COMES

"Sounds like you were trapped in a life that everyone wanted, except for you."



KIRSTIE GOODE

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SOUNDTRACK

"Love Myself" by *Olivia O'Brien*"homecoming queen?" by *Kelsea Ballerini*

"Burning house" by Cam

"Sad Forever" by Lauv

"Breathin" by Ariana Grande

"Lego House" by Ed Sheeran

"Waves" by Dean Lewis

"No Judgement" by Niall Horan

"Messy" by Chase Rice

"Anxiety" by Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit

"Wannabe" by Spice Girls

"No Brainer" by DJ Khaled

"Anything She Says" by Mitchell Tenpenny (feat. Seaforth)

"All On My Mind" by Anderson East

"Lost at Sea" by Phillip LaRue

"Incomplete" by James Bay

"Perfect" by Ed Sheeran

"The Few Things" by JP Saxe

"Feel" by *FLETCHER*

"You Were Meant For Me" by Jewel

"We Lied To Each Other" by Olivia O'Brien

"Space Cowboy" by Kacey Musgraves

"Sleeping Sickness" by City and Colour

"A Drop in the Ocean" by Ron Pope

"Not a Bad Thing" by Justin Timberlake

"The Bones" by Maren Morris

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PROLOGUE

BLAKELY

June 1

The floor is cold; it's too cold, like lying on a frozen pond in the middle of winter. I see them walking and talking around me, but I can't hear them. I can't hear anything, just my own heart beating, at least I think that is what it is because, at this point, I'm not sure if I am still alive. My mother is in front of me, my phone shattered to pieces in the bathroom stall. I must've dropped it, but I can't remember. I fell to the ground, holding my face cupped in my hands. It's like I can't move or really even breathe.

Why am I here? I don't want to be here, especially not now. I needed a wake-up call, but I'm not sure if this is what I bargained for. The silence is deafening, and my tears are burning my face. It's so cold - it's June and 99 degrees outside, but I'm freezing. It feels like it's been hours. I'm scooped up by hands that are like fire against my skin. I look up at this man I've known most of my life, and it's like I saw right past him. He gives me a weak smile and rests my lifeless body on the couch in the church's common area. Everyone is in another room, probably talking about what just happened, and I'm left here alone.

I don't want to talk. I'm not sure my lips will move to say anything at all. I can't believe he is gone. I feel shattered, even more so than my phone, which is still lying on the bathroom floor. I must be in shock. I'm trembling and frozen in place. Still unable to form words, in fear of choking on them. I can't do this. The weight of this Cinderella dress feels like a cinder block on my chest, and *I can't breathe*. This should be the happiest day of my life, and suddenly it's the worst. I feel his presence standing near me, his lips are moving, but I can't hear anything beyond my heart thumping. I don't want to hear. I slip the ring off my cold finger and place it in his hand, and

with every ounce of energy I have in my weak body, I gather up the train of my dress and *run*.

CHAPTER 1

BLAKELY

October 25

"Blakely!" My mother shouts from the lower level of our tiny house. She is probably still in her pajamas, sipping on coffee.

"Be right down!" I yell and roll over to see what time it is. 9:15 *fucking great*, I'm late for work again. You would think after five months, I would finally have my shit together.

"Morning." She says, glaring over her cup, waiting for a response.

"Morning." I mutter and exit the kitchen as quickly as I entered it. Hoping she doesn't ask me for the hundredth time if I'm "Ok."

I sprint to my car to get away from the house as quick as I can. I honestly can not take another minute of someone's judgmental eye rolls. It's been four months since the day that changed my life forever, and truthfully, I'm still not okay. I'm not sure if I'll ever be okay. My Dad was my rock. He understood me. When I went to school with every intention of studying art, he had my back when everyone else told me it was a dead end. He was a massive part of me, and now that he's gone, I feel like part of myself died too.

The drive to work feels longer than the usual seventeen minutes, probably because I am already late. I hit the drivethru for my morning coffee because I am already terrible to be around. Let's be honest, I need the coffee to make myself tolerable. I pull into the bank I've been working at for almost six months. I am in the middle of my degree, and I was lucky enough to swing this job three days a week and still take classes at the small community college downtown for the other two days. School started back in September, but I didn't enroll. It's too soon. I can't sit in a classroom full of people and pretend to care. Hell, I can barely fake a smile at work anymore to make it through the day.

I run through the lot and bust through the doors, hoping no one will notice I was late again.

"Hello, Ms. Walker!" Emily sing-songs from behind her desk. She is the front desk receptionist and started a few months before I did. She's a sweet girl, but I'm not sure if she's "friend" material.

"Hi, Emily." I sigh, obviously winded from parking in the back of the lot and running in.

"Mr. Taylor wants to see you in his office." She chirps out cheerfully, the words sounding like nails on a chalkboard to me. I can not lose this job. I need to save up these next couple of months to move out of my mom's house. I have been staying there since the first week of July, and she is all but smothering me.

"Tell him I'll be right up," I almost whisper, trying not to completely panic.

The walk up the stairs and down the hall to Mr. Taylor's office seems like the longest walk I've ever taken. I know what will happen. The uneasy feeling in my gut is making me want to turn for the bathroom instead. I gently knock, hoping he's not in there.

"Come in!" He yells from behind the door. So much for wishful thinking.

I tip-toe through the door shamefully. I am so thankful he decided to take a chance on me, and I blew it. I've been late most days this month, and let's not even discuss productivity. I am not myself. He smiles at me, "Blakely, how have you been doing?"

How am I doing? What kind of question is that?

"I'm fine," I mumble, faking a smile. Maybe if I can smile, he will just leave it alone. Fuck, this is embarrassing. Am I that pathetic that my own boss is calling me into his office just to check on me?

He looks down for a minute at some papers on his desk, then looks up at me. I can tell he isn't sure what to say. Most people in my life have been walking on eggshells the past couple of months, afraid to say the wrong thing or upset me.

"I think you should take some time off." He looks at me, waiting for a response, but I don't really know what to say.

"Really, Mr. Taylor, I am fine. I promise I will try to get it together, I am starting to feel better." I lie, but I need this money.

"Blakely, I am offering you a leave of absence for two weeks, paid. I need you to clear your head, a lot has happened, and I think you should spend the next two weeks reflecting and gaining a new perspective." Damn, is he my boss or my therapist? I am already taking the semester off from school, so what are two weeks?

"Sure," I tell him, trying to sound thankful.

"Also, Blakely, Dakota emailed me. He is worried about you, he hasn't heard from you since... well, you know. That day."

He emailed my boss? Of course, he did. Oh, the joys of living in a small town where everyone knows everyone. I offer him a smile and thank him for everything before barreling out of the building before I have to speak to anyone else.

It's been months since the funeral. I can barely remember it. I feel like I went through the entire thing in a daze. For the most part, the three days between the wedding and the funeral were utterly silent. Dad had his own problems, but he never put anything above me. I was number one, and I knew it, a spitting image of him. My long dark hair the same color as his, and most everything else came from him too. My mom and my dad got divorced when I was five years old. At the time, I didn't understand, but now I know that it was inevitable, and it was a matter of time before they both found true love with other people. My dad more quickly than my mom. She had to plow through four marriages before she discovered my stepdad, Jason. My mother struggled much like my dad for years, and I spent a lot of time at my grandmother's house in the city while she worked. I saw my dad every other weekend and a little more when I got to high school.

I feel like he was taken from me, and it's not fair. I didn't get enough time. What's even worse is, looking back, I cared about everything else more. Am I pretty enough? Do these clothes look expensive enough? Am I skinny enough?

I spent too many of my teenage years wearing a mask and hiding who I really was to make sure I fit in. It didn't take long to get any boy's attention. After finally hooking up with Dakota, It wasn't long before it took over my life. I made sure I was doing everything to ensure his happiness and forgot about myself.

I glance over at my broken phone in the cupholder. I had insurance, but I haven't wanted to get it fixed. I haven't wanted to talk to anyone about what happened. My best friend, Camille, has come by my mom's house a few times to check on me, but I haven't had much to say to her. She has held down the "best friend" spot since freshman year of high school and has always been there for me. Her boyfriend Brayden was Dakota's friend.

Shit. Dakota.

I need to talk to him. It's just easier to push him to the back of my mind. I feel so guilty about what happened. Actually, I feel a lot of things, none of which are healthy. I whip my car back into the gravel driveway at my mom's. I'm fairly sure at least an hour has gone by. I contemplate going inside but ultimately decide to drive to Cami's House.

"Hey girlie," she sings as I walk through the door. I smile and look down at Kaycee, her daughter. The cutest little baby girl, possibly ever, with light brown bouncy curls and blue eyes.

"I'm so glad you came by, Brayden is working a double, and we are so bored!" I just smile at her, and she looks down at the remote in her lap. I realize I am making her uncomfortable, but I honestly don't know what to say yet.

"My boss put me on a two week leave today." I tell her, ashamed. She slides over on the couch and puts her arms around me, and I burst into tears. Aside from Dakota, she has always been my safe place. She keeps whispering in my ear,

telling me it's all going to be ok, but I can't seem to get it together, so I just continue sobbing into her dark brown curls. This whole mother thing looks good on her. Of course, having a baby at seventeen wasn't easy, but it's been nearly two years, and she has found a way to make it look easy. It's been five long months, but here I am again dumping it all out. Kaycee is looking at me like I am completely nuts. Maybe I am, especially if a toddler can sense it.

Cami slips into the kitchen and returns with two glasses of lemonade.

"Have you talked to Dakota?" She asks but doesn't look at me, afraid of my reaction.

"Not since the church."

Silence.

She looks me dead in the eye, scalding me with her "mom" look.

"Don't you think you should?"

I don't respond. Instead, I take a long sip of lemonade and look the other way.

"Blakely, you are my best friend, and I love you, but you have to talk to him."

"I know." She's right, but I am not ready. "I don't think I am ready to talk."

I just can't face him. I can't look him in the eye and tell him the truth, not yet.

"Honey, you may not ever be ready, but he still loves you. He thinks you are coming back. If you aren't, you need to let him go."

I left him. Standing in the church in a black tux alone. I wasn't ready for something so permanent; everything felt too permanent. Death and Marriage were just too much. Some of our friends had recently gotten married, and Cami and Brayden had a baby. All Dakota ever wanted was a family, and I took that from him that day. We had been on and off again since Junior year of high school and had just gotten back

together weeks before he proposed. It just didn't feel right. I love him, but I don't think I can love him the way he needs. Dakota was all I'd ever really known. Aside from Austin, a boy I met at college on one of the "Dakota breaks." Dakota was my normal. I just don't think I want normal anymore.

"Maybe you should get away from here for a while, like a mini-vacation. I don't think being in this town is helping you." Cami is waving her hand in front of my face, Earth to Blakely.

Cami is absolutely right. I need to get away from here, away from everything. Maybe being alone will give me a different perspective than this same small town with these same small-minded people.

CHAPTER 2

BLAKELY

October 31

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Mom asks as I fling a suitcase in the back of my tiny Volkswagen Beetle.

"I need to do this, mom. I'll be back soon, I just need to go... I can't spend another day here."

She rolls her eyes and lets out a sigh.

"Blakely Grace, you can go away, but you can't run from this forever. You need to at least talk to Dakota."

I know he has been sending her messages checking in on me. I mean he messaged my damn boss for crying out loud. If he is anything, it's persistent. The look on his face as I handed him my ring is still burned into my brain. His eyes just filled with tears, and he didn't say a word. He didn't try to stop me. He just let me go. He knew that trying to stop me then would've been a terrible idea. I was in no state to explain. He sat in the back pew at the funeral and gave me my space, which I am entirely thankful for. I don't think I can provide him with anything right now, certainly not an apology.

I pull into the tiny lot at the Verizon store in town and place my broken phone on the counter.

"Rough day?" The tall and lanky guy behind the counter questions.

"Something like that," I reply, as he hands me my new phone.

"Do you want me to sync your contacts over?" I stare at him blankly for a second, then he starts to explain what he suggests as if I didn't understand.

"No, thanks, though." I blurt and try to rush out of the store as quickly as I can. The last thing I need is them trying to sell me a ton of add on's that I don't need. Especially since I

just dropped two thousand dollars of my savings on a beach house in Wilmington for two weeks.

Going to Wilmington alone at 20... well, almost 21, is probably not the best idea I've ever had, but I have to be alone. I need time by myself to figure out what I need. If it's Dakota. If it's not Dakota.

The drive from Tennessee to Wilmington is silent. A long seven hours, give or take a few minutes for my bathroom breaks. The trip would probably be a little less quiet if anyone knew I had a new phone. I had the number changed, attempting to avoid as many people as possible. For now, that seems to be working. I whip the bug into a rather large truck stop right off the interstate and pull my phone from the cup holder:

Cami, It's Blakely. I have a new phone, I'm going to be in Wilmington for a while so don't worry. Pls don't give this number to Dakota. I promise I will talk to him soon. Just need more time. xoxo

There. Someone besides my mom knows where I am. I merge back on the interstate, plug in my phone, and open Spotify. Thankfully I remember my sign-in information to get my music. Music heals me more than anything. Of course, I put on my favorite, Ed Sheeran, and sing along about building a lego house. The buzzing of my phone makes me jump entirely out of my seat. It hasn't gone off in 6 months, and the sound makes me sick to my stomach. I open a text from Cami:

Ok, thx for telling me. I won't give Dakota your number, but I won't lie to him if he asks about you.

I gulp. The lump in my throat starts burning more and more, and before I know it, I'm pulled over on the side of the interstate spilling my guts on the shoulder. The thought of having to face Dakota after everything makes me physically sick every time I think about it. I feel terrible about leaving him, but he isn't as innocent as they think. We both made mistakes and how I even ended up in the church about to marry him in the first place still blows my mind.

Cami can tell Dakota where I am, but he won't hunt me down here. I need time. *I need space*. I feel like such a coward hiding from everyone, but for once, I'm going to take my therapist's advice and work on myself.

The drive to Wilmington flies by as I am completely lost in my music and thoughts. The GPS tells me I have arrived at my destination, and I put the car in park. I utilize my new phone to pull up the email to get the code to get into the house. I hop out of my car and grab my bags out of the trunk. The code doesn't work the first time, so I instantly start to freak out but it turns out I entered it wrong. Typical.

I open the door and flick on the light. It's beautiful, not the typical beach house. It's not very big, which was expected since it's a one bedroom house, but it's more than enough for me. The floors are old-fashioned hardwood, and there is a charming stone fireplace at the center of the main room. The kitchen is very modern, white with black appliances and black and gray tile and matching counters. I walk through beautiful white glass French doors with white curtains to find the bedroom. It's cozy and has an oversized California King bed and bathroom.

I lock the door and make a glass of water, grabbing my keys to make sure I locked the bug and head to the bed. I plug my new phone into the charger—no new messages.

I can't help but smirk at myself. Who would message me? No one knows the number but my mother and Cami. Neither of which wants to talk to me anyway.

I swipe a tear that I instantly feel trickling down my cheek. Why am I crying? I feel so pathetic. The pain I feel seems never-ending. For what seems like the millionth day in a row, I am trying to fall asleep on a tear soaked, mascara stained pillow. It just hasn't gotten any easier, and I wish for one night I could forget.

The sun shines through the curtains as I roll over to check the time. I have no clue what time I went to sleep. I hardly even keep up with time anymore. It's half-past eight, and my bladder is half-past full. I jump up quickly to go pee. I wash my hands and glance at myself in the mirror. My hair looks dull compared to the shiny dark brown it used to be, and my skin is clear. My freckles on my nose and cheeks are more noticeable than usual due to the fact I haven't worn makeup in what seems like an eternity. I flip my head over and gather all my hair and pull it into a quick bun. I remember I need sunscreen. I burn so quickly, and all I need on top of this mess I'm in is a sunburn. I squeeze out a glob and rub it between my hands and onto my face. I throw on a suit, t-shirt, and flip flops and head out the front door.

The walk to the beach isn't very far, and honestly, just being out in the salt air makes the sides of my mouth tilt upward into a half-smile. I walk up some wooden stairs and out onto the sand. I set my gaze out into the ocean, and for the first time in months, I feel calm. The line where the sky meets the water draws my attention and makes me realize that something is more significant than what I'm going through.

The anxiety seems to wash away. The cool water flowing over my purple painted toes feels like a relief. After sitting most of the day on the beach, I skip lunch, which isn't anything new. An appetite isn't something that I've had much of here lately. Some days I have forgotten to eat altogether. I pull out my phone and turn it to the camera and snap a few pictures. The pier is in the distance, and there is a little girl down the beach hunting for seashells. The pictures just don't do this place justice and what it is doing for my soul. Memories are more precious to me now than ever, so I've decided to make sure I capture everything because the memories will be all we have left in the end.

It's about 4:30 when I decide I better pack it up and figure out what I will do for dinner. Plus, with it being nearly November, the second the sun starts to fade, it gets cold.

The walk back to the house seems longer than it was before. I put the code into the door and push it open. I throw my bag down near the door and nearly jump out of my skin.

"Who the hell are you?"

I'm confused when I see a man leaning against the counter. My first instinct is to start backing toward the door. His face is perfection, with sharp jawlines and a beautiful complexion. Honestly, he looks harmless.

"Judson, nice to meet you too, feisty," he responds with a smirk.

"Hi, Judson, where I'm from, most people knock on the door. How did you get the code anyway, and what are you doing here?"

"I own the house. I got the code because I created it. I was dropping by to leave you a key. I noticed a longer than usual rental, so I figured it'd be easier than the code because the codes expire every two days." He pushes a single key across the counter at me.

"Didn't mean to freak you out, though, Ms. Paranoid." He grins and pushes his body off the counter.

He walks by me and grabs the door handle. "Later, Ms. Walker, if you need anything, let me know."

Are you kidding me right now? Who even does that? Who was this guy anyway? I sit down and go through my email to find my reservation confirmation. There it is. Banks Properties. I close out the window and go to Facebook to creep. Judson Banks. Nothing. Well, that was a bust. I am usually really good at Facebook investigation, thanks to Cami. I don't have much energy to keep trying and honestly could care less. I have already forgotten what he even looked like, and I don't think i'd be able to find him anyway. I sling the phone down on the coffee table. I want to go out for seafood but decide against it. Ultimately, I decide to stay in tonight and order take out.

After a few minutes of rummaging through the cabinets, I find a wine glass and overfill it with Moscato. I barely touch the pizza I ordered and run a bath. I slide my tiny body into the bubbles, and once again, I feel at peace. Something about the water washes away all my fear. I close my eyes, and the first thing that comes to mind is the image of Dakota's face, his eyes filled with tears. Why don't I miss him? I mean, I guess I

do, sort of. In a sick and twisted, "I don't want to be alone" kind of way.

The house is silent. No one to ask me how I'm doing. No one to judge me. No one to know my secrets. This place is perfect. I slip on an oversized sweatshirt and some leggings and go to the couch, alone, finally.

CHAPTER 3

JUDSON

Intrigued is about the only word I have to describe what's going on in my head right now. Who is this girl? She can't be more than 20-21 years old. She looks like she is still in high school, though honestly. I flip open my laptop and scroll through about what seems like ten thousand emails, looking for her booking. I'm typically not the one to handle anything to do with any of the vacation properties, but I figured I would run her the key since I'm in town. I skim through the email and don't find much more information than her name, Blakely Walker. I don't even entertain the thought of social media and pull my laptop closed.

I blow out a laugh at myself for even caring and pull out my phone. My baby brother is in school in Savannah, and if it weren't for me looking out for him and paying for everything, I'm not sure where he would end up. He has been in and out of trouble since mom died, everything from drugs to bar fights. You name it, Jameson is at the heart of the scene. I may be a lot of things, and the way I turned out could be questionable, but one thing is for sure, I am a damn good brother. That kid hasn't had much direction, but what little he has received has been from me, not that I should be giving fatherly advice to anyone. I click the message, ready for a dirty meme:

Jameson- Big game against State next weekend. You want to get your busy ass down here?

Judson- Someone has to pay for your drinks you are buying for all your girlfriends. I'll try to be there.

It's his first year of college. He just turned eighteen, and up until I moved him into an apartment a month ago, he lived

with me. When dad got in trouble, I went to court to be his legal guardian. Unfortunately, when you're 22 with a 12-yearold to look after, it doesn't do much for the dating scene. Not that any of the girls from college even stood a chance. I wasn't much for relationships. Luckily Aunt Karen was close enough to help with Jameson occasionally so I could still make work trips and shit that paid the bills. Jay has played football for the better part of his whole life; he loves it and is pretty good. I wasn't much for the sports scene. It was hard for me to watch something where I couldn't control the outcome. I encouraged him to put everything he had into sports the latter part of high school to keep him away from a lot of the trouble he was getting in. He ended up playing college ball as a walk-on, and so far, so good. I don't mind taking care of him. I try to do what mom would have wanted. I've learned the hard way that I can't be his best friend, so we are close, but it's not what a typical brother relationship should be.

Shit. I guess I'm going to have to watch some football.

As soon as I lay my phone back down on the sleek counter, my mind shoots right back to her long dark hair swinging. I run my hands through my hair. I don't think I've ever been so fascinated by a woman, especially one not ready for a night on the town. This girl had not one ounce of makeup on, and she was still beautiful, freckles and all. The way she tossed her attitude at me finds the corner of my mouth turning up into a smirk. I mean, I did let myself in the house and scared the shit out of her, but she wasn't the least bit afraid. The little spitfire probably would've tried to kick my ass, not that she could've, but hell, that would've been fun to watch. I sink back into the couch cushion. I have to think about something else, *someone* else.

CHAPTER 4

BLAKELY

November 5

The past few days went by pretty fast. The beach has really calmed my soul. When I am looking out into the ocean, everything seems so much bigger than just me. Sometimes I feel like I could just go out there and let it swallow me and forget everything. Unfortunately, it's not that simple, and every night when I close my eyes, it catches back up with me.

"Blakely, wait! Please let me hold you! It's going to be okay, just stop..." I jerk awake in a cold sweat. I run my sweaty hand over my forehead and pull myself up to sit. What time is it anyway?

I grasp my phone and push the home button to awaken the time. 5:50AM. Great. Well, there is absolutely no way I can go to sleep after that. I need coffee. I cram my feet into some tennis shoes and grab my purse and keys. The smell of the beach fills my nose as I open the door. The salt air is definitely something I could see myself getting used to. I walk to my car and open the door. Instead of getting in, I slam the door back. I wander down the street to a little diner that I saw on my way in.

It's small and has a retro vibe, and not very busy considering it's only 6 AM. I slide into a corner booth and pick up a menu and flip through. I decide on a waffle and order a coffee. The waitress comes back, and the most amazing smell of coffee fills the air. I find myself smiling. What the hell is wrong with me? I giggle a little under my breath, I really am losing my shit.

"So, the crazy girl also laughs at herself?"

A man slides into the booth across from me. I look up at him, but I can't get any of my words to come out.

"Judson, from the other day... remember?" I just look at him. Why am I not speaking? I'm typically a talkative person,

and it's not often I'm rendered speechless.

The waitress comes by, "Hey Judson, Can I get you anything?"

"Coffee, Anna, thanks." He smiles at her and then looks back at me. That smile. Who is this guy? Is he following me? He's tall, muscular build. He is dressed in a hoodie and sweat pants, tousled dark hair and dark eyes. He looks at me, and I feel like those dark eyes are looking straight into my heart.

"So what is a pretty girl like you doing here alone at 6 AM?" He smirks. The stubble on his chin is inviting me to look, and it's practically begging me to touch it.

I take a sip of my coffee.

"I don't know what is a guy like you doing breaking into houses and stalking girls?"

He laughs. "Easy killer. I come here a lot, and I don't typically classify myself as the psycho-stalker serial killer type."

"Sorry." I look up at him, and I can't manage to look away. "I didn't mean that. I'm sorry. Thanks for the key." I grab my purse. Throw a twenty-dollar bill on the table and head out of the diner so fast I'm sure there is a Blakely shaped hole in the door.

I walk back to the house, faster than usual. Am I so bitter that I have resorted to being rude to strangers? What happened to me? I just want myself back. The old me before the pain swallowed me whole and never spit me back out. I slam the door behind me and slide to the floor, and feel the tears coming. I can't help but sob so loudly I'm practically screaming. I sling my purse across the floor and slam my head back into the wood a couple of times in frustration. I feel as if I may throw up, so I walk out the sliding door and slump into the chair on the porch. I bury my face into the sleeves of my sweatshirt. I know that I'm on the verge of a panic attack by the way my chest is tightening. I feel my breathing begin to pick up, and I am counting out loud. I will try anything to stop

this, even if it is ridiculous exercises my therapist recommends.

Strong arms wrap around me and pull me in tight, and for the first time in my life, I feel safe. I should pull away, or at least look to make sure I'm not in danger. The way my body responds to him is unexplainable.

"Shhh... it's okay. You are going to be okay." He whispers in my ear, the same words I have heard a thousand times. This time is different, I believe him. He pulls me tighter against his chest, this perfect stranger. He doesn't know me. He doesn't know what happened. He doesn't care. I feel my sobbing start to subside, and I feel him lift me up off the chair. He carries me to bed and pulls the blanket over my body. His hand pushes my hair back, and he stares at me for a second. I look into his eyes, the same eyes I couldn't look away from at the diner. I force my eyelids shut, and I feel so peaceful. He stands at the door of the room, contemplating what he may be getting himself into before pulling the French doors closed. I don't care why he's here, and I don't care who he is. I'm fully aware that my "stranger danger" radar should be going off.

I wake to a faint sound of music playing beyond the doors into the main living space.

Ed Sheeran. I roll over and consider going in there. Is he still here? I decide the best thing for me right now is a shower, even if he does have good taste in music.

I hop out of the shower and into some jeans and a t-shirt. My hair is so tangled that I cringe as I yank the brush through it and leave it there it wet strands. I sigh at myself and give my appearance a shrug and walk into the kitchen.

There he is.

He didn't leave. I think I might die of embarrassment, like go ahead and dig my hole. Six feet deep sounds great right about now. I want to crawl into my turtle shell and maybe never come out. His eyes leave the kitchen counter and lock with mine.

"Good Morning." He beams and motions to the bar stool for me to sit. I drag my feet that feel like weights over to the counter and sit. He places a plate in front of me.

"I brought your waffle you abandoned at the diner to you this morning, but you fell asleep, and it was getting soggy. I figured you may want something else."

I push the eggs around with a fork and glance up at him. "I'm so sorry, I..."

He interrupts, "Don't mention it. What is a girl like you doing crying alone in a beach house anyway?"

"It's complicated." He turns to the coffee pot and pours me a cup, and sits it near my plate.

"What time is it anyway?" I ask but am afraid to hear his answer.

"It's 10:30, I'm sorry I serial-stalked you home and stayed until you woke up. I just wanted to make sure you were going to be okay before I left."

Why does he care? I manage a half-smile and shovel some eggs in my mouth.

"So she does smile..." He grins and leans back against the counter.

By this time, I am blushing so hard I can't help but cover my face with my hands in embarrassment, like a serious facepalm moment.

He walks around the counter and grabs my wrist to pull my hands from my face. The way his hand fits around mine makes me literally feel like my heart is stopping, although I know that is impossible. This guy seriously needs a warning label. The phone rings, and I escape his grasp before I end up melting into a puddle on the floor, like Alex Mack. Yes, I'm feeling old for referencing that, in case you were wondering.

He pulls his phone from his pocket and glances at the screen. He ignores the call and looks back at me.

"You can take that if you need to." I grab my coffee cup nervously, trying to hide my face.

"Nah, that can definitely wait." He smiles at me.

"So, where are you from?" He blurts, trying to obviously break whatever tension we had going on for a second.

"Tennessee, what about you?"

"I'm from Savannah, but my family has property all up the east coast, so I guess you could say I'm from all over." He flashes his perfect teeth and takes the stool next to me.

"Are you in school?"

"No, I'm taking a semester off, hell, at this point, I may not even go back. I don't even feel like that's where I should be."

Why do I continue to word vomit?

"I can understand that, It's not for everyone."

"Where do you go to school?" I ask him.

"I graduated a few years ago. I'm obviously into younger women." He laughs playfully, turning up his coffee.

He's into me? He obviously isn't shy about flirting. I honestly don't even know what to say to that comment.

After a few more seconds of silence, he scoots his barstool over.

"You are at least 18, right?" He tilts his head and looks over at me.

"Yes!" I swat his arm. "I'm 20, but what makes you think this is an "into you" kind of thing?"

He shrugs, "I don't know, honestly when I broke into my house to leave you the key and you came busting in with that cute ass attitude, I was pretty fascinated."

"You don't even know me." I drop the fork down, and it clanks across the plate.

"I know you are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen. Tears, snot and all." His smirk has me trying my hardest not to smile too big. This guy is a real piece of work. I'm sure he sweet-talks all his women like this.

"You really have no idea. My life is so fucked up right now."

"Well, do you want to talk about it?" He turns the seat of the barstool to face me. Placing his hands on the top of my knees, almost naturally.

"Not particularly." I sigh, pushing the plate away from me.

"Well, if you need a set of stranger's ears, they work as well as my arms. I'm staying in the house next door." He gets up from the stool and makes his way to the door.

"Whatever it is, I have a feeling you are going to be fine." He pulls the door closed, and I can hear him moving down the steps.

Then back up the steps?

The doorbell rings. I can't help but laugh to myself. Why even bother ringing the doorbell if you just walked out the door?

I pull the door open and look at him, confused.

"What are you doing tomorrow? I know you are here on vacation, but..." He looks down at his shoes as if he is almost embarrassed to even ask me that. It's actually kind of cute considering I pegged him as an arrogant ladies-man, and here he is acting shy. He pulls his hand up to the back of his neck to scratch his head.

"I don't have any plans. I didn't come here with an agenda. That was kind of the point of coming here."

Was that bitchy? Why am I always sounding like such a bitch?

"Well, would you want to come with me to a fundraiser gala? I don't know why I am asking you this. I'm sure there are 100 things you'd rather do than go to Charleston with some stranger you just met." He looks down at his shoes, then back up to me with a half-smile.

This guy. He could ask me to jump off a cliff, and I'm pretty sure I would ask him, "which one?"

"Well, I'm not sure I packed a dress fancy enough for a fundraiser. Honestly, most of what I packed is bathing suits." I step outside the door toward him, unable to say no. "I could go shopping, though. A fundraiser with a stranger might be fun." His dark eyes find mine, his mouth sporting the biggest grin.

"I'll pick you up at 3." He turns to basically run away before I can change my mind.

I turn back into the house, closing the door before my mind goes into "freak out" mode. Oh my Gosh! What have I done? Is this a date? It's totally "date" like, and he said he was into me. Dakota's ring is barely off my finger, and I'm dating? I should not be dating. This can not happen. This guy seems to be everything I've never known i've needed. I don't know him, but it's been five months, and the only time I've felt okay is the few minutes he has been around. I don't know him at all. I know his name, Judson. He's from a family that is probably loaded considering they own all these houses, and a fundraiser gala?!

The fanciest thing i've been to is prom, like 5 years ago. All of these thoughts come rushing through my head so fast my feet are basically running before I even realize it.

The next thing I know, I am banging on his door.

The door drags open and I feel my eyes go wide. No shirt. No shoes. And absolutely *no problem*.

My eyes wander very obviously from his head to his toes. He is perfect. His black basketball shorts hang low on his hips, and I know for sure I am so obviously checking him out.

"This is not date. We are not dating. I don't know you. You don't know me. We are hardly even friends." I blurt out.

He smiles and laughs under his breath, "Thanks for clearing that up for me. I'll take what I can get."

I take a step back from the door and slowly turn around, then turn back.

"I am not dateable," I repeat to make sure he is crystal clear.

He just stands in the door with his arms crossed, waiting for me to finish.

"Are you done?" He asks.

"No! I'm a mess. I'm so screwed up, and I don't want you to get the wrong..." He nearly jumps out of the doorway and grabs both sides of my face, pulling my lips to his. The way his fingers intertwine in my hair makes me feel like I am floating. He pulls away, his hands still cupping my face.

"You are not broken." He demands.

JUDSON

I close the door as slow as humanly possible. It's official, I've lost my mind. I don't know why I am following this girl and hanging on her every word like some sort of lost puppy. I feel strangely protective of her. She's obviously got issues, hence the constant crying, but she is insanely beautiful. The sad thing just doesn't suit her. Her smile is worth living for, and the fact she could be so hurt makes me want to beat the shit out of someone.

I blame it on male instinct because I just want to protect her from whatever she is running from. The exhaustion in her is apparent, and I can't bring myself to ask too many questions, but I also can't seem to stay away. I don't want to.

Her tiny little physique and dark hair is not my usual type. Most people would say I go for the tall, blonde supermodel look. In all honesty, I can't recall the last date I've been on. I was too busy chasing naked sixteen-year-olds out of Jameson's bed, so he didn't end up knocking someone up. Since he moved out, I've had a few one-nighters, but slipping out before they wake up doesn't exactly say "date me." Here I am with a date to one of the largest charity events of the year, with a girl I've known for 10 whole seconds.

I flip the TV on and open up online banking on my laptop to make sure I make a transfer for Jay for the week. I don't trust his 18-year-old ass with a credit card, so I have to set limits. He got a DUI last year, which cost me a pretty penny to get him out of. I'm hard on him, but I have to be. The TV is going insane with severe thunderstorm warnings for this evening, and I can tell you right now, if my car is hail damaged, I'm gonna be pissed. The weather here has been wild lately, but it is hurricane season. I check the time and slip on some slacks and a dress shirt, and head out.

The drive downtown feels more prolonged than usual. I have a meeting about some potential flip properties, both huge houses up the coast a bit. I should've checked the properties

out already, but I sent one of my partners in my place to take pictures. I have already decided to buy them both. This meeting is just to bullshit about the price. I pull my car in the parallel spot and jump out, making my way up the steps of the glass building. I sit at the table and pretend I'm listening, but I can't help but wander off into "Judson land." I keep glancing down at my phone like I'm expecting it to go off. I don't even have her number, and before I know it, I am scribbling onto my notepad.

"Judson, what do you think?" Sara, my assistant, barks, kicking me under the table with the toe of her high heeled shoe.

"Sounds good. Let's get all the details sorted out." I flip my notebook closed and practically run out of the meeting as quickly as I got into it. My head just isn't in it today, that's for sure.

"Judson, I got your flight for tomorrow all set for Charleston. I sent your boarding pass to your wallet on your phone." Sara smiles and walks back around her desk. "Everyone is really excited to see you."

"Actually, cancel it. I'm gonna take the Vette."

"Are you sure?" She gives me a confused look. She knows me well enough to know I hate driving. She's 100% correct. I hate driving.

"Yeah, I'm sure. Thanks, Sara." She is still giving me the strangest look as I rush out of the building and back down to my car. My lead foot is extra heavy today. I swing back into the driveway and take my note to her door. How could I be so stupid? Rule number 1 in the dating game...

Get the girl's phone number— Such an amateur.

BLAKELY

It's only 5:30, so I have plenty of time to go shopping. I grab my keys and take off to hit up a few of the local boutiques. I haven't went shopping in what seems like forever, but I have lost a little weight and could use a dress that fits right.

Three shops later and I finally find one that is a little more my style. I flip through three racks and eventually find a rack with some potential dresses. Black? How can you go wrong with a "little black dress?" I pick up a cute one, hold it up to my chest, and instantly put it back because it makes me think of going to the funeral. Red? No. Red says, "do me."

Hmmm... This is it. I pull the dress off the rack and admire it. It's off-white, not bridal looking, just soft and pretty. The top is mostly lace, with a wide neckline for an "off-the-shoulder" look. It's a little sparkly and has long see-through sleeves. The bottom is flowy and short, but not slutty. This will have to work!

I pair it with some heels, and the combination is actually pretty adorable! Not my usual get-up, but Judson doesn't know the difference, so maybe reinvention is a good thing. Besides, I'm pretty tired of doing every single thing that is expected of me.

I've always been the nice girl, everyone's friend, the popular girl, Dakota's girlfriend, the cheerleader, the homecoming queen. I've never just been myself. I've been busy pretending to be who everyone else wanted me to be. It's okay to be a little rebellious, I tell myself as I head to the checkout counter.

I drive back to the house, and for once, I find myself thinking forward. I put the car in park and fumble my shopping bags up the steps. There is a note hanging on the front door:

Blakely,

You said you didn't know me.

I'm Judson Chase Banks. In case you wanna run a background check.

I'm 28.

My favorite color is Blue.

I have a brother.

I work a lot, and I'm here for meetings.

I live full time in Savannah.

I'm also incredibly handsome, in case you didn't already know.

There is my dating website bio (only kidding). Now maybe our 3-hour car ride will be less awkward.

Can't wait for our "not-date."

x, Judson

I find myself grinning from ear to ear as I push the door open and throw all my bags on the counter. I re-read over the note admiring his neat handwriting. Sure it's a little elementary but still adorable. He seems playful, and honestly, it's a nice change.

I stopped by the grocery store and grabbed a few things on the way in. I toss a few things in the fridge and plop down on the couch. What am I doing? This feeling isn't familiar. People don't just meet and hit it off like this! I'm starting to think they should just put me in the looney bin. This is the first day in forever I haven't had Dakota on my mind. My whole life has been mapped out for me since high school, Blakely and Dakota. No other option. That is what was expected. Dakota was a decent guy, and he loved me. I genuinely believe that. Even though sometimes his actions weren't in agreement, I blew it off as typical dude behavior. He was a year younger than me, so our maturity levels were a little off.

He was offered a full scholarship to play basketball but turned it down to stay close to me. Dakota quickly became obsessed with having a family. All of his friends were getting engaged, and a couple had gotten pregnant. We had broken up over and over, and I did my thing at school. He came crawling back not long after our worst break up and proposed a few weeks later, in front of his entire family. Yes, in front of everyone, giving me a social anxiety attack. The engagement didn't scare me. I figured I was young, and I could still change my mind. It was his constant rushing that caused my continuous stress.

I lean over the coffee table to grab the remote and immediately turned the tv back off. No thanks GEICO, I don't need to see another one of your ridiculous commercials. Instead, I connect my phone to the speaker and play some music.

I jump like I've been shot when my phone chimes. I'm relieved to see It's Cami.

"Hey Girlie!!! Did you make it to the beach? Are you okay? Happy Birthday!!!" She practically shrieks.

"Thanks. I'm fine. I made it." I assure her.

"Okay, I was just making sure, have fun! Try and relax! You know it's not good for..." I cut her off before she can even finish her sentence.

"I am fine. I promise I will relax."

I hold the home button in and power the phone down. I can't afford another near heart-attack right now. I can't think of anyone I want to talk to. At this point, maybe no phone is part of healing. I throw it in the bottom of my purse. I pull out some chapstick and line my lips. They have been so dry lately, probably due to being so dehydrated. I shake my head, promising that I will genuinely try to take better care of myself.

I pull a book from one of my bags and cuddle up with a blanket on the porch. It's the only thing I still do for me. Read. It usually calms me down. Before I know it, I'm dreaming.

I feel his hands in my hair. His fingers trace my jawline.

"Let's get you inside. It's about to storm." He whispers in my ear and presses his forehead to mine.

I try to force my eyes open. Am I still dreaming?

On the off-chance I am, I keep my eyes closed. I wrap my hands around the back of his neck and feel his hair between my fingers. I press my lips to his. Just the touch sends electricity all over my body. He slides his tongue against mine and lifts me out of the chair as if I'm weightless. I wrap my legs around his waist. They fit perfectly around him, and I feel his erection hard against me.

He gently places my body onto the bed, and I feel him between my legs, setting my lady bits on fire. He kisses my neck, and the remnants of his beard rubbing against me makes me want to come right then. He pulls back, and I can tell that he is hesitant. The sexual tension between us is obviously about to kill both of us. Am I really about to have sex with this guy I've known for two days? Of course not, no way.

His eyes are piercing directly into mine.

His cheek rests against my ear as he whispers, "Blakely, I'm trying really hard to not take advantage of you right now."

His words touch my heart somehow, but that constant smirk he wears makes me want to get him naked anyway. I knew there was something about him from the first time I saw him, and I probably won't ever be able to explain it. I pull him down to my lips.

The thunder interrupts us, and he pulls up to look out the window.

"It looks like it's really getting bad out there." The storm warnings flood the TV in the other room, sending the most aggravating sirens through the house.

I stretch over the bed to grab his hand.

"Thanks for saving me. Dying in a thunderstorm would've been a really shitty way to go."

"I will save you every time." He laughs.

"You are safe, though, so I guess I will get back." He backs away from the bed and turns to the door.

"Judson..." I stop him.

"Could you maybe stay?" He glides back across the room and plants a subtle kiss on my forehead. I'm not sure how other people see Judson, but I assume it's not like this.

JUDSON

The sound of the rain on the roof is the single most relaxing sound on the planet. Blakely is a breath of fresh air, too, when I can get her out of her head. Her tiny body next to mine fits flawlessly, and her skin seems to always be cold. I pull her in closer to me, creating body heat. Her long wavy hair is sprawled out across my chest as her head rests on my shoulder. Our fingers are intertwined over my stomach, and she nervously fiddles with my fingers sending high school butterflies deep into my core.

I find her innocence so attractive. I have never been attracted to anyone this young. Hell, she is barely older than my baby brother. Here I am wrapped up in this mystery and hanging on every moment to learn something new. She isn't the talkative type, and I don't pry. If she just needs me to be here, then that is what I will be. I feel like she says the most when she isn't talking, and I'm not much of a people reader, but from what I can tell, she is as nervous and confused about our connection as I am.

"What are you thinking about?" I question as I breathe into her hair, which smells like the perfect mixture of coconut and salt.

"Nothing." She whispers and looks up at me. Her green eyes are pulling on my lips, so I lean down and kiss her. I can't help it. I could kiss this girl a million times, and it wouldn't be enough. I want to ask her things. I want to know everything there is to know.

The thunder is finally a softer rumble, the lightning has calmed, and so has Blakely. Her breathing has slowed, and she is asleep. I catch the notion it's not something she gets much of, so I can't dare wake her up. After going through my phone and checking some messages, I'm right there with her. Sleeping, and only sleeping. I'm not sure what is going on with me, and sure, I'd love to have Blakely's legs wrapped around me as I'm feeling her up with my dick. My name on

her lips as she screams out in pleasure, but I don't want a one night stand.

Not with her.

BLAKELY

November 6

Waking up in these arms is as natural as breathing. He's the complete opposite of Dakota. We didn't do much talking, and he held me, he really held me. Not just because he knew I wanted him to. It felt like he needed me here just as much. My head is rested on his shoulder, and my eyes are raking down his body. He is quite possibly the most attractive man I have ever seen.

How is he single?

I put my hand in his and notice a tattoo on the inside of his forearm. I don't want to wake him up, so I don't move him to investigate.

"Are you staring at me?" He groans and rolls over some to face me.

"Definitely not." I smile at him.

"I love that smile." He pushes my hair behind my ear.

He plants a gentle kiss on my lips and gets up to walk to the bathroom. Those boxer briefs fit him so perfectly I can't help but notice the outlines. He comes out and throws his white t-shirt over his head.

"I've got a few errands to run before we leave for the event later. You be okay until then?"

"Of course, I'll see you in a little bit."

He pulls some sweats over his hips and grabs his phone, and turns to leave the bedroom.

"I'll see you at 3, pretty girl." He gives me a cocky wink that makes my stomach turn backflips.

I fall back into the pillows and cover my face doing a giddy dance. I don't think I've ever been excited over Dakota. I loved him, but if that is true, how could a stranger make me

feel like this? This time away from everyone the past five months has helped me figure out who I want to be. I think it's about time I start doing things for me and see what happens.

I roll over to look at the time, 11:30. *Shit*, it's hard for me to sleep at all, let alone until noon. I decide I better go ahead and take a shower and start getting ready. I haven't dressed up in a hot minute, so I had better get going.

I stand in the shower way too long. My mind seems to be going 100mph. Sometimes when it's quiet, it's like I can feel my dad here with me. The stages of grief do not precisely cover "Feeling like you are being haunted." I'm not sure I believe in ghosts, but I swear sometimes I can feel him. I can still hear his voice. The memories repeatedly play in my head. It's like a dream that I can't wake up from. When I really sit and reflect about the events of 5 months ago and think of how I will never see him again, how I'll never talk to him or laugh with him, it makes all of the Dakota stuff seem so petty.

I run the razor over my legs, wash my hair, and jump out and into a towel. I run the brush through my long dark hair that hangs halfway down my back and determine that I should run and get a few inches cut off.

I pull on some shorts and a tank top and make my way to a salon downtown. Doesn't take long for my hair to look decent. A few layers and some loose curls, and I am on my way. I have tried growing my hair for a couple years, so just a couple inches is all I can manage to part with but, the difference is almost incredible. I know a haircut doesn't change anything, but honestly, after a break up it kind of feels revolutionary.

I decided to get my eyebrows waxed since that has been a long-overdue thing. I'm kind of impressed. I am looking somewhat like a female human. This is definitely a change I can embrace.

I hurry back to the house to get dressed because, typical me, I am pressed for time. I bust through the door and into the bathroom, dumping my makeup bag out on the counter. I shoot for a natural look, nudes and some subtle lip gloss. I slide the dress over my head and slip my heels on, taking a long look at myself in the mirror.

Here goes nothing, literally.

I rummage through my suitcase, pull out a bottle of vodka, and take a swig to calm the nerves. *Ready*. I glance at the time on the microwave, 2:57pm. Well, if that wasn't cutting it close, I don't know what is. I hear him on the steps, so I pull the door open before he can knock. He looks so different. He's dressed in a navy suit, white shirt, and tie. Man, He pulls it off. His hair is still messy, and he didn't shave. I've quickly decided that the scruffy, "I didn't have to try," look on him is my favorite.

"Woah, Blakely." He looks me up and down, speechless.

"I don't think I want to take you as my date. Someone may steal you away." He puts his hand on the small of my back and steps inside the door.

"Well, good thing it's not a date then." I shoot him a smile.

"You look insanely beautiful, I'm currently wishing I could ditch the gala and take you to the bedroom." He whispers as he pulls me in closer.

I break his hold.

"Guess I'd better grab my bag." I pull it off the counter and turn to pick up an extra pair of shoes just in case.

I flip the light off, and we step out into the sun. I can feel his eyes burning through me. If I am honest, I don't want to stop staring at him either. There is just something there between us. We walk down the path and over to his driveway. He drives a corvette? Of course, he does. It's super nice and black, but I'm 100 percent sure he looks better than the car. He pulls the door open, and I slide in. He cranks the ignition and pulls it down into drive.

He sighs and then puts it back in park. Before I can think about it, his lips are falling into mine.

"You make me want to break all the rules," he says, still close to my lips. He plants one more slow and soft kiss on me

and turns back to drive.

JUDSON

"Well, we definitely could've flown to Charleston, but I figured if I made you sit in the car with me for three hours, maybe you'd tell me a little bit about yourself." I look at her and grab her hand, so her fingers intertwine with mine.

"What do you want to know?" She shrugs.

"I want to know everything. Who are you, Blakely Walker?"

"I don't think three hours is enough for everything. Besides, my life is pretty boring." She rolls her eyes and stares out the window.

"Well, considering you are in Wilmington alone, I'd say it's more interesting than you think. Besides, I can create more hours, as long as it takes." I squeeze her hand, it's kind of becoming my signature move.

"Well, since you are desperate for information, I broke off an engagement, pulled a complete runaway bride, and my dad passed away all on the same day. So I've been a little confused lately. My family and friends were worried about me, so they suggested I get away from it all."

The fuck? Talk about a bombshell.

"Damn, I was thinking more like favorite color, birthday, and hobbies." I look at her and try to laugh, hoping the mortified look in my eyes doesn't keep her from telling me more.

"Oh... well, in that case. Purple. Yesterday. Reading, Traveling, Music." She blurts. She obviously doesn't realize the innocence in her response.

"Your birthday was yesterday?"

She rolls her eyes. "I haven't cared about my birthday in a while. Really, it's no big deal." She pulls her hand away and swipes it on her knee. Sweaty palms are one thing we have in

common. I change the subject, hoping she doesn't lose her giddiness about our conversation.

"Any other surprises?" I smile, grabbing her hand back. I don't care how sweaty it is.

"I guess not. I didn't mean to throw all of that on you like that. My filter is obviously lacking." She looks at her feet on the floorboard.

"Will you stop apologizing? If I didn't want to know, I wouldn't have asked. Those are some pretty traumatic things."

"Yeah, I guess so." She looks out the window, trying to avoid any tears. She would be the type to avoid showing anyone her weakness. Before all of this, something tells me she was quite the strong-headed "I'll kick your ass" girl.

"I'm sorry about your dad." I look at her. Those green eyes tell me she appreciates my words but doesn't want to get into something so profound with someone she doesn't really know.

"Thanks," she whispers.

"What did he do? Your fiancé, I mean."

Curiosity killed the cat.

Silence. Shit. Why did I just ask her that?

"I'm sorry. That's none of my business." I say and brake for the red light.

"He didn't do anything. I wasn't ready. I know there is supposed to be some big reason, but there isn't." I realize the words make her feel terrible, guilty somehow.

"Oh, so you just decided you didn't love him?"

Here it comes "asshole Judson"

"I felt pressured. I had lost sight of some things. Sure I loved him, but suddenly it wasn't enough. I just kind of grew up." She attempts an explanation, but suddenly I feel ridiculous that she even feels the need to give me one. I'm basically a stranger.

"No judgment from me. You don't owe anyone anything. Seriously, when the right guy comes along, you will know it." I turn and give her a wink. Let's be real. This conversation might be deep as fuck, but I'm still Judson, and Judson is a flirt. Well, at least I am with her. I'm so infatuated with her, I can't see myself giving another woman the time of day.

She rolls her eyes at my arrogance, attempting to hide her smile.

"When did all of this happen?" I ask, hoping for a timeline.

"Back in June."

I sincerely want to make her days here unforgettable. Actually, I want to make all her days unforgettable.

"Your turn, Tell me all your secrets, Judson Banks." She turns to me with her arms crossed, looking cute as hell.

"I'm an open book... Ask me anything you want."

"Why are you single?" She lets the words fall out, and her eyes go wide, surprised she just asked me that.

"I guess I just haven't found the right girl. I don't date for sport. Really I haven't dated much at all."

Which isn't a lie, leaving out the fact that I'm basically a dad.

"Ohhh..." She looks genuinely surprised I don't have strippers rolling out of my house.

"What?" I laugh. "I know that sounds corny."

"No, I think it's sweet. Maybe you'll get it right the first time." She squeezes my hand this time. My game is rubbing off on her, and it's adorable.

I pull my hand away and pick up my phone out of the cupholder. It has been buzzing the whole ride. I swipe the screen.

Jameson- Hanna is moving into the apartment. Just letting you know.

I toss the phone back down into the cupholder. Damn it, Jay. He is ridiculous. He has been at school barely six weeks and is already knee-deep in pussy. Come the fuck on.

"Is something wrong?" She whispers.

"Nothing I can't fix." I sigh.

The rest of the drive consists of small talk and a little flirting. My game is spot on. Her game needs work, but it's not for lack of trying. She is awkward, and I love it.

We pull into the spot, and I get out to open her door. I toss the keys to the valet and place my hand on the small of her back, where my hand fits perfectly. We walk through the doors, and I'm instantly bombarded with guests. I haven't seen some of these people in a while. I try not to seem uninterested as I guide my lady to her seat. Pushing past several people on a mission, I make my way over to the bar. I didn't ask Blake what she wanted to drink. Damn. White wine it is. I wouldn't want her to get anything on that beautiful dress I have been taking off her all night with my eyes.

"Here, beautiful." I set the glass in front of her.

"Thanks." She winks and tips back the glass. The way her lips are softly pouted around the rim of the glass makes me wish they were somewhere else. I take my seat, adjusting my pants before my attraction is known by every damn person in this room.

"Blakely, this is Dr. Baker, his wife Brianna and Dr. Carlson and his girlfriend, Alexa. Guys, this is my girlfriend, Blakely."

Totally not a lie. She is a girl that is a friend.

She gives me a "you better take that back" look.

"I'm sorry, I mean, my wife." I can't help but mess with her. I run my hand over her knee as she kicks me under the table. To my surprise, she doesn't contest and tips her glass back. Come to think of it, I don't think I have ever entertained the thought of referring to someone as my wife. Everyone finishes their plates, and I can't help but notice her pushing the food around in circles.

"Would you just relax, please?" I kiss her ear softly, and her hair falls back down over it. Her cheeks glow with a pink blush. I sit another glass of wine on the table, and she tosses the whole thing back in one sip. Must be calming her unnecessary nerves.

She excuses herself to the restroom, and my colleagues bombard me with questions about my newfound wife. I am not typically the type to lay it out there on display, so they aren't surprised when their questions are unanswered.

"I don't kiss and tell." I smile.

Blakely returns with the strangest look on her face. What the fuck happened?

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"There was this girl in the bathroom." She waves her hand, dismissing it, "Nevermind."

Damn it.

Before I can question her again, the sound of the speaker floods the room, "The Man of the hour, my friend and Colleague Judson Banks."

"I'm sorry we will talk about it in a few." I kiss her head and make my way up the stairs to the stage.

"Thanks, Paul." I slide in front of the podium and microphone. No matter how many times I do this, I'm still nervous. Public speaking isn't my favorite thing to do.

"Good evening. Thank you all for coming out tonight. As most of you know, I'm Judson Banks. I started this foundation nearly 5 years ago now, and it has grown tremendously. I am so thankful for every last one of you. I host several charity events throughout the year, but this one is particularly special to me."

I pause and take a deep breath. Emotions flood my brain and heart.

"I lost my mom to breast cancer. She was my best friend, but more than that, she was an advocate for Women's health. I'd like to think she would be proud of the foundation and all the funds raised for those affected by breast cancer. In honor of my mother Amy Banks and anyone else who is suffering or recovering, get your dancing shoes on and your checkbooks out. Thank you again, and enjoy your night."

The room erupts with applause, but I can't get down the steps of the stage to Blakely fast enough.

BLAKELY

Judson lost his mom? I have a gigantic lump in my throat. I want to cry for him. I want to hold him and tell him it's going to be alright. Suddenly my pain is reflective. We are more alike than I thought, the same kind of different.

"I'm sorry about that," he whispers to me as he pulls his chair back out.

"It's okay. Can we go somewhere quiet, please?" We need to talk.

"Sure, let me get my coat." He grabs my hand, and we make our way to the coatroom.

The hallway is packed full of people. Then wouldn't you know, my eyes meet the woman from the bathroom. She walks up with an agenda, revenge written all over her face.

"Judson, it's so nice to see you! It's been a while, obviously."

She looks me up and down, sizing me up, and I can't help but notice the look of disgust on her face. What is this woman's issue? She practically bombarded me with questions in the bathroom about my fake husband. I couldn't help but get defensive. I don't know if she believes she has a claim on Judson or what. I pull Judson closer to me, and I can feel my whole body tense up like I'm about ready to take my earrings out and kick her ass.

"Don't you have someone's dad to please, Melissa?"

Judson slings words back at her, and I can't help but smile.

Lord have mercy; he has no filter. She rolls her eyes, brushing my shoulder as she passes.

"What was all that about?" I ask him, still laughing.

"That was Melissa. She used to be my neighbor growing up, we had a fling in high school, and she ended up sleeping with my dad. Long story." He pushes the door open, and the night air is a little chilly. He pulls the door open on the car.

I wait until he rounds the car and settles into the driver's seat before exploding.

"That was your party, Judson! Why didn't you warn me or something." I'm almost shouting.

"I didn't want you to know. There are always girls that know. They think I have money, and then they are trying to pull me into the bathroom and get naked. I didn't want you to know because I knew you wouldn't care." He looks down at the steering wheel and starts the engine.

"I don't care how much money you have or don't have, Judson. I don't know why you didn't tell me you were some hotshot business guy or about your mom."

"You were going through some stuff. I didn't want to throw any more on you. I'm sorry. I should've told you it was my event." He looks defeated.

"I'm not mad. I'm not. I'm sorry. It's not my business." I apologize. I can tell he has been used and abused, and there is a reason he's so closed off.

He pulls the car over on the side of the road.

"Blakely. I'm so sorry. I don't do this. I just saw you that day, and I had to be around you. I don't know why. I just have this crazy feeling that I need to be near you." He grabs my hand. I practically jump over the center console and straddle his lap. I pull his mouth to mine.

"I want to be near you too." My breath mixes with his.

He pulls back to look at me.

"I wanna show you something." He kisses my forehead. I make my way back over to my seat, trying not to show everything under my dress. We drive for about an hour, and the car slowly comes to a stop.

Where the hell are we? It's so dark I have no clue where we are. The dim lights look like they are overlooking a boardwalk.

"Is this where you murder me?" I laugh.

"Not yet," He chuckles, "We are at the docks. How do you feel about a boat ride home?" He pops the trunk, and I open my door. He pulls a black backpack out and grabs my hand, leading me out on the dock. I swear it is creepy out here. He stops at a rather large boat and helps me in. He leads me into the cabin and slings his backpack on the bed.

"Told you I could create more time." He snickers.

"Is this your boat?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

"Yeah, one of a few. I have boat obsession." He smiles. "Some guys like cars. I like boats."

He pulls his phone and wallet out of his pockets and flings them on the table. I kick off my heels and curl into one of the chairs.

"How are you gonna get your car back to Wilmington?" I ask. He is just leaving it here. What if someone messes with it or steals it?

"I'll have someone come get it and drive it back. You don't need to worry about it." He takes a bottle of wine out of the cabinet and pours me a glass.

"Wine for the lady, scotch for me." He winks.

"So, are you going to start the boat captain?" I joke.

"Nope, we are docked until morning. I created some time, plus it'll be much more scenic in the daylight. You'll enjoy it, promise." He plops down in the chair next to me.

"I wish I would've known we were spending the night so I could've grabbed my toothbrush!" I shoot him an innocent grin showing him my white teeth.

"You are in luck, Blake. I have a pack under the sink, in case I ever forget mine." He leans over and plants the softest, sweetest kiss on my lips and pulls away.

Only one man has ever called me Blake before, my dad, and the way he says it sends flutters down in my stomach. I am so mesmerized by this guy I have yet to do my usual brake-slam. I don't do relationships. I don't let anyone get too

close, I don't have many friends, and I have serious commitment issues.

Hello! Runaway Bride here!

Of course, now looking back, Dakota just wasn't the right fit, sadly it took my dad's death as my wake up call to leave the church. Life is just a vapor. We are here for one minute, and then the next, we can be gone. No warnings, no "Hey, do you wanna come with me." No, anything, just gone.

"You okay?" he asks, waving his hand in front of my face.

"Yeah, sorry. What did you say?" I snap out of my thoughts.

"I'm gonna slip into something more comfortable. You want one of my t-shirts?"

"Yeah, thanks." I look down at my dress. I can't sleep in this. Not comfortably anyway. Good choice.

He rummages through his backpack and sets a t-shirt on the bed. I lift my hair to try to reach the top of my zipper. My hair is stuck. Of course, it is. No matter how many times I brush it, there will always be tangles underneath.

"Could you maybe help me get my hair untangled? It's stuck in my zipper."

He stops looking through his backpack and makes his way over toward me. I turn into him and can feel his body against mine. He attempts lifting all of my hair to get to my zipper. It takes him all of five seconds to get it untangled and tugs down my zipper. The touch of his hand sends fire all over me. What the hell? It is just a zipper! Get a grip, Blakely!

He turns me back around, and the way he looks at me makes me want to tackle him right then and there. My self-control is pretty impressive at the moment, and I can refrain.

"Turn around," I demand as I grab the T-shirt off the bed.

"Are you serious?" He asks, laughing.

"Dead." He rolls his eyes as he holds his hands up in surrender, turning around.

JUDSON

"Are you about done?" I groan. Is she for real right now?

"Yeah, sorry, I forgot to tell you you could turn around." She laughs.

"You are ridicul-" I turn, stopping mid-sentence. My brain is not communicating appropriately with my mouth to make words come out. My eyes are wandering from her face to her perfect tan legs in my shirt. It looks more like a dress on her tiny little body. I don't think I have ever thought barefoot, and a glass of wine was this sexy.

"What's wrong?" She eyes me with terror written all over her face. Damn this girl; she is perfect. She is the epitome of "She doesn't know she's beautiful."

Can she not see what she does to me?

"There is absolutely nothing wrong. You look like a goddess in that shirt." Pretty sure my eyes are popping out of my head. I can't take them off of her.

The way her face turns red as she looks down at her naked legs and feet is the cutest thing.

"I like the Preds, so the shirt is fitting." She smiles.

"Really? I have season tickets. I try to go to a few games a year. We should go some time."

She smirks and plops down in the chair.

"What?" I ask her. "You don't want to go?"

"Of course I want to go, but let's be real, Judson. What is this? What are we doing? You know I don't live in Wilmington, right? I have to go back to the real world eventually." Her words hit me like a ton of bricks. I am relatively sure there is no color left in my face. The girl just sucker-punched me with her words. She is right. What the fuck are we doing?

"What if you didn't go back? Wilmington is real too, or anywhere."

Did I ask her to stay here for me?

"I don't think that is much of an option." She looks sad at her newfound realization.

"Well, I don't know what this is, but it's something." Well, that was forward, but the thought of her leaving pisses me off, honestly.

"Sorry." She grabs my hand. "I didn't mean to upset you. All of that doesn't matter right now."

"I don't want to think about never seeing you again." I down my entire drink.

"I think I need some air." She whispers.

Am I already smothering her? I don't know how to handle this.

She makes her way up to the deck with me close on her heels. I place my hand on her shoulders and give them a light massage motion.

"I forget things when I'm here sometimes." Her green eyes pierce up and see straight into my heart.

"Blake, when I told you that you are going to be okay, I meant it. One day you will wake up and feel better than the day before." A single tear wets her cheek. She is the first girl I have cared about since my mom died, and that scares the fucking shit out of me.

"You shouldn't have to keep doing this. I'm sorry. Maybe I should be alone. Maybe you should take me back." She pulls away from me.

I scoop her up and carry her like the princess that she is.

"You will never deal with anything alone. Not anymore." I carry her back downstairs and place her on the bed.

"You want another glass of wine?" I ask as I pour myself another drink.

"No, it appears the alcohol doesn't make me forget; it just makes me cry. So I'll pass. I don't want to be sloppy drunk for our not-date." I can't help but laugh at her. I introduced her as my wife.

"It is most definitely a date." I smile and pull her into my kiss.

"I don't think that's allowed. I'm a terrible person." She whispers into my lips.

"No judgment, remember?"

Our lips reconnect, and I push myself between her legs. My belt grazes her panties, and I unbuckle it. She undoes the buttons and slips the shirt off my shoulders. My hand tangles in her hair, and her lips against mine are the only thing I want right now. She starts unbuttoning my pants, yanking the zipper down. Her fingertips are on my hips, just underneath the waistband of my pants, ready to shove them down. Before we get to the point of no return, I muster up every last ounce of self-control I still have and pull away.

Brake-slam.

"Blakely, are you sure this is okay? I don't want to mess this up. Whatever this is." I breathe into her lips, dipping my forehead to hers.

She places her finger over my lips and pulls her mouth to mine. Our kiss is forceful like she is claiming me, and I am claiming her.

I slip my shirt over her head and move my mouth down her chest. Her touch is soft against my rigid body, sending tingles all over me. I feel her warm breath in my ear, and the tension between us is just too much. I open my eyes and look into hers.

Brake-slam.

She fumbles away from me quickly, "Wait, I can't. I, I don't..."

"It's okay. It's probably too fast." I push the hair back out of her face. She can't even look at me. I didn't want this to happen, but I can barely control myself around her.

"It's okay if you want to take me back to the house. I'm sorry. I don't know what is wrong with me." She yanks my shirt back down over her head.

"You aren't going anywhere. It's just there between us." I sigh.

"I can't explain it, and neither can you. You aren't only here because I want to have sex with you."

She scoots next to me and lays her head on my chest. It may be too fast, but this feels good. It feels right. At least for now.

BLAKELY

November 7

I force my eyes open, confused. No dreams? I roll over to an empty bed and a note. Chivalry is not dead after all.

Went to get coffee, be back soon! X, Judson

I drag myself to the bathroom and freshen up a little bit. I rummage through my purse for my phone, powering it on. 5 missed calls. I go to my voicemail to see what Mom wanted. She was only checking in. It shouldn't be like this, but it is, and I don't want to talk.

I'm ok, mom. Love you.

There a bandaid text. That should hold her off a while. I sneak up on the boat deck and snap a few pictures. It's beautiful here, and I can't help myself. I quickly turn it back off and throw it back down in my bag. I hear the lock turn, and Judson pushes the door open with the cutest grin. I think this is how I like him best.

Casual.

Of course, last night was a breath of fresh air, but this is the version of him I don't think many people get to see. I guess that is why I like it the most. Sometimes when I look at him, it's like looking in the mirror at the other half of myself. I can't explain it because I barely know him, but I feel like I've known him my entire life. These past few days, he has been the glue holding me together, and I have to admit it's nice not always having to depend on myself.

"Vanilla Latte." Damn, he's good.

"How did you know?" I ask. Have to admit it's a little freaky, but I will drink coffee pretty much in any state.

"Just a guess." He winks. He's insanely confident. To most people, I'm sure he comes off as an asshole. We make our way up to the deck, and Judson starts up the boat. The Intracoastal waterway is beautiful. All the boats docked, and massive houses are something to see. Of course, I can't help but feel out of place. Judson, however, looks right at home.

"What got you into boats?"

"It's a long story." He sighs, looking out into the water before fidgeting with the GPS.

"I thought we had the time?" I snap.

"Well, my dad was gone most of the time, and I didn't have any male role models in my life. I would go out onto the docks a lot as a kid and met a neighbor who always wanted kids. He took me under his wing and taught me about boats." He looks down, saddened.

"What's his name? Your old neighbor?"

"It was Russ. Jake Russell. I usually just called him Russ."

"Where is he? Where is your dad now?"

Is he dead? He said his name was Russ. Maybe I should just drop it.

"That's enough about me." He demands, quickly changing the subject.

"Where do you work, back home?"

"I do special accounts at the bank, but I hate it, and apparently, I'm the world's flakiest student."

He laughs. "Then why do you do it?"

"Gotta make a living somehow." I shrug.

"What do you want to do?" He questions. He sounds like my mother. She's always like, "What are you gonna do with your life" blah blah blah. "I don't know. I thought I did, but as it turns out, it was what everyone else wanted except me." I look out into the water hoping for a new conversation.

"Well, maybe you need to figure it out on your own. You need to stop feeling like a failure because you aren't where you think you should be. There's not some unwritten law that says you need to be married and successful by 21." His words slap me right in the face.

"That's exactly why I left." I shrug and pull my legs up into the seat. "I'm sick of everyone else thinking they know what is best for me.

"I know exactly how you feel." He admits.

"How so?"

"My dad had my life planned for me since I was born. He expected me to go to school at his Alma Mater. He told me who was acceptable to date, where I was supposed to work, all that shit." I can hear the irritation in his voice.

"I'm sorry." I take a sip of my coffee.

"We're more alike than you think." He says so quietly I can barely hear him.

I'm glad he said it. I feel less strange thinking that too.

Most of the morning ride we spent in small talk, stealing kisses. My brain is telling my heart to slow my pace, but I just want to jump in headfirst. I don't think he's ready for me and all my baggage. I can't throw all that on him right now anyway. He doesn't deserve all that shit. I notice him take a sharp turn and pull into the dock. He is seriously mistaken if he thinks I'm getting off this boat in a t-shirt and panties.

"Where are we?" I ask.

"We're gonna eat lunch," he says with the biggest grin.

"You have lost your marbles if you think I am leaving this boat in this." I snap back and tug at the bottom of his t-shirt.

"Well, you're in luck because I grabbed you some clothes at the store this morning when I went for coffee."

"How do you know they will even fit?" I roll my eyes and cross my arms over my chest.

"They are in the bathroom. Change so we can eat. Otherwise, I'm leaving your ass here." He pulls me up by my hand and motions toward the stairs, with that wicked grin stretched across his face.

Um, he bought me clothes? Who does that? How would he even know what to get? He is a guy! I practically jump down the stairs and into the bathroom. Folded on the counter sits a long sleeve t-shirt and a pair of Nike shorts, socks, and tennis shoes. Even new panties! I guess he decided not to try and guess my bra size. Smart move because he probably would've gotten that wrong. I slip everything on, and to my surprise, everything fits perfectly. Silently, thanking him for not getting an extra small because I like my clothes a little loose. I run a comb lightly through my hair, and it still looks pretty good from last night, considering. I brush my teeth with the toothbrush he left for me and grab his Columbia snapback off the counter, deciding to steal it. A hat is better than a sunburnt face. I make my way back up the stairs; he is against the steering wheel with his arms crossed in front of his chest.

"Can we eat now, princess?" He smiles, pushing himself off the steering wheel and toward me.

"I suppose so. I will admit I am pretty impressed and a little creeped out you knew what to buy." I laugh.

"Well, I don't typically tell all my secrets, but I looked at the dress and shoes you took off last night to get your sizes."

"Well played, Judson Banks, well played." He grabs my hands, helping me off the boat and onto the dock.

"That hat looks better on you." He gives me a boyish grin, and we make our way to the restaurant.

Finally, some real seafood! I look the menu up and down but just can't decide what to order. Judson doesn't even open the menu, cocky ass. The waitress breaks my concentration, "Have you guys decided what you'll be having?"

Judson grabs the menu out of my hand.

"We'll have the sampler. Thanks." She nods, smiling at him, her eyes lingering a little too long.

Ugh! I have never been the jealous type, but the way girls look at him makes me want to fight. I have no idea why. We aren't even together, but it doesn't keep me from having irrational feelings that he is mine. I know he isn't property, but this man makes me want to become territorial.

"Is something wrong?" He asks. My thoughts must be showing all over my face.

"No, do all the girls mack on you like that around here?" He looks at me, confused.

"I'm not sure," He laughs, "why you jealous?"

I'm jealous, but I will never admit it. I know exactly why they are looking. Judson is gorgeous and no ring, I can't blame them. Hell, I would probably be looking too if the circumstances were different. Who am I kidding? I am looking now, which makes me a terrible person.

"Not the jealous type." I proclaim, trying to make a case.

"Sure, if that's your story." Judson smiles and places his hand on mine.

"I'm here with you." He reassures and squeezes my hand. My stomach does backflips to hear him say that.

"Get me a sangria, hotshot." I wink at him, sliding out of my chair to go to the restroom. I can feel his eyes on me as I make my way past the bar, checking out my ass. I smile to myself as I push the door open. I didn't even need to use the bathroom, but I have made it a habit to wash my hands before a meal. Germs are one of my phobias. I pull the door back open, and throw my paper towel in the trash. Standing in my way is Judson.

"What the hell are you doing?" I whisper. He is blocking the entire entrance waiting on me, "What if someone else came out, you creep?" I laugh and push him back with one hand on his chest. "You shook your ass the whole way to the bathroom. I had to follow you to let all the guys at the bar know that you weren't available." He turns me into the wall; his body tight against mine. He looks down at me with fire in his dark eyes, "Because you are not available."

I feel the heat between us, and I swear there is an actual fire between my legs. He glances down at me, still sandwiched between him and the wall. He turns my hat around backward and pulls my mouth to his. I typically am not one for PDA, but he makes me forget my own name sometimes, so I could care less who is watching. He pulls away and pulls me by the hand back to the table. My face is bright red, and I can feel the tingle on my lips still from that kiss.

"Now, who is the jealous one?" I laugh as he scans the bar, full of what looks like frat boys out on a fishing trip.

"Why don't you just pee on me next time, you know, mark your territory." He beams and flashes the brightest smile as if he is picturing my suggestion. If they were looking, they are certainly not turning to look now. He is not the type of guy you piss off.

I gulp down my whole drink and find myself zoned out. Daydreaming is something I often do. It doesn't take much to be entirely in a different place, here physically but mentally somewhere else. I can't help but feel a little guilty for being here with Judson while Dakota is at home, just wondering where we stand. I mean, sure, the ring in his hand and the failed wedding is an indicator that we are over, but there hasn't been a conversation. I've ignored him for five months straight, and as I decide to call Dakota tonight to set it all straight, I look over at Judson, and he is waving his hands in front of my face. Damn, I'm terrible.

"I'm sorry, I was just... I'm sorry." I stumble over my words.

"What is it, Blake? You ok?" He motions for the waitress to bring more drinks.

"Yeah, I'm just. I'm fine." I look down at the table and pick at my fingers, a nervous habit I have picked up over the

years.

"Look at me. What is it? You can tell me." He demands.

"I just feel a little bit guilty, ripping apart lives and running away. I even feel guilty for smiling with you, even being here with you." The words make my heart fall into my belly. I swear, sometimes, I should just shut up.

"Those people would be hurting even if you were home, Blakely." He is right. I hear the words but can't wash the guilt away with them.

"Yeah," I whisper, clutching my new drink. The food arrives, and I am hopeful it will be enough of a distraction to keep Judson off the subject.

We finish up most of the food that I'm positive was intended for an army, not two people. It was delicious. I swear I love the beach, the real unfrozen seafood, the salty air, just all of it. Judson pays the bill, refusing to let me pay. He does a phenomenal job playing the gentleman role. His mama must have taught him well. I catch the feeling his mom did most of the raising. I could be off, but the vibe he puts off makes me think he would've been a mama's boy. He leads me out of the restaurant and back onto the dock by the hand. He grabs me by the waist as I jump over onto the boat. He lifts me like I weigh nothing, but he has a pretty athletic build, so I am chalking it up to football or basketball or something.

"Did you play football?" I ask to ease my curiosity.

"A little bit. Why?" He looks puzzled, but it's hard to see his eyes through his sunglasses.

"Just wondering." I laugh as he sets me down, still holding me between his arms. Dakota never lifted me the way he does.

"I'm not much of a team sport kind of guy." He shrugs.

"What kind of guy are you then?" I pull his sunglasses down his nose and look into his eyes.

"Guess you'll have to stick around and find out." He pushes his Raybans back up and smiles. I can tell by how I feel when I see that grin that I am in way over my head.

After a couple of cruising hours and me taking ten thousand pictures while telling Judson all of the houses I love, we are back. Judson docks the boat a few blocks away from the house, and I gather up my things as we hop off the boat onto the dock. The walk isn't very far, and the fact that we are walking hand in hand makes it go by that much faster. I don't think all day would've been long enough. I find myself sad that the not-date is coming to an end. We walk up the steps, and I dig around in my purse for the key.

"Thank you for coming with me." He blurts as I place the key into the door and turn the knob.

"Thanks for having me." I turn back into him as he threads his hand him my hair, taking my lips and pulling them to his. Kissing him sends my stomach into backflips pretty much instantly. It's soft and subtle, and I'm pretty much a puddle on the ground, like every time he touches me.

"I've got some calls to make and an online meeting in a few, but if you want, I could bring dinner over later?"

"That sounds amazing."

I push the door closed and watch him walk down the steps. He is excited as he pulls his arm down in victory and whisperscreams, "YES!", completely unaware that I am watching him out the window.

CHAPTER 13

JUDSON

I walked into the house ready to call Jay and cuss him out. I decide against it and shoot him a text.

We will talk about this when I come in for the game this weekend.

There. Handled. Sort of.

I stand in the shower and let the water wash over me. No matter how hot I turn the dial, I can't wash her touch off of me. The past few days have been like a whirlwind, and I'm still trying to catch my breath. I grab my usual spot on the couch and flip open my laptop, considering I haven't been doing much work. Responding to emails has become almost second nature, and I could do that shit in my sleep. For the first time in as long as I can remember, work can't even distract my mind from thinking about her.

I send Sara an email to secure some seats for the game on Saturday, it's a day game, so it will leave the night free, which is good because I have to talk some sense into Jay. If I can pry him away from whatever Malibu Barbie he has selected for this week. I refuse to let him turn into dad. Poor mom was going through cancer treatments, and dad couldn't keep his dick out of the neighbor and his secretary, and I still hate him for it. The sudden realization that if I ever find a girl who can put up with my ass, she will never meet my parents sinks into me. Dad doesn't deserve anything from me, and he won't ever be part of my life again. If I can, I will keep him away from Jay too. He fucked that kid up enough. At least I was an adult. He left that kid to fend for himself at twelve. He has to do ten years and has already served six, so I'm sure he will try to get out early for "good behavior" or whatever. I guess I'll deal with that when the time comes.

I grab my keys and wallet and head out to the store to grab dinner. I don't usually do the "grocery shop and cook" thing. Poor Jay has lived on take-out basically since mom died. I can grill, though. I'm a man, damn it.

I laugh to myself. I feel ridiculous, trying to impress her. I don't know much about Blake, but the one thing I have picked up on is she is as down to earth as they come. I can't get the vision of her coming up those stairs in my hat out of my head. She screams tomboy homecoming queen.

I don't know her, but I want to. I'm just here for the week for meetings and work, but I don't want to go anywhere else as long as she is here. Maybe I'll just adult-nap her and take her with me, as crazy as that sounds. Blake seems like the gowith-the-flow type of girl, so she may just pack her bags. I don't want to take advantage of the fact she doesn't want to be home, but I will keep her as long as she will stay. What the hell is wrong with me? This young, sad but vibrant girl has me wrapped around her pinky finger, and I haven't even had sex with her. I keep trying to play it cool, but I have a feeling I am about to make a complete fool of myself. It's official Judson Banks is a fucking idiot.

CHAPTER 14

BLAKELY

Knocking.

I startle awake, jumping a few inches off my pillow. Oh my goodness, I fell asleep. That must be Judson. I stumble across the floor, hesitant to open the door still in my towel. I take a deep breath, trying to compose myself before opening the door to peek out.

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry, I fell asleep and well..." I explain while pulling my towel tighter around my body.

"Well, I honestly can't think of a better view." He smiles and walks into the kitchen, sitting down some grocery bags. I don't really want to take my eyes off of him. He looks so hot in his dark jeans, I could start drooling, and a gray t-shirt clings against his biceps. I decide to pick my jaw up off the floor and throw some clothes on. The feeling of his eyes on my back sends electricity inside of me. Igniting every sense of desire I had forgotten existed. I pull the french doors closed, intentionally leaving it cracked, peeking out at him.

I don't say anything, and neither does he. He glides across the floor to me and lifts his hand, gently grazing the edge of my jaw. My towel falls to the floor, and I am completely naked, but I don't care. Typically I am shy about my nakedness. I have never liked the feeling of being on display or completely exposed to another. He pushes my long wavy hair out of his way as we fall onto the bed. His mouth feels like fire on my chest. I can't get his shirt off as fast as I would like, but after what seems like an eternity, it pulls over his perfect hair, and I am more turned on than ever. The blaze in my chest moves down into my stomach as he glides into me. I am entirely consumed. His breath on my ear sends chills all over my body.

We are both at our climax, as he fills me with a few last pumps and wears my name on his breath. His lips connect with mine, but my whole entire body is numb. I roll into the sheet and look over to him. His eyes are closed, and of course, me being me, it comes out as quick as vomit.

"Was that too fast?"

"Way too fast, let's do it again." He laughs and rolls over onto me again, planting a soft kiss on my lips. We both erupt in laughter, and I pull my hands up to my face in embarrassment.

"Stop trying to seduce me. We gotta eat dinner." I motion to his pants on the floor, pushing him off of me.

He smiles the biggest grin and pulls them over his hips. I reach over and pull his t-shirt over my head.

"Um, did you? I mean, did we use?" I can seem to find the words I want to say. I didn't see it, and now I'm worried we weren't safe. Damn it, Blakely!

"You mean this?" He waves a used condom in the air, and honestly, I am so relieved. I wasn't even thinking of it. I'm glad he was responsible enough to remember. Now I am even more embarrassed. Dear God, I seriously should just stop talking.

"Thank you," I whisper. He just smiles and walks to the kitchen to toss our evidence. I follow close behind.

"Sit." He demands and points to the stool at the island.

"Bossy." I bark and do as I'm told, which doesn't often happen, so he better enjoy it.

"How were your meetings? You never talk about work."

"Not much to discuss, mostly boring business deals, and plans to expand." He pulls the steaks out of the grocery bag and onto a tray to take out to the grill.

"Expand what?" I ask. I don't know much about what he does.

"Just more investment properties. I am trying to move west. Right now, we just have properties on the East Coast."

"So, what exactly do you do?" I laugh, and he just smiles because he knows I have no idea about anything he is saying.

"Basically, I sit in on meetings and decide what will turn a profit and sign off on final deals."

"So, you're the boss?" I wink and give him a huge grin.

"I'm the boss." He smiles and walks out to the porch to start the grill.

"How did you get the gig?" I am tight on his heels and plop down in the chair next to the grill.

"It kind of just fell into my lap." He slaps the steaks on the grill and shuts the lid.

"Well, that was pretty lucky. You obviously do well for yourself."

"I don't know if I would say lucky. The circumstances weren't ideal." He takes a deep breath and looks at me as if he is getting ready to let the flood gates loose.

"It's okay if you don't want to talk about it. I can be pretty nosy." I scrunch my nose, pulling my fingers up to inspect my nails. He makes me so damn nervous, if I was a nail biter I wouldn't have any left.

"Well, my dad lied to a bunch of really important people and went to prison for fraud. I had just graduated from college a few months prior, and it was basically thrown on me like a wet towel. I didn't want any part of it at first, but my mom helped build a lot of what my dad destroyed, and I needed to make sure that her name wasn't dragged through the mud. So I got a lawyer, and Russ helped me settle with some investors."

Holy shit. Prison. Wasn't expecting prison. I thought he was dead, honestly.

"Do you visit him?" If I don't ask, I'll never know.

"I haven't seen him since the day he was booked six years ago. I made it perfectly clear I was done." I can see it in his eyes how pissed off talking about him makes him.

"I'm sorry." Is all I can manage. I know that doesn't mean shit. Here I am with one less parent, and Judson doesn't have either. Kind of puts things into a different perspective for me. I feel selfish.

"What is your tattoo?" His arms haven't been still enough for me to really examine. He turns his forearm over, and I take his hand into mine. I am treating his hand like it is glass and could break at any moment. My eyes wander over it and examine a small paper boat. His tattoo is of a folded origami paper boat. Underneath are the initials JER. I run my thumb over the initials and look up at him. He still doesn't speak.

"What does it mean?" I whisper to him.

"Jacob Elijah Russell." My heart drops into the pit of my stomach. If anyone knows anything about loss or the grief that I'm feeling, it's Judson.

"What happened?" He sits in the chair next to me, his legs spread with his elbows on his knees. His are holding up his head as he looks at the ground.

"They found him about five years ago, near the docks. He drowned." He doesn't look up from his feet. The words hurt him so much coming out. I can tell he hasn't said them much to face the reality of it all, much like myself.

"Why the paper boat?" I ask, trying to lighten the mood.

He looks up at me from the ground with the saddest tearfilled eyes I have ever seen.

"The first time my dad hit me, I was ten. He was an entitled asshole, and I was just a little shit that stood in the way of his golf trips and gambling. It was mid-day, and mom came home from a long weekend in New York, shopping with her friends. She told him she was pregnant with my brother, he was furious. He was screaming and threatening her. He was so drunk he was slurring his words, and it was barely 11am. I was so pissed at him, so I ran into the middle of the argument, and the back of his hand met my jaw. My mom was so scared. I could see it in her eyes. She told me everything was okay to go outside and play. I hesitated for a minute, afraid he would hurt her, but she nodded to me that she was okay. So I did what I do. I went down to the docks. Russ was down there, tying his boat up. He knew something was wrong. His wife had passed away years before that, and he didn't have any children. He jumped back into his boat and came out with the morning

newspaper and folded me a boat. He played with me there until my mom came back outside to find me and get me inside."

He sighs and averts his gaze in the other direction, fighting back the tears, as I squeeze his hand. This guy, who has been mostly a mystery until now, just opened up to me. He let me in, I just wish I could do the same thing.

CHAPTER 15

JUDSON

Seeing her wash the dishes from dinner at the sink, barefoot and beautiful, is toying with my mind. I see a vision of her, wearing my ring, feeding my kids, *our* kids. She turns back to me with her snappy attitude.

"Like what you see?" She flips her hair over her shoulder and winks at me.

"No," I say as dryly as possible. Her mouth falls open as if she is offended.

"I don't like what I see. I *love* what I see."

"That has to be the worst pickup line I have ever heard." She rolls her eyes and grabs her phone from the counter.

"You have a cellphone?" I smile at her, "You've been holding out on me." She sets it back down on the counter. I walk over to her and pick it up and turn it around for a selfie. She looks at me, confused. I program my number into it and hand it back to her.

"Call me sometime." I wink and walk back around the island.

She walks into the bedroom and comes out wearing a swimsuit, leaving nothing to the imagination.

"I'm going to the beach. Wanna come?" How the hell could I say no to her?

"Lead the way." I follow her out the door, and she practically skips down the road dragging me by the hand. She looks happy and carefree. The second her toes hit the sand, she's sprinting, still pulling me in tow. We hit the water, and she is wrestling with me, dead set on getting me soaked. This playful side of her makes me feel like I am a teenager again. She finally realizes I will win this war and concedes, running out of the water, and stands there with her arms crossed. Her neon pink high waisted bikini flushes flawlessly against her

skin, and I can't help but imagine her thighs wrapped around my neck. I can feel myself growing from the thought.

"You just going to stand there, gawking?" This attitude she gives me sets me on fire. I walk straight to her and pull her lips to mine, soft and subtle, because I will lay her down and fuck her on this beach if not. I think about how she hasn't told me much about herself, and I can already picture her being a mother to my kids, so I want to know some things, even if they are simple.

"Let's play a game," I tell her as I grab her hand, and we take off walking.

"I don't find the jigsaw thing attractive, Judson." I laugh out loud, not many people can make me laugh, but she is on a whole different level tonight.

"I will ask you a question, and you answer them," I tell her.

"That doesn't sound fun. What do I get in return?"

"Ok, a gift per answer." I'll come up with something.

"Sounds fair." She holds out her hand to shake mine, confirming the deal.

"You don't trust me?" I grab her hand and raise an eyebrow.

"I don't know yet." She pushes her hair behind her ear. That's fair. I guess.

"What is your favorite food?"

"Mexican. You?" I didn't plan on returning answers.

"Lasagna, pretty much anything Italian."

"Candy?" This may be my most important question, for when I fuck up and need to apologize.

"Gas Station candy or Fancy candy?"

"Didn't think of that, both I guess."

"Gas Station is Hershey's Cookies & Cream. When you need to impress me, Godiva."

I make a mental note and think of what else would be beneficial to know.

"So that is two gifts." Damn, she is good. She is enjoying this, making me pay for her answers. Her emerald green eyes look at me, and I know I'm willing to give her anything she wants, which is dangerous.

"What do you do when you are bored?"

"I like to read." She's smart and artistic, so reading makes sense.

"What do you like to read?"

"Anything really, but I really like poetry. I like how deep it is, how a few words can sum up an entire slew of emotions."

"Who is your favorite poet?"

"Damn, that's hard!" She slaps my arm. "Sylvia Plath. No! Definitely, Atticus."

"Who's that?" She raises an eyebrow and gives me a look.

"You can look him up."

"Holiday?"

"Christmas, I'm a sucker for the lights."

"Dream car?"

"G-wagon." Damn, I am actually impressed she even knows anything at all about cars.

She rolls her eyes. "So expensive. Don't think my job is going to allow that quite yet." I laugh at her.

"You mean, unemployed and college dropouts don't get those?"

She playfully slaps my arm.

"I have a job, for now." She looks down at her feet, gliding through the sand.

"You could just quit and go to school here or Savannah. I have a place there." Did I just nonchalantly ask her to move in?

She is completely silent. I'm half surprised she hasn't taken off running. I realize I am walking a fine line with her. I know she's been hurt and is still hurting. I don't want her to think I'm going to take advantage of that.

"I could help you find a place, I mean." Backtracking my words.

"That's really nice of you, but why do you care? I'm just some random girl who came to town and just happens to be your neighbor for a couple weeks." She's right. I have no right to interfere with her life. I bury the sickening feeling that stirs in the bottom of my gut when I think about this being temporary.

"I'm not sure. Would you prefer I didn't give a shit?" I bark back at her realizing how hateful that sounds.

"Do you have any more reasonable questions?" She looks back at me.

"What do you want to do when you are all grown up?"

She laughs, "I am all grown up!"

Hardly, but I won't argue with her on that one.

"You are only a few years older than my brother."

"What is he like?" She stops walking and plops down into the sand

"He is reckless and stupid. I did the best I could, but he has a big heart." Brutal honesty.

"Sounds a lot like you." She scoffs.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means you recklessly showed up at the house uninvited, took a stranger on a date, but cared enough to keep saving me from myself. I'd say you have a pretty big heart." Well, I guess I have been pretty mushy when it comes to her. I suppose my "I don't do relationships" isn't gonna work with this one, when my brain tells me I'm not worth loving.

I guess I don't respond fast enough.

"I think I'd like to study photography." She lets go of my hand, like she thinks it sounds unrealistic.

"I have always enjoyed taking pictures. Not just of people, of places, of things, just anything. I always thought it would be amazing to travel around the world taking pictures."

My heart feels like it is completely bursting out of my chest at this point. I know why I am so quickly and undeniably attracted to Blake. She reminds me of mom. When I see her so upset, I see mom crying, upset over something dad did. I am drawn to making sure she is ok helping her like I didn't, like I *couldn't* help mom. I guess that is pretty fucked up.

CHAPTER 16

BLAKELY

"I think you'd be good at it." He smiles, and I find my heart swooning. The only other person that supported my "crazy and reckless" dreams was my Dad. I know that is no reason to attach to Judson. I'm sure he's just telling me what he thinks I want to hear.

"My mom thinks it's ridiculous, and Dakota. He thinks it would be hard to find a job. They are probably right. That's why I have been taking classes at community college at home. I had the opportunity to go to art school, but after arguing with everyone, I decided to stay."

"So you stayed home because everyone told you, you can't. That doesn't seem much like the girl I know. I could see you giving everyone the finger and taking off." He smiles at me, and I let out a giggle. That is the real me, you know, the one no one gets to see or cares much for. Everyone at home prefers class president, level headed, cheerleader Blakley.

"That would have been more fun." Instead, I got stuck in a routine. Basically, people telling me, "Do what you want, but make sure you do it this way."

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"Who is Dakota?"
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Shit.

"My boyfriend... My Fiancé... My ex... sort of."

Shit. Shit. Shit.

"So you let a boy tell you not to follow your dreams? I say boy because no man would want his future wife to be mediocre." Dakota was really good at manipulating me to do whatever he wanted.

"Yeah. I woke up, just a little late." I laugh nervously. A single tear falls before I even realize it's coming. I wipe it off as fast as I can and stand, so maybe he won't notice.

"Sounds like you were trapped in a life that everyone else wanted, except for you."

"Well, it's all shot to hell now." God, let's talk about something else.

"Any more questions? I think you are up to like six-ish gifts." I wink at him. I am enjoying this too much.

"I couldn't think of anyone else I'd rather be indebted to." He draws me in and wraps his arm around my shoulder as we head back toward the house. He may take that back if he keeps asking me questions. I can't tell him everything.

We are approaching the house when he steps away from me and covers my eyes.

"I have a surprise for you."

We walk toward the house. I am so confused as to what in the h-e double hockey sticks is going on.

"Don't open, not yet." He takes his hands off, and I hear his car door opening, "Ok, open."

In the front seat is a box wrapped in silver paper with a giant pink bow. What is he doing?

"Happy birthday!" He sings. He got me a birthday present? I couldn't tell you the last time someone got me a birthday present.

"You didn't need to do that." I smile at him as he lifts the box from his car and hands it to me.

"Open it." He instructs. I walk toward the porch to a chair to sit. I pull the paper away and see a box, a camera. A nice, costly looking camera. What the fuck? I literally only told him this twenty minutes ago. There is no way he could've done this.

"This is... this is incredible. I can't accept this Judson, it's too much. How did you do this? We were literally just talking..." He cuts me off. "I bought this earlier today. The way you were taking pictures on the boat, I could just tell it's something you liked to do."

He shrugs.

He bought this before I even told him because he saw me.

"No one has ever done anything like this for me before. I don't even know what to say."

"Just say, thank you." He smiles and gets a knife out to cut open the box. I grab his neck and pull him into me, "Thank you."

He smiles and plants the most gentle kiss on my lips. He pulls the camera out of the box and hands it over to me.

"Get to work." He demands. I squeal, do a giddy dance and take the camera, and the first picture I snap is him. Judson. The only reason I have to smile.

CHAPTER 17

JUDSON

November 8

Last night was incredible. Even though I am what seems like forever indebted to her, it was worth it. I feel like I know more about her now, her hopes, dreams, everything. Well, not everything, but we are off to a great start. I have tons of shit to do today. All I want to do anymore is spend all my days with Blake. I want her nights too, but mostly her tomorrows, sure we had sex, but I think I want more for the first time. It wasn't just sex. I know she needs time, but at this point, I'm willing to wait as long as it takes for her to realize it's not a bad thing to fall in love with me. It looks like she will head back to Tennessee, and the only thing I know for sure is she won't be able to leave without me fighting for her to stay.

The day goes by in a blur. I can't help but check my phone every 30 seconds to see if she has reached out. Four o'clock rolls around, and I'm itching to get back to the house to see if I can run into her. I pull out my phone and call Jay before heading out of the office, yes he's eighteen and perfectly capable of keeping himself alive, but I want to make sure he's doing okay and staying out of trouble.

"What's up bro," he answers.

"Just checking on you. How is your week?" I genuinely want to know but also want to make sure he isn't drinking himself to death.

"Hanging in there, my classes are hard as hell. It's too bad, I can't skip the damn things." He laughs.

"No, you can't, Jay, not if you want to remain on the football team."

The brutal reality, the main reason I wanted him to pick up a sport, to keep his ass in line.

"I know, I know. Don't get your panties in a wad, Jud." I guess I am a little overprotective. This little shit head is all I got left.

"See you on Saturday, man. Stay out of trouble, and stay out of Heather." I demand.

"It's Hanna." He laughs and hangs up. Sure it is this week. He scares me to death jumping from girl to girl. I have been there. They look at him and see money and talent. I just don't want him to get trapped. I sigh and yank my car door open.

The ride home was quick due to the anticipation of seeing Blake and the fact I was speeding. Her car is gone, and there is no sign of her as I pull into the drive. About the time I pull the door open, my phone is buzzing in my pocket.

Unknown Number.

"Hello?"

"Were you going to hide from me all day?" Her voice. I suddenly find myself with a nervous stomach.

"I've been at work. Where are you?" I hear her laugh.

"I'll give you a hint."

"I'll take it."

She laughs, "I'm trespassing." Her whisper of rebellion makes my dick grow harder.

"How far from the house are you?"

How fast can I get to her is what I really need to know. I adjust myself.

"5 minutes if you walk fast. I'm floating."

The line goes dead. I slip my trunks and Sperrys on as quick as I can, grabbing my hat and glasses off the table. I know exactly where she is.

I knew it. There she is, legs tossed up in the seat and a beer in her hand. She is trespassing on my boat, adorable. Her hair is down in big waves, and her sunglasses hide her eyes that I am so desperate to see right about now.

"Took you long enough." She pulls her glasses down her nose. I could get used to seeing her on this boat.

On my boat, At my house, In my bed. Everywhere.

"How long have you been here?" I smile at her as I make my way over to her.

"Are you gonna tell the cops?" I grab the bottom of her chin and pull her into my kiss.

"It's not trespassing if I want you here," I tell her.

"Then, I've been here all day." She winks. Her new camera sits on the seat next to her.

"Have you taken any pictures?" I ask, nodding to the camera.

"Only a few thousand." She laughs and tips her beer back. I see the way her lips wrap around the bottle, and I wish they were on me.

"Happy to see me?" She nods down to my noticeable bulge. Damn it.

"Always." I attempt to adjust myself.

"Let's take care of that."

What?

She pulls me by my trunks and starts untying them. I might come apart just by the mere thought of her lips wrapped around my dick. I grab her elbow and pull her to a standing position, leading her down the stairs because no one is watching her but me. She pushes my back into the wall and falls to her knees. Before I can take a moment to process, she takes my length between her lips. If I take one look at her, I'm done. She takes me in and out, and I feel my entire body shuttering. I can barely breathe as she takes one last thrust into her mouth.

She gets to her feet and plants a kiss on my mouth as I am still trying to form words.

"You want a beer?" She chirps and runs up the stairs leaving me to get my shit together. I finally get my shorts back

up and feel like walking. As I reach the top of the stairs, I see her, standing looking down at her phone, a single tear falling from her eyes. What is going on?

"Blake?"

She sobs, falling to her knees as her phone falls to the deck. Something is wrong. I drop down to the ground and pull her into my shoulder, holding her head steady with my hand. I pull her away to look at her.

"What is it, what happened?" I plead.

"I have to go home. Now."

CHAPTER 18

BLAKELY

No sound. Again.

I see Judson moving around me, grabbing my things, rushing me to the house. I haven't even told him what is going on. He doesn't care. He's doing what he does, saving me. He storms through the door of the house, grabbing some of my things, my purse. I just stand there frozen. He opens the car door for me and throws my bag in the back. The words across the screen of my phone are burned into my head.

It's Dakota. There's been an accident. It's not good. You need to get here.

Here I am again. Cold, shivering, not knowing how to feel, what to feel. Judson reaches in the backseat and hands me a Duke sweatshirt. Duke? Did he go to Duke?

What is wrong with me? Dakota is hurt or possibly worse, and I'm thinking about Judson.

"Do you want to talk about it?" He asks, breaking the silence.

"I don't know what to do." The guilt comes rushing into me, and I'm instantly nauseous.

"Then talk to me. It may help to let it out." He responds.

He is driving like a damn NASCAR driver, which isn't helping my sickness.

"It's Dakota. Cami sent a text that he was in an accident. She said it's not good." I don't think he knows what to say.

"Okay, well, we will get you there as fast as we can, and you can see what is going on."

So, Judson is taking me to see my unspecified Dakota. This has trouble written all over it.

"You don't have to do this." I am half hoping he decides to leave this alone.

"I know I don't have to." He pulls the car off the exit and into the parking lot at the airport.

"What are we doing?" I ask.

"We're flying. That is the quickest way to get you back." He's right.

"How did you do this so fast."

"Connections, don't worry about it."

We jump out of the car, and Judson hands his keys to the valet. He slings a backpack over his shoulder, and we rush into the airport. We sit in the lobby of the airport near our gate, waiting to board. This sweatshirt feels like a protective barrier. I pull my knees up inside. Judson is bigger than me, so there's plenty of room.

"I grabbed some of your leggings if you want to go put them on." He pulls them from my backpack. I grab them and slide off the chair and down the hall to the restroom. I slip them on over my legs and instantly feel warmer. I've never had anyone take care of me like this before, he knows what he is about to walk into, and still, there he stands right by my side. The thought of facing Dakota hits me, and I am throwing up in the toilet before I can even control myself.

I splash water in my face and pull my hair into a top knot, and all of a sudden, I'm back to sad, lifeless Blakely. I can't help but think this is my fault. That's Dakota's game. I try to place the guilt somewhere out of my mind. I don't feel regret. I should regret leaving him, but I don't regret anything. These last few months have taught me more than I ever thought. I need to face him, get this chapter of my life closed. I hear them calling our gate, so I make my way out and back to Judson. We sit on the plane and wait for take-off. He grabs my hand, and I lay my head on his shoulder, where I feel safe.

Most of the flight is silent as I go over scenarios in my head. What to say. How to say it. The plane lands, and as I imagined, the anxiety is like a brick on my chest. The car stops at the hospital entrance. Judson gets out and helps me out.

"You don't have to do this," I assure him, knowing the stares he is about to receive.

"Don't worry about me." He states as he pulls me in closer to him.

Here we go.

The doors to the ICU waiting room slide open, and the moment I have been dreading the past three hours is here. Everyone goes from whispering to silence. Like you could hear a pin drop silence. The tears smear my mascara down my cheeks. I wipe them with the sleeves of Judson's sweatshirt.

Shit. This doesn't look good. I'm here to see Dakota with Judson.

Cami runs up to me and pulls me in close for a hug, but her eyes aren't on me.

"Cami, this is my friend Judson, Judson this is Cami." She looks at me and then back to Judson. I know what she's thinking. I want to tell her it's not what it looks like, but it kind of is what it looks like.

Dakota's mom, dad, and sister sit across the room. They won't even look in my direction. The questions and hate is written all over their faces. I feel like I'm a ghost haunting their lives. It's obvious they don't want me here. However, they haven't asked me to leave, knowing that Dakota wouldn't want me to go.

My head hasn't left my palms. I feel less nauseous when it's down between my knees. Judson's hand rubs my back, and I can feel the eyes around the room, burning a hole through us. Maybe I should be more considerate and wait somewhere else.

The doctor comes out, and Dakota's mom jumps up from her seat.

"He's going to be okay. The crash's impact was intense, both of his legs are broken, and the damage to his right ankle is severe from laying the bike down. He will need another surgery. Other than that, a concussion and some bruising. Your son is very fortunate. The helmet saved his life. He is awake if you'd like to see him."

She grabs his dad by the hand, and they make their way back. The circumstances surrounding Dakota and I aren't "normal," so I stay put and wait until someone tells me what to do from here.

All of two minutes go by, and Dakota's dad comes out.

"Blakley, he's asking for you."

I don't move. I just look at him. It's like my body doesn't comprehend his words.

"Are you going to be okay? Want me to walk you back?" Judson whispers.

He helps me up, and the look on Dakota's father's face is furious.

"Blakley, this isn't a good idea. He warns me as I walk by." I pretend like I don't hear him. We stop before entering the room.

"Do you mind waiting out here?" I turn to him.

"Of course not. I'll be out here if you need me."

Five months of feelings come crashing to me as I enter the room. The tears are filling my eyes as I make my way to Dakota.

"Blakley?" Dakota whispers, and tears fall down his face. This is basically the first time I have seen him face to face since my dad's funeral.

"I'm here, are you okay. What happened?" I can't even look at him without seeing the last vision I have of him in the church. His black tux, teary eyes, and broken heart as I handed

him his ring. He doesn't respond to my question. I hear footsteps behind me and turn to see a cop.

"Mr. Anderson, we have a few questions. If you feel up to answering them, then we will get out of your hair."

I pull away from Dakota's grip on my wrist and sit in the chair next to his mom.

"We just need a statement from you about what happened." Dakota almost looks scared to answer him.

"I don't remember. I just remember hitting the bank." I can tell when he's lying, and he is definitely lying, but I just sit instead of calling his bluff.

"There weren't any witnesses, Mr. Anderson. Did you try to stop or slow down? There were no skid marks or anything." Then it all comes rushing to me and out of my body like a damn monster.

"You did this on purpose! You knew it would get me here!" My yelling prompts his mother to her feet in defense. The cop steps away from the bed.

"Blakley, it's not what you think." His attempt to play mind games with me right now makes me furious.

"You are unbelievable!! You realize that you could've died!?" I scream at him and start backing toward the door. The cop stands very defensively in the corner of the room, as does Dakota's mom, who looks just as furious as I am that her son would do something so stupid.

CHAPTER 19

JUDSON

I feel weird sitting out here in the hallway, but it's what Blakely needs, so here I am. I can't hear what's going on in there, but a cop walks by me, and I can't help but get curious. Blake looked scared to death of facing this guy. He's got some kind of twisted hold on her. I hear her voice, but it's not what I want to hear

Is she yelling?

I know I should mind my own business, but here I am, standing at her heels. She turns to me but doesn't speak.

"Blakley, just wait. We need to talk." Dakota is speaking to her, but she isn't having it. His eyes meet mine, and I'm pretty sure if his legs weren't broken, he'd be toe to toe with me right now.

"No, Dakota, I have nothing left to say to you! This is insane, you are crazy!" I am not sure what is going on, but there's one thing I know for sure, I am here for Blake. Dakota's mom suddenly doesn't look so defensive and goes back to her seat. Blakley turns to leave the room, but his voice stops her dead in her tracks.

"Where the fuck is my baby Blakley?" She doesn't move or speak; she just looks at her feet. What the fuck? Blake has a baby? Her empty green eyes find mine, and she turns to Dakota.

"There is no baby Dakota." His face turns white. His mom walks over to him and places her hand on his shoulder. Blakley doesn't move. The tears streaming down her face tell a story without her having to say much at all.

"Where is she?" His eyes narrow toward her. If looks could kill, I'm sure she'd be dead. Who does this guy think he is? Blakley doesn't say anything. Is she afraid of him?

"That's enough," I say to him as I grab Blake by the hand.

"Do you want to go?" I whisper to her.

"Who the hell are you?" He questions, and me being the asshole that I am, can't stop the words before they escape.

"Apparently, it's none of your business anymore." This guy is a complete douche, and my defensive instincts just come out uncontrollably when it comes to her.

"Did you get an abortion?" He is practically screaming at her at this point, and I'm just not having it. She breaks my hold and is almost running toward his hospital bed. The slap she plants on his cheek could be heard in the lobby, I'm pretty sure.

She leans into his face, "You don't know anything about me. You never did."

She walks out of the room and basically collapses into my arms. Dakota's mom follows her into the hallway.

"Don't you think you owe him an explanation?" She turns to her, and I'm feeling like a referee in a boxing ring, holding her from doing something she might regret.

"I don't think I owe him anything, Miranda." She lifts her hand in dismissal and makes her way to the waiting room. She jerks her backpack up out of the seat and makes her way to the exit.

"Blake, what is it? Where are you going? How's Dakota?" Her friend Cami is trying to grab her arm. Blake looks at her, then back to me.

"Dakota is fine. He's more than fine. Go ask him." She turns and is basically five steps ahead of me before I move. She walks out of the main doors of the hospital and plops down on the curb.

"It's okay," I slide next to her on the curb. "I'll call a car."

She doesn't respond to me. She doesn't look like she is even inside her body. She is sitting here, but Blake isn't inside. A few minutes go by, and the car pulls to the curb. I offer her my hand, and I open her door for her to get in.

"There are no more flights back out tonight. I got a room, or if you'd rather me take you to your mom's, I can do that." I don't want her to leave me, but if that's what she wants, that's what I'll do.

"No, I can't go home." She stares out the window. I'm not sure what I can do to help her. I pull her over into the middle seat and turn her chin to face me. I take my hands and wipe away her tears.

"Thank you." She whispers. I pull her into my arm and onto my shoulder. The Uber pulls into the hotel, and I lead her out of the car through the lobby. I give the receptionist my name, and she sits the keys down on the counter and winks.

"Do you not fucking see me right here?"

Holy shit. Blakley is going to get us kicked out of here, but I am flattered by her jealousy a little bit. I am not going to lie. I throw the receptionist an apologetic smile and take the keys.

"I'm sorry I don't know why I did that." She admits.

I slide the key into the door and push it open. Her bag is a little heavy, so I toss it onto the bed with a thud. She sits down, and the second the door closes, I hear her weak voice.

"I didn't get an abortion."

She doesn't owe me any type of explanation, but after the shit show I just saw, I want to know what the actual fuck is going on.

"By your reaction to that comment, I didn't think that was the case."

"He wrecked his motorcycle on purpose. He knew that if he was hurt, I would come."

What the fuck? What kind of sick-ass individual does some shit like that? It makes me so mad that he would do something like that to manipulate her.

"That is crazy. Does he know that is crazy?"

"He does this. He plays mind games. He will do anything to make someone his pawn. He manipulates and manipulates until he makes you believe that all the fucked up things he does is your fault."

"Well, at least now I don't feel like such an ass for being a dick to a guy with two broken legs." I chuckle, attempting to lighten the mood.

"The first year or so, I didn't realize what he was doing to me. He would do things that weren't acceptable and then make me feel like I was the reason. He cheated because I was too clingy. He lied because he didn't want to hurt me with the truth. I was going to leave him the day I found out I was pregnant. I went to the doctor alone and planned on getting an abortion. I couldn't do it, It felt selfish and wrong. So I went back home, and when I told him, things changed. It wasn't about us anymore."

Whoop, there it is.

"What do you mean, wasn't about us?"

"He became obsessive. I had suspicions for months that he was trying to get me pregnant, I had to switch birth control, and he insisted it would be okay. He had such a power over me, I was afraid to defy him. I think he knew if we got pregnant, I wouldn't leave him. So that's what he did. He proposed the month after we found out and planned the wedding before the baby was supposed to come." She looks down like she is ashamed.

I grab her hand and intertwine her fingers with mine. She lets out a deep breath.

"So by the time the wedding day rolled around, I was just under 20 weeks. The day unfolded, and I don't remember much about the time at the church. I remember Dakota standing there, asking how I felt. I remember putting the ring in his hand and running out of the door. I don't remember driving from the church to the apartment. The whole day comes back in pieces. I remember the blood all over my dress and legs as I walked into the Emergency room. I told them not to call anyone."

I don't think these words have ever left her mouth before now.

"What happened?"

"The pain I felt, I knew something wasn't right. They couldn't get her heartbeat on the doppler, so they induced my labor. After a few hours, she came. A girl."

I don't even know what to say to her. I'm sorry just doesn't seem sufficient.

"She was so tiny, and I couldn't save her." She sobs between her words, and I can't help but pull her into me. I want to cry with her. What was already the worst day of her life got worse, and she did it all alone.

CHAPTER 20

BLAKELY

"Have you told anyone about this?" His eyes pierce into mine. I contemplate lying to him but decide that's a hole I don't want to dig myself out of.

"No."

"So you have been faking a pregnancy for five months?" He is freaked out. I'm sure he is wondering what kind of person does that.

"I didn't exactly fake it. No one asked about the baby. I haven't seen Dakota in person since my Dad's funeral. Not for lack of him trying to see me. I guess I just felt guilty and ashamed."

"You know what happened to the baby isn't your fault, right? Things like that just happen, Blake."

"I just couldn't tell him, or anyone. I kept thinking, what if it was because I was stressed, what if it was because I worked out, what if it was because I didn't eat right. I couldn't shake the feeling that I could've done something different." It feels so good now that someone knows what happened. I have kept this inside for so long it almost feels like setting the flood gates loose. I understand that the way I went about handling everything wasn't the healthiest, but I couldn't shake the feeling of everyone placing the blame on me. I was doing enough of that for everyone.

"You shouldn't have gone through all of that alone. I'm sorry you felt like you had to." He squeezes my knee.

"I'm sorry about all of this mess. Thanks for bringing me here." I can't bring myself to look at him. I am so embarrassed about everything.

"If I could take all the pain away from you, I would." He seems apologetic.

"It's not your pain to take." I look up at him. He places both hands on my cheeks.

"Can I kiss you?" He is hesitating about an inch from my lips.

"You still want to?" I question.

"It's literally the only thing I want." He leans in and plants his lips on mine, just a simple light kiss.

He pulls back, his hand still tangled in my hair.

"Want me to start the shower for you?"

"No. I don't want to take this off yet." I cross my arms and pull his sweatshirt closer to me.

"I never thought I'd be jealous of an article of clothing." He laughs and pulls me onto his chest as he lies back onto the bed.

"Are you hungry?" He asks. After all that has happened over the past few hours, food doesn't sound too appealing.

"Pizza?" He smiles.

"Actually, that sounds really good."

He calls the pizza in, fumbles through his backpack and hands me my phone.

"I picked this up off the boat. The screen is busted. I'm not sure if it still works." He places the broken phone, which is less than a week old, in my hand. Honestly, I wasn't even worried about my phone.

"Shit!" I instantly remember leaving my camera on the boat.

"What is it?" He raises an eyebrow.

"I left my camera! Oh my Gosh! What if it rained!?" I am frantic at this point, I didn't give two shits about my phone, but the camera is special. Mostly due to the fact it came from Judson, but it's the most thoughtful gift I've ever gotten.

"It's okay, I will send someone after it. I have insurance on it, so it's fine. Don't worry about the camera." He pulls his phone out to send a "save the camera" text. I power my phone on at the same time, and the messages flood in.

Mom- Honey, where are you? I missed you at the hospital? What happened!?

Mom- Is it true? You aren't pregnant? Dakota is talking crazy!

Cami- Text me back. I'm coming to you.

I give Cami the info for the hotel because she deserves the truth. Judson opens the door for the pizza, except it's not the pizza guy. It's Cami, she already found me. When I said she was better than the FBI, I wasn't joking. She pushes by Judson brushing shoulders with him.

He closes the door and takes a seat in the desk chair.

"Blakely, why didn't you tell me? I could've helped you through this." The disappointment is written all over her face. I don't know what to say to her, so I remain silent.

"When did it happen?" She whispers and grabs my hand.

"The night of the wedding. I ran away from the church, and I ended up at the apartment. I walked up the stairs and felt a sharp pain and blood all over my dress. I didn't even change. I just drove straight to the hospital." She looks at me in disbelief. Now she doesn't know what to say.

"Why didn't you tell me? Or your mom? If you didn't want Dakota there, we could've at least been there to hold your hand." Tears fill her eyes. I know she feels betrayed that I didn't confide in her, and I don't blame her.

"I was in shock, Cami! I didn't know what to do. I felt so guilty for not wanting her in the beginning and resenting her for tying me to Dakota." I sob.

"When she was gone, I didn't know what to do."

"She?" She asks, and I nod, fighting back more tears. Dakota and I were the only ones who knew the gender, we were telling everyone at the reception, but the reception never occurred.

"Dakota is a mess."

"I can't help Dakota." I'm still furious with him.

"This loss happened four months ago for you, for Dakota, he lost the baby today." She squeezes my hand. "I'm on your side B, I'm always on your side."

"The only thing that tied me to Dakota is gone, Cami."

"Do you still love him?" She asks.

I don't respond immediately. Do I love him?

"Does it make me terrible if I say no?"

"I guess it would make you honest. I told you I'm always Team Blakely." She nudges my shoulder with hers. I wipe the tears from my face and hug her so tight I'm afraid I'm gonna squeeze her guts out.

"Now, on to the next situation at hand." She looks at Judson and then back at me. "Where did you pick this one up?"

I choke out a laugh, "Judson owns the house I rented at the beach."

"And?" She looks to me and then looks to Judson.

"And we're friends." He interjects.

"If that's your story." She rolls her eyes and gets to her feet.

"I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I need to get home to Kaycee before Brayden has her turned into a complete tomboy, and she refuses to wear bows." She smiles at me and then at Judson.

"Take care of my girl." She demands.

"Always." He smiles, and she gives me a "tell me everything" grin. I rush her out the door before she asks any

more questions. My poker face is non-existent when it comes to Judson.

"Camera crisis averted. Sara put it inside."

"Thank you." I give him a reassuring smile.

The remainder of the night was spent laughing and eating pizza. He keeps my mind off of the complete shit-show that is my life, and I can't seem to shake him, so he must like being around. The night turned into morning, and we both gave up our battle with sleep.

The plane lands the next morning, and Judson walks with me hand in hand off the plane and up the jet bridge. When we turned into the hallway, I could tell something was off with the airport.

"Judson, this isn't Wilmington." I stop in my tracks.

"Did we get on the right plane? Where are we?!" I was half-asleep this morning when we boarded, so I honestly don't remember checking the gate.

He grins at me and pulls me close, "We're in Savannah."

CHAPTER 21

JUDSON

November 9

I know, I know. I'm crazy, but my attraction to Blakely apparently makes me do crazy things.

"I have meetings here tomorrow, and I wanted you to come with me. You shouldn't be alone right now." She doesn't say anything, so I'm afraid she's pissed.

"I promise I'll make up for your stolen vacation time." I stop walking, and she walks a step in front until our connected hands jerk her back.

"Are you upset?" I ask her.

"No, just a little surprised." She fidgets with her backpack, so I grab it off her shoulder and put it on mine.

"Thanks. How long are we staying here?" She asks.

"My brother has a football game Saturday, so I thought we could head back on Sunday."

"Okay, I am supposed to go back to Tennessee on Sunday, so I suppose that works."

The thoughts of her going back to that town make me want to beat the shit out of someone. She deserves so much more than that dead-end place. I cram the feelings into a pocket deep down in the pit of my brain, knowing that having irrational thoughts of violence isn't good for either of us.

The drive to the house takes a little longer than usual due to the traffic, and that fact I had the driver go directly through downtown so Blake could sightsee on the way in. The car turns down the long driveway. The front yard is full of live oaks, hiding the house away from the main road. When we approach the house, Blakely looks over at me with the widest eyes.

"This is your house?" I nod at her, "Judson, this is the most incredible house I have ever seen!"

I'm glad someone appreciates this house. I bought it about 5 years ago. I passed it a lot growing up and always wanted to live here. I trespassed more than I should have and already had this place picked out before I was 16. I pictured my family here, my kids playing in the yard, my wife sitting barefoot drinking lemonade on the porch.

"It's big. You live here alone?" She raises her eyebrow and looks at me.

"Yeah, well, Jay used to live here. He still has a room here." She looks from left to right, taking it all in.

"This is not what I was expecting your bachelor pad to look like." She laughs and playfully slaps my arm.

We slip out of the car, and she runs up the few stairs to the porch, and for a split second, I can't make my feet move. Blakely standing at the entrance to this house is every vision I've ever had come true.

"Don't just stand there, you goof! You got me here! Show me around!" She sounds so excited. She pulls her sunglasses to the top of her head, and her hair swings as she makes her way to the door.

I unlock the door and push it open. She practically skips through the foyer, rushing to see the inside.

"Judson, this is gorgeous!" She takes a spin and looks at me with the wildest eyes I have ever seen. I haven't ever brought a woman here before, but Blake is different. Our situation is unique. I grab her hand and lead her to the kitchen. On the counter is a box, great it came.

"Sara overnighted your camera. I thought you may want to explore tomorrow while I work."

She practically jumps into my arms.

"Thank you, thank you!" She squeals.

"Anything for you." I smile and kiss her forehead.

"I invited my brother over here for dinner since I'm in town, so I'm gonna need to go out and get a few things in a bit."

She doesn't respond. She still looks around in a daze.

"Is that okay?" I try to snap her out of it.

"Of course it's okay, it's your house. Do you mind if I shower and get ready first?"

"I'll lead the way." I grab her hand and push the big white french doors open to the Master bedroom and turn her into the bathroom. She flicks on the light and slings her backpack down on the floor.

"I am going to run to the store. You be okay by yourself for a few?" I look at her, she nods, and I pull the door closed. The pipes whine as I hear her turn on the water.

I walk back through the kitchen and grab my phone, wallet, and keys. Suddenly thankful I'm a dude and don't have to have a bag full of things to leave. I fling the door open to the garage and jump in my truck. The engine purrs, and by the time I blink, I'm at the grocery store a couple of miles away.

I buzz down every aisle slinging things in the buggy. I decide to get a little more than we probably need and find myself grabbing things I think Blake will like. I laugh at myself. I am so fucked, I'm pretty sure I would do anything this girl said. I have never been a wrapped around the finger type, but I guess there is a first time for everything. Rounding every aisle in the grocery store, my mind is spacey. I think about Jay, what he will think about Blakely. I haven't ever brought a girl home, so I'm not sure what I'm doing exactly. I'm hoping that he won't freak out.

I pull back into the driveway and bust through the door, grocery bags in hand. I'm a pile in all on in one trip kind of guy. I lay the bags on the Island with a thud, rubbing the red marks that appear on my wrists. I walk back through the house, looking for Blakely. The door to the back patio is cracked, and there she is. She is facing out toward the back yard, her feet crossed up on the table with her pretty purple

painted toes. Her long, perfectly curled hair hangs over the back of the chair, and her sun-kissed skin is practically begging to be touched. Realizing I've stood here way too long staring, I push the door open. Her head snaps in my direction with a grin.

"It's about time. I thought maybe you left me here for dead." She laughs.

"No, I bought out nearly the whole grocery store, though. I got a little carried away."

Her eyes widen as she takes in the piles of bags on the counter.

"I hope we aren't cooking all of that tonight." She glides into my personal space and wraps her arms around my neck. I kiss her, almost so greedy I don't want to stop. She pulls away, noticing the time on the stove clock.

"Better get started. It'll be dinnertime soon!" She starts pulling food from the bags.

"You don't have to cook anything. I can take care of it," I offer, and her green eyes cut straight through me.

"Nonsense. I can cook." She says as she makes herself familiar with my kitchen, her bare feet gliding across the floor.

"What's on the menu?" She asks.

"I was gonna make Chicken Parmesan, but there's enough stuff here to make anything you want." I laugh.

"Chicken Parm is good!" She smiles as she gets started. She puts dinner in the oven and starts washing dishes as she goes. Something about her in this kitchen has me mesmerized. The door bursts open, Jay comes in, dragging his newest conquest by the hand. It gets Blake's attention as she turns from the sink, turning it off and drying her hands on a towel. Jay doesn't even make it into the kitchen. He stops in his tracks staring at her like he just witnessed a bigfoot, his girl slamming into his back.

Please don't say anything stupid. Please don't say anything stupid.

"Am I in the right house?" He looks around, confused. "I know she isn't here with your ass." He laughs.

"Jay, this is my wife, Blakely." She bursts into laughter.

"In your dreams, baby." She pats my shoulder and sticks her hand out to shake his.

"I'm Jameson," He replies before turning to his side. "This is Hanna." She is a couple inches taller than Blake and not as petite. The first thing I can't help but notice is how different she is. This is not the type of girl Jameson usually bones. She is reserved, tomboyish, but still very pretty. Her strawberry-blonde hair is straight, and she seems a little shy, unlike the social butterflies he usually brings around. We sit around the table, and everyone makes small talk. The girls are going on about Vampire Diaries, and Jay keeps giving me looks.

"Blakely, this is really good. I can't believe Jud brought a girl in this house." Jay stabs at me. I give him a "shut the hell up" look. Blakely turns her eyes to me like she can't believe there hasn't ever been another woman in this house.

"Thanks, Jameson." She smiles at him and shoves another bite into her mouth.

After several minutes dinner is over, and Blake starts the "clean up crew." Hanna stands to help her load the dishes into the dishwasher. Jay opens the cabinet and searches for the liquor stash. He rolls his eyes at me, and he opens another two finding nothing.

"Judson, can't we just have a little fun? I haven't seen you in weeks. Quit being such an old man." As much as I don't want to babysit his ass tonight with Blake here, I still have a weak spot for him. I nod to the bottom cabinet. He opens it and yanks several bottles out.

"Jackpot." I know his game. He thinks he can get the girls drunk, and they will spill all their secrets. This isn't his first rodeo. He knows exactly what he's doing. The truth comes out at the bottom of 100 proof, and he's going to interrogate Blakely for information. He glances at Blake, then at me.

"Pick your poison, princess." He winks at her, and I feel the fire coming out of my head.

"Blake, he is a dumb kid. You don't have to drink with him."

"Tequila." She pushes the shot glass at him.

"You sure about that?" He asks her, surprised. I am instantly turned on, Jay thinks he is a big shot when it comes to drinking, and something tells me Blake has a past of drowning her sorrows with alcohol. So she can probably keep up. I don't condone drinking for my underage brother, but he will be doing it somewhere else if he isn't doing it here. Everyone downs their first shots, and Jay opens his big mouth.

"Are you even old enough to drink? Judson, she looks a little younger than you." She is, but I do not look old. He is just an ass.

"Yes, I am. Thank you very much." She rolls her eyes. "Barely," she laughs.

"Oh shit, bro, you really are robbing the cradle." He laughs, punching my arm.

"It's not a big deal." It's not for me.

"Get Jameson another shot. It won't be long until he's passed out." Blakely snaps, defending herself.

He gives her a look, and she rolls her eyes, "Intuition."

"Are you calling me a lightweight?" He laughs, and she shrugs. Jay gets a look on his face that I have seen one too many times. He is about to get his way.

CHAPTER 22

BLAKELY

"Alright, Sis, let's make a bet." I feel like I am probably signing my own death wish, but he is Judson's brother, and I want him to like me. Plus, he called me sis, and I've never had any siblings. I shrug.

"Okay, what is the bet?" I ask, waiting to hear my fate.

"You match me, shot for shot. The first one to throw up or give up loses." I smile at him. He is acting like a child playing drinking games.

"Okay, if I win, you don't drink for six months. Not a drop." I bark at him, treating him like my own little brother.

He laughs hysterically, "Okay mommy." He pours another round of shots and looks me dead in the eye.

"If I win, you move in with my brother."

"Jameson, No. You sound crazy. Blake doesn't have to move in here." Judson interjects, brushing my arm apologetically.

"Deal." I snap at him and tip back the other shot before he can pick his up.

"Better catch up." I tease and make my way out to the backyard.

Judson starts a fire in the pit, and I make conversation with Hanna, who seems like the sweetest girl. She's a few years younger than me, but I could see us being friends. I grab Judson's phone and have him connect it to the outdoor speakers. It doesn't take much convincing to get him to choose a throwback playlist. Jameson comes out with another round of shots, and by shot number four, I am drunk. No, I am really drunk, but I am attempting to hold my own, so I go inside to feed myself some snacks to sober up some before drinking more. Hanna follows me inside, and we both hop up on the counter and start snacking down. She is hilarious. The way she

cracks jokes and has me laughing makes me want to be riend her. She takes one last shot.

"I better stop there, or I won't be able to control myself." She laughs.

"I lost control two shots ago." I smile and fill my mouth full of Cheez-its.

"Jay makes me crazy, I have to keep my will power, or he will be in my pants before 10pm." I just look at her blankly.

"You mean, you two haven't?" I question her.

"No, we haven't. I haven't ever..." She is so embarrassed, but she shouldn't be. I think it's amazing she isn't just giving it away. I just hope Jay isn't using her for the chase.

"I think that's cool. Do you want to be married first?"

"That has always been the plan, but he makes it incredibly difficult."

"Well, I've learned the hard way that you should live for you, not for anyone else. So as long as you're doing what you want to do, you'll be okay."

"Thanks," she smiles. "Most of my friends at school think I'm crazy for not sleeping with him. It's nice not to be judged."

"Never any judgment from me."

Judson and Jameson walk through the door, and about that same time, Spice girls start blaring through the speaker. My self-control meter is significantly low. I stand on the counter, pulling Hanna up to her feet, and bust out all my moves. If I wasn't entirely wasted, I'd probably be embarrassed, but I'm at the "Don't give a fuck" stage.

Jay shoots Judson a look. I can tell Judson is pissed that Jay started this shit, but I'm having fun. I can not lose this bet. Jay pours another two shots, placing one at my feet. I jump off the counter and quickly tilt it back.

"Jay, that is enough. You have a foot and a hundred pounds on her. I will not let you give her alcohol poisoning." Mr. Protective has made an arrival. I haven't binge-drank in well over a year or two. I'm sure I will regret the hell out of this later, but I will put up a good fight.

Judson grabs Jay's arm and yanks him to the side, whispering to him. I pour myself another shot and dump it back.

"Jameson, I am one up! You better get your head in the game!" I yell across the room.

"Judson, you can't tame this one. You are in trouble, man." He yells over his shoulder and makes his way to the counter to pour another shot.

I plop down in a chair outside, and Judson takes the seat next to me.

"You should slow down. I have never seen a girl drink this much before." I just look at him.

"It's kind of scary." He admits.

"Just give up. You don't have to live here."

"I'm not worried about that." I smile at him. His eyes brighten, and he pulls me from my chair to his lap.

"Just stop then." He begs. He is adorable when he begs. Those big dark puppy dog eyes will make me do anything, I am pretty sure.

"Jameson!" I yell. "I'm done!" He fist fights the air and does a celebratory dance.

"I hope you learned your lesson, B." I want to tell him I'm stopping for Judson, but I will give him his moment.

"I am impressed, though. I have never had a girl hang with me this long." I smile at him.

"I'm basically a fish." I laugh.

"Well, this is my last drunken night for six months. I owe you that for living with my asshole brother."

Holy shit. I can't move in with Judson. I don't live here, I can't live here. Maybe I will just plead temporary insanity in

the morning, and all will be forgiven and forgotten.

CHAPTER 23

JUDSON

Blakely is trashed, and I could beat the shit out of Jameson for getting her this drunk. Luckily for me, she promised to slow down. Hanna and Blake are laughing by the fire, attempting to roast marshmallows. I'm staying close enough to make sure she doesn't fall in but far enough back that she can't hear my conversation.

"She's cool, Judson." Jay looks to me as I tip my drink back.

"Does she know?" He looks down and kicks some leaves with his shoe. I know he's talking about the stuff with dad, but what he really means is, "Does she know that you are fucked up?"

"She knows enough. I can't believe you made that bet with her."

"I haven't seen you with anyone in a while. I didn't know where you guys stood, so I figured I'd make sure she stuck around long enough to fall for your stupid ass." I laugh at him push his shoulder. I want to tell him how completely mesmerized I already am by her, that I am the happiest I've been in a while, but I don't want him getting too attached.

Blakely walks over to me and pulls me in closer by my Tshirt. Her lips crash into mine like fire, and I taste the Tequila on her breath. I can taste the desperation on her lips as she deepens the kiss. She starts to pull me into the house, and I break up our moment. She looks at me, confused. I want to tell her I can't have sex with her here, not like this, but I don't want to risk sounding too clingy. She makes the decision for me, though, as I see in her eyes that she is about to be sick. She holds up her finger and takes off toward the bathroom. I motion to Jameson that I'm going to bed. I make sure everything is locked up and make my way into the bathroom.

Never in a million years have I thought I'd be attracted to a head in the toilet. She's drunk but smart enough to pull her hair into a knot on the top of her head. Something tells me she has been here before. I shake my head at the thought of her doing this alone or with anyone else. The idea of some other guy taking care of her, undressing her, invades my mind making me feel like tossing my liquor too. I have never seen a girl, especially one as small as Blake, take as many shots as she did, which honestly kind of worries me a little bit. I open the cabinet and wet a towel. She pulls her head away from the toilet, settling into my lap on the floor. I use the towel to gently wipe her face, folding it up and leaving it on the back of her neck.

"You don't have to do this. I promise I'll be okay. I just may need to sleep in here tonight." She looks into my eyes, and I can't pull mine away. I want her to be mine to take care of.

"I'm not leaving you," I assure her and adjust myself so that she can be more comfortable.

"I'm really sorry, Judson." She mumbles.

"Are you going to be okay?" I can feel her head nod against my legs. I brush the tiny hairs out of her face, and she passes out in my lap. She comes with baggage, that's for sure, a whole damn airport full of luggage. I would never follow a girl anywhere, let alone to her hometown, to go toe-to-toe with an ex-fiancé. Somehow these past couple of weeks, that is what I find myself doing, following her.

The sun peeks through the window, and I adjust my leg that is currently tingling from her weight on it. The floor is hard, and leaning against this porcelain bathtub is probably the most uncomfortable thing I've ever slept against. She has been in the same position for most of the night, so I scoop her up and carry her to the bed, knowing this is one hangover she will have to sleep off. I pad into the kitchen and start a cup of coffee. The smell makes my stomach turn a little. I don't feel great after drinking last night, but I'm nowhere close to the shape Blake is in. The sound of the shower makes Blake turn over in the bed, so I close the door, careful not to wake her. It's

Friday, and I have to go into my office and sort some things out. Jay and Hanna must've already left. I'm honestly surprised he came at all last night, especially with the game tomorrow to worry about.

Stepping out of the shower, I see Blakely standing in front of me in the bathroom, looking a bit of a train wreck. Her mascara is smeared down her face, her eyes rake my body, and I can feel the warmth of her against my wet skin. I just take her all in, sure she is a mess, her hair in a knotted mess on top of her head, black smeared eyes, pale face, and in that instant I realize she's a different type of beautiful I've never experienced. Her imperfections are the parts of her I like the most. I've only known her for a short time, but I can see a life with her. Her free spirit sets my soul on fire. She pushes me, she's quirky and fun, and I need her.

"You should get some rest," I whisper to her, pulling her into a hug.

"I am so embarrassed." She chuckles, hiding her face with her palm.

"I don't do this, just so you know."

I smile at her wrapping my towel around my waist. The water still dripping from my hair and down my back.

"That's hard to believe. You were the life of the party last night." I laugh.

She pulls her shirt over her head and reveals her lacy purple bra.

Holy fuck.

"What are you doing?" I question her intentions.

"Well, I was brushing my teeth, and now I'm taking a shower." She nods to the shower right behind me.

Holy shit. Holy shit. Is she seriously going to strip naked right in front of me, only to leave me to get in the shower?

She slides her shorts down and slips by me. My feet aren't moving, I need to get ready for work, but now I can't even walk—self-control Judson.

Fuck it. I drop my towel and turn back to slip into the shower. My eyes glide down her back to her ankles. I wrap her up into my arms from behind. She jumps, startled a little bit.

"You scared me." She turns to me, pressing her perfect chest into mine. I am currently thanking my lucky stars that I decided to have this bathroom renovated, and the shower was made big enough for two people. I can't even convince my voice to form words. I tilt her chin up with my finger, and she glances up at me with her beautiful emerald eyes. I devour her mouth with mine. I find my hands exploring her body, touching everything, caressing every inch of skin I can.

"I could come apart just looking at you," I whisper to her. She takes my length in her hand and makes long and even strokes. In what feels like seconds, she is pumping every last breath and orgasm from my body. I feel like a damn high school kid getting off from a hand job. I'm a fucking 28-year-old man, damn it! What the fuck is wrong with me?

"See what you do to me." I glance down at her. She giggles a little, and it sets me over the edge. I slip my fingers in her, needing to feel her tightness. I feel her squeezing me. She's so tight and perfect. Her soft moans fill the air as I softly rub her bundle of nerves in circles. I could live to see my name rolling off her lips, knowing I'm the one doing this to her, me. She breathlessly lets out a scream and comes hard all over my hand.

"See what you do to me?" She throws my words back at me.

CHAPTER 24

BLAKELY

November 10

I am almost positive I'm lost.

I know I look lost, but no one downtown seems to notice, as most people are wandering aimlessly anyway. It is so beautiful here, and I feel grateful as I stumble through this historic city, camera in tow. I take picture after picture admiring the atmosphere of this place, and for the first time in a long time, I'm in a place that feels like home. I take a seat on a bench downtown and pull my phone out. I type the message out three different ways before I finally hit send.

Blake- Judson, It's Blake. This town is amazing. YOU are amazing. Thanks for bringing me with you.

Judson- I knew you would love it. You're more than welcome. I'll be done here in a couple hours, I'll call you when I leave, and I'll hunt you down and pick you up.

Blake- Sounds good!

I still feel like shit from last night, and I'm sure the way I look matches. However, the hangover couldn't stop me from exploring the city. After roaming and snapping tons of pictures, I find myself outside the Savannah College of Art and Design Museum. My curiosity gets the best of me, I walk inside, and I am awestruck. It's incredible—beauty in all forms. I could spend forever here. This is my passion, finding beauty in places where it may not be so obviously displayed. As I am walking around, I realize I am daydreaming, which isn't uncommon. Remember, Blakely gets lost in her own

thoughts most of the time. My phone pings and I pull it out, careful not to cut my fingers with shards of glass. I honestly could care less about getting it fixed.

Judson- Drop a pin. I'm leaving the office.

I send Judson my location and continue to look around. The time is flying by, and I realize I have been admiring the same picture for well over thirty minutes. I turn to make my way around the corner, and I see him talking to someone. He looks so adorable in his slacks and dress shirt, I love him no matter what he's wearing, but he looks so professional.

Did I just say I love him? What the hell. I do love the way he looks. He shakes the guy's hand and makes his way over to me.

"Pretty cool place, huh?" He grabs my hand.

"This place is insane. I could spend all day here."

"Well, you'll have plenty of time to explore next week." He nudges me with his shoulder. Holy shit, I forgot about the bet. Does he really expect me to move in with him? I mean, it's not terrible, I do like him, but it seems too soon. I mean, I know it's too soon.

"Unless you don't want to stay here, you don't have to. Jay was just being, well... Jay." He blurts out before I can respond.

"Can I be honest with you?" I stop walking and turn to face him.

"I don't want you to lie to me." He laughs.

"I know that moving here seems crazy. I know it's crazy because we just met. I'm not naive enough to think that I could be yours forever by only knowing you for a few minutes. I know this is going to sound extremely cliche, but after all day walking around, this is the first time I've been somewhere that

felt like home." I try to keep the tears from welling up in my eyes. He pulls me into a hug and places a kiss on my forehead.

"If you want to help me find an apartment or something, that's fine, but I think I could give staying here a chance. You know, find a job, maybe go to school." He pushes me out of our hug, both hands placed on my shoulders.

"I would love for you to stay at my house, you can get an apartment if you want, but you are welcome to stay with me, in my bed. I feel like it's where you belong. I know that sounds cliche too."

I smile at him, and he pulls me in. His arm rests around my shoulder as we walk back out onto the street.

It's beginning to get dark, and after grabbing a glass of wine and walking all over, I am beyond tired. Judson opens the car door for me, and I slide in. We laugh and joke the whole way back to his house, and as we pull in, I catch him staring at me.

"You have to stop looking at me like that. I feel like I have something on my face." I pull the mirror down and look at him, weird.

"There is nothing on your face. I just can't keep my eyes or my hands off of you." He flips the mirror back up and puts the car in park.

"They are the only hands I want on me." I smile and open my car door. He comes after me and throws me over his shoulder, and I know exactly what is about to happen. I wiggle around playfully, and he lays a big smack on my butt.

"Judson put me down!!!" I squeal.

"No chance in hell." He slings the door open and shut in one motion. I don't think I've ever been manhandled like this, but I can tell you I am here for it.

The next few hours go by faster than I'd like to admit. I managed to dose off, and now I can't keep from tossing and turning. My sleep schedule is way off. The clock light says

2:12 am, which has to go, by the way. I can't stand any light, and the tiny red numbers drive me insane. I'm a blackout curtains kind of girl. I roll over, and Judson is fast asleep, so I creep out of bed as quietly as possible to avoid waking him up. He just looks so peaceful, in this beautiful bed, his bed. This place is decorated exquisitely, it's beautifully modern with a southern charm, and it's perfect. Not your typical bachelor pad at all. This is a *home*. I know creeping around the house at two in the morning seems a little strange, but I feel the sudden urge to explore.

I quickly find myself in Judson's office. The window looks out into the backyard, which has beautiful landscaping, I might add. It's pretty dark in here, so I switch on the desk lamp and look around. There is a bookshelf lining the entire wall, stuffed full of books. I run my hands over the spines and take in the smell; there's nothing like the smell of old books. Judson's college diplomas hang on the wall, and a few signed basketball and hockey jerseys hang meticulously in shadowboxes. Pictures line a shelf opposite the bookshelf, several images of Jameson growing up, some of Judson with his mom. One particular shot stands out to me, a picture of Judson. He looks younger in the picture, possibly a teenager. The giant fish he is holding is as big as the grin on his face. The man standing next to him looks like he is looking at his entire world. I pick the picture up off the shelf to tilt it into the light of the lamp.

"Trying to give me a heart attack?" His soft voice fills the small room.

"Won't be hard to do at your age." I tease. It's only seven years between us now, but I can't help to aggravate him about it.

"In that case, do I need to go make you a bottle?" He laughs. I walk over and slap his shoulder, still holding the picture in my hand.

"Who is that Judson?" I ask as I sit the picture down softly in its spot on the shelf.

He angles the picture and adjusts it as if it is so fragile and special that the thought of this frame being out of place is just too much to bear.

"That was Russ." He sighs and sits back into his desk chair.

I slip onto his lap and run my fingers through his bed hair.

"You look pleased with yourself."

"He was my best friend, and that was a huge catch." I can tell the subject makes him sad, but it's 2 am, and my filter isn't working tonight.

"It looks like you were his best friend too." I smile at him, hoping he will open up to me. It seems as if he knows all this stuff about me and is regularly saving me from myself and my panic attacks. This time I want to be the one he confides in. I can tell he wants to speak, but it seems like Judson just shuts down when it comes to Russ.

Talk to me, damn it. I promise you won't scare me off. He doesn't say anything, so rather than make him uncomfortable, I decide to change the subject.

"I'm hungry. I'm gonna go raid your kitchen." I kiss his cheek and stand to make my way out of the room.

"Don't you mean our kitchen?" His words make the hair stand up on the back of my neck. I don't exactly know what to say to that.

Just four months ago, I was engaged to someone else, my dad was still alive, and my entire world was different. Now all of those things seem like a lifetime ago. I can't help but feel guilty for wanting to live in this moment.

CHAPTER 25

JUDSON

November 11- Barely

"Find anything appetizing?" I question this beautiful creature standing in my kitchen, still amazed that she is here.

"Yup, waffles!" She giggles and tosses them into the toaster. It's 2am, and this girl is making waffles.

Is it too soon to admit that I'm falling for her? Well, I am, and I'm falling hard. She's perfect, the actual epitome of everything I've ever wanted. I think I've known since she came busting into the beach house that day that she was the one, and trust me, I have never been a "love at first sight" kind of guy. Obviously, I have assumed I was in love before, but I think that is kind of the point. To find love and realize nothing could ever compare, and question if it was ever real.

"Want some?" She is chipper as hell, so she is obviously going to be up for a while.

"Nah, I'm good."

"How can you turn down waffles?" Remember when I said her innocence is what attracts me to her? Prime example, right here. I seriously don't think I can say no to her. If I ever have to, I am going to have a tough time.

"You know what, you're right. Give me some." She giggles and flops them down on my plate. She sets down two cups of coffee and digs in like she is starving.

"These are so damn good." She laughs, "I think I'm in love."

"With waffles?" I raise an eyebrow at her.

"I could marry these waffles, probably the only thing I can commit to." She rolls her eyes and fills her cheeks.

It kinda feels like she stuck an arrow into my chest at the fact she hasn't even imagined us as long term. Maybe I just

move too quick. I push my thoughts to the back of my mind and change the subject.

"I am having someone gather your things in Wilmington and bring your car down here." She nearly chokes on her waffle.

"Damn, you okay?" I chuckle a little bit nervously.

She laughs, "Yeah, just a little nervous about this whole thing, and all of a sudden, I realized it's real."

"It is real, Blake." The last thing I want is her having second thoughts.

"I know, I'm gonna go job hunting on Monday. I should probably call my mom eventually and let her know I'm not coming back." I have so many connections around this city. I can get her any job she wants, but she seems like the kind who will want to get it independently.

"I can help you find something, but If you want to wait a bit before you get a job, that isn't a big deal either." I mean, it isn't.

"It's important to me to be self-sufficient, Judson. I'm not coming here to mooch." I burst into laughter.

"I know you aren't a mooch." I make sure to put a ton of emphasis on the word mooch. She laughs with me.

"We will find you the perfect job if that is what you want." I smile at her, and she scoops more waffles into her mouth.

"I think I'm going to visit the art school, and do a tour, maybe apply."

SCAD would be the perfect place for Blakely.

"I think that is the best idea you have had all night."

We spend a couple hours on a house tour. I show Blakely the house from top to bottom and tell her all my favorite things. She makes sure to kiss me in every room to make sure she's my first kiss in every single room of the house. It's adorable, and I have a hard time not pulling the tiny sleep shorts down her legs. Finally, after a wrestling tickle match, I talk her into sleeping since we have Jay's game tomorrow.

I roll over in the bed and get a face full of her long dark hair, I take a deep breath and breathe her in. She senses that I am awake and turns into my arms. Her white t-shirt makes her dark features stand out even more, and those eyes could cut you like a knife. We had some real conversations last night, I find myself opening up to her more and more, and it honestly freaks me out a little bit. I'm pretty good at putting up walls. She was explaining how she's a "Jumper." Some people dip their toes in the water and overthink it before jumping into the pool. She said she's a jumper and doesn't take the time to think things through. She just jumps in, head-first with no safety-net. I could tell in the back of her mind, she was referring to this move to Savannah as one of her impulse "jumps."

She's passionate about things, which is a good explanation for jumping. She gets overzealous, and the next thing you know, she's knee-deep in a potential mistake. I think it's a good thing she goes after what she wants, even if it means she could get hurt. I'm not a jumper. I'm the thinker. I overthink every single aspect of my life, which is probably why I am 28 and alone. I don't let anyone get too close, and when they do, I dissect the relationship and find something wrong with it.

The day goes by fast, as it is mostly spent in the bedroom cocoon. Blakely gets her gameday attire on and jumps into the truck. She has on a solid red shirt, cropped jeans, and one of my hats. Let me tell you right now, there will not be a girl in the stadium that can hold a candle to her. I'm not alumni here, but I donate enough money to the school to have connections and close parking, thank God.

We hop out and make our way to the seats. I can feel the eyes around us on her, and I am the jealous type when it comes to her. At this point, I'm considering a t-shirt for every day of the week inscribed with "Judson's Girlfriend."

Is she my girlfriend? Damn, I have no idea.

"What is it? You have the strangest look on your face." She slings her dark hair over her shoulder.

"Nothing." I lie. I can spot at least three different guys staring at her. How can she attract so much attention without even trying?

Blake and Hanna are whispering and giggling most of the game, and I am talking to some friends from work. She knows so much about football, it's actually insane. I've never met a girl that likes sports like her. It's late in the fourth quarter, and we're down by a field goal. Blake is on the edge of her seat, screaming at the coach to "Run the ball." The defense has basically shut down our throwing game, and none of our receivers can catch tonight.

"Our offensive line is good, they need to run the ball!" She yells into my ear.

There is only time for one more play, Jay takes the snap, and Blake stands in anticipation. Jay fakes a handoff to the running back and keeps the ball, running it in for a touchdown. She is jumping up and down with Hanna, so excited, it was a crazy good comeback.

"That was crazy! It's like the coach heard my play-calling!" She screams over the roar of the crowd. The smile displayed on her face is contagious. We grab all of our stuff and wait outside the field house for Jameson to come out.

Hanna runs toward him, wrapping him in a big hug. I'm still not sure about their relationship, but she seems genuine. I just know it's young love, and at eighteen, it's probably shortlived.

"Good game, bro!" I give him a fist bump and watch as Blake wraps him in a hug.

"That was awesome, Jameson!" It warms my heart how she treats Jay like she's known him her whole life. He looks at me over her shoulder with a knowing look. He can read me pretty well.

"So who is down for celebration pizza?!" Blakely yells.

"You know I am, sis!" Jay winks at her and wraps one arm around Hanna's shoulder and one arm around Blakely.

"You can't have them both," I demand, stopping in my tracks.

Blakely turns her head to me and smiles the biggest grin.

"Don't be silly, Judson." She reaches her hand out to me and drags me up close to her.

We make it to the pizza parlor, and it just still blows my mind how normal she is. She doesn't complain because we aren't anywhere fancy. She eats the pizza with her hands, not a fork, and drinks her beer. Hanna and Blakely have a full-blown conversation about shoes, while Jay and I chat about the game. The service is shitty tonight, so Blake and Hanna go to the bar to fetch more drinks.

"You love her, don't you?" Jay's eyes pierce into mine.

"I'm not sure." Which isn't entirely true. I'm not sure how I feel.

"She is the coolest girl I know. If you don't love her, someone else is going to. That's for damn sure." I know he's right, but it pisses me off even thinking about it.

"I just met her a couple of weeks ago. It's still new."

"It may be new, but I know you, and I have never seen you like this."

He is right.

The girls come back with a couple of pitchers and sit back down. Jay sticks to water and explains to the table he is holding up his end of the bet and not drinking as long as Blake promises to stay in Savannah. I laugh at him because he really is trying so hard to help me out. Blake eyes me the entire night, and I consider taking her home right then to take her to our bedroom, but I put on my big boy pants and tough it out. She is having fun with Hanna, and I may not want to, but I can wait a couple of hours.

At least I think I can.

CHAPTER 26

BLAKELY

November 26

It's been two weeks since I started staying in Savannah with Judson. It still feels like a dream. An unbelievable daydream that I never wake up from. Falling into this perfectly comfortable routine with Judson is pretty incredible. It doesn't even seem real at times, and I just keep waiting to wake up.

My mom doesn't understand the move and has been trying to convince me to go back to Tennessee. I haven't heard anything from Dakota, but I have talked to Cami, and she says he is healing and is somewhat moving on. I haven't heard anything back from Savannah College of Art and Design about acceptance yet. It's kind of making me crazy, not knowing. I have been taking pictures for realtors on the side, and it's actually a pretty fantastic job. Of course, Judson helped figure out who to contact, but I have made a name for myself in the past weeks. Several of the houses I photographed sold quickly.

Tomorrow is Thanksgiving. Judson insisted we make a big dinner over here. I have never cooked Thanksgiving dinner before, but surely I can make it edible. Hanna is coming to help me, so between us, Google, and YouTube, hopefully, we can make it work. Judson is flying in from Miami today, he's been gone a couple of days, and I am having severe withdrawals.

I open the door to the car and lay my camera bag in the seat. This house is on the beach, and the drive back home is about twenty minutes. I am anxious to get back to put dinner on for Judson and get things prepared for tomorrow. The road twists and I can't help but drive a little faster than usual, blame it on the excitement. My eyes move to the stereo to adjust the sound. When I look up, the truck is coming straight at me over the yellow lines. I don't have time to think, honk, or even swerve before we are colliding.

Everything from this moment feels like slow motion. The airbag explodes from the dash, and glass is shattering around me. In what seems like an eternity, my car finally comes to a stop, and everything is black. My ears are ringing, and I hear screaming and shouting, but I can't respond. The ringing gets worse, and I hear someone yelling to dial 911. The sound of the saw cutting through the metal fills my head, and emotions flood my body. My body that I can't move. I feel so many different things but mostly fear. I have never been afraid of dying or the thought of death. However, the idea of leaving Judson is making me feel an ache in my chest that I haven't ever felt. I'm not sure where to put those feelings. I feel myself floating in and out of consciousness. The darkness is scaring me, and the pain is unbearable. They are moving me from the car, and I can't see or scream, but I feel.

Boy, do I feel.

Sight unseen, I can tell the crash is terrible due to the number of frantic voices I can hear.

In what seems like only seconds, the noise becomes silent again, and I'm dreaming. At least I think I'm dreaming because my sight has returned. The light is so bright, it's like a glimpse into heaven. I have never understood the phrase "blinded by the light" until now. I have never really believed in things I can't see or explain. I am overcome with emotion when I see past the glare.

It's my dad.

"Dad? Is that you?" I scream in excitement. When the vision becomes more evident, I know it's him, and he's holding a baby.

My baby.

She has the sweetest little button nose and is wrapped in a pink blanket. He lays the baby down in the crib and turns to me, and reaches out his hand. He doesn't speak to me, but he pulls me by the hand into a new scene. I see Judson, with two

beautiful kids and the back of a woman. That woman is not me. I feel my heart breaking into a million tiny pieces around me. Is he showing me the life I am going to miss?

He looks so happy, pushing a little girl on the swing set and an older boy that looks just like him, playing basketball with Jay. At that moment, this perfect incredible scene, I realize how much I need him. How much I love him. Next, he shows me, Judson, sitting on the floor of the ICU. He is a mess, his hands cover his face, and Jameson has him wrapped into a hug. I can't cause him that pain. I have to get to him.

"Dad, I can't." I sob, "that is Judson. I have to go back." He doesn't speak. He just touches my hand and pulls me into a hug. The familiar place sends chills all over my body. I feel at peace, he pulls me into him, and with the touch of his lips against my forehead, I am in the hospital bed, awake.

CHAPTER 27

JUDSON

The plane wheels can not touch the ground fast enough. I haven't seen my girl in 2 days, and it's driving me crazy. The past few weeks have been amazing. Just having her around makes my entire world better. It honestly makes me ready to jump out of this plane with a parachute if it would get me there faster. Okay, maybe not, but I'd be lying if I said that thought hadn't crossed my mind.

I make my way through the airport and power my phone on. Jameson has called me like twenty times. I don't even bother listening to the voicemails and call him back. Something must be up because he never calls back to back. He rarely calls me at all. He prefers to text.

The phone barely rings once before Jameson picks up, "Jud, you need to get here now. It's Blake. There was a wreck. She was hit head-on. They aren't sure if she is going to wake up." I feel my heart fall into the depths of my stomach and search for my driver. There is a particular urgency in Jay's voice that makes the air in my lungs feel sparse.

"I'm leaving the airport now. What are they saying?"

"A truck crossed the center line and hit her. She's in pretty bad shape. So far, they aren't saying much. They've called her mom."

They aren't talking to Jameson because he isn't family. They probably won't speak to me either. Shit. I can't get there fast enough. The car feels like it isn't even moving. I don't feel like I can breathe, I loosen my tie and take my suit jacket off. I feel the tears burning my eyes as I try to fight them back. I have never done love, but I can't lose her, and that fact smacks me right in the face.

The car pulls up in front of the hospital, and I make my way to the ICU, where I find Jay and Hanna. Jay is shaken up, and Hanna is hysterical.

Her hands are shaking as she grabs my shoulder to pull me closer, "I'm so sorry, Judson, I wish we could've gotten you here quicker. The cops found her phone, and I was the last person she called, so they called me. I came straight here. I watched them wheel her in." Hanna sobs into my shoulder as she pulls me into a hug. I run my fingers through my hair, which is now a mess. I can't sit here and wait for her mom. I just can't. I make my way to the front desk.

"I'm here to see Blakely Walker. How is she? Can I see her?" I am rambling off as I attempt to walk past the desk.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we can't let you back unless you are family." She taps her pen onto the paper she was scribbling on.

"She's my family." The lady sees the desperation in my eyes and buzzes me back.

"Room 102." I practically run through the double doors and make my way to find her.

I slide the glass door back and take a deep breath. I can't fight the tears. They flood my face, and my legs feel so heavy I can't pick them up to walk. I hit my knees and the side of the bed and place my hand on her thigh. I can't lose her when I just found her. I just got her here with me. The door slides open, and a nurse rounds the bed.

"Is she going to be okay?" I blurt.

"She's fortunate. She has a broken wrist and a serious concussion, but luckily there is no swelling in the brain. She's very bruised up, mostly from the airbag. Upon impact her left hand was pushed from the wheel and into the window. It was pinned under the car, and they had a hard time getting her out, so she lost a lot of blood. The break was severe and required surgery, we aren't sure what the outcome will be yet, but we tried to save her hand. Now is just a waiting game for her to wake up, but her vitals are stable, and we expect her to be okay." The nurse pushes medicine into her IV.

[&]quot;So, are you saying she might not be able to move her hand?"

"We aren't sure. The damage was severe. The trauma surgeon on call said it would be a waiting game. The nerve and muscle damage is pretty significant." I can feel my heart sink, and I am so pissed that I wasn't here to protect her. The nurse turns to exit the room tossing her gloves into the trashcan. They have her arm wrapped up, so I can't see it. Her face looks pretty normal except for a gash and some stitches above her left eyebrow, nearly in her hairline. I rub my thumb back and forth on her thigh and say a silent prayer that she will wake up soon and know that I am here. I hear a woman's voice outside the room and then the sound of high heels. A small petite woman pulls the door open and runs toward the bed.

"Jesus, Blakely. Oh my goodness, honey, what happened?" She pushes Blake's hair behind her ears and plants a kiss on her forehead. Her long auburn hair swings down her back, and she turns to me with familiar green eyes.

"Are you the doctor? Is she okay?" Holy shit, this is not how I expected to meet her mom.

"No, I'm Judson. Blake's... friend." I kind of ramble on nervously. "They think she will be fine when she wakes up, her wrist is broken, and they aren't sure how the recovery will be for that, but they said she's very lucky."

"Her car is totaled, the police called me. The driver that hit her didn't make it. I came here half expecting the worst." She sobs and pulls out her cell phone.

"Jason, I'm here. She is going to be okay. They are waiting for her to wake up. She is pretty banged up. It'll probably be a few days before I can head back. I'll call you when I know more." She quickly hangs up and looks at me.

"So you are Judson, huh?" She places her hand on her hip. Blake hasn't said much about her mom.

"In the flesh." I snap back, walking closer to Blake, praying that she picks this exact moment to wake up.

"I'm Reese, Blakely's mother. Cami mentioned you might be the reason for this sudden move to Savannah." She flips her hair over her shoulder. I can tell she is awaiting my response. I look down at Blake, and my response isn't fast enough to suit her.

"Listen, I don't know what your intentions are with my daughter but don't you think you should quit stringing her along and let her go home."

"I don't think she wants to go back to Tennessee." I try to remain calm and composed, but I'm so protective of her. I'm not sure how long it will last.

"She doesn't know what she wants. That is the problem. She never knows what she wants." She rolls her eyes and sits in the chair next to the hospital bed with her legs crossed.

"Have you ever asked her what she wants, or do you just expect to decide for her?" Shit. I knew it wouldn't last long.

She doesn't respond to me or even acknowledge that I've said anything at all. She crosses her legs and smooths out her perfect pencil skirt. She looks a little bit like a Stepford Wife. Her pink blouse is tucked in, and her hair is waved and smoothed perfectly. Just when I think she will ignore my comment and let it go, she turns to me.

"So when is Blakely coming home?" If her eyes could cut me right now, I would be bleeding out.

"She hasn't mentioned going home, not once." She rolls her eyes at me.

"I'm sorry we had to meet like this. I was hoping Blake would decide to introduce us at some point." Genuinely I am, even though she seems like a bitch. I am trying my best to lighten the mood.

"It's not ideal." She admits. "So where did you meet my daughter?"

"I own the beach house she rented. I was staying next door at another one of our properties in town for meetings."

"Why do you want her to live here in Savannah with you if you're just friends?" She gets me on that question because I'm not really sure how to respond.

"Blakely got a job and applied to art school, so I don't think I am the reason she is staying."

This may be true, but deep down, I hope part of her is staying for me.

"She is living in your house, though, isn't she?" She is like a damn detective. She keeps throwing all of these questions at me like I'm under the spotlight about to be locked up for life.

"Yes, she is. I don't have her tied up in the basement though, she can leave whenever she wants. I have real estate all over Savannah, so she has options."

"Well, I expect she thinks she likes you if she is still hanging around." Suddenly I get it, why she has this need to please everyone in her life. Her mother seems like she would never be satisfied, no matter what Blake did.

"Do you know what happened with the baby? She won't talk to me about it."

"Yeah, she's talked to me about it. I think she should be the one you are asking, though."

I won't talk to her mother about this.

"I don't know what happened to us." She admits as a single tear falls down her cheek. "She used to be so different. I feel like I don't even know her anymore."

I don't think she knows anything about her. No one in her old life seems to know anything. They don't understand that the Blake they thought they knew is 6 feet deep and gone. I think she finally feels free from her old life, starting over and doing what she wants for once. I can tell her mother doesn't understand why I am here, and honestly, I can't explain it to her. I am so in love with her, it's nearly blinding and clouding all of my judgment.

CHAPTER 28

BLAKELY

November 27- Thanksgiving

Judson is sitting in the chair next to the bed, his perfect head laying across my stomach. I am so thirsty and feel high from all the pain meds. I adjust myself in the bed and manage to croak out Judson's name.

His head shoots up, "Blake? Oh my God, you scared me to death." He quickly gets to his feet and passes me a cup of water. I try to lift my arm that all of a sudden feels so heavy.

"Why can't I feel my arm?" I am now obviously freaking out, and the medicine makes me feel a little bit crabby. Judson turns back to sit the water down, he doesn't respond right away, and I can tell he is avoiding my question.

"What the fuck is wrong with my hand Judson!" I snap at him, he looks at me with glassy eyes, and I instantly feel regretful for yelling at him.

"It's broken, they did operate, but the nerve damage is severe. The doctor said they almost had to amputate." His words ring in my ears, and I can't form words.

"What does that mean?"

"It means they don't know if you will be able to use your hand. It's a waiting game."

"Honey! I am so glad you are awake!" My mom comes barreling in the door and straight to the bedside, coffee in tow. Basically knocking Judson out of her way. My eyes fill with tears, and I am quite positive they are tears of joy, but the medicine makes it hard to tell.

"I called your primary doctor, and they are getting therapy, and everything set up for you." What? Why is she talking to the doctors?

"I need a new doctor, I think, since I'll be here, right?" She looks at me then to Judson. Did he tell her he doesn't want me here?

"Honey, don't you think it's time to come home?"

"I am home." I snap at her. Judson's eyes get as wide as saucers. He walks over to the bed and places his hand on the back of my shoulder.

She doesn't know what to say. I feel a little bitchy, but I am so tired of doing what everyone wants. I am going to do what I want. "Mom, can I have a minute alone with Judson?" She rolls her eyes and walks out, pulling the sliding door closed behind her.

"Do you want me to leave?" I ask him point-blank.

"What?" He pulls my forehead to his lips and pulls back, looking directly into my soul. "I love you, Blake. Leaving is the last thing I want you to do."

What?

He wipes the tears away from my eyes and pulls me into a hug.

"Are you sure about that because look at me, I am a walking trainwreck?" He chuckles a little and looks me in the eyes.

"I have never been more sure. I haven't known you long, but I know that you are the one. I knew the second I saw you standing there with your arms crossed and attitude blazing off of you."

I pull him closer, and his lips crash into mine. I forget everything. I forget what happened with Dakota, forget that the life I've been living is a mess, forget about everything before this moment.

"I love you too, Judson."

He looks into my eyes as if I am the only woman he has ever seen. Like I'm the only girl in the world. No one has ever looked at me like this, with such adoration and love. He glances down at my wrist wrapped up.

"They are going to move you to another step-down room, and we will talk with the doctors and see if we can get you a local doctor and therapist." I think for a second about how much all of this will cost. Thankfully, I am still on my mom's insurance for now, but I'm not sure she will keep me on there living here. I push those thoughts out of my mind and remember I have a job and have been making pretty good money.

He can see the fact that my brain is in another place. "Don't worry about it right now. We will figure it all out when we get back home."

Home. The sound of that simple four-letter word falling out of Judson's mouth is quite possibly the greatest sound I've ever heard. My mother walks back into the room, and if her looks could burn a hole through me, they would. She is just trying to keep me in Tennessee to live the life she missed out on, vicariously through me. What she doesn't understand is there are no do-overs, which is why I left. I left Dakota because I couldn't visualize my future with him. I left school because I didn't want to major in business for a "secure" job. I left home because the more life was pushed on me, the more it forced me away. We only get one shot to be happy, so we may as well make it work.

"Reese, when they get Blakely's discharge papers worked up, we are going to go home. Hanna has prepared a Turkey, so we will try to get this girl back for Thanksgiving dinner. You are more than welcome to join us."

Silence fills the air. I see mom glance at Judson and then back to me.

"Okay." She agrees. I take a breath out, relieved. Why am I always craving her acceptance or approval?

CHAPTER 29

JUDSON

December 11

The morning was slow and subtle, full of kissing, and coffee. I drag my fingers through Blake's long dark hair as she rests her head on my chest. I glance down at her wrist, now perfectly wrapped in a cast, and graze my thumb over the scribbles of black Sharpie. She looks up into my eyes.

"I'm okay, you know. Will you quit looking at me like I'm sick?"

She's right. I can't stop thinking that I almost lost her before we really got to live our lives together. The cast will stay on a few more weeks before we will know about therapy. She still can't move her fingers, and it breaks my heart to think that she may not be the same.

"I know, I just am so sorry about everything."

She jumps up off the couch and twirls around, grabbing my hand.

"Let's go do something fun." Her smile is infectious, and her optimism is inspiring. "You are killing me with this sadness. I'm alive. I didn't die!"

She has a point. Did I mention I don't know how to tell her no?

"What do you want to do?" I ask her with a raised brow.

"Well, I was taking pictures a few days ago and found something, let's go, and I'll show it to you." I can't help but picture her stumbling around with one hand snapping pictures.

"Okay, boss. Tell me where to go." She opens the door to the corvette that she has been driving until we find another car to grab her camera.

Nope, I'm driving." She demands, hopping up into the truck. I can't help but eyeball her in the soft green sundress

she is wearing with brown cowboy boots. She is perfect. I slide into the passenger seat, and she backs out of the garage. I swear the drive feels never-ending. I am half convinced she is lost when she pulls over on the side of the road and shuts off the ignition.

"Did you bring me here to kill me?" I joke and wonder to myself why she was even out here alone in the first place. She jumps out of the truck and pulls me by the hand through the thick tree line. After about a hundred yards, the trees open up to a pond. It's small, but the view is incredible. There aren't any houses around, and the area we are in is wooded and very secluded. She takes two steps out onto a wooden dock.

"You better be careful. That thing looks like it could fall in at any minute," I warn.

She rolls her eyes at me and sits down with her feet hanging off the edge.

"It's perfect. The most beautiful place." She takes my hand as I squat down next to her, half afraid my weight will send the wood tumbling into the water.

"Sometimes, I can't stop thinking about my dad." She looks down at her cast then into the water.

"I think about my mom all the time, so that's normal. I would like to tell you it gets better with time, but the hurt will always be there." She looks up at me and gives me a half-smile. Her head falls onto my shoulder.

"When I was about five years old, my dad took me to a fishing tournament. It was a bunch of his work buddies, and most of them were bringing their little boys, but I remember my dad asking me to go with him. I was so proud. I tried not to dress as girly that day and wore my boots. My Mom and Dad had just gotten a divorce, so my dad helped me pull my hair into a ponytail. I can still remember the way he struggled and laughed at himself." She fights her tears back and laughs a little bit. "Anyway, we made our way to the lake and got into the canoe. I was terrified the entire time that we were going to flip it over. He gave me a fishing pole and spent time helping me learn how to fish, although I had more fun playing in the

bucket of minnows." She laughs again, and I can tell she hasn't told this story to many people, but it's important to her. "We get back to the dock, and I'm laughing and playing on the dock, and after the whole day of me being scared of flipping the boat, I slipped and fell into the water. His eyes were always on me, so my dad saw and immediately pulled me out." She pauses and starts laughing even harder.

"Then what happened?"

"Well, I was soaked, and had no extra clothes, so we laughed the whole way home about how I smelled like Carp." Her smile spreads across her face, and she squeezes my hand. "This dock reminds me of that, of him.

"That is a great story. I wish I could've met him," I tell her. "Me too."

I sit in silence and can't help but think of my dad, I try to think of the good times, but I can't recall any. Not one time with my dad where I felt like I was the center of his world. Every decent time as a family included my mom, and even as a child, I could see that she deserved more. Even now that he has spent the past six years in prison, I haven't missed him. In fact, I've hated him. I've spent every day of the last six years wishing someone else was my father.

"I miss my Mom every day," I admit. "I don't talk about her all the time, but I do miss her."

She pulls her head off my shoulder and looks at me. She is so soft, and her heart is always on her sleeve, just like mom. She pulls me into a kiss. I feel her shiver. It's unseasonably warm but at times can get a little nippy.

"Are you cold?" I ask.

"A little." She scrunches her nose and shrugs.

"Let's go back to the truck, I'll get you a sweatshirt, and we can go get lunch."

She stands and stretches her hand out to mine. I haven't ever been a PDA type of guy, but with Blake, it's different. I want everyone to see she is mine. I hold her hand every chance

I get, and best believe I will pull her into a kiss every chance I get.

"I'll drive," I tell her as we get back to the truck. She smiles and jumps up into the passenger seat and over the middle console to scavenge the backseat for a jacket. She pulls a gray Duke hoodie over her head.

"Never-ending supply of these, huh?" She laughs and pulls the chest of the hoodie out, and smiles.

"Proud Alumni, I guess."

The engine roars, and I pull the car out onto the road.

After an almost thirty-minute ride, we are back in town. I run into the sandwich shop and grab us some food to go, and we head back to the house. The truck tires hit the driveway, and I notice someone sitting on the steps. I can't really make out much even when we park. Blake glances at me and then back at the steps.

"Dakota?" She whispers as I push the shift to park and slip my seatbelt off. We get out of the truck and make our way to the porch. Realizing he isn't alone, he lifts his head from his hands. One of his legs is now in a boot, and his crutches are laid beside him. His hair is a mess, and his eyes look bloodshot and tear-stained.

I don't say anything as Blakely approaches him. She looks at me apologetically, then back to him.

"What are you doing here?" She asks. I stand behind her, close enough to make sure he doesn't do anything stupid.

"I just want to talk." He says, leaning over to grab his crutches to pull himself up. He is much taller than I would've thought and has an athletic build, but you can tell he is struggling.

She looks at me and then back to him. The last thing I want to do is leave her out here with him, but maybe she needs this as much as he does.

"I'll be inside if you need me." I kiss her cheek and make sure he knows by my stare that I will hurt him if he does anything to upset her and walk through the front door without Blake.

CHAPTER 30

BLAKELY

"What do you want, Dakota?" I demand and cross my arms over my chest.

His lonely, lost eyes connect with mine.

"Can you tell me about her? Please, I'm sorry, Blake. I just... I need to know what happened. It's driving me crazy, I can't eat, I can't sleep."

He runs his fingers through his hair frantically and huffs, "I'm so sorry for everything."

I take a seat on the step next to him. "She was tiny. Her hands were so small, she even had the most adorable amount of black hair already." I fight back the emotion and continue, "When I got to the hospital, they couldn't find the heartbeat, and I was already bleeding. They delivered her a few hours later, said it was early labor."

I can see the pain all over his face, listening to my words.

"Why didn't you tell me? I could've been there for you or helped."

I don't respond immediately. He pulls me into a hug, which catches me off guard a little. I pull away, stiff and confused. "I was scared, it was everything you wanted from me, and no matter how many times they told me it wasn't my fault, I couldn't shake the feeling that it was." I take a deep breath and turn to look at him, "I didn't tell anyone that she was gone. It almost didn't seem real if I didn't say it out loud. So the day that should've been the best day of my life was the worst. I lost two of the most important people in my life."

"Did you love me?" He asks bluntly.

"Of course, I did. I still do. I'm just not sure it's the kind of love that makes a marriage or family. Honestly, Dakota, I think we both deserve better."

"I can't imagine anything better than you, Blakely." He pleads.

I didn't think seeing him on the steps that I would feel any pity for him at all, but he's broken too. His life was ripped from him, sure maybe it was manipulated there in the first place, but nevertheless, it's gone. I take a deep breath as the tears burn my eyes and decide that the truth at this point would be better for him than anything.

"I should've never said yes." He looks up at me, and his sadness starts slowly turning to anger, and if he needs to be angry, that is okay. So I continue, "I knew it wasn't right. Something always felt off."

His voice turns into a yell, "Blakely, this isn't you. Why are you acting like this?!"

Judson steps into the doorway, and Dakota's eyes find his.

"This is because of him, isn't it! Blakely, what is wrong with you? This isn't like you, moving somewhere on a whim, with someone you *barely* know."

His eyes rake Judson, and the look of disgust turns to me, and I try to keep my cool.

"Are you sleeping with him?"

"Dakota! That isn't any of your business. You don't even really know me. You accused me of having an abortion! You wrecked your bike on purpose for answers and have been playing mind games with me for the past 4 years." I take a slow breath to try and calm my voice. Judson is now standing behind me, not leaving my side. "I'm sorry we lost the baby. I will always be sorry. I won't ever forget it, and I will always feel the guilt that I could've protected her somehow. I hope we can get past this one day."

He grabs his crutches and stands back up, shifting his weight and hobbling closer to his car. "I'm sorry too, Blakely. For everything, I hope I can find someone that won't feel so pressured to want the same things that I want."

Well, if that wasn't an underhanded jab to the gut, I don't know what is.

"I hope you find that too, I really do." I choke out as all of the good memories I have with him come flooding my thoughts.

He forces a crooked smile and yanks the door open on his black Honda Civic. The brake lights shine at the end of the driveway. A sinking feeling in my chest has me feeling weak in the knees. I fall to the steps and wipe the tears away from my cheeks. He will thank me for this one day when he finds someone who makes him feel like Judson makes me feel. The real thing.

"Are you going to be okay?" His voice is soft and apologetic as he pulls me into a tight hug.

"You know, for the first time in a while, I think I am going to be okay."

Honestly, I feel relieved, like a huge weight was just lifted off my shoulders. I don't have everything, but at least I have a little bit of closure.

"Let's eat." He pulls me up by my hand and leads me into the kitchen, where he has our sandwiches on plates and two glasses of sweet tea. Judson doesn't question our conversation, he doesn't push, and I am thankful for that. I don't need that right now, and I really don't feel like talking about it. The food is amazing, and I really can't think of a bad meal I have had since I have been here. Plus, Judson's cooking is awesome. Who knew a bachelor could have cooking game? I figure his mama taught him everything he knows. There's a small moment of silence when the front door bursts open.

Jameson's eyes connect with us. He looks disheveled and confused. Judson puts his sandwich down and makes his way around the island and into the foyer.

"What's wrong?" Judson asks him as Jameson begins pacing around the house like a mad man.

"We had practice today, and I was looking up into the bleachers for Hanna, and I couldn't find her. Do you know who was there, though?" Jay looks completely freaked out.

"Dad."

Judson's face turns white as a ghost. As his hands fall down by his sides, and his eyes go wide.

"Are you sure you saw him?" Judson sits on the couch and stares blankly into space. I walk quicker than my feet want to allow and sit next to him. I want to be here for him, as much as he will allow. I place my hand on his knee, and it's almost as if my hand burned him. He jumps up as quick as he can, his eyes shoot to mine, but he looks right through me.

"I'll be back. I'm going to go make some calls." He walks away, and I make my way over to Jameson.

"Are you okay?" I ask him and pull him into a hug. He breaks into sobs, "I'm sorry I interrupted you guys." He cries.

"Jameson, you are welcome here with us anytime." I just continue to hold him for a while until his phone rings. I glance at it as he pulls it out of his pocket. I see Hanna's name and picture across the screen. He looks at me and then back to his phone. I can tell he is contemplating whether or not he is going to answer the call. It goes to voicemail, and he looks up at me.

"I left her and came straight here. I didn't know what else to do. I saw my dad and instantly walked off the field looking for him, and he was gone. Hanna was coming down to practice after class and riding home with me. I'm sure she is freaking out."

I pat his arm, "You should call her and let her know you are okay and here." He nods and pulls the phone to his ear, walking into the kitchen.

I tiptoe down the hall into Judson's office, I expect him to be on the phone, but he isn't. His chair is turned backward, and he is staring out the window. I pull my uncasted hand up to the door and softly knock twice before entering. He turns to me and motions me over to him.

"Are you okay?" I whisper as I pop a squat on his knee.

"No. I'm not." He lets out a sigh and then slams his phone down on his desk.

"Fuck! How did this even happen? How were we not notified?" He chokes out. I can hear the tears in his voice, even if they are visibly absent. His hurt runs deeper than the fact that his dad got out of prison. I feel like he is bottling it all up inside, and honestly, I'm scared of what the outcome will be when he implodes. I take a deep breath and turn his head to face me.

"Everything is going to be okay. Let's talk about what we are going to do about this."

He pushes me off his lap and stands in one motion.

"We aren't going to do anything. I am going to figure this out, but you can't get involved in this, Blakely."

Just like that, Blakely falls off his lips, rather than his usual Blake, and I feel like a stranger.

CHAPTER 31

JUDSON

Sophomore Year, Duke University

"Jud, let's go! We gotta stop and get booze." My friend, Carter, yells as I shove all my books back down in my backpack. When I say friend, I mean lifeline, my boy since basically our first day here.

"Shhhhh! I know you don't come here much, but this is the library, you dumbass." He smirks and swags by the next table, winking at the ladies. He is such a flirt, probably the biggest ladies' man here, including all the upperclassmen. Which isn't hard to do when you have more money than God, well, when your family does. I'm not poor, but I also don't flaunt it and wear my money like Carter does.

We jump into his black Jeep and make our way to the frat house. We stop at the liquor store because neither Carter nor myself are beer men. We prefer whiskey. And even though I need to be at the library studying for exams next week, I am going to a party, for the 3rd time this week.

We pull in and jump out of the Jeep. It's like an instant swarm of flies around us. I have tried my absolute hardest to be invisible around here, but it's hard to do when your best friend is Carter Graham. Last summer was spent at his family's house in the Hamptons, and if you think he is popular here, you are mistaken. He is like a God there.

"Hey Carter, can I get you a drink." A brunette in daisy duke shorts brushes his arms and drawls. If there is one thing I like about school here, it's still in the south. I know for sure I want a southern girl. Probably not now, not here, but someday. All I want from my time here is sex, because well, I'm still a dude.

Carter raises the bottle of whiskey at her and shakes it back and forth, like, "No bitch, I have a drink." Sure the girls fall at his feet left and right, but he isn't nice to them. She rolls her eyes and retreats back over to her friends. We spend most of the night doing shots and talking about our upcoming trip to the Virgin Islands after finals. My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out to take a look. It's an unknown number, so I let it go to voicemail, and take another swing of the bourbon in my hand.

My phone dings again. I pull it out, half expecting it to be Jay, my little brother since he's the only person who would text me this late since he is probably playing video games all night.

It's a voicemail, so I press play and hold it up to my ear.

"Judson, It's Dr. Baker. I need to reach you concerning your mom. Please call me. I can't get ahold of your father."

I press his number, wondering what could be so important that he calls me at 11:30 on a Thursday night.

"Dr. Baker, It's Judson. Is everything okay?" He takes a deep breath before responding.

"No, Judson, your mom's cancer has spread. She is refusing treatment, says she doesn't want to go through Chemo again. I thought maybe you would speak with her. I know she doesn't want anyone to know. You didn't know it was back, did you?"

I find myself feeling instantly sober as I reply, "No, I didn't. Does Dad know?"

"I would assume she hasn't told anyone, Judson. I think she is just depressed and wants to die. I know that sounds morbid, but maybe you could talk to her. I shouldn't even be telling you this, but technically you are listed on the release information paperwork."

I sigh, "Is she at the hospital?"

She told me she was going to the spa for the weekend, but obviously, that was a lie, and she is getting sicker.

"Yeah, she's here." I instantly feel the alcohol coming back up, burning my throat. I choke it down, barely, and decide on finding Dad and going straight to the hospital. Drunk or not.

I shut my flip phone and set out to find Carter. I bust through every upstairs room and finally find him, his dick buried deep inside a busty blonde.

"Carter. We have to go."

"Shit Judson! What is wrong with you? I'm a little busy, obviously."

I guess the look in my eyes is enough to get through to him. He pushes the girl off of him and stands, grabbing his pants.

"What the fuck, Carter!" She whines. He shrugs and leaves her there butt ass naked.

We make our way downstairs. I called a car because I'm in a hurry but not stupid enough for a DUI. We slip in, and I tell Carter what is going on.

"Shit, man, what are you going to do?"

"Find Dad, I guess."

Which is the last thing I want to do. I haven't had a meaningful conversation with the man in years. Honestly, I don't even think of him as a father figure. The most important thing in his life is money. He doesn't care about the family he created. All he wants is a good image. I can't tell you this last time he referred to me as his son. He uses people. He will only contact me when he needs something for his benefit. I am five hours away at school because I had to get out from under his reign and do things on my own. So now I'm the fuck-up that went to State school at Duke instead of one of the Ivy's like he envisioned. He graduated from Yale and would always brag about how it was destined for me to continue his legacy. His legacy, through my eyes, is anything but something to be proud of.

We get back to our apartment, and I sling a few things in a duffle and grab my keys.

"You aren't driving all the way to Savannah, Jud." Carter yanks the keys out of my hand.

"There is a car coming to get us. We will fly back." He's right. I'm too drunk to drive. It would do some good to sleep a little of it off on the way.

"Okay, You don't have to come." I look down at my duffle and run my fingers through my hair, wishing I could just pull it out.

"Shut up." He rolls his eyes, grabbing his backpack out of the closet. "You aren't going without me."

Carter knows everything about my family. He is really the only person I've ever confided in. How fucked up everything has always been.

No planes were leaving out tonight, so after calling a driver and a five-hour ride, we arrive at the house. Carter jumps out and heads through the front door, leading the way.

The house is empty. Thankfully Jay is at School. I kind of expected him to be here alone, but I guess mom has a sitter here for him because she knows as well as anyone, Dad wouldn't be able to be a Dad, not even for five minutes.

"Well, I guess Dad is at work." Carter grabs an apple off of the counter and then leans against it.

"Want to call a car?"

"Nah." I dig through the kitchen drawer and find the keys to one of the 3 cars my mom has. My Dad doesn't love her, but he wants everyone to think everything is perfect, hence the fancy cars.

We make our way out to the garage and hop in the Mercedes. I swing by the coffee shop and get a black coffee. If I am going to have to face him, I'm gonna need it.

We pull into his office building and walk inside. I don't even bother with the receptionist. Just make my way past her on a mission. I hear her calling me down, "Sir, do you have an appointment? Mr. Banks is with a client?"

I ignore her and bust my way into his office, Carter close on my heels.

Holy Fucking Shit.

Dad jumps at the sound of the door opening, quickly trying to pull his pants up and get them zipped. A young redhead, quite possibly a Victoria's Secret model, adjusts her dress back down, smoothing it lightly.

"Judson. I-I..." He stutters. I stand there in the doorway, frozen, unable to look away. I hold my hand up and turn on my heels, leaving as fast as I entered.

We hop back into the car, and I can't even find any words.

"Man, are you okay. Has he done that before?"

"No. I don't know." I punch the steering wheel a few times, pissed the fuck off.

"My mom is in the hospital dying, and he's fucking a 20-year-old."

"Let's go back to the house and change. We will go to see your mom."

We pull back into the garage, and although I wasn't cheating, I feel dirty having seen what I saw. I jump into the shower and try to erase what is now burned into my brain. After the scalding hot shower, I retreat back into the kitchen to find Carter.

However, my eyes find Dad, or Ryan Banks, because I refuse to accept that this man is my father. I have to be adopted. That is the only explanation. He looks so smug like he isn't even sorry, just sorry he got caught. I know why he's here. It's to make sure I don't tell mom.

"Son, I am sorry you had to see that." I don't respond, just stare at him.

"What are you doing here?" He asks.

"I'm here to see mom."

A smirk tugs his lips, "Well, I'm afraid you'll be disappointed. She isn't here."

"I know she isn't here. The question is, where is she?"

"She is at the spa..." I hold my hand up, interrupting him.

"Actually, she is in the hospital refusing cancer treatment. You are so blind. Actually, after today it's crystal clear you are just too busy fucking interns to give a shit." I grab my duffle off the floor, making my way out to the car Carter has strategically placed there.

He comes after me, grabbing me by my t-shirt, throwing me up against the car.

"Judson, you don't know anything! You have been a fucking anchor since the day you were born, tied to my foot, dragging me down. If it wasn't for you, I would've left a long time ago."

I instantly feel the anger barreling out of me, faster than I can even imagine possible. I pull my fist back and land a nasty right hook to his jaw. He stumbles back, blood pouring. That was the last time he will ever put his hands on me.

I sink into the car next to Carter, and for the first time in years, I cry. I sob into Carter's embrace, and he pulls me close to him.

"I'm sorry, brother." He gives the driver the address to the hospital, and we head in that direction. At this exact moment, I realize my whole life is about to fucking explode, and there isn't a damn thing I can do to stop it.

CHAPTER 32

BLAKELY

December 12

Judson has done a pretty good job of completely shutting me out. He left yesterday on business and said he would be back today. Handed me the keys to an apartment he has in the city and his car and walked away. He said it was better if I didn't have a run-in with his father, but at this point, I think maybe it was an excuse to just get away. I just wish he was retreating to me as his safe place, rather than running away.

I pull out my phone and call Hanna, I don't have any work for today, and I want to catch up with her.

"Hey B, what's up?" She chirps through the phone.

"Not a lot. Want to grab drinks?"

"Sure, want to meet at CJ's at say 6 o'clock?"

"Sounds good. See you then." I hang up and throw the phone back down in my bag.

The next few hours go by quick, and I still haven't heard anything from Judson. I haven't messaged him. I was trying to give him his space with all the new things that he is dealing with.

After my shower, I throw on a cute black cocktail dress and curl my hair loosely. I put on some black tights and wear booties, deciding I look pretty cute for a girl's night out, minus this hideous pink cast. I roll my eyes at myself and my luck and make my way out the door.

The drive to the restaurant is pretty quick, considering I'm staying in town. I spot Hanna immediately. She looks beautiful. She is a few inches taller than me and has this innocent girl next door thing going on, and let me tell you, for her, it works. Her blonde hair swings around as she spots me and stands to give me a hug.

"B, you look great! I feel like I haven't seen you since the wreck." She smiles and orders us a bottle of wine.

"I'm hanging in there, ready to get this cast off!" I sigh, holding my wrist up.

"When does it come off?"

"In a couple of weeks, then we x-ray and go from there." I smile at her and take a sip of my drink.

"Judson told Jameson that you still don't have any feeling." She glances at me apologetically.

"I don't... well, it's hard to tell with this cast on, but I can't even wiggle my fingers." I look down and swallow tears because deep down, I feel like I won't regain any motion in my wrist.

"Where's Judson?" She pushes her hair behind her ear and pours another drink.

"Well, I'm not sure. He left yesterday. I haven't heard from him."

She looks up at me with tears in her eyes.

"What's wrong, Han?" I grab her hand, wanting to pull her into a hug.

"Jameson broke up with me."

What?

Jameson was upset the other day when he saw his dad, but he looked like he genuinely cared for Hanna.

"What do you mean he broke up with you?" I am actually pretty shocked, considering the way he acts around her. He seems pretty infatuated with her.

"He said he needed to take a break. I haven't talked to him since last night. No explanation. He just called me yesterday after leaving practice and not telling me and said he needed some space."

Shit. He didn't tell her anything. He is definitely Judson's brother.

They are both shutting us out. I respect that he wants his privacy, but I won't lie and say it doesn't hurt. About the time I am about to explain everything, Judson and Jameson come strolling through the restaurant's door. I tap Hanna on the hand, and she turns her head. She instantly tenses up. I can tell she is on the verge of tears.

Judson looks rough, his eyes are bloodshot, and I can tell something is wrong.

Jameson walks up, and Hanna's eyes find his.

"Can we talk?" He asks her and gives me a weak smile.

She glances at me, and I nod to her that she should go.

Judson pulls out a chair and sits down. He is having trouble looking me in the eye. I feel my heart sink and a lump in my throat the size of a golf ball. I can tell whatever is about to come out of his mouth isn't good.

"You look beautiful." He takes my hand, and finally, those big dark eyes find mine. It's like I'm looking straight into his empty soul. He doesn't seem the same. Something is definitely off.

"But?" I ask, waiting for the bomb.

He doesn't speak. He picks up his phone, completely disconnected from me, from this conversation.

"Why do I feel like this is goodbye?" I ask bluntly, and he looks down at the table. What more validation do I need?

I grab my purse and leave his car keys on the table. If he wants to go through this alone, what choice do I have? I walk out the door, realizing whatever connection I thought we had, wasn't as strong as I thought.

CHAPTER 33

JUDSON

December 16

It's been three days since Blake walked out of the restaurant. She left my keys, and by the time I got back to the apartment, it was empty. My mind was spinning about a hundred miles an hour, and now I'm just worried. I thought maybe she would be at the house, but she wasn't. I even checked the spot by the lake. She won't return my calls, and I don't know where she is. I have called almost every hotel I can think of. I am going through about a thousand different scenarios in my head of where she is. The most important thing right now is making sure she is safe. If she doesn't wanna see me, then that is her choice, but I want to know she is okay.

I spent the night away from home in Atlanta talking with Carter, who happens to be my attorney. Jay came with me, and I wanted to make sure there wouldn't be any issues with Ryan Banks getting out of prison, as far as the company and assets are concerned. He assured me, any and all association he had with the company is history. I am going to attempt to get legal restraining orders against him where Jay is concerned. I just don't trust him. Sure Jay is eighteen and can make his own decisions, but I refuse to let him manipulate Jay. Myself, on the other hand, I'm not afraid of him anymore. I know everything he says is bullshit.

When we got back to town, we saw him at the office around 5. He said he had business with both of us. I basically did everything I could to make sure he knew there would be no conversation, no little chat, and indeed no relationship. However, I know this won't be the last time I hear from him. He's out of prison with an ax to grind. He lost everything, and he blames it all on me.

Even though I wasn't the one who pulled the trigger with the investigators, he still knows of my involvement. It actually wasn't my idea to have the company and investments looked into, it was Carter's, but I helped get the info needed to shut it down. Then when everything went crashing down, it was up to me to fix it. So I took the past six years making everything right and being a dad to his kid.

By the time I had Hanna and Blake tracked down and got to the restaurant, my mind was anywhere but where it should have been. She must be running for the hills finding out about my fucked up daddy issues. I just don't want to see him try and get to Blakely. I know he isn't going to let this go. He will try and do everything to destroy me and everyone I care about. If I have to leave Blakely alone to protect her, then that's what I will do.

My phone flashes across the room, and I catch the display light in the corner of my eye. I basically run to it, a slither of hope that it is Blakely. My heart sinks a little when I see an unknown number across the screen with the words "Tennessee" underneath it.

"Hello?" I answer, praying I hear her voice on the other side.

"Judson? It's Reese, Blakely's mom. Have you seen her? I can't get her on her cell?"

Actually, I haven't talked to her in 3 days, because I'm an idiot.

"Not today. I'll see if I can get her for you though, I'll have her give you a call."

I will find her. I have people combing the town for her as we speak.

"Thank you." She chirps, hanging up.

I decide to drive to Jay's apartment to see if Hanna has heard anything. The ride there seems longer than the usual 20 minutes. When I whip into the parking lot, I notice Hanna walking to her car. She jumps in and starts backing out before I can even get to her, intentional? I think so.

I feel a lump forming in my throat. Why is she avoiding me?

I take the stairs two at a time until I'm standing outside the apartment. I have a key but decide to knock, and Jay can just let me in.

After a knock and what seems like an eternity, Jay comes to the door. I push past him quick and frustrated.

"Have you seen Bla—" I am stopped in my tracks when I see Blakely leaned up against the kitchen counter.

"Jay, what the fuck! You know I have been losing my mind about this. I just wanted to know she was okay!" I take a step toward him, and he backs up a step.

"I-I'm So-sorry. She said she just needed a minute to breathe and think." He stutters and shrugs.

"Judson, don't yell at him." Blake's eyes me with a murderous glare, one I haven't witnessed.

"I'll give you guys a minute." Jay grabs his keys and walks out the door.

"Why haven't you been answering my calls? I have been worried about you. I thought maybe you left." I am still kind of pissed off because Jay covered for her.

"I didn't think you needed to talk to me. You made it pretty clear at the restaurant that we-" She motions her finger between the two of us, "aren't going to work." She pushes away from the counter, dropping her phone into her purse and grabbing her keys.

"Where are you going?" I ask. "You need to talk to me Blake, I'm sorry I shut down. It's just there's so much history and..." She cuts me off, "You don't need to explain Judson. It's fine. I guess we just jumped into this too fast."

What? She thinks we moved too fast? Before I can respond, she is headed out the door, but I am quick on her heels. She practically jumps down the stairs and stands outside a Honda.

"Did you buy this?" I ask her.

"No, it's a rental until I decide what I want. Which needs to be soon, I guess." She opens the door, and I push it closed,

closing the space between her and the car seat.

"I love you, I do. I am just trying to keep you safe." She laughs and wraps her arms over her chest.

"Keep me safe from what Judson!" She yells.

"The shit storm that is my father. Blake, you don't know him. You don't know what he's capable of. I can't risk it."

She relaxes her defensive stance, "Judson, you can't protect me from everything. You have to let me make my own decisions. I love you, I want to be there for you, but there's only so much I can do if you won't let me help you."

I glance down at her wrist. I guess she is right. I don't have as much control as I'd like. The feeling of not being able to protect her makes me feel nauseous but not as bad as the thought of what my father is capable of. I can't form words as quickly as I would like. She reaches up and kisses my cheek before shutting the car door. Leaving me to watch her drive away.

CHAPTER 34

BLAKELY

December 31

Two weeks without so much as a single text from Judson, complete radio silence. He feels like a ghost, part of me feels like maybe the last two months were a dream after all. If I wasn't still in Savannah, I would probably think it was, but being here definitely makes the memories more vivid. I have been living in a small apartment near the college. My application was approved, and I will be starting this semester. It's the smallest studio apartment I've ever seen, but the rent is doable, and I actually like its character.

This weekend is my first wedding shoot. I am pretty excited to get started, and I roped Hanna into tagging along. The gaudy pink cast came off a few days ago, and after six weeks, the bones healed back correctly, according to my x-ray—still no motion, not even a twitch. I thought I'd get the cast removed and magically be healed but so much for wishful thinking. The doctor seems to think therapy may help, but I'm not gonna hold my breath. I strap a brace over my wrist to keep it stable and roll over in the bed, glaring at the empty wall. I've only been here a week, and it's not much of a home, it feels temporary, and I know I can't hold onto that.

This is my new start. I tell myself, grabbing my camera off the floor and scrolling through the pictures I've taken recently. My thumb comes to a screeching halt on the picture of Judson, the first picture I took. It seems so long ago, but I can't move it from the camera. I study his face, the dark eyes I've come to love, and the way he looks at me through the lens. The camera hits the sheets with a thud, and I can't stop a sigh from escaping my lips as I throw my head back down on the pillow.

The buzzing of my phone snaps me back to reality as I toss over to see Hanna's face flash on the screen.

"Hey," I answer, trying to hide my sadness.

"You're coming over tonight. We are ringing in the new year!" She sounds so chipper, and honestly it makes me want to punch her in her pretty face.

"I think I'm going to pass," I say with a hesitant whisper.

"No, you can't. I already told Jay you were coming."

"I'm sorry Han, I can't. Judson and I... well, I don't know what we are." I admit.

"Judson isn't coming. Jay said he is in Atlanta. So you're coming."

As much as I want to argue and stay in with rocky road and a rom-com, I decide it's not worth it because she isn't going to let me out of this. I agree to stop by and throw the phone back down.

Hanna is a great friend, but her ties to Judson leave me wishing I had other friends that didn't know him... or me.

I rummage through the closet after my shower looking for something to wear. I have managed to accumulate a bit of a wardrobe since moving here but decide nothing really screams Happy New Year. Going into town to pick up a few things won't be so bad.

I still haven't bought a car, so I've been taking an Uber to most places or walking. I would say I didn't like to walk but exploring has actually been pretty fulfilling when getting my mind off of the shit show that is my life. After a solid forty-five minutes of shopping, I finally decide on a soft gold form-fitted dress and some black booties and make my way back to get ready. I don't spend a lot of time priming because I don't have anyone to impress, So I grab my clutch, phone, and keys and head out the door.

The night is still young as I pull into Jay and Hanna's apartment. I am a couple hours late, but after pacing my apartment trying to think of an excuse not to come and coming up empty, I decided better late than never. I force the front door open. The crowd is thicker than I had anticipated. I feel a wave of nausea as I enter, remembering the last conversation I had with Judson.

"Blakely! I am so glad you are here!" Hanna squeals as she runs up to me and takes my hand. I offer her a forced smile and follow her through the crowd to the balcony.

"Jay, Blake's here!"

He pulls me into a hug, unsure of what to say.

"Blake, I'm sorry about ev-" I cut him off.

"Don't, it's alright. I don't want to talk about it." He gives me a weak smile and glances down at my wrist.

The next few minutes we spend in small talk about doctor appointments and how I'm doing. I excuse myself and head into the kitchen for a drink. I am pouring myself a beer into a cup when I can't help but feel this odd sensation that I am being watched. I turn and glance around the room, trying to decide if I need to worry. I don't really see anyone I recognize, so I continue to pour my drink.

A few seconds later, I feel a hand on my back, and the familiar feeling has my heart beating out of my chest. I jerk around, frightened, and gasp as I see Judson closing in around me. I can't help but pull myself away.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" I stutter.

"I don't even know Blake." He looks exhausted like he hasn't slept in a month. The look of desperation in his eyes has me willing to listen to him when I really just want to walk away.

I just stare at him, wondering if this is real or if I just imagine things now.

"Can we talk?" He looks down at me and places his hand on my hip.

I nod, and he takes my hand and leads me into Jay's bedroom. Suddenly the nerves are feeling a lot like dread, and I'm not sure if I want to break things off again. Once was enough for me. He pulls the door closed, and I take a seat on the bed. He hesitates as he sits down and pushes my hair behind my shoulder.

He doesn't speak. I see the hurt in his eyes. The pain radiates off of him so much, I am starting to feel it myself. I find myself wishing I could break down this imaginary wall he has put up and take it all away.

The silence should be awkward, but it's actually comforting. He tugs me into a hug, still speechless. I can feel him crumbling into me. His large frame feels weak, and it's as if he's turned into a puddle on the floor. He pulls back, and I can see the moisture on his eyelids.

Is he crying?

"I can't stay away from you. I want to. I need to, but I physically can't. I need to know that you are ok." His words sting and are difficult for me to process as I sit here staring at him. So he doesn't want to be with me but doesn't want to let me go? The realization of how fucked up I feel right now doesn't sit well with me.

"So you don't want to be together, but you don't want to leave me alone?" I take a deep breath, "I can't keep doing this Judson, I want to be with you, but I am all in. I can't be *just* friends. I would like to think I could be, but I can't lie to you and say I would even try." He grabs my hand out of my lap and fidgets around with my fingers.

"I feel this strange need to protect you, Blake. I can't explain exactly what that means, but I need you in my life, and I feel like to keep you around, I have to take a step back. I just need you to be patient and understand what that means for us." He looks away, out the window, and my heart is breaking again.

"Judson, you don't need to protect me or pity me. Sure we met under weird circumstances, but I have been through enough. I don't want to be drug around, I have been my whole life, and I think it's finally time for me to be free from that." His face pales, and he looks at me, trying to find some words.

"I love you. God Blake, I love you. I don't want to hurt you." He lets out a sigh.

"Then don't, Judson." He looks up at me, and before I can even think it through, his lips are connected with mine. The desire is pulsing through me, love. What I have always wanted to feel, a specific craving that only he can fill.

The door opens, and I jolt away from Judson. Jay is standing in the doorway.

"Jud, what are you doing here? I thought you were in Atlanta?"

Judson looks completely flustered, "I was, I am, I will be."

He practically stutters the words out at Jay. The look in Jay's eyes tells me something is going on that is about to completely change everything.

"B, can you give us a second?" Jay gives me a genuine smile, and I drop Judson's hand and walk toward the door, giving him one last glance before pulling it closed.

CHAPTER 35

JUDSON

Watching her slip out that door knowing good and well I won't see her again, at least not anytime soon, damn near tore my heart out of my chest. Jay closes in on me, and I can feel his harsh tone in my bones, "I love you, but you are fucking stupid. Why did you come here? Was it to torture Blakely?"

"Jay, you don't have any idea what you are talking about."

He yanks his desk chair out and plops down in it with the same teenager attitude I've dealt with for the better part of 6 years.

"Well, why don't you enlighten me, Judson. You ghost us all for two weeks because Dad is back and break up with Blakely. I just don't understand. I know you don't do relationships, but I saw how you were at the hospital when Blake wrecked her car. You love her, so why don't you just tell her and stop being a dick."

I run my fingers through my mess of hair, "Jay, I've told her I love her. She's young like you and doesn't understand that I need to protect her from Ryan. You were twelve when shit went down. You were collateral damage, he has unfinished business with me, and I am sure that he will attempt to get to you or her if he finds out my relations with her." I blow out a deep breath and lay back onto the bed, my hands still tangled in my hair.

"She's young, but she isn't stupid. If her age difference was an issue, why did you pursue her in the first place?" He lets out a sigh.

"Her age means nothing. I love her, Jay. I'd marry her tomorrow." I know that is a pretty big revelation to my kid brother, but here lately, the words come before my brain can force them back down my throat.

"Wow, I've never heard you talk like that." Jay rolls the chair closer to me and places his hand on my shoulder. "Whatever goes on with Dad, I know you will come out on top

and stronger than before. I know you're my brother, but most of the time, I wish you were my dad." I pull him into a hug. I can't let anything happen to him or Blake. I shuffle fast to stand and bust toward the door. Before I head out, I turn to Jay, "I'm going to fix everything. Look out for her." I fly out of Jay's room and to the front door as quick as I can. There's only one place I need to be right now, and that is in Atlanta finishing what Carter and I started.

I jump into my car and drive a little too fast to Atlanta. I pull up outside Carter's penthouse and make my way up. We've spent the past two weeks digging through old company paperwork, trying to find any evidence of other crimes. So far, the only crime we have found is a whole lot of infidelity, which we already knew. When Ryan went to prison, we boxed up his office and only kept out some necessary files, so Carter and I have been digging through some of the files attempting to find any kind of ammunition. The sad part is, I feel so fucked up right now. Who wants to put their father in prison?

"Can you just breathe, man? We will find something, and if we don't, it's not like you can't kick his ass." Carter pushes my shoulder as I dig frantically through the 10th box. My breath hitches, and I suddenly feel the burning sensation coming up in my throat. My eyes feel betrayed at the label on the next manilla folder, and the second my brain realizes what it says, my hands become too weak to grab it, and the folder falls to Carter's hardwood floors.

Paternity.

What the hell? Just when I thought it couldn't get any dirtier, now I have a sibling somewhere that my dad abandoned?

"What is it?" Carter asks as he slides the folder closer to him with his foot. "What the..." He whispers as he opens the folder, his eyes dart to me and back to the papers he is now shuffling through.

"Is it a boy or a girl?" I ask playfully to hide the panic and the fact I feel like I was just sucker-punched in the gut. The cheating was one thing, but getting some other woman *pregnant*? How could he do that to my mother if he really loved her?

"Judson, you are a boy. These papers are yours."

I yank the folder out of his hand, digging through it like my whole damn life depends on it.

Probability of Paternity 0%, Judson Banks, Ryan Banks... The muscle inside my chest feels as though it is going to beat straight out onto the floor. The harsh realization sets in. He knew he wasn't my father. Would my mom have cheated on him? The questions flood my mind quicker than I'd like as I sit in complete silence, trying to figure out my next move.

"Are you okay?" Carter's voice is soft and apologetic, "I want to say I'm surprised Judson, but you have never been anything like him." I breathe in and out, reminding myself that is how I survive. You know, normal things like breathing. I sit back into the chair. What seems like an eternity goes by before I can even move. I stand, and my feet feel like bricks as I walk into the kitchen to pour myself a drink. The whiskey burns as it makes its way down my throat.

"Easy tiger..." Carter grabs the whiskey bottle and sets it back up onto the shelf. I shoot him a look and pull the bottle back down, refilling my glass.

"Judson, I know you are pissed and confused but is this really what you want." He glances toward the bottle.

"Carter, would you just shut the fuck up? I really don't need you judging me right now for having a drink." He pulls back with his hands up in surrender.

"Do you understand what is going on right now?" I slam my already empty glass down on the counter, not giving him any time to respond before continuing my mini rampage.

"Carter, the man that I have hated since I was twelve, is not my real father. I love Blakely, but I can't even be with her because I am so fucking worried he will do something to hurt her. I want to marry her, Carter. Forever. I never thought I would ever feel something like that, and just when I do, Ryan gets out of prison and comes back into my life to make me miserable. Don't even get me started on Jay. I love that kid more than anything." I take a deep breath before placing the bottle back on the shelf.

"It doesn't even matter. Blakely probably already thinks I'm certifiably insane. I've already fucked everything up with her the day he came back, and I walked away like a bitch."

Carter loosens his tie and pushes the stool away from the countertop. "She will understand, Judson. Maybe you shouldn't shut her out. Do you really think Ryan would hurt her?"

"Carter, he hit his own kids." The realization washes over his face as he blows out a breath, "Shit, you're right." He is silent for a few minutes before finally asking, "So what are you gonna do?"

Damn, I wish I knew.

CHAPTER 36

BLAKELY

January 4

I push myself up onto my elbows as I roll over to check my phone. It's still dark outside, which isn't surprising since I haven't been sleeping much. School starts on Monday, so I have the weekend to prepare, and honestly, I'm feeling a little anxious about it.

When I thought I had a support system, everything felt easy, but now I just feel alone. I want this, though, and I want it for me. Surprisingly, I was accepted as a transfer. However, they did tell me last minute, generating a small panic attack.

Luckily, I was able to get my therapy appointments to work around my school schedule. To say I'm nervous about school with only one hand is an understatement. I've still been figuring out my everyday one-handed tasks, and it's been challenging, to say the least.

I decide to get up and make my way over to my small kitchen in the tiniest apartment known to man. It's basically just one room, besides the bathroom, which is barely big enough to turn around in. But it's cheap, and I have to admit, it's got good bones. This old historical structure has character, and the walls are all exposed brick. Three large windows spanning the wall let in an astonishing amount of light, and as much as I try to hate it, I can't. Even if it's not where I'd rather be.

I press the power button on the Keurig, deciding Dolly was right and I really could use a cup of ambition. The desk that I put together a couple days ago sits close to the window. I glance over at the counter, eyeing the four screws I mysteriously had left, and give the desk a good wiggle. I followed the instructions but somehow managed to have leftover parts. I'm sure something was missed, but it hasn't fallen to the ground yet, so I shrug my shoulders, taking a seat

in the chair. Which didn't have any leftover screws— *small victories here*.

I push the laptop open and work on editing several photos that need to be sent out. I have a wedding to shoot tomorrow, and truthfully, I'm looking forward to getting my mind off of Judson and spending the day with Hanna.

After spending several hours in town, shopping and picking up several things I needed for classes, it's time for dinner. I decide I should head back home and whip something up. The apartment location has been a lifesaver with public transportation. There is a bus that comes directly to my building. I need to get a new car, but I'll admit I'm kind of afraid of driving by myself. I know that sounds silly, but I have developed *Post Traumatic Crash Disorder*.

Barging through the door, I toss my bags on the floor and fling my coat on the coat rack.

"Shit." I curse myself as I open the fridge and decide to order take out.

After the longest 45 minutes of my life, with my belly growling and my patience reaching the brink of explosion, the doorbell rings. I stomp to the door and fling it open, "Well, it's about time! Haven't you ever heard of under-promise and over-deliver?"

The man at the door looks at me like I have lost my everloving mind. This is obviously not the guy from "China Dragon." My eyes go wide as I take him in. He towers over me, dirty blonde hair and a suit that screams, "Hi, I'm important! Respect me right now!".

I take a step back, "Um... I'm sorry, I was... well, someone is coming..."

He looks at me with a smirk, "Are you always that rude to the delivery guys?"

I have no idea who he is, but I decide to banter with him because, well... he asked for it. Also, let's be real, I'm a little mouthy.

"Only the really late and annoying ones. Who are you?"

"Carter Graham, Judson's friend." I look him up and down. *So this is Carter?* He certainly does look like a hotshot attorney from Atlanta.

"Are you going to invite me in?" I step back on my heels.

"Can I see some ID?"

Yeah, I totally went there because he is a freakin stranger, just showing up out of the blue.

He laughs, "Judson said you were tenacious. He wasn't joking."

He shoves his ID in my face with a Cheshire Cat grin, "See, I told you I am who I say I am."

He is actually pretty hilarious, and I just can't help but fuck with him.

"You have gotten uglier, though. Do you have any pictures with Judson? You know, for extra verification."

He fidgets with his phone a minute before holding a picture of him and Judson up to me. They both look happy, laughing at the camera.

"Come in, but no funny business because I will stab you with a kitchen knife." He laughs and plops down on the couch.

"What are you doing here, and how do you know where I live?"

Without hesitation, he throws a paper down on the table, "I'm here for Judson." I pick it up, scanning the contents. My eyes grow wide by the realization of what I am reading.

"He can't come here, Blakely, not yet. He's a good guy, but he is so fucked up when it comes to this." I nod, throwing the paper back down on the coffee table.

I feel tears burning my eyes as I turn to him, "I wish he would let me be there for him. I would be."

"Yeah, I thought you'd say that. That's why I'm here. Typically I would tell a girl to just take a loss and move on because no guy with Daddy issues is going to be worth it, but I'm here to tell you the opposite." He takes a deep breath before continuing, "I've known Judson a long time. He doesn't get invested with anyone. He won't get too close in fear of getting the rug pulled. He's spent his entire life watching the fucked up relationship of his mom and dad, and quite honestly, he doesn't know how to do the whole *boyfriend* thing."

The realization sets in, he's right, but he doesn't know what I've been through either. Why do I always feel the constant need to help other people when I can barely help myself.

"I haven't ever seen him like this. He will push you away but don't think that it's because he doesn't love you. After all, I can assure you that is not the truth."

He hands me a post-it note, "I found this in a stack of papers he was going through. That is his handwriting."

Carter stands abruptly and turns to the door, "Thanks for letting me in. Judson will let you in too— *eventually*."

He pulls the door closed behind him, and I turn the deadbolt locked. I glance down at the horribly ugly yellow post-it note...

Atticus.

There is a collection of poems scribbled down. The tears fall as if they are entirely natural as if they belong. I tear my jacket off the coat rack and grab my purse. He is going through this but still thinking about me, about us. He is a guy, and he looked up a poet, for crying out loud! I run down the stairs of the building as fast as I can until I reach Carter.

"Can you take me to him?" He looks at me. I'm positive I look like a complete train wreck with mascara all over my face. He nods and opens the car door for me. I settle into the seat, jerking the seatbelt around my shoulder.

"Thank you for coming to me. You're a good friend."

"He is my best friend, like a brother, really. We can be friends too." I smile at myself, thinking about how I went from no one to Judson, Jay, Hanna, and now Carter.

We make it about 2 minutes down the road before I burst into a fit of laughter—a full-blown belly giggle. I'm still crying and quite possibly snotting everywhere.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" He asks, his forehead wrinkled up between his eyes.

I can hardly get the words out between my explosions of giggling, "I'm gonna miss the real China Dragon guy!"

He laughs with me as we make our way onto the interstate. *To Judson*.

CHAPTER 37

JUDSON

I jerk my head from the counter at the sound of the knocking at the door. Shit, I must've fallen asleep. I turn my head toward the clock on the stove, midnight. Thinking it must be Carter, I pad my way to the door and yank it open, my heart falling quickly into my stomach.

Blakely.

The absolute last person I expected to see. She is a mess, her hair tied into a messy knot on top of her head and mascara under her green eyes. She doesn't say a word. I step back, allowing her inside. The tears seem to fall from her eyes unconsciously as she reaches out a tiny yellow piece of paper.

I take the note from her hand and pull her closer to me. Her breathing slows as she nestles up against my torso. She pulls away and looks up at me, speaking to me with her eyes because her mouth can't decide what to say. I think about telling her every last detail of why I am afraid Ryan will try and destroy my life but instead, I freeze. Looking into her eyes, there isn't any way I would fill her pretty mind with all of the bullshit that is eating away at me every second.

"I love you." Three words coming off her lips are desperate and full of emotion. "I don't want to be without you Judson, I don't care about any of the bullshit. We can get through it together."

She's wrong.

She's adorable and determined as hell, but she's wrong. I can't hurt her, and I won't let anyone else. But as much as I need to send her back out the door, I need her here just the same.

"I'm sorry, Blake. I don't want to hurt you. No matter what, I just want to protect you."

The look in her eyes ignites every sense of desire within my soul. Her lips pull mine onto hers. She opens her mouth slightly as she presses her mouth, forcefully into mine. Her tongue and mine dance softly as I lay her body down onto the sofa. Her legs wrapped around my waist send me into a fit of arousal, and the sweat pants I have on are doing a shit job hiding it.

She rakes her hands up my abs and around my back as she lifts my gray t-shirt over my head. Her steady look into my eyes produces completely unfamiliar feelings, and the intimacy has my entire body on fire. I am silently cursing myself for not living in an alternate universe where I didn't have to bring her into all of the drama that is my life. I slowly kiss a trail down her neck and hover over her breasts, breathing them in, planting soft kisses. The look of adoration in her eyes and the soft moans coming off her lips are sending me close to edge as I pull back to slide down her jeans.

Her breath hitches as my fingertips hook around the top of her black lacy panties. My eyes haven't left hers, and I swear she is holding my entire heart in the palm of her hand, and I'm holding hers. Her hand wraps around the back of my neck, and she pulls my mouth onto hers. I slowly pull my pants off as I continue kissing her, sliding into her folds. She completely unravels. It's been too long since I've been inside her, and as badly as I want to take it slow, I'm afraid I'm incapable of doing so.

"You are so tight." I take long strokes as she digs her fingers into my back.

"Judson, I'm so close. Don't stop."

I couldn't stop even if I wanted to. I push into her, feeling her tighten around me. My name coming off of her lips louder and louder sends me into complete ecstasy.

I can't pull out of her. I can't even let go of her. This sudden need to be close, to be fully present with her in this moment, trumps everything else.

"Are you okay?" Her eyes are piercing straight through me, and her body language seems different than it ever has been before. Suddenly in the pit of my stomach, I feel worried. Dreading that the next thing out of her mouth will be something I don't want to hear.

"We didn't use protection, Judson."

Her words almost don't even process in my mind. I see the sheer terror on her face as a wave of guilt washes over her. For the first time in her eyes, I see something unfamiliar—regret.

She repeats herself, and the thoughts run through my head about a mile a minute as I try to come up with some explanation.

"I just got caught up. I really wasn't thinking." That is the best I can do.

"You weren't thinking about the possibility of making a baby? Isn't that what sex is meant to do?" She throws her words at me like an accusation, and honestly, the hostility in her voice pisses me off a little.

"I didn't see you stopping to think about it either." Her breathing starts to pick up as she shuffles away from me to throw her clothes back on.

I'm fucking twenty-eight years old and have never had sex without a condom. I didn't even care to ask her. Truthfully, I had never pictured a life that didn't involve her in it long term, so I had already planned kids with Blake.

"We should be okay. It's not the time of the month I should get pregnant."

"I wouldn't mind if you did get pregnant, Blake."

I can't believe I just said that out loud.

"I already fucked this up once. How could I be so stupid, so irresponsible and reckless." Her voice is so low, it's almost a whisper, and I can't help but grab her by her cheeks.

"I love you. Let's just trust that there is a plan for us, and we can't know it ahead of time. It will be okay."

She nods, leaning her forehead against my chest.

"I'm sorry I freaked out on you. You've just been so up and down lately, and that would be the last thing you need to deal with, Judson."

"I'm not dealing with you, Blake. I love you."

My emotions are heightened tonight. She has totally torn me apart, pulling and stretching back every layer of my heart. She's right though, the last thing I need is a child depending on me when I can't even give my full attention to the woman I want.

Scratch that, the woman that I desperately need.

She doesn't speak as she swipes more tears from her eyes. I hate seeing her so torn up. It makes me feel powerless. Especially when there is nothing I can do to make her smile. I can feel her chest move up and down as she breathes, the scent of her hair reminding me of home. I don't want her to leave, but the more silent moments that pass by, the more I know what is coming. She pulls herself to her feet, and I feel her slipping away.

"I have to go. I have a wedding to shoot tomorrow." She stumbles over her words nervously as she slips her shoes on.

"Let me drive you back. It's late."

"No." She whispers out a sigh. "I'll be fine."

Without another word or even a goodbye kiss, she is gone.

CHAPTER 38

BLAKELY

January 5

My head pounds as the sun streams through the ginormous windows in this tiny bachelorette pad, making me want to have curtains delivered, pronto. I've never woken up with a Judson hangover, but I'm pretty sure that is the diagnosis. I feel fucked, in all aspects, and I'm ready to just throw in the towel.

I have never felt the flood of so many emotions in my life. I'm sure I need to call my therapist, but at the same time, I'd rather wallow in my own misery. I don't need someone else telling me how messed up I am right now. I'm most definitely aware.

I glance at my bum wrist as the anger heats up my blood. It's just not fair. As if enough shit hasn't already happened to me, here I am down one hand. As hopeful as the doctor is to my face, I know between him and the physical therapist, they don't think I'll be able to use it again. Everyone tiptoes around the injury like they are afraid I might combust at the mention. Genuinely, at this point, I'm just happy to have lived through the crash, not that my living means much right now, but I'm scared to die. So I'm glad my life was spared, I guess.

Hanna comes busting through the door with what appears to be a million jackets and coffee in tow.

"You look like your puppy just died." She eyes me curiously as she sets the drink tray down on the counter.

"Worse... I saw Judson last night." I drag myself to the kitchen space, and I take a long gulp of coffee.

"Oh, Jay said that he stopped by the party the other night. We haven't seen much of him at all."

"Yeah, he was there, and then Carter came to see me last night. They found some paternity paperwork that showed that Judson's dad isn't his actual father."

"Jameson hasn't said anything about that, do you think he knows?" She fidgets her weight from one foot to the other, obviously nervous about that bombshell.

"I really don't know. I don't think anyone knows." I let out a breath.

"What about Jay? Did he find anything about him?"

"I don't think so. I think Carter would've mentioned it."

She shrugs, "He doesn't talk to me about it, Blake. He is keeping everything inside. I'm nervous for the moment he goes off like a bottle rocket."

Judson has mentioned Jay's temper and fighting, but I honestly didn't even think of him hurting Hanna.

"Are you afraid of him?"

"No, he wouldn't hurt me, but he would hurt someone if he felt threatened, and I just want him out of trouble."

I don't know what goes on inside Judson's mind, or Jameson's for that matter, but I've grown close to Hanna almost like a little sister. If I could, I would put caution tape around her heart to protect her. It seems right now the only thing we can do is try not to get dragged down into the dark hole of the Banks family reunion.

"Ready to do the damn thing?" She smiles as she picks my camera up off the counter and waves it around.

"Not really, but it's now or never." I smile and lift my coffee at her as I make my way into the bathroom to get ready. There is no way I can go to a wedding looking like this. I turn the shower on and quickly wash my hair and hop out. I throw on some comfortable but fashionable clothes and decide on an easy blow-dried look. It's hard to accomplish much with one hand, but I have gotten better with practice. I shrug at myself in the mirror and make my way out into the living area. Hanna is on the phone, but the look on her face is making me nervous.

She lays the phone down, and she cuts her eyes to me.

"What's wrong?" I ask her.

"That was Jay. I could barely even understand him." The fear in her eyes breaks my heart as she lets out a loud "ugh," throwing her phone down.

"It's 8:30 in the morning. Is he *drunk*?" She looks away quickly, wiping tears from her eyes.

"Let's go get him. If we go now, we can bring him back here until after the wedding." She nods, and we head down to her car.

It takes a combined effort, but we are able to drag Jameson out to Hanna's car. He is mumbling about how much he loves her and how he wants to get married. Hanna looks over at me and rolls her eyes. After a struggle up the stairs, we get him settled onto the couch. I nod to the trashcan, and Hanna drags it over near him. It isn't 30 seconds later that he's throwing up. Hanna sits next to him and rubs his back as he continues to spill it out.

"I didn't make it six months, B. Please don't leave my brother." He runs his hand over his mouth and settles back on the couch. I turn around to respond, and he is passed out. He has obviously forgotten that Judson has made that choice for both of us.

"Hanna, why don't you stay here with him for a couple hours to make sure he is going to be okay, and meet me at the wedding in a little while." She gives me a hesitant look as she glances over at Jameson.

"Yeah, maybe that is smart."

I pull into the venue and shove everything I may need into my backpack. I slide the camera strap over my neck and cram some extra SD cards into the front zipper of my bag. It's cold outside, and the weather is gloomy with flurries of snow falling from the clouds. The ceremony is inside a stunning stone building and will make for the most beautiful memories.

I have yet to meet the bride, we've exchanged a few emails, but we never got the chance to meet face-to-face before this day arrived. I make my way into the bridal suite, and an army of pink dresses appear.

"You must be the photographer! I'm Katherine. It's so nice to meet you." She pulls me into a hug like she has known me forever.

"Thank you so much for choosing me to capture your day. I'm really excited to get started. Just act like I'm not here. I'll be between here and the groom's suite before the ceremony."

After taking a ton of pictures, I make my way over to where the groomsmen are. There are two guys, probably in their late 50's, smoking cigars on the deck.

"Hey guys, I'm Blakely, the photographer. Care if I get some pictures?"

These guys look important and powerful, like they are ready to take someone's entire life and crush it between their palms and fingers.

"Sure, but you will probably need the groom." He nods toward the bar.

I make my way over to the bar and take a seat on the stool next to him. He doesn't take his eyes off his drink.

"I'm Blakely, congratulations on the big day. I'm here to take pictures."

He doesn't respond, just slides his drink glass back and forth.

"Is everything okay?" I ask.

"Is anything ever okay?" He responds, and boy, do I feel that.

"Good point." I nod to the bartender, and he brings me a shot, I turn it up, and the sound of the glass hitting the counter draws his attention.

"You don't look old enough to be drinking."

His words bring out the tigress that I try to keep in the cage.

"You look too old to be drinking."

He erupts in a burst of deep, growling laughter, lifting his glass.

"Touche."

"So why are you at the bar? Cold feet?" I ask, instantly regretting the fact that I have no filter.

"No." He barks, tilting up his glass and finishing off his drink.

"Do you have a crazy aunt that is coming to the wedding?"

"No. I don't have any family."

Suddenly I find myself feeling sorry for him.

He stands, "So I guess we better get to taking pictures, or I will have one upset bride."

We make our way out onto the deck, snapping several pictures. This is the most serious, unemotional bunch of men I have ever seen. They wouldn't know a smile if it smacked them in the face. I finish up with the guys and decide to take pictures of the venue. The ceremony is beautifully decorated. I'm almost positive they bought the entire floral shop.

Hanna makes her way into the door and spots me.

"How is he?"

"Better than I expected." She shuffles with her keys, cramming them into her purse.

"Are you ready to help me get them posed for group pictures?"

"You know I am. I *love* weddings." She grins, grabbing my backpack, and tossing it on her back. Sure I can carry it, but she wants to help and if I'm honest, taking pictures with one hand isn't the easiest. I'm still learning how to hold the camera still, so I'll take her help.

We make our way back into the bridal suite, and Katherine turns to face us from the mirror. She is beautiful. If I had to guess, she's probably in her mid 40's, with long, blonde-dyed

hair. She looks a little bit like a trust fund baby, and what I am gathering about the past real estate moguls I have photographed for is that most of them were born into money. I haven't met a single one that was self-made or humble.

Seriously lacking in the humility department.

Other than the fact that she looks like she just stepped off the set of "Real Housewives," she seems nice, so I'm trying really hard not to judge.

After a long hour of taking every picture that Katherine felt the need to imitate off Pinterest, a nap away from Bridezilla sounds amazing.

I guzzle down two full water glasses and make my way into the big event room for the ceremony. I take it all in and really didn't expect to feel anything. The emotions hit me like a ton of bricks. The exposed beams have white drapes hanging off of them with twinkle lights, quite possibly the most beautifully decorated wedding I have ever seen.

I find myself wanting all of those things that I didn't want six months ago. The happily ever after, the family, the love. Just all of it. The sinking feeling of grief floats around in my stomach. The only person on my mind is Judson. I try to push my thoughts aside. *If he was serious about me, wouldn't he be running toward me, not away?* I take a deep breath as the pianist gently begins playing, and I pull up my camera like a shield.

Vows are exchanged, the most insensitive and rehearsed sounding vows I have ever heard. I find myself wondering if they even love each other at all. The groom pulls Katherine in for a simple peck on the lips.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, It is now my pleasure to present for the first time, Mr. and Mrs. Ryan Banks."

The crowd erupts in cheers as my camera crashes to the cobblestone floor.

CHAPTER 39

JUDSON

January 26

Three weeks feels like an eternity when you really miss someone. Carter and I have been spending every night digging into things, trying to find something, anything. We have come up empty-handed every time. I haven't reached out to anyone because I know if I talk to Blake, it will only make me want to see her even more. It's hard enough to stay away as it is, let alone be reminded of her voice. Most nights, I roll over in my empty bed, hoping to get tangled in her hair and realize this was some sort of twisted dream. Her memory isn't something I ever want to escape, so attempting to forget is out of the question.

Luckily I've had Hanna secretly checking in with me, she's not my biggest fan, but she will give me a "she's ok" text when I need it, so I'm thankful for that. I actually like Hanna, which was not what I was expecting from the beginning. She's good for Jay and seems to keep saving him from himself, which is more than I can do right now. Ryan has been lying low, and I haven't heard anything from him, which seems way too suspicious for comfort. Not to mention I'm still dealing with the fact he isn't biologically my father.

In a perfect world, he would just disappear and leave us all alone, but I know that isn't his style. I know perfectly well; this is the calm before the shit-storm. I just wish I could see beyond the walls of this damn apartment and into the mind of Ryan Banks, at least try to predict his next move.

My dinner plate clanks into the sink as I cut the water on to rinse it off. The city lights are streaming in the windows, and it boggles my mind that there are probably hundreds of people walking the street below, and I have never felt so alone. I pull the blinds closed and find a spot on the couch. I switch on the T.V., hoping to think about something else. Of course, hockey is on, the *fucking Preds*. I let out a deep growl and toss the

remote into the mantle and watch the back come off, and the batteries expel onto the floor.

Visions of Blakely standing on my boat in my damn T-shirt flood my mind. My daydream is short-lived when there's a loud knock at the door. I slide a gray shirt over my head and look through the peephole.

I open the door for Carter and Jameson. Instantly suspicious.

"What are you doing here?" I turn my attention to Jay as he pushes past me in the doorway.

"We need to talk." He demands, slamming his fist into the fridge.

"When were you going to tell me?" I take a deep breath and start walking toward him.

"I didn't think it was relevant to anything. I don't even know what to do with the information." I say truthfully.

"What about me, Judson?" He fights the tears back as he stands in front of me. "It's relevant to me. You should've told me what was going on."

He steps back and pulls out a stool. I don't think I've ever seen him so torn up.

"Did Blakely tell you?" I ask, knowing she didn't. Meddling isn't her style.

"No, Hanna let it slip out last night." I sigh, instantly feeling bad for her because I know his temper and that he probably blew up on her.

"Where is Hanna?"

"She's staying at her parent's beach house. We can't even be in the same room. I can't even look at her. She's lied to me for weeks. *Just. Like. You*," he continues, his tone getting more choppy and loud.

Is withholding the truth the same as lying?

"Have you even talked to B, Judson?" He asks but doesn't give me time to respond.

"Of course you haven't because you've been hiding here in Atlanta thinking you can keep Ryan away from her, but he's already been fucking with her, and you just don't care!"

I get a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach as I try to find something to say.

"What?" I lean in closer to him, and I can feel Carter on my back, ready to jump in.

"You heard me," he barks, slamming a fist into the counter.

"You wonder why I am so fucked up? It's because of you. It's because you can't love anybody Judson, all you know how to do is push them away, and that's all I've seen since I was twelve."

He stands, staring at me through his tear-soaked eyelashes, "If you love Blakely, you shouldn't wait too long to make sure she knows just how much. A girl like her deserves more than this, and so does Hanna. I'm going back to Savannah. Figure it out, Judson, before it's too late."

He grabs his keys and stalks out the door slamming it behind him. Carter shrugs at me and pours himself a drink. Jameson isn't wrong.

"What do you know?" I turn to Carter, and he takes a long drink before setting his cup in the sink.

"You sure you want to know?" He asks.

"No, I asked so you wouldn't tell me."

He doesn't find my sarcasm amusing, as he gives me a death glare.

"Blakely went to photograph a wedding, Ryan ended up being the groom."

The fuck?

"Hanna told Jay last night, apparently it was a few weeks ago. It shook Blakely up pretty bad."

"Why didn't she tell me? Why didn't Hanna tell me?" I ask, pacing a hole in the floor.

"I don't know. Hanna told Jay that Blake thought maybe it was just a coincidence. So they didn't want to stir anything up."

"Coincidence? No." I shake my head.

"I know that, and you know that, but they're innocent in all of this. You know Blake, I think she tries to see the good in every situation. Plus, it doesn't help that I'm sure he turned his fake charm on high." I let out a deep breath. I can't sit here and wonder what he said to her or what he is doing to her.

I march into the bedroom and pull out a bag. Carter stands at the door as I'm throwing clothes and shit inside.

"You know I'm a lawyer, but I can't get you out of everything, so think carefully before you do anything stupid." I roll my eyes at him and continue shoving things into my duffle.

"Carter, I'm not making any promises."

"Well, let's hope the next time I see you, it's not on the other side of the glass." He laughs nervously.

"I'm going to Savannah. I'll call you tomorrow."

He nods, and I push past him grabbing my keys.

The walk down to my car is cold and windy, and the second I reach my driver's seat, I know I can't go straight to Blake. I'm going to find him, and I'm going to tell him that he is done holding any power over my life.

The Corvette is probably the last thing I need to be driving right now, pissed off. I got back to Savannah way quicker than legally possible, but honestly, it helped to blow off some steam. I decide against busting down any doors tonight and to sleep it off at my house. I will gain some composure to find him tomorrow.

The second my car hits the driveway, I feel sick. I don't want to be here without her, this should be our house. The garage door creaks back closed, and I open the door into the kitchen. As I flick the lights on, I notice a figure sitting at the bar.

"Hello, Judson." Ryan goes to stand and struts toward me. He looks way too comfortable in my house.

"How did you get in here?" I demand. I can feel the anger burning inside me like wildfire.

"Jameson is anything but subtle. I knew he was going to tell you about my run-in with your girlfriend. Knowing that you are predictable, I figured you'd come back to Savannah to look for me, so here I am." He smirks.

"What did you do to Blakely?"

"Nothing. She was too easy to scare off. I guess you taught her well. She's a mess though Judson, you really should find someone that at least has two working hands and can have kids."

I pull my fist back, and it finds his jaw before I can even muster up any words. He stumbles back, wiping his mouth before laughing.

"You are finished. I don't know what you want coming around and trying to fuck my life up, but it ends tonight. I'm not afraid of you anymore, and I found the paternity test, *Dad*."

His eyes turn dark, and he takes a step toward me and grabs my shirt, "I knew from the moment she got pregnant you weren't mine. I didn't even want kids, so I was careful, *extra careful*. Jameson was my only mistake, and your mother paid for that." I shove his hands off me, clenching my jaw shut.

"You don't deserve to be a father, and you sure as hell didn't deserve my mother."

He makes his way toward the door, "Stop digging around in my business Judson, there isn't anything to find. I won't fight you for the company. I have a new business venture in mind." I laugh to myself because I highly doubt it's legal.

"I know what you want to know Judson, the questions are all over your face. The answers..." He tosses a key on a keyring at me across the kitchen "are in that storage unit." He opens the door and slams it behind him.

I take a deep breath as I pull into the storage building, not far from our old house near the docks. I feel strange coming here so late, but I need to know what is inside. I push the key in, and the door rolls up. It's dark, so I use the flashlight on my phone to find the light switch.

It's basically empty. Against the back wall, there are two cardboard boxes. My curiosity peaks as I look around to make sure I wasn't followed. I open the lid of the first box and find an envelope on top addressed to me. I rip it open, finding a handwritten note inside.

Judson,

The first time I saw you, I knew I couldn't stay away. I physically couldn't do it. When Emily died, I didn't think I'd ever find anyone else that made me feel, really feel. Your mother opened up my heart. She made me see things I didn't think were even possible. I didn't mean to fall in love with her, but she made it too easy, and Ryan made everything more difficult. She was afraid of leaving him, what he would do. The reputation he had created would have been ruined had everyone known that your mother had an affair, so he did everything in his power to keep me away. Telling you at such a young age would have been confusing for you, so I thought I could build a bond with you in other ways. I bought the house next door, much to Ryan's Disapproval, and I wouldn't have accepted any amount of money for that house. I wish I could've gotten the nerve to send you this sooner but with Ryan put away, hopefully for good, I want you to know the truth. I want you to know I've always been proud of you, from your first home run to taking over this massive empire to honor your mother. You've always been my best friend and my son. I love you.

Jake "Russ"

The papers fall back into the box as my hand trembles. I lean my head back against the cinder block wall. The tears flow quicker than I can wipe them, and I feel the worst pain in my chest I think I have ever felt.

Russ was my dad.

After all this time, I finally know the truth. I decide against going through the boxes tonight and put them in my trunk. So many of my questions are answered, but so many still float around my mind. How did Ryan know about this, and why did he hide it all here in this storage unit?

It's a cold night, but there is only one place I want to go, the only place where I've ever felt like I belonged.

The dock.

CHAPTER 40

BLAKELY

February 6

I slam my book closed, pushing my papers to the side. I can't concentrate on anything. These first few weeks of school have been a breeze, and for that, I am so relieved. Jameson and his interrogations about Ryan's wedding have me avoiding him at all costs.

I got out of there as fast as I could. I didn't ask questions, so there wasn't really anything for me to know. I don't want to know what Ryan has up his sleeve for me. The fact that Judson was right, though, made me cringe.

Judson has been MIA since our unofficial goodbye that night in his apartment in Atlanta. We didn't say those words, but we both felt it. Well, I did. Seems like goodbye is all I know anymore. I feel like, without him, I'm not living. I'm merely existing, and existing is exhausting.

Cami came to visit last weekend, and it felt so nice having her here. Brayden kept Kaycee, and she drove down. We spent the whole weekend in slumber party mode, and honestly, it was nice getting my mind off of everything. It's a strange thing when your best friend lives a few hundred miles away, especially when you're as close as Cami and I are. Well, as close as we were. I'd be lying if I said the past six months hadn't changed me and every relationship I've ever had.

Most of my appointments for the week are scheduled today because Wednesdays are my "get shit done" days. I don't have class at all on Wednesdays, so I decided to put Physical Therapy on that day, and it's getting more and more frustrating every time. My phone catches my attention, buzzing on the coffee table.

Bryce- Still on for lunch?

Shit, I almost forgot about lunch. Bryce is kind of my first friend at Art School. We met in the library and don't have a single class together since he is in the Architecture program, but I like his personality. He actually sat down next to me one day, thinking I was someone else, and we couldn't stop laughing and got kicked out. Through Bryce, I met Lexie, a fashion major from California, and we have all three became fast friends.

I type a quick response and tell him I'm still down, rushing around to get ready since I overslept. I grab some high-waisted leggings and a cropped hoodie. My hair is a bit of a rat's nest, so I just pile it on top of my head and throw on some mascara for the finishing touch.

Voila, a homely masterpiece.

I grab my keys to my new car and make my way down to the street where It's parked. I couldn't stand the thought of another tiny car, so I opted for a bigger Toyota 4-runner. It looked safer. It's not brand new or the nicest, but it's perfect for me. At first, I had trouble mustering up the courage to go anywhere alone, but I can make it a few miles around downtown without a panic attack, so that's progress. I pull into a parallel spot off the street and run into the cafe where I'm meeting Bryce and Lexie.

Bryce waves at me, motioning me to come to the table, as I walk in the door. He is seated at a small round cafe style table in the middle of the restaurant. I can't help but roll my eyes at him, typical, dressed in nice jeans and a sweater. He's super tall, dark-skinned, and dark eyes. He tries to pretend he isn't rich, but the Rolex on his wrist and the Audi outside gives him away. He always laughs and calls it "Daddy's money," which I guess is right.

I glance down at my clothes, wishing I was more put together looking because next to Bryce, I look a little out of place.

"Where's Lexie?" I ask as I drag my chair across the floor.

"She's on her way. Something about a "Fashion Emergency" at the fabric store." I laugh out loud because I can see her running franticly, screaming at the sales clerk.

We talk back and forth for a few minutes, and he seriously makes me laugh so much, it makes my stomach hurt.

"Then my mom found my sister three cabins down, naked and wrapped in a bear rug." He laughs and is yanked up by his shirt out of his seat. I stumble out of my chair and take a couple steps back. My eyes scan the situation and come directly locked with the last person I expected to see.

Judson.

What the fuck is he doing?

"Judson, what the hell!" I whisper-shout, trying to figure out what is going on.

He disappeared for a month and thinks he can come in here to cause a scene?

No.

His wild eyes find mine, noticing my plea, and Bryce yanks his hand off of him.

"Is there something going on here that maybe I should be aware of?" Bryce asks, looking between Judson and myself.

"So that lady at the fabric store is seriously..." Lexie comes barreling in with her purse, phone, and keys all piled in her hand. She lifts her sunglasses on top of her head, her gaze finds Bryce, his hands clenching at his side.

"What's going on?" She asks.

"I'd like to know the same thing." Bryce agrees, sitting back down.

Judson's eyes have never left mine. They look needy and frantic. I give Bryce an apologetic look.

"Blake, can we talk?" He asks, stepping closer to me.

Bryce looks to Lexie with a questionable glare.

"I guess." I shrug and grab my stuff, "Guys, I'll catch you in a bit."

Lexie stands up and puts her tiny 110-pound body between mine and Judson's. Her long blonde hair swings in her ponytail as she grabs my arms.

"You don't have to go anywhere with him. If you don't want to."

She gives Judson a "go to hell" look. Her loyalty is adorable, coming to the rescue. I can tell she doesn't know if Judson is someone we can trust.

"I'm fine, promise. I'll call you in a little while." She pulls me in for a hug, and I walk out the door of the cafe with Judson on my heels.

We barely make it out onto the sidewalk before I lose my shit.

"Judson, what the fuck was that?"

He sighs, running his fingers through his messy hair. "I don't know, I didn't like how close he was to you."

"He's my friend! Which is a whole lot more than you've been here lately. I haven't seen you in a month, Judson." I cross my arms, crying. The tears fall quickly, but at this point, I'm pretty positive they are tears of anger. Not something I've dealt with in quite some time.

"I'm sorry Blake, Jay came to see me last week, and I've been... well, I've been..." He starts to walk faster, his behavior is becoming erratic. I stop on the sidewalk at my car door. He turns back toward me, wondering what I'm doing. I pull on the handle and slide into the seat. He grips the door to make sure I'm not going to close it.

"Can we just go home and talk?"

He is a wreck, and as much as I want to just tell him to fuck off and drive away, there is a small space of my heart that I know will prevent me from doing so.

"I can't. I have Physical Therapy."

I hold up my brace wrapped wrist in case he forgot.

"Can I go with you? Then we can go home?"

"Are you talking about my home or your home?"

He hesitates before looking at the ground. "Whatever you think is best."

I nod, and he walks around, sliding into the passenger seat.

He looks like he is a grenade about to go off and all I need to do is pull the pin. He is antsy and impatient, and I can feel that the words are about to erupt out of him.

"Blakely, I just want to..." I cut him off mid-sentence.

"Can we talk after therapy?"

I'm just not ready to go there yet. I feel like I should build a wall around my heart and guard it. He nods, agreeing that we can talk later, and is silent the entire ten-minute ride.

We pull into the lot of the doctor's office. He follows closely behind me as I walk inside. The receptionist is friendly, and I sign my name on the clipboard. She assures me that it will only be a minute.

My therapist comes to the door and calls my name, I expect Judson to wait in the waiting room, but he stands to his feet and guides me by the small of my back into the room. It's a decent-sized room with workout equipment and beds. We start by trying flex therapy, and no matter how many times we try, still nothing.

"We will keep trying honey, have you been feeling anything at all? Any numbness or pain?"

"Some dull pain, but nothing extreme," I lie, sometimes it hurts so bad I can't breathe.

"I have been reporting to your doctor about progress. He has mentioned that maybe you should see a specialist for additional surgery."

I roll my eyes, yanking my sweatshirt back over my head. "Another expensive surgery that probably won't even work."

Judson stands, "I think we would like some information for a specialist."

The anger builds in the pit of my stomach. He doesn't just get to come back into my life and make decisions like this.

"I can speak for myself," I remind him, crossing my arms over my chest before turning to my therapist, "I'll get in touch with my doctor and see what he has to say. Thank you." I wave as I walk back out the door to my car.

I feel the tears soaking my cheeks before I even realize they are falling.

"Hey, It's okay. It's going to be alright." Judson assures me as I wipe my cheeks on my sleeves.

"I'm fine, Judson."

We pull out of the lot, but I can't go to Judson's house, not without a hundred memories flooding my mind. I park on the street of my apartment building and make my way up, Judson close behind.

I push the door open and gasp. The whole place is trashed, my stuff tossed all over the place. I take a step back, a little freaked out.

"Stay here," Judson demands as he checks the bathroom.

I look around, trying to notice if anything is missing. My laptop and camera still sit unharmed on my desk.

"No one is here. Grab a bag. You're coming home."

He's so demanding, and at this point, I don't even feel like arguing with him. I stand frozen in shock, unable to get my brain to relay words to my voicebox.

"Blakely, please. Just get some stuff so I can make sure you are safe."

I grab a duffle bag and my school bag and shove it full of stuff I need. When we get back down to my car, I am literally shaking, so I ask Judson if he can drive us there.

It only takes about 10 minutes to get to Judson's house. The second we hit the driveway, I feel nauseous.

He opens the door and holds it open for me. I step over the threshold, feeling a wave of emotions. Happy, sad, upset, mad,

annoyed, relieved. Everything hits me all at once, and I feel like I was sucker-punched right in the gut. I shrug out of my layers and glance at Judson, who looks extremely uncomfortable. He glances at me and back to the counter, where a large manilla envelope sits.

"What is that?" I ask him, strolling toward him. He takes several seconds, staring at it before responding.

"I don't know." He states, undoing the metal prongs and pulling several photos out of it. He tosses them down on the counter before pulling his hands down his face. He backs away from the counter, dumbfounded.

"What is that, Judson?"

He doesn't respond, looking a little stunned, so I make my way closer to the counter and look down at the pictures.

"That's me," I state, moving the pictures around.

"Judson, these pictures are from the day of the wreck."

I push them around on the counter, sorting them out—me getting in my car, me standing outside my car.

"Why would someone send these?" I glance at Judson, and the look on his face is sheer terror.

"Judson! Why did someone send these?" I raise my voice, trying to break him out of whatever trance he is in.

Was someone following me?

He takes a deep breath and turns to face me, his eyes wild, "I don't think the crash was an accident."

I feel my stomach turn as I run to the sink to throw up. I can feel him behind me as he grabs a paper towel, running it under the faucet.

"Are you okay?" He asks as I finish retching.

"Um, no, I'm not okay. You think someone tried to kill me?" I ask, pulling out a seat at the bar.

"These pictures prove that someone was following you that day. I don't know what to think anymore." He becomes

more agitated the more he paces back and forth, and honestly, he is making me a little nervous.

"Was it Ryan? Do you think he did this?"

"I don't know. I think he wants to hurt me, and hurting you would hurt me."

"So you think he put a hit out and had someone crash into me?"

"That's what it looks like, and someone leaving the pictures here makes me think it's some type of warning or threat."

He pulls his phone out of his pocket and types furiously into it before slamming it on the counter and busting his fist through the kitchen wall.

I jump at the outburst, and he turns to face me, "Damn it, I'm sorry." He apologizes as he gathers the pictures up and crams them back in the envelope.

"Blake, I just.. I'm sorry." He takes a step toward me. "So much has happened in the past few weeks, I'm just not myself, all I want to do is..."

I stop him right there, finishing his sentence. "Keep me safe?"

He rounds the island, placing his hand on the back of my arm, he starts to speak, but I shrug out of his grasp, cutting him off. "Well, you left me for a month, and apparently, I'm still not safe."

I think about the crash, about how Ryan conveniently hired me to photograph his wedding.

"Remember that night we spent on your boat?"

"I remember every second we have ever spent together." He sighs.

"You said..." I use my fingers to imitate a quote, "You won't deal with anything alone." He looks down at his feet, defeated.

"Did you really mean that, or was that just a ploy to sleep with the girl next door?"

"Blakely, this was never about sex, you know that."

I take a deep breath to calm myself before responding, "I'm sorry," I say, attempting to steady my breathing. "I didn't mean that."

"I know," He whispers.

"I have spent so much time working on myself, getting to a place where I felt like I could just be *me*. After I lost my baby, there was a time where I would go to sleep, not caring whether or not I woke up the next day. I would go through everyday feeling like a bomb on a timer just waiting to self-destruct." He pushes a strand of hair behind my ear, taking the seat next to me. "I still feel pain every day. I crave a certain peace that I'm not sure I'll ever find. I love you, but the back and forth isn't good for me, Judson. You aren't good for me, not right now. I don't want any more setbacks."

CHAPTER 41

JUDSON

February 27

I drag myself out of bed two hours late, "Shit," I mumble, reaching for my phone to check it. The missed calls and texts aren't surprising, and I start to text Carter back when his name flashes on the screen.

"Yeah," I answer.

"Where the fuck are you? You're going to miss the flight."

"I'm leaving now. I'll be there in 20."

He mumbles something before hanging up.

I drag myself out of bed and grab the bag that I packed and conveniently positioned by the door. I need a shower, but I also need to make it to the airport.

The car drops me off at the entrance about 30 minutes later, and after finding the right concourse, I step directly on the plane. I shove my bag in the overhead bin and plop down in the aisle seat next to Carter.

"You look like shit," He laughs, tipping his water bottle back.

He is dressed in slacks and button-down, and I struggled to get out of pajamas, opting for jeans and a t-shirt.

"Can you just give it a rest?" I snap.

"You still haven't talked to Blakely?"

Of course, he can't just leave it alone.

The answer is no. I haven't talked to Blakely. She stayed at my house the night her apartment was ransacked but woke up the next morning distant. She said she needed space. She grabbed her bag and went to Lexie's. She lives close to the school, and the fact that no one knows where she is makes me feel a little better, but I still wish she'd let me protect her. I

want her desperately, but I need her to be okay. As long as I am connected to Ryan, she's not okay.

He's still laying low, I've tried to reach out to him, thinking I could make a deal with him to leave Blakely alone, but I suspect he knows that I am miserable without her. That is enough for him right now. He knows I won't put her in danger. That's why I haven't pushed talking to her or busted down her door already. The second he thinks we are happy together, he will retaliate to make sure I don't have an ounce of happiness. So if that means I have to be miserable until I can find a way to take him down, I will.

"No, I haven't talked to her," I state blatantly.

"Does she know you're leaving?"

"I said I haven't talked to her," I repeat.

He stops pushing, burying his nose into the computer as soon the flight attendant gives him the okay.

I am headed to California for the next several weeks with Carter to look into some investment properties.

Turns out I have family there, a family I'm not sure knows I exist but nonetheless biological family. Turns out Russ had a sister, so I have an aunt and some cousins. Part of me thinks I should seek them out and find out more about where I come from. The other part of me isn't sure they'd want to know me or my mess. After going through the boxes left inside the storage unit turns out there's a lot about him I didn't know.

I push my burdened thoughts aside and attempt to focus on the real reason I'm here.

We land in Dallas and hop on our next plane to San Francisco, we board first, and everyone is still taking their seats when my phone vibrates with a text.

My heart nearly beats out of my chest when I see Blakely's name.

I fumble through the letters trying to type a quick text. I don't have time to call her.

Judson- Is everything okay? Are you safe? On a plane to San Francisco. I can call you when I get there.

She responds almost immediately.

Blakely- I'm okay. I'd rather talk in person, call me when you get back in town.

I'm ready to push my fist through the seat in front of me. I don't know when I'll be back in town. I chuck my phone into my bag and decide when I get to San Francisco, I'll call her anyway.

The plane lands a couple hours later, and I'm dialing her number before I get off the jet bridge. It doesn't even ring, "Hi, it's Blakely, leave a message or don't..."

I call Jay to let him know where I am and to go by and check on Blakely. He agrees, sounding reluctant to get involved.

We find a car and head to our new penthouse in the city for the next few weeks.

The minutes drag as I wait all evening for Jay to call me back, but he doesn't, and I'm growing impatient, so I send him a text after dinner.

Judson- Did you check on Blakely?

Jameson- Her apartment is empty. She must've moved in with Lexie. I'll go by there tomorrow or send Hanna.

After several more attempts at calling her, I put the phone down, deciding five voicemails is probably enough.

The mini bar is fully stocked, so I pour myself a glass of whiskey. Could this be any worse? I guess it could always be worse, I assure myself. The girl I love hasn't spoken to me in weeks, and the second I hop on a plane, it's time to talk. The timing definitely could not be worse, that's for sure. I pop the lid off and refill my glass, adding a little more than usual. Carter stalks into the kitchen and leans against the counter, sliding the bottle toward him.

"You sure you wanna drink that?"

"Pretty sure, dick." He laughs and grabs the glass out of my hand, setting it on the counter.

"I just got an email." He grins and crosses his arms over his chest.

"So? You get four hundred a day."

"This is a good email." He walks over to grab the computer and sets it down in front of me.

I browse through the details of the email.

"Do you know what this means?" He is practically yelling, getting pretty worked up.

I look at him and back to the screen.

"Judson, Ryan is trafficking drugs."

"I can see that, but what are we going to do about it."

"Well, we are going to set him up. It may take a while, but we will get in touch with the DEA and make sure he gets caught. It will violate his parole, and he will get carted back to prison."

Shit. He's right. This is what we've been looking for. This would be the end of him dictating my life. I shut the computer and pour myself another drink. I'll need it to get through this "master plan" session Carter is about to put on.

April 5

Five weeks come and go, with endless meetings and constant traveling. To say I am exhausted would be an understatement. Blakely hasn't returned any of my calls or emails. Jameson insists that Hanna has been keeping up with her, and she is alive. The plane's wheels hit the runway, and a strange calmness drapes over me like a blanket. I let out a breath that I feel like I've been holding since the day I left.

I push open the door at my house, dragging my suitcase and bags into my room. Jameson and Hanna pull in the driveway and come busting in the door behind me.

"Broski! I missed you, man!" Jay laughs, pulling me into a "bro hug." Hanna walks into view and gives me an unsure smile, giving off a vibe that she knows something I don't.

"What are you guys doing here?"

"Well, I knew the first thing you would do is go see B, but Hanna found out this morning that she left two days ago. So we thought we'd save you a trip."

I stumble into the chair in the living area.

"What do you mean she left?"

"She's gone. Lexie said she wouldn't be back until September, something about a summer internship."

I open my laptop, knowing she wouldn't leave without saying goodbye. I scroll through what feels like thousands of emails and come up empty-handed.

No Good-bye. No, "fuck-off Judson." Nothing.

CHAPTER 42

BLAKELY

July 4

3 months later...

The way the moon shines off the water and illuminates the world makes me believe in something bigger. Something greater than just myself, or even anything in this world. It's been a while since I've felt that way, since a child even. I still find myself looking back to last year and feeling the guilt and pain, but I find it easier to cope every day. I look to the moon and realize that maybe I'm not so messed up, that no matter what phase of life I'm in, I'm still whole. Even when the moon isn't full, it still shines, and that gives me hope. I think about where Judson is. If he is looking at the moon like me, wondering if he still thinks about me.

The internship is in full swing and incredible. I didn't really have a choice but to accept, and I don't regret it, well, almost. The constant feeling of being extremely busy helps keep my mind off everything but essentially that Judson isn't here. I'm out here chasing my dream, but without him here, I feel a little lost.

I would say it was the best decision I've ever made for myself if there wasn't this vast gaping hole where my heart used to reside. I still check my emails every day, trusting that there will be something from Judson, reassuring me that he's okay. That's all I want, for him to be alright. I haven't talked to Hanna in a few weeks. That's not for lack of effort. Our schedules haven't been coordinating much, and I'm in another time zone.

Lexie has been messaging me every day to let me know every single thing I'm missing out on. Bryce is just as persistent but a little less enthusiastic. Lexie is like a cheerleader. She wants to root you on but also gossip about every single thing she can think of. Half the time when she's on a fashion rant, she sounds like a Kardashian. I love her, and honestly, we balance each other out. She said Judson has reached out to her a few times. He is pushy, but she is Lexie, and well, not many men stand a chance against her. She is a tornado in a tiny body, and while she may look harmless, she is anything but. Bless the soul that decides to marry her.

Judson can't know where I am. I wish he could, and we could be together, especially now, but his life and my life depends that he doesn't know. At least not right now. I don't know what will happen come September when I come back, but we will have to cross that bridge when the time comes.

Luckily this summer internship will count toward credits for school, and I have already notified my professors that I will be a late start back into the program for fall. Still, after this experience, I may need to start back after Christmas. As much as I love photography, I'm tired. The days are long, and the editing hours are even longer.

Physical therapy is over, and I have come to terms with the one-handed life. My doctor keeps trying to push a second surgery, and I haven't ultimately ruled it out. I just know I'll be down for months recovering and just don't have the time or money to make that work right now. The internship, however, is actually a paid one, and I live here for free. So I have been stacking up a good saving account, which will help me when I return to Savannah. I'm just hoping that things will be different when I get there, and I'll be able to stay. I know where I belong, but the journey to get there seems neverending.

I pick myself up off the wooden dock and situate my blanket over my shoulders.

I stumble back inside the cottage, trying not to trip over all the camera equipment, and make my way over to the bay window overlooking the lake. I can't help but dream as I watch the fireworks illuminate the skyline, alone.

CHAPTER 43

JUDSON

September 30

After six long months of not-so-patiently waiting, today is the day we take down Ryan with the DEA. We followed him for months learned his patterns, and the names of several of the guys he works for. Well, technically, we know several alias names but enough information to find out who is running the operation in this area. We worked with the DEA for weeks, developing a plan to bust him, and today we will see it through.

Carter and I get dressed and ride with our DEA agent we've been working with, Maxwell, to the location of Ryan's next drop. Maxwell hides the sleek black SUV behind the rundown building, along with several other cop cars, in case the arrest attempt goes south. I didn't necessarily need to be here, but Carter and I decided that we wanted to see this in person after all of the work we put into this. I want to look Ryan in the eye as they push his head into the back of the police car.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out to Jameson's face.

Shit. I tap ignore again since that is what I do lately. We haven't told him about this plan, and keeping it from him for the past six months has been pretty hard. We didn't want him involved if Ryan got to him. We know for sure Ryan was keeping tabs on him. Jay is as loyal as they come, but let's face it, he has a big mouth. Two shots of tequila, and he will tell you his entire life story.

Several hours go by, and we have yet to see Ryan or any sign of movement from inside the building. Maxwell insists that maybe they were tipped off when a car pulls into the lot. Cops come from around the side of the building, guns pulled, surrounding the car. The door swings open, and a man steps out with his hands in the air.

It's *not* Ryan.

The guy is forced to the ground and handcuffed. I can feel my heart sinking lower into my stomach as I start to feel sick. Carter looks over at me.

"Man, I'm sorry, I thought for sure this was it." The sympathy in his voice is making it crack.

"It's okay. I'm just not sure what we do now."

"We regroup, we will figure it out, Jud, don't give up."

The car rolls down the road, and all I can do is look out the window and pray that there is another chance.

Carter drops me off at the house and decides to stay here for a few days while we decide what we will do. I push the door open and sling my keys on the counter. I look around and pick the keys back up. I don't want to be here. This was supposed to be it, put Ryan away, and go get my girl. Now I'm back where I started, with absolutely nothing accomplished but a whole lot of wasted time. It was easier for him to believe that she doesn't mean anything and we are done, simply because I don't want her killed.

I pull into the docks and climb out of my truck. After everything that has happened today, I decided it'd be best to take the boat out for the night. It's warm, but it's been raining for two days, so the fog lingers above the water. Nobody seems to be hanging around here, but that is expected for a Sunday night.

Just as I am making my way out onto the wooden boards, I hear what sounds like footsteps behind me. I turn to see Ryan quick on my heels. I can feel the rage radiating off of him as he grabs me by my shirt, throwing me to the ground. His hand wraps tightly around my throat as he speaks, "I told you to stop, Judson. This is the only way you are going to learn that you can't win. You think I didn't know you were following me? I guess I'm going to have to do the work myself this time."

I attempt to wiggle my way out from under him, but he weighs a little more than I do. I lift my hand off the wood and

send a punch, best I can, to his ribcage. He rolls off me and grabs my shoulder, pushing me into the water. I feel his hands wrapped tightly in the fabric of my t-shirt near my shoulders as he holds me under. I fight him for what seems like hours. The single breath that I could take before going under wasn't ideal, and I can feel myself getting light-headed. I slow my struggle. The water is dark and murky, so I close my eyes and try to focus on something else while striving not to breathe water into my lungs.

The only images that come to my mind are Blakely.

Blakely in that white dress at the fundraiser, her smile wide as she straddles me in the car.

Blakely wearing my T-shirt, it hanging to her knees, with her bare legs and feet.

Blakely standing on the beach, in her pink bikini, holding my hand.

Blakely cuddled up to me in the hotel room in Tennessee.

Blakely cooking in the kitchen, her lengthy hair hanging over the back of the patio chair.

Blakely's lips parted as she pulls me down to her, claiming me as hers.

All of these thoughts that I wish I could go back and relive flood my mind, just before everything goes completely black.

CHAPTER 44

BLAKELY

I've been home for a couple of weeks, and I still feel like I haven't been able to sit down and take a breath. Deadlines are quickly approaching for final edits of pictures that have been piling up, but I can't manage to find a single second to get them done. I returned home to Savannah, and Bryce and Lexie had all of my stuff moved into a new house, definitely bigger than my apartment but still modest.

I take a deep breath attempting to find some composure as I focus back on my computer. Feeling unsuccessful, I pull it closed and walk over to the kitchen, grabbing a cup of coffee. Sleep isn't something I've been getting much of lately. I push the curtains out of the window and watch the kids next door walk around the back yard playing. They have two little girls, and I find myself watching them more than I'd like to admit. I'm not really sure if that is normal, but I find myself wondering, "what if." Their mother walks out on the back porch and calls them in since it's getting dark. I let go of the sheer curtains, and they fall back in front of the window.

Lexie comes strolling out of the bathroom, and I nearly jump out of my houseshoes.

"I totally forgot you were here." I laugh as she throws herself down dramatically on the couch.

"Let's watch Legally Blonde!" She practically yells as she picks up the remote.

"You have to scream it?" She smiles and leans back on the couch, shrugging her shoulders.

"Sorry, I really am trying to remember my inside voice." She whisper-screams, and we both end up giggling.

I have seen this movie a thousand times but still love it, and it's Lexie's favorite movie, so she just recites all the lines dramatically as we cram an unreasonable amount of popcorn in our mouths. My phone starts buzzing on the kitchen counter, and I make my way over to pick it up and see Hanna's name flashing across the screen.

"Hello?" I answer timidly, fully expecting her to scold me for not making arrangements to see her yet.

"Blake, I'm sorry to call you so late, but we need to talk." I glance at the clock.

"Hanna, It's only 9:30. What's up?"

"It's Judson. Well, we're at the hospital. Can you come?"

"Is he okay?" I ask.

"Well, we don't really know much, but it doesn't look good." I take a breath, trying to deflect the tears. "I'm on my way." I end the call and grab my purse. I glance at Lexie, giving her an apologetic look.

"Can you stay here? I'll be back. It's Judson."

"You know I'm fine here. Go, text me when you know something. Did they say what happened?"

"No, they didn't." I grab my keys and head out the door, trying to shut it carefully. The footsteps I take to my car feel like they are pounding into the ground, flawlessly in sync with my heart. Which I swear I can feel beating in my ears.

I swing into a spot at the emergency room and jump out of the car so quickly I'm not even sure if I put the car in park. The automatic doors open, and the sterile smell fills my nostrils. I scan the room quickly, trying to find Hanna. I walk to the desk and give the receptionist Judson's name, and she motions to an elevator advising that he is on the third floor in ICU.

The elevator door opens to Hanna and Jameson seated side by side in chairs near a wall phone.

She sees me and starts to stand. "Blake, I'm glad you came."

"What happened? What's going on!" I ask frantically as Jameson shoves his hands into his pockets. He looks extremely uncomfortable, rocking back onto his heels.

Hanna looks to Jameson and then to me, "You should tell her." Hanna whispers.

Is he dead? Did he die? I feel my heart sinking lower.

"Jameson, he's not, oh my God, no..." Jay shakes his head with tears in his eyes.

"No, he's okay, maybe. It's Ryan. I followed Judson down to the docks because he had been acting shady and ignoring all of my calls, and I found Ryan there." He takes a slow breath, trying to finish his sentence, "drowning him."

I can't find any words to say, so I just look at them both, stunned.

"So, how is he? Have you heard anything?"

Hanna grabs my hand and pulls me over to the seat near her. "No, we don't know anything. He had water in his lungs."

Jay turns and looks down at the ground. His leg is shaking uncontrollably up and down.

"Let's go get some coffee." Hanna stands and motions for me to come.

We get outside the waiting room and down the hall to the family kitchen before Hanna turns to me, "Jameson isn't doing good. He thought he was dead, Blake. I have never seen him like this. Ryan was here, Jay wasn't too friendly when he found him. I think he needed stitches before the police took him in."

Hanna pours two cups of coffee into paper cups and hands one to me. I take a sip and lean back against the counter.

"I don't know if I should be here, Hanna."

She shoots me a glare, "Where do you think you should be?"

I shrug, "What if he doesn't want me here. We haven't talked in months."

"I promise you that he wants you here."

We walk back out the door and down the hall, entering the waiting room as a doctor is speaking with Jay. He turns to walk back through the double doors, and we both look to him with questions.

"He's alive." He states. "He's awake. We can go back one at a time."

Hanna hugs Jay and gives him a soft kiss on the cheek, relieved.

They both look to me, "Jameson, you should go." I state. "If he wants to see me, I'll still be here."

He turns quickly and rushes through the doors. I take a seat in the chair and take some deep breaths, trying to count to ten over and over and calm my nerves.

"Why haven't you called me? You have been home for over two weeks." Hanna pushes her hair behind her ear before continuing, "I know you and Judson have a complicated relationship, but I thought we were friends."

I feel the tears stinging my lashes as I look to her, "We are friends. I'm so sorry, Hanna, I have been so busy since I got back I haven't really had time to do anything." She gives me a half-smile.

"It's okay. I just really thought that after you had been gone for six months, you'd come in ready to see everyone... Including Judson."

I think back to the last time I saw Judson. It feels like a lifetime ago, but it also feels like yesterday.

"I've been ready to see him, Hanna. It's just... I can't." She rolls her eyes and sighs. "Well, you guys are going to have to figure it out or move on. It's not healthy the way you guys are constantly pining over each other."

I take my phone out and text Lexie quickly to let her know what's going on. Jay comes back into the room and nods for me to come. I walk toward him in slow strides, practically dragging my feet.

"He's asking for you. Go easy on him." He steps out of the way. Glass windows frame the rooms, and the nurse nods toward the room across from her station.

I step into the room and see Judson. He's awake and sitting in the bed. I freeze mid-stride when his eyes connect with mine. He starts attempting to stand up to get to me, pulling his IV around the side of the bed, trying not to get tangled in it.

"Easy, Tiger. You should rest," I say as I finish making my way to the bedside.

He swings his legs off the side of the bed and pulls me closer to him as he wraps his arms around my torso.

"I need you. I'm so sorry I pushed you away. I thought it was the right thing to do, but I don't know that it was. Come home with me please, let's figure this all out together."

I just stare at him. I don't even know what to say. These are the words I have been waiting to hear for months. Here they are coming out of his mouth, and my brain is on high alert with a sniper rifle guarding my heart.

I step back as he takes my hand in his. He starts to speak as I interrupt him, "Are you going to be okay?"

"I think so. They said I am doing extremely well. Jameson got there just in time before my brain was deprived of oxygen for too long, and my organs are fine." He coughs, sounding like he is going to spit out a lung at any moment.

"You don't sound fine," I say as I drop his hand and take a seat in the chair beside the bed.

"I feel okay. They said they will keep me tonight to make sure everything is okay and I can go home tomorrow. Ryan is gone." I let out a massive breath of air, and he can feel that I am relieved by the knowledge that he isn't going to be able to do anything else to anyone.

"Can you stay with me?" He blows out a breath and leans back into his pillow.

"Judson, I don't know. I think I have to go home."

I don't want to upset him, but I can't hash all of this out here in the hospital, and I really need to think about what I am going to do.

"Can we at least talk then?"

"Sure, let's talk when you get home."

"Okay, you want me to come to you when I get out of here?" He asks, looking a little anxious as he brushes his disheveled hair off his forehead.

"Um. No. I will come to you." He gives me a puzzled look and looks at his hands folded over his lap.

I stand to kiss his forehead before turning to leave the room, stopping just shy of the door, "I'm really glad you're okay."

CHAPTER 45

JUDSON

I haven't slept so terrible in my life. I'm not sure if it's the weird way that Blakely left last night or the fact that this mattress kept blowing up, sounding like a generator. The curtains are open just enough for the sun to hit me square in the eye, and the nurse comes in every 20 minutes to poke and prod. I'm ready to go home.

She steps through the door again with an apologetic look as she wraps the blood pressure cuff around my arm.

"When can I be discharged?"

"Soon, the doctor is getting your discharge papers ready now." She smiles, walking back out of the room, tossing her gloves into the trash can.

Jay walks in the door with coffee and sits it down on the rolling bedside table.

"Thanks, man."

"You're welcome. You ready to bust outta this joint?"

"I am so ready. I need to text Blake and tell her I'm about to head home."

"Yeah, what was that about? She seemed off yesterday."

"I really don't know. I told her I wanted to be with her, basically professed my undying love. She just said we could talk today once I got home."

Jameson looks around the hospital room and then to me, "Maybe she needs more of a commitment from you than just words."

What?

"What I mean is that the last time you wanted to be with her, you ended up pushing her away and weren't with her. Maybe she thinks that will happen again." I slam my cup down on the table, coffee splashing out everywhere, "It's not like that. I wanted to keep her safe from Ryan. It wasn't like I wanted to be away from her, and in case you forgot, she left me for six months."

"Well, you weren't exactly doing much to keep her here. All I'm saying is that it's a two-way street."

I don't respond. Instead, I grab my sweatpants and t-shirt Jay brought and go change out of this hospital gown.

After being discharged and Jay dropping me off at home, I decide to text Blakely and let her know I'm home.

Judson- I'm home. Jameson just dropped me off.

Blakely- K, I'll be over in a couple hours.

Several hours pass before Blake pulls into the driveway. I look down at the clock and wonder what took her so long. The thought that she may be seeing someone else crosses my mind, making me think irrational things. The sound of knocking jerks me from my inside my thoughts, and I pull the door open slowly as she walks inside.

She is breathtakingly beautiful but looks so tired. I can see it in her eyes that she is exhausted. She tugs at the end of her baggy sweatshirt as she walks into the main room, plopping down in the chair. I can see she is nervous, and the fact she sat in the chair gives me the vibe she is trying to create space between us. The couch feels lonely, and I remain silent, hoping, and praying that she makes conversation first.

"How was your internship?" I break the silence as she twists the end of her ponytail around her finger.

"Do you really want to talk about my internship?" She barks back at me, dropping her hair against her shoulder.

"You're right. Why did you leave? Why did you ignore all of my calls?" She lets out a sigh.

"I couldn't be around you. Ryan threatened me. He said he would hurt you if I didn't leave you alone. I thought he was probably monitoring my phone and your phone. I didn't know how dangerous he was, but I didn't want him to hurt you."

I feel the tightening in my throat as she continues.

"I tried not to tell anyone, hoping that maybe if I just disappeared for my internship, he would leave you alone. It didn't make it easier how we left things, the emails you sent nearly broke me to read, but they are what kept me going."

She stops talking, rubbing a tear from the top of her cheekbone as several more continue rushing from her eyes.

"I wish I would've known. I should've known." I scoot to the side of the couch closer to her, picking her hand up from her lap.

"I'm sorry all of this happened. I should've just went after what I wanted, but I was so consumed in making him go away."

"Why did he come after you anyway?" She chokes out.

"Carter and I had followed him for months, knew he was part of a drug ring, and got the DEA involved. When we went to make the bust, it wasn't him. He caught on to our plan."

She shakes her head in disbelief, "You almost got yourself killed."

"I needed him gone. I needed you safe."

She squeezes my hand, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was leaving. The internship seemed like the perfect opportunity. I was away from you, but as much as I tried, I couldn't fill the void, not even with pictures. You wanted to keep me safe, and I wanted to keep you safe. Kind of ironic."

We make small talk for a while about the internship, what it entailed. She seems genuinely proud of her work on the west coast. We laugh about both being over there, but at separate times, as much as I feel our reconnection, I can tell she is still guarded. I want to pull her into my arms. I want to kiss her. I want to give her the ring that has been in my dresser drawer

for months. I want everything with her. I decide against throwing a proposal at her right now, our history doesn't guarantee our future, and truthfully, I'm afraid she will think I am certifiably insane.

Maybe I am. So I change the subject with a bombshell.

"Jake Russell was my dad." She sucks in a breath, moving to the couch.

"Judson. Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. He knew, and Ryan knew. He left me a note."

"Oh, my gash." She breathes.

"I think Ryan had Russ killed." I think back to Ryan's words on the dock before pushing me into the water.

"Did you tell the police?" She pleads.

"No, honestly, I've been playing it over and over in my head, and it just now hit me."

"What did he say?" She asks.

"He said that he would have to do it himself this time, right before he pushed me into the water."

Her eyes go wide, and mine glass over. Her arms wrap around my neck, and my face buries into the shoulder of her sweatshirt. I could stay in this exact spot for as long as she'd let me, but instead, she pulls away.

"You need to tell them."

I shake my head and look to my sock covered feet, I know I need to do something about it. Her phone chimes and she yanks it up quickly, glancing at the screen, then at me.

"I'm sorry, but I have to go. Can we finish this tomorrow?"

She wants to leave? She has been acting so strange since last night at the hospital. Always in a hurry, she looks depressed and tired.

Before I can stop the words from barreling out of my mouth, they explode, "Is that your other boyfriend?"

Her face twists as she jumps to her feet, taking several steps back.

"Blake, if there is someone else you need to just tell me." She takes another step back, and her eyes fill with tears.

"You aren't my boyfriend, so it would but hard to have another one." She snaps.

"It's Lexie. She has to go to work."

In her eyes, I can see that I was way off base with the "other boyfriend" comment, and I instantly regret it.

"What does Lexie's work schedule have to do with you?"

She looks to her feet, then to her phone in her hand, and then to me.

"She has my son." She swallows hard before continuing, "Our son."

I'm quite sure the look on my face is sheer terror, and I take a step back from her, unsure if I can keep my balance.

"What?" I ask, adamant that I must've misheard, due to the rhythm of my heartbeat in my ears.

"Lexie has to go to work, and she is my babysitter. So I have to go." She repeats, leaving out the fact that this child is *my* child.

"I... I well..." I fumble through my words, trying to muster up a sentence.

"It's okay, Judson, really. I don't expect you to process this right now. I wasn't sure how to tell you, or if I should tell you. I certainly didn't expect to tell you like *this*." She explains, picking her keys up off the table in the foyer. I follow her closely, ready to demand she tell me everything, but instead, I stand like an idiot in the doorway as she walks out.

CHAPTER 46

BLAKELY

That definitely did not go how I had pictured it in my head for the past six months. I'm sure there will be questions that need answering, but they will have to wait for now. I put the 4-runner in reverse and turn around in the driveway. I try not to speed as I hit the highway back to my house, but I can't help but go a few miles over as my mind speeds as fast as my car. When I push my front door open and see Lexie rocking JC, everything feels a little different. The way he makes little cooing sounds, and smiles, makes my anxiety disappear.

"Thanks for watching him."

"You know I will anytime!" She smiles and squeezes my bicep as she gathers her things.

"How did it go with Judson? He okay?"

"Physically? Yes. Mentally? Probably not great." She slips her purse over her shoulder, and her eyes connect with mine. She is pretty good at reading me.

"What happened?" She sighs.

"Well, he thought I was seeing someone else, but turns out the only other man in my life is JC, and now he knows that." She takes a few steps toward me, rubbing JC on his head.

"How did he take it?" She questions.

"Well, he didn't really say anything, and I left to come here." I sit JC down in his swing and go to the fridge to pull out a bottle of water.

"I didn't expect to just dump it on him like that, but he pissed me off, and the cat that was supposed to get my tongue was MIA."

My phone chimes over and over again as I take a long swig of water, trying to ignore the fact that I hear it.

"Is that him?" Lexie asks as she takes her keys in her hand.

"I don't know, but he just found out he's a father, so probably."

She gives me a quick hug, "Good luck with that." She points her tiny finger at the phone on the counter, "I'll call you after work."

She heads out the door, and I look over to see JC sleeping and pick up my phone.

Judson- We need to talk about this.

Judson-Please, I can come to you.

We absolutely need to talk about this. I just don't know what to say right this second. I type out a quick response knowing he isn't going to just leave it alone.

Blakely- I don't think that is a good idea.

Judson- You don't think me seeing my son is a good idea?

Blakely- Honestly, I don't know yet. He's just a baby, and I don't want you to decide on a whim you want to be part of this and then just disappear.

Judson- It's not like that Blakely, please.

Blakely- I think I need some time to think about all of this, maybe we can meet tomorrow?

Judson- Okay, I'll come to you.

Blakely- No, I'll have Lexie watch him, and I'll meet you at the dock, say 2 PM.

Judson- Fine.

I keep replaying the look on Judson's face in my head when I told him about his son. I never expected him to be thrilled, but I didn't expect him to look at me like that.

The rest of the evening continues without a hitch. I honestly expected Judson to show up and do something rash. Demand a paternity test, something, but he doesn't. I finish up some editing while JC finishes his nap. I sit him in his bouncy seat while I cook dinner, and as much as I want to sit and think about how things could play out with Judson, the distraction of JC is more than enough to keep my mind from going there, at least for now.

After dinner, I decided that even though I'm breastfeeding, I need a drink, so I pour myself a glass of wine. I have enough breastmilk frozen to pump and dump, and after the day I've had, that's precisely what I'm going to do.

I fight with JC for a good ten minutes to get him to take a bottle, and he finally gives in. He hates the bottle when I'm the one giving it to him. He knows I've got the goods and doesn't like to be tricked. Sleep consumes him before he even finishes drinking, and tonight I don't think I have it in me to set him down. I need his cuddles. I reach for my phone and scroll through my messages with Judson, reading, and re-reading. I type out a message and hit delete, watching it disappear letter by letter until it's gone. Instead, I snap a picture of JC asleep in my arms and send the picture.

The night turns into morning, and there is no response from Judson. My mind is racing with a million explanations about why he wouldn't respond after he seemed so adamant about talking earlier. JC will be up before long ready for another feeding, so I turn off my phone and wish for a magical reset button for my brain.

CHAPTER 47

JUDSON

I have a son.

I have a son.

I have a son.

I figure if I say it enough times, it will make it more real. I should've said something, anything, but instead, I just looked at her with my jaw on the hardwood floor. I pace back and forth, contemplating whether I should chase after her and bang on the door demanding answers to all of these questions I have orbiting around in my head.

I have a child, and I don't even know his name or his birthday.

Does he have my eyes or Blake's?

I missed everything, and I didn't even know that I was missing it. After a quick shutdown of text messages, I quickly realize I do not have the upper hand in this situation. She gets to make all the decisions, and I have no choice but to agree. I throw my phone into the wall, and the remnants cover the floor.

I'm so pissed at myself that I can't even think straight. She's right to have her reservations. I just ghosted her because I thought that was best. I felt that leaving her alone until I could figure out what to do about Ryan was the right thing to do. I was wrong, I was so wrong. If I'd known she was pregnant, I probably would've done whatever I could, illegal or not, to make sure Ryan didn't hurt her.

I'm pissed at myself, but I'm also mad at Blake for not telling me. I had a right to know. That is my fucking kid too. I slam my fist into the sofa table and try to control the involuntary tears that are flowing. I don't cry usually, but the fact that the only girl I've ever loved had my child alone and probably afraid just shakes me up. I should've been there, but instead, I stood in my own way.

Most of the evening goes by, and I find myself still sitting in the same spot staring into the same space trying to make sense of this mess. I question everything. Will I be a good father? Am I ready to be a father? The thoughts linger in my mind until it makes me physically ill. I think about how I want a family, her family, our family.

My doorbell goes off as I quickly jump to my feet, practically floating to the door to answer it, praying that Blakely is on the other side.

To my dismay, it's Carter. I can feel my heart sink into my abdomen as I pull the door all the way open and step away for him to come inside, leaving it for him to close. He stalks past me, eyeing the empty bottle of scotch and my broken phone on the floor.

"You okay, man?" He steps over to the table picking up the bottle and swirling it around with judgmental eyes.

"No," I respond flatly.

"Dude, it's gonna be fine. He's not getting out this time..."

"I have a baby." I snap.

Carter spins quickly on his heels, "What?"

"I got Blake pregnant."

"What? When? I thought you hadn't seen Blake in months?"

"I haven't. What I mean is Blake was pregnant. I have a son."

"So she lied to you? Is the baby even yours? Is she sure?"

I know her better than anyone, and I trust her when she says it's my son. She has no reason to lie.

"Ryan threatened her to stay away. She said she wanted to tell me, but she was afraid of what he would do."

"Shit," he says, cringing, his brow furrows, "What do you know, have you seen him?"

"We haven't talked much. It's killing me not knowing."

I blow out a deep breath and turn the bottle up to finish it off.

"You better slow down. You can't be getting this drunk."

Fuck. He's right. I'm a dad now. I feel the sudden urge to kick him in the face, but deep down, I know he just cares. I toss the bottle into the trash.

"You're right." I agree and grab a water bottle out of the fridge.

We sit on the couch and watch a Monday night football game as he sits and scrolls on his phone. He can sense my worry and knows I don't want to sit and talk. The silence is refreshing, and I try my hardest not to think about Blake, raising our child alone, or worse, with someone else.

Waking up in this big empty bed sucks. I remember waking up to her on the other side, feeling like an arms-length was too far. Now she's all the way on the other side of town. I roll over to check the clock. Staying up most of the night didn't do much for my natural alarm. I slept way past my usual 8 o'clock and only have about an hour before I'm supposed to meet Blake at the dock.

The shower turns on, and the water runs down over my scalp. I turn the water as hot as it will go hoping that it will erase this shitty way I feel. With no luck, I pull on some jeans and a henley. I want to look nice, but I figure she might think I'm crazy if I show up in a suit. She'd be right though, this isn't a business transaction. I need to remember that. I throw on my vans and slip my watch on my wrist.

I want to text her to tell her I'm on the way, but I'm going to have to get a new phone before I do that. I swing my car into the lot, and I don't see Blake. The near-drowning was the last time I was here, so my anxiety is a little high. Slipping out of my car, I make my way out onto the dock. There's a small bench outside the marina where I take a seat, the parking lot is still in view, so I see Blake pull in.

She jumps out of her SUV and makes her way over with her arms crossed over her chest. She looks indifferent as she's walking toward me instead of her usual vibrant self. I rise to my feet when she reaches me, pulling her into a hug. I expect her to be rigid against me or mad, but instead, she melts into my embrace.

I pull her away, holding her by her hands.

"Are you hungry?" I ask timidly.

"Not really," she states.

"Do you just wanna go inside? Or do you want to go somewhere more private?" I nod toward my boat down the dock.

"We should talk, probably without an audience."

I lead her down the wooden walkway, helping her onto the boat. We walk inside the cabin, and she sets all of her things down on the table.

"You want a drink?"

She rolls her eyes, "I'm fine, Judson. Just ask me what you want to know. Let's not make this more awkward than it already is."

"Okay, no small talk, got it." I nod before continuing. "Tell me about him."

She pulls a half-smile. The fire behind her eyes ignites, and I realize that he has her whole entire heart. Jealousy overwhelms me because I used to hold that spot.

"He's pretty great. He was born 5 weeks early, so he was a little small, but he was a tenacious little guy. Didn't even need time in the NICU. His lungs were the only concern, and they were good. They kept him a couple extra days, but he was okay."

I feel my heart constricting in my chest, "When was he born?".

August 25th, he's a little over a month old." She fidgets with her nails in her lap.

"Did you have him here in Savannah?"

"Well, that was the plan, but it wasn't his plan. I was actually in the middle of a shoot when my water broke. I had him in California. We stayed a couple weeks then came here. Lexie and Bryce had the house ready for me."

"Blakely, I would've been there."

"Yeah, maybe." She doesn't exactly agree.

"You don't think so?" I scoff, rubbing my sweaty palms down my jeans.

"I didn't say that."

I take a breath and run my hand through my hair.

"So I'm a father," I admit, but mostly to myself.

"Only if you want to be."

"What the fuck does that mean?" I turn toward her. "Only if I want to be."

She scoots back a little in the chair, slipping her foot under her bottom nervously.

"I just mean you didn't exactly ask for any of this. I'd rather you decide now if you don't want to be all in. It will be harder on all of us later on if you decide to jet."

"That's my kid too. I'm not Ryan. I can take care of my shit." I immediately regret the words as they fall off my lips.

"JC isn't something you need to clean up. He's not some mess that you need to fix." She stands. "This was a bad idea."

I grab her hands and pull her back to the chair.

"I'm sorry, that's not what I meant. I've already missed too much, and I'm just pissed off." I take a breath and count to five to calm down.

"JC?" I question, immediately noticing those are my initials.

"Yeah, Jacob Chase. I've been calling him JC since he was born."

I feel my heart swell. She named him Jacob because she knew what that would mean to me. I feel my eyes glass over and I tell my brain that I'm not crying right now.

"Can I see him?" She raises an eyebrow, "Did you not get my picture I sent last night?"

"No." I cringe, thinking about how I reacted and the condition of my phone.

"Oh, well, here is a picture of him." She scrolls through her pictures and lands on a picture of a tiny baby with the darkest hair I think I've ever seen. His eyes are so green they almost look unnatural. He is wrapped in a dark blue blanket in Blake's arms. She scrolls to the next picture of a baby smile, and he most definitely has my dimples.

A wave of emotions come crashing into me, and I try to choke back anything that I might regret later.

"So are you going to let me physically see him, or is this tiny phone screen all I get?" Her defensive exterior goes up the instant I mention seeing him.

"I mean, right now?" She states, "Don't you have to work today?"

"I think this a little more pressing, don't you think?" She looks up from her phone, and her eyes find mine. I pull her closer to me and lean into her hair to kiss her head. She pulls away, almost frantically.

"You can see him, but we can't do this."

"Can't do what?"

"This, just all of this. I'm finally getting used to being alone, and then you are here."

I pull to my feet, trying to hide my disappointment, "You lead the way."

She gets into her car, and I follow her about 15 miles outside of town. When we pull into the little house, Blakely steps out of her car. "Be quiet in case he is asleep." She demands, using her best "mom voice."

"Why do you live so far from school?" I ask as we walk up the front steps.

"I am taking the semester off." She replies, pushing the front door open slowly. Lexie tiptoes her way out of a bedroom pulling the door closed.

She jumps at the sight of us, "Jesus, B, you scared the shit out of me." She whispers.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't Judson Banks. I was beginning to think you didn't really exist." I can't even crack a smile at her shitty joke.

"Hi Lexie, yes, it's very comical that I've missed a whole month of my son's life." Her eyes turn into daggers as she stares a hole through me.

"Whose fault is that?" She barks.

"Guys, stop." Blakely whisper shouts. "Lexie, thank you, I'll see you tomorrow. We're still on for that thing?" Lexie nods and smiles at Blakely, while I wonder what is so secretive. She pushes past me, her shoulder grazing mine roughly.

"I'm sorry, she's well... she's Lexie." Blakely tries to explain.

"She's not wrong. I should've been here."

"You didn't know, and as much as I wish it would've been about me, it's not. It's about him now." She motions toward the door with her thumb over her shoulder.

"It should've been about you. Instead, I let it be about myself and Ryan."

I watch her chest rise and fall as she takes a deep breath. She grabs the handle and turns back to me, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"There isn't anything I want more, except maybe you."

Her focus shifts toward the door, and she pushes it open.

It's not super dark in here, Blakely has the room painted a light gray, and the curtains on the windows are sheer and blue.

Other than a small toy box and bookshelf, the space is pretty empty. She glides over to the crib placed against the far wall. I notice a mobile above the crib with tiny boats on it before turning my attention to the blanket bundle in the crib.

At the sight of him, I feel like I've been punched in the gut. Blakely places her hand in the crib, and he unconsciously wraps his tiny fingers around her index finger. There has never been another moment in my life where I felt this complete. After the last few months of everything falling apart, it feels good to see them fall together again. It's my son, of course, but it's also Blakely. I know for sure this is it for me. This right here is everything I will ever need.

"He looks like you," I whisper to her.

"Really?" She questions, "I think he looks like you." She laughs.

"I guess we won't know for a while right now he's just a squish."

"A squish?" She raises an eyebrow.

"Yeah, I mean, he just looks like a baby."

She laughs, "Well, he is a baby."

"Were you ever going to tell me?" I need to know.

"I tried to tell you. Once. I texted you that we needed to talk, we needed to talk about the fact that I was pregnant, but you were on your way to California. I decided not to tell you after Ryan came to see me. I was afraid if he knew, he would eventually get to my child. I didn't want that. So when you called me back and wrote those emails, It killed me not being able to tell you."

Ryan took this from me, my child, Blakely, everything. I feel the urge to snatch him up and hold him but don't want to wake him up.

"Does he sleep at night?"

"Look at me Judson, do you think he sleeps through the night?" She motions up and down her body as if something is wrong with the way she is dressed. "I guess I need to get one of the rooms turned into a nursery at the house."

"You don't have to do that, Judson. He's perfectly fine here, he isn't going anywhere."

"I can help. I want to help, I mean, I know I travel some with work, but I really want to make this work..." She cuts me off before I can even finish my sentence.

"Judson, you can't come barreling back into our lives and expect to take charge. It doesn't work that way." She says in a tone that I don't think I've ever heard come out of her mouth.

There's a soft knock at the door, and Blakely looks to the crib before exiting the room to open the door. I am reluctant to leave this space beside the crib. Honestly, at this point, I might stake out here forever.

Curiosity gets the best of me as I hear Blake whispering from the foyer.

I see Bryce standing in front of her, both of them smiling, something I don't seem to make her do much of anymore. The heat radiates off of me as I close the gap between us.

CHAPTER 48

BLAKELY

The animosity on Judson's face makes me nervous as he approaches us from JC's room. Remembering the last time Bryce and Judson were in the same room, I quickly decide to re-introduce them, hoping for a better outcome than before, "Judson, you remember my friend Bryce?"

Judson looks to me and then to Bryce, silently.

"Good to see you again, Judson." Bryce extends a hand to him, and Judson avoids it like the plague. I nudge Judson with my elbow, and he begrudgingly takes his hand to shake. His eyes never leave mine. I pull Judson back by his bicep, attempting to calm him down, wondering why he acts so protective.

"Where's the little man?" Bryce asks, looking at me and walking past Judson.

"He's asleep. He just went down about 30 minutes ago."

"Damn, I was hoping for Jakey cuddles," he whines.

I smile, thinking about how much Bryce loves JC. He has been begging me for a month to babysit.

I notice Judson's exterior turn rigid, "We are kind of in the middle of something." He practically growls.

"Judson, don't be rude." I plead.

Bryce turns to me, "It's okay." He whispers.

"It's not okay. What is wrong with you?" I snap at Judson.

"This guy is always in the fucking way." He motions to Bryce.

"Who me?" Bryce laughs. "I've been here for Blakely, where the fuck were you? I certainly wasn't in your way for the past six months!"

"What the fuck is this, Blakely? You think you can just play house with him? With my son?"

I am so confused? He thinks Bryce and I are together?

"Judson, Bryce is just my friend!" I practically scream at him.

Before he can respond, Bryce's fist connects with Judson's jaw.

I gasp as Judson stumbles back. I expect him to retaliate, but before he can, Bryce is in his face.

"Blake is only my friend, and I love your son. The only person you have to be pissed at is yourself!"

Bryce is cut off by a shrill, angry cry.

Judson's attention shifts to JC, dropping his clenched fist at his side.

"You should go," I demand.

"Come on, Blakely, you can't do this." The panic on his face and in his voice nearly breaks me. "I want to be part of his life and yours."

I look back at Bryce and then to Judson, "You should both go."

Bryce nods, "I'll call you later."

JC's screaming seems to go up a couple octaves, and I leave Judson standing in the kitchen with a small cut under his eye.

I scoop him up and pat his back as his cries calm. I can feel Judson's presence behind me as he brushes his hand over his soft baby hair. I'm pissed as hell at him right now, but my anger starts to dissolve as JC calms and looks around.

"He is beautiful." He says as JC scopes him out, looking all around. I roll my eyes at him, still obviously irritated at him. I switch JC to my left arm to grab a bag of milk out of the fridge to warm up. I know he will cry if I sit him down, and I'm pretty strong with my forearm even though I can't use my hand.

"Let me take him."

I stare at Judson for a moment before reluctantly passing JC over to him.

JC wiggles around in his arms, making cooing sounds.

"Mama getting you some food, little man." He walks over to the couch and sits down while still whispering and talking to him.

I return to the couch with a bottle, "Do you want me to feed him?" I ask.

He grabs the bottle from my hand and sticks it into his mouth.

"That little turkey never drinks from a bottle for me. You got lucky." Judson smiles at me without taking his eyes off JC.

"Why won't he take the bottle from you?"

"Because he prefers my boobs." I point to my chest area.

"He's definitely my son then." I roll my eyes because that is the most "Judson" comment I've ever heard.

This is what I have dreamed about since the moment I found out I was pregnant. I've pictured this moment in my head over and over again, hoping this day would come. Now that it's here, I can't help but feel fear. Fear that he will leave him, leave us. Fear that I will lose JC to him. Fear that we won't be enough. After months and months of therapy, I'm finally happy. I feel like I don't need a guy in my life to happy, well, only my son. I'm satisfied with who I am, and I can't help but wonder if we'd be better off alone.

Looking at Judson being so attentive with JC, I think back to when I found out I was pregnant. I was scared. Literally scared to death something would go wrong. The doctor sensed my anxiety and recommended I see a therapist. I had horrible dreams, dreams about losing him. Nightmares that I would wake up in a pool of blood, that he was stillborn. I went to the high-risk doctor due to my history, and he assured me that everything was okay and that my constant worrying wasn't helping.

"What are you thinking about?" He asks me as I pull myself out of my zone.

"Just how lucky I am to have him." I nod toward JC.

"What are we going to do, Blake?" He looks to me, and I shrug.

"You can't expect me to just walk away. I don't know where we stand, but I know where I stand with him."

I take JC from him, rocking him into my arms. I swallow the lump in my throat.

"I think you should go. I just need time to think about what to do about this whole situation, and my judgment is cloudy when you are here."

"Are you saying you don't think having his dad in his life is the right thing?"

"No, I'm saying I don't know how we all fit together yet."

"We fit together as a fucking family, Blakely." He stands, bowing down to kiss JC on his head before kissing the top of my head.

"I'll give you time, but I've missed enough time with him, and I don't plan on missing anymore." He threatens before closing the front door behind him.

CHAPTER 49

JUDSON

It's been two days since I've held my son. I can still smell him and feel his thick, soft hair on my fingers. I barely pulled myself out of bed this morning, and I just don't feel like doing anything. Knowing my kid is at Blake's, and I'm here isn't helping.

Jameson and Carter got here about thirty minutes ago, pushing for answers. I keep trying to avoid them, but they are like scavengers, picking my bones clean for information.

"I can't believe you are a dad, and I'm an uncle," Jay states as he tips back his coffee.

"Yeah, I can't believe it either."

Carter just sits across the room, fidgeting his hands on the counter.

"Do I need to draw up custody papers? We can go to court and get something established?" He says dryly.

I just stare at him. I don't want to take Jacob from Blakely. I love her more than anything, and I want them both here. I just don't know what I can do to prove to her that we are past everything, and I'm not running from this. I glance out the back doors to the patio. I can't see a single space in the house without seeing her. I can see her on the kitchen island dancing to Spice Girls, standing in the doorway to my office, in my bed. This house just feels like a house, and the short time she was here, it felt like home.

I'm awoken from my daydream by banging at the door, so hard and loud it could be SWAT. I look to Carter and nod for him to go get the door. He glides over to the door, pulling it open as Blakely frantically pushes past Carter, and I can see the fury penetrating off of her. Her hair is down in loose curls, and her jeans hug her hips. Her Led Zeppelin bleached t-shirt is loose, and she looks even more beautiful than I have ever seen her. I can feel my breath hitch, and I am sure that my

heart is skipping beats. She closes the gap between us, slamming a paper on my chest.

"This is low, Judson, even for you. If you didn't think he was yours, why would you try to see him? This is about your crazy notion about Bryce, isn't it?" She steps back, crossing her arms over her chest. I pull the paper back out to attempting to free my brain from confusion.

Paternity results?

"Blakely, I didn't..." She stops me by holding her hand up and turning to Carter.

"If you think you can take my child away from me, you must be dumber than I thought."

I turn to Carter, and I swear I could strangle him with my bare hands. We were already having trouble figuring this situation out. Carter holds his hands up, surrendering, as I try to say something, anything.

"You guys, are unbelievable." She scoffs as she turns to leave, slamming the door behind her.

I stand there in disbelief, looking to Carter and then to Jay. I grab my keys from the drawer as Jay pushes me back.

"Dude, maybe you should give her a minute." He pleads.

He's right. If I go after her now, we may both say things we don't mean. I understand my jealousy over Bryce is irrational, but some other guy has been there for her when I wasn't, and it's eating me alive. I never ordered this paternity test, though. I pick it up, reading over it before handing it to Carter.

"Are you happy?" I demand as he glances at it, turning to me.

"The question is, are you happy?" He slings the paper back down on the counter.

"I knew he was mine. If you saw him, you'd know it too. You don't trust anyone Carter."

He hasn't ever had a single soul in his life that was genuine other than me. His parents are real pieces of work, and every girl he's ever dared to pursue only wanted his social status. I can see why something like this would've been necessary for someone, anyone else. Blakely isn't like that though, as much as it hurts, it doesn't seem like she wants anything from me.

The next day comes much faster than anticipated, thanks to several glasses of whiskey, and now I get to nurse this grueling hangover. I roll over onto my side and look through the sheer curtains. Deciding not to waste any more time, I jump in the shower.

After digging through the closet to find something to wear, I grab my keys off the counter, making a mental note to clean this place up when I get back. I drop the empty bottles in the trash and the glasses into the sink. I nudge Jay with my sock foot, who is passed out on the couch. I haven't seen him around Hanna much lately. In fact, I haven't even seen much of him either. He waves me off as I tell him I'm leaving.

It's time to go fight for what I want.

I park outside of Blakely's house and skip several steps on the way up to the door, rushing to knock. I bang on it frantically, praying she opens it up. Her car is here, but all this knocking isn't producing Blakely. I start to panic, and a sinking feeling that she left for good fills my mind.

Is she gone with Bryce? I push those thoughts of him coming in to swoop up my family out of my head as I continue to beat on the door.

It jerks open, and I see Lexie standing there in her pajamas, hair a wreck.

"What do you want Judson, Blake isn't here?" She says matter of factly.

I wonder if Lexie lives here and decide she probably does because she is usually here. I glance at her car and back to Lexie.

"Just let me see her. I need to see her."

"Judson, I told you she isn't here."

"Where is she, Lexie?" I demand.

"Why are you so grouchy?" She says, walking toward the kitchen counter, leaving the door open. "It's hard to deal with someone like you when I first open my eyes, so forgive me, but I need coffee." She seethes as she places her cup under the Keurig.

"Are you going to tell me where she is?" I am all but begging, and at this point, I'm willing to get on my knees and beg her to tell me if that is what it takes.

"Why should I Judson?" I can hear the vindictiveness in her voice.

"I love her Lexie, I need to tell her. I need her to know I want to make this right for her and JC."

"Judson, she has been mentally drained for months. I don't want to see her go back there. Her heart has been abused for years. Don't you think it's time to give it a rest?"

"That is the last thing I want to do, Lexie." She eyes me before taking a sip of her coffee, her eyes never leaving mine.

"She's in Nashville." She claims, leaving me scratching my head wondering what she is doing there. Is this what they were whispering about?

"I drove her there yesterday after your little paternity test fiasco."

"I didn't order that Paternity test. I know he's mine. I didn't need a piece of paper to tell me. Why is she in Nashville?"

"She has surgery tomorrow on her hand."

Why didn't she mention this to me? I feel like no matter what I do, I can't keep up with what is going on.

"Where's Jacob? Is he here?" I stalk into his nursery.

"No, He's not here. Blake's mom has him. She's there with her at Vanderbilt."

I pace back and forth, trying to figure out what the fuck I'm going to do. After several seconds Lexie speaks up, "Can you stop pacing? You are freaking me out."

I stop, rocking back onto my heels, realizing quickly I didn't even need to think about what I was going to do. Because in my mind, I'm already there with her.

"I'm going to her," I state.

Lexie sits her coffee cup down and stands up while clapping her hands sarcastically.

"Ding, Ding, Ding. Ladies and Gentleman, Judson Banks finally has the right idea." I start running toward the door before turning to her.

"Thanks."

She nods, smiling at me as I pull off and head toward Blake.

The drive doesn't take near as long as I thought it would. As I pull into the hospital, it's dusk but not quite dark. I bust through the doors, desperately searching for someone to direct me to the information desk. After finally finding someone who can look up to see where Blakely is, it takes her 5 minutes to get her computer system unfroze. The way she is smacking her gum has me on edge, and I really can't take it.

"If you can't do this, I will go find someone who can." I bark at her as she rolls her eyes, her hands quickly typing into her computer.

"What was her name again?" Are you fucking serious?

"Blakely Walker," I repeat slowly.

"Oh, here she is. Sorry Sir, but I can't let you back there." I become even more aggravated.

"What part of the hospital is she in!" I demand. She doesn't immediately respond, so I grab the computer screen turning it to myself as I quickly scan the screen. She yanks the screen back to herself.

"Sir, do I need to call security?" She asks as I start running away from the desk, searching for room 709A.

I round the corner of a long hallway with light brown closed double doors at the end. Just as I'm approaching them, someone is coming out, so I slide by unnoticed.

"Sir, can I help you. Did we buzz you back?" The nurse at the station looks confused as I walk right past her, searching for the room number.

After a couple more turns, I find the door, busting through it like it's not even there. Her face turns into pure shock, and It takes me all but two steps to reach her bed. Her hair is piled on top of her head, her hospital gown is the ugliest shade of green I think I've ever seen. Her eyes glass over as she looks at me.

"Judson, what? I mean, how did you..." I silence her with a long solid kiss while grabbing her hand.

"I love you," I whisper as I pull away from her lips but linger close enough to kiss her again.

Her eyes shift from the bed up into mine.

"I love you. I'm sorry, I never ordered that Paternity test. I knew he was mine the second I laid eyes on him. I just knew." I ramble as she stares at me.

"You love me?" She asks, taking a deep breath.

"I never stopped loving you. I knew I loved you the first time I saw you in Wilmington."

"Love at first sight, the Judson Banks. Never." She says sarcastically and pushes my shoulder playfully.

"I never meant to be so selfish. I was so distracted with Ryan, and the more I thought about him, the more I worried that I would lose you.

Just like I lost mom, and I didn't think I could handle it again." She glances to the wall and back to me, uncertainty written all over her face.

"I need you, Blake, and I need Jacob. He's our son, and I want to be his dad."

She tears up and pulls me into a hug.

"You don't know how much I needed to hear you say that."

"Probably about as much as I needed to say it."

The doctor comes in confirming the surgery and everything for in the morning. Blake looks hopeful about this procedure, and it is the first time I've seen her like this since the accident. I have seen her frustrated and upset about it, but now it's like she has come to terms with it.

"When did you decide to see a specialist?" I ask.

"When I found out I was pregnant." She sighs, laying back into the raised hospital bed, "I thought I would at least try. I didn't know if you would want this or if I was even coming back to Savannah. If I was going to be a single mom, I needed to try to have two functioning hands. If it doesn't work, I won't be upset, but I need to try for JC." She explains.

I sit back in my chair, attempting to manage my thoughts. I think about how strong she is. How she had to give birth without me. I think about how neglected they both must feel. How I should've tried harder, hunted her down, anything other than those emails. I should've known Ryan had gotten to her when she didn't respond. Our bond was stronger than that, and I should've known something was wrong.

"Where is JC?" I ask, changing the subject.

"With my mom, they got a hotel. It was getting late, so she left to put him to bed."

I lace my fingers with hers, and she doesn't pull away. I decide that is enough for me tonight. I have hope, hope that for once in this lifetime, I am going to get the girl. My girl.

CHAPTER 50

BLAKELY

I awake the next morning, definite that it was all a dream.

It wasn't. Judson is here. His head laid subtly on the bed near my hip, his hair disheveled and messy. I adjust myself in the bed, making sure my arm is available for the nurse who is here to take my blood pressure. I whisper to her, trying not to wake Judson. She assures me the anesthesiologist will be in soon to talk and closes the door on her way out. I glance out the window, noticing that it is still dark.

The door launches open, and my mom walks through with JC. Her eyes immediately landing on Judson. Her gaze finds me before sitting JC's car seat down.

"Blakely, what is going on?" She asks dryly, ready for me to appease her by telling her he's leaving.

"What do you mean?" I question.

"Why is he here? I thought you said you didn't trust him." She unbuckles JC pulling him from his car seat before continuing, "I thought we agreed that it would be best if you moved on." She says in a condescending tone, flipping her hair over her shoulder.

"Don't patronize me, mom," I state, rolling my eyes before grabbing JC from her. He needs to breastfeed before they take me back.

"I'm just saying he deserves someone who isn't going to run away when things get hard."

I've gotten used to ignoring her over the past couple of months, so that's exactly what I do.

"You be okay for a little bit? I'm going to go grab some food from the food court."

I nod, and she takes off, closing the door not so subtly behind her. Judson jerks his head up, and I yank the sheet up over JC's head. I can tell I am looking at him awkwardly as he gives me a questionable glare. "Good morning." He smiles.

"Morning."

JC starts whimpering, and I know exactly why. He hates being covered up while he is trying to eat. I pat his bottom, trying to appease him.

"Blakely, you don't have to cover him up. If you don't want me to watch, I can turn around."

"I just don't want to make you uncomfortable," I state, pulling the blanket back to look at JC.

"I'm fine. It's our child. He's just eating. It's a completely natural process."

I pull the sheet down, and I can see Judson's eyes landing on JC but pulling away quickly, so he doesn't make me feel too exposed. His eyes avert from JC to mine. I would swear that I was looking at the other half of myself. Suddenly I realize all of the emptiness I've been feeling is temporary, and the part of myself that seemed to be missing was always here.

After several minutes the nurse comes to wheel me back.

"Can we wait a few minutes?" I look to JC, reaching for my phone to dial mom.

"Blake, I got him. It's okay." Judson reaches to me to grab JC from my arms. I look up to him.

He gives me a reassuring smile as he sits down with him. I am trying to reassure my brain that this is real and not an illusion as they wheel me out of the room. Hoping the next four hours don't result in my mom or Judson killing one another.

When I wake up in recovery, I feel intense pain in my wrist. I look around in a panic remembering the accident and how I woke up the first time. The nurse squeezes my shoulder, reassuring me that everything is okay. After a few minutes, they push me back to my room. My head spins in circles, thinking about seeing Judson again. As the door moves open, Judson stands, making his way over to me.

"How do you feel?" He asks before bending to kiss my forehead, JC in his arms.

"You stayed here with JC for four hours?" I question.

"Yeah, I didn't want to leave you." He bounces JC, rocking him back and forth.

"He's guarding poor Jacob with his life." My mom scoffs as she rounds the bed to check on me.

"If it were up to me, I'd never put him down," Judson responds.

I chuckle with him, trying to hide my adoration from my mom and her doubts.

The next 48 hours go by great. I feel good, the pain is minimal, and I can't wait to start physical therapy. They keep telling me to take it slow and not rush things, but I can't help it. As we are leaving the hospital, my mom looks to Judson, and he nods.

"So Blake, since you are feeling good, I have a surprise for you." He smiles, handing JC to my mom.

"Reese is going to watch JC tonight, I got them a room, and I have a gift for you." I look to my mom with a questionable glare as she smiles. I kiss JC on the head and stand up out of the wheelchair that the nurse made me ride to the car.

I climb into Judson's Truck, and we drive downtown. He pulls into a parking garage at Bridgestone Arena.

"What is going on?" I ask.

"The preds play tonight." He smiles at me and pulls me over the console, careful not to hit my hand. He kisses my lips and neck and jumps out to get to my door.

By the half, I am sure that I am going to kill him of embarrassment. He puts on a brave face as I yell and whistle. He places his hand on my thigh, and I am tingling all over. I forgot what it was like for him to touch me and how my body reacts to his touch. I find myself distracted by thoughts of where I want his hands for the rest of the game. When it's

over, I have never been more ready to get outside. Needing fresh air to cool me down and a bucket of water to douse the heat between my thighs.

"Did you have fun?" He asks, pulling me in close to him as we walk toward the car.

"Are you kidding? That was incredible. Those seats were insane!"

He looks up to me with those dark eyes.

"So how many gifts do I owe you now?"

I stop in my tracks, turning to him with a grin.

"You remember that?" I think back to our walk on the beach when he was dying for information, and I played games with him.

"I told you I remember everything."

"It's been a year, Judson. You don't owe me anything." I laugh.

"I keep my promises." He states as he opens my door and gets into the driver's seat.

"Your mom said she has Jacob for the night, but if you want to get back to him, I can take you there," He says.

"I don't think I'm ready for this night to be over."

He places his hand on the back of my neck, threading his fingers softly through my hair. He puts his lips on mine, and my breath hitches as he swipes his tongue along my bottom lip. His lips become more demanding as I become completely captivated by this kiss. He pulls back quickly, looking at me with wild eyes, desire shining through. It's like I'm under some type of magical spell.

He doesn't say a word. He pulls the car into drive, and we go about a half of a mile before he turns into a hotel. He slams the brakes at the valet stand, tossing him the keys before opening my door. His hand reaches for mine as he pulls me through the lobby and into the elevator. I can see him fidgeting impatiently as the elevator goes up 10 floors. The elevator

doors slide open, and we walk hand in hand to the end of the hall, where Judson sticks the keycard into the door.

In the back of my mind, I'm scared to let him in. I am afraid that this is the beginning of the end. He shoves the door closed, and his lips slam into mine. We stumble through the entryway to the bedroom. He pulls away long enough to look into my eyes, giving me a chance to change my mind. I get lost in his familiarity and how it feels like just yesterday that his lips were on mine. His hands roam under my shirt, his fingers tracing my skin. The more area his hands explore, the more desperate I become.

He pushes me back onto the bed, pulling his shirt frantically over his head, reconnecting his lips to mine.

His hands fist the top of my jeans and pull them down my thighs. I hear him rip a condom open, and instantly I put everything on hold, shuffling away from him. I lift myself off the bed.

"I can't do this."

He quickly grabs my hands, thinking he has pushed me too far.

"I'm sorry," he breathes, pushing his forehead against mine, "I got carried away."

"It's not that I don't want to." I pull my pants back up, offering him an apologetic smile.

"I just, well, it's not quite been six weeks since I had JC. Plus, I had a baby, Judson. I'm not what you remember."

I glance to my thicker thighs and fuller stomach. I stretch my shirt out, hoping he doesn't analyze.

"Blakely, your body is beautiful. It gave me a son, a beautiful baby, that is half of me and half of you." He pushes my hair behind my ear, his fingers raking down my jawline.

"I love you."

I connect my forehead with his before responding with what I've known all along.

"I love you so much."

October 17

The last couple of weeks were a lot of trial and error. My hand is doing really well, and they believe that I will regain some function, the pain comes and goes, but overall, it's bearable. Judson has a company to run but still manages to make time for us. If he's not here helping with JC, he's sending me groceries or diapers. My fear of him being a flight risk has begun to wash away slowly as he continues to prove that he is in it for the long run. We spent last weekend visiting my dad's grave in Tennessee with JC. It was the first time I had been there, and it gave me some closure I didn't realize I needed. My phone buzzes, and I can feel the excitement wash over me. Judson comes back today from a two-day conference in Atlanta, and I can't believe how much I've missed him in just two days.

Judson- Hey mama, I just got home. Meet me at the house at 8:00. Bring my boy, I have a surprise for you both.

I smile widely as I look at JC.

Blakely- Okay Dad. We'll be there.

The fluttering in my stomach sends me into a happy dance as I spin into JC's room to find his clothes. It makes me sad that none of his newborn clothes fit anymore, and he is already wearing three-month clothes. Growing like a weed is normal I guess. I quickly dress him and sit him in the bouncer, outside the shower. I take the fastest shower possible without neglecting personal grooming. My hair is a complete rat's nest as I drench it with leave-in conditioner and rake a brush

through it. I throw on light makeup and blow dry my hair, opting for my natural waves.

We pull up outside of Judson's house. Before I can even cut the engine, he is at JC's door. He pushes the button to detach his car seat from the base and carries him for me. I hear him whispering to him incoherently. I roll my eyes, wondering what kind of scheme he is coming up with. He puts his arm around my shoulder, pulling me into a quick kiss.

"I missed you guys. Are you ready for the surprise?"

"You know I am." I squeal as we walk up the front steps.

"Happy Halloween!"

I feel as if all the air is stolen from my lungs. It is the most beautiful thing I have ever witnessed. The Christmas tree is enormous, probably twelve feet tall. Thousands of ornaments. Everything is lit up and sparkling. I drop my purse to the ground as he pulls me into his embrace.

"Do you like it?"

"Like it? I love it! It's beautiful." I feel tears pooling behind my eyes.

"You said Christmas was your favorite. So I figured instead of Halloween, we would just skip to Christmas."

He unbuckles JC and lifts him out of the car seat. I can see the lights reflecting in his eyes as he gazes around the room.

"Do you like it, little buddy?" Judson coos at him.

"I think he's speechless," We both laugh.

"There's more." He grabs my hand and drags me up the stairs skipping a few, making my heart drop, afraid that he will drop JC, even though I know he won't.

We round the top of the stairs, and he shoves the door open. It's a beautiful room. It's painted a pale yellow, navy sheer curtains line the windows. A large preds decal hangs over the crib. A rocking chair occupies the corner with a shelf of books next to it. Judson pulls me close to him as I take it all in.

"Blakely, I never dreamed that I could get so lucky. That I would have you and my son. I'm not perfect, and I know I can never be. I'm not half of what you deserve, but I'll spend every second trying to be that guy. I guarantee that there will be hard days, but they could never outweigh the amazing ones. I know you are scared, and so am I, but what we have is worth fighting for. We are worth it, Blake."

The tears stream down my face unconsciously as I think of how this is all I have ever dreamed about.

"Judson, you are more than I deserve." I choke out.

"Move in." He demands. "Move in here, where you and Jacob belong."

I shake my head vigorously, and he pulls me into a hug kissing me over and over again.

Judson puts JC to bed earlier than usual, and we make our way into our bedroom, sitting the monitor down on the nightstand. Everything is exactly as I remember it. Perfect.

I sit on the edge of the bed as he closes the gap between us. I push the hem of his shirt up, exposing his skin. He jerks his shirt over his head, and my hands roam all over his body. He pushes me down on the bed as I finagle my pants off and pull him closer to me. His lips find my neck, and he pushes my shirt up so he can roam light kisses all over my torso. I let out a breath. I feel as if I could just explode at any second without even really being touched. I can feel him grow between us, and he is just as ready for me as I am for him. The anticipation is killing me, so I roll him over and straddle him. His eyes go wide as I take control.

He hisses as I slide down on him. His hands grip my hips forcefully and up my back pulling me closer to him. Our rhythm is entirely in sync and slow. It feels as if we are one. The way he breathes into my ear sends me over the edge. I call out his name over and over as he comes undone.

I fall into the bed as I roll off of him. He pulls me into his chest closely, nuzzling his cheek against the top of my head.

"Any more surprises?" I chuckle.

"I can think of a few." He tilts my chin up, and our lips meet.

EPILOGUE

BLAKELY

Six months later...

I wipe my sweaty palms down the front of my dress as I make my way out of the driver's seat of my car to meet Judson. A few weeks ago, I came up with this plan, and I can't believe it's here, and I'm going to ask Judson to marry me. I know it's unconventional, but he's afraid, and I've decided to take this approach. Although I've told him repeatedly that we are forever, he's got this inevitable fear of rejection. I could never picture our lives any differently. If you would've told me two years ago that this is where I would be, I would've said, "you're crazy." I went from following rules to allowing myself to follow my heart. It wasn't easy, and I had the patience I didn't even know existed.

The grief is still there every day. It comes in waves, as does happiness. I can't forget, but I can be thankful for what I have now and how things have turned out. Time doesn't heal everything, but it certainly makes things a little bit easier. It all seemed to make me a little bit stronger. I pull JC out of his car seat and saunter slowly onto the dock. Carter is supposed to bring him here, and I'm hoping he didn't spill the surprise.

I see Carter's car pull in, and Judson gets out quickly, slamming the door.

"Carter, I told you, I don't have time for games. I have plans with Blake!" He scoffs as he rounds the front of the car, spotting me at the end of the dock. He raises an eyebrow to Carter, wondering what is going on. Carter shrugs and pushes him toward me.

JC is squirming in my arms, and as Judson approaches us, he reaches out for him.

"What's this?" Judson questions, pulling the folded paper boat from JC.

"Open it," I demand with a shit-eating grin covering my entire face.

He looks to me with a million questions as he unfolds the boat. The tears fall down his cheeks and mine too, because I've never actually seen him cry.

Just when I think he's about to respond, he pulls me closer to him. Holding JC with one arm, he looks to him, "Of course I'll marry your mommy."

"The real question here is if your mommy will marry me?" He looks to me, laughing softly as he pulls a tiny blue box from his pocket. My eyes go wide, and I look to Carter, who stands at the end of the dock, smirking. That asshole knew we were both going to propose today. If we are anything, it is dysfunctional, and Carter learns that every day.

"Blakely Grace Walker, will you marry me, make all of our last names match?" He asks, adjusting JC so that he can remove the ring from the box.

"You know, I will!" I squeal as he places the ring on my finger.

"I can't believe you were going to propose tonight! When did you do this?" I motion to the ring on my finger.

"Blakely, I've had that ring for longer than I'd like to admit. I was just afraid to give it to you." I smile at this perfect man in front of me, holding our son.

This is my family. It's our family.

For the first time in two years, I'm thankful for the waves. Sometimes they are calm and floating, and other times overwhelming, making us feel pain and the constant struggle to keep our heads above water. The wreckage of my past floats like storm debris in the water. It's always there to remind me of what was. Finally, instead of looking at the wreckage with sadness, I feel privileged to have loved so deeply to have experienced such grief in the first place. I know now that the same love that broke me is the same love that put me back together, piece by piece.

Thank you for reading It Comes in Waves! Continue reading for an excerpt of the next book in this series Drowning in Desire.

EXCERPT "DROWNING IN DESIRE"

CARTER

I follow Judson down the hall and wait behind him as he beats on the door.

"Come on, we aren't even superstitious!" He tilts his head against the wood, slowly knocking with two knuckles.

His reasoning isn't working because his bride has yet to open the door. Hanna steps out, only opening the door far enough to slip her body through.

"Judson, it is bad luck!" Hanna whines, crossing her arms over her chest. Her dark purple strapless dress hugs all of her curves. I can see why Jay is obsessed with her.

"We need confirmation from Blakely that she doesn't want to see him," I demand.

"Do you need to act like a lawyer all the time?" Hanna laughs.

Blakely shouts from behind the cracked door, "Go away, Judson!"

He raises his hands in defeat, shrugging his shoulders.

We make our way outside, taking a break from the chaos.

"I can't believe you're getting married, man," I admit, shaking my head toward the ground, lighting the end of my cigar.

"Believe it. I never thought this would happen, but I'm glad it did."

I roll my eyes, shaking the sudden jealousy from my mind, as I try to picture myself at the altar.

"So which one of these lovely ladies is my conquest tonight?" I laugh, scanning the room inside through the glass doors.

"Blakely said if you fuck with any of her friends, she will castrate you."

"Not looking to go to jail tonight." I laugh.

It's a low blow, I know. Eight years isn't a big deal.

He rolls his eyes, "Since when do you discriminate based on age?"

"Since I caught myself looking at Hanna earlier and felt gross."

He bursts out laughing, shooting me a judgemental glare, "Jameson would die."

"What is going on with them, anyway?"

"I'm not sure. She moved out. He won't talk about it."

"He's tough. He'll be alright."

Judson has been pretty tight-lipped about how Jameson has been handling things since the altercation with Ryan. Jameson nearly killed him. If it wasn't for Hanna, I'm not sure he would've stopped. I left that part out when I told Judson about Ryan being in the hospital before heading to jail. According to the police report, he did a number on him.

The wedding planner saunters her way over to us, "It's gotime, guys."

We make our way over to our places. The ceremony is decorated with a million flowers. It's so feminine, I'm sure Judson told Blakely to do whatever she wanted. It does look romantic, though, the sun is starting to set, and the guests are all seated. Everyone is eagerly awaiting the bride, and I'm ready for the after-party.

The music starts playing as the bridesmaids start walking in. Rose petals already line the aisle since there are no flower girls. This wedding is a dream though, I'm sure Judson would've hired her some. I laugh at the thought. Apparently, her friend Camille's daughter was supposed to do it but decided she was too old to be a flower girl. She's 4.

Everyone stands as Blakely appears at the end of the aisle, her step-dad next to her. I look at Judson and feel tears burning my eyes. He looks so happy. I mean, I guess he should be. Isn't this the ultimate goal? A bunch of messy moments that make a life. That's definitely what this is. Thankfully after a

lot of groveling, Blakely forgave me for the whole paternity test fiasco. If it wasn't for Judson, though, I wouldn't have wasted my breath apologizing. I don't regret looking out for him.

The officiant says a few words, and I am zoned out until I hear Judson speak up.

"Blakely, I never thought I could deserve a love like this. You came into my life like a bulldozer, ready to take down all of my walls. I'm out of my mind in love with you, the crazy kind that makes you do completely irrational things. I plan to wake up every day with you by my side, adding to our crazy family. I promise to spend every second of forever loving you like it's my last." He takes a nervous breath, "You look beautiful, by the way."

He pulls her in, planting a soft kiss on her cheek.

"Dude, you are supposed to wait for your cue," I whisper.

He waves me off in dismissal. Blakely's friend Lexie holds JC, and I can't help but notice the way her eyes are glossing over, listening to their vows. Do all chicks cry at weddings? JC grabs a hand full of her hair as she shifts him to her other arm, untangling it from his tiny baby fingers. She is beautiful. Her long blonde hair hangs in loose waves down her back, and a flower headband wraps around her head. Her dress is different from Hanna's, a softer purple, and boy, it flawlessly clings to her curves.

It's too bad that she hates me. Well, she hasn't said, "Carter, I hate you," in those exact words, but she hasn't ever spoken to me, and I'm sure if looks could kill, I'd be dead.

Blakely gets a little choked up but finally speaks, "Judson, you saved me. You saved me when I couldn't save myself. This may not be how I pictured things, but I would choose you over and over again, in any lifetime. It will always be us. Nothing will ever change that. Our love will always be easy, even when life tries to make it hard. I promise you my heart, my soul, and every imperfect piece of me you'll accept. I love you."

Judson catches her tears as they slowly fall down her cheeks. They kiss slowly like no one is watching. I feel another ping of jealousy down in my core.

We exit the aisle, hand in hand with the bridesmaids. Of Course, I'm paired with the one woman who can't stand me. I lift JC from her arms, offering her my elbow to grab. She rolls her eyes at my gesture, and we make our way to the courtyard for some quick pictures.

The reception is over-the-top, just as I expected. Judson spared no expense. The dance floor is packed full, and I'm more than a few drinks in. I didn't bring a date, deciding it would be easy to find entertainment for the night. There are several attractive women worth talking to, but only one that keeps my gaze.

She sits across the room at a bar table with several other friends and an entourage of guys, vying for her attention. Her red lips wrap around her wine glass as she tips it back, laughing at something Blakely says.

"Dude, will you stop staring at Lexie?" Judson closes in behind me, setting his glass down next to mine.

"What are you talking about?" I pick my drink up like a shield, tipping it back to hide my feelings.

"Everyone in this room can see you eye-fucking her."

I chuckle, "That's funny because I was thinking of my master plan to steal Blakely from you."

He pushes my shoulder, laughing, "In your dreams, bro."

"What's her deal anyway?"

"Who, Lexie?"

"Yes, Lexie. She won't even look my way. Does she have a friendly bone in her body?"

He laughs and slaps my back, "She's way out of your league."

"What the fuck does that mean? No one is out of my league."

"I just mean Blake would never approve, so there's no hope for you."

Am I that terrible that Blakely doesn't want me around her friends?

"Why does B think I'm so terrible?" I ask. Genuinely curious about what Judson has let slip.

"Maybe it's your stellar track-record with women?" He laughs, "Or It could be the lawyer thing, never leaving shit alone, you got issues, man."

"Alright, alright. Fuck. It's not "rag on Carter" night."

"I'm just saying, don't fuck with Lexie. She's not right for you, plus I'm pretty sure she has a boyfriend."

"Warning received, thanks for the consideration." I stand from the chair and lift my glass to Judson. The bar is calling my name, so I head over and nod to the bartender for a refill.

The air in the room feels thicker and thicker as I sit and wonder how my life has become so fucked. Different women every night, not caring if I ever see them again.

My eyes can't leave the fucking beautiful blonde in the corner, dancing with every guy in the room that isn't me. That can't be me.

I stand, breaking a conversation with Jay, and head up to the roof. I walk to the edge and watch the cars beneath. I tip my drink back, finishing it off, the whiskey burning my throat as it goes down. I drop the glass to the ground 3 stories down, It makes a shattering sound that's oddly satisfying.

"Just because my speech was better than yours is no reason to jump."

Lexie crosses her arms over her chest, walking over to me.

"What are you doing up here?" I ask, turning my gaze back to the street below.

"I could ask you the same thing." She sasses, moving closer to the edge, leaning over. My heart-rate picks up. What is she doing?

"You're too drunk to be that close to the edge?"

"How do you know I'm drunk?" She laughs, positioning herself between me and the edge. I stand defensively.

"Because I've watched you drink all night."

She rolls her eyes, "You've been watching me, huh?"

Her balance gets weaker, and I find myself involuntarily reaching for her.

"Hard not to notice when you do everything you can to draw attention to yourself."

Completely not true. She literally doesn't have to do a single thing for me to be drawn to her.

She yanks her arm away from me, her eyes cutting into me like daggers, "You're an asshole."

"Yeah, I get that a lot."

"I'll bet you do." She scoffs.

"What does that mean?" I block her against the ledge.

"I just mean, do women call you an asshole before or after their walk of shame?" I pull back from her, surprised she said that. She's usually quiet, but apparently, drunk Lexie is unfiltered. Just like any other time, my words come out before my brain has time to stop them.

"So you don't think every single guy down there you've been rubbing your ass all over doesn't want to fuck you? You can't be that naive." She closes the gap between us.

Her perfume fills my nostrils, and her body is inches from mine, begging to be touched.

"Is that why you were watching me? Because you want to fuck me?"

Holy shit.

Hearing those words come off her lips like that makes me want to bend her over the ledge, right here, right now.

"Depends. Is that an offer?" I gently brush the back of her arm.

"Never in a million years. I know guys like you, I'm not interested."

As much as my mind is telling me to pull away, to run, to get out of here. I can't.

My feet feel like they weigh thousands of pounds. I reach up, rubbing my thumb against her jawline, as she leans in, her warm breath falling onto my lips as her eyes dart up to mine. I need to kiss her like I need to breathe.

"Lexie!" Blake calls from the other side of the roof, "Are you out here?"

Lexie jerks away quickly, regretful and frantic.

"Yeah, I'm coming!" The door slams shut, and her eyes never leave mine.

"I guess that's your cue," I state.

"Um, yeah, I guess it is."

For the first time, maybe ever, I'm nervous. I'm positive that if I don't make a move now, I might not ever have another chance. I think briefly about what Judson said.

Fuck that, Lexie can make her own decisions. I grab both sides of her face and pull her into me, claiming her mouth with mine.

She pulls back quickly, her hand pressing firmly in the center of my chest, "We can't."

Unsure of what to do, I agree with her, "You're right, I'm not good for you. I would ruin you."

She takes a couple of steps back before stepping around me, heading for the door to the stairwell, "I hope I never give you that chance."

Her words linger there a little longer than she does as I watch her disappear down the stairwell, her blonde hair swinging down her back. I feel the corner of my mouth tug into a smile. Against my better judgment, I realize I may be incapable of leaving her alone.

Carter's story continues in: <u>Drowning in Desire</u>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



KIRSTIE GOODE is a contemporary romance author. She writes real and raw emotion into her books and relatable characters you are sure to fall in love with. She loves a good plot twist and likes to keep things exciting and full of suspense.

She lives in East Tennessee with her husband and three wild and crazy boys, who have taught her how to wrestle appropriately. She can't imagine her life without books, her Mac, and all of her "book boyfriends" that live in her imagination. She adores traveling to new places, football, and living out her very own happily ever after.

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