but he goes right back in for more. I stop him before he bruises my skin any more than he already has, pulling on his head and guiding his lips back to mine.

But he refuses to stay there long, unzipping my jacket without a warning and dipping his head lower.

I stiffen up instantly, and he seems to notice because he rasps, "Relax, baby."

I do, letting him undo the first few buttons of my short-sleeved silk pajamas. He yanks the fabric down, exposing my collarbone and the small tattoo on my shoulder. He leaves kisses all over my clavicle.

But then he stops.

His eyes latch onto the years inked on my shoulder.

The first is the year Gray and I were born.

And the last is the year he died.

Underneath it are two hands reaching for one another with the words, *Until we meet again.*

I got it with Maggie last semester. Only she could convince me to agree to such torture. Getting the tattoo was so painful I almost passed out, but all in all, I'm glad I did it. This way, I can carry Gray with me. At least, until we're reunited.

Kane's face changes as soon as he sees the numbers, his eyes turning cold.

"I got it last semester," I explain.

Kane gives a nod, releasing my silk shirt and stepping away.

Just like that, the spell is broken, the magic is reversed, and the boy who was kissing me less than a minute ago now looks like he'd do anything to put a thousand miles between us.

I chew on my bottom lip, my chest still heaving with shallow breaths. "Is everything okay?"

Avoiding my gaze, Kane shoves a nervous hand through his hair. "I'm fine, I just... I need to go."

"What?" is all I manage to say before he spins...

...and leaves me there.



HADLEY

I'm not usually the type to text a guy first.

Mostly because I'm a firm believer that if a man wants to talk to you, he *will*. There isn't a good enough excuse in the world to justify a guy who cares about you not taking the time to reach out.

And there is especially *no* excuse for a man failing to text you back. Unless, of course, he never cared in the first place...

I lie down on my beach towel, a curse rolling off my tongue as I stare at the unanswered text on my screen.

HADLEY

What happened to you back there?

If I'm being honest, I don't think Kane even *opened* it.

I sent that text five days ago, more specifically the morning after he dropped the ultimate romantic speech on me and then claimed my mouth like there was no tomorrow.

We've barely seen each other since that night. Even when I was working full-time, I'd run into him around the house, but he's been busy lately.

He spends most of his days—and evenings—locked away in the upstairs office with Drea, taking business calls I'm sure have to do with his eventual comeback to the music industry.

I'd be willing to bet he's been having legal meetings as well, discussing the upcoming trial—word online is they finally set a date for the end of the summer.

“What are you looking at?” Jamie plops down right next to me, wiping the sand off her yellow towel with the back of her hand.

I'm quick to shove my phone into my beach bag and sit up, crossing my legs. “Nothing. Just scrolling.”

She nods, but I can't tell if she believes me, her large sunglasses too dark for me to discern the look in her eyes.

“Got you one, too.” She hands me one of the ice-cold water bottles she just went into the house to grab.

I thank her with a smile before lying back down on my towel and using my beach bag as a pillow.

When Jamie suggested that we have a beach day, I was ecstatic. For once, we had our day off on the same date, and we've barely hung out since I got hired at Sandy's.

We needed to catch up *stat*, and I couldn't think of a better place to do it than the private beach across from the house. I found an old beach umbrella in the garage and anchored it into the ground to shade us from the sun.

I nudge the sunglasses resting on top of my head in front of my eyes, remembering the text Jamie sent me a few days ago. “Girl, I almost forgot. You wanted to tell me something?”

After she texted me she had something to tell me, I *begged* her for some details.

Of course, she hit me with the most painful response a girl who's hungry for some hot goss can receive: *I'd rather tell you in person.*

“Oh, right,” she says, rubbing sunscreen up and down her arm. “It's, um... Remember that time we all hung out at the docks not too long ago?”

I immediately know what she's talking about. I'm the only one who didn't show up that night. I'd been working late a lot, and I just wanted to go to bed.

"Of course. Did something happen?"

She clears her throat. "So... Cal and Vince were completely *gone* by the end of the night, and my car broke down when I tried to drive everyone home."

I'm not surprised to hear that her car *finally* broke down. The clunker deserves a medal for toughing it out this long.

My brain dissects her sentence from start to finish. She said Vince and Cal were drunk, but she said nothing about Kane.

He was drinking the night he kissed me, but before that, he hadn't had a sip of alcohol in a while. He was doing so good. I wonder what made him want to start again.

I roll onto my side, propping my head onto my bent elbow. "Shit, what did you do?"

"I tried to get a cab, then a tow truck, but the Hillford cab company closes so early it's a joke, and the only tow truck available at 3:00 a.m. would've cost me my firstborn, *plus* a couple organs." Her comment makes me snicker. "I didn't know what to do, so I called Shay to come pick us up."

I've only seen Shay once since I moved out here. She's one of Jamie's friends, a cute brunette with tanned skin and a shy personality.

I met her the day Jamie invited her, Brooke, Drea, and me over to her place for dinner. Then there was the whole matter of the girls signing an NDA so that they could hang out with us and not tell everyone about Kane, an idea he turned down faster than a speeding bullet.

"Did she?" I ask, curiosity gnawing at me.

"She did. She was so nice about it, too. I pulled her out of bed at 3:00 a.m., and I felt so bad, but she kept telling me she was happy to help."

“But wait... wasn't Kane with you?” I'm guessing Jamie calling Shay would've been a problem for him since he's so adamant on keeping his circle small. Only people he trusts are allowed to know he's in town.

“No, he, Drea, and Scar had gone home like an hour prior. Kane was sober and bored out of his mind. He wanted to leave the whole night.”

I hope that means him drinking in the gazebo was a onetime thing.

I nod. “So, it was just you, Cal, and Vince, then?”

“Yeah. Shay dropped off Vince first and then drove us home, but Cal was passed out in the back seat. And we ended up staying in the car for a bit. We were talking and laughing and...”

She doesn't need to tell me the rest for a squeal to slip past my lips.

I sit up. “You totally made out, didn't you?”

Her cheeks turn scarlet, a giddy smile spreading across her face.

“You totally did! How was it? Good? Bad? How did it happen? Also, I didn't know Shay was gay.”

“She was going out with some douche canoe named Mason when I met her, and so I assumed she was straight and never even let myself look at her. Trust me, I *would* have if I'd known she was interested, but then after the kiss, I asked her about it, and she told me she's pan. Mason's the first guy she'd dated in a while.”

The next few hours basically consist of me demanding that Jamie shares every tiny detail about their hot make-out session.

She then tells me all about Shay's confusing signals. They've been texting here and there since, but Jamie hasn't wanted to bring up their kiss since she's not sure if Shay regrets it.

These two have been toeing the line between being friends and possibly becoming *more* for way too long.

“I have no idea where we stand. I haven’t wanted to ask her to hang out just the two of us because I don’t know if she feels that way about me or if she just got caught up in the moment.” She lets out a groan, nestling her face between her hands. “First kisses are such a pain.”

I scoff, Kane’s devastating kiss playing on a loop in my head. “Don’t I know it.”

Her features twist with confusion, and she points a finger at me, squinting as she says, “Excuse me, ma’am, what does *that* mean?”

Shit.

Did I just expose myself?

“Nothing, I was just agreeing with you,” I lie.

She frowns. “Do you smell that?”

I stop and breathe in through my nose. “No.”

“Smells like a load of horseshit,” she accuses.

This girl knows me too well.

I chuckle. “Fine, maybe something did happen, but it didn’t mean anything.”

Her eyes widen. “Oh my God, who was it? Was it Cal?”

I cringe. “Not exactly.”

Jamie’s mouth drops open. “Holy shit... it was Kane, wasn’t it?”

Should I lie?

You’d think I said that out loud when she adds, “Don’t even think of lying to me!”

It doesn’t take her long to get me to spill my guts. I tell her all about Kane’s possessive texts during my date with Cal, and while I’m worried about her reaction to me turning down her brother, she doesn’t seem to give a shit.

I ask her if she's mad at me halfway through the story, and she doesn't waste a second telling me, "Are you kidding? I shipped you and my brother for, like, a total of five seconds. Meanwhile, I've been shipping you and Kane since we were *kids*."

She gasps when I get to the good part, letting her in on what happened in the gazebo, and she throws herself backward, kicking her feet in the air for young Hadley, who would be over the moon if she were here.

I've made a lot of mistakes in my life, but losing touch with Jamie Torres was definitely one of the *biggest*.

I never would've believed it if you'd told me when I first got to the beach house that I'd end up being thankful for my mom's condo getting flooded.

It got me to reconnect with my childhood friends after a tragedy tore us apart. I can only hope that my bond with Jamie doesn't end once summer does.

We've just finished all our snacks when Jamie's phone goes off on her towel. She picks it up, checking the screen. "It's my grandma. She's getting a bit senile, and she won't stop calling to wish me a happy birthday, even though it's on Friday."

Jamie accepts the call, pushing to her feet and distancing herself for some privacy.

I may not have been present in Jamie's life after Gray left us, but I still remember how important her birthday is to her.

She spent every single one of her birthdays with her father growing up.

This will be her first birthday without him.

I glance at Jamie to make sure she's out of range and pull my phone out of my pocket, selecting the group chat I created a few days ago.

The guys and I argued back and forth about what to name the group but eventually settled on "Jamie's surprise partay!"

Thank God for Brooke and Shay having my back when the guys suggested “Jamie’s fetus eviction day!”

I type a quick message to the group and press Enter.

HADLEY

Everything set for Friday?



HADLEY

“Hello? Earth to Hadley?” Drea’s voice echoes in my head as I check the website on my phone.

I should be handling this better.

Growth always happens outside of your comfort zone. I just wish I’d known “outside your comfort zone” was a place built on fears and your deepest insecurities.

“Hadley?” Drea calls again.

My head snaps up. “I’m sorry, what?”

Drea, who’s straightening her hair in front of the mirror in my room, casts a worried gaze in my direction. “Everything okay? You’ve been staring at your phone for, like, half an hour.”

“Yeah, everything’s great. Just scrolling on Instagram,” I lie.

When Drea suggested that we get ready for Jamie’s surprise party together, I thought it might help get my mind off the launch of my website.

Wishful thinking on my part because I haven’t been able to stop checking the analytics and the social media accounts I set

up for my brand.

The brand's name?

Paintoholic Hearts.

I stayed up until 3:00 a.m. last night, posting every painting I've completed since Kane pulled a hero moment and refilled all of my supplies.

To say I have no idea what I'm doing would be a *massive* understatement. My online store has been getting a little bit of traction, but no sales. Not that I expected any different.

My social media accounts sit at zero followers, and my website hasn't had a single visit so far.

To be fair, it only went live yesterday, and I haven't done any advertising. That's a whole other story that'll require tons of research and time.

"All done." Drea unplugs my hair straightener, places it down onto my desk, and makes her way over.

Her perfectly straight, purple hair falls down her shoulders, stopping inches below her breasts, and she's wearing a cute gray dress with stunning cat-eye eyeliner—the kind that usually takes me a decade to do, but she somehow managed to make each side even on her first try.

My focus darts to my phone again.

Maybe I should change my logo?

I did what I could with Photoshop, sticking a heart on top of a pale blue watercolor stain with the name of my business on it, but I'm no graphic designer.

"You should get ready. Jamie will be at Vince's place in an hour," Drea advises, and I give a small nod.

I only realize she's peeking over my shoulder when she says, "What's that?"

"Oh, it's, um... It's nothing. Just a little something I'm working on."

Her brows shoot up to her forehead as she reaches for my phone. “May I?”

I sink my teeth into my bottom lip. “Sure.”

She starts to scroll through my store, checking all of my paintings. “Holy shit. Did you do this?”

She zooms in on the painting of a multicolored bird flying away, leaving a few of his feathers behind. The sun reflects on each of them, giving the floating feathers a pink-and-orange glow. “You’re crazy talented.”

A pit of emotion stretches my throat. “You think so?”

“Do I think so? Girl, I want all of these hanging above my bed.” She hypes me up, and it’s like a breath of fresh air infiltrated my lungs.

That’s the thing about artists.

We’re alone with our creations for so long we forget to look at them through the eyes of the person discovering parts of our souls for the first time.

We leave a little bit of us in each song, book, or painting we complete, and hearing someone else appreciate something we’ve poured all of our bleeding hearts into is incomparable.

I’m afraid I might cry when she taps the “Add to basket” button and proceeds to buy not one but *two* of my paintings right in front of me—the painting of the bird and one of a diamond heart that looks like it’s disintegrating, glitters amassing on the floor beneath it.

I make sure to tell her she doesn’t have to do that, but she forges ahead, becoming my first customer with a click of her finger.

My heart swells with joy when my phone chimes with an email notification, informing me of my first sale.

I throw myself into Drea’s arms as soon as she puts her phone down, and she laughs. “Now, you get your talented ass into the bathroom and do your hair, or we’re going to be late.”

I chuckle, taking her advice and racing to the bathroom to do my hair. It's a good thing my makeup's already done because my hair is a bitch to curl.

Drea came through with her magnetic lashes and bronze and copper eyeshadow. I opted for a black off-the-shoulder bodysuit and pale blue jeans tonight, and I look like a new girl.

"Oh, and you're never going to guess who changed his mind at the last minute," she tells me as we're racing down the stairs a half hour later.

I grip the railing. "Kane?"

She snorts. "Looks like he didn't want to be the only one *not* invited after all."

Fuck.

When the idea to throw Jamie a birthday party came to me, I knew I had no choice but to invite Shay and Brooke. It's Jamie's birthday, for fuck's sake. I could hardly see myself not inviting her friends because Kane doesn't want to mingle with us normies unless they've signed an NDA.

I figured since he was the one causing a problem, he should be the one to stay home.

It's been hard enough to avoid him since our kiss. I wasn't trying to get near him, let alone in a situation where booze runs high and inhibitions run low.

Shit, I was *so* sure he wouldn't be willing to compromise on the NDA situation.

"Wait, so he's not going to make them sign an NDA?" I ask when we reach the first floor.

"Oh, no, they signed it. You should've seen Brooke's face when I told her who my boss was. Poor girl looked like she was having an asthma attack."

A hint of jealousy burns within me. "Is she a fan or something?"

"The biggest."

Great.

So, you're telling me I'm going to have to watch Brooke drool over Kane all night?

Well, that backfired quickly.



WE MAKE IT TO VINCE'S HOUSE TWENTY MINUTES EARLY.

Cal was supposed to text us once he and his sister left the house, but we haven't heard from him yet. I'm starting to worry something's gone wrong. Jamie thinks we're just hanging out at Vince's house for no particular reason.

What if she decided to bail and stay home after a long day at work?

Drea tangles her arm with mine. "Relax, they'll be here."

The boys and I spent all of yesterday decorating Vince's house for the party.

We hung up balloons, streamers, and a gigantic "Happy Birthday" sign and set up a minibar area.

Scar and Vince were in charge of buying the snacks, which is why you'd think this is a two-year-old's birthday party—they got mini corn dogs, cheese sticks, and pizza rolls. All very elegant snacks.

They also dumped five different flavors of chips and Flamin' Hot Cheetos into a single bowl, and I feel bad for whoever's unfortunate enough to try their concoction.

"When's Kane getting here? He's still coming, right?" Brooke's questions make my teeth grind.

She's been asking us about him since she showed up. When she's not fishing for compliments about her appearance—she looks gorgeous, as always—she's bombarding us with questions about what Kane is like in real life.

Part of me feels bad about it.

She's a fan, about to meet a huge celebrity and a total hottie.

I can't blame her for being excited, but she's being so damn annoying I wish we could make her sign another contract—this one stating that she has to shut her trap until the end of the night.

"I think they're here. I heard a car pulling up," Vince says five minutes later.

"What? They're early," I shriek, dashing to the switch to turn the light off.

I remind everyone to grab a party horn, and Vince, Drea, Brooke, Shay, and I scramble behind the kitchen island, waiting for Cal and Jamie to enter the house.

We wait a total of three minutes before we hear what sounds like Jamie's voice on the porch. "Why are the lights off?"

Cal answers, "I don't know. That's weird."

We hear the door creak open but wait until Jamie flicks the light on before jumping out from behind the island and shouting, "Surprise!"

"What the fuck?" Her hand flies to her mouth as she scans her surroundings, taking in the minibar and decorations.

She bursts into tears the second she realizes this is all for her.

We all huddle closer to her, hugging her one by one. It isn't long before my turn rolls around, and I pull her into my arms. "Happy birthday!"

She laughs, wiping her face. "Did you do this?"

We separate. "How did you know?"

"Well, for one, there's no way the guys had the brainpower to put this together, and I never even told the girls it was my birthday," she explains, and I assume she didn't tell them because she was dreading her first birthday without her dad. She's only been friends with Brooke and Shay for a year.

“Are you mad that I blabbed?” I give her my best puppy eyes, and she cracks a smile.

“You’re forgiven.” She pulls me in for another hug.

We’ve just withdrawn when I spot him.

Kane’s standing in the doorway, the dark circles rimming his green eyes not nearly enough to dim his beauty. He must’ve gotten here seconds after Cal and Jamie.

He sees me right away. He’s wearing a leather jacket and a white T-shirt, rocking that effortless James Dean look.

That’s when I spot the cut on his lower lip.

Scar pops up behind him, and I swallow the gasp building in my throat.

Scar has a black eye.

The *mother* of all black eyes.

And it looks recent.

Did Kane and Scar get into a *fight*?

I force myself to mind my own business, retreating to the fridge to grab one of the seltzers I brought. I join the girls hanging out by the kitchen island, watching Brooke stalk toward Kane from the corner of my eye.

I might act like I couldn’t care less, but my blood is sizzling beneath my skin.

Brooke stops before him, flips her blonde hair over her shoulder, and introduces herself. Kane looks her up and down swiftly, giving her one of his panty-dropping smiles.

This is going to be a long night.



“ARE YOU FUCKING INSANE? YOU’RE GOING TO BREAK YOUR leg.” Jamie laughs at Vince, who’s standing on top of the pool

table, doing a ridiculous little dance and spinning his shirt over his head.

“A deal’s a deal.” Vince refuses to listen to reason, throwing his shirt at us and removing his belt as the guys laugh so hard they’re gasping for air.

A dare.

That’s what started this whole thing.

Kane bet Vince that he could beat him at every table game in his house.

I thought that was just Kane being cocky, and he couldn’t possibly beat Vince at pool, foosball, air hockey, *and* darts. But he did. Although not before Scar and Cal requested that the loser be punished with a dare.

Vince was pretty confident at first, but he realized he’d fucked up when Scar brought his fist to his mouth to muffle his laughter.

“What?” Vince asked.

Scar bit back a smile. “You’ll see.”

Turns out he and Kane have played these games *a lot* since summer started. Kane couldn’t exactly go out and explore the town, so he occupied himself the best he could—by ordering a bunch of games and kicking Scar’s ass at them over and over.

Brooke cheers when Vince begins taking his pants off, and Cal turns up the volume of the stereo as if to spur Vince on.

I might worry about the loud music if it weren’t for the fact that I’m feeling buzzed, relaxed, and *surprisingly* unaffected by Brooke eye-fucking Kane.

The girls cheer louder at the sight of Vince’s sculpted, tattooed body and the dark briefs covering the bulge in his pants. He doesn’t look small, that’s all I’ll say.

Brooke shapes her hands into a megaphone and shouts, “*Take it off!*”

He’s down to his underwear now, and I’m certain he’s going to wuss out until he slips his fingers into the waistband

of his underwear and—

The sound of the doorbell scares the shit out of us.

“Fuck.” Vince snaps out of it, leaping off the pool table and picking his pants up.

He shoves his legs into his jeans while balancing himself on his right foot and then his left and takes off toward the front door.

I wouldn’t be surprised if it was the cops grilling us about a noise complaint. It’s past 1:00 a.m., and the music is way too loud.

Cal lowers the volume of the stereo as soon as Vince dashes out of the room, and we try to listen in, but it’s no use.

The game room is on the opposite side of the house, as far as can be from the front door. It’s a miracle we even heard the doorbell.

A few seconds elapse before music cuts through the air again, but this time, it doesn’t come from Vince’s pricey speakers but from my phone.

I’m getting a call from Maggie.

I have no idea what she’s doing calling me at this hour, but I figure she forgot about the time difference between Italy and North Carolina.

Or maybe she butt-dialed me since we talked on the phone a few days ago.

I’m about to pick up, but the call disappears from my screen. I get a text from her a few seconds later. It’s a picture of her holding a mimosa at brunch with some Italian stallion kissing her cheek.

I grin, texting her back.

HADLEY

Who’s this guy? What happened to the hottie on your stories?

MAGGIE

That's over. I'm with Antonio now. At least I think that's what his name is. I don't understand much of what he says.

HADLEY

MAG! You ask the young man what his name is right now!

MAGGIE

Trust me, telling me his name is the LEAST interesting thing he can do with his mouth.

I chuckle at her shameless message. This girl is incorrigible.

At least she doesn't lie to you...

God, I hate that I'm keeping things from her. I didn't even tell her about my kiss with Kane during our phone call.

In all fairness, I can't exactly tell her that I made out with her idol because then I would have to tell her that he's also my childhood friend and the boy I used to be hopelessly in love with.

There's a lot to unpack, and I'm hoping by the time I get back to Boone, whatever happened between me and Kane won't be worth telling.

I'm about to slip my phone back into my pocket when a deep voice stops me.

"You're a fan of Anaya?"

I whisk my head to the right and find Kane staring at me intently.

We haven't addressed each other all week, and *this* is what he has to say to me?

Not "I'm sorry I never answered your texts" or "I'm sorry I ran out on you in the middle of our kiss"?

My brain needs a second to process what he just said.

I recently bought a ringtone of one of my favorite songs, “Breathe” by this young songwriter and singer named Anaya.

I’m not usually one to use songs for ringtones, but I’m completely obsessed with her new stuff, and I intend to listen to “Breathe” until I’m sick of it.

“Since she started. I don’t think there’s one song on her new album I haven’t listened to a thousand times,” I confirm.

Kane responds with a nod.

The ironic part is, Kane and Anaya are good friends.

At least, that’s the impression I get from following her on social media. They post each other every year on their birthdays and are often seen hanging out.

The media tried to twist the truth and start rumors at first, but Kane quickly shut them down, calling the press sick for implying he would be in a relationship with a sixteen-year-old girl. It looks like they have more of a mentor thing going on.

“I’m an Anaya fan, too.” Brooke feels the need to throw in her two cents, slowly running her hand up and down Kane’s leg.

Lava courses through my veins.

I wish he’d push her hand away. Maybe cut it off with a chainsaw—*whoa, take a chill pill, Hadley.*

Kane barely even reacts, green eyes drilling into me.

Jesus.

There’s something about the way he stares.

Like he’d rather stab himself in the fucking face than take his eyes off me.

Why is he doing this? In case he didn’t notice, there’s a whole-ass model next to him, and she would *gladly* let him fuck her within an inch of her life.

“Really? What’s your favorite Anaya song?” I put Brooke to the test, loving every minute of her panic as she opens her

mouth to speak, only to close it a second later.

She has no idea who Anaya even is, does she?

“I... I like all her songs,” she stammers.

It would be *so* easy to keep this going and embarrass her, but I decide to drop it.

“Let’s do another shot,” I say without thinking.

“Sure,” Jamie and Shay agree.

I’m pouring tequila into five shot glasses before I know it, handing out the remaining four to Cal, Shay, Scar, and Brooke.

Scar starts the countdown, but I don’t even wait for him to finish to tip the shot back.

My eyes water as the liquor streams down my throat, and I have this inkling that unless I want to end up with my head in the toilet again, I’m going to have to stop drinking.

Vince pads into the room the second we set the glasses down, holding what seems to be a ticket in his right hand.

“The fuck is that?” Scar asks.

Vince shrugs like he doesn’t have a care in the world. “A five-hundred-dollar noise complaint ticket.”

With that, he grabs the remote to the stereo and turns up the volume, as though he didn’t just get fined half a grand two minutes ago. “You motherfuckers want to play beer pong?”



“FOR FUCK’S SAKE, HADLEY. ARE YOU *TRYING* TO MAKE ME puke?” Jamie says on a chuckle, a hint of disgust crossing her face as she takes the red cup to her mouth to knock it back.

“I told you I wasn’t half bad.” I crack a guilty smile, rinsing the beer pong ball in the cup of water next to me.

I’ve played beer pong a *lot* since I started college.

Maggie was dating some douche nozzle named Jordan my freshman and junior year, and every party we'd go to, without exception, would end with me kicking some frat guy's ass at beer pong while Maggie and Jordan made out in a corner.

It was a good way to pass the time, and seeing the dudes' faces when I beat them *amply* made up for being the designated third wheel.

Jamie rests the empty cup on the table. "Yeah, but I didn't think it meant you could compete in the fucking world championship of beer pong!"

She's exaggerating.

I missed a few shots here and there, and I'm only winning because Jamie is so *drunk* she throws like she's standing on a rocking boat. She's had enough to make a breathalyzer implode on itself.

"Let's end this so we can get a gallon of water in you." I take my shot and send the ball flying straight into Jamie's last cup after a single bounce.

My victory draws a sigh out of her, and just as she's about to down the beer, I say, "Leave it. You're only allowed to have water for the rest of the night." I round the table, gesturing for her to follow me with my chin. "Kitchen."

Jamie doesn't protest, shadowing me down the hall.

The rest of the party doesn't even notice we're gone, too wrapped up in Scar and Vince arm-wrestling on the air hockey table to pay attention to us.

It's past 3:00 a.m., and I haven't had a drop of alcohol since one. If Kane wants to go ahead and fuck Brooke six ways from Sunday, then he's free to do so. I won't stand in his way, and I certainly won't beg for a sliver of his attention.

I get Jamie and myself water bottles before taking a seat around the kitchen table.

Jamie follows suit, taking small sips of her water as she plops down next to me.

“So... it looked like you and Shay were getting quite... comfortable earlier,” I tease, a grin playing on my lips.

The girls and I felt like dancing at some point through the night, and we pushed the game tables aside to create a dance floor. Jamie asked Shay to dance, and she immediately said yes. *Because who could refuse the birthday girl?*

They were absolutely adorable, whispering in each other’s ears, chuckling and swaying their hips to the music. As for Kane and the guys, they parked their asses on the couch and bickered like they always do.

“I know.” Jamie throws her head back with a groan. “I wish I had an excuse to be alone with her. We haven’t had a second to talk since we made out in her car.”

Ideas flood my mind, and I’m quick to identify the most viable one. “What if we play some sort of drinking game?” It hits me a moment later. “No, what if we play seven minutes in heaven?”

Her first reaction is to laugh in my face. *Fair enough.*

“Oh, shit, you’re serious?” she realizes when I don’t laugh.

“Think about it. It would be the perfect excuse. We can just put all of our names into a hat and each pick one. We’ll tell them you get to pick first because it’s your birthday, and I’ll conveniently put Shay’s name on top of the pile. Then you two can go in the closet and just...” I wiggle my eyebrows. *“Do your thing.”*

Not going to lie, I’m also hoping to set up Scar and Drea. I’m not dumb. These two are obviously obsessed with each other.

She’s not convinced. “I don’t know... Isn’t that, like, a kids’ game?”

I can’t help my smirk. “Not the way we would play it.”



AS I EXPECTED, THE GUYS MOCK MY IDEA FROM THE MOMENT it leaves my mouth.

They go on to call it lame and a kids' game, but I manage to turn things around when I show them the whipped cream I pulled out of Vince's fridge and the bandana I found when I went snooping around his bedroom.

Speaking of, I think Vince deserves some kind of award for heaviest sleeper in the world.

He drank so much he passed out, and the guys carried him to his bed while Jamie and I were in the kitchen. He didn't even notice me going through his room, lying on his bed in a star position.

"Not so much of a kids' game now, is it?" I flash a proud smile, showing them the bandana we're going to use as a blindfold.

Scar snorts. "It's still a kids' game. Just a more interesting one."

"Come on, guys, it'll be fun." I glance at Jamie with a knowing smile. "Who's in?"

"I am." Jamie backs me up. "But first, hit me." She opens her mouth, and I laugh, pouring a mountain of whipped cream inside.

"I'm down," Brooke chimes, glancing at Kane with a smirk, and blame it on the alcohol in my system, but I hadn't realized how easily this could come back to bite me in the ass until now.

Let's hope she doesn't pick Kane's name.

The last thing I want is for them to be alone in a dark closet for seven minutes.

I look down at Vince's baseball cap filled with everyone's names. I was careful to put Shay and Scar's names on top of the pile, just like I planned, but I can't control the names other people pick.

It isn't long before the others go along with my plan, and of course, by the time I realize it wasn't such a good idea after

all, they're all pumped and ready to play.

"We only got one blindfold, though. Who's going to wear it?" Shay points out the game's flaw.

"How about we just roll a dice for it? Whoever gets the lowest number wears the blindfold," Drea suggests.

"Works for me," Jamie agrees.

"Okay." I force a smile. "Jamie should pick first since it's her birthday."

We all settle around the L-shaped couch in the corner of the game room, and I pass the hat to Jamie.

She picks a name, unfolding the piece of paper and wrestling a tell-all smile. "I got Shay."

Jamie, who's fully aware of the next part of my plan, passes the hat to Drea without her asking, and she's a bit surprised but doesn't argue.

Color leaves Drea's skin. "I got Scar."

Looks like I was right to put his name right underneath Shay's.

"Gimme," Brooke presses.

Drea clears her throat, passing the hat to Brooke, who's so eager to pick a name it makes me cringe. She shoves her hands into the hat, and I'm hopeful she's going to pick out my name or another girl's name just so that she doesn't end up with Kane.

Brooke unfolds the piece of paper and represses a squeal, her face lighting up with excitement. "I got Kane."

Cal's eyes find me instantly, and he gives me an awkward smile. "I guess that means it's you and me, Queen."

I don't answer, managing a nod.

So, not only did I practically force Kane and a supermodel to hook up, but I'm also going to have to spend seven minutes alone with the boy I rejected not even a month ago.

“We should pick again.” Kane’s voice slices through the air.

We all turn to look at him, but the only person he’s looking at is *me*. His eyes are hard, his jaw tight, and call me crazy, but I think I saw his eye twitch.

“What? Why?” Brooke whines.

“No backsies,” Scar protests. No wonder he doesn’t want us to pick again. It’s obvious he’s over the fucking moon about getting paired with Drea.

“Agreed,” Cal piles on.

This isn’t happening.



I GOT THE LOWEST NUMBER.

Of course I did.

Cal rolled a six, and I, being the definition of unlucky, got a one, which means I have to wear the blindfold.

All I can hear is my unsteady breathing as I take a seat on the floor of the large closet in the next room, waiting for Cal to come in so that I can reject him one more time.

The guys decided that the person with the blindfold would go in first. I swear it took *all* of my willpower not to fake a bad migraine and run.

I should’ve.

Anything is better than having to tell Cal I don’t want to kiss or touch him.

My heart drops to my stomach when the closet creaks open.

Here we go.

I had my speech ready, but now that he’s here, I can’t make a sound.

Footsteps sound against the hardwood floor, and I squint, hoping to see something, but the bandana is too opaque.

I almost yelp when a hand wraps around my wrist and pulls me off the floor.

I land on my feet, struggling to steady myself for a moment, but the hand flies to the small of my back, helping me regain my balance.

I exhale a breath. “Look, Cal, I—”

The words on my tongue evaporate when Cal jerks me closer and crashes his mouth against mine.

A gasp rips from my throat, and I press my palms to his chest, preparing to push him away, but the feel of the fabric under my fingertips kills every drop of resistance in my system.

It’s leather.

I claw at the fabric as Cal’s mouth slides against mine and realize...

Cal isn’t the one kissing me.

I catch a whiff of the cologne filling the closet, and the delicious smell solidifies what my body already knows.

I’m kissing Kane.

I don’t know how he got in or why he didn’t just settle for a quickie with Brooke, but he’s the one ravaging my mouth with his, taking my hips into a bruising hold and licking past the seam of my mouth with a groan.

I want to call him out for breaking every single rule we laid out, but all I can do is grasp at his shirt, holding his body dangerously close to mine.

One of his hands leaves my hips and climbs up my spine, landing in my hair and angling my head back an inch. The action causes my mouth to open wider, and the fucker jumps at the chance to slide his tongue past my lips.

I might not be able to see anything, but I can feel every bit of his smile when I let out an unintentional moan, and his

tongue darts out to find mine.

It's all too much for me.

His mouth, his hands tugging at my scalp, the pounding vessel in my chest. He is *such* a good kisser I have no chance of escaping him. No chance of even wanting to.

He breaks the kiss, and another gasp leaves me when a trail of cold foam is sprayed over my skin, all the way from my ear to my clavicle.

He just covered me in whipped cream, and when his guttural groan sweeps over my flesh, I read his intentions loud and clear.

My knees nearly buckle when he descends on my neck, my back hitting the wall behind me with a thud. He closes the space between us, slamming his body to mine. Then his tongue is gliding up the side of my neck, licking me clean.

Heat consumes me, and I throw my head back against the wall.

"Please," I pant, and a low "*Fuck*" fills the darkness before Kane digs his teeth into my collarbone, nipping at my skin as if to brand me with ownership.

The next thing I know, a layer of whipped cream is stretching over my cleavage, and Kane is dipping his tongue in the dip of my breasts, one of his hands pushing against my hip bone before running his fingers along the waistband of my jeans.

God, I want him.

I want to let him do everything to me.

Whatever he wants, wherever he wants, whenever he wants.

If that's not the most terrifying thought that's ever crossed my mind, I don't know what is.

He pulls back, drawing his finger up the side of my neck to gather the remnants of whipped cream.

“Open,” he commands in a low voice, and I feel his thumb sweep over my lower lip.

When I don't open fast enough, he dips his index and middle fingers inside my mouth, groaning when my tongue latches onto them, twirling around the tips to lick them clean.

His other hand finds the base of my neck, and he pulls his fingers from my mouth, his lips grazing the side of my jaw. I can't bring myself to put an end to his teasing, a hiss falling from my lips when he captures my earlobe between his teeth.

Running solely on instincts, I drop my hand to his pants, curving around his cock straining against the fabric, and the hand he has wrapped at the base of my neck tightens at the contact.

He's so hard he's probably super uncomfortable, but the thought doesn't deter me from squeezing him until he groans with irritation.

He smashes his mouth back to mine the next second, his tongue dipping back inside without requesting access.

I thought his kisses were intense before, but the way he's kissing me now? I can feel his resolve thinning with each stroke of his tongue. I run my palm up and down his stiff cock once more, and he wedges his knee between my legs, pressing against my clit ever so slightly.

I'm crazy enough to consider slipping my hand inside his jeans when...

An alarm goes off on his phone

I can't see shit, but I do hear the growl breaking past Kane's lips as he stops the alarm and pulls his body off mine.

It's been seven minutes.

The absence of his touch leaves me in an uproar, a type of desperation I'd never felt before taking me under, but I don't have time to voice my body's protests because he slings the closet door open.

Just like that, he's gone.



HADLEY

Kiss number two dominates every inch of my brain for *days* after Jamie's party.

I spend most of the week on autopilot, picking up as many shifts as possible and staying out of the house to avoid Kane.

Going straight home after work would increase my chances of accidentally running into Kane, and if the seven minutes we spent in that closet taught me anything, it's that what my brain wants and what my *body* wants are two very different things.

I can't be trusted around him.

Whatever resentment I harbor for what he did five years ago is *nothing* compared to the desire overwhelming my body whenever we're in the same room.

Hence my new goal in life: pretending like nothing ever happened and avoiding Kane by any means necessary.

Unbearable attraction aside, I'd be lying if I said I haven't been racking my brain trying to figure out how Kane pulled it off.

How he managed to sneak into the closet without anyone noticing and why, when I came back out, he was sitting on the couch, looking like the picture of nonchalance. Not to mention Cal was nowhere to be found.

You can imagine my surprise when Cal walked back into the room a beat later and apologized for taking a phone call and keeping me waiting.

Maybe it was a coincidence.

Maybe Cal got a phone call, and Kane saw an opportunity to take his place.

I thought I was going to be sick when Cal turned to me and asked if I still wanted to go in the closet with him, completely unaware that I was just touching Kane's cock a few minutes prior.

Embarrassment rose to my cheeks, and I made up a story about having a terrible headache and wanting to go home—that should've been my excuse from the start.

Like that was Kane's cue, he pushed off the couch and said he was beat, too, and calling it a night. Brooke seriously looked like she was about to cry when he said that.

Scar and Drea decided to go with Kane, and that was the end of seven minutes in heaven.

At least Jamie and Shay got to play.

They were the first to go into the closet.

They came out holding hands afterward, and Jamie texted me the next day saying they'd spent the night together, so that's a win in my book.

I've had enough of coming home late and not being able to focus on my craft. My storefront's been getting more traction, and though I haven't had any more orders since Drea bought a few paintings, I've never been more motivated to make my dream come true.

I'm fighting off a yawn by the time I pull up into the beach house driveway. I had to open *and* close up the restaurant

today, and my body is begging for some rest, but I'm determined to get some painting in before I head to bed.

I only work late in the afternoon tomorrow, so I should be able to sleep in.

Plus, I love sitting down to paint while the world is asleep. There's something satisfying about being the only person awake.

I climb out of my mom's car and drag my feet to the porch, typing the combination onto the keypad before walking in.

The house is silent as I jog up the stairs. I make a quick pit stop for some clothes, entering my room and changing out of my work clothes into shorts and a T-shirt.

I'm heading down the hall toward the sunroom when I notice the door is ajar. I glance over my shoulder.

I'm pretty sure I closed that the last time I went into the sunroom two days ago.

I tell myself the maid must've gone in, and I push the door open, stopping so abruptly I almost slip on the waxed floors.

I was right. The maid *did* go into the sunroom. But she's not the only one.

Something in my chest gives a jolt when I see Kane sitting at the grand piano with his head down.

He looks up right away, green eyes finding me across the room. He looks like he hasn't slept in days, the dark spots under his eyes and his disheveled hair drawing a clear picture.

Is something keeping him up at night?

It takes me a fragment of a second to spot the notebook on his lap and the pen trapped between his fingers. Moonlight envelops the room, creating a dim glow around his silhouette.

I'm happy to see he's writing songs again.

I think I see his eyes flare when he gives me a once-over, and the heat diffusing through my bloodstream makes me want to turn my ass around and walk out.

The last time we were in this room, all we did was talk. So why do I feel like the sunroom is a trap, Kane is the most delicious piece of cheese, and I'm the stupid little mouse about to meet her end?

I clear my throat. "Sorry, I didn't know you were in here."

He stares for a moment, and then he rips his eyes away as though he can't bear to look at me any longer. "It's fine. I was done, anyway."

My mouth falls open, my gaze glued to his muscular frame as he picks up the notebook, pushes off the piano bench, and makes a beeline for the door.

Okay?

Just like that, we're back to the start. Back to when he bounced the second I walked into the room.

It makes no sense.

I know why *I'm* avoiding him.

Because he hurt me, and I'm scared of what this attraction could turn into, but he's gone from taking my breath away with a gutting speech in the gazebo to trapping me in a closet and owning my mouth to running... again.

Why is he sending me so many mixed signals?

"That's it?" My voice is close to a screech.

He stops dead.

"We're just going to pretend like nothing ever happened?"

He spins to face me, his cold expression unwavering. "What are you talking about?"

"I know it was you last week. Cal got a phone call, and you took his place somehow, and then you..."

What I can only describe as a cunning smirk warps his lips. "And then I what?"

Just say it, Hadley.

"And then you kissed me."

A scoff leaves his mouth.

This is the part where he denies it.

Kane parks himself inches away from me, leaning forward until his breath hits my parted lips. “So what if I did?”

That is *not* how I expected this conversation to go.

“You... You had no right to do that.”

Another scoff. “What part? Kissing you or licking whipped cream off your tits?”

His blunt response shocks me to my core.

“W-What the hell is your problem?”

His eyes narrow into slits. “You.”

“What?”

He clenches his jaw. “It’s you. You’re my fucking problem, Hadley. Sharing a house with you is making my life fucking miserable. You happy now?”

Again, *what?*

He starts to walk away.

“What did I ever do to make you hate me so much?” I snap before he walks out.

The move he makes next makes me wish I could rewind time and unsay that last sentence.

Without a word, Kane shuts the door.

And *locks* it.

“You think this is because I hate you?” His voice is barely above a whisper.

I’m at a loss for words.

He turns to face me, pinning me with a look I feel deep in my bones. “You think I’m fucking killing myself not to go anywhere near you because I *hate* you?”

As scared as I am of the point he’s trying to make, every nerve in my body is imploring me to get closer. I take a few

steps forward, stopping when Kane beats me to the punch, meeting me halfway.

“If I *hated* you, this wouldn’t be so fucking hard.”

My entire body freezes when his hand lifts around my throat in a single move. He’s not cutting off my airways, but his grip is tight enough to make breathing more difficult.

“Being near you feels like suffocating.” He moves closer, his breath crashing against my lips. “Like the air in my lungs is thinning with every fucking second that I don’t have you, and I’ve been going mad knowing that I *can’t*. I’m fucking begging you, Hadley. Do not push me right now...” His mouth grazes mine, the contact so soft and light it makes my body ache.

I have no idea why he won’t let himself be with me.

But in a moment of madness...

I want him to change his mind.

I throw caution to the wind, letting my tongue trace the seam of his mouth.

That’s all it takes for his self-control to snap.

The impact of our mouths colliding nearly sends me to my knees. His tongue immediately slips past my teeth to capture mine, and I let him take what I promised he’d never have again.

His big hands curl around the backs of my thighs and he lifts me up so fast I yelp, but his mouth muffles my surprise, his kisses so powerful and possessive I’m panting in his arms.

“I fucking warned you,” he says through a clenched jaw, and I wrap my legs around his waist, the bitter taste of defeat flooding my mouth.

Kane’s tongue meets mine again, the sounds rising in his throat telling me what I’ve been too afraid to admit.

Kane Wilder is the biggest mistake of my life.

The one I never learn from.

He's the bad decision I continuously make.

Letting him in is like drinking from a poisoned cup while knowing damn well it's going to kill you.

And the worst part?

I drink it all the same...

Kane carries me across the room, his mouth never leaving mine, and I grip his face with both hands, losing myself in his kiss. I think he's going to take me to the couch against the wall until something cold touches my ass cheeks through my shorts.

I sever the kiss just long enough to realize...

He didn't drop me on the couch.

H dropped me on top of the grand piano.

He set me down where the music rack normally goes, and I have no idea when he even removed the rack, but his lips finding mine immediately expel the questions from my mind.

He pulls back a few seconds later, heat blazing in his green eyes, and rests a final kiss on my lips before sitting down on the bench.

"Spread your legs, baby." His request rumbles deep in his throat, and I must've left my sanity at the door because I do just that.

I stretch my arms out behind me, propping myself onto my palms as Kane stares me dead in the eyes, as though he's waiting for me to ask him to stop at any moment.

His fiery gaze locks on mine as he traps his bottom lip between his teeth and inches closer.

I gasp when he reaches for the waistband of my shorts.

He waits a few more seconds, giving me a chance to oppose.

I never do.

Then he yanks my shorts down my legs in one go.

Seeing as I thought I was going to bed after this, I went commando under my shorts. I'm fully exposed to him now, save for my T-shirt, and a wave of self-consciousness washes over me from the moment he zeroes in on my pussy. I'm so painfully aware of how turned on I am, and now... he is, too

The next thing I know, he's resting my legs up on each of his shoulders.

"Shirt off," he commands.

I hesitate. I'm already spread-eagled on top of this fucking piano with my pussy bared to him. My shirt is the last piece of clothing shielding my body.

"Now, Hadley," he grits out when I don't oblige quickly enough.

My hands are shaking, but I grip the hem of my T-shirt and pull.

"Fuck, that's it," he breathes as I toss my T-shirt, showing him all of me at once.

His jaw drops at the full picture, hungry eyes raking over my entire body.

"So fucking gorgeous," he rasps and wraps his arms around my thighs, jerking me forward. "*Closer*," he growls, his voice thick with impatience.

I oblige, scooting until my ass is dangling off the piano. His grip grows tighter around my thighs, his fingers digging into my flesh as he presses down to keep my legs firmly on his shoulders.

This is the same boy I used to share a shed with.

The boy who took my first kiss.

The very same boy who put all those tears in my eyes.

Turns out he's also the one making me wet and the definition of my blind spot.

That's when he stops to give me another chance to back out, his breath sweeping over my center as he waits.

I don't take the out he's offering me.

A voice in my head utters a warning as scary as it is thrilling.

This was my last chance.

There's no going back now.

Kane doesn't wait a second longer, filling the little space left between us and flattening his tongue against my clit.

It's only a second.

A sharp lick.

But holy mother of...

It feels like little zaps of electricity shooting through my body.

"I need you to hear me right now. If you let me do this, I'm going to want to do *everything*. Fuck you, feel you, make you beg until you hate me. This isn't a onetime thing. Once we do this, you're mine. Do you understand?"

The pulsating point between my legs wants me to agree. But my heart can't handle *everything* with Kane.

It wouldn't survive sex with him.

Not without reigniting feelings I've spent years trying to bury.

"Hadley, tell me you understand." He proceeds to sink his teeth into the side of my thigh and leaves a few bite marks behind. "Fuck, just... *please*."

His begging is all it takes to make me cave. "I understa—"

I can't even finish my sentence.

Because Kane is already sucking my clit into his mouth and making me see five times the number of stars the windows of the sunroom ever could.

His tongue practically assaults my pussy the second his teeth release my clit, and I throw my head back, fighting my moans with all my might.

Kane's feral groan mixes with the sound of my arousal, and I attempt to close my legs to decrease the pleasure, but his grip on my thighs is so strong they barely even move.

The growl of disapproval vibrating against my core tells me he didn't like that, and I'd be an idiot to try it again.

I can't even describe how incredible his tongue feels, and I give myself over to the sensations, playing the words he said to me on a loop.

This isn't a onetime thing.

And as much as I hate myself for it, I *really* hope not.

It isn't long before I start to squirm, wriggling on the piano and pressing myself farther into his face. I can't help it. I need more.

"That's it. Ride my fucking face," he breathes, flicking my clit with his tongue until I'm chasing my breath.

"Kane," I moan a tad louder than I should, considering where I am and what time it is, but he doesn't seem to give a fuck because he only goes harder at the sound of his name. "More," I manage to whisper.

"What do you want?" He releases his hold on my thigh and stops teasing my clit. I miss his tongue instantly, but his finger sliding up and down my slit stops me from complaining. "You want my fingers in your pussy?"

He starts rubbing my clit in quick circles, and I have to bite down on my lip not to moan. I'm so sensitive I just know it won't be too long before I fall apart.

"Y-Yes," I croak. I sound so ashamed. So damn pathetic to my own ears, and I want to cringe, but it sure doesn't have the same effect on Kane because he groans again, guiding his finger to my entrance.

"How's that?" He barely moves two of his fingers inside me. They're not even fully in. "Is that enough?"

With bated breath, I whimper, "*More.*"

God, what is *happening* to me?

“Beg, Hadley. How badly do you want my fingers?”

“Kane, for fuck’s sake.” I’m growing irritated, and he laughs at the impatience plaguing my tone.

“What did I ask you to do?”

Defeat crushes me. “Beg.”

“And is that begging I hear?”

I might just kill him before I climax.

“Put your fingers inside me. *Please*,” I relent, desperate for his touch.

“Such a good fucking girl.” His fingers dive inside me, stretching my walls, and I’m so wet they only hurt for a few seconds.

Pleasure envelops my body as soon as he starts curling his fingers in and out of me, slowly at first and then furiously.

“Where do you want my mouth, Hadley?” He continues to torture me until I’m seriously considering kicking him in the face.

“On my clit,” I surrender too quickly for my liking.

He groans in satisfaction. “Full sentence, baby.”

“Put your mouth on my clit, *please*.” I hate myself, but I need to come more than I need air right now, and I’m willing to swallow my pride if it means feeling his tongue again.

I nearly scream when he sucks the bundle of nerves between his teeth. His fingers don’t slow down, continuously pumping into me as he eats me out, twirling his tongue around the sensitive bud to the point of making my thighs shake.

I only realize I’ve gripped his hair and buried his face deep between my legs when he laps at my pussy and lets out a carnal laugh I feel in my stomach.

My impending orgasm creeps up on me faster than my body can handle, and I throw my head back with a quiet moan.

I tug on his hair harder, and he picks up the pace.

He pulls away a few seconds later, staring me dead in the eyes as he says, “Don’t come before the second verse.”

What?

That’s when his other hand lets go of my thigh and falls to the piano keys.

“What are you doing?” I ask, but his mouth is back on my clit the next second, and I take it he has no intention of answering me.

The melody he plays seems familiar, but it’s not until my orgasm reaches the point of no return that I recognize it.

He’s playing “I’m Still Yours.”

I can feel myself coming undone. “Kane, I’m—”

“Hold it.” He drives his fingers deeper inside me but abandons my clit, placing sharp kisses all over my pelvis so that I don’t come just yet.

“I can’t.” I claw at the piano beneath me, barely breathing as he plays our song.

At least, I’d like to think he wrote it about me.

I’m losing control by the time he gets to the chorus. The lyrics flash before my eyes, tugging at my heartstrings and self-control.

You’re not mine.

And that’s okay.

But I’ll still care.

From far away.

You’re not mine.

And that’s okay.

But I’m still yours.

Now and always.

The moment the chorus ends, he drags his tongue up my slit and curls his fingers faster, allowing me to come all over his face.

And I do.

I come so hard I disconnect from my body, convulsing and reaching a level of pleasure I'm worried the human body can't sustain.

I'm trying to steady my breathing for dear life, but all I can do is watch as my chest heaves furiously. I'm sure I've peaked until he scrapes his teeth against my clit a final time and takes me even higher than before, my juices dripping between my ass cheeks.

I can barely hold myself up, my orgasm fading and taking my strength with it. The arm I was leaning on flinches, and that seems to be Kane's cue to slide my legs off his shoulders.

That just happened.

I knew I was naked while he had his face between my legs, but I wasn't *as* aware of it as I am now. Is this the moment where I gather my clothes, dignity, and pride off the floor and run?

What exactly is a girl supposed to do after being given a mind-blowing orgasm on a piano?

I can tell he's taken notice of my inner dialogue because he steps forward, grips my chin in one hand, and places a hard kiss on my mouth.

Next thing I know, he's pulling me back into his arms like I'm weightless, wrapping my legs around his waist and walking out of the room.

I'm butt naked in the hallway. Drea and Scar could see Kane carrying me if they just opened their bedroom doors. I've never felt so vulnerable.

I circle his neck with my arms, leaning forward to whisper, "What are you doing?"

He positions his mouth next to my ear, his voice packed with need and bad intentions. "You didn't think I was done with you, did you?"



HADLEY

Kane drops me onto his bed a beat later, luring a small gasp from my lips when my back hits the mattress with a thud.

I grip the blanket as if to brace myself for whatever he has planned. My chest is rising with erratic pants, and I look up at him, waiting for his next move.

I expected him to pick up right where we left off, but he doesn't move, standing perfectly still at the end of the bed, dark strands of hair falling in front of his hungry eyes as he drinks in my naked body.

My heart is pounding furiously in my chest, the crushing tension in the air anchoring me into place. I still haven't recovered from the insane orgasm he gave me in the sunroom, but when he lowers his gaze to the sweet spot between my legs, my thighs clench.

For the love of God, I *just* came.

How can I still be this desperate for his touch?

"Didn't have enough, did we?" His raspy voice is like liquid heat dripping down my body.

The cunning, sexy smirk on his face tells me I've already given myself away, but my pride butts in. "I... I don't know what you mean."

His eyes rake over my naked figure once more. "I think you do."

I feel so damn vulnerable like this, with him fully dressed while I'm naked.

"Spread those legs for me," he instructs, still unmoving.

He's not serious.

He wants to make me come *again*?

"What?"

A low growl rumbles in his throat. "Spread your fucking legs, Hadley."

"But I—"

He's climbing on top of me before I can conclude my sentence, parting my thighs as far and wide as he can. I'm still ridiculously turned on, and satisfaction tears through his eyes when he zeroes in on my pussy.

He sinks his teeth into his bottom lip, guiding two fingers near my entrance. He doesn't push them in all the way, driving his fingers just deep enough to coat the tips with my arousal.

I know my body's betrayed me from the way his eyes flare. "Legs over your head."

My skin is on fire. "I'm way too sensitive. I can't do this again."

He slowly pulls his fingers out of me. "You can. And you will."

I can't breathe, my body shuddering with need.

"Hadley, legs over your head. Now," he repeats with such authority that I feel compelled to obey, pulling my legs back so that they frame my face and fall on each side of my head.

I've never been more exposed in my life. Not only does Kane have an extremely clear shot of my pussy like this, but

he also has a front-seat view of my ass, and judging from the low groan he expels, he wouldn't have it any other way.

The next thing I know, he's dipping two fingers between my lips.

"Has anyone ever played with your ass?"

"No." My body aches from all the stretching this position requires. I should start doing yoga or something.

"I went easy on you before. If it gets to be too much, you need to tell me."

Wait.

He went *easy* on me before?

Were we in the same room?

"Hadley?" he presses when I don't answer.

What did I just get myself into?

"Okay."

"Good girl."

Those are the last words he says before sliding two fingers deep inside my pussy. I bite back a moan when he starts curling in and out of me.

"Breathe," he commands.

Then he leans in to graze my clit with his teeth.

The sensation is almost painful due to how raw and sensitive my last orgasm made me, but it isn't long before the pain switches places. Kane's previous request makes more sense the second he squeezes a third finger inside me.

I can't stop myself from crying out.

I feel so full like this. Like there isn't an inch of space left for him to claim.

"Fuck, quiet, baby," he rasps and laps at my pussy one, two times, until he's fully eating me out, dragging his mouth up and down my clit with rapid strokes of his tongue.

I can't seem to adjust to his fingers, shifting and fighting the discomfort the invasion created.

"Kane," I half moan, half whine, and he drags his teeth along my clit again, capturing it between his lips and releasing it.

"You're doing so fucking good, Hads."

Somehow, his words soothe me.

"Can you loosen up for me?" he asks, and I inhale a sharp breath, pouring all of my focus into relaxing. Kane stretches me deeper, the curling of his fingers increasing in speed as I close my eyes.

It's like a switch.

As though all I needed was to completely surrender myself to him for the pleasure to overpower the pain.

My mouth falls open, a quiet moan escaping it, and Kane's mouth clamps down on my clit again. "That's it, take it all in."

He doesn't stop the way he did in the sunroom. He doesn't give me multiple chances to back out like before, devouring me without a sliver of restraint.

His right hand flies out to grip the back of my thigh, and he presses down, stretching me even wider, but I barely feel the sting.

This whole situation seems surreal.

I'm naked in Kane's bed, lying on my back with my ass in the air and my legs sprawled over my head.

I should be horrified that I went from hating him to letting him bury his face between my thighs two times in a single night, but all I can feel is pure bliss, each stroke of his tongue a reminder of the ecstasy that tore through me just minutes ago.

I didn't think I could come again so soon.

Hell, I didn't think my body could *handle* round two, but before I can even attempt to conceptualize it, a second orgasm

—this one stronger than any I’ve ever had—gathers momentum in my stomach.

I can hear how wet I am as Kane’s fingers repeatedly hit my G-spot from the inside.

“I need you to trust me, Hads.”

My eyes fly open from the moment his hand abandons my thigh.

I open my mouth to ask him what he’s going to do, but he cuts me off by circling my asshole with his fingers.

“*Trust me,*” he repeats, placing slow kisses on my inner thigh.

I feel myself shaking as soon as he pushes half of his index finger into my ass. It hurts, but in a good way, and I want to protest, but the next thing I know, his tongue is right back on my pulsating clit, and I’m coming on his face so hard my hips buck.

I’m convulsing, my thighs coated in my juices, and Kane responds by curling his fingers harder and suctioning my clit between his lips a final time.

Another cry tries to break free, but I keep my mouth shut, forbidding its escape.

My journey back down to Earth is a more violent one than I expected. Fear gushes through my veins faster than my orgasm faded to black, and my eyes fly wide open.

“You’re out of this fucking world, Hadley.”

I asked myself what I’d gotten myself into before, and I’m starting to think the answer is *more than I bargained for*.

A surge of emotions swarms through my chest as Kane reaches for my thighs and lowers my legs. He lies on his back, catching my hand in his and leading me onto his chest. A sharp breath escapes me when his arms close around my body and squeeze.

The sweet, unexpected gesture tugs at my heartstrings, and I shiver against him. He takes notice immediately and pulls

away, just long enough to guide the blanket on his bed over the two of us.

The weighted blanket is comforting, but nothing compares to the relief that fills me when he sits up and takes off his shirt before lying back down.

I barely realize how quickly I cuddle up to him, my body chasing the warmth of his skin.

I rest my head against the guitar tattoo on his shoulder, but he drops his hand to my lower back and presses on my tailbone to lure me closer. My head is flush with his pec now, and he exhales what sounds like a groan of satisfaction.

“I can’t believe we just did that,” I think out loud.

The corner of his mouth curls into a grin, and he tucks a strand of my red hair away from my face. “Believe it. Because it sure as fuck won’t be the last time.”

His response sets a wild herd of butterflies loose in my stomach.

So many questions eat at me. *Does he want to be friends with benefits? Is this purely about sex to him?*

And what about me?

Do I want more than a sexual relationship?

We hold each other in silence for the next few minutes. Somehow, this silence feels *telling*. We’re both comfortable like this. With Kane dragging the backs of his fingers up and down my arm while I trace endless circles on his chest.

We both welcome the quiet instead of dreading it, and another five minutes pass before my mind returns to its scheduled overthinking.

All the mysteries I’ve yet to elucidate since getting to the beach house pop into my brain, and I might not be ready to label what just happened between us, but I’m more than willing to ask him about everything else.

“Can I ask you a question?” It comes out as a whisper.

His green eyes drop to mine. “Hit me.”

“Do you still drink?” I ask, memories of the first time he kissed me fueling my curiosity. “I know you were drinking that night in the gazebo.”

He was sipping on a bottle of whiskey when I found him sitting alone. But that was the only instance where I’ve seen him drink since the beginning of the summer.

He hasn’t had a drop of alcohol at any of our parties and gatherings so far.

He wasn’t drinking at Vince’s pool party, nor did he drink the night of Jamie’s birthday. Jamie also said he didn’t have a drink that time they all hung out at the docks without me.

I just want to know if he’s actually sober or *way* too good at pretending that he is.

“That night in the gazebo was a relapse. It’s the only time I’ve had a drink since summer started.”

“Shit... That couldn’t have been easy. Stopping cold turkey.” I angle my head to look at him.

He scoffs. “You’re telling me.”

“How’d you do it?”

A sigh leaves his lips. “I overheard our moms talking when I snuck out to try and find something to drink one night. It was just days after I got here.” He scoffs in recollection. “I had glasses and this creepy-ass camouflage on. I was hoping to raid a 7-Eleven or whatever liquor store I could find downtown.

“They were out on the patio when I came down. My mom was sobbing in Lillian’s arms, talking about how worried she was about me and how she felt she’d failed me as a mother.” Something in his eyes shifts, a drop of guilt bleeding through his words. “I just... I felt like such a piece of shit I thought I was going to die.”

I’m not even the tiniest bit surprised that Evie’s the reason he stopped drinking.

“I’d rather spend the rest of my life in fucking *agony* than ever have to hear my mom cry again.”

God, he *cares* so much.

Maybe not about everything and everyone, but the select few he loves can be sure he'll *never* desert them.

This guy is loyal to a fault.

“She’s lucky to have such an adoring son.”

He shakes his head. “I’m the lucky one.”

A few more seconds elapse before I feel a yawn coming on.

“I should get some sleep. I have to work tomorrow.” I start to move out of his embrace, but he immediately tightens his grip around my waist.

“Okay. *Night.*” He grabs his phone on the nightstand and selects the app controlling the house’s smart lights.

He turns off the lights in his bedroom with one click. Then he closes his eyes as if ready to doze off.

A chuckle climbs up my throat. “I meant in my own bed.”

His lips tip into a smile. “What was that? I can’t hear you with my eyes closed.”

My chuckle evolves into a full-body laugh. “What am I? Your hostage?”

He cracks one eye open, giving a shrug. “If that’s what you want to call it.”

I should want to fight him on this, but I don’t have the energy. “Are you saying I’m not allowed to leave?”

He closes his eyes again. “You’re not sleeping anywhere else, I can tell you that much.”

I consider my options.

I won’t be comfortable unless I put some clothes on.

I *hate* sleeping naked. Just doesn’t seem right. Probably because of that time Gray and I watched those funny videos of people having to evacuate their fifth-floor apartment butt naked during a fire.

“If you’re going to keep me here, the least you can do is give me some clothes.”

He peels his eyes open, the smirk dancing on his mouth making my heart flutter. “Says who?”

Idiot.

I’ve slipped out of his arms and flicked the lights back on before he can protest. I’m quick to wrap the blanket I pulled off the bed around my body and pad toward his dresser on the far wall. I’ll just grab a T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants.

The first drawer I open has hoodies in it. It isn’t long before I find the T-shirt drawer and start digging through the pile of clothes.

The first shirt I pull out casts a thick mist over my eyes.

What the...

I glance back at Kane, holding the shirt in the air. “Is that...”

Discomfort streaks through his eyes. “Gray’s? Yeah.”

The T-shirt in my hand is black, old, and sports a funny quote. I remember looking for this shirt when Mom and I were sorting through Gray’s clothes and donating them.

I wanted to keep it like the rest of his quotes T-shirts. I was so sad when I didn’t find it anywhere.

Turns out Kane had it all along.

My gaze skims over the quote.

It’s okay to lose your shit sometimes. If you don’t, you’ll end up full of shit and you’ll explode. Then there’ll be shit everywhere and nobody wants that.

I never thought a quote about *shit* could bring tears to my eyes, but I’m losing the battle against my grief before I know it, a lone tear streaming down my face.

I wipe it away quickly. “Why do you have this?”

He averts his eyes like my tears make him physically sick. “Gray gave it to me.”

“He did?”

Kane nods. “Yeah. A little after we moved into your house.”

“Why?”

“We’d sold most of my designer clothes so that my mom could afford rent, and I had three shirts left, *tops*. One night, my clothes were in the wash, and I was looking for something to wear. Gray noticed and gave me the T-shirt. I refused at first, being the proud little shit that I was, and in typical Gray fashion, he told me to get over myself and take the damn shirt.”

“And you still have it?” I state the obvious.

“Wouldn’t get rid of it for the world.”

My heart cracks down the middle.

I comb through his dresser for a pair of sweatpants before changing the subject. “Can you close your eyes while I get dressed?”

His scoff is my answer. “My face was between your legs five minutes ago, but you’re embarrassed to change in front of me?”

I hold my own. “Yes.”

“Fine. But just so you know, I intend to have every inch of your flawless fucking body committed to memory by next week.”

My cheeks flush.

“Eyes, mister!”

He lets out a deep, breathy laugh but complies. I get dressed as fast as I can and excuse myself to the bathroom.

By the time I come back, Kane has his eyes closed, but he’s covered himself with the bedsheet. It sits a few inches below his Adonis belt, his sculpted and tattooed body on display. I glance at the door, wondering if I could get away with sneaking off to my room while he’s asleep.

I start to walk away, but his voice cuts through the air. “Don’t even think about it.”

I look in his direction to see him staring at me with the most adorable smile on his face.

I wrestle a grin and amble toward the bed with the blanket balled up in my hand. I climb in right next to him, but he doesn’t let me pull the duvet over the two of us, immediately pulling me into his arms.

Kane presses his chest to my back, spooning me so tightly our bodies fit together like two pieces of a puzzle. His breath fans my skin as he buries his nose in the crook of my shoulder. I reach for the lamp on the nightstand and turn the lights off, for good this time.

Kane rests his chin on my shoulder, his breath skittering down my cheek. “Drea told me you opened a store.”

I can’t explain how nervous I feel when I realize he’s probably visited my website and gone through all of my paintings. “Oh, um... yeah.”

Kane drags his lips against the side of my neck, resting a gentle kiss below my jaw, and I shudder in his arms.

This is starting to freak me out.

All of this... cuddling with him... sleeping in his bed...

It feels... intimate.

Maybe more intimate than *actually* getting intimate with him.

I’ve had my fair share of meaningless hookups with guys before—that’s pretty much all I allowed myself to have after Gray died—but this moment feels significant.

He brings my focus back to him. “I went through your paintings.”

“And?”

“Your work is fucking incredible.”

My smile takes up my whole face. “Thank you. I’m hoping to sell enough to pay you back for all those supplies.”

He lets out an annoyed growl. “I told you I don’t care.”

“And I told you I’m not a charity case,” I counter.

He pushes on my stomach to press my body even tighter against his, and I feel his cock prod the crease of my ass.

He makes a disgruntled noise, slipping his fingers under my T-shirt. “Goddamn, you’re stubborn.”

I rub myself against the bulge in his pants. “You’re just figuring that out now?”

“Sleep, baby,” he warns, his fingertips digging into my hip bone and holding me steady as if to stop me from teasing him.

I’m quick to comply, letting the exhaustion take my body under and closing my eyes.

I spent all night wondering if this was just sexual.

But a guy who only wants sex doesn’t call you baby.

He doesn’t make you come twice without asking for anything in return.

He doesn’t kiss your jaw or tell you you’re not allowed to leave his bed.

I think this might be more.

The question is, can my heart handle it?



“HEY, ASSHOLE, WE HAVE TO LEAVE IN... SHIT, I’M SORRY!”

My senses blur together when I peel my eyes open, confusion making my thoughts foggy.

It takes my brain a few seconds to catch on, the previous night’s events coming back to me from the moment I take in my surroundings.

I'm in Kane's bed.

The first thing I notice is the veined forearm firmly wrapped around my waist. I cast a glance over my shoulder and find Kane sleeping like a baby. He's still spooning me. We haven't moved an inch since last night.

"I didn't know you were with... *someone*." Drea's voice snaps me out of it, and I look up, immediately spotting her by the doorway.

She's staring at us with her mouth agape, her shocked expression morphing into a knowing smirk as soon as we make eye contact.

On autopilot, I pick Kane's arm off my body—as though that's magically going to erase what Drea saw—and drop it at his side. Only then does he come to, stirring next to me.

"Drea? What the fuck are you doing here?" Kane's tired voice carries across the room.

"Just wanted to make sure you were awake. We have to leave in an hour."

Leave?

Leave *where*?

"I'm awake. Now, get out," he drawls.

Drea can barely contain her smile as she nods, apologizes again, and walks out.

I realize I *also* have somewhere to be as soon as she closes the door and sit up straight. "What time is it?"

Kane shrugs. "Who cares? Get back here."

I have the good sense to climb out of bed before Kane can trap me into his embrace.

"Where's my phone?" I search the nightstand and the floor, with no luck.

Shit, I must've left my phone in the sunroom.

Kane watches as I round the bed and grab his phone off the nightstand to check the time.

10:05.

Thank God.

I don't have to be at work for another two hours. But I still need to shower, get ready, and have breakfast. I also like to get to work a good twenty minutes before my shift.

“So, um... I need to take a shower and get ready for work. Last night was fun. Thanks for the orgasms.”

Thanks for the orgasms?

Did I really just say that?

I have zero idea how to talk to this guy, knowing where his tongue was last night, and it shows. I turn to walk away, but Kane's hand flies out to catch my wrist before I can take another step.

I expect him to pull me back into his arms, my mind racing when he pushes out of bed instead and makes a beeline for the bathroom.

“What are you doing?”

“You said you needed to shower. Let's shower.”

He doesn't give me a chance to digest what he just said, locking us in the bathroom and releasing my wrist.

He wants us to shower together?

As in... completely naked?

Duh.

People don't usually shower with clothes on.

He might've seen me in an extremely vulnerable position last night, but I've yet to see *him* naked, and the anticipation turns my stomach into a bag of knots.

“I... Don't take this the wrong way, but I was thinking alone.”

Problem is, he's already sliding the shower door open and turning the water on.

He spins in a circle, hungry eyes studying my body, and fills the space between us in one stride. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but not a chance in hell.”

Then his mouth is on mine.

I gasp at the suddenness of it all, and Kane uses my surprise to slip his tongue past my lips. My hands dart upward to clutch his face, and I moan at the expense of my pride.

Fuck.

Last night felt like a fever dream.

I somehow managed to convince myself that he would wake up the next day and go right back to avoiding me. The words he said to me before making me his on the piano echo in my head.

“This isn’t a onetime thing.”

Looks like he meant it.

Kane’s fingers curl around the nape of my neck as if to nail me into place as he works his tongue deeper into my mouth, claiming and tasting mine.

The kiss is raw, maddening, and carries a sharp edge of resentment. I wish there was a world in which I didn’t want him. A way to stop craving every little touch, every breathtaking kiss and the noises he makes when our lips fuse together.

If I could, I would surgically remove him from my body. Grab a scalpel and cut this boy out of me. Problem is, he’s so deep under my skin I’m afraid any attempt at extracting him would rip me open and bleed me dry.

I’m starting to think there’s no escaping my fate, and when he backs me up against the outer pane of the shower, sucks my bottom lip between his teeth, and tugs on it hard, *I don’t want to.*

Kane crushes his shirtless body to mine, and his right hand falls downward. He fists the fabric of my shirt like he’s pouring all of his willpower into *not* ripping it to shreds.

His groan is packed with impatience and a tinge of desperation. “Let me see those fucking tits.”

I arch my back, lifting my arms over my head to facilitate the process. He removes my shirt first. Then he goes for the sweatpants he lent me.

His big hands cup my breasts, his mouth latching onto my puckered nipples one by one. He twirls his tongue around the tips, sending bolts of pleasure to my lower stomach, and I take a fistful of the hair on the back of his head, keeping him there for a beat.

He’s got me butt naked.

Again.

Meanwhile, he’s still wearing the pants he fell asleep in—don’t ask me how he managed that one. You would have to pay me a *fortune* to sleep in jeans.

I bring my palms to his chest and push him off me.

“You’ve seen me naked two times now. I think it’s only fair that I get to see the goods, too.”

His stupid, sexy smirk constricts my throat. “No one’s stopping you.”

I don’t think twice, dropping to my knees in front of him and unbuckling his belt. His chest heaves with a sharp breath as I tug his zipper down and slip my fingers into the waistband of his jeans.

A growl rumbles deep in his throat, and I blink up at him innocently. “Jesus, Hadley. I can’t promise I’m going to be a gentleman if you—”

I pull his pants down in one go.

His cock slips free.

It’s thick and hard, bulging veins snaking up his shaft, and I can’t even begin to hide my shock.

He’s... huge.

I’m not exaggerating.

He makes the other dicks I've seen in my life look pathetic. Not only would he tear me apart *down there*, but I'm pretty sure I would risk death if I tried to deep-throat him.

I ogle his tattoo of a guitar wrapped in roses and thorns. The dark ink stretches across his bicep, pec, and obliques, stopping inches above his dick.

He must pick up on how overwhelmed I am because he takes my hand into his and lifts me off the bathroom floor.

"Get in," he instructs, gesturing to the shower with his chin. He barely gives me a chance to comply before he's following in after me and squeezing me into a tight corner of the tiled shower.

He doesn't even flinch at the temperature of the water, so hyperfocused on me that I feel the depth of his gaze in my bones.

He captures my lips in a searing kiss, his tongue tracing the seam of my mouth before requesting access. I open up for him, inching closer until my breasts are flush with his chest, and his cock is rubbing against my stomach.

He parts from me a few minutes later, reaching for the bodywash on the shower caddy and flipping it over, gathering the soap in his palm.

He rubs his hands together and covers my arms in soap before focusing on my breasts.

A moan escapes me as he washes me slowly, flicking my nipples with his thumb as he runs his fingers up my chest. He touches me everywhere except where I want him, discovering the curves of my body and taking his sweet time doing it.

Once he's done, he grabs the detachable showerhead and rinses the soap off me. I push to my tiptoes as soon as he's put the showerhead back into place and take his lips with mine. He sucks in a sharp breath at my initiative, kissing me back instantly.

Our tongues are in a frenzy by the time I garner the courage to grab his cock. Kane ends the kiss right away,

jerking his hips and pushing his cock farther into my hand without realizing it.

“Shit.” A sigh hisses between his lips when I tighten my hold around him. “Don’t fucking start something you can’t finish.”

I attempt to jerk him off, but it’s an epic failure, seeing as he’s giving me *no space*, still cornering me. It’s as though he needs to be as close to me as humanly possible, and I can barely lift my arm in this position, let alone give a good hand job.

Crazy thing is, looking at him now, you’d think he’s about to come in my hand, the muscles in his jaw flexing every time I squeeze my fingers around him.

I slip away from him, and his eyes widen in shock, watching as I lower myself to the shower floor and grab his cock again.

His hand dives into my red hair. “Fuck, just... look at you. You’re a fucking dream.”

Shaking on the inside, I circle his cock with my hand and move forward until his tip is inches from my face.

I scan his features, taking in his reaction as I swipe my tongue over the head of his cock.

He twists my hair around his fist. “Fuck, Hadley... Don’t look at me like that unless you want me to go fucking feral on your mouth.”

I keep my gaze firmly on him, hovering near his cock but never touching it.

That’s when he snaps.

“*Open.*” He uses his grip on my hair to jerk my head closer, and I let out a small gasp. The next thing I know, he’s driving his length past my lips and filling my mouth to the brim.

My first instinct is to pull back, but he doesn’t let me, holding me in place.

“Fuuck.” He groans, burying himself deep in my throat.

I can’t explain what he does to me. All I know is the look on his face flips a switch inside me. I’ve never been more turned on in my life, and the fact that it took him taking charge and shoving his dick inside my mouth scares me.

Desire pricks at my skin, and I try to take him deeper, gagging when I do. I look up just in time to see his eyes soften.

“Relax your jaw.” He runs his fingers up and down my jawline.

I can’t seem to do it.

“Hadley, relax that pretty mouth for me.”

My eyes are starting to water, and he doesn’t seem to like it.

He’s just so damn big there’s no way I can put all of him in my mouth.

He rubs my cheek with his thumb, what sounds like a mixture of affection and doubt lacing his tone. “Hey, it’s okay. We should stop if—”

He’s cut off by both of my hands enclosing his cock.

He’s too big for my mouth. There’s no point in denying it. And while I intend to do everything I can to make him feel good, I refuse to make myself feel bad in the process.

I begin pumping him with both hands while my mouth attaches to the tip of his cock. I’m putting my all into it, sucking him off with so much pressure his head falls back.

“*Oh, fuck.*” His groan is the hottest thing I’ve ever heard.

I twirl my tongue around him repeatedly, pumping my hands faster and guiding him deeper every once in a while. I can’t keep him there the whole time without choking, but judging by the pleasure contorting his face, it doesn’t matter. I repeat the process a handful of times before he starts shaking.

“Stop.” He taps the back of my hand, and I comply, removing my fingers from his cock and gripping his legs for

balance.

That's his cue to grab hold of my face and start full-blown fucking my mouth.

"Hadley Queen, you're a fucking *goddess*." He squeezes his eyes shut, ramming himself down my throat again and again.

I don't say a word, letting him use me to get off.

And the crazy part? I *love* it.

That's right. I must be out of my mind because I love what he's doing to me, and when he unloads inside my mouth with a curse, I feel... sad.

Disappointed that it's over.

I swallow every drop of his cum, wiping the corner of my mouth with my index.

He takes my wrist into his hand and helps me to my feet just seconds after he comes down from the high. I can feel his stare boring holes through my forehead, but I'm not brave enough to look at him.

I feel ashamed.

Like I should be embarrassed that I let this happen when I *swore* I would never forgive him. I broke every single one of the promises I made myself. All for the boy who broke me.

It's easy to forget who he is when we're alone, trading confessions in the sunroom, but he's still one of the most famous artists on the planet and the *one* person I can't trust.

I don't want to fall for him, knowing he could walk out of my life all over again.

"Hads," he breathes as though he can sense me pulling away from him.

I show him my back. "I really need to get ready if I don't want to be late for work."

He doesn't speak for a moment.

But then a strong hand wraps around my arm, and he spins me around so quickly I nearly lose my balance.

Kane's hand flies to my lower back before I slip, and he tugs me against his chest. "What just happened?"

I look up at him, the ache in my ribs spreading to my entire body. Understanding flashes in his eyes. I don't need to answer his question. He knows the spell is broken, and unlike the time he kissed me in the gazebo, *I'm* the one who wants to run.

When I don't respond, he tilts my chin forward and kisses the fuck out of me.

I let him kiss me.

In spite of all the reasons why I shouldn't. Like the fact that summer will be over in a few weeks, and he'll go right back to LA while I go back to Boone.

He'll go back to being on top of the world, and I'll go back to being the invisible girl who put him there.

It takes all I have to disconnect from him and step out of the shower.

"Hads, just... wait." His plea hurts a little. "Did I... Did I do something wrong?"

I make quick work of drying my body with a towel and getting dressed, well aware that he's watching my every move, still inside the shower.

I don't allow myself to glance his way, but I can just picture him standing there, naked and confused as water courses down his glorious body.

I can't even look at him. "No, I just really need to get to work."

Those are the last words I say before racing out of there.



HADLEY

“He’s texted you *how* many times now?” Jamie asks as she pours white wine into a coffee mug and slides it over to me across the counter.

A smile forms on the corners of my lips when I scan the mug. “Are you out of wineglasses by any chance?”

“Yup. It’s either that or a measuring cup.”

I snort, bringing the mug to my mouth to take a swig of wine. “No time for dishes, huh? Shay must be keeping you *very* busy.”

I’ve always known Jamie to be a neat freak. The only reason she wouldn’t be on top of her cleaning was if she was on top of... well, *Shay*.

The mention of her girlfriend paints Jamie’s cheeks a deep shade of red.

She rounds the kitchen island before plopping down onto the swiveling stool next to me. “Don’t try to change the subject, missy.”

Shay and Jamie are *so* smitten with each other it’s become a bit of an inside joke.

It didn't take the guys very long to figure out that Jamie melts into a puddle at the mere mention of Shay. They've been having a blast teasing her about it.

"I'm not changing the subject. I'm *dropping* it. There's nothing left to say." I glance at my phone resting on Jamie's countertop.

"Nothing left to say? The poor guy's been begging for scraps of your attention for *days*! I think the least you can do is reply to his texts."

I cringe. "And say what? Thanks for the almost-sex, but we don't stand a chance? He has to know that already."

Irritated, she grips my phone and flips it over, holding it up to my face and cracking a satisfied smile when it unlocks.

"Hey!" I try to steal it back, but she pushes to her feet, distancing herself and selecting my conversation with Kane.

"Eight messages. He's sent you *eight* messages since he left. It's so obvious the guy is obsessed with you."

A part of me wants to believe her.

Hell, a part of me already *does*.

He's given me no reason to think that this is only about sex, and that's a good thing, but it also terrifies me. What if she's right and Kane wants to be with me?

What then?

Are we just going to spend the rest of the summer lying to ourselves?

Enjoy the time we have left while pretending we're not going to crash and burn the second reality catches up to us?

I've already had to watch Kane walk away once, and it almost killed me. I am *not* doing it a second time.

"You done?" I swipe my phone from her hands.

A sigh escapes her mouth. "Hadley... you've been hiding out in my house since he got back. You can't avoid him forever."

Doesn't mean I'm not going to try.

Kane got back from LA two days ago.

Apparently, he and Drea had to go home to “take care of business.” My guess is it had to do with Joshua’s lawsuit and the trial, which is right around the corner.

Evie did mention something about Kane’s legal team trying to negotiate a settlement, but Josh refused.

“Josh plans to broadcast the trial online. It’s like he’s trying to make a spectacle out of it. Like he wants the whole world to witness the end of Kane’s career;” I heard Evie say to my mother while they were enjoying their morning coffee on the patio.

The last time I saw Kane was the day I gave him a ridiculously filthy blow job in the shower. And if I’m careful, I should be able to avoid him until the end of the summer.

Mom’s condo should be ready in a few weeks, which means we’ll be leaving the beach house and moving into her place sooner than we thought.

Jamie hasn’t kicked me out of her house yet, and since Cal got a summer job, I’m usually asleep by the time he comes home. *Thank fuck.* Having to see him every day would be next-level awkward.

My mom was suspicious when I told her I’d be crashing at Jamie’s for a little while, but I made it look like I was only doing it to be closer to work. Jamie’s house is a short walk away from Sandy’s, so I won’t be needing to use her car every day.

She wasn’t sold at first, but I pointed out that not having to use the car meant I’d be saving time *and* money. Not only is it a win-win situation, but it just made sense. Especially considering that I only agreed to stay at the beach house so that Mom and I could save up.

My phone chimes with a text just as I’m about to put it down.

It’s Kane.

Jamie peeks at the notification on my screen. “Make that *nine* texts.”

I decide not to read his text.

“Aren’t you going to check what it says?” she presses.

I chew on my bottom lip. “I don’t know...”

“For fuck’s sake!” She grabs my phone again, pulling the same trick by flipping the phone over and unlocking it with my Face ID.

She taps our conversation, displaying all of Kane’s unanswered messages, and a pang of guilt flickers in my chest. I take it back from her, giving in to curiosity and reading what they say.

KANE

I’m going back to LA for a few days. I was going to tell you this morning, but I didn’t get a chance.

KANE

Just in case I wasn’t clear before, I expect you to be naked in my bed when I get back.

KANE

Hads?

KANE

Now who’s ghosting who?

KANE

Hadley, just fucking talk to me.

KANE

Seriously?

KANE

I'm coming home soon. We're going to talk.

KANE

Hadley... this is fucking me up...

And then there's his most recent message.

KANE

Fair warning. I'm tracking your ass down if you don't come tonight.

“What's he talking about? What's tonight?” Jamie asks, reading over my shoulder.

I think on it for a bit. “I have no idea.”

Both our phones chime at the exact same time.

“It's the group chat,” Jamie says.

We exchange glances before tapping our conversation with Scar, Kane, Cal, Vince, and Drea.

The guys changed the chat's name from the Fantastic 6 to Summer Fuckers—just a few of the *many* names the chat has had in the past month. Better than last week's names.

Cum Guzzlers and Duck My Sick.

Kane sent a message to everyone, inviting us to a rather... unusual place tonight.

I just know the guys are losing their minds right now.

Well, shit.

How am I supposed to say no to *that*?



“I CAN’T BELIEVE HE RENTED OUT THE WHOLE PLACE. LIKE, seriously? Who does that?” I grumble as Jamie pulls into the deserted parking lot a few minutes after nine.

“Rich people, that’s who.” Jamie pushes the gear into park and kills the ignition.

We ran into three security guys the size of military tanks on our way in. We had to give them our names and pull out our IDs in order to get in.

I thought Kane was messing with us when I read his message telling us that he’d rented out a whole damn *fair* for the night.

The place is ours from nine to midnight, and while the employees are here to make sure the night goes smoothly, no one else is allowed on-site.

Did I want to come?

Hell no.

Did I have a choice?

Also, no.

Jamie turned to look at me the second Kane shared the news. She could tell how hesitant I was, and she immediately said, “Tell me you’re not coming, and I’m dragging you there by your hair.”

Not to mention Kane made it clear he wouldn’t hesitate to show up on Jamie’s doorstep if I didn’t come tonight.

This was a bad idea. I can feel it.

“About time. We’ve been waiting for, like, seven minutes,” Vince bitches the second we climb out of the car.

He, Kane, Drea, and Scar are waiting by Vince’s car—which is the only car in the parking lot aside from Jamie’s—and I’m quick to understand that they all caught a ride together.

I notice Cal isn’t here and remember he told us he couldn’t get out of work so last minute.

I fake a gasp, shutting the passenger door. “Seven whole minutes. *Outrageous.*”

“We’ve got the biggest fair in the state waiting on the other side of that gate. Every minute counts,” Vince argues.

I can feel Kane’s eyes boring into my skull as we approach the group. I’m careful not to meet his stare, keeping my head down and wishing the sky would swallow me in a scene worthy of an alien abduction movie.

“What are we waiting for? Let’s fucking *go.*” Vince can’t contain his excitement a minute longer.

His comment springs us into action. Faint music increases in volume the closer we get to the entrance gates. The structures of the rides tower in the distance like steel giants.

“Goddamn,” Scar breathes once we enter the site.

Goddamn indeed.

A sea of twinkling lights illuminates the fair, creating a spectacle of vivid colors and an atmosphere I can only describe as magical. Blue, red, and yellow lights dance and shimmer all around us, casting a glow upon the rides, the game booths, and the food vendors.

Marveland Fair is by far the most popular amusement site in North Carolina. I remember coming here with Gray and my mom a few times as a kid, but it was always during the day and nowhere near as mesmerizing as it is now.

The place was packed every time, and being a tiny little thing, I couldn’t see past the crowd, even standing on the tip of my toes. Not to mention I couldn’t go on most of the rides due to being an inch shorter than the permitted height.

Gray, however, was just tall enough to ride the roller coasters. Let me tell you, I was *green* with jealousy.

An employee I assume to be the manager comes up to Kane right away. “Mr. Wilder, it is such a pleasure to meet you. An honor, really.”

Kane responds with a polite smile, and the lady proceeds to tell him she has all the fair employees on standby to operate

any ride we might want to go on.

“We only have three hours. What’s a ride you guys really want to do?” Jamie suggests when the manager walks away.

“All of them,” Vince deadpans.

We laugh.

He doesn’t.

“I’m serious. I’m not leaving until I’ve done every single ride and thrown up at least once.”

Jamie and I exchange glances.

I don’t think three hours are going to be enough.



“A HUNDRED GRAND?” JAMIE SCREECHES SO LOUDLY THE REST of us suffer mini heart attacks. “No way you just spent a hundred fucking grand on *three hours*.”

Kane shrugs, rearing his arm back and letting the dart fly straight into the red balloon on the board. “What’s the point of having a fuck ton of money if I can’t spend it on my friends?”

Jamie smacks her mouth shut, but it’s obvious she’s appalled by how much this cost him. To be fair, she *asked*. This is Kane we’re talking about. She should’ve known the answer would be nothing short of ridiculous.

I get that by closing down the fair they’re losing ticket sales, and they need to compensate food vendors and all that, but a hundred grand? Were they really going to make a *hundred* grand in three hours?

No wonder the manager was sucking up to him. For a hundred grand, she should’ve bowed down and fed him grapes or something.

Scar scoffs, looping his arm around Kane’s neck and shaking his shoulders. “We get it, asshole. You’re loaded.”

Vince angles the paper bag he's holding backward so that the popcorn inside it falls directly into his mouth. "You fuckers want to do the Detonator? It's the only ride we haven't done yet."

This guy baffles me.

We've gone on nearly every single ride at the fair in the last two hours—some we've even done *twice*—and he wants to go again? I thought we'd be on a time crunch, but the process is much quicker when you don't have to wait in line.

The last thing we went on was this roller coaster that flips you upside down so violently I thought my organs were going to come out through my mouth.

Afterward, we decided to take a break and hit the food vendors.

I'm the only one who hasn't inhaled twice my body weight in popcorn. I'm still nauseous from that last ride.

We relocated to the game booths ten minutes ago, and we've been alternating between the ring toss game and the dart balloon game.

"I was thinking we could do the Maze," I suggest, eyeing the big, terrifying house next to the Ferris wheel. It's got three floors, few windows, and a large neon sign that reads "The Maze: *Can you find your way out?*"

"Back up. There's a maze?" Scar asks, scanning the area.

I snort and point to the tall structure in the distance. "Not an actual maze. That's just what the house is called."

"Isn't that the creepy house you can't get out of?" Jamie asks.

"You *can* get out. It just takes a while," I answer.

I'll never forget the time Gray and I snuck in there while Mom was ordering us cotton candy.

It's not scary per se, but the Victorian-style house is full of dark, narrow corridors, secret tunnels, and doors that lead to

nowhere. It's old, dusty, and there are flickering lights in every room.

They used to drop visitors through trapdoors, but a guy broke his leg a few years back, and they took those out. They still drop the floors, but just a few inches to make people think they're falling.

It took me and Gray a good hour and a half to find our way out when we went in. Granted, we were kids back then, but every time we went through a door, it would lead us back to where we started, and by the time we made it back to my mom, she had the entire fair on lockdown and every security guard looking for us.

"That shit's going to take *forever*." Vince makes it clear he's not sold on the idea.

Scar shrugs. "I'm with Park on this one. I say we continue doing rides until they kick us out."

There's just one problem with that: I know for a damn fact that my stomach won't survive another roller coaster.

They all seem to agree, arguing about which ride to go on.

Whatever, I'll just do it alone.

It's been a while since I went into the Maze. I'm curious to see what they've changed and if I can find my way out after all these years.

"Well, I'm doing it," I declare.

"We only have an hour left. You sure that's going to be enough time?" Jamie worries.

I flash a smile. "I'll be fine, I promise."

We go our separate ways a few minutes later.

A pit settles into my stomach as I make my way toward the Maze. It's not like this is a horror house and killer clowns are going to jump out at every corner, but for a reason I can't pinpoint, I feel anxious.

The employee at the entrance of the Maze walks me through the rules, reminding me to press one of the panic

buttons throughout the house if I get lost or feel claustrophobic. He assures me that he knows the house from top to bottom, and he'll have me out of there in no time.

I thank the employee before pushing the double doors open and walking inside. The man closes the doors behind me seconds after I've passed the threshold.

And then there's nothing but quiet.

Jamie was right.

This *is* creepy.

A lot creepier than I remember.

Was it always like this?

I'm guessing the eerie feeling is amplified at night. The sun was out and blinding the last time I was here. Not to mention I wasn't alone then. I had my brother with me.

Before me is a long and narrow corridor. Wallpaper with floral designs covers the walls, the flickering chandelier hanging above my head barely illuminating the space. Three doors sit at the end of the hall, a faint light peeking through the gap underneath the middle one.

I seriously consider turning around and telling the employee I changed my mind, but my pride stops me.

If you could do this when you were a kid, you can do it now.

I come to a slow stop in front of the closed doors and grip a knob at random.

The first thing I see when I walk in is the lit marble fireplace against the far wall. It's covered in cobwebs, and the fire is artificial in spite of looking oddly realistic.

A large rug spreads across the floor, the red velvet couch and armchair on top of it facing each other, while a wooden desk and a chair are pushed into a corner.

There are two full floor-to-ceiling bookcases on each side of the fireplace, and I figure one of them has to lead to a secret passage.

I've only taken a few steps when I hear the front door closing in the distance.

Someone just walked in.

I stiffen up, listening in for another noise.

Footsteps rumble down the hall.

My mind is immediately swamped with worst-case scenarios.

My friends weren't interested in joining. What if one of the employees saw me going in alone and—

The door creaks open behind me, and my throat tightens until oxygen can't travel to my lungs anymore.

I spin, scared out of my mind, and then...

I see Kane.

I'm relieved, at first.

Until I notice the expression on his face.

Oh, he is *not* happy.

"What are you doing here?" I say dryly.

Kane cocks an eyebrow at my less-than-welcoming greeting. "Is that all you have to say to me?"

I open my mouth to answer, but I can't produce a sound.

It's the way he's looking at me. His eyes are packed with anger and satisfaction, a combination I'm in no way ready for.

It's as though he was waiting to get me alone, and now that he has me, he's not letting me get away.

"What else am I supposed to say?"

He closes the door behind him with a bang. "*I'm sorry I ghosted you would be a good place to start.*"

Holy shit.

Why do I feel like I just signed my own death warrant?

I try to school my expression, but my trembling voice gives me away. "To be fair, you ghosted me first."

He laughs and takes a few determined steps in my direction, his gaze never straying from mine.

He stops too close to me. “You want to tell me why you weren’t in my bed when I got home?”

I know he’s referring to that text he sent me.

I swallow hard. “I’ve been busy.”

The side of his mouth curls into a smirk. “Have you now?”

I nod, but his proximity is intoxicating, and I might just have to run before it’s too late.

I clear my throat. “We only have an hour. I need to keep looking for a way out.”

I’m about to leave.

Only, something stops me.

Something warm.

And soft.

Kane’s mouth comes down on mine with such power that I stumble back a step.

Shit.

Kane’s kissing me.

Worse, I’m kissing him back.

“Did you really think—” He traps my bottom lip between his teeth and bites hard enough to hurt me. “—you could walk out of my life after I had you begging me to let you come on top of a fucking piano?”

His kisses are vindictive, fueled by irritation and resentment. I fist the fabric of his shirt, preparing to push him away, but all I can do is claw at his chest, needing more as he slips his tongue inside my mouth.

No, no, no.

This is precisely what can’t happen.

“Did you really think I would *let you*?” His mouth meets mine again, swallowing the moan that escapes me when our

tongues connect.

Kane snakes his arm around my back and crashes our bodies together, his free hand gripping my cheeks as he bruises my mouth with his, practically milking the kiss out of me.

“Don’t *ever* do this shit to me again.” His tongue thrusting back in steals my breath. He pulls back abruptly, staring me dead in the eyes, and grits out, “You nearly fucking killed me, you know that?”

The next thing I know, he’s wrapped his hands around the backs of my thighs and lifted me up into his arms. My legs close around his waist like it’s muscle memory, and I lose myself in another searing kiss.

I want everything he has to give me, regardless of my brain’s disapproval, and when he drops me onto the wooden desk shoved into a corner of the room, I know the apology he really wants is the apology I can’t give him.

Not without getting my heart broken.

“Why did you ghost me?” He parts from my mouth just long enough to sink his teeth into the skin below my ear. “I need to know *why*.”

My head falls back, giving him clearer access to my neck, and he doesn’t hesitate to run his tongue up the side of it, stopping near my ear to say, “Why do you keep pushing me away?”

His head falls to the swell of my breasts just seconds later, and he marks my skin, knowing damn well I’m not going to stop him.

Because I *can’t*.

I can’t deny him, no matter how much I should.

When I don’t reply, he abandons the hickey he was working on and looks up at me, the misery in his eyes slicing my heart in half.

“Summer will be over soon,” I croak.

His eyes flare with confusion. “And?”

He just doesn’t get it.

“And you’ll go back to your real life. To your screaming, adoring fans, supermodel girlfriends, and million-dollar mansions. You and I... We don’t exist after this. We *can’t*. The sooner we accept that, the sooner we can move on.”

I swear he looks at me like I just asked him to join a cult where we worship farm animals and sacrifice newborns on an altar of fire.

“Move on?” His features twist with disgust.

There’s a beat of silence.

“Don’t you think if I were able to get you out of my fucking head, I would’ve done it by now?”

I can’t reply.

He lets out a bitter scoff. “You have no idea, do you?”

“About what?”

He makes air quotes with his fingers. “Those ‘*supermodel girlfriends*’ you talk about... they’re nothing but placeholders. Knockoffs of what I really want.

“I’ve spent five years searching for you in everything that I do. Burying myself in random girls because they reminded me of you. I ask them to do their hair like you, I look for you in places you’ve never been, search for your face in every crowd I see.” He stops, inhaling a sharp breath. “God, Hadley, you fucking own me. You have me by the fucking throat. Don’t you get that?”

My jaw drops.

“So, no, I *can’t* move on. I didn’t move on then, and you’re out of your fucking mind if you think I’m moving on now.”

I’ve heard some shocking stuff in my life, but this?

This takes the cake by far.

All this time, I was convinced he never looked back. Told myself I was just another chapter in his book. Meanwhile, our

story is the only story he's been reading for five years.

I didn't fully believe him when he first told me he'd never stopped thinking about me that night in the gazebo.

I definitely believe him now.

Shit, is *that* why he got with his sober sponsor at the beginning of the summer?

She had red hair. I remember thinking it was weird that she was wearing my hairstyle, but I told myself I was being ridiculous and the whole thing was a coincidence.

Then there's Tate Zimmer, his fake girlfriend and the model he hooked up with.

Also a redhead.

Oh. My. God.

Kane doesn't seem to expect an answer because he moves closer and rasps against my mouth, "This isn't a summer thing, you got me? It never fucking was."

Our mouths clash together in an explosion of anger and desperation, the blaze between us burning brighter than the stars themselves.

Kane grabs both my legs and spreads me apart, wedging his body impossibly close to mine and jerking my ass to the very edge of the desk.

His right hand tightens around my thigh, the other slipping into my hair as he parts my mouth with his tongue, reckless and demanding in the way he takes what he wants, barely stopping long enough to allow me to breathe.

"Fuck, baby, I need to feel you. I need you to be *mine*. Be mine, Hadley." The mere thought of crossing the line draws a revealing moan from my lips.

Is he asking me to be his girlfriend?

Or just to have sex with him?

The vessel in my chest goes wild as soon as his fingers drop to the button of my jeans. He's pulling my pants down

my legs before I can make sense of what's happening.

Once you've had sex, you can't *unhave* it.

Sex can ruin everything, just as it can strengthen any bond and solidify confusing feelings.

If we do this, I'm all in.

I'm following this guy into the scorching flames of hell and holding his hand as I do.

He doesn't stop kissing me for a second, our tongues caught in an eternal dance as he strips me naked, tossing my shirt and bra in no time. I'm wearing nothing but my panties while he's still fully clothed, and I won't have it.

"Take these off." I tug at his belt and guide his jeans down his legs with the heels of my feet.

It takes some serious inner talk for me not to gawk at his cock when it springs free. Taking him in my mouth is one thing. Taking him inside me is another.

He gets rid of my underwear so fast I don't get a chance to voice my concerns. He removes his own shirt and leads the tip of his cock between my pussy lips.

"Shit." The pressure of his shaft sliding against my clit feels heavenly.

"You're already so fucking wet. *Jesus*," he says through clenched teeth. He lowers himself to my entrance, inching inside me without going all the way.

A slight panic overtakes me. "It's not going to fit."

The kiss he places on my mouth is reassuring. "It will. And it's going to be fucking amazing. We just need to get you ready and comfortable first."

One of his hands comes up to wrap around my throat, squeezing lightly as if to ensure that I can't look away. He uses his other hand to grab himself at the base and dive farther into my slit.

The back-and-forth and the friction of his dick feels way too good for me to hold back, and I'm suddenly very aware of

where we are.

I bite into my bottom lip to quiet myself, and Kane's grip on my throat grows tighter. "Let me hear those fucking moans, Hadley."

I wrestle the sound bubbling up in my throat. "What if someone hears us?"

"Not possible. I sent the guy outside on a break."

My lips warp into a grin. "Did you know this would happen or something?"

His shameless, cunning smirk confirms what I suspected. "I knew I wasn't leaving this house until I had my girl coming apart on my cock. Do with that what you will."

His girl.

Does this mean we're together?

Hadley, now's not the time.

"Look how wet you are." Kane pulls his cock from my slit, the tip glistening with my arousal. He proceeds to fist himself, spreading my wetness down his length and groaning.

Two of his fingers curl inside me as he takes his cock back to my center. Watching his length slide against my clit repeatedly, his hips flexing with urgency and determination... it does something to me.

I love that he's chasing my orgasm with twice as much ardor as he would his own, and when his fingers curl deeper and faster, the pleasure in my lower stomach snowballs into something more.

Kane's hand departs from my throat, and he dips downward, his mouth attaching to my nipple and alternating between biting and circling it with his tongue.

The combination of his fingers speeding in and out of me, his mouth on my breast, and his cock rubbing me raw makes it impossible to contain myself.

"I'm close," I pant, and Kane doesn't say anything, groaning in satisfaction.

He watches with intent, adoration, and pure fascination as I thrash, surrendering all control to him and falling apart with a moan I couldn't stifle if my life was hanging in the balance.

I'm clawing at the desk beneath me as if to diffuse the sensations coursing through my body, but it's pointless. My orgasm hits me all at once, cutting me open with pleasure.

The second my climax fades, I fall backward, boneless and spent, but Kane's plans for me don't include rest, something he makes clear by gripping my waist to keep me in place.

He guides his cock to my opening, angling himself perfectly. He could easily fill me with one pump of his hips.

Our gazes lock, fixed together like powerful magnets.

Suddenly, we're the only two people in the universe.

The earth could cave beneath our feet, and we still wouldn't look away.

"I..." I open my mouth, feeling the need to say something. To acknowledge that this is the moment where everything changes.

An unexpected wave of emotions blankets me from head to toe, settling into my throat and causing me to choke out, "Please don't leave again."

I swear something in his eyes breaks.

His mouth comes down on mine, and he pulls back to say, "I'm not going another fucking day on this earth without you."

Then he thrusts inside me.

We cry out in unison, the sensation too much to bear.

It's not just that he's stretching me to the limit. It's that I can feel every piece of my broken heart falling back together when he squeezes his cock deeper.

I inhale a sharp breath at the sting between my legs, holding back tears that have nothing to do with the pain.

This moment feels like letting out a breath you've been holding for years, finally letting go of a grudge that was eating

at your soul.

Kane presses his forehead to mine, his features twisting with pleasure as he says, “Jesus, you’re gripping my cock so fucking tight.”

I will him to move by shifting my hips. He sinks his teeth into his bottom lip and complies, hitting a spot no one else ever has.

He throws his head back. “*Goddamn.*”

He needs a second to compose himself, but I can’t bring myself to give it to him, needing to feel him hit that spot again.

“Fuck me, please,” I beg, and his eyes flare.

He starts moving inside me.

The first thrust feels like a knife plunging into me, the second like a small cut, and the third like painful relief. The faster he goes, the better it feels, and I loop my legs around his waist, desperate to keep him there, fucking me into this desk like he’s trying to send it to the ground.

That’s when it starts to feel *good*.

I extend my arms around his neck, sinking my nails into his shoulders. He’s driving his cock into me with savage thrusts, his hands gripping my hip bones so hard I’m confident that it’s going to leave a bruise.

I meet him thrust for thrust, the sound of flesh slapping together mixing with my moans and Kane’s heavy breathing.

“Sweet fucking heaven.” He smacks both his palms on the desk like he needs a breather, but it doesn’t stop me from bucking my hips for more.

He looks up at me, beautiful lips falling open as I pick up the slack.

“That’s right. Be a good fucking girl and fuck me back.” I’m more than happy to oblige, sliding up and down his length without a smidgen of restraint.

I pull his mouth back to mine, whimpering when his fingers find my clit. I’m still sensitive and worried I won’t be

able to come, but if our first night together taught me anything, it's that he's not going to stop until I'm climaxing for a second time.

Kane rubs my clit in rough circles, setting me up for another orgasm. He begins matching each roll of my hips again, the noises multiplying in his throat driving me insane with lust.

It isn't long before he's got my thighs shaking, my heart pounding, and my sanity depleting from my body.

"Kane." I call his name right before I come all over his cock, clenching around him as pleasure infiltrates my bloodstream.

A hiss leaves him. "I'm so fucking close, Hads. Don't clench my cock unless you want me to—"

I don't heed his warning, suctioning and squeezing him until I've got him right on the edge with me.

I smash our lips together, pulling away to whisper, "Come inside me."

"Shit," he growls against my mouth and grabs my waist again, fucking me senseless.

I can feel myself falling with each passing second, and when he peaks, producing *by far* the hottest noise I've ever heard in my life, I realize that I was wrong.

I'm not falling.

I've *fallen*...

It's done.

I'm in love with the first boy who ever broke me.

Kane Wilder has the hearts of millions.

And from this moment on?

He also has *mine*.



HADLEY

CAL

Are you going to the bonfire tonight?

Cal's message is the first thing I see when I grab my phone out of my locker after the most miserable shift of my life.

Normally, I don't mind working doubles. More hours equal more money, but I've barely slept all week—thanks to Kane's obsession with sneaking into my bed after everyone's asleep and burying his face between my legs.

To make matters worse, Jamie handed in her notice last week. She and Shay decided to make the most of the last few weeks of summer and rent out a van to go on a cross-country road trip together.

Yesterday was Jamie's last day at the restaurant, and I've been covering her shifts while Fred looks for a good replacement for us—I won't be here much longer either. We're moving into my mom's condo next week.

All those late nights and early mornings are starting to take a toll. I spend more time at work than I do at the beach house

most days, which is *torture* considering what's waiting for me at home.

I knew, from the moment Kane led me out of the Maze after fucking me into a desk, that there was no way I could walk away from us.

A sentiment he seemed to share because not even an hour later, he had me moving out of Jamie's place and back into the beach house.

We've shared a bed every night since the fair, although we haven't had sex again for no other reason than I'm exhausted by the time he's done with me.

I swear this guy doesn't get tired of making me come. Sometimes I think he likes it more than the actual fucking part. It's like he has no interest in having sex unless I get off first.

We've only had two weeks together.

Two perfect, painfully addictive weeks. We laugh, cuddle, give each other nonstop orgasms, have deep talks about everything and anything, and *shit*, I'm so ridiculously in love with him it's alarming.

I climb into my car a few minutes past 6:00 p.m. I'm supposed to be meeting the girls at Jamie's place so we can get ready together before the bonfire.

At first, the bonfire was meant to be a going away party for Jamie and Shay, but it eventually turned into a going away party for all of us.

Soon, our little group will disassemble.

Everyone will leave Golden Cove and go back to college—except for Kane, who'll go back to LA to try and salvage what's left of his career.

I may never come back to this town, and it's likely that adulthood will pull us all in different directions.

I climb into my mom's car, toss my phone onto the passenger seat, and speed out of the restaurant parking lot without answering Cal.

He should know I wouldn't miss what could be my last night with my friends for the world.



“WAIT... SO YOU HAVEN'T HAD THE TALK YET?” JAMIE ASKS when we settle around the firepit in her backyard.

I snort at the term she chose, taking a quick sip of my wine. “We're a little old for the *birds and the bees* talk, don't you think?”

Jamie rolls her eyes, wrestling a smile. “No, I mean the ‘can we sleep with other people’ talk. You're not really exclusive until you've had it. Just like you're not officially dating until you've told everyone.”

There's a hint of worry in her voice, which suggests that she's trying to spare me heartache by reminding me that Kane and I are not *technically* together.

I shrug, feigning indifference. “We're taking things slow.”

Maybe Jamie has a point.

Technically, Kane hasn't asked me to be his girlfriend.

Not word for word, anyway.

He also doesn't want anyone in the house to know about us. When I asked him about it, he said Drea and Jamie know, and that's enough for now.

Shay and Drea join us seconds later, the two of them jogging down the patio stairs.

They've just grabbed a seat when Drea snorts. “From what I heard this week, they don't do a lot of *talking*.”

Kill me.

Kane and I have been trying our hardest to be quiet, but Drea's bedroom is *directly* across from mine. That and Drea's a super-light sleeper. Thank God my mom's and Evie's rooms are on the first floor.

Scar's room is also on our floor, but Kane told me you could play the trumpet directly in his ear and he still wouldn't wake up.

I lift my palms to my face and groan, "I'm so sorry."

She chuckles. "What? Don't apologize. I'm just glad Kane finally pulled his head out of his ass and stopped lying to himself."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Please. I've known the idiot was obsessed with you since the day we got here. I don't know what you did to get him to stop fighting his feelings, but respect, girl!"

Drea's spent half a decade with Kane. It's her *job* to know how he thinks and make it so that he doesn't say or do the wrong thing publicly.

She knows him better than almost anyone.

And she's right about one thing. He might've stopped running from our connection, but in the beginning, there was *something* stopping him.

He avoided me, tried to make me hate him, pretended like he never cared about me.

He insinuated more than once that we couldn't be together.

But then we hooked up.

And everything changed.

It's like his resolve snapped.

Like his resistance was blown to pieces after we gave in to each other.

At first, I thought he was just being a typical guy, freaking out about commitment and his feelings for me, but now?

I'm thinking there has to be more to the story.

Drea's eyes flare with realization. "Oh, and we need to start working on a way to tell the world you're dating."

My stomach twists into a big knot.

I've always known we'd have to deal with the media eventually, but I was hoping it wouldn't be anytime soon.

Drea contemplates our options for a moment. "We might want to wait until the trial's over. The last thing we need is more drama. Not to mention everyone thinks he was dating that Tate chick like two minutes ago, and we don't want people thinking you're the rebound."

It's surprisingly easy to forget, when Kane and I are hiding in Golden Cove, that our relationship will never be just ours.

Once the world knows about us, people will make our business their own. The media will surely make up all sorts of ridiculous rumors and scandalous headlines.

There's also the issue of whether I even want to be famous—even if just by association. I always dreamed that I'd get recognized for my art one day. Not once did it cross my mind that people would know my name because of a *guy*.

I guess... what scares me the most isn't being known as "Kane Wilder's girlfriend."

It's losing my identity in the process.



WE SHOW UP TO THE BONFIRE TWO HOURS LATE.

Blame it on the tequila shots and Jamie insisting that we play a drinking game before heading out to meet the guys.

I check the group chat as Shay, aka our designated driver, parks Jamie's car into the beach house driveway.

OZZY BEAR

Who the hell changed my name in the chat???

I snort at Scar's message.

Did I mention we had some fun renaming the guys between rounds of Drunk Jenga?

OZZY BEAR

How do I change it back?!

VINNY THE POOH

They're late AND fucking with our names. The audacity of these girls.

I chuckle at Vince's reply and the nickname I picked for him. I'm especially proud of myself for coming up with that one.

CAL-IFORNIA GIRL

No shade to Katy Perry or anything, but at least pick a recent song.

Our name for Cal is boring, but we stopped putting in effort around shot number six. Kane's name isn't our best work either. We argued for a bit but settled on Candy Kane. It was either that or Kane-dall Jenner.

OZZY BEAR

I knew we shouldn't have put them in charge of booze and snacks. I'm fucking starving.

VINNY THE POOH

Ladies, respectfully, hurry the fuck up before Scar tries to eat the firewood.

I scroll down to the last messages in our conversation.

Scar sent a meme of a skeleton sitting on a chair, covered in cobwebs, with the words "STILL WAITING."

I notice I have a text from Kane just as I'm exiting the chat.

KANE

Not to sound clingy, but I'm gonna need you to get your cute little ass to the bonfire right fucking now.

The biggest smile dances on my lips.

I text him back quickly.

HADLEY

Almost there.

We climb out of Jamie's car and empty her trunk, which is packed with alcohol and all the ingredients needed to make s'mores, before aiming for the backyard, grocery bags and booze huddled up in our arms.

We decided to have the bonfire on the private stretch of beach near the house. The beach in Hillford tends to be crowded on Fridays, and we wouldn't want to risk someone recognizing Kane when he's managed to stay under the radar this long.

We jog down the wooden stairs leading to the beach and immediately spot Kane, Cal, Vince, and Scar sitting on towels and foldable chairs in the distance.

The boys form a circle around the fire, which is already going strong.

The flames show no sign of slowing down, but as mesmerizing as the fire is, it doesn't hold a candle to the green-eyed boy sitting next to it.

It's as though Kane has some sort of Hadley radar because he looks up the next second, noticing me before the rest of the group does.

Our gazes connect, and his entire face lights up, the curl of his lips sending my heart into a frenzy.

His smile might look sweet, but his eyes puncture my skin like a thousand needles.

Dear God...

We've seen each other every night this week, but he looks at me like he's gone months without touching me. To be fair, it has been a while since we did it.

"Thank the fucking Lord. We might not starve after all," Scar rejoices at the sight of us.

Vince joins in. "What took you so long? Just so you know, the only acceptable answer is that you were busy having a naked pillow fight."

His absurd fantasy makes me scoff. "Yeah, sorry about that. We were trying to figure out how much bleach to put in your drinks."

Everyone laughs. Except for Vince, who gives me a shit-eating grin before rising to his feet to lend us a hand with the grocery bags. Cal, Scar, and Kane take the hint, making their way over to help, too.

Kane heads straight for me, his eyes never leaving mine as he takes the heavy bags I'm carrying. I crack a timid smile, which he returns.

His eyes drop to my lips for a fleeting moment, and I almost expect him to kiss me.

Until... he stops.

His gaze darts to something behind me, and I flick my head to find Scar staring at us with a furrowed brow. He and Kane make eye contact.

Then Kane turns to leave.

He doesn't kiss me.

He doesn't say hi.

He just walks to the cooler with the bags as though I'm a complete stranger rather than the girl falling asleep in his arms every night.

I'm reminded of what Jamie said earlier.

"You're not officially dating until you've told everyone."

Well, then I guess...

We're not dating.



HADLEY

I've always known saying goodbye to Golden Cove would be tough.

I knew I'd miss our little group... but I guess I failed to realize just *how* sad the thought of never seeing my friends again would make me.

Tonight's been great.

Full of laughter, music, booze, and promises to get together at least once a year.

I'd love nothing more than to believe we'll keep that promise, but I also know better than to expect our busy schedules to align once we go our separate ways.

It's past 2:00 a.m., but the party doesn't look like it's going to run out of steam anytime soon.

The guys are all drunk from playing beer pong—well, all of them except Kane, who's been drinking water—and the girls and I have been breaking our backs playing limbo and drinking every time we fail, which is often.

It takes me another forty-five minutes to admit that I've reached my limit. I tell the girls to continue without me and

head for one of the beach towels laid out in front of the fire.

I'd be lying if I said Kane treating me like a stranger didn't put a damper on my mood earlier, but I had no intention of letting him ruin my night.

In a way, he did me a favor. Now I know where he stands. From this moment on, I'm done assuming we're together. He doesn't want to tell people about us? Fine.

But I won't sit around waiting for him to grow a pair. As far as I'm concerned, I'm a single woman.

I guide my water bottle to my lips, taking a long sip and watching the guys try to pull off trick shots.

Oh, and remember when I said the guys were drunk?

I was wrong.

Vince and Scar may be drunk, but Cal is *wasted*. He can barely hold himself up.

I've just remembered the weird text he sent me earlier, asking me if I was going to the bonfire, when he notices me sitting alone.

I shoot him a polite smile, expecting him to resume his beer pong game, but he doesn't, telling the guys something I can't hear and heading straight for me.

I barely have a chance to register what's happening before he's plopping down on the towel next to me.

"Hey, stranger." Cal gives me a lazy smirk, his breath reeking of alcohol.

Discomfort scampers down my spine. We haven't really talked since the night I told him we weren't going to work out. I know it was a hot minute ago, and his flirty demeanor is most likely the result of alcohol, but this feels so awkward I want to put a few hundred miles between us.

"Why are you sitting all by yourself?" He nudges me with his elbow.

"Water break." I gesture to my water bottle with a forced smile.

“Boring. Who drinks water at a party?” Cal teases, scooting way too close to me.

At first, I play it off like him crowding my personal space doesn’t bother me.

But then he rests his hand on my thigh.

Nope, I can’t.

“On second thought, I’m going to get another drink.” I push to my feet, practically racing to the cooler sitting in the sand a few feet away.

Cal doesn’t take the hint, rising off the towel and following after me. “I’ll come with you.”

Great.

I throw the cooler open under Cal’s scrutiny, begin digging through it, and grab a can at random.

Cal proceeds to get himself another beer, and I can’t seem to keep my concern to myself. “You sure you want another one? You’ve already had a lot. Maybe too much.”

But it’s no use. He’s already twisting the cap off and throwing the beer bottle back.

“On the contrary.” He wipes his mouth with his hand. “I’ve had just enough. Otherwise, I’d never have the guts to tell you this.”

I don’t like the sound of that *at all*.

“Tell me what?”

He flashes a lopsided smirk as he stumbles closer. “How much I like you.”

Oh, dear Lord.

Don’t tell me I’m going to have to reject this guy *twice* in one summer.

I cringe. “Cal...”

“I know, I know. You’re not looking to date right now, but summer will be over soon, and I... I just feel like this could be something great, and we haven’t given it a fair shot.”

My gaze darts to the guys gathered around the beer pong table. They're listening to every word, not even bothering to hide it. I can only see Kane's back from where I am, but his fists are rolled into tight balls, a clear sign that he's not happy about what he's hearing.

"You said it yourself. Summer will be over soon. Why would you tell me this *right* as we're about to leave?"

"Because I'd hate myself if I left without at least telling you how I feel. You and I... we have a connection. Now, I'm not saying it would be easy, but Chapel Hill's not that far from Boone, and I—"

"Stop." I chew down on my bottom lip. God, I *hate* that he's making me say this. I hate that I didn't just tell him I wasn't into him instead of making up an excuse about not being ready for a relationship after we went out.

I can understand why he'd think there may be hope for us, but damn is he putting me in an uncomfortable situation.

"I made myself clear before. I'm not looking for anything."

His voice is packed with frustration. "But why? Why won't you give me a fucking chance? You're single, I'm single. We just make sense."

I open my mouth to argue, but nothing comes out.

"She's not single."

Cue the heart attack.

I spin, my jaw dropping when I come face-to-face with the boy who treated me like a secret just a few hours ago.

I meet Kane's stare, the stern, bone-chilling expression on his face stealing my breath. He's so pissed I'm surprised he's not ripping Cal's head off with his teeth.

I don't have time to think up a response before Kane presses his chest to my back and wraps an arm around my waist from behind.

He's holding me so tight you'd think he's trying to cement our bodies together.

"What the fuck?" Cal screeches, stumbling backward and nearly tripping over thin air.

The corner of Kane's mouth twitches. "You heard me, fuckhead. She's not single."

Speechless, I glance around the beach. The girls have stopped playing limbo, witnessing the scene along with the rest of the group.

I attempt to move out of Kane's hold, but he makes a noise deep in his throat and holds me tighter as if to say, *Don't even think about it.*

"Wait... are you two..." Vince's voice captures my attention, and I look to my right to see him and Scar closing in on us, shadowed by Shay, Drea, and Jamie.

Cal blinks at us in shock. "How long?"

"Officially? Since the fair," Kane says matter-of-factly.

I can't believe this is happening.

I don't know what was keeping him from telling everyone about us before, but it's clear his reluctance went flying out the window the moment he saw Cal hitting on me.

Cal's features twist with anger. "So, what you said? About not being in a good place to date? None of it was true?"

I don't reply, but my silence speaks volume.

"You're so full of shit, Hadley."

Yes, I lied to Cal.

But I only did it so that I wouldn't hurt his feelings.

Jesus Christ, we only went out *once*. Why is he making me feel like I cheated on him for ten years?

"You couldn't just tell me you weren't interested? You had to fuck my friend behind my back and make me look like a fucking idiot?"

That's Kane's snapping point. "Look, man, I get that you're wasted and all, but disrespect her like that again and I'm going to shove that beer so far up your ass you'll be choking on glass for a month."

I have no doubt he means it, but Cal scoffs, calling his bluff.

"You two-faced piece of shit. You're no better. You knew I liked her, and you went for her anyway."

Kane releases my waist, stepping between Cal and me. "I went for her anyway? You went on like one date. You're blowing shit way out of proportion."

Cal's bloodshot eyes land on me, and he tumbles closer to Kane, letting out a slurred "I'm just glad Gray's not here to see what a fucking slut his sister's become."

A succession of gasps ricochets around the beach.

And Kane decks Cal in the face so hard I hear something crack.

At first, I think Kane broke Cal's nose, but then I realize...

That noise came from Kane's hand.

He was still wearing his rings when he threw that punch, and his fingers absorbed a good portion of the blow. I don't know if he fractured his hand or if it's just bruised, but that sounded painful as hell.

Jamie drops to her knees next to her brother. Cal's lower lip is busted, blood pouring from his mouth and staining his front teeth. Jamie's eyes flick to mine, and guilt crashes into me like a semitruck.

This is *not* how I wanted our last night together to go.

"I'm so sorr—" I don't get a chance to properly apologize before Kane traps my hand in his and drags me away from the bonfire. He doesn't stop until our friends are all but tiny dots in the distance.

"What the hell are you doing?" I call as we're charging up the wooden stairs leading to the beach house.

He's fuming, his jaw and shoulders noticeably tight. It's as though he's in some sort of anger trance. Not even two seconds after we've reached the top, he makes a beeline for the pool house.

The next thing I know, he's shoved me inside and followed in after me.

I assess my surroundings. It's been ages since I was in here. The lights are out, but the space is just bright enough for me to discern two changing rooms, a shower, and a seating area that transforms into a storage bench for pooling equipment. The place is surprisingly big, considering how small it looks from the outside.

"You didn't deny it," Kane damn near growls at me the second he slams the door.

"Are you okay?" I reach for his hand, needing to see the damage for myself, but he doesn't let me inspect his injury.

He flings his arm out of my reach, making it clear that his busted knuckles are the least of his concerns. "He said you were single, and you didn't fucking deny it."

My worry morphs into annoyance. "You're one to talk. You looked right through me earlier. Not very *boyfriendly* of you."

He inhales a sharp breath through his nose.

"You're right, I fucked up. But me fucking up doesn't mean we're not together. We are. We've been together, and we're going to fucking *stay* together. You should know that by now."

My heart flutters at the confirmation.

"How the hell was I supposed to? We haven't had the conversation yet. For all I knew, we weren't exclusive."

He lets out a dark chuckle, the sound traveling to my core and covering my forearms with goose bumps.

He cocks an eyebrow. "We weren't exclusive?"

I open my mouth to answer, but my body being pushed against the wall behind me drains the air from my lungs.

Kane anchors me into place, staring me dead in the eyes as he says, “What part of me punching Cal in the fucking face says not *exclusive* to you?”

I start to talk back, but Kane doesn’t allow it, crushing his lips to mine without a moment’s hesitation.

“What part of me begging on my fucking knees when you weren’t texting me back says *we’re not together*?”

One of his hands comes up to wrap around my throat, the other diving into my hair and drawing me in for another kiss. A fierce fusion of fire and electricity ignites between our joined lips, and I grip his shirt like he’s a lifeline and my only chance at staying afloat.

“Every part of you is mine, Hadley Queen. *Every. Last. Part.*”

I let out a yelp when he spins me around like a rag doll, the front of my body hitting the wall with a thud. Kane’s chest comes flush with my back, his growing cock prodding my ass.

He brings his mouth to my ear. “The noises you make when you come...” His free hand snakes beneath my shirt. “... the freckles on your tits...” He takes a handful of my breast inside my bra. “...that drenched little cunt.”

He doesn’t miss a beat, slipping his arm between my body and the wall. His hand slides inside my leggings and underwear in a single move, a deep noise sounding in his throat as he whispers, “*All mine.*”

He locates my clit almost immediately, the pad of his finger grazing the sensitive nub until I’m arching into his hand.

“We were written in the fucking stars, Hadley. You were born to belong to me.” Kane buries his nose in the crook of my neck, inhaling my scent before squeezing a finger inside me. “And even if you didn’t... I’d still be yours.”

His finger thrusts deeper, and my head falls back, coming to rest on his shoulder.

“Tell me you belong to me.”

I’m still mad at him.

At least, my *brain* is.

My body, however...

A whimper escapes my mouth. “I belong to you.”

He groans at my obedience. “Body and soul, baby.”

He withdraws his finger completely, ignoring my protests as he drops to his knees.

“Kane.” His name doesn’t sound like the plea it really is, coming out as a question. He’s yanking my leggings and panties down my legs before I can blink.

“Spread those pretty lips for me,” he commands, and I know exactly what set of *lips* he’s referring to.

Sucking in a gust of air, I reach behind me and spread my ass cheeks and pussy, baring all of myself to him. His hand flies to my lower back, and he pushes me forward, forcing me to cling to the wall as he buries his face in my slit.

His mouth clamps down on my clit, drawing a shrill noise from my lips. My body contorts with pleasure, and I back up without realizing it, shoving my pussy so close to his face I’m scared I’ll suffocate him.

His oxygen levels seem to be the last thing on his mind as he sucks, licks, twirls, and nips at my clit with his teeth. He continues to taste and explore until he has my eyes closing involuntarily.

He pulls away for a short moment, and I hear him undo his zipper. Then he’s back between my thighs, slowly tracing his tongue along my folds, the sensations overwhelming me.

His right hand comes up to wrap around my ponytail, yanking on it and causing my body to arch away from the wall.

My hands abandon my ass cheeks, a decision that earns me a disapproving growl and a low “Did I tell you to let go?”

He clamps down on my clit harder, as if to punish me, and I slap my hands back into place, stretching my pussy for him again. I expect him to resume what he was doing, but he doesn't, placing torturous kisses everywhere *but* on my clit.

My moans evolve into desperate pleas, and Kane's dark laughter ripples against my core.

“What, baby?”

“Don't stop.”

He doesn't speak for long seconds, rising off the ground.

No explanation, nothing.

He moves closer, placing his mouth next to my earlobe. “One last thing.”

I hold my breath.

“The next time some loser asks you if you're single, you better not fucking hesitate.”

Something warm settles between my legs.

Then he's pushing his cock inside me.

“Kane!” I cry out.

“*Fuuuck,*” he agrees.

He wasn't gentle about it.

Didn't even give me a heads-up before entering me, but it doesn't stop my clit from pulsating. I gasp when he inches forward, proving me wrong. He wasn't even all the way in.

I try to adjust to his size, clawing at the wall and shifting around him.

“Hands on your ass, baby,” he orders, and I realize I've taken my hands off again.

I oblige, pulling myself open once more.

“Fuck, just like that. I want to see you swallow my cock.”

Another roll of his hips has my breasts connecting with the wall. Next thing I know, he's fucking me into it without a fuck given about how loud we're being. There's something particularly dirty about holding my pussy open as he's jamming himself inside me.

He retreats momentarily, only to thrust back in at full force. My eyes roll to the back of my head, the sound of my arousal and our bodies connecting filling the pool house.

Kane releases his hold on my ponytail, removing my hands from my ass himself and joining my arms together behind my back. One of his hands wraps around both of my wrists as he thrusts faster.

I gasp when my face meets something cold. I have zero wiggle room, my front flush with the wall while Kane drives his cock inside me over and over.

I'm convinced he couldn't possibly take me any higher than this until he jerks my back to his chest, lacing one of his arms around my shoulders and over my breasts to keep me in place.

He lets go of my wrists, his free hand slipping toward my pussy. He starts rubbing me in quick, determined circles, reviving an orgasm I thought was long gone.

He's got me on the edge faster than I thought possible.

My muscles tighten, my walls contracting around him.

"Fuck yes. Come all over this fucking cock."

His encouragement is what does it.

My body gives in, the world around me disappearing into darkness. Blinding pleasure tears through me like a hurricane, and a primal scream rips from my throat.

"God, Hadley, you're so... *Fuck.*" He pumps harder, pinching my clit between two of his fingers.

His hand flies to my throat, squeezing as he thrusts a few more times and finishes inside me.

Hearing is the first of my senses to flood back in, the sound of our labored breathing pervading the pool house.

We stay like this for a few minutes, the weight of reality creeping back in.

Kane doesn't pull out right away, his lips grazing the side of my neck. He places a handful of kisses up and down my shoulder, the affectionate gesture liquefying my insides.

I flick my head back, catching his lips with mine.

We kiss for long minutes, barely separating long enough to draw air into our lungs. His words return to the forefront of my mind as he's tracing the curve of my jaw with the tip of his index finger.

We were written in the fucking stars.

And I've never been one to believe in fate.

But for him...

I might.



KANE

I used to think nothing could compare to the feelings I get when I'm onstage.

Told myself nothing and *no one* could possibly bring me as much happiness as performing does.

How could anything ever top the *surreal* experience that is looking out onto a crowd of adoring, screaming fans?

But that was before I got myself a feisty little thing with red hair and a knack for putting me in my place.

Suddenly, being adored by a million strangers doesn't mean nearly as much as being loved by this one girl. And the only person I want to hear screaming my name is *her*.

"FYI, your staring really isn't as romantic as you think it is." Hadley cracks one eye open, her lips twitching when I shoot her a "how the fuck did you know?" look.

If you'd told me before summer started that I'd turn into some sort of lovesick dumbass who watches his girl sleep, I would have pointed you to the nearest insane asylum.

It's gotten to a point where I'm not even whipped anymore.

I'm Hadley's bitch.

“How long you been staring, creep?” she says on a yawn.

I shrug. “Long enough to know you sleep with your mouth open.”

A soft chuckle leaves her. “Yeah, well, *you* talk in your sleep.”

She isn't the first to tell me that—Scar and the rest of the band mentioned it on tour—so I know it's true, but I make it a point to deny it just to piss her off.

“That's bullshit.”

“It's true!” My baby sits up in bed, running a hand through her wild red hair. “I swear I heard you saying Gray's name like three times.”

My smile fades instantly.

I didn't remember last night's dream until this exact moment, but she's right. I *was* having a dream about Gray—although the correct term here would be “nightmare.”

It's been a hot minute since I've had a nightmare this vivid.

Especially one about him.

I feel like I could puke as images play out in my head, faces, places, and moments blurring together.

Fuck, I thought those were *gone*.

“You okay?” Hadley picks up on it right away.

I'm quick to snap out of it, shoving memories of that day to the back of my brain and offering her my most convincing smile. “I'm fine.”

“You sure? You're looking a little pale.” She brings her hand to my forehead to check my temperature, but I intercept it, grabbing her wrist and pulling her on top of me.

She laughs, the sound going straight to my cock as I throw my arms around her. Hadley rests her head on my chest,

draping one of her legs over my thighs and placing a soft kiss against my pec.

“What was the dream about?” she asks, drawing the curve of my tattoo with her fingertip.

“I don’t remember,” I lie.

“Well, do you want to know what *my* dream was about?”

I nod. “Tell me.”

Ocean-blue eyes plunge into mine, and I use my hand to cup her face, my thumb sliding across her bottom lip.

Shit, she’s breathtaking.

So much so that she’s fucking painful to look at.

“You and I were horse racing in the grocery store, and if we lost, we’d get our face shoved in a bucket of hot sauce.”

I snort. “Damn. Did we win, at least?”

“No, but I wasn’t going to let them *hot-sauce* us to death, so I pulled a coconut out of my jeans and beat them up.”

I bite back a laugh, twirling a strand of her hair around my finger. “Them who?”

She rolls her eyes dramatically. “The people forcing us to horse race in the grocery store, *keep up.*”

We exchange glances and burst out laughing.

God, her *laugh*.

It’s breathy and quiet and so fucking beautiful.

Our laughter dies down a heartbeat later, the radiant smile on her lips fading along with it.

It’s as though she just realized something, and that something sucked every ounce of joy from her body.

“What’s wrong?” I drop my hand to the small of her back.

“I was just thinking about the bonfire.”

Oh.

That.

Last night was a shitshow.

And I'm not saying I'm innocent, but even she has to admit Cal was just begging to have his fucking teeth kicked in. Granted, he was drunk off his face, but there's no excuse for what he said to her.

No one disrespects my girl and gets away with it. It's bad enough that he was pressuring her when she'd made it crystal clear she wasn't into him, but bringing up Gray? There was no goddamn way he was going home without a black eye after that one.

Worry darkens her features. "Do you think Jamie's mad at me?"

I raise a brow. "Why would she be?"

"Gee, I don't know. Maybe because I rejected her brother twice. Oh, and my boyfriend punched him in the face."

Her boyfriend.

Hearing her say that feels damn near orgasmic. If we weren't in the middle of a serious conversation, I'd be pulling my phone out, asking her to say it again and using that shit as my fucking ringtone.

"You weren't the one refusing to take no for an answer." I rub her back.

She gives a small nod, averting her sad puppy eyes and chewing on the inside of her cheek.

Jesus, I'm pretty sure shoving my hand into a blender would hurt less than seeing her like this.

"Hey." I tilt her chin forward, guiding her gaze to mine. "It *wasn't* your fault. Jamie will understand."

"I'm sure you're right."

I can tell she means that—at least, a part of her does—but it doesn't quiet her demons. It's tearing her apart and making me feel horribly powerless.

"Fuck, just... come here." The words are out of my mouth before my brain can process them.

Next thing I know, I'm wrapping a hand around her neck and crashing my lips to her hard enough to draw a gasp from her throat.

Hadley welcomes my mouth, the way she always does, opening her own to invite my tongue inside.

Our tongues meet instantly, tasting each other and leaving her desperate for oxygen. I don't waste a second locating her ass, taking a handful over her shorts and squeezing until my cock is straining against my sweats.

My other hand drops to her bare thigh, my fingers digging into her flesh like I'm trying to mark her skin with reminders of who she belongs to.

Fuck, I need to taste her.

Now.

"Ride my face," I pull away to say.

Her blue eyes flare, her tongue slipping out to wet her bottom lip.

Oh, she wants it.

I know my girl's tells, and she wants me to go to fucking town on her pussy.

"I haven't showered yet," she says like that carries any weight in the decision-making process. "I fell asleep before I could get a chance."

Ah, that's right.

Last night, after we fucked in the pool house, I took her up to my room and suggested that we shower together. She was all for it. Problem is, she passed out the second her head hit my pillow, and I didn't have the heart to wake her, so I showered alone.

I wait for her to elaborate. "So?"

"So, I don't want to smell like tuna fish."

The corners of my lips twitch. "I could go for some sushi."

She laughs, the blush on her cheeks deepening. “I’m serious. I wouldn’t even want you to touch me down there, let alone *eat* me.”

It’s clear there’s no changing her mind, so I decide not to argue. The longer I fight her on this, the longer it’ll take before she’s coming on my face.

“Fine,” I relent and smack a loud kiss on her mouth. “But hurry that pretty ass up.”

She flashes a warm smile. “Promise.”

I watch her walk out of my room. It takes a boatload of self-talk for me not to join her in the bathroom, but I know, even if she’d never admit it, that she needs that time to herself. My girl’s independent like that.

Doesn’t mean I don’t spend the next fifteen minutes imagining her running soap all over her body.

I’m getting a severe case of blue balls by the time the door opens and she comes out in nothing but a tiny towel.

Fuck meee.

She pins me with a look I know damn well.

“Now, where were we?” she asks.

Then she’s making her way over to me. She takes a goddamn century to cross my room, teasing me and loving every second of my misery.

“Crawl,” I tell her once she stops at the end of my bed.

She hesitates. “Like...”

“That’s right, get on all fours and crawl to me.”

I see her throat bob, but she doesn’t protest, inching closer to the mattress.

I stop her. “Drop the towel first.”

She does that, too.

I give her a once-over, memorizing the freckles on her perky tits, the curve of her hips, and that smooth little pussy...

God, I know we don't talk much, but I owe you one for making Hadley Queen.

My breath hitches when she starts to crawl.

She has that look in her eyes. The one telling me she wants everything I'm about to give her, but knowing her, I'm going to have to pry it out of her.

Preferably with my tongue.

I only realize I'm holding my breath when she gets on top of me, straddling me and reducing my self-control to pieces.

"You have five seconds to shove that pussy in my face."

She cracks a shy smile. "Or what?"

I frown. "Three seconds."

My countdown kicks her ass into high gear.

She obliges, but she angles her body so that she's facing away from me and her mouth is lined up with my cock.

Jesus.

I immediately understand where she's going with this, and while I don't mind sixty-nining, I don't know how the fuck I'm going to be able to hold back while she's blowing me *and* sitting on my tongue.

Both of my hands fly to her ass cheeks, and I spread her for a better view.

"Fucking hell, baby," I growl before lurching forward and capturing her clit between my teeth.

I'm so focused on getting her off that I barely feel her pulling my sweats down to my knees. My cock springs out, the little noises she makes when I place kisses up and down her pussy lips driving me so insane I make it a point to make her come quickly.

There's no way I'll be able to fuck her if she keeps this up.

Her mouth closes around my cock, and my head kicks back for a moment.

Yep, I don't stand a chance.

I go twice as hard on her clit, sucking and nibbling until she's moaning around my dick. I'm pretty sure I go blind as she takes me in her mouth so deep she starts to gag.

I want nothing more than to enjoy her tongue twirling around my cock as she deep-throats me, but I know if I give myself over to her mouth, I'll be blowing down her throat before I'm finished with her.

I start by pushing two fingers inside her, assaulting her clit with my mouth repeatedly and gripping her ass so tight you'll be able to see my handprint for a week.

"Oh, God. *Kane*," she moans, and I take it as a sign to keep going.

I don't change a thing, not my rhythm, not the circular motion of my tongue. She told me once that guys tend to change what they're doing when girls tell them it feels good when instead, they should be sticking to what works and doubling their efforts.

I have no idea how I manage not to spill inside her mouth, but by some miracle, I pull it off, devouring her until she starts rocking against my mouth. The back-and-forth of her hips is my first cue.

"Shit, shit... I... This feels incredible," she whimpers, releasing my cock and sitting up.

Another moan.

Another flick of my tongue.

"I'm right there." She sinks her nails into my chest.

And then she's coming on my face.

Squirting is more like it.

"Oh my God!" She bites back a gasp, a mixture of shock and pleasure lacing her voice.

I've made a few girls squirt before, but this will be the first time I've gotten Hadley there. When I tell you I feel on top of the world right now.

She, on the other hand, seems horrified because she climbs off me not even two seconds after the orgasm drains from her body.

“I’m so sorry. I can’t believe I did that. This has never happened before. I’m so—”

My hand darts to her throat, and I squeeze just enough to shut her up. “This is by far the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen in my life. *Don’t* apologize.”

I crush my lips to hers, hoping to show her just how much I *don’t* care that she turned into a human fountain for a second there. I kiss her until she’s breathless and pushing on my chest to draw air into her lungs.

My first thought is that she’s going to need a second to recover, but she seems to have other plans because the next thing I know, she’s straddling me and taking my cock into her mouth again.

I was already right on the brink, so I know it won’t be long until I blow down her throat. As I expected, all she has to do is twirl her tongue around the tip of my cock a few times, and I’m coming deep inside her mouth.

“Jesus fucking...” I can’t even finish a sentence, pumping into her mouth one more time.

As soon as we’re both able to function again, Hadley gets dressed, and I throw my clothes back on.

I pull her into my arms, planting a kiss on her forehead. That’s when the same troubled expression as before creeps into her gaze and I know I only managed to take her mind off her worries temporarily.

“What? What’s wrong?” I pull back.

“We’re leaving soon.”

The reminder feels like a hot poker entering my chest.

“I know,” I whisper.

I’ve been killing myself to not think about it all week. I don’t want to go back to LA, I don’t want to get back to

reality, and I sure as hell don't want to be apart from the only good thing in my life.

How am I supposed to function without her?

How am I supposed to go from having her in my fucking house to being miles and miles away from her? I have no idea how to handle Hadley not sleeping down the hall, and I've done a good job at running away from my problems up until now.

"What about after?" She brushes the back of her hand against my cheek. "What's going to happen to us?"

The answer seems evident. "We're going to be long-distance for a while. Then, once you're done with school, I'll move back home, or you'll move to LA. I don't fucking know, but we'll make it work."

"What about the world? Your fans? Are we going to tell them we're dating?"

That's the tricky part.

I don't want to add fuel to the fire by telling people something this important while I'm public enemy number one. We'll just have to wait until the dust has settled.

"We will. When the time is right."

I'm glad she brought it up. We haven't had a chance to talk about what's going to happen when the news breaks. It's one thing to be the most hated celebrity in the world; it's another to drag her into my shit.

"But before we do, I need you to understand something."

"What?"

I blow out a breath. "What it means to be mine..."

She nods, her blue eyes filled with curiosity. "Tell me."

"Once we announce that we're together, your life is *over*. Or at least, your life the way you know it. Your image, your body, your freedom. None of that shit will belong to you anymore. You'll be giving up your privacy to a bunch of soulless creeps with cameras and an obsession with scandal.

Once we go public, everything is going to change. *Everything*. Are you sure that's what you want?"

She doesn't speak for long seconds.

"I... I want you." She gives me a look so innocent and clueless it tears me up inside.

She doesn't know what she's getting herself into.

My teeth clench. "Goddamn it, Hadley. I'm trying to be the bigger man here."

She thinks on it for a few more seconds.

Her gaze lifts to mine, and my heart caves in on itself. "A public life with you is a thousand times better than a private one without you."

Thank God.

I can't help myself. I *have* to kiss her, so I do, grabbing her jaw and taking her lips with mine. She answers by slipping her hands into my hair and tugging.

I lick past the seam of her mouth and thrust my tongue inside, but then I'm moving away, ending the kiss and uttering words I never thought I'd say in my entire life.

"I'm so fucking in love with you."

Her jaw nearly hits the ground.

It feels like she doesn't blink or say a word for a whole minute.

"I... You're just saying that because I made you come." She says it as a joke, but I detect a hint of truth in her tone.

"I'm saying it because it's true."

Her eyes get misty, and man, my entire body aches.

"I love you, Hads. I've loved you since the moment you told my dad to eat shit in the sunroom when we were kids. Jesus, I loved you when I didn't even fucking know it. When I was on the other side of the planet selling out shows and trying to convince myself that I wasn't completely miserable. I kept the guitar you gave me to remind myself of how royally I

fucked up the day I let you go. So that I'd never forget that everything I have, I owe to you. I never thanked you properly. I mean, *fuck*, you didn't just save me from my dad, Hadley. You saved my fucking life.

"You're the reason I was able to get my mom out of poverty.

The reason I was able to do what I love most in this world for the past five years. You showed me it was okay to follow my dreams when I thought it was impossible. You posted the video, and you believed in me when I couldn't. Hadley, you're the only good I've ever done. You're... You're my whole fucking heart."

Tears are streaming down her face now, but mark my words, this is the one and only instance where I'll allow Hadley Queen to cry over me.

"I love you. I love you so fucking much," I repeat.

She wipes her cheek with the back of her hand. "I—"

The door opens, startling the both of us. "Dude, I need to talk to you."

Scar's intrusion doesn't surprise me nearly as much as it pisses me off. I look at my drummer standing in the doorway, staring venom-laced bullets into his forehead.

He realizes he interrupted something when he notices the tears coating Hadley's cheeks.

"Shit, sorry, I didn't know—"

I cut in. "Get out. We're busy."

"This can't wait. Meet me downstairs in a few?" he presses, and I know the bastard's not going to drop it until I hear him out.

"Fine," I say dryly.

I don't even wait for him to close my bedroom door before directing my focus back to Hadley.

"I believe you were in the middle of saying something."

Her lips curl into a grin. “Was I? I don’t remember.”

“If that’s how you want to play it.”

I’m pinning her under me before she has a chance to protest, caging her in with my arms and relishing in her laughter as I bring my forehead to hers.

“Hadley,” I warn, needing to hear her say it back.

“What?” She plays dumb.

“Finish what you started.”

She has me on the edge of my fucking seat.

Then she says it.

“I love you, too.”

I was wrong.

This is better than anything I’ve ever done.

Better than performing, better than playing music.

Nothing can top this.

“Not to sound like a girl, but I just threw my bleeding fucking heart at your feet, and *that’s* all you’re going to give me?”

A chuckle escapes her. “What more do you want?”

“Like, how much are we talking? Do you love me a little? A lot? You’ve got to give me something.”

She responds by pecking the corner of my mouth. “I’ve loved you almost as long as I’ve been *alive*. If that doesn’t tell you what you want to know, nothing will.”

That’s what I wanted to hear.

We must make out for over five minutes. I have every intention of fucking her into this mattress until I remember that Scar’s waiting downstairs.

Goddamn it.

I’m ninety-nine percent sure I know what he wants to talk about.

It's always the same shit these days.

Do you know what you're doing?

You and Hadley can't be together, and you know it.

I've already lost my temper and punched him in the face over it *once* this summer.

He punched me back, and it cut my lip open. Then we said we were even. I figured we were cool, but he better not talk my ears off about how I'm making a mistake dating her, or I'm going to give him another black eye.

I know what I'm doing is fucked-up.

But I can't help it.

I need her.

"You should go talk to Scar," Hadley chimes. "Then maybe we can... seal the deal, if you know what I mean."

I like that idea. A lot.

"Sounds like a plan." I kiss her one last time before rising off the bed.

"Bring me back a glass of water? I'm thirsty," she asks, grabbing her phone off my nightstand.

I nod. "You got it."

I jog down the stairs with a sigh. I spot Scar waiting for me in the kitchen, irritation contaminating the happiness I was feeling just seconds ago.

"We should talk outside." I gesture to the patio with my chin.

"I checked the house. Evie and Hadley's mom are out."

"And Drea?"

"She's gone back to LA a week early."

What the fuck?

"Why?"

I think I see a flash of regret in his eyes. "Not important."

Okay?

I'm surprised she didn't talk to me about it.

Shit, I did get a text from her last night, but I didn't bother opening it.

"Let's get this over with," I drawl, coming to a stop in front of him.

This guy is the closest friend I've had since Gray. I consider him my fucking brother, but I don't want to hear what he's about to tell me.

I get that he's just trying to look out for me, but he doesn't understand what it's like.

I don't have a choice.

Not when it comes to her.

"I thought we talked about this," he scolds me.

"Dude, no offense, but I'm really not in the mood for one of your lectures."

He lets out a bitter scoff, inching closer. "Do you think I *want* to lecture you? I don't. But you're not giving me much of a choice here. Are you seriously dating her?"

"I am, not that it's any of your business."

"Considering you're dating Gray's sister, it *is* my fucking business. Jesus Christ, man, are you *trying* to get caught? You're not fucking alone in this. You go down, I go down with you."

Alarms blare in my head.

I don't want to go there.

We promised we wouldn't talk about this ever again.

We fucking swore.

Every time he pulled me aside this summer, he'd get on my case about getting close to Hadley, but he never mentioned Gray.

He never went into details like this.

I can't handle the details. They make me fucking sick.

"We're not doing this." I shut him out.

"Yes, we are. I'm not going to fucking jail because you can't keep it in your pants."

My fists roll into tight weapons, and I have no doubt if he keeps this up, said weapons are going leave a big bruise on his face.

"Out of all the pussy in the world. All the fucking girls who would throw themselves at your feet without a moment's hesitation. Why'd you have to go for her? The one girl who could ruin our lives?"

"Because I'm in love with her." I state the fact.

Color spills from his face, but he's quick to restore his poker face.

"That's just your guilt speaking."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Doesn't feel any less real."

Either way, if I've learned anything from sharing a house with Hadley, it's that my feelings are not going away.

"Okay, I'm sorry, but this is bullshit. You're not in love with her. And even if you *were*, do you really think she'd love you back if she knew? Do you think she'd ever forgive you?"

I keep my mouth shut. Partly because he's right.

Hadley Queen would never be mine.

Not if she knew I played a part in the worst day of her life.

Scar grips my shoulders as if to knock some sense into me. "Man, I'm fucking begging you. Get that girl out of your life before—"

"No."

That's what makes him snap.

"You think you can just pretend like you didn't kill her fucking brother?"

There must be something in the air

Some sort of chemical.

Something toxic.

All I know is I can't fucking breathe.

I shake my head, shoving his hands off me and stumbling backward.

"I... I didn't kill him."

Air.

I need *air*.

"No, but you know who did."

Fuck.

Fuck.

I need to leave.

"You've been covering for that piece of shit for so long you might as well have pulled the trigger yourself."

I was having a hard time breathing before, but now? I'm suffocating.

"I know we said we'd never talk about it again, but I can't keep watching you..."

I don't hear what he says after that.

I spin, ready to get the hell out of there.

That's when I see her...

My baby.

Standing in the hallway with glassy eyes and her hand pressed to her mouth.

No.

No, no, no.

"Hadley!"

The next few seconds are a blur.

I do everything in my power to soldier through my panic attack, chasing after her from the moment she starts to run.

“Hadley!” I shout, my voice cracking.

I see her turn the corner, just a few steps behind her.

She doesn't look at me or even acknowledge me calling her name.

She enters a room.

The bathroom.

And then a door is slamming in my face.

I hear her lock herself in the bathroom over the pulse of my own heart.

I pound against the door, sputtering out pleas I'm not even sure make sense.

I beg even though there's no point.

I beg...

...even though I've lost her.



KANE

“**Y**ou ready to go in?” Scar questions, the pity lacing his tone making my stomach curl with unease.

I never thought I’d see the day where I’d have to be invited into my own house.

But then again, I also didn’t think I’d see the day where my mom would have to kick me *out* of it.

“Yeah,” I say in a hoarse voice. My vocal cords are still strained from all the shouting and begging I did this morning. My throat hurts like a motherfucker, too. I wouldn’t be surprised if I woke up tomorrow unable to make a sound.

“It’ll be okay,” Scar lies to my face, but I appreciate him making shit up to make me feel better.

“No, it won’t.” I state the fact before climbing out of the car and slamming the passenger-side door.

The truth is, nothing is ever going to be okay again.

Because Hadley knows what I did.

More importantly, she knows what I *didn’t* do.

I *didn’t* report Gray’s killer to the police.

I *didn't* give her brother the justice he deserved.

I *didn't* come through when she needed me the most.

The best excuse in the world couldn't make up for the fact that I condemned Hadley and her mom to three years of agony.

My mom texted me that it was okay to come home a few minutes ago. I know it's not fair to her. I put her in the middle by lying and ruining every good thing in my life.

She and Lillian came home just minutes after Hadley locked herself in the downstairs bathroom.

They knew something was wrong the second they heard Hadley's sobs. I was pounding on the door, imploring her to open up and let me explain. I begged and I begged until my voice gave out.

After that, all I could do was repeat that I loved her.

It didn't take my mom and Hadley's long to put two and two together.

Not exactly the best way to tell your mom you hooked up with her best friend's daughter, I know.

That's when my mom pulled me aside, gripped my shoulders, and said, "I don't know what's going on, but you need to go."

My initial reaction was to object to the idea. "Like fuck I do! I'm not going anywhere. I need to—"

"Kane, honey, look at me." My mom cut me off, staring me dead in the eyes as if to drill the words into my brain. "She needs space. You hanging outside the door is *not* going to help. You're just making things worse."

I knew she was right. I knew it in my fucking bones, but that didn't make letting go any easier.

"Baby, I promise I will let you know when it's okay to come home, but she's not in the right headspace to listen to you right now." She glanced at Scar. "Can you take him somewhere to cool down?"

My drummer didn't hesitate. "Come on, man."

He reached for my arm, but I flung it away, walking back to the bathroom door and whispering a weak “Hadley, I love you. I love you so fucking much. I can explain everything. I promise.”

Scar had to practically drag me out of the house and into the car.

We’ve been driving around town all day. It goes without saying it was the longest afternoon of my entire life.

I spent most of that time blowing up Hadley’s phone with apologies, despite what my mom said. It took everything I had to walk out of the house earlier. I didn’t have enough self-control left to stop myself from texting her.

She didn’t answer *one* of my texts, not that I expected a different outcome.

My mom is the first thing I see when I step foot inside the house. She’s drinking coffee on the couch, wrapped in a plush blanket.

She puts her coffee down the minute Scar and I pass the threshold and round the couch.

Then she’s pulling me into her arms.

“Oh, my sweet boy.” She rubs my back in a circular motion. I melt into her embrace, the pit in my throat sharper than glass.

She has no idea what’s going on, and yet, she’s comforting me. She hugs me like it never even occurred to her that I might’ve done something horrible. Her faith in me will never cease to amaze me.

Hadley used to have that kind of faith in me...

“Where is she?” I croak the second we separate.

“Outside,” she says, taking my hand and squeezing.

I give a small nod, reading the pity in her eyes loud and clear.

This is the part where I lose her.

I venture onto the patio, closing the door and scanning the vicinity.

Nothing.

“Hadley?” I call.

I search the backyard for a few minutes, stopping near the edge of the patio and making out what seems to be a silhouette in the distance.

She’s down on the beach, standing inside the gazebo, where I first kissed her weeks ago.

Fuck, I *shouldn’t* have kissed her that day.

That’s what started this whole mess in the first place. I was doing so good before I tasted her. I’d managed not to touch her, even though every atom in my body begged me to.

I was supposed to stay away from her. I figured it would be the only way I’d get through the summer without my guilt eating me up from the inside.

The more I avoided her, the easier it was to forget about that night.

About the part I played in Gray’s death.

But then I caved.

I kissed her.

And I was done for.

Before I knew it, kissing her wasn’t enough. I needed to feel her. To please her. To have her in any way that I fucking could.

It all started here.

Only seems fitting for the story to end here, too.

I jog down the stairs leading to the beach, a pressure spreading inside my chest and stopping me from inhaling all the way.

Her back is facing me when I come to a stop behind her. I can see her body shaking from repressed tears, her arms folded

over her chest as she hugs herself, as though she needs all the courage she can get.

“Hads...” My voice trembles.

She spins at the sound of her name, her body racking with a silent sob, and my fists clench.

I’ve never hated myself more.

“Let me tell you how this is going to work,” she chokes out, rubbing her palms up and down her arms.

I move closer, itching to hug her.

“You’re going to tell me everything. Every single detail. Who did it, how you found out about it, when you found out...”

My throat aches, a sign that I’m on the verge of falling apart.

Fucking get it together.

“And then?” I breathe.

“And then...” She stops, closing her eyes for a moment. “You’re never going to see me again.”

My heart caves in on itself.

She sits down on the gazebo’s built-in benches, gesturing for me to join her for the last time.

I sit down next to her, take a deep breath, and tell her a story there is no going back from.



THEN

KANE, 17

“THE FIRST BREAK YOU’VE HAD IN YEARS, AND *THIS* IS HOW you want to spend it?” Scar raises a brow, staring at me from the passenger seat of my rental car.

I shrug, slouching in the driver's seat. "No one forced you to come, dipshit."

My drummer snorts, opening a bag of Sour Patch Kids. "No, but your hot mom asked me to watch you, and I take my job as your chaperone very seriously."

I cringe. "Call my mom hot one more time and I'll shove that bag somewhere you won't be able to get it back."

He lets out a laugh, popping a Sour Patch Kid into his mouth. As annoying as he is, I'm glad he's the one joining me on this trip instead of my mom. She wasn't sold on the idea of letting me go on a vacation by myself.

You're not even eighteen yet, she said when I told her I wanted some time on my own.

She's been following me on tour for two years now. She says she'll be damned if she leaves her underage kid without adult supervision.

She eventually caved, but not before I told her that Scar would be with me at all times. Scar might only be two years older than me, but he's considered an adult—pretty damn ironic that he's the least mature person I know.

I check the time on my phone for the tenth time in under two minutes and drop it into the center console of the car.

School will be out at four.

Just fifteen more minutes until I see her again.

"I'm just saying—" Scar props his feet up on the dashboard. "—you could be anywhere in the world right now, and you chose fucking *Silver Springs*."

The bastard has a point.

My US tour wrapped up just a week ago. I should be parking my ass on a beach right now, but instead, I'm here.

Staking out Easton High like some sort of predator.

It's the first time I've been allowed a real vacation since I started touring—and by real vacation, I mean longer than a few days. I'm off for an entire month, and the first thing I did

was get on a plane back to the town I left behind two years ago.

“I told you I’m here to see a friend,” I lie.

Technically, that’s not a complete lie.

I *am* in town to hang out with Gray, but he’s not the reason I’m waiting in this parking lot.

The reason is *her*.

Hadley.

I’m here to see her again.

I wonder what she looks like now.

Does she still wear her hair up? Do her eyes still sparkle when she smiles? Does she still dress the same?

Does she *hate* me?

I have no fucking idea what I’m going to say to her. Or if she’s even going to want to talk to me, but I figured she’d have a harder time telling me to go suck a dick if I was standing in front of her.

I know I messed up. I shouldn’t have gone radio silent on her, but part of me knew that staying in touch with this girl would make my new life unbearable.

Being with Hadley would’ve made me hate my dream career and the constant traveling it requires.

I cut her off before I could get addicted. Tried to spare myself the withdrawal by putting a thousand miles between us, but she’s been on my mind every damn day for the past two years.

And fuck, that kiss...

It didn’t exactly help me move on.

It took me a while to understand that running wasn’t the answer. I’d rather be long-distance with her than not have her in my life at all.

I’m hoping once I tell her why I did it, she’ll give me a second chance.

I'll spend all thirty days of my vacation begging on my knees if I have to.

My phone chimes with a text just as the bell goes off in the distance.

It's Gray.

GRAY

I can't hang out tonight. Got basketball practice and then I'm watching the store. But I'm off tomorrow.

I texted him right when I landed, asking him when he was free. Of course, I didn't tell him I was hoping to spend my first night here worshipping every inch of his sister's body.

KANE

All good, man. I'll stop by your house tomorrow night.

He texts me back instantly.

GRAY

You sure? Hadley might see you.

Right...

I've asked him not to tell Hadley that he and I keep in touch. He knows what happened between us, and he agreed it was for the best.

I'll never forget what Gray said when he found out I'd hooked up with his sister. I'd just walked into our bedroom after kissing Hadley in the shed on her birthday, and I felt horribly guilty for not telling her I was leaving. Not to mention I'd made out with my oldest friend's sister behind his back.

Gray took one look at my face and immediately knew something was wrong.

He asked me about it, and the truth just came pouring out of me. I told him everything. I told him about our meetings in

the shed, the kiss, my confusing feelings for her.

He didn't say a word at first. Then he pushed off our bunk bed and took a few steps toward me.

I was sure he was going to punch me in the face, tell me to never look at her again, but instead, he asked me if I was serious about her.

If you're serious about her, you have my blessing. But I need to know you're not going to bail and break her heart were the exact words he said to me.

I was fifteen. I'm not sure I even knew what "serious" meant. Not to mention I was supposed to be getting on a plane the next day. And so, I said nothing.

After that, he made me promise to stay away from her. He said he'd rather die than let his sister get hurt.

I wasn't ready then.

But I am now.

Today is the day I get my girl back.

KANE

I'll talk to her. Make shit right.

He texts me back right away.

GRAY

Okay, but just a heads-up, she hates you.

I figured as much.

"Which one's your friend?" Scar calls for my attention.

I told Scar we were picking up Gray to justify us coming here.

I look up, glancing at the building towering in the distance and the steady flow of students gushing out of it.

"He doesn't need a ride after all. We're hanging out tomorrow."

Scar's brow furrows. "All right, then. Let's go back to the rental."

This would've been so much easier if he'd just stayed there to begin with.

"In a minute," I mutter, scanning the crowd for her fiery-red hair.

"Who are you looking for?" Scar asks.

I pretend not to hear him, my pulse skyrocketing every time a girl with Hadley's hair color wanders into my field of vision

"Kane?" Scar presses.

I can feel my entire body contract when my eyes land on her.

Hadley. Fucking. Queen.

Chatting with her friends, she comes jogging down the stairs with a denim bag dangling off her shoulder.

She's wearing a cheerleading uniform, a black-and-white top with a sexy little skirt that makes my eyes bulge out of their sockets.

Her body's changed—obviously. The curve of her hips is more prominent, and her tits are noticeably fuller, but she still wears the same hairstyle. Every part of me wants to get out of my car, march over there, and talk to her.

Problem is, it would cause a panic, and I don't have security with me. Plus, I don't want to risk alerting the media that I'm here.

Wow, I did *not* think this through.

I tell myself I'll just follow her home and wait until I've got her alone.

Spoken like a true serial killer.

Jesus, Wilder, be more of a creep.

"Who's the hottie you're staring at?" Scar questions.

My fists clench.

“Family friend” is all I say.

Scar’s eyes widen with realization. “We were never going to pick up your buddy, were we?”

“Nope.”

He scoffs. “Well... You coming to this shit town instead of the Bahamas suddenly makes a lot more sense.”

My eyes track Hadley’s every move as she stops just a few feet away from the parking lot, laughing with her cheerleader friends.

I’m surprised she joined the team.

I didn’t even know she liked cheerleading. I figured she’d be spending all of her time in her shed, painting.

Unless she doesn’t paint anymore?

She was so talented, it would be a shame if she stopped.

“You’re going to go talk to her?” Scar drives his elbow into my ribs.

“Not now, that’s for damn sure.”

Scar finishes the Sour Patch Kids and says, “Probably a good call. You don’t need a bunch of trampled cheerleaders on your conscience.”

I begin mentally making a list of all the things I’ll say to her when I—

“Who’s this guy?” Scar speaks my mind.

I dig my nails into my palm when some douchebag with a varsity jacket comes up behind Hadley and wraps his arms around her waist.

No.

“Maybe they’re friends. Or he’s gay.” Scar tries to soften the blow.

And it almost works.

Until he spins her around, cups her face, and kisses her.

It feels like getting stabbed in the chest with a butcher knife.

I blink repeatedly, as if to cleanse my mind from the image of them together.

Scar cringes. “Okay, definitely not gay.”

“I’m such a fucking idiot,” I whisper to myself.

Did I really think a girl like Hadley would stay single for two years? I never even answered her texts or reached out to her. Of course she’d move on with some asshole from the basketball team.

Why wouldn’t she?

It’s not like *I* gave her a reason not to.

I squint, making out the surname plastered on the back of her boyfriend’s varsity jacket.

Aster.

This Aster guy tickles her from the moment they move away, and she fakes a smile, shooing his hand away.

Fucking rookie.

She *hates* being tickled. She once kicked Gray in the face, almost breaking his nose, to get him to stop. He doesn’t even know her.

Why does *he* get to be the one kissing her?

“I’m sorry, man.” The pity in my drummer’s eyes makes me nauseous.

She kisses the lucky motherfucker again, crushes her body to his, and slips her hands deep into his hair.

“Whatever,” I drawl, starting the engine and backing out of my spot. “Let’s get out of here.”

I must have a taste for torture because I glance into the rearview mirror as I drive away, watching him kiss the hell out of her.

My Hadley.

Mine...

But that's just the thing, isn't it?

She's not mine.

Even though I'm still hers.



“REMIND ME AGAIN WHY WE COULDN’T JUST GO HOME?” I hear the words Scar is saying, but they don’t register, his voice a dull echo as I pull into the driveway of the only other people I know in this town.

Brody and Finn Richards.

Part of growing up with a rich father is getting to know *other* rich kids.

The Richards and my family were what I like to call convenient friends—i.e. people you wouldn’t be friends with if it weren’t for the fact that you run in the same social circle.

Everybody knows the rich life tends to be a lonely one.

Once you reach a certain level of wealth, things get messy.

Sometimes because your ordinary friends start to expect you to pay for everything; other times because your lives, goals, and schedules simply don’t align anymore.

Sooner or later, rich assholes find themselves other rich assholes to talk to.

Hence, *convenient* friends.

The Richards and my family went to the same country club for years before my dad died. We’d also get invited to the same events, and Brody, Finn, and I were usually the only kids there.

Granted, Finn was two years younger than Brody and me, but I liked Finn better than his older brother.

My mom agreed, calling Brody a delinquent and the embodiment of apathy. Partly because he was always lying and manipulating people, but also because he was the type to “throw his own mother under the bus if it benefited him.”

I haven’t talked to these guys once in the past two years, the last time being when I moved into Hadley’s house and Gray dragged me to a party.

The Richards were there, and we exchanged numbers.

Now, would I consider these people my friends?

Not really, but I sure wouldn’t mind some “convenient friends” right about now.

I want to get fucked-up.

To drink until I don’t remember Hadley’s name, let alone what she looked like kissing someone else.

And Brody might be a liar and a bit of a narcissist, but if there’s one thing the guy is good at...

It’s *partying*.

“Why don’t we just head back to the rental?” Scar insists when I don’t reply.

I completely ignore him. “Brody said to meet them in the backyard.”

“You sure this is a good idea? Getting fucked-up won’t change anyth—”

“You’re welcome to get an Uber and leave,” I say dryly.

The town is so small I don’t know if they even *have* Uber here.

“No way in hell,” he protests.

“Then stop bitching.”

Normally, I wouldn’t be this careless.

I’d have Drea send over NDAs directly to Brody before getting anywhere near his house, but the burning sensation in my chest won’t let me be reasonable.

I just want one night where I don't have to worry about my image or my reputation. I just want to get drunk with a bunch of townies and forget that I lost the only girl worth fighting for.

"How many people are there?" Scar asks as we climb out of the car.

"Just him and a few of his friends."

Scar cocks an eyebrow. "Who? Do you know them?"

"No."

His disapproval is made clear by his frown, but he doesn't voice his concerns, biting his tongue. Blaring music emanates in the distance, and we follow the beat to the backyard.

We've just reached the fence when I hear what sounds like muffled voices. I can't discern the words spoken, but the overall tone paints me a pretty clear picture.

Two people are arguing.

The closer we get, the louder the voices grow. I'm quick to realize the strangers are right around the corner and stretch my arm out in front of Scar, stopping him.

"You didn't see shit, Mitchell. You were high off your face."

"I know what I saw. You were fucking the—"

Brody cuts him off. "If I were you, I'd think very carefully about what I'm going to say next. Last I checked, I'm not the only one with skeletons in the closet."

There's a beat of silence.

"Was that a threat?"

"If that's what it takes for you to keep your fucking mouth shut," Brody spits.

"I told you those things in confidence."

"And I'm telling *you* to mind your fucking business unless you want me to pay your little sister a visit. Dia, is it?"

"Fuck you, Richards."

My reflexes kick in just in time for me to grab Scar and take cover behind the garden shed on our right. We watch as the guy Brody was talking to storms past us and out of the backyard.

Looking at him tells me hiding was a good move. He's tall, on the buff side, too. I don't want to know how he would've reacted if he'd caught us eavesdropping.

"What the hell was that about?" Scar mutters.

I shrug. "No fucking idea."

Scar scoffs. "Your friend sounds like a tremendous guy."

"He's not my friend."

Although tonight, he will be.

Scar and I cut across Brody's backyard, meeting him and two of his friends by the pool.

They're passing a joint around, seated on the patio furniture. The air is dense with smoke, the smell of weed infiltrating our lungs the second we reach them.

"Fuck me. Is that Kane Wilder?" Brody says in a high-pitched voice, fanning himself like he's one of my groupies. He rises off the three-seater, making his way over.

"Glad you made it. How've you been, man?" Brody pulls me into a bro hug, patting my back. He introduces me to the group as soon as he's pulled away. "Guys, this is Kane. We've been friends for ages."

I force a smile, greeting everybody. It's funny how he's making it sound like we're tight, when really, I haven't thought about this guy *once* in the past two years.

You wouldn't believe the amount of assholes I've had claim to be my friend since my career took off.

New day, same shit.

"I'm Axel." The younger-looking guy waves, eyes bloodshot from the substances he's been abusing. He looks higher than a fucking giraffe.

“Dean,” Brody’s other friend says.

“This is Scar.” I point to my drummer, who I have no doubt wouldn’t have bothered introducing himself. He looks like he’d rather swallow that entire joint than get to know these people.

One thing I like about Scar is that he doesn’t pretend for anyone. If he doesn’t like you, you’ll fucking know.

“Go ahead. Make yourselves at home.” Brody gestures to the patio furniture.

I plop down into the one-seater nearby while Scar drags his feet to the three-seater and takes the last spot next to Axel.

“Aren’t you supposed to be off doing superstar shit?” Brody drops into the hammock across from me.

“I’m off for a month,” I say.

“How long are you in town for?” Brody opens his hand, glancing at Axel, who quickly takes the hint and passes him the blunt.

“Not long. Two days, tops.”

There’s really no point in sticking around now that Hadley’s out of the picture. I’m thinking I’ll head back to LA and hit some after-parties.

Brody lifts the joint to his lips, dragging a hit. “Well, then... since we only have tonight, what do you say we make the most of it?”

He extends his arm in my direction, offering me a puff.

Now we’re talking.



WHAT THE HELL DID I GET MYSELF INTO?

Just one of the questions I’ve been asking myself since I got behind the wheel of Dean’s shady van a little after

midnight.

Don't ask me how I got roped into being the designated driver. I couldn't tell you. All I know is there was a coin toss involved and a shit ton of tequila.

"Dude, seriously? Grandma just passed us," Brody mocks from the passenger seat.

I may be drunk and an idiot for driving under the influence, but that doesn't mean I'm dumb enough to risk getting pulled over. I've been watching my speedometer like a fucking hawk.

Man, the media would have a *field* day with this one. I can already see the headline popping all over the internet.

Kane Wilder arrested for driving under the influence.

"My guy's got the grass." Axel looks up from his phone. "He says to meet him behind the abandoned movie theatre."

We ran out of weed an hour ago.

Then the guys decided to go meet their dealer in a sketchy part of town to buy more. In hindsight, that probably would've been a good moment to call it a night, but I wasn't ready for the party to end—to Scar's absolute misery.

I make eye contact with him in the rearview mirror. He's staring daggers at me from the back of the van. He wanted to go home hours ago, but I insisted on staying. I still see her face whenever I close my eyes.

Translation: I'm not drunk enough.

"Tell him we'll be there in a couple years. Maybe sooner if someone would just step on it," Dean scoffs from the back seat, and I flip him off in the rearview mirror.

I may be a slow driver, but it's not like his shitty van has much horsepower to begin with. The thing is covered in rust and making all sorts of weird noises.

The clunker also doesn't have any seats in it, except for the driver and passenger seats. The guys are sitting on the ground like a bunch of hostages, passing a liquor bottle around.

When I asked Dean what he uses the piece of shit for, he said he uses it for his job. His answer made Brody snort. The whole thing seems sketchy as fuck. Not that I care.

I'll never see any of these guys again after today.

"I'm fucking starving," Axel complains as we're turning onto a familiar street.

"Same," Dean agrees.

They've got the munchies.

Classic.

"Dude, dude!" Axel, who's seated behind me, taps me over the shoulder repeatedly. "There's a store. Pull over!"

I glance at the convenience store they're talking about

It's right down the road.

But it's not just any store.

I've been here before.

Hell, I've *lived* here before...

This is Lillian's store.

Above it is the house where I lived for months after my dad died. Last I heard, Gray and Hadley work the register on school nights to help out their mom and make some money.

Matter of fact, Gray's working the store tonight. That's why he couldn't hang out.

It feels so weird being here again.

The next thing I know, I'm turning into the parking lot, my eyes flocking to the large window on the second floor.

This is Hadley's bedroom.

I wonder if she's up there, sleeping like a baby.

Maybe she's out with her boyfriend. It *is* Friday night.

Maybe they're going at it on her bed. Images of her clawing at that guy's back as he fucks her fill my vision, and I clench the wheel until I can't feel my fingers.

“Holy fuck,” Deans blurts out just as I’m slowing down before the entrance. “Richards, isn’t that where the asshole from the party works?”

Brody’s eyes light up with realization. “Shit, I think you’re right.”

The asshole from the party?

“Did you ever get back at him for that stunt he pulled?” Axel questions.

“Him who?” I ask.

“Grayson Queen. The motherfucker whooped Brody’s ass last week.” Dean takes his closed fist to his mouth, stifling his laughter. “Gray heard Brody talking shit about his prudish sister and lost it.”

My eyes widen.

Hadley...

Brody’s features twist with anger at the recollection. “It’s not my fault his sister’s a stuck-up bitch.”

Dean snorts. “I don’t know how my brother does it. They’ve been dating for *months*, and she still won’t put out. If it were me, I’d have pinned that girl down and fucked that virgin pussy from day one.”

Rage replaces the blood in my veins.

He would’ve forced himself on her is what he’s saying.

It takes all I have not to follow Gray’s lead and crash my fist into his jaw.

“Bastard’s lucky I was wasted.” Brody clenches his teeth at the recollection, his anger picking up steam. “Man, I should wipe the fucking floor with that kid.”

“Why haven’t you?” Dean pours fuel into the fire. “He fucking humiliated you. I say you go in there and show him who’s boss. Unless... you’re scared you can’t take him?”

I cast a glance toward Brody.

And see a switch flip in his eyes.

It's like something died... Like whatever humanity he had inside him was drained from his body.

His fragile ego couldn't handle the blows, and Dean knew that. He knew exactly how to push his buttons.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" Brody asks Dean.

Dean nods. "That kid needs to be taught a lesson."

"You still have them?" Brody adds.

"You bet."

What the fuck is happening?

Scar and I trade glances, the look in his eyes matching the confusion in mine.

I realize what a monumental fucking mistake I've made when Brody reaches inside Dean's glove compartment...

...and pulls out a gun.

"Dude, what the fuck?" I blurt out, backing away.

"What the hell are you doing?" Scar echoes.

"This isn't fucking funny, man," Axel joins in.

Brody lets out a dark chuckle. "What? You pussies never seen a gun before?"

I haven't.

Not up close, anyway.

"Bro, just put the gun away." Axel tries to talk some sense into him.

"I don't think so," Brody says through gritted teeth. "Let's see how brave this asshole really is."

That's my snapping point.

"Fuck this shit. Scar, let's go." I start to unbuckle my seat belt, ready to make a run for it.

But something stops me.

Something cold.

It prods the side of my head, pushing against my temple.

“You’re not going anywhere,” I hear Brody’s snarl, but all I can focus on is the pounding of my heart in my skull.

It takes me a split second to understand Brody is pressing the gun to my head.

Gasps ricochet around the car, but no one speaks, the shock descending over us snuffing out our ability to speak.

I just wanted to party and drink my troubles away.

How did I end up here, stuck in a car with two psychopaths?

“Do you think I’m stupid? I let you go, and you’ll go straight to the police. Like it or not, superstar, you’re a part of this, too.”

Brody lowers the gun from my head long enough to pull out a ski mask and another gun from the glove compartment.

Then he hands the spare gun over to Dean.

Brody throws the mask on, the material concealing his identity. “Give me your phones.”

We don’t move or react for a few seconds.

“I said give me your fucking phones! Now!” Brody snaps, pointing the gun at Scar and Axel.

The weapon kicks us into high gear, and we practically throw our phones at him. Brody proceeds to shove all three of our phones into the back pockets of his jeans.

He points to us with a flick of his chin and tells Dean, “You take care of them. I’m going in.”

“Copy that,” Dean says. “Get the money, too.”

Brody pulls a large black gym bag from underneath the passenger seat and scoffs. “I always do.”

Holy shit...

This isn’t a first-time thing for them, is it?

They do this often.

Jesus, is that why Brody laughed when Dean said he uses the van for his “job”?

They’re fucking robbers.

I bet they steal all sorts of shit together. I know Brody’s dad refuses to give his sons a penny, hell-bent on teaching his kids how to make their own money, but Christ, I never thought Brody would break the fucking law to get some.

I meet Scar’s gaze in the rearview mirror, and he gives a small nod. I immediately know he’s up to something. I think I see him mouth the word *wait*, but I’m too busy imagining all the ways things could go horribly wrong to be certain.

Once Brody’s out of the car, it’ll just be Dean.

That’s three against one.

My best guess is Scar is going to try to disarm him.

If we’re lucky, we’ll knock him out and go get help.

But if we’re not...

It’s curtains for Scar.

I have no idea how far Dean is willing to go. From the looks of things, he and Brody are just low-grade robbers, hitting a few stores here and there. Maybe some vacation homes. Odds are they’re all talk and wouldn’t ever pull the trigger.

The question is: am I willing to bet Scar’s life on that?

I inhale a sharp breath when Brody casts a final glance at his accomplice, the vicious smile stretching across his lips chilling me to the bone, and climbs out of the car through the passenger-side door. I watch him make his way to the entrance of the store and disappear inside.

Fuck.

Gray.

I don’t even have time to worry about him because Scar’s launching himself at Dean before I can make sense of what’s

happening. Dean falls onto his back, and Scar jumps at the opportunity to clock him in the face.

“Run!” Scar hollers like we’re in a fucking action movie, and a rush of adrenaline surges through my veins. I unbuckle my seat belt, about to haul ass out of the van to try and get help, but then...

All the hope in my body bursts into flames.

Dean manages to elbow Scar in the face and regain control of the situation, climbing on top of him and angling the gun underneath his chin.

“Don’t be a fucking idiot,” Dean growls, fury seeping out of him. “This doesn’t have to get messy.”

What does that even mean?

Are they just going to let us go after this?

And if they do, what’s stopping us from going straight to the police station?

There’s no way this is *not* going to get messy.

Either they kill us, or we rat them out.

There’s no door number three.

Scar seems to share my thoughts because he blurts, “Are you fucking kidding me? It doesn’t have to get *messy*? It got messy the second you—”

That’s when I hear it.

The gunshot.

It resonates through the night, the sound making my throat close up and blocking my airways until my lungs feel like overinflated fire balls.

Brody was probably just trying to scare Gray.

That was just a warning shot.

It had to be.

Brody comes rushing out of the store with the black bag in his hand, and Dean starts shouting at me. It’s something about

“getting ready to drive,” but my ears are ringing.

Something's wrong.

“Let's go!” I hear Dean scream as soon as Brody drops into the passenger seat. “Are you deaf? Fucking go! Now!”

The gun is back on my temple before I know it, pressing so far into the side of my head my skull radiates with pain.

Brody is hyperventilating next to me, his entire body shaking.

Scar's voice is the only thing to pull me out of the trance dragging me under.

“Kane, fucking drive!” he begs, the concern in his tone rebooting my brain.

My foot comes down on the gas so hard the tires screech as we take off at maximum speed.

Brody starts throwing up all over himself, mumbling nonsense as his body spasms. “I didn't... I wasn't... I didn't mean to...”

“What the fuck happened?” Dean yells, but Brody doesn't answer. “Brody, what the fuck did you do?”

On autopilot, I drive and drive, images of Gray flashing before my eyes, the memories we've made from age five up until this moment flashing before my eyes.

I see it all.

Us sharing a bedroom.

Us laughing on the Fourth of July.

Us lying to our moms so we could go party on the beach.

Him asking me to promise that I would treat his sister right.

“Look me in the eyes and promise me you won't break her heart, Kane. And if you can't, then promise me that you'll let her go.”

Tears start spilling down my face.

Almost as though I know what Brody's about to say before he opens his mouth.

"He..." Brody chokes. "He said my name."

"What?" Dean presses.

"He recognized me. He fucking knew who I was, and I... I just panicked," he says in between vomiting.

"Don't tell me you killed him," Dean belts out, panic consuming him. "Do *not* tell me you fucking killed him!"

Brody says nothing, gasping for air.

That's all it takes for me to know.

Gray's dead.

Gone.

And I just became the getaway driver to my best friend's murder...



NOW

HADLEY

I can count on one hand the number of times I've been rendered speechless in my life...

This time is different, though, because I'm more than just *speechless*.

I'm fucking dying.

"Brody Richards?" I'm crying so hard I can barely get the monster's name out. "H-He killed my brother?"

I don't know why I'm asking. I already know the answer.

I already know what he's going to say, but I still ask stupid questions because my brain needs help processing the atrocity Kane just shared with me.

Kane can't bring himself to speak, his jaw clenched so tight it looks uncomfortable.

A tear rolls down his face.

And he nods.

I rise off the bench, seconds away from collapsing to my knees when Kane's arms jump to my waist to hold me up.

I recoil, pushing him off me with a gutting “Don’t touch me.”

Brody Richards shot my brother in the head.

He killed Gray in cold blood.

And Kane *knew*.

I’ve only ever known Brody as Finn Richards’s older brother and Dean’s best friend. I used to date this guy Ben, and Dean was his older brother. They were two years older than us, and so we didn’t run in the same circle.

I knew Gray had landed himself on Brody’s bad side after getting into a fight at a party, but shit, I had no idea that fight was about *me*.

Gray wanted to defend me.

And it got him killed.

“I’m so sorry.” Kane’s broken rasp pierces my heart right in the middle.

He’s *sorry*?

My shock evolves into rage. “How fucking dare you call yourself his friend?”

He glances down at his feet.

“Were you ever going to tell me?” I cry out, my breathing out of control. “If I hadn’t found out when I did, would you have ever told me the truth?”

He doesn’t say anything, tears streaming down his face.

That’s my answer.

“You were going to let me wonder for the rest of my life, weren’t you?”

Still, he says nothing.

“Why?” I’m hysterical at this point, my entire body consumed by tremors and violent sobs. “Why didn’t you just tell us?”

I immediately know I can't handle whatever response he's about to give me. I can't handle another piece of information when I'm having a mental breakdown.

"You know what? I can't. I just..." I wipe my face swiftly, failing to pull myself together. "I can't do this."

Then I do the only smart thing I've done all summer.

I turn...

And leave Kane Wilder behind...



IT'S FUNNY HOW THE WORST BETRAYALS COME FROM THE people closest to you.

How the people you'd trust with your life can make you wish you were dead at a moment's notice.

I might not be dead yet, but I sure as hell feel like it.

I'm sure I *look* like it, too.

I haven't left my bed in forty-eight hours except to go to the bathroom and shove whatever food I could find into my mouth—anything to get my stomach to shut up.

I thought going back to school would make everything better, but it turns out I'm just as depressed at the dorms as I was at my mom's.

It's been four weeks.

Four weeks of wasting away in bed, battling inner demons and wondering what the hell I'm supposed to do with what I know.

Four weeks of ignoring my friends because I'm too busy trying to *survive* to answer their messages.

I unlock my phone with a swipe of my thumb, scrolling through all the texts I've ignored.

JAMIE

Girl, what in the FUCK is going on?

JAMIE

I can't believe you just left town without saying goodbye. You know I'm not mad at you for what happened at the bonfire, right? My brother acted like a douche nozzle.

JAMIE

Are you okay? No one's heard from you in weeks.

JAMIE

Drea and I are this close to showing up at your dorm to make sure you're alive. ANSWER US.

I tap out of our conversation and select Scar's name.

He's the last person I expected to hear from and, ironically, the person who's texted me the most since I left the beach house.

SCAR

He's not sleeping.

SCAR

Hadley, I've never seen him like this.

SCAR

I know that was a lot to take in but you need to hear him out. You don't even know the whole story.

SCAR

Hadley, please. He's off the rails.

SCAR

You're going to have to talk to him sooner or later.

I considered blocking his number, the way I blocked Kane's number the second I found out the truth, but I couldn't bring myself to do it.

The truth is, I *want* Scar to update me. All the media does these days is talk about how the trial with Joshua is coming up when all I really want to know is how Kane is doing behind closed doors.

I know I shouldn't care.

I don't *want* to care.

If only I had a say in the matter.

I delete Scar's messages before opening my conversation with Drea.

DREA

UMMM, you want to tell me what the hell happened between you and Kane?

DREA

He's a fucking mess.

DREA

He won't tell me anything. He just said you got into a fight?

I scoff.

A fight, huh?

If you want to call me getting my heart smashed into a thousand pieces by the person I trusted most a *fight*.

Memories appear before my eyes, and I cringe, failing to stop the flashbacks from invading my brain.

After Evie convinced Kane to leave the beach house for a while, I came out of the bathroom and lost it. My mom held me while I cried, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her the truth.

Oh, and by the way, Mom, I know who killed Gray.

I packed my bags, and the next morning, Mom and I hit the road. I couldn't sleep for a week afterward. I just kept replaying Kane's story over and over.

I considered going to the police and telling them what I'd found out. But I figured I'd be pointing a finger at an incredibly rich and resourceful celebrity.

Would anyone even believe me?

I doubt Scar would testify against Kane. Or that Brody and his accomplice would ever admit to what they did.

My bladder urges me to get up for the second time today. I've just climbed out of bed when a loud knock rattles the door of my dorm.

I stop dead, Jamie's last message coming back to me.

She said she and Drea would track me down if I didn't answer. I convinced myself she was just trying to scare me, but what if she meant it?

It can't be Maggie. She was spending the weekend with her new boy toy—she even knows his name this time—and texted me that she wouldn't be back before six tonight.

I check my phone.

It's barely 3:00 p.m.

I glance down at my disgusting pj's. I haven't changed clothes since Friday.

“Just a minute,” I call as I’m throwing on a large hoodie and shoving my legs into a pair of jeans.

I’m thinking Jamie and Drea would’ve announced themselves already.

One thing’s for sure: whoever it is clearly isn’t going away until I answer.

I trail to the door and grip the knob.

My jaw damn near hits the ground when I see the two police officers on the other side.

My initial thought is that someone died.

“Can I help you?”

“Hadley Queen?” the taller officer says.

Shit, did I commit a crime and don’t remember it?

“Yeah?”

“We’re here for a welfare check.”

I’m convinced I misheard them.

“A welfare check? Why?” I realize I know the answer to that question a second too late.

“Your boyfriend and your friends are worried about you. They said they haven’t heard from you in over a month.”

I’ll be damned. Jamie and Drea sent the fucking *police* to my house.

Back the fuck up.

Did he say I have a *boyfriend*?

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” I correct.

“Are you sure? Because a young man’s called over five times asking us to check on you. And that’s on top of your friends calling.”

“Yes, I’m sure.” I pause, giving in to curiosity. “Can I ask who the young man is?”

I already know what he's going to say before he opens his mouth.

“The name's Kane Wilder.”



HADLEY

I'm sorry I've been MIA, but a welfare check?
Seriously?

MOVING DOTS POP UP AT THE BOTTOM OF MY SCREEN. MY phone chimes with Jamie's and Drea's answers a heartbeat later.

JAMIE

Considering we haven't heard a peep from you in WEEKS, I think we were entirely justified.

DREA

We love you, bitch. You can't just bail on us and expect us NOT to send the cops to your house.

A chuckle leaves my lips.

I just spent two hours with the police, trying to convince them that I'm not a danger to myself. If I'd known the girls were genuinely afraid for my safety, I would've answered them sooner.

Scratch that—I would've *tried* to answer them.

I could barely get out of bed or feed myself the first few weeks, let alone answer everybody's messages.

HADLEY

They said Kane's the first person who called.

Their responses come right away.

JAMIE

About that... the whole thing was sort of his idea.

DREA

I told him we hadn't heard from you in a few weeks and he just flipped his shit.

The conflicting emotions in my chest fight for dominance.

He knew I wouldn't answer him after what happened, but finding out I wasn't answering *others* sent him spiraling.

Good.

I hope he drove himself mad with worry.

He owes me five years of misery.

The girls and I dedicate the next hour to catching up and filling each other in on what we've been up to in the past month—of course, I don't tell them about Kane's betrayal and the fact that I've been crying myself to sleep every night.

Shit, I've missed them.

I'm realizing now that isolating myself has done nothing but drag me deeper into depression. I told myself I couldn't tell anyone what I know yet, but that doesn't mean I have to push everyone away.

I drop onto the two-seater couch in my dorm a few hours later. I've showered, brushed my teeth *and* my hair, not to mention made myself a real meal. Safe to say this is one of the best days I've had in a long time.

As though I'm on a mission to ruin my own progress, I grab my phone and pull up the internet.

My fingers type out Kane's name in the search bar before I can come to my senses.

As I predicted, every article is about how the trial will be broadcasted online two weeks from now. My stomach twists

as I scroll through the comments below the article, each of them stating how excited they are for it.

Jesus, they're talking about it like it's reality TV.

The third article catches my attention.

Kane Wilder opens up about his struggles with alcohol.

I click the link and begin to read.

This is the only interview he's done since he left the beach house. I'm guessing his management wants him to stay out of the public eye until the trial as a way to ensure he won't accidentally do something to make shit worse.

In the interview, he talks about how he's been sober for a few months. It's basically just a bunch of "I'm a changed man" talk, which I'm sure has to do with his team wanting to salvage his image.

Good to know he hasn't relapsed, though.

I'm about to scold myself for still giving a shit about his well-being when the door to the dorm swings open.

Maggie and her new boyfriend burst into the room, their smiles making me cringe.

I *so* don't need this right now. I know it probably makes me sound bitter, but the last thing I want is to see Maggie make out with some frat guy while I'm heartbroken.

I managed to keep her in the dark about my disastrous love life up until now. She stayed with her man at the party house where he lives most of last week, and when she did come home, I was usually in class or asleep.

Something tells me I won't be able to hide much longer.

Maggie takes one look at my face and stops dead in her tracks.

Worry creeps into her gaze. "You look horrible."

I force a smile. "Gee, thanks."

"No, no, I just mean... you look... not okay." She tries to lessen the blow, but I don't take offense to her comment. She's

right. I look like shit. I squeezed a crying session in the middle of my shower, and my face is still puffy.

Maggie doesn't await my response, spinning on her heels and telling her flavor of the week, "Babe, I know we were supposed to hang out tonight, but would you mind if we rescheduled?"

"What? But we were supposed to catch that movie," he protests.

"We can catch it tomorrow," she says and pecks his mouth quickly. "Okay, bye now!"

She practically kicks him out of the dorm, and I bite back a laugh.

Maggie turns to me as soon as he's gone, planting her hands on her hips and pinning me with a knowing look. "Start talking."



"I'M SURE IT WASN'T *THAT* BAD." MAGGIE POPS A GUMMY bear into her mouth. "I once had a guy go out to a bar to cheat on me because I was sleeping and he—" She makes air quotes with her fingers. "—'didn't want to wake me.'"

I snort at her story.

To be honest, I *wish* it was something as simple as cheating.

I wish Kane was unfaithful instead of an accomplice to my brother's murder.

"Oh, it was bad. Extremely bad." I give her as little info as I can.

"I still don't understand why you won't tell me what happened." It doesn't sound like criticism but genuine confusion.

"I... I'm just not ready to talk about it."

Oh, and by the way, the guy in question is your idol. More gummy bears?

I have no doubt she'd lose her shit if she knew Kane's the guy who broke my heart.

"Well, did you at least ask why he did what he did? Maybe he had a damn good reason. For all you know, you would've done the same thing."

"I don't think so," I counter.

"Look, I'm always on your side, but it seems to me like Team Hadley is missing some crucial information here. Have you even considered giving him the benefit of the doubt?"

I love Maggie to pieces, but I don't want to see things from Kane's perspective. It's so much easier to hate him when I don't put myself in his shoes.

"You want to watch a movie?" I change the subject before I do something stupid like take her advice and unblock Kane's number.

"Sure." She nods, rising off the couch. "Let me get my laptop."

She makes her way to her bedroom, but her phone goes off in her pocket, halting her steps.

She pulls it out, her eyes growing in size when she looks at her screen. "No way."

"What?"

"A drunk Kane Wilder goes off on paparazzi at LA club," she reads out loud. "I can't believe he's drinking again."

My heart drops to my stomach.

She continues reading. "It would seem the singer's vows of sobriety have gone down the drain as Wilder was spotted drinking with friends after..."

I stop listening, my focus slipping away.

"There's a video of him walking out of the club," she adds.

She presses Play, and I hear what sounds like an amalgam of voices. Questions blend together, most of them revolving around the trial. A man I assume to be Kane's bodyguard shouts, "*Out of the way.*"

"Kane! Kane! You talk to Joshua lately?" one man asks.

"Are you ready for the trial?" the other adds.

"How's Tate doing?"

But the sentence that gets his attention is "Your mother should be ashamed."

That's what does it.

"The fuck did you just say?" Kane snaps.

Noises I can't identify follow. I think I hear a car door closing. Then the video's over.

"What happened?" I can't stop myself from asking.

"His drummer held him back and got him inside the car, but Kane looked like he was ready to tear that guy's head off," she explains.

Holy shit.

Scar wasn't lying when he said Kane was off the rails.

"Wait, why'd you get a notification about that?"

She nods. "I've got Google alerts set up. I get notified every time something with Kane Wilder's name gets posted online."

Of course she does.

There are fans, and then there's *Maggie*.

Fuck, I can't believe Kane relapsed.

He was doing so good. He said he would rather die than disappoint his mom again.

Tears prick at my eyelids, and I curse beneath my breath.

Why can't I just stop *caring*?

“What’s wrong?” Maggie takes notice of my tears, and I dab my eyes dry with my sleeves. She sits down on the couch next to me. “Hadley, talk to me. What’s wrong?”

I’m betraying Gray.

I’m betraying my twin brother by still loving Kane.

And I do.

I love Kane.

With everything I have.

“Sorry, I’m just... my emotions are all over the place right now.”

“Come here.” Maggie opens her arms, offering me a hug I accept immediately.

It takes me a few minutes to get the waterworks under control.

“You know what you need?” Maggie’s eyes light up when we pull away.

I sniffle, wiping my tear-soaked cheeks. “Therapy?”

She laughs, but deep down, I’m sure she agrees. “Dancing. And booze. Lots of booze. There’s a party at a frat house tonight. We’re going.”

I consider my options.

A: Stay here and rot the way I’ve been doing for a month.

B: Take a day off from crying and have fun with my friend.

The answer is easy.

“Okay.”



KANE

I'm in hell.

Call me dramatic, but going through life without Hadley Queen is what I imagine *hell* to look like.

Only, in my version of hell, there are no flames, no tormented souls, no devil...

Just silence.

Loneliness.

And this intense, piercing cold that chills you to the bone.

I've been alone with all these thoughts... all this *guilt*... for over a month now.

I'd say I reached my lowest point last night, when I ruined all of my progress by drinking my way through that club's entire liquor supply, but something tells me I've yet to hit rock bottom.

I'm sure there are many more ways for me to punish myself and drive my health, career, and sanity into the ground. Alcohol is just the first step on my journey to ruin.

At least she's safe.

That's what I've been telling myself since the cops called to update me on the welfare check this morning.

I don't know how my baby's doing, seeing as we haven't spoken since she left the beach house, but one of the officers who stopped by her dorm said she seemed fine.

Fine. I hate that word.

It's a stupid fucking word that's open to interpretation.

Is she fine in the sense that she's doing okay or fine in the sense that she's miserable but not *so* miserable that she'd do something stupid?

In case it wasn't clear, I'm losing my fucking mind.

The universe must agree because the next thing I know, my publicist's bursting through my bedroom door without knocking, parking herself at the end of my bed and shrieking, "What in the ever-loving *fuck* were you thinking?"

"Here we go," I drawl, rolling onto my back and rubbing my eyes.

"It's all over the internet!" Drea continues, stomping over to the side of my bed and ripping the blanket off my body. "Do you have any idea how *bad* this makes you look?"

I don't even bat an eye, reaching for my phone on the nightstand. "I'm guessing really bad?"

"Just weeks before the trial, to make it worse. What the hell is wrong with you? Are you *trying* to make my job harder?" She shoves her phone into my face, the headline and subhead displayed on her screen leaving me unfazed.

Kane Wilder gets drunk and assaults paparazzi unprovoked.

So much for sobriety!

I snort at the picture they attached below. Not only can you see me death-staring the dude who talked about my mom, but you can also see *his* face and the fear in his eyes. Bastard looks like he's about to shit his pants.

Already bored with her speech, I unlock my phone, doing the exact same thing I've been doing every single morning for

a month now.

I stalk Hadley's socials.

Did I mention Hadley's a fucking ghost on social media?

She only has three posts on Instagram. *Three!* One of them is a selfie of her with her roommate, the other is a picture of a sunset she took in Golden Cove, and the last one is a picture of her and Gray devouring ice cream cones when they were little.

My stomach twists at the caption. She used a quote from one of Anaya's songs. Hads wasn't lying when she said she loved her music.

Love doesn't go away.

Even though you did.

Jesus.

Drea goes on and on in the background. "You're lucky Scar took you home when he did. First, you go and do all these interviews preaching sobriety, and then... Hey, asshole! Are you even listening to me?"

I click on Hadley's Instagram, my heart doing a whole-ass backflip when I see that she's posted something for the first time in forever.

She just posted to her story, but I'll take anything. I'm about to click to view her story when my phone is ripped out of my hands.

"Hey!" The desperation in my voice makes me cringe.

"What are you looking at—" Drea shuts herself up the second she recognizes Hadley's profile. "*Oh.*"

"Give me my phone," I snap.

That phone is the last thing connecting me to my girl.

I need it.

Pity floods Drea's gaze. "You're never going to tell me what happened between you two, are you?"

"Give it." I ignore her question, holding out my hand in her direction.

She pauses, probably wondering if she should push for answers, but she seems to decide against it because she sighs. “Piece of advice. You might want to skip her story.”

What?

She gives me my phone back and spins, heading for the door. Seconds before she walks out of my room, she says, “Get dressed. We need to fix your mess.”

I wait for her to close the door before doing exactly what she told me not to do.

I click Hadley’s story, aching to see her beautiful face. Problem is, Hadley isn’t the one recording the video. Some girl I don’t know is.

I connect the dots in seconds.

I think that’s her roommate.

The brunette seems drunk as hell, holding a red cup and blowing kisses to the camera. Loud music blares through my phone speaker, making it clear she’s at a party. You can see colorful flashing lights rotating in the background, along with drunk college students dancing and grinding on each other.

The girl flips the camera over and quickly films her surroundings before ending the recording.

I only see her on the third watch.

Hadley.

Talking and cuddling with some douchebag on the couch pushed up against the wall.

He has his hand on her thigh and his arm looped around her shoulders.

I must rewatch the story a dozen times to make sure I’m not imagining things.

I want nothing more than to go fucking ballistic on my phone. But smashing my phone into a thousand pieces is not going to help me get my girl back.

Only one thing will.



HADLEY

“WAKE UP, SUNSHINE! WE’RE GOING TO BE LATE FOR CLASS.”
Maggie’s voice stirs me awake.

My eyes flutter open, and I attempt to sit up, only to be forced back down onto the mattress by the dizziness crashing into me.

Why do I feel like I’m *dying*?

Memories of last night come flooding back in, along with a tinge of dirty shame and the promise to never drink this much again.

Why did I think going to a frat party on a Sunday night would be a good idea?

I reach for my phone on my nightstand just as Maggie’s walking into the bathroom and shutting the door.

I check the screen, cursing at the time. 8:50 a.m. We came home at around 3:00 a.m. last night, and I have class in an *hour*.

My gaze drops to the notifications I’ve missed while asleep.

I have a text from my mom, asking me how school is going and when she can come visit, but that’s not all.

I also have a few messages from an unknown number.

The first message is a zoomed-in screenshot of my last Instagram story—courtesy of a very drunk Maggie.

The picture shows me sitting on the couch with some rando whose name I don’t even remember.

I figured a little flirting might help me get over Kane, but the guy was too handsy for my taste, and after trying to convince myself that I was into it for ten minutes, I ended up asking Maggie to fake an “emergency” so we could leave.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

Who is that?

I obviously didn't respond fast enough because the stranger double texted me soon after.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

Hads, who the FUCK is that?

UNKNOWN NUMBER

I swear to fucking God if you slept with him, I'm tracking him down and chopping his puny dick right off his body.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

In case it wasn't clear already, I will not fucking lose you.

Funny enough, the threat *isn't* what's causing my stomach to do cartwheels.

There's only one person in the world who calls me Hads.

Kane.

I blocked his number the day I found out the truth, which means he either got a new one, or he's using one of those apps that generate fake numbers for you.

His jealous comment elicits a scoff from me.

If he thinks he has any say in who I fuck after what he did, he's in for one hell of an awakening.

I will never forgive him for what he did, but what Maggie said got me thinking.

Why didn't he just tell the police?

I get that he had a fucking gun to his head and there was nothing he could do to stop Gray's murder, but that doesn't explain the years of silence that followed.

I know for a fact that Kane loved Gray like a brother—the fact that these two remained close even after Kane got famous makes that clear. The Kane I knew would've chosen endless torture over letting his best friend's murderer run free.

Maybe that's just it.

Maybe I never really knew him at all.

I block Kane's new number and drag myself out of bed with a groan. I need to get dressed and chug a gallon of water before class.

I've just finished changing clothes when a loud knock echoes through my dorm.

Doubt burdens me.

The last time there was a knock on my door, police officers were standing on the other side.

What is it now?

"Coming!" I call, trying to tame my morning hair with my hands.

The last thing I expected was to find a delivery guy carrying a large package.

"Morning, miss. I have a delivery for—" He double-checks the name on the label. "—Hadley Queen."

"That's me," I say.

He asks me to sign off on the delivery before handing me the heavy box. "There you go."

I rack my brain for a moment but can't recall ordering anything.

I take a look at the label and the sender's name.

Yours. Always.

That's all it says.

The return address is a PO box in California.

At first, I think a mistake was made and the package was sent to the wrong address, but the box is addressed to my name

and my dorm, so the wrong-person scenario is a bit of a stretch.

I don't waste a second carrying the box to the kitchen counter and opening it.

Inside the box are what seem to be hundreds of postcards and...

Souvenirs?

There are key chains, refrigerator magnets, shot glasses, mugs, bracelets—any souvenir you could think of.

And they all seem to come from different places.

Same goes for the postcards, all of which bear pictures from various countries, states, and capitals.

London, Paris, Rome.

I reach inside and pick up the postcard atop the pile. It's a Los Angeles postcard with the Hollywood sign photographed from afar.

The oxygen swooshes from my lungs when I turn it over and notice the date.

This was written five years ago.

Hey Hads,

*I've never written a postcard before. Is
Hey even the proper way to start one? I have
no idea.*

*It doesn't matter, though. All that
matters is that I made you a promise. A
promise I intend to keep.*

*I've been in LA for a week now and I
don't like it here. My mom says I need time to*

adjust, but there's a part of me that misses Silver Springs. Or maybe it's you that I miss.

You, and your laugh and our secret meetings in the shed. I haven't been able to sleep thinking about the way I left.

I think I'd love this place a lot more if you were there to see it with me. I think I'd love any place a lot more if you were there to see it with me.

I miss you.

P.S. I got you a keychain with your name on it.

Kane

Seconds elapse before the information registers.

There's just no way.

He kept his promise?

The ache in my throat becomes unbearable when I'm brought back to that day.

We were in the shed, and I'd just shown him one of my paintings for the first time.

He made me promise to send him some art once I was a famous painter, and I answered with a joke, asking him to send me postcards of all the amazing places he would see as a famous singer.

And he did it.

He actually did it.

I go through the pile of postcards, my sight covered by a thick veil of tears.

All the postcards date back to when Kane was fifteen, up until the day he turned eighteen. Then he stopped writing them.

He never sent them to me.

Every city he visited, every beautiful place he saw... he wrote a postcard about.

I grab another postcard at random. This one dates to before Gray died.

Hey Hads,

I'm in New York this week. Work has been crazy since my album came out. My label's on my ass to write more romantic songs like the one I wrote for you, but every time I do, they say they're too depressing.

I'm trying my best to write upbeat lyrics, but it turns out it's hard writing positive shit when all I do is miss you.

You left a void in me. I fucking hate that I was too stupid to realize how important you are until after I ruined everything. I'm starting to think running away was the worst mistake I've ever made. I hope it's not too late to fix it.

Oh, and I'm liking New York.

Even though it kind of smells.

Kane

A laugh rips from my throat as I pick up another letter.

And another one.

Before I know it, I've read over twenty of them.

Let me tell you, I was in no way prepared for the Florida postcard.

Hey, Hads,

I've finished my tour. I have never been this exhausted in my life, but being done with the tour means I finally get some free time to come see you.

Hopefully, by the same time next week, you'll be mine again and I won't feel so shitty about the fact that I've been yours since the day I left.

My plan is to surprise you and tell you that I love you.

I ran away because I thought loving you would stop me from following my dreams, but it turns out... my biggest dream is you.

I'll see you soon.

Kane



HADLEY

Movie night has always been my favorite part of the week.

It's become a bit of a tradition for Maggie and me. A roommate ritual, if you will.

Every Thursday, we stop by the nearest store, pick up some snacks and margarita mix, and huddle up on the couch to watch whatever movie's trending on streaming platforms.

I've been patiently waiting for tonight all week. My classes have been kicking my ass in every way possible.

Come to think of it, that's probably a good thing. All the homework and readings have managed to keep my mind off Kane.

"We all set?" Maggie sets the pitcher of margarita down onto the coffee table, right next to the popcorn bowl and chips.

I just got back from the library ten minutes ago. I had a project to finish before I could enjoy my one night of freedom.

"Let me just take a shower real quick," I tell Maggie, who's already in her pj's and throwing herself onto the couch.

She pulls a large blanket over her body. "I'll start looking for a movie."

I pad into my room to grab a pair of pajama shorts and a T-shirt, memories of the past few days unfolding before my eyes.

I almost thought I was going to text Kane back after reading his postcards. I'm still not sure how I managed not to, if I'm being honest.

While it was by far one of the sweetest things anyone's ever done for me, it doesn't change the fact that if he'd told the truth that day, my brother's murder could've been solved by now.

But *shit*, reading his words... seeing all the souvenirs he picked up for me when we weren't even talking...

I just know I would have spent my entire life loving this man.

I would have stuck by him through thick and thin, held his hand when he was hurting. I never would've left his side. And that's what makes this whole thing so fucking hard.

I feel like I was robbed of true love, and I don't know how I'm ever going to get over what could've been.

My shower is quick and mainly consists of me trying not to cry out all the water in my body. I'm drying myself with a clean towel by the time I discern what sounds like loud banging on the door of our dorm.

"Maggie, can you get that?" I call as I'm running my fingers through my wet hair.

"On it!" she answers.

A few seconds elapse.

Then the loudest scream I've ever heard travels through my dorm.

Maggie's scream propels me into action. I don't even bother getting dressed, throwing on a long bathrobe and rushing out of the bathroom so quickly I almost slip on the water on the floor.

"What's going on?" I shriek, turning the corner and meeting my roommate by the front door.

That's when I see him.

And I understand why Maggie lost her shit.

"That's... it's... he's..." Maggie points to the hooded figure standing in the hallway.

I know exactly who I'm looking at, regardless of the fact that he's wearing shades.

He takes his glasses off the second he sees me, his green eyes sucking the air from my body.

"K-Kane Wilder." Maggie glances back at me, as if to make sure I'm seeing the same thing she is. "That's Kane Wilder."

Well...

Guess the cat is out of the bag.

Maggie starts hyperventilating, fanning herself as if she thinks that's going to help her get a grip.

Kane doesn't even bat an eye at my roommate's fangirl moment, pinning me with a look so full of desperation and pain it makes me weak in the knees.

"I need to talk to you." His rasp punctures through the walls I built around my heart.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" I erupt, taking in his creepy attire.

He looks like your typical drug dealer, with his hunched shoulders, black hoodie, and black sunglasses—let me tell you, that disguise is not doing much to hide his identity.

But that's not even the worst part.

He's *alone*.

Where the fuck is his security?

Whispers and gasps can be heard outside of our dorm, and I pop my head into the hallway, immediately spotting the group of girls staring at us from afar.

I understand just how bad the situation really is when one of them pulls out her phone and snaps a handful of pictures.

Shit.

“Get in here.” I grip Kane’s bicep, dragging him inside my dorm and slamming the door.

What was he thinking, showing up here alone? No, what was he thinking showing up here *at all*?

Does he not realize how famous he is? He could’ve been attacked by a herd of crazy fans or intercepted by the paparazzi.

“What are you doing here?” I spit, folding my arms over my chest. I glance down, reminded that I’m only wearing a bathrobe. I’m bare-faced, too, with dripping wet hair and a big-ass pimple that decided to take residency on my chin two days ago.

This is *not* my best look, to say the least.

Kane takes off his hood. “What other choice did I have? You’re not answering my texts.”

Meanwhile, Maggie is still having an out-of-body experience, staring at Kane with her mouth open.

I shrug. “That’s because I have nothing to say.”

He clenches his jaw, moving closer. “Hadley, fuck, I... I just want a chance to explain myself. You have every right to hate me, but—”

I step back. “But nothing. You already told me what happened. At the beach house.”

“But I didn’t tell you what happened next. Or why I didn’t tell anyone. I was going to, but...” He stops himself. “Hads, please, just... *one chance*.” His eyes are turning red, and judging by the burning sensation pricking at my eyelids, I’m right there with him.

“What’s even happening?” Maggie snaps back to reality, shifting her focus over to me. “Do you two know each other?”

“I... You could say that.”

Really, Hadley?

“And you never told me?” She throws her hands in the air, a scandalized expression on her face.

Kane glances at my roommate and then back at me. “Can we go somewhere to talk? Just the two of us.”

“No,” I croak. I’m afraid if I’m alone with him for too long, I’ll forget why I’m supposed to hate him. Maybe even fall back into his arms in a moment of weakness.

“I have a car waiting outside. My driver will take us back to the penthouse I’m renting. Then I’ll tell you everything. I promise.”

He’s not going to drop it, is he?

Considering the fact that he flew all the way out here just to show up at my dorm, I’d say that’s a given.

I chew on the inside of my cheek, pondering my next move.

“Baby, please don’t make me beg. ’Cause I will. I’ll sleep outside your fucking door until you agree to hear me out. I’ll move into that fucking hallway if I have to,” he warns.

I cock an eyebrow, calling his bluff.

“Just give me a blanket and I’m good to go.” He makes it clear he’s not backing down.

Fuck.

I’m going to regret this, aren’t I?

I exhale a sigh. “Just let me get dressed.”



KANE

I used to think the day Hadley told me I'd never see her again would go down as the most miserable day of my life.

Ironically enough, now that I'm here, in a car with the girl I love, I'm realizing that day doesn't even come close to the fucking nightmare that is sitting right next to her without being able to *reach* her.

She hasn't said a word to me since we got in the car.

She hasn't even *looked* at me.

Physically, she's here, but emotionally, she's gone.

And she isn't just icing me out.

She looks like she genuinely hates me.

Her body is crushed to the car door, her back facing me in a way that ensures small talk isn't a possibility.

I take it back.

Watching her walk away doesn't even make the top five of my worst moments on this earth.

Realizing the only girl you've ever loved has lost all feelings for you?

Now, *that* shit will kill you.

Part of me is hoping that she's faking it, but the other is fucking terrified of what it'll mean if she's not.

"We're here," the driver I hired notifies me, entering the building's underground parking garage.

I might've been reckless when I showed up to Hadley's dorm without security, but I'm going to play it safe starting now.

I'm sure pictures of me knocking on Hadley's door dressed like a fucking serial killer are already circulating online, but I can't have the media finding out where we are.

Drea and my new management have been blowing up my phone since this morning, when they found out I left my LA house without telling anyone.

I knew they'd never approve of me playing hooky and flying to North Carolina right before the trial, so I snuck out in the middle of the night, got on a jet, and did what I do best.

I went after Hadley Queen.

Although, I'm starting to think getting her back isn't going to be as simple as sending her postcards and souvenirs of all the countries I've visited and missed her in.

I'm not saying I expected her to forgive me over a bunch of postcards, but I was hoping it might win me some points. Help her see that she never left my mind, even when a thousand miles stood between us.

I would've tried anything to get her to talk to me.

My chauffeur stops the car, and I thank him before getting out. Hadley follows suit, rounding the vehicle to meet me by the elevator.

The doors of the elevator part, allowing us inside, and I insert the key card needed to access my floor into the electronic card reader.

More silence.

Then the doors are gliding apart again, revealing the foyer of the luxurious penthouse I booked on a whim yesterday. Wraparound windows adorn the walls, the city lights and moonlight casting a golden glow over the common areas.

I hit the light switch the moment we step out of the elevator, preparing myself for the traumatic walk I'm about to take down memory lane.

I've spent years trying to block out those memories, but tonight, I'm facing them head-on.

Hadley releases a quiet gasp when the lights come on, and even I must admit the place is incredible. Not only is the panoramic view insane, but the penthouse is elegant, with modern furniture, carefully curated artwork, and an open layout.

"Come in." I lead the way into the living room, Hadley trailing right behind me.

I make a beeline for the couch in the center of the space and take a seat, gesturing for her to do the same. A flash of hesitation gleams in her blue eyes, but she eventually complies, sitting opposite me.

My airways suddenly feel thinner. "Do you want something to drink? I can get you some water or—"

"Just get to the point. You wanted to talk. Now, *talk*."

Damn. She's not messing around, is she?

I've always liked that about her.

How blunt she is.

She always tells me how it is, like the time she tracked me down after I ruined her date with Cal and gave me hell for leaving her on Read.

Or that time she called me out for leaving any room she walked into and told me she wasn't going to accept my disrespect.

She was also the first person to notice that I'm not passionate about the songs I sing. She didn't hesitate to tell me

that my new stuff was lacking in emotion and meaning.

Hadley's never been afraid of anything.

But I'm nowhere near as brave as she is.

I sure as hell wasn't brave that day.

I blow out a breath. "It was the morning after Gray died..."



THEN

"I DON'T THINK WE SHOULD DO THIS," I HEAR MY DRUMMER say, but his comment goes in one ear and out the other.

"Kane?" Scar presses when I don't answer, glancing over at me from the passenger seat.

"Just give me a fucking minute," I snap, guiding a hand to my right temple and rubbing to alleviate my headache.

We've been parked across the street from the police station for over an hour.

I know we're going to have to go in sooner or later, but a part of me is terrified that marching through those doors will make last night *real*.

As long as I don't walk up to that police station and tell them Brody Richards is a murderer, then maybe...

Gray doesn't have to be dead.

Maybe he can be just *fine*.

Maybe... I can close my eyes without picturing my best friend lying in a puddle of his own blood.

Fuck.

I clench my jaw to keep the tears in my eyes from spilling down my face.

Brody's threats has been playing in my head like a broken record since last night.

"You'll lose everything, you know that, right? You'll go down as an accomplice. We'll tell them you planned the whole thing with us. That you're one of those bored celebs looking for a thrill and that you offered to drive. It'll be your word against ours."

Brody might be a professional manipulator and a narcissist, but he's not stupid. As soon as he managed to stop puking, the fucker realized he needed to cover his own tracks.

First thing he said was "You're not going to tell a soul what happened tonight, you got me?"

When I tell you I almost *laughed* at how fucking delusional he was.

I would've thrown myself at him and beat him into a pulp if it weren't for the gun still in his trembling hands. Axel and Dean immediately gave Brody their word, promising to stay quiet, but Scar and I didn't make a sound.

"You got me?" Brody snarled, urging us to reply, and for a moment, I thought he was going to put a bullet in our heads, too.

Wrap up the loose ends.

"What kind of idiots do you take us for?" Scar fed him whatever bullshit he wanted to hear. "It was an accident, man. It's not like you meant for it to happen."

I couldn't tell you where he found the strength to look that dirtbag in the eyes and make him feel better for taking a life.

But he did.

Scar played right into Brody's hand, manipulating the ultimate manipulator and making it seem like we weren't blaming him for pulling that trigger.

One look at Scar's face, and I knew... he was making a play for our survival.

Brody's shock was almost as apparent as his relief when Scar eased his guilt. "What the fuck was I supposed to do? He knew who I was. He would've gone to the cops!"

Having to listen to him trying to justify his actions made me sick to my stomach.

Would Brody have killed us if we'd refused to keep quiet? If we'd told him we were going to snitch the second he let us go? There's no way to know for sure, but I wouldn't put it past him.

Looking back, I believe Scar sympathizing with him saved us.

"What do you want to do?" Scar jerks me back to reality, and I exhale a long sigh.

I want to cry every fucking tear in my body, that's what.

Gray is dead.

Dead.

I don't cry in front of people. Not even my mom. It's something I picked up from all the times my dad would slap me around as a kid.

Don't let them see weakness, no matter what.

But years of practice aren't enough to keep the grief at bay. For the first time since it dawned on me that Gray isn't with us anymore, I allow myself to break down.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" I go apeshit on the steering wheel, accidentally honking when I pound my fist against the horn.

A helpless Scar watches from the passenger seat.

He doesn't try to stop me or comfort me. He simply lets my rage run its course, waiting for the sadness to take over.

And boy, does it take over.

Tears begin streaming down my face uncontrollably, and I choke on an angry sob, facing away from Scar.

Once I've managed to steady my breathing, I unbuckle my seat belt, wipe my face, and cringe like I have something to be

ashamed of.

“Let’s go in and tell them everything,” I tell Scar, reaching for the door handle.

I’m about to get out when my phone chimes with a text.

From the last person I expected.

My manager.

JOSHUA

I’m here.



“I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU CALLED HIM,” I SCOLD MY DRUMMER for the fifth time in ten minutes.

“Would you have preferred I called your mom?” Scar argues as we’re making our way down the hotel corridor.

“You didn’t have to get him involved,” I grumble under my breath.

“Yes, I did. Dude, you’re not just *anyone*. You can’t just walk into the police station and accuse someone of murder without proof. We need guidance. We have no fucking idea what we’re doing!”

He’s not wrong about that part, but it doesn’t make Josh’s presence here any less frustrating.

Josh is my mentor. He has been since the day he showed up in Silver Springs to try and get me to sign with his label two years ago.

I respect the guy, and I promised him when he told me he’d do anything to make my dreams come true that he wouldn’t regret taking a chance on me.

Finding out that your biggest artist was the getaway driver to a murder just might make him think twice about managing

me.

We come to a slow stop in front of Joshua's suite.

Scar texted him right after Brody gave us our phones back, telling him to catch the next flight to North Carolina because we had a "pressing situation."

"Look..." Scar sighs. "We just need to be smart about this. We're going to need lawyers and resources we don't fucking have. Josh can help."

Doubt weighing on me, I knock on the door a few times.

I discern footsteps inside the room.

"I'll be in the car," Scar surprises me by saying.

"You're not coming?" I ask.

"No, he wants to talk to you alone."

On that note, Scar walks away, leaving me to fend for myself.

Shit.

I was hoping I'd have Scar there to back me up.

Knowing Josh, he's going to be pissed that I even put myself in this situation by hanging out with guys I don't trust to begin with.

He made it clear when we first started working together that I should be careful who I associate with. My inner circle should *only* consist of people I know for a fact wouldn't stab me in the back.

The door opens the next second, and I cringe at the sight of the forty-year-old man on the other side.

He doesn't look happy, that's for sure.

I give him a quick once-over.

Josh's black hair is slicked back, and he's wearing a suit—*what's new?*

You'd think he's on his way to some prestigious event when really, he's probably going to stay in all day and order

some room service. That's just who Josh is. He's rich and successful, and he *always* dresses the part, even on weekends and his days off.

I expect his greeting to run along the lines of "What the hell did you do?" but instead, he says nothing.

Nothing except "Inside. Now."



I THOUGHT WALKING JOSH THROUGH WHAT HAPPENED LAST night would be easier than living it.

I just wish I'd known that telling him everything would mean putting myself through it *all over again*.

By the time I finish the story, I feel as though I'm going to be sick. The room is spinning, the air in my lungs is scarce, and I'm on the verge of a full-blown panic attack.

Sitting on the couch across from me, Josh struggles to process the information I've shared with him. He doesn't speak or look at me for long seconds, staring blankly into space.

I can't imagine what he must think of me right now.

Fuck, I bet he regrets ever managing me.

"I-I didn't have a choice. He had a gun, and I—"

"I know," he cuts me off. "I know it wasn't your fault, kid."

Every part of my body unwinds.

Hearing him say that fills my chest with relief, and I inhale a sharp breath, attempting to calm myself down.

"You didn't know that was going to happen. You just wanted a night off. That's not a crime." The understanding in his voice shocks me.

What? No lecture?

No “you should’ve known better”?

He’s almost too calm.

It’s freaking me out.

“You made a mistake that escalated into something much bigger than anyone could’ve ever anticipated. You were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. We can fix it.”

For a split second, I’m almost glad that Scar went behind my back and called Josh.

I’m glad that I have my mentor’s guidance to help me through this nightmare.

“I know we have to go to the police. We need to tell them everything,” I state the obvious.

That’s when he says the last thing I wanted to hear.

“That’s not what I meant...”

I blink at him for a few seconds, half expecting him to backtrack.

But he never does.

“Kane, listen to me...” He joins his hands together, leaning forward as he props his elbows on his knees. “Do you have *any* idea what going to the police would do to your career?”

My jaw drops.

Did he just imply that protecting my career is more important than Gray getting *justice*?

“Your contract clearly states that you can’t, under *any* circumstances, do anything that might cast the label in a negative light. You going to trial for driving the getaway car to someone’s murder wouldn’t exactly bring good publicity. They’d drop you without a moment’s hesitation.”

I hear what he’s saying, I do.

But as much as I love singing, I couldn’t give less of a fuck about all that legal stuff right now.

I don’t care if the label drops me. I don’t care if I never get to step foot on a stage again.

Gray's dead.

I won't protect his murderer.

I can't.

"You can't expect me to keep quiet. I couldn't live with myself."

"There's also the fact that you're legally required to complete four albums. It's in your contract."

I frown. I've only put out one so far, but what does that have to do with anything?

"If you were to go public with your story, the label would hold the right to request that you pay back the two-million-dollar advance they gave you for breaching the contract."

My first album released six months ago. It's done well enough to recoup half of what the label gave me, but I still have a million dollars to go.

I haven't made enough to earn out the advance yet, which means I haven't received a single penny from my songs or my shows so far. The only way for me to get paid for my work would be to pay back the label in full.

I used a big chunk of the money they gave me to pay off my mom's debt and hospital bills from the time I broke my ribs trying to protect her from our pervert landlord.

Another big portion of it went into buying my mom a ranch and supporting her.

The amount I would owe the label if they were to drop me is around the same amount I have left in my bank account right now.

I could pay them back, but then I wouldn't have a dollar left to my name. And I doubt any other label would want to sign me after such a scandal.

We'd be broke.

Again.

"Where would that leave us? My mom and I?"

“Right back where you started,” Josh answers.

He pauses.

“Look, your career is *just* beginning. You’re on your way to becoming one of the biggest male artists of our generation. You’d be throwing it all away for one mistake.”

I can’t speak, my throat coated in guilt.

“You don’t want your mom to be homeless again, do you?”

Tears are streaming down my face again, but this time, I don’t wipe them away.

“You’d be responsible for putting her back on the street. You’d have to take her away from the beautiful life she has now because of a crime you didn’t commit yourself. You’re her protector. That’s what she calls you, isn’t it?”

Very few people know about my mom’s nickname for me.

Mostly because saying it in front of people would lead to questions we didn’t want to answer.

My dad always hated us.

He hated that he got his one-night stand pregnant and was forced into marrying her by his controlling, old-fashioned family. He hated that he had to get hitched instead of enjoying his bachelor lifestyle.

He hated us, but mostly, he hated *her*.

He blamed her for getting pregnant and ruining his life—like that was her fault to begin with.

I was nine the first time he hit her in front of me.

It didn’t take long for me to figure out that this had been going on for a while, and just because it was the first time I’d witnessed it didn’t mean it was a rare occurrence.

So, I started putting myself in between them, trying to distract him from her, and it worked. He’d get mad at her, and like clockwork, I’d say something to provoke him, and he’d take out his anger on me instead.

Gradually, he stopped hitting her.

He stopped hitting her because he started hitting *me*.

It didn't matter how many bruises I had or how many times I had to cover them up.

All that mattered was that she was okay.

But then he died.

Images of me and my mom living in that disgusting New York studio flash before my eyes.

Sometimes she wouldn't eat for a week to ensure that I had at least one meal a day. Of course, I kept pretending that I wasn't hungry so she'd finish off my plates.

She was nothing but skin and bones by the time Lillian took us into her home. Mom was killing herself, working three jobs because she couldn't afford to go to school, and she still wasn't able to make ends meet.

I promised myself the day she fainted from extreme hunger that I'd do everything in my power to take care of her.

“The question now is, what are you going to do? Are you going to tell the truth... or are you going to protect your mom?”



NOW

HADLEY

A STUNNED SILENCE PERVADES THE AIR, MY MOUTH GOING slack, and I slouch into the couch, struggling to come to terms with Kane's confession.

He did it for his mom.

Of course he did.

Besides the fact that he was only seventeen, he was also scared out of his mind. Terrified of having to watch his mom suffer.

That's who Kane is.

He's a mama's boy through and through.

Evie is his whole world—she always has been.

And Joshua *knew* that.

He knew exactly how to manipulate Kane into keeping quiet.

Joshua preyed on Kane's fears, took advantage of his endless admiration for him.

Kane already felt like he owed this guy his entire career. As though Josh was some sort of angel sent from above for making his wildest dreams come true.

When your mentor tells you to keep your mouth shut, that's what you do.

Kane drops his face between his hands with a strangled curse. "Fuck, I... I'm so sorry for the pain I've caused you and your mom. I should've never let Josh get in my head. If I'd just done the right thing that day instead of listening to him, he would've never been able to..." He looks up, clenching his teeth and jaw.

"Been able to do what?" I'm afraid the answer will scar me for life.

"I showed up to his LA house unannounced a few weeks before the beginning of last summer. I was fed up with singing cheesy love songs, and I wanted to talk to him about putting out an album with tracks I actually liked. I couldn't find him anywhere, so I went through the first floor of the house, only to find him and a bunch of people smoking cigars in the parlor. The room was full of powerful men—award-winning movie producers, big-shot directors, record label owners, and a bunch of other sharks I knew from the industry.

"Everything looked normal, at first. Then I saw them. The little girls. There were four of them. They were sitting on one of the couches half naked, staring ahead of them with glassy eyes. One of them looked familiar, and I realized... I'd met her at a meet and greet a few days prior. She had a very

distinct blue strand in her hair and a birthmark on her cheek, which is why I recognized her instantly. When I'd met her, she'd told me she was twelve. But the worst part is... out of the four girls, she looked like the oldest..."

My palm flies to my mouth.

Joshua's a predator, isn't he?

This is why Kane attacked him at the club.

"It didn't take me long to realize that the girls were on something. I don't know what, but it was obvious that they weren't *there*. That's when Josh saw me standing in the doorway. I've never seen him look so fucking pale in my life..."

"He immediately pulled me aside, trying to feed me some ridiculous explanation about why there were a bunch of half-naked kids on his couch. I called bullshit, and he started panicking, asking me not to say anything. That it wasn't a big deal since the girls didn't remember a thing afterward. I thought I was going to be sick right then..."

"I asked him how long this had been going on, and the shame in his eyes... I just knew it started years ago."

God, these poor girls.

Kane's fists are so tight his knuckles are completely white. "That's when he admitted to drugging them and letting each of his buddies have their way with their unconscious bodies. They'd touch them... take pictures... and eventually..."

My vision becomes blurry, tears gathering in my eyes.

"I just fucking lost it. I made him tell me everything. I found out he used my name to get these girls to come to him. He'd ask them if they wanted to meet me, and he'd lure them to his house for his little predator parties. Then, he'd get them front-row seats to my shows, free passes to my meet and greets, and if one of them asked what happened to them, he'd deny everything and threaten to take the tickets away. He spent the last five years abusing my fans. Everything he did... is on me."

I'm sobbing by the time he's done.

"Hey, this is *not* your fault. Not even for a second, you hear me?"

He doesn't say anything for long seconds, glancing down at his joined hands on his lap. He's blaming himself. Understandably so. These girls were tricked because they *loved* him and wanted to meet him.

"I told him I was going to stop him, and he threw the night Gray died back in my face, telling me that if I told someone, *anyone*, he'd tell the cops I was the getaway driver and an accomplice to Gray's murder. I trusted him, and he's been holding it over my head to make sure I won't rat him out."

My eyes widen in realization. "And that night? When you attacked him at the club? Was it because of..."

He cringes at the recollection. "Yeah. That was the first time I'd seen him since I'd walked in on his pedo party. He didn't even look sorry. He was just acting like nothing happened, and I saw red."

I think back to the video of Kane punching Joshua before he fell down the stairs. That video made Kane look like the bad guy. People just assumed Kane punched him because he had "anger issues."

Little do they know, Joshua isn't the victim in all this. He's the villain.

"Why would he sue you? If he knows you could tell the world everything he did to those kids?" It makes no sense. Joshua is a monster, but he's also smart. Otherwise, he wouldn't have managed to abuse so many girls without getting caught.

"My best guess is he's certain I won't say anything to protect my own secret. And if I can't say anything about the girls, then I'm just a violent asshole who put his manager in a wheelchair. He'll get a big payday, the world's sympathies, *and* he'll destroy my career, all in one swift move. Not to mention it might've looked suspicious if he *hadn't* come after me."

My voice fails me.

What he's told me doesn't change the fact that Mom and I spent years begging for answers.

It doesn't erase the suffering, all the nights where we cried ourselves to sleep.

And it sure as hell *doesn't* make Kane's betrayal okay.

But it does help me understand why he decided not to go to the police.

He's given me answers I thought I would never get.

Even if it took him three years to do so...

In the end, his mistake stemmed from trusting the wrong person. He got dragged into an impossible situation, and I hate to admit it, but if I'd been in his shoes, torn between doing the right thing for someone else's family and protecting my own...

I can't guarantee that I wouldn't have done the same thing.

"Hadley..." He chokes on a guttural plea, producing the most heartfelt request I've ever heard.

He rises to his feet, crossing the space between us and taking a seat right next to me. He tries a glance in my direction and reaches for my hand, his hesitation made clear by the pause that follows.

He waits for me to remove my hand from his hold.

I don't.

Not yet.

He seems to take my acceptance of his affection as a good sign, lacing our fingers together and inhaling a shaky breath. "Fuck, Hadley, I... This past month has been a nightmare. It hurts to breathe. It hurts to wake up. I can't fucking take it. Most days, I miss you so much I want to tear everyone's head off. I don't know how to live in a world you're not a part of. It's fucking pathetic, but it's true."

I wish someone had prepared me for this.

The goodbye that fucks you up beyond repair.

“I love you, Hads. I love you so fucking much. Just... don't leave me. Please.”

His green eyes have never looked so bright, the color of his irises enhanced by the tears shrouding them. I can't tell him what he really wants to hear, but I can tell him the truth.

“I love you, too,” I croak.

And it *is* the truth.

I've loved him for almost my entire life, and I'm convinced a part of me will continue to love him in every life after that.

Even if I have to live all of them without him.

Kane's mouth parts at my admission.

He emits a sigh of relief, his shoulders unwinding, and it breaks me. Although, nothing splinters my heart quite as much as the rush of desire roaring inside me when he pulls me closer.

His mouth comes down on mine, grazing the corner of my lips for an instant. I don't shove him off, inching closer in response. A groan of satisfaction rips from his throat, and the next thing I know, he's going all in, marking my mouth with a bruising kiss I feel deep in my stomach.

The worst part? I let him kiss me.

I don't have the strength to push him away. I just don't, so I open up for him, granting his tongue access. He immediately accepts the invitation, his tongue slipping inside my mouth and reducing whatever resistance was left in my body to ashes.

His kiss carries urgency, desperation, but mostly, it conveys fear. I know Kane. He's *terrified*. Scared that I'll come to my senses and leave him again.

For good this time.

My hands are in his hair before I can overthink my own actions, pulling at his scalp for more. Only then does he surrender to the moment, groaning against my mouth and pinning me down under him.

He climbs on top of me on the couch, grabbing the lower half of my neck with one hand and holding himself up with the other. We're both panting, our chests meeting with each breath we inhale. I moan when he traps my bottom lip between his teeth and pulls hard, releasing it a split second later. You'd think he was inside me based on the noises I'm making.

It's been an entire month since we slept together, and we're both feeling the effects of withdrawal, impatiently clawing at each other's clothes.

I only realize I'm rocking against his cock when he grits out a low "Fuck, Hadley."

He's rock hard, straining against his pants and positioned perfectly. The back-and-forth of his body against mine creates just the right amount of pressure between my thighs, and it doesn't take me long to know this dry-humping business is *not* going to be enough for me.

"Touch me. Touch me, please," I nearly cry out, playing with the buckle of his belt.

Normally, he'd tease me.

He'd torture me the way he always does, and I'd be a writhing mess by the time he gives me what I want, but he doesn't seem to have the self-control needed to deny me.

Not after we've been apart for a month.

He doesn't argue, immediately curling his fingers inside the waistband of my leggings and yanking them down my legs. He doesn't stop until he has me completely naked and at his mercy on the couch.

He stares at my exposed body for a few seconds, his nostrils flaring.

Hot damn.

He looks at me like he's been starving himself for *weeks* and I'm the gourmet meal he's spent every day thinking about.

"It should be a fucking crime to look this good." He grips my waist, jerking me closer and spreading my thighs apart.

I know what his intentions are before he even makes a move, and I'll be damned if I allow this to be one-sided.

I smack my palm to his chest. "Take your clothes off."

Kane raises a brow, a sexy, familiar smirk stretching his mouth. Then he's stripping, starting with his shirt and kicking his jeans and briefs down his legs.

"That what you had in mind?" He fists his cock, pumping himself under my gaze.

God, I've missed him.

I've missed everything about him, but his cock ranks pretty damn high on the list.

It feels like my skin is on fire.

And not in a good way.

The desire pricking at my flesh is unbearable, damn near maddening.

"Now, where were we?" He lowers his mouth to my pussy, biting down on my inner thigh and making me cry out in frustration.

This isn't enough.

I can't take his teasing, and I sure as hell can't take having to wait for my orgasm.

"No, I need..." I can't bring myself to say it.

"What? You don't want me to? We both know how much you love my tongue, don't you, baby?" He continues to spread kisses everywhere except where I need him most, his mouth latching onto my pelvic bone and staying there long enough to drive me insane. His breath cascades down my core, and I clench.

"No, I... More." I squirm, my brain failing to form a sentence.

"I'll give you anything you want *after* I'm done."

A frustrated growl leaves my lips, and he laughs, gripping my hips and pinning me down, effectively immobilizing me.

Then he's dragging his tongue along the crease of my pussy.

It's just one sharp lick.

One lick and he's moving away.

But it has me losing my mind.

"Fuck me. I need you to fuck me," I manage to say.

He lets out a sharp breath, eyes widening, but he doesn't let my request throw him off his game.

"Not before you're dripping all over my fucking face."

That's when I know I won't survive our last night together.

Not unless I take control.

I grip his shoulder and push him backward onto the couch.

I straddle him before he can get a word in, slipping my hands between my thighs and grazing my engorged clit with my index. I dip my finger lower, almost embarrassed by how wet I am until Kane's hand matches my actions, finding my entrance. He squeezes his eyes shut for a moment.

"You want to fucking kill me, don't you?" He throws his head back, but I refuse to let him break the eye contact, knowing this will be the last time he'll get to look at me.

"Open your eyes." I turn the tables on him, and his mouth drops, green eyes snapping up to mine. "Lower."

His focus falls between my legs, and I reach for his cock underneath me, fisting him slowly before guiding his tip between my pussy lips.

His hands shoot to my waist, but I slap them away.

"What? Can't stand not being in control?" I offer him a sly grin, continuously using him to get off.

Pleasure courses through me, and my eyes roll back at the friction. I angle his cock at my opening, leading him inside me just an inch. But then I'm pulling away, resuming with the back-and-forth against my clit.

"Fuck, stop teasing me."

“Or what?”

“Or I’m going to come before I get to fuck you.”

I pay him no mind, gripping him tighter and jerking him off.

“Shit,” he grits out, clenching his jaw and fists. “Hads, please.”

That does something to me.

The next thing I know, I’m lowering myself onto his cock.

“Oh, God.” I have to stop myself from screaming.

I don’t know why I thought I could handle his cock like this. Did I forget how big he is? How hard it is to adjust to his size, especially in this position?

Kane grips my waist, and this time, I let him. “Fuck. That’s it. Nice and slow.”

I clearly underestimated how wet I was. I’m guessing that’s why Kane was adamant on oral intercourse. He knows it helps me relax before we get down to business.

“That’s it. Be a good fucking girl and take every inch of my cock.” His hands cage my body, urging me to move downward. He must notice the look on my face when I swallow him entirely because he cups my face, swiping his finger along my jaw.

I wince, attempting to adjust to his size by moving around.

“Hands on my chest, beautiful.” Kane captures both my hands into his, places them flat against his pecs, and tugs me forward. The new angle turns out to be a revelation. At least this way, I don’t feel his dick stabbing my organs. “I’m going to move now, okay?”

He starts to pump his hips into me, his eyes never leaving mine as he gradually fucks me harder.

It feels amazing.

Much better than it did earlier.

Shit, I was supposed to be the one in control.

Instead, he's calling all the shots.

It feels so good I don't even care.

"Go on. Take it," Kane rasps, his thrusting increasing in speed and intensity.

Pleasure fully replaces the ache between my thighs when he jerks me flush against his chest, one of his hands flying to the back of my head as our mouths collide.

"I've missed you so fucking much. I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't forgiven me." His lips find mine again, sparing me from having to come up with a response that'll most likely be a lie.

He kisses me like he's succumbing to illness and I'm the only thing capable of saving him. My eyes begin to water, but I forbid my emotions from spilling down my face.

I'll have the rest of my life to miss him.

We kiss for what feels like an eternity and a fleeting moment all at once. Our tongues tangle like we're battling each other for dominance. Meanwhile, my heart is disintegrating in my chest.

It quickly becomes clear that unless I pull away right this second, I'm going to break into a million pieces, and I can't lose it yet. I distance myself, interrupting our kiss and pouring my focus into riding him until my thighs burn.

I sit upright, propping my arms behind me, and Kane doesn't waste a second locating my clit and rubbing me in rough circles.

"I'm going to make you come in every room of this penthouse, you hear me? You won't be able to fucking walk by the time I'm done with you."

He has me on the edge of an orgasm just minutes later, and I shut my eyes, Kane's rapid thrusting turning me into a wild animal. Pressure builds between my legs, the noises I make sounding unrecognizable to my own ears.

I begin to peak at the exact same time Kane sits up, his free hand digging into my ass as he rams himself inside me so

fast my vision fails me for a split second.

He plunges his gaze into mine, staring through my soul, and whispers, “Promise me that you won’t leave me again.”

My orgasm overpowers me, and I come undone, self-hatred contaminating the blinding pleasure gushing through my body. Hearing my moans is too much for him, and he responds with a final thrust, spilling inside me with a groan.

“Promise me, Hadley. Promise me that I won’t lose you,” I hear him choke out the second he finishes, but how do I promise him that he won’t lose me...

When I’m already gone...?

“I promise.”



HADLEY

I often wonder what my life would look like if Gray were still alive...

Would I still be here, dropping out of college a few weeks into the semester and packing everything I own into the back of my mom's car?

Would Kane and I still be together if he'd never played a part in my brother's death?

Doubtful.

I think, in the end, our relationship wouldn't have survived his fame and the lack of privacy accompanying it.

The past week gave me a sneak peek of what it's like to be famous, and those few days alone nearly drove me insane.

And it's all because of a stupid picture...

It was taken on the wraparound balcony of the penthouse, right after Kane and I slept together. I could feel myself coming apart at the seams and stepped outside for some fresh air.

Kane followed me, pulled my body to his from behind, and buried his face into the crook of my neck. I was leaning

against the railing and wearing his shirt, the fabric stopping inches above my knees. As for Kane, he was in nothing but sweats.

Basically, the whole thing *screamed*, “We just fucked.”

The picture surfaced online less than twenty-four hours after I left Kane asleep in the penthouse. I still have no idea how the paparazzi even knew where we were—or how they managed to snap a pic of us on the sixth floor of the building.

It was all anyone talked about for days afterward.

Who is Kane Wilder’s mystery girl?

It wasn’t long before the media uncovered my identity and labeled me Kane’s “childhood sweetheart.” Some articles even pulled old photos of me, Kane, and Gray off my mom’s Facebook page.

Gossip sites have been running with the “superstar falls in love with ordinary girl” narrative, and the public is eating it up.

Like it wasn’t bad enough that my DMs have been flooded with angry messages from groupies, paparazzi also started showing up at my dorm.

They’d ambush me when I’d leave to go to class and be waiting outside my door when I came home. It got so bad that Maggie had to move in with her boyfriend until the dust settled.

Although, not before I sat her down and apologized for keeping her out of the loop for so long.

It would’ve been easy to blame my silence on the NDA Kane made me sign, but I felt she deserved to know the truth.

I didn’t tell her about us because I was scared to admit that I was in love with Kane.

That I *am* in love with Kane.

She was mad at first, but once I told her the whole story—from us growing up together, to Kane leaving out of the blue,

to us living in the same house for an entire summer—she understood and was gracious enough to forgive me.

But you know who *wasn't* so understanding?

Kane...

He's been blowing up my phone since I vanished from his life, begging me to talk to him.

Doesn't matter how many of his numbers I block. He just keeps on getting new ones.

I know that I caught him off guard, but I refuse to put myself through this again. If I text him back, he's going to want to see me in person. And if I see him in person... well...

We all know what happened last time.

Bottom line is, we're doomed.

I understand why he did what he did, but I'm never going to be okay with him protecting my brother's murderer—even if he had good reasons to do so.

We can't be together.

Not when Brody Richards is walking free and enjoying his life.

All I know is, I *will* get justice for Gray. The question is, do I want to throw Kane under the bus in the process?

"I think this is the last one." Mom brings me back to reality. I look up to see her drop a box of my stuff into the trunk.

I hope I'm doing the right thing by dropping out. I figured I could always come back if I change my mind, but with everything that's happened, I don't feel like staying in school studying something I'm not truly passionate about is the right thing to do.

I'm not the same person I was when I chose to major in communications. That girl would've never even *dreamed* of opening her own store and trying to make it as an artist.

I've been selling a few paintings here and there—definitely not enough to make a living, but it's convinced me to take this more seriously. I'm also blessed to have my mom fully supporting me in this endeavor.

She's agreed to let me move into her condo rent-free while I give my dream career a real shot. I intend to get a job to help out, but most of my time will be spent looking for opportunities to get my work in front of the right people.

Mom shuts the trunk of her car, offering me a warm smile. "You ready?"

I glance at the dorms, torn between feeling sentimental about the past and hopeful for the future.

"I'm ready."



KANE

THE DAY I TOOK MY MOTHER TO VISIT HER NEW HOUSE, SHE cried.

And believe it or not, they weren't tears of joy.

I remember her going off on me, telling me that she was perfectly fine in that tiny LA apartment she was renting, and she didn't want me to feel like I had to spend my hard-earned money on her.

"This is your money. Your work. *Yours*. You don't owe me anything, honey."

Her words slapped me across the face.

I was offering her the ranch of her dreams, and she was too fucking selfless to accept it.

When I was growing up, my mom would make it a point to tell me how parents should have no expectations from their kids. They could have hopes, sure, but never *expectations*.

I later found out that my grandparents were the type to go around making her feel like she was indebted to them for putting a roof over her head.

They'd tell her, "*I feed you, I buy you clothes. You have no idea everything I do for you. You should be grateful.*"

And of course, she was, but it also made her feel guilty for existing. Almost like they expected her to bow down for simply taking care of the human being they'd chosen to bring into the world.

I showed her around, and I could tell she was in love with the property, but all she said was, "Being a good parent isn't about what your kids can give you. It's about what you can give *them*."

Her worst fear was becoming like her parents, and so, she refused to move into her dream house, telling me to back out of the sale.

Spoiler alert: I *didn't*.

I bought the house and moved all her furniture into it while she was out of her apartment one day.

It took me a solid week to convince her that I wasn't doing it because I felt like I *had* to but because I *wanted* to. Same thing happened with the beach house.

I passed it off like I was buying it for me but told her she could come and visit whenever she wanted—even though everybody knows the house is really *hers*.

My chauffeur pulls into my mom's driveway an hour later than expected. My flight to Colorado was delayed, and then we had to circle around the block a couple dozen times to lose the paps.

I'm honestly surprised my management allowed me to go. Especially since the last time I flew to another state, photos of my trip wound up on every tabloid's front page.

My stomach twists into a knot when Hadley's face flashes in front of my eyes.

I see her smile.

Hear her laugh.

See myself driving my fingers through her red hair.

I miss her.

I miss her so fucking much.

A week has gone by since she made me believe there was hope for us and then walked out of my life, taking my goddam sanity with her.

It didn't make sense at first.

She was right *there*.

Riding my cock like it was her life's purpose.

Meeting me thrust for thrust and letting me kiss her until she was gasping for air.

And then...

She was gone.

Just like that, she grabbed her clothes off the floor and snuck out while I was asleep.

Suddenly, breaking the fancy art all over the penthouse seemed like a damn good way to channel my anger.

Two hundred thousand dollars' worth of damage later, I fell to my knees, forced to face the truth.

She's never coming back.

Inhaling a breath, I drag myself out of the car and grab my luggage out of the trunk. I don't have a fucking clue what I'm doing here. The trial is just three days away, but I felt the need to get out of LA.

I knock on my mom's door, praying for her to be home. I didn't see her car in the driveway on my way in, but I'm hoping she parked in the garage.

Minutes elapse.

I hear what sounds like hurried footsteps on the other side of the door.

The door opens, and my mom's face comes into view, her shock blending with the joy in her eyes.

Her face lights up. "Kane? What are you doing here?"

I open my mouth to speak, but my voice fails me, the words on the tip of my tongue trailing off.

Her smile disappears the second she takes a good look at my face. "Oh, baby, are you okay?"

The next thing I know, I'm walking inside and damn near collapsing into her arms.



I COULDN'T TELL YOU HOW MANY TIMES I'VE PLAYED OUT THIS exact moment in my head...

The moment where my mom finds out what really happened the day Gray died.

Most of the scenarios I came up with ended in the same way: with her furious and disappointed in me.

Never did it occur to me that she would be *sad*.

A tear rolled down her face as soon as I finished confessing my biggest sin to her.

She hasn't said anything in a few seconds, her gaze fixated on the coffee in her hand as she struggles to come to terms with the truth.

I don't know what I was thinking coming here. Did I really expect my mom not to ask me what was wrong? From the second I fell apart in her arms, the "fixer" in her took over, and she took it upon herself to get to the bottom of it.

After she held me for several minutes, she made me some coffee, sat me down, and asked me to be honest with her.

A request I granted.

But judging by the look on her face, I might've been a little *too* honest.

“You...” She pauses, the shock gleaming in her eyes making me cringe. “You’ve known who killed Gray all along.”

I reply with a small nod, too ashamed to speak.

“And Josh used *me* to talk you into keeping quiet?” She sounds as though she can’t make sense of what she’s saying.

Again, I nod.

Against all expectations, she clears her throat, rests her mug on the coffee table in front of her, and says, “Thank you.”

Wait, what?

I frown. “Why are you thanking me?”

“Because you put my needs before your own. And I could yell at you, tell you how badly you messed up, but I think you know that already.”

My jaw drops.

“You were nine. The first time you put yourself between your father and I. You were so small, and you still jumped in without hesitation... I still see that day every time I close my eyes.”

More tears escape her eyes.

“Maybe you weren’t brave enough to go to the police after that night. But how can I blame you when *I* was never brave enough to stand up to your father?”

I never blamed her for tolerating the abuse—okay, maybe I blamed her a little. But to be fair, she never knew that he was violent with me. I never told her.

And I never will.

He’d call me names and boss me around in front of her, but hit me? Nah. That shit was reserved for the privacy of my bedroom. He’d wait until I was completely alone. Vulnerable to his mood swings. Plus, he didn’t want anyone to intervene. It would’ve ruined the fun.

“I should’ve taken you away from him the minute he even looked at you wrong...” She stops, shutting her eyes like the recollection sickens her. “I was a high school dropout who’d gotten knocked up at seventeen and had no one apart from Lillian. As much as it hurts to admit, I was convinced *this* was the best life I’d ever be able to give you. Your father was an unpleasant prick, but at least you’d never want for anything.

“It was like you knew I’d never leave him. So, you protected me... even though I was supposed to protect *you*. That’s just what you do, honey. You protect me. God, I’m so sorry I made you feel like you had to take care of me when it was never your job.”

I’m the one tearing up now.

I had no idea that getting an apology I didn’t ask for would feel this liberating.

“Mom—”

“No. It was my job, you hear me? *Mine*. You were a kid. I failed you the day I allowed you to carry my burdens for me.”

A painful pit forms in my throat.

It’s like a huge weight just slid off my shoulders.

“You were seventeen years old, for God’s sake. You’d just lost your childhood best friend, and your first thought was *how is this going to affect my mom?*”

“I betrayed him.” My voice breaks on the last word. “He was my friend, and I let his murderer walk free.”

“Hey.” Mom tilts my chin up, aligning my gaze with hers. “You did what you thought was the right thing to do. You might be famous, honey, but you *are* still a human being. I think you forget that sometimes.”

I release a deep sigh, burying my face in my hands for a brief moment. “Fuck, I... I don’t know what to do. If I come clean, I’ll lose everything.”

She scoots closer to me on the couch, rubbing my back gently. “If you don’t come clean, you’ll lose yourself.”

Hearing her say that flicks a switch inside my brain.

It's as though I can finally see clearly for the first time in five years.

On autopilot, I grab my phone out of my back pocket, pull up my conversation with Drea, and type out a text I should've sent her a long time ago.

KANE

Tell them I changed my mind. I'll do it.



HADLEY

The next two days merge together, morphing into one big web of confusion I couldn't unravel if I gave it my best shot.

I managed to drag myself out of bed and go down to the gym in Mom's building this morning. Now, I'm not saying I deserve a round of applause, but considering the fact that I haven't been able to truly smile in over a week, I'd appreciate a pat on the back or, at the very least, a pity thumbs-up.

I dreamed about him last night.

Of course, the whole thing made no sense—someone had cast a spell on Kane and turned him into a talking alpaca—but I still woke up feeling shattered inside.

It's embarrassing how much I miss him.

All I wanted to do when I dropped out of school to chase my dream was tell him about it. He's the one who gave me the courage to open my online store in the first place. He bought me supplies when I didn't have a dollar to my name.

I like to think that he'd be proud of me.

I enter the empty gym at around ten and hop on the treadmill to warm up. I'm not a fan of cardio, but I also can't keep wasting away in bed the way I have been in the past month.

I put my earbuds in, starting with a light jog. A notification pops up on my screen just as I'm about to select an upbeat playlist.

It's an email.

I frown at the sender, the name making no sense.

Unveiling Your Vision Contest.

The subject says, "You've won!"

What?

I click the email and begin to read.

Dear Hadley,

We are thrilled to inform you that your work has been selected to grace the album cover of Anaya's next album! Your creativity and talent truly stood out amongst all the entries we received.

I nearly fall off the treadmill.

I heard about that contest.

It's all Anaya talked about on her Instagram for the last two months. She thought it would be fun to have her fans create the artwork for her next album, which is coming out in two months. Last I heard, there were thousands of applicants.

I thought about entering, but in the end, I chickened out. Why am I receiving this?

My gaze drops to the third paragraph of the email.

We are so excited to work with you and bring your artwork to life. We will be sharing your store and announcing your win on Anaya's Instagram tomorrow. Our team will also be reaching out to discuss your fees!

Oh my God.

I had a bunch of missed calls from an unknown number when I woke up.

I brushed it off, thinking it was a telemarketer. I scroll lower, landing on a section that reads, “Your entry.”

All the information of my application are listed under it. The email address of the person that submitted my work leaves me breathless.

kane_2932@gmail.com

My chest caves in on itself.

He did this.

He submitted my painting of a diamond heart but also linked my online store in the social media bar. He entered me into the contest months ago, long before we left Golden Cove, and the crazy part?

He did it anonymously.

He could've used his fame and friendship with Anaya to get me to win, but he didn't.

Because he was trying to prove something to me.

The time he bought me art supplies, I went off on him and accused him of treating me like a charity case.

I also didn't want him to give me a shout-out on social media because I wanted to make it on my own and not have to wonder if I owed it all to him.

And then he did this. To show me I could and *would* succeed on my own merits.

I must go over the email a dozen times, unable to fully grasp that my work is going to be shared with Anaya's ten million followers tomorrow.

Not only that, but I'm also going to get paid for this. All because Kane saw my potential when I couldn't.

Emotions overpower me, and I plop down onto the exercise bench nearby, my thoughts racing at a thousand miles per hour.

I dropped out of school to chase my dream.

And it turns out...

I just might be able to *catch* it.



I DECIDE TO TAKE A QUICK SHOWER BEFORE DINNER, TELLING Mom that I'll be out in time to watch *Dancing with the Stars* with her.

It was our thing for the longest time after Gray passed. We'd order takeout and watch it on the couch together. Everything may be different now, but my mom is the one constant in my life. In a way, grieving Gray has brought us closer than I ever thought possible.

I've just finished washing my hair when I hear my phone chime with a text on the bathroom vanity.

I don't think much of it at first, continuing to rinse the conditioner out of my hair.

Until it goes off again.

And again.

And again.

Someone's blowing up my phone

Must be important.

I quickly rinse my hair, grab a clean towel, and wrap it around me. I see that I have messages from Jamie, Drea, and Maggie when I check my screen.

JAMIE

DID YOU SEE IT?

JAMIE

Everybody's freaking the fuck out.

What the hell is she talking about?

DREA

I can't believe this is happening.

DREA

If I'd known he was going to say that, I would've given you a heads-up. He went completely off script.

DREA

I'm so sorry.

Fear scrapes at my insides.

Did I miss something?

I even have a message from Maggie.

MAGGIE

CHECK KANE'S INSTAGRAM NOW!

I do just that, my fingers trembling as I open the app, preparing to type Kane's name into the search bar.

Only, I don't need to.

Because his latest post is the first thing that comes up.

The picture is all black.

Why is he posting a black picture?

The caption beneath his post sends my heart into my throat.

The truth comes out one way or another. Tune in to my final interview with Giana Sterling.

Back the fuck up.

He's doing an interview with Giana Sterling?

The woman is a well-known TV host who conducts extra-personal interviews with “controversial” celebrities—that’s her whole brand. Every time a public figure is on the receiving end of criticism and bad publicity, her team comes calling.

Also, he said his *final* interview.

What on earth does that mean?

I click Kane’s profile, hoping another one of his posts will answer some of my questions.

I audibly gasp.

All of his posts are *gone*.

Photos from his world tours, late nights in the studio, pictures of his band. *All deleted*.

The only post that’s left is the one about the interview.

The comments are still on, to my surprise.

I click on the comments section to see what people are saying.

“Just watched the interview. I have no words.”

“I’m going to drown in my tears if Kane quits music. FUCK JOSHUA. Kane didn’t do anything wrong.”

“If Kane mysteriously disappears, we’ll know why.”

“JUSTICE FOR KANE. Bro did what he had to do. Not all heroes wear capes.”

What. The. Fuck.

I go online and type the words “Kane Wilder Interview” into the search bar. The first video that comes up is fifteen minutes long and only an excerpt of the forty-minute interview with Giana Sterling.

I plop down onto the corner of the bathtub and press Play, my pulse wilding out in my neck.

The interview starts with Giana introducing Kane as her guest and Kane walking onstage. So far, the whole thing looks like your typical celebrity interview.

Giana shakes his hand before gesturing for him to sit down on one of the two armchairs beside them. “I’m so glad to have you here today. We haven’t done a live interview like this in years.”

I immediately fast-forward the chitchat and pleasantries, skipping ahead a few minutes.

“In light of your recent controversy with Joshua Caldwell, you’ve decided to postpone your tour and focus on your sobriety. How’s that been going for you?”

“Honestly? Horrible,” Kane deadpans, causing the live audience to laugh. “Getting sober is hard enough without having to worry about your manager suing you for every penny you have.”

Giana’s face contorts with shock. It’s obvious she didn’t expect him to be willing to discuss the trial. I’m guessing Kane’s people had to approve a list of questions beforehand, and none of them were about the lawsuit.

“Have you had any contact with Joshua since the incident?” Giana jumps at the opportunity to pry more juicy details out of him.

“None whatsoever. We’re not exactly on good terms since I found out he and his buddies were drugging and molesting my young fans.”

My jaw nearly hits the floor.

And so does Giana’s.

Fucking hell, Kane.

Ever heard of easing into it?

“You see, I walked in on him abusing unconscious minors, and *that’s* why I lost my temper at the club. He was using my name to lure my fans to his house and drugging them to keep them compliant. He also wasn’t the only one I saw there. There were a handful of powerful men at that party, people

you all know and love. Some even direct TV shows and movies with a cast that's mainly child actors."

Giana Sterling looks at him as though she's unsure if she's imagining the whole thing or if Kane Wilder is really outing a bunch of Hollywood predators on live TV.

"D-Do you have any evidence to back up your claims?" she stammers.

"I will. Soon." That's all he says, and Giana quickly understands she's not going to get any more information out of him. At least, not on that particular topic.

"Do you have the names of the men who were *allegedly* at that party?" She's very careful with her words, determined to remain neutral.

From there, he begins making a list of all the creeps he saw there that night, exposing countless men from the industry without batting an eye.

I don't know what happened to him after I left, but he looks like he ran out of fucks to give, and he's accepted his fate.

Like he's made peace with the fact that his career is over.

"If Joshua did abuse these girls, why didn't you just come forward? One would think you'd want to clear your name instead of hiding something so vile."

Kane doesn't speak for a few seconds, pondering his response.

"I didn't come forward because Joshua held something over my head. He threatened to tell the world about my darkest moment. Which is why I'm going to do it myself. Right here. Right now."

This isn't happening.

I'm hallucinating, I know I am.

I only realize tears are coursing down my face when one of them slips between my parted lips. A sob rips from my throat,

and I smack my hand against my mouth to muffle the next one.

A knock rattles the bathroom door the next second, knocking the wind out of me.

“Hadley, everything okay in there?” Mom asks, worry dripping from every word.

“I’ll be out in a minute,” I choke out, directing my focus back to the screen.

I hold my breath to the point of suffocating.

Then he says it.

“Three years ago, I was held at gunpoint and forced to be an accessory to my best friend’s murder.”



KANE

You'd think I'd be used to being stuck at home by now.

After all, I spent all of last summer confined to the beach house, unable to leave except to go see my friends every now and then.

This time is different, though.

Because now, I'm not allowed to leave *at all*.

I'd be stupid to even try considering the ankle monitor the court stuck me with.

That's right, *I'm on house arrest*.

Forbidden from leaving my LA house while awaiting trial.

Better than being in jail, if you ask me.

Not that I would've been behind bars for long. My mom would've accessed my money and bailed me out the second they put me in a cell, anyway.

I have no fucking idea what's going to happen to me. My lawyers are pushing to get me tried as a minor since I was seventeen when it all went down, but they can't guarantee that it'll work.

Scar was older than me at the time of Gray's death, so *he'll* definitely be tried as an adult. I'm hoping the fact that we were held at gunpoint that day will result in us not being held fully responsible for what happened.

But I'm not foolish enough to think our decision to stay silent all these years will go unpunished.

In spite of everything, I don't regret telling the world. Yes, my career is officially over, but let's not pretend like I wasn't unsatisfied and miserable for most of it.

I haven't been passionate about the songs I'm singing in *years*.

"Honey? Can I come in?" My mom's voice travels through my bedroom door.

"Yeah." I give her the go-ahead, rolling onto my back and rubbing my eyes with a groan.

I've slept like shit all week.

Mostly because a part of me was hoping that maybe... just maybe... Hadley would come around once I told everyone the truth.

Wishful thinking on my part. She hasn't reached out once. I understand if she never says another word to me, but that doesn't mean I won't spend the rest of my life in fucking agony over it.

Only bright side is she won the contest I entered her into. I saw her business promoted all over Anaya's social media. No surprise there. I always knew my girl would go on to do great things.

The door opens, and my mom walks in, crinkling her nose at the mess. Can't blame her. It looks like a fucking hurricane went through my room. There are clothes all over the floor, old boxes of pizza scattered everywhere, and it smells weird.

She cringes, kicking the clothes at her feet in order to create a path to my bed. "I mean this in the nicest, most loving way possible. It smells like a dead rat in here."

I snort. "Is that all?"

I pull the duvet over my body, ready to doze off again—who cares that it’s 2:00 p.m.—but my mom rips it out of my hands. “Get up, take a shower, and put some clothes on. *Clean* clothes,” she specifies, pointing her finger at me like she already knows I’m going to wear whatever clothes I find on the floor.

I have never, and I mean *never*, felt so hopeless in my entire life. I don’t even have the energy to exist right now, let alone be a productive member of society.

Fuck, I’m never going to get over this girl, am I?

Mom races over to the floor-to-ceiling windows across the room and draws the curtains open, the sun blinding me and making me hiss.

“Jesus, Mom.” I stick my hand up in front of my eyes, blocking out the light.

She sets out toward the door. “I want you downstairs in thirty minutes. Are we clear?”

I blow out a sigh. “What for?”

She stops in the doorway, glances at me over her shoulder, and says, “Call it an intervention.”



I DRAG MYSELF DOWN THE STAIRS A HALF HOUR LATER, MY energy levels dropping at an alarming pace.

I showered and brushed my teeth, which is the bare fucking minimum, but it felt like trying to move a mountain.

I’m just drained.

Physically.

Mentally.

Emotionally.

My hair is still dripping from the shower, but I couldn't care less, counting down the seconds until I can collapse into bed again.

"Mom?" I call when I reach the first floor.

"In here," she replies.

I track her voice to the parlor, half expecting her to sit me down and remind me of all the reasons why my life sucks balls.

But then I turn the corner...

And I see *her*.

She's just sitting there, chatting with my mom, with her red hair in a high ponytail.

She's. Just. Sitting. There.

As though she's not knocking my entire world off its axis by being here.

In front of me.

Hadley's head snaps up when I come in, her blue eyes locking with mine and pummeling the dead vessel in my chest.

"Hi." She offers me a timid smile.

Be cool.

"Hi." My voice cracks like I'm a prepubescent teenager.

She rises off the couch. "I'm so sorry to drop in announced. My mom told me you were on house arrest, and I sort of booked a flight on a whim."

She's sorry?

She's fucking *sorry*?

Every atom in my body is telling me to drop to my knees and thank her for coming.

"Don't apologize" is all I manage to say.

"I'll give you two some privacy." My mom pushes to her feet, shooting me a satisfied smile on her way out of the room.

This is why she wanted me to shower.

Remind me to thank her later.

Hadley waits for my mom to be out of sight before taking a few steps in my direction.

“Wait, before you say anything... if you came here to tell me it’s over, please just... *don’t* tell me it’s over.” My plea is as confusing as the expression on her face.

I’m pretty sure I’m hallucinating when Hadley cups my cheek with her hand, tears glistening in her blue eyes, and says, “Well, then... I guess it’s a good thing I came here to do *this*.”

Her mouth crashes against mine before I can even attempt to make sense of her words. I immediately take a fistful of her shirt, jerking her closer to me, keeping her there.

It’s a miracle I don’t *actually* fall to my knees when she throws her arms around my neck, her lips making me a promise I’m terrified she’s not going to keep.

I’m here.

I’m not leaving.

I’m so fucking scared she’s going to come to her senses and take it back.

Take her *heart* back.

Destroy mine in the process.

But she doesn’t show any sign of wanting to stop, opening up for me, allowing my tongue to taste hers. I groan at her initiative, my free hand wrapping around her throat and squeezing just enough to draw a moan from her lips.

“Are you really here?” I gasp into her mouth when we separate. But I’m diving back in before she can answer. “Are you really *mine*?”

I don’t know if I could survive you walking away one more time.

Hadley backs away, her teary eyes reflecting the relief in mine. Then she makes me the happiest man in the world.

“I’m yours. Now and always.”

It takes me a second to realize she’s referring to my song.

Our song.

I wrote “I’m Still Yours” for her when I was fifteen years old, and all these years later, I still mean every word. I don’t know shit about what’s going to happen next, but if there’s one thing I’m sure of...

It’s that I’m going to love this girl until I take my last breath on this earth.

I end the kiss without a warning, pull my future wife into a hug, and make her a promise of my own.

“Now and always.”



Four years later...

KANE

“**B**lue or black?” The love of my life presents me with two cocktail dresses, her doubt-ridden gaze flickering between the two for long seconds.

The dresses are nearly identical.

They’re the exact same cut, length, and fabric. The only difference is the color, and maybe that’s just me being a sucker for her, but she could show up to the event in her pj’s, and she’d still be the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.

“What’s wrong with the one you’re wearing?” I sit up on our bed, my lips twitching into a smirk as I admire the dress fitting her body like a second skin. “I mean... aside from the obvious.”

Hadley’s brow furrows, concern spreading across her face as she glances down at the dress in question. “What’s wrong with it? Does it not look good?”

“No, it looks good.” I push to my feet, stalking across our bedroom to meet her. I wrap my arm around her waist the moment I reach her, jerking her body to mine and making her smile. “I’m just saying it would look better on the *floor*.”

She catches my drift immediately, a deep blush creeping into her cheeks, and swats at my chest. “Get your mind out of the gutter, Wilder.”

I press my lips to the corner of her mouth, lingering for a few seconds before saying, “How can I when my girl looks this fucking good?”

“So... you think I should wear this one?” she teases, her finger tracing down my chest.

“Hell fucking yes.”

“You sure?”

“See for yourself.”

My hand drops downward, curving around Hadley’s perky ass and squeezing. I press her body to mine, her stomach flush with my hard-on. Her eyes widen in realization when she notices my desire for her.

That’s how sure I am.

“Stop giving me that look,” she scolds, sticking her finger in my face.

I play dumb. “What look?”

“The ‘let’s make babies’ look.”

I fake gasp. “Me? I would never.”

She rolls her eyes, grinning from ear to ear.

She knows damn well that if it were up to me, our house would be filled with mini Hadleys by now. But she’s not ready yet. She wants to focus on her career before she dedicates her life to her family, a decision I understand and support.

But that doesn’t mean we can’t have fun while we wait.

“How much time before we have to leave?” I ask.

She pushes me away with a chuckle. “Could your timing be any worse? I just finished doing my hair.”

She is right about the shitty timing part.

Now is the *worst* time to be fantasizing about ripping off her dress. We have to be at the art gallery in forty-five minutes, and as much as I would love to watch my girl come on my cock, I refuse to let anything ruin this night for her.

This will be her first-ever gallery opening.

After running a successful business and selling her art online for years, Hadley is *finally* showcasing her work to a live audience. At one of the most prestigious art galleries in LA at that.

She's been a nervous wreck all week. I've tried everything I could think of to calm her nerves, but she's one of those people who put themselves through things *twice* by driving themselves mad with anticipation.

All our friends and family are coming out for her big night, and I'm starting to think she's nervous they won't like her work.

Pretty damn ironic that she's scared she won't measure up to her peers' expectations when you can find her work in nearly every mansion in California.

My girl has become what you'd call Hollywood's go-to artist in the last few years. It all started when Anaya commissioned a handful of paintings from Hadley's store for her Beverly Hills house.

It was just a little while after Anaya's album had come out, and her fans had gone absolutely *insane* over the cover art.

Other artists and Anaya's friends started taking notice of how good the art in her house looked. Anyone who stepped foot inside would eventually ask her where she'd gotten those sick paintings from.

Word of mouth and social media did their thing, and Hadley's career took off faster than a speeding bullet.

If you'd told me a few years ago that my girlfriend would be the one in the spotlight while I worked behind the scenes, I would've pointed you to the nearest drugstore so you could get some good painkillers for tomorrow's hangover.

There was a time where I thought I'd be a front man for the rest of my life, but it turns out setting my own career on fire was the best thing to ever happen to me.

Aside from Hadley, obviously.

After the news came out that I was involved in Gray's murder, my entire world stopped turning. I was sure working in the industry was no longer an option for me.

Little did I know the world didn't hate me as much as I hated myself.

Quite the opposite, actually.

My fans stood by me, supported me, and sure, there were a few haters, and I'd still get the occasional death threat every now and then, but most of my supporters saluted me for taking a few pedophiles and Gray's murderer down.

Both Josh and Brody wound up in jail in the end.

Josh got put away for life, while Brody only got fifteen years.

Hadley and her mom were devastated about the relatively short sentence, but in time, more and more cases got linked to Brody through his fingerprints and DNA testing.

We later found out that it wasn't the first time Brody had robbed a store and held the employees at gunpoint.

The extra charges added another ten years to his sentence. As for Brody's accomplice, Dean, I was surprised to hear that he and Axel, the other guy who was in the van that day, both OD'd on weed laced with fentanyl just a few months before I came clean to the police.

In the end, they died alone in Axel's parents' basement.

Some might say they got off easy. That their accidental deaths allowed them to avoid punishment. But then again, people could say the same thing about Scar and me.

After Josh's lawsuit against me was dismissed, Scar and I got sentenced to a thousand hours of community service.

We put in twenty-hours a week for a little over a year.

Then that was it.

We were free.

The first thing I did was put my house up for sale and move away from downtown LA. Hadley and I found this gorgeous house in a quiet gated community and moved in together a week later.

I'll admit I didn't know what to do with my life after I served my sentence. Sure, I was set for life, and I had enough to support my family and myself until the day I died, but I had no intention of sitting on my ass and doing nothing until I retired.

Hadley had to talk me into it, but I eventually picked up the phone and made a few calls to some of the music producers I'd worked with during my short career.

Which brings us to now and what I do for a living.

I'm a songwriter.

I spend my days holed up in the studio, writing songs for others.

Songs I'm actually *proud* of.

Some do incredibly well; some don't. I don't have any expectations. As long as I get to do what I love.

I'm able to work with amazing artists without feeling the pressure of being scrutinized and treated like a zoo animal for the public's entertainment.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss singing, though. I put out a few more songs over the years, but I paid to produce them instead of selling my soul to a label. People can stream them online, but I'm not doing tours or interviews. I'm an independent artist now.

I do what I want, write whatever I want, and fuck, I've never been happier.

Now, that's not to say my career is the only reason I'm over-the-moon happy.

The main reason is her.

My Hadley.

“Where’d you go?” Her voice brings me back, and I shake my head, snapping out of it.

“Sorry, I was just thinking.”

She laughs. “Well, can you do that while we’re getting in the car? We’re going to be late.”

I nod. “Lead the way.”

My girlfriend smiles, checks her outfit and makeup in the mirror one last time, and walks out of our bedroom.

What she doesn’t know is by the time we come back tonight...

I’m hoping she’ll be my *fiancée*.



HADLEY

I CAN’T BELIEVE I’M HAVING MY FIRST GALLERY OPENING.

You hear that, me?

You did it.

Nausea crawls up my throat as I run around the gallery, triple-checking each painting to make sure they are properly labeled.

I have no idea what to expect from tonight. Will I sell out? God, what if I don’t sell anything? What if I have to go home with all of these paintings at the end of the night?

What if nobody *comes*?

“They’ll be here,” Kane says, and I inhale a sharp breath, grabbing a glass of champagne off a waiter’s tray.

It freaks me out when he does that. Mostly because it makes me wonder if he’s a mind reader. It’s bad enough that

my heart and soul belong to him. Now, you're telling me my thoughts do, too?

I feel his presence behind me, and my shoulders release all tension when he wraps his arms around me and rests his chin on my shoulder. "Breathe. You're going to kill it."

I sure hope he's right.

It's weird that I still get the jitters, considering how far I've come in the past four years. But I don't think I'll ever see the day where I'm so cocky I just assume everything I do is going to be a hit.

I could be a multimillionaire and still pray that people will show up to my event.

The gallery staff notifies me that they'll be opening the door in a few minutes, and I tense in Kane's embrace. He responds by taking my hand from behind and lacing our fingers together.

"Ready?" Kane whispers in my ear when the clock strikes seven.

This is it.

"Let's do it." I give a small nod, squeezing his hand before releasing it.

The next thing I know, the large wooden doors of the gallery are flying open, letting in a steady influx of people I realize were waiting in line.

As in people are *lining* up to see my work.

Kane and I stand by the doors, greeting every attendee with a smile and polite chitchat.

I lose count of the guests once we hit a hundred.

My heart swells with joy when I spot Evie and my mom in the distance. I wave at them, and Mom immediately notices us. She grabs her partner Walter's hand, dragging him over to us in no time. Evie follows suit, a few steps behind the lovebirds. The guy she's seeing couldn't make it.

I don't think I'm ever going to get used to my mom dating. She was single for so long I never stopped to think that one day she'd want to be in love, too.

I'm glad she met Walter. He's nice. He's our landlord *and* the building's handyman. He'd keep coming around to ask if she needed anything fixed for the first year we lived there.

He and Mom hit it off instantly. They started dating a little over three years ago.

"Oh, sweetie, I'm so proud of you." Mom throws her arms around me, holding me so tight she cuts off my airways.

I don't complain, enjoying every second of her hug. "Thanks, Mom."

We separate a few seconds later. I barely have time to greet Walter before Evie is pulling Kane and me into a group hug. I notice the tears in her eyes the second she withdraws.

"Evie, are you okay?" I worry.

She wipes her cheeks, a sob climbing up her throat. "Of course. I'm just... I'm so happy for you. You two are meant for each other. I wish you so much—"

"Um, Mom?" Kane interjects, seemingly uncomfortable.

What am I missing here?

"Can I talk to you in private?" he asks, offering her a tight-lipped smile.

Her eyes grow. "Oh, have you not... But I thought you said..."

Again, *what?*

"I'll be right back." Kane smacks a loud kiss on my cheek before taking his mom's hand and ushering her to a quiet spot.

Well, that wasn't weird *at all*.

I don't have time to overthink the awkward interaction I just witnessed, continuing to greet every attendee. I must thank a dozen people for coming before a familiar voice startles me.

"*Hadley!*"

I whisk my head to the right, emotions clawing their way through my chest when I see Jamie beelining for me.

“Oh my God!” I match my best friend’s energy. “You made it!”

I pull Jamie into my arms, hugging the breath out of her as though I haven’t seen her in ages when really, we vacation in Golden Cove together every summer.

Shay slows down next to her wife a short moment later. “Are you kidding? You could’ve dropped a whole damn building on top of her, and she still would’ve found a way to come.”

“She’s not lying. Our flight was delayed, and honest to God, I considered swimming here,” Jamie deadpans, and I laugh, squeezing her tighter.

A part of me was afraid she’d have to cancel on me last minute. She and Shay are so busy raising their daughters, an RSVP doesn’t always guarantee that they’ll be able to swing by.

That’s adulthood for you.

I wasn’t nearly naïve enough to think everyone from my past would make the trip to LA. For example, Vince and Maggie sent us the biggest bouquet I’ve ever seen to apologize for not being able to come. I knew Cal also reached out to let us know he and his girlfriend couldn’t get off work.

I don’t hold it against them.

No matter where life takes us, I’ll know we’ll all be back in Golden Cove come summertime.

“Where’s Drea?” Jamie asks the moment we move away.

I quickly scan the gallery, looking for Drea’s dark hair somewhere in the crowd.

I push to the tip of my toes to see above the crowd. “I don’t know. She said she was coming.”

“Is she bringing Lucifer?” Jamie grumbles, causing Shay to elbow her. “I’m sorry, I meant *Lucian*.”

I snort at the disdain in her voice. “Yes, she’s bringing Lucian.”

Jamie hates Drea’s new fiancé. Hates him with a *passion*. To be fair, he’s not exactly a pleasant person. Not only does he brag... *a lot*... but he’s also extremely self-centered.

It’s a special talent he has. It’s become a bit of an inside joke between all of us. Whenever he and Drea come to the beach house, we bet on how long it’ll take him to make the conversation about him.

So far, his record is seven seconds.

I don’t know what Drea sees in him, but hey, she clearly likes him, otherwise she wouldn’t be marrying the guy.

“What about Scar? Did he RSVP?” Shay asks, the elephant in the room becoming impossible to ignore.

“Kane said he wasn’t. I don’t blame him. Drea and Lucian did just announce their engagement.”

“Shit, that’s right. How do you think he’s taking it?” Jamie questions, and I wish I had a solid answer to give her.

The truth is, Scar is a closed book when it comes to Drea. He and Kane are still close, but Scar has strictly refused to tell him anything about why he and Drea broke up.

It never made any sense to me. Especially considering how head over heels in love these two were. One day, they were eloping, making plans for the future, and the next...

He was leaving her at the altar.

No explanation.

Drea spent the next year picking herself up. Scar moved back to LA two months ago. And he still won’t tell anyone where the hell he went for three years.

Not that it matters. When I asked her how she felt about it, she said she was happy with Lucian, and she couldn’t give a rat’s ass about Scar.

“Holy shit.” Jamie’s gasp captures my attention, and I track her gaze to the front door, where a tall, dark-haired blast

from the past stands.

I'll be damned.

Looks like Scar changed his mind after all.



WE SOLD OUT.

That's right.

Every single painting sold.

My gaze darts around the now empty gallery, and tears prick at my eyelids. To say my first gallery opening was a smashing success would be the understatement of the year.

All the guests left a half hour ago—with the exception of Jamie, Shay, Drea, Lucian, my mom, and Kane's.

We got started on the cleanup as soon as the place cleared out. We have to be out of here before eleven. As amazing as this experience has been, I can't wait to get home and sleep for at least a week.

My poor body's been dealing with so much stress lately it needs a reset.

From the look on Drea's face, I'm not the only one who's eager to call it a day. For someone who doesn't give a rat's ass about Scar, she sure didn't look like she didn't care when she saw him come in earlier.

She didn't have it in her to pretend like this was no big deal and booked it to the back door leading to the alley the second they made eye contact across the room.

I expected her fiancé to chase after her. But Lucian was in the middle of telling his life story to an uninterested stranger and didn't notice. Scar, however, didn't miss a beat, immediately following after her.

She came back inside a half hour later, but Scar was nowhere in sight. I didn't see him again for the rest of the

night.

“There’s my girl.” A large hand wraps around my wrist and spins me around.

I come face-to-face with Kane, my lips automatically curling into a smile when he brings my knuckles to his mouth and kisses them.

“How are you feeling?” He uses his grip on my hand to tug me to his chest.

“Like I’m on top of the world.”

His sexy smirk sends shivers down my spine. “Speaking of being on top...” He moves closer to whisper against my mouth, “You need to see the rooftop of this place.”

Not where I thought this was going.

Next thing I know, he’s pulling on my hand and guiding me to the stairwell by the back door.

“Now?” I chuckle, even though I know I’d follow this man to the ends of the earth if he asked me to.

“Yes, now. The view is fucking amazing.” His enthusiasm is as adorable as it is confusing. He seems in a rush to get to that rooftop.

I don’t protest, shadowing Kane up the stairs and asking myself if I’ve officially peaked.

This night.

Right here.

This just might be the happiest I’ve ever been.

It doesn’t get any better than this, I’m sure of it.

“Ladies first.” Kane gestures to lead the way, and I comply without a second thought, rounding him.

That’s when he pushes the door open.

And I realize I couldn’t have been more *wrong*.

It does get better.

The first thing I notice are the city lights twinkling in the distance. My focus falls to the sea of candles spread out on the rooftop and the trail of white rose petals on the ground.

At the end of the path is a gorgeous flower arch—that's also adorned with roses—and a canvas propped up on an easel.

Four words are engraved on the canvas.

Four words I'll never forget.

Will you marry me?

I attempt to hold back my tears in order to keep them from blinding me and committing this moment to memory.

But there's no point.

I'm already bawling my eyes out.

I spin to face Kane, searching for his gorgeous face until I realize he's down on one knee, holding a velvet box open.

The ring inside takes my breath away.

Kane's bloodshot eyes make me cry twice as hard, and I have to cover my mouth with my palm to muffle my sobs.

“Hadley... my first supporter... my inspiration. You told me once that you've loved me almost as long as you've been alive...” His voice is low, dripping with emotions and adoration. “I should've told you then that I intended to love you for as long as my beat-up heart would allow me to. I want you to call me out on my shit when we're old and wrinkly and I'm too stubborn to admit that I need a walker. I want to wake up every day and see your beautiful face staring back at me. I want forever and everything after that. I want it all. Please marry me.”

I know he wants an answer, but I find myself throwing myself into his arms and catching his lips in an all-consuming kiss. He kisses me back with so much ardor I have to grip the collar of his shirt to keep steady.

“Tell me you'll be my wife, Hadley.”

I can't breathe, choking on my tears.

He sounds like he's begging me.

As though he's afraid that I might say no.

But what he doesn't realize... is that there was never a moment in my life where I *wasn't* his.

"Tell me you'll always be mine," he whispers.

The words are out of my mouth in a heartbeat.

"I'll always be yours."

Thank you so much for reading P.s. I'm Still Yours!

Enjoyed the book? Please consider leaving a review on [Amazon](#)! It lets me know continuing this series is worth it and that you would like to know more about other couples! (*Scar & Drea, Maggie & Vince, and so much more*)

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