



*He
killed
for
me.*

K I A N N

NYT and USA BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TIJAN

KIAN

New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Author

TIJAN

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DEDICATION

*This book is a thank you to all my readers!
Thank you for all the support and excitement!
It means more than I could ever put in words.*

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CHAPTER 1

My stomach plunged to my feet.

Three steps earlier, I was already tasting the daiquiris I'd be drinking that night and the song "Copacabana" was on repeat, blasting in my mind. I was leaving my last exam of my sophomore year at Hillcrest University, and we were celebrating that night. The whole gang—myself, my roommate, and Wanker, the guy who loved my roommate, but she was too daft to realize it.

But once I left that classroom, I froze.

I took those three steps from the door, just clearing it, when it shut behind me. My butt got a swift whack, not that I was feeling it. All of that registered in the back of my mind. I was too transfixed across the hallway where the student lounge was located. That was the con of having classrooms attached to the social hub of the campus. The person I was staring at, smack dab in the center of the news report, was me.

Not *me*, me, but me nonetheless.

It was the old me, when I was Jordan Emory, and that girl looked different from how I was now. Current me had short brown, slightly golden-blonde hair. My hairstylist had come heavily recommended, straight from the federal government. But the girl on the television screen still had her long jet-black locks. I needed to move aside the frozen anvil to appreciate how good my hair looked, but damn, it did. I'd been a little bit of a hottie back then, and I never knew it. My nose wrinkled.

What a waste. I should've taken classes in self-esteem. A lot of problems would've been avoided, but I hadn't. Old me was broken and spineless.

New me was spunky and fierce with extra emphasis on the spine.

“Jo! Yo!”

Jo, not Jordan. My new nickname was from my new full name of Joslyn Keen. There was that other fact.

Jake Monroe was weaving his way toward me.

My brain needed another two seconds to fully register what was happening. I was on the TV—old me, not new me—and Jake was coming my way. Jake, whom I had been in love with seven months ago, had broken me, like really broken me. I had been in a puddle on my bathroom floor, crying and sniffing with soggy Kleenex, wearing a bathrobe, next to an old pizza box and a box of wine.

It was that Jake.

I couldn't compute. I just couldn't.

He wove his way around a group of students, a very bright, fake smile plastered on my face. It felt alien-like, but hey, I was going this route. I felt like I was in a twilight zone anyway.

“Oh, hey...there”—I gave his arm a slight punch—“Jake.” This was awkward. We hadn't talked in seven months. I should be doing something else, not being nice to him, but at that moment, my brain wasn't working.

And I wasn't stopping. I was making it worse.

I raised my hand and pretended to shoot him with my finger. “How are you doing...there?”

His head tilted to the side, and his grin slipped a little, morphing into is-she-nuts territory. “I’m good. How are you?” He was holding a textbook to his chest and leaned forward, motioning with it to the coffee cup in my hand. “Hitting that early today?”

He thought I was drunk. I wish.

“No.” I cleared my throat and glanced behind me to my classroom. “Just finished my last exam of the year. You? What are you doing?”

“Looking for you.”

“Oh?” My eyebrows shot up.

As he started talking, my gaze slid past his shoulders to the television mounted on the wall in the lounge. My face was still there. There were words scrolling across the bottom of the screen along with old pictures of my hometown and other pictures that I didn’t want to register. I knew Jake wouldn’t recognize me, but I scooted around, so he had to turn with me. I tried concentrating on him. Whatever *that* was in the background, it could wait. I had a ~~he~~ life to live here.

Jake Monroe.

Age: 21

Occupation: College Juniorish (Might be a senior now.)

Looks: Wide shoulders. Trim waist. Washboard abs. Nicely muscled thighs. Wavy brunette hair with speckles of sunlight. Strong jawline. Dark eyes that could make me groan and sigh

at the same time. I had lost many afternoons just gazing into them. He had a young-looking face with a smooth complexion. He was gorgeous—too gorgeous at times.

My history with him: I could already feel the condemnation. Mental assessment turned off.

He was saying, "...Susan, do you think?"

"Susan?"

"She's up for a promotion with the newspaper. There are two spots, but only one—"

No, no, no. I knew where he was going with this, and I could only shake my head. "But only one is getting the full-time promotion."

He paused, a side grin appearing. "How did you know that?"

"Do you not know who the other person is?"

I was waiting. His friend Susan was my nemesis—or so I heard. Because of my history with Jake, she hated me. Well, *hate* was a strong word. *Loathed* was a more correct summary of the situation, but her reasons were twofold.

Here's the condemnation part—I was the other woman. Jake had a girlfriend when he and I started our fling in the first semester of this year, but I didn't know he had a girlfriend. I heard, along with many others, that they broke up. I thought Jake was free and clear. And no, Susan wasn't the girlfriend. Susan was best friends with the girlfriend, Tara Moore. Susan was doing her best-friend duties, which was hating me. And the other reason she hated me was the other part of my current conversation with Jake.

My roommate and best friend, Erica Rouche, was the other one up for the job promotion. They both started as interns freshman year, then were hired on as junior writers. When the senior writers went on strike, Erica and Susan got promoted again. Things were touch and go for a while, but they both proved they could do their jobs well. The job opening was another step up, into full-time employment. It was a big deal for someone still in college.

And Jake was asking me to...what? I wasn't following that part.

"The other person?" He scrunched up his adorable eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"Jake."

"What?"

"Come on."

"Huh?" He scratched behind his ear. "That's why I'm asking you. Do you think you could come with me?"

His shoulders bunched up. His arms moved back, and his hands slid into his pockets. The book he was holding moved, so it was pressed between his arm and his chest, right where his rib cage was and right where I knew he had a tattoo.

I almost groaned. I was reminded that not only was he the last guy I loved, but he was also the last guy I slept with. Remembering how that tattoo, a tribal tattoo positioned to make him look like a piece of art, was on his toned body—yes, I needed to get laid. By someone else.

My eyes snapped back to his. "Erica. It's Erica."

“Huh?”

“The other person is Erica. The other person who Susan is competing against for that promotion is my roommate, my best friend.”

“*Oh*, shit.” His hand moved to cup the side of his face. He stared down at me. “I didn’t even think about that. That *is* a wrinkle in my chances for asking you on a date.”

“Exactly.” My head bobbed up and down. “Don’t tell me who got the promotion already. I don’t want to know. I still have to be excited or pissed when Erica tells me the news. That’s my” —*wait a minute*— “job.” I fixed him with a look. What had he said? “Date?”

He was waiting, watching me, and his head moved up and down in a slow nod. “Yeah. This is going to be awkward now, huh? Susan got the promotion.” He gritted his teeth and stepped back. His head moved back, too, as if waiting for an explosion from me.

None came. I was still dumbfounded by the date comment. All that vanished in two seconds, and my brain was back to normal. I took a step back and pretended to do a double take. “Are you talking to the right person? You must be mistaken.”

“Oh no.” He looked down.

“Oh yes,” I corrected. He looked back up, and I shook my head. “You’re asking me on a date? Did I hear that right?”

He groaned.

“A date?” I needed to make sure.

“Yes. A date.” He was much more timid this time.

I clipped my head from side to side. “This is the first time you’ve had the balls to talk to me in seven months and you’re asking me out? Do you remember the last time we spoke?” And speaking of, I should’ve ripped him a new one when he first said hello. I blamed the news for that blip.

“Technically,” he lifted a hand up. “We didn’t speak that time.”

“You’re right.” I snorted. “Because you had your tongue shoved down your ex-girlfriend’s throat. But no, I have to correct myself, because she wasn’t your ex at all. She was *still* your girlfriend.”

“I’m sorry. I really am. Things are over now with Tara and me. We’re done. I mean it.”

His face got red, and I knew he had more apologies ready to spew, but I didn’t want to hear them. As fast as my anger rose, it faded, too. It still burned, what he did, but I’d process that later. I was more concerned about Erica.

“No, Jake. Go away.”

When he didn’t, I was the one to walk away. I didn’t want to hear anymore, but he got in front of me and held his arms out. “Just hear me out. I’m not asking you out on a date. Although, full disclosure here, I wouldn’t mind if we went that route, but,” he raised his voice when he saw that I was about to give him the middle finger, “I was hoping to ask a favor from you.”

“A favor?” My eyebrows arched up at that one.

“Susan is having a celebration at Sids tonight, and,” he hesitated, “Tara is going to be there...and I was wondering if

you'd go with me tonight.”

“You want to use me?”

“What?” His eyes got big a second later. “No! No. Well... yeah. Kinda.”

I checked out. This conversation was going nowhere. I wasn't going to date the guy who almost shattered me, and I wasn't going to let him use me to get back at his now-ex-girlfriend. I just didn't have the energy to vocalize all of that to him, especially when I could still see my old face on the television behind him. Although, seeing my face there and my old name shouldn't have been such a shock.

Three years ago, my face was everywhere. The media followed me anywhere I went. I was hounded, hunted, and harassed. I tried to finish out my last year of high school, but couldn't. I quit halfway, finished up my GED, and the FBI helped me hide—or I should say that a federal agent helped me hide. I wasn't officially in the Witness Protection Program because I didn't qualify. There was no real threat to my well-being, just the media hounding me. But, even if there had been, I would've refused.

I wanted to make my own decisions. I just needed help with changing my name and my looks. I still looked like my old self, but there were enough changes that people wouldn't put two and two together.

Besides the new hairdo, I had put on some pounds. The old me had been too skinny, ribs and hip bones sticking out everywhere. This me was healthy. I was toned, tanned, and ready for action. I was in shape, too, but the biggest change were my eyes. Nothing surgically had been done to them, but I

ordered colored contacts by the bundle. My eyes were now like Jake's, a chocolaty brown. My old eyes were a myriad of all different colors—blue, green, hazel, brown, and some amber mixed in. I was mostly hazel, but the other colors had been enough to make people stop for a second and third look. My eye color was also part of the reason I'd needed to go into hiding.

My foster father was bewitched by my eyes. On a good day, I was a goddess to him. On a bad day—and there had been a lot of them—it was as if I had been sent by Lucifer himself.

Everything went kaput on one of those bad days.

“Jo?”

Jake was frowning at me.

Oh, yes. Date. Erica—crap, Erica lost the job. “I have to find Erica. I need to be with her when she finds out.”

“What?”

“I have to go.” I started to leave.

“Wait.” He reached out for me, but I was hurrying toward the door. He called after me, “So, no date then?”

I held up a hand in an absentminded wave. Jake was the least of my...whatever he was—problem, person of interest. I didn't know. I wasn't going to think about him, not until I found Erica.

It didn't take me long. I found her by the food court. She was standing behind a group of students, huddled around another television.

“Hey.” I tugged on her shirt when I got to her side. I had an insta-frown on my face. This wasn’t going to be good. Should I break the news to her? Or play dumb and wait for the phone call?

“Hey,” she mumbled back, distracted. Her eyes were narrowed, focused solely on the television in front of us.

I didn’t want to look. From the corner of my eye, I knew it was my face again. By now, the shock wore off. I remembered it was the anniversary of my case. I should’ve assumed to see my old face today. The trial had been all over the news, but it faded once I went into hiding. My case was solved. There was a dead body, and someone was in jail, but I was the only unknown. Every now and then, it’d pop back up on one of those shows about what had happened to so-and-so.

I shoved that out of my head again. “Erica?”

“Yeah? What?” Her attention was still zeroed in straight ahead.

I waved my hand in the air. “Roomie?”

“What?” She turned sharply to me, then softened her voice. “Sorry. What is it, though?”

I moved back a step, but I saw something in her eyes that I rarely saw. Hurt appeared there. She took her glasses off, and I saw it more evident. I rarely saw my roommate without her eye equipment. Her glasses seemed permanently attached. I even found her sleeping with them a few times.

Crossing her arms over her chest, Erica shielded the hurt, so she was just hostile now. When the full effect of *that* was coming at you, you’d need to be wary. My roommate was only

five feet four, but she was a feisty five feet four. Weighing a hundred twenty-five, she might look like a book nerd with her glasses, choppy short hair, and pale skin, but her looks were deceiving. She had a reporter's nose, intuition, and concentration that would outdo a bird dog on a bird trail. When something piqued her interest, nothing and no one had better get in the way...like I had just done.

I glanced at the phone she was clutching in her hand. "Any calls yet?"

"Why?" Suspicion formed on her face.

"Uh..."

She jerked her head back to the television. "They called thirty minutes ago."

"I'm so sorry, Erica. You weren't planning on going to Sids tonight, were you?"

"What?"

"Susan's going to be there tonight."

"How do you know that?"

Well. Shit. I glanced to the floor for a moment. My roommate was not a fan of my ex-fling-whatever-he-was. "Jake invited me to it, to the celebration."

"Jake?" Her eyebrows pinched together. "What celebration?"

"For Susan. She got the job at the paper." *Ah, crap. I thought she knew?* "You did know, right?" I touched her arm. That's what I heard from her, wasn't it? "That Susan got the job? I didn't break that news to you?"

She nodded, chewing the inside of her lip. “I can’t believe her nerve. Did she ask Jake to ask you? And holy shit, Jake asked you out? After the last time you saw him? Asshole! That’s something Susan would totally do. I bet she made him ask you just to piss me off—you know, kick me when I’m down, pour salt in the wound.”

Erica was the one who helped me get over him, promising to ruin him with the power of a thousand suns. Those were her words, not mine. I knew she’d exacted some revenge on him—hacking into his school email and changing his passwords to everything in the system—but she toned it down when I told her I didn’t want to hear his name again, which included any revenge she had taken out on him.

“Or did he ask you out on his own?” She pinned me down with that question. “He humiliated you last winter.”

I moved back a step. “Well...I mean...that’s putting it dramatically.” It was true, but I glanced around. She didn’t have to broadcast it to everyone.

“You slept on your bathroom floor for an entire weekend.”

Yep, we were getting attention now. A rush of blood went to my face, and I was becoming redder as she kept talking by the minute.

“Hey, now. Can we lower this conversation just a small bit?”

“I had to buy twelve cartons of ice cream for you.”

“That’s a lie,” I told our newfound audience. “I don’t even like ice cream. It’s a complete lie. She’s making things up.”

Erica rolled her eyes but quieted her voice. “Don’t go with him—” She stopped and latched on to my arm. “Wait. Did you say they’re going to Sids tonight?” She squeezed my hand.

I winced under her hold. “Sids, I think. Yeah, Sids.”

Abruptly, she let go and turned for the doorway. “We’re going there, too, then.”

“Huh? I was never going to go with him.” I moved my hand around just to make sure I could. “Where are you going?”

She was through the first set of doors and crossing to the last set as she called over her shoulder, “Let’s go. We’re going shopping, and then we’re going to Sids tonight. I have to call Wanker.”

“Shopping?” I muttered under my breath.

Erica’s form of shopping was looking for new pens and notepads, not clothes. I shrugged.

I liked Sids. It was a popular nightclub in town. The other two colleges in town went there, too, but it would mostly be Hillcrest University students tonight since we were done with finals a week earlier than other campuses.

I hoped to convince Erica and Wanker into going to Sids anyway. This was the icing on the cake. My last exam was done, and I was officially a junior. I wouldn’t have to spend my night at the winery down a block from our apartment. That was Erica and Wanker’s favorite spot. It was small, quiet, and way too conservative for a night of celebrating—or a night of spying, in Erica’s case.

Either way, if she wanted to go shopping, then I'd go along.

I was heading behind her, knowing she'd be impatiently waiting, when someone yelled behind me, "Hey! Turn the TV up. I want to hear this."

I dodged around a group of students, another step closer to the doors, when I heard the reporter's voice. I couldn't ignore it this time.

"Kian Maston, the son of billionaire investor and entrepreneur Carl Maston, has been released early after serving two years for the murder of Edmund Solario, the foster father of missing Jordan Emory."

CHAPTER 2

Kian Maston was the definition of *bad boy* to me. He wasn't the type who was arrogant or would throw his money around, like he was God's gift to women. He wasn't that kind of bad boy, but he was dangerous. A quiet type who ruled from the shadows—that was him.

A shiver went through my spine, charging my body with a jolt of electricity, as memories flared in my mind.

We both grew up in Fosston. Compared to the city, Fosston was small potatoes with a population of six thousand, but it was big enough where people knew who the *populars* were, and Kian had definitely been in that crowd. He was rich and gorgeous, and he was respected. He also had the whole dark, mysterious, and brooding thing down pat, too.

I hadn't thought much of Kian back then. I knew who he was, but I didn't really know him, to be honest. I didn't socialize much with anyone back then, except for a few nights when I snuck out to see my boyfriend, though he had been a bust. After a disastrous end with him, I never broke my Edmund's strict rules again. They weren't worth it. School, home—those were the two places I had been allowed to go. When I was at school, I heard the other girls talk about Kian a lot. In the restrooms, in the hallways, and in the locker room when we were changing for gym class, Kian was at the top of most girls' wish lists.

That was then, and this was now.

He graduated to national stardom.

Most killers wouldn't be idolized, but that was what had happened to him—with his face, penetrating dark eyes, black hair, chiseled high cheekbones, and lean body. When Kian killed my foster father, the news outlets all over the nation swept up the story. Add in his last name, knowing who his father was, and we had a phenomenon right there in Fosston.

And he was being released.

On the way home, I was in a daze. Erica was babbling about finding the right dress for Sids, but once we got to the apartment, I went straight for the shower. It had been my sanctuary during the trial, and I needed that privacy once more. I don't know how long I stood in there, with my head down and letting the water pound down on me, but when someone knocked on my bathroom door, I jerked backward. I would've fallen and hit my head on the toilet, but I grabbed ahold of the door.

“Jo!” Erica's shadow was under the door. “What are you doing? I thought we were going shopping.”

I was naked and wet, and there'd be a bruise on my hand in an hour.

“If you were to take a guess?” I called out, sharper than I intended, as I turned the water off and reached for a towel. Shit. This was my friend. I didn't have to be a bitch to her. “Sorry. I was showering.”

“This whole time?” She hiccupped. “Okay. Change of plans. Instead of shopping, I'm drinking. Wanker got here a little bit ago. Actually,” I could hear the laughter from her, “I

might be a little intoxicated already.” Her shadow swerved to the side. “Make that, slightly wasted.”

Wrapping myself with the towel, I sat down on the toilet and closed my eyes. Even sitting here, the old Jordan was coming back to me. I felt my spine leaving me, and all the old insecurities moving back in. I drew in a deep breath. I wasn’t back there where I couldn’t trust anyone, couldn’t even hope to believe someone. No. That was Jordan. I was Jo, and this was Erica on the other side of the door. I could trust her.

She had no reason to hurt me.

A muffled giggle and then a snort sounded. “How long until you’re ready? Wanker’s ready for some dancing and kicking butt tonight.”

My eyebrows pinched together. It was hard to think of a six feet three Wanker—constantly shoving his glasses back on and pinching the top of his nose—as a disco-fighting machine. But Erica was raring to go.

She had spewed the entire subway ride home about Susan: how she always got what she wanted, how she slept with the supervisor for the job, how she must’ve given him a blowjob if she hadn’t spread her legs. Erica kept going, but I’d been in my own Kian daze.

I wasn’t surprised that she was drinking already or that she got Wanker worked up with her. What she did, he did. He was there to support her, no matter what, just like she was with me.

Okay. Time to let go of the past. I was Jo now. Not Jordan. “Ten minutes,” I answered, hugging the towel tighter around myself. I needed that long to shake all the old baggage off me.

“Okay.” She began edging backward, away from my door. “I called a cab. I say, screw it, let’s go all out and pay for our own transportation. Forget public transportation for the night. Susan’s celebrating, so I’m going to celebrate tonight, too. The cab will be here in twenty.” She stopped a little bit away. Her voice was a little quieter. “Hey, I know I was raging, but you were quieter than normal on the way home. Is everything okay?”

“No, no,” I called out. “I’m fine. Honestly. My exam was harder than I had studied for, that’s all. I don’t think I’ll get an A on it.”

“Really?” She coughed, and the slight slur she’d had two seconds earlier was gone. “Oh, Jo, I’m so sorry. I’ll have a glass ready for you. It’s a perfect night for both of us to drown our sorrows, huh?” A wry chuckle left her. “Not for Wanker. I’m pretty sure he thinks he’s getting laid tonight, but it’s not going to be by me, so once he figures that out, he’ll be joining in with the depressed boozing tonight.”

Her voice trailed off as she left my bedroom, and once I heard that door close, a deep breath left me. I closed my eyes and rested my forehead against the door.

“Get your shit together, Jo,” I whispered to myself.

That was enough. No more Kian. No more thoughts about him or that night. No more thoughts about Edmund either. I never wanted thoughts about my foster father, even on a good day.

A slight panic buzzed in me as I knew what kind of media storm could be coming my way, but I pushed all of that down, way down, in me.

I changed into jeans and a T-shirt. I didn't want attention.

I never did, but tonight was less than normal for me. Going to the mirror, I brushed my hair back so it grazed the tops of my shoulders. My hands lingered as I tucked the strands behind my ears.

I was the same girl as then but different. I used so much makeup back then, dressing up for my boyfriend. That was another rule, and the only one I continued to break from my foster father. Edmund said, "No makeup." My teenage hormones replied, "Screw that," so I scrubbed my face before going home every day. I liked makeup back then. I liked how it made me look older, not so pathetic. I was prettier. I was more sophisticated.

I barely used any now.

I applied just a little bit of soft pink lipstick and reapplied my mascara. That was it, some mascara and lipstick. I was good to go. Same girl but different.

Erica shoved open the door and stood there with her hands on her hips. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were glazed over. "Cab's here, Jo Mama."

Definitely drunk.

I nodded and straightened my shirt, then grabbed some cash and my ID. "I'm ready."

She didn't move. Instead, she smiled and waved her hand up and down. "You look nice."

I looked plain and forgettable, how I preferred it, but I reared back and looked at her. Erica didn't dress up, not for anything, but she had a dress on.

“Damn, Erica. Is Wanker still alive?” I pretended to rub my eyes.

“What?”

I gestured to her, doing a Vanna White flourish with my wrist. “Do I need to call the ambulance? Did the sight of you stop his heart?”

“Shut up.”

I fought against my grin. “You’re hot, woman. You’re wearing a dress.”

And it was one that hugged her form. She was close to five feet four and usually dressed in shirts with sarcastic quotes over tattered jeans. All of that was gone, and Erica was transformed. Her boobs showed. She had an ass. Her stomach was flat, and she even had hips.

“Oh, this?” Her nose wrinkled, and she smoothed her hand down the front, picking at some lint on the bottom. “Ugh. Whatever. I’m sinking to Susan’s level. Don’t hate me. She’s going to be dressed to the nines, so I have to, too. So, yeah.” She waved a hand at herself. “Sexiness ensued for the night. I already can’t wait till we get back, and I can put my pajamas on. Looking good sucks major balls.”

She flounced from my room and called over her shoulder as I followed her, “We’re going, Wanker.” She grabbed her purse on the way out.

He stood from the couch, and his hand checked his zipper when he chugged the rest of his wine. His entire face and neck were beet-red. That meant one thing. Sexiness ensued had indeed ensued him.

I felt a flicker of pride for my roommate, but then Wanker was out the door, and they were halfway down the hallway, so I didn't have time to savor the proud moment. I hurried to catch up, and the cab took off the second I shut the car door behind me.

When we got to Sids, I asked Erica, "You sure you want to go in there?" The line to get in was around the corner.

Erica shoved up her glasses. "I did an article for them. Time to call in a favor."

Wanker mirrored her action, pushing up his glasses.

The favor worked. The bouncer waved her in, and when we went through, he said, "Go have fun."

Erica pulled me behind her, moving into the bar. Sids was packed. It was standing-room only. Hip-hop music blared from a deejay on the second floor. As Erica dragged me, I recognized other students from our college. I was right. Most of the people here were Hillcrest students.

Kian was supposed to go to Hillcrest, but then he'd gone to prison instead.

No. No thoughts of him.

I shook my head to clear it and ran into Erica.

"Hey." I frowned at her, but she wasn't paying attention.

She was enraptured by something on the opposite side of the bar. I didn't need to take a guess. It must've been Susan. I started to look, figuring I should get this over with. Jake had said he and Tara had broken up, but I knew Tara would still be

all over him. Every time he said they were broken up, I would see them cuddling on a couch at a party a day later.

Erica clutched at my arm and pointed. “You see him?”

Him.

My heart lurched for a second. She couldn’t mean...that would make no sense.

I looked...and saw someone else. It wasn’t Kian.

“Oh. Jake. Yeah.” I frowned, feeling a flutter in the bottom of my throat. I was being ridiculous, thinking she’d meant *him*.

“I don’t get it.” She shook her head and shoved her glasses back up her nose. “They broke up, but he’s here, celebrating with Susan? I didn’t even think Susan liked him. At the paper, she’s always complaining about Tara’s relationship with him. I’m surprised that hasn’t gotten back to Tara yet.”

Her eyes got big then, and I could see the ideas filling her head.

“No, Erica. Don’t say a word. You don’t want to step into that. Trust me.”

“Not Jake and Tara. Susan and Tara,” she clarified. “Susan talks so much crap about Tara’s relationship with Jake. If Tara knew—”

I took her shoulders and turned her in the other direction. “That wouldn’t end well either. Susan can spin it, say she was distraught as a friend, et cetera, and Tara will forgive her.” I gritted my teeth.

As much as I had been jealous of Tara seven months ago, I couldn’t find any rumors where she was mean. Everyone had

tended to say the same thing. She was beautiful and nice. It would make me gag, so I'd stopped asking.

"I know," she clipped out, sounding distressed. "But..." Her hand abruptly fell back to her side. "I just can't stand Susan. She already thinks she's above everyone. With this promotion, she'll think she's on a totally different level."

Everyone meant Erica, Wanker, and me.

Erica's features tightened in frustration. "Susan is not better than us. Tara is not better than us. And Jake's an asshole so he's really not better than us." She added, her lips pressed tight, "Even if he is kinda dreamy to look at."

I mused, "I doubt Wanker would enjoy hearing that."

She flushed and rolled her eyes. "Not funny, Jo. You're"—her hand gestured up and down at me—"you. You don't even notice that half the guys in here are checking you out, and I know that's why Susan hates you, but..." She stopped, and her shoulders drooped.

I placed my hand on her shoulder. "Hey," I murmured. "I can tell you one thing. Susan's not anywhere as tough as you are. If I had to back someone in a fight—whether it were verbal, physical, or academic—I'd back you any day."

"Really?"

"You're tough as nails. If Susan thinks she's on a higher level than us"—I snorted—"let her think that. You'll be more successful than her within five years. I know it."

One side of her mouth lifted up as the other remained down. She patted my hand on her shoulder. "Thanks, Jo."

I shrugged. “Besides, Susan’s a bitch, and no one really likes her. We all know that.”

Erica started laughing.

I needed a drink. The restlessness was stirring inside me again. My past was a headache knocking at my head, trying to get back in. I wouldn’t let it. No way, no how. Time to head for the bar. Speaking of drinks, I spied Wanker. He was behind us, bobbing back and forth to the music, with a drink in his hand.

I pointed to it. “Hey, where did you get that?”

He leaned closer to us, still doing the shimmy shoo. “What?”

Erica yelled for me, “Where did you get your drink?”

He held it up with a bright smile plastered on his face. “You want one?”

“Yeah.”

“What?” Another yell from him.

I stood up on my tiptoes and yelled in his ear, “Yes, please!”

“Oh, okay!” he shouted before turning for the bar.

He hadn’t gone two steps before I heard from behind me, “Here. You can have mine.”

And I froze.

CHAPTER 3

Kian?

But no.

It was Jake. Friendly Jake. Non-killer Jake. Not someone-who-had-gone-to-prison-for-two-years-because-of-me Jake. My body began to warm again from its frozen state. This was the Jake who asked me on a date, to get back at his ex-girlfriend. That Jake.

“You.” I scowled at him.

He raked his fingers through his locks, leaving little lines, and the side of his mouth lifted up into a self-conscious grin. “Hey.” His eyes were trailing me up and down.

“Really?” I asked, my eyebrows arching high.

He shrugged, giving me a small smile. “You look good. I’ve never stopped thinking that.”

I was two seconds away from delivering some scathing retort, when he looked beyond my shoulder. “Erica, how’s it going?”

“Actually...” Erica said, raising her voice as she scooted in. One of her shoulders touched his chest, and the other touched the top of my arm. She was acting as a barrier between us.

Jake flashed her a grin and shifted backward. She moved so she was facing him completely.

An exaggerated smile was on her face. “It’s great, you know. Got passed up for a job today. Found out about it from my friend, who, you know, you asked for a date to Susan’s party. Yeah. Great. Life’s wonderful. How are you doing? It’s been a while since I last saw you. Was it early December?”

He tensed, grimacing.

Erica clapped a hand on his shoulder and beamed up. “Remember, Jake? You and Jo were finishing up a paper that was due. She couldn’t get ahold of you to help. She didn’t want to bother you, because she worried you’d be annoyed with her so I was trying to help instead. We went to a private study room in the library, the same one you and Jo used to study in all the time and there you were, you and Tara were making out. Yeah.”

His grin faltered.

She snapped her fingers in the air, like she was just remembering. “It’s all coming back to me now.”

He scooted back another half step before someone bumped into him from behind. The drink he had extended for me was pulled back and raised above his chest. I didn’t know if he was holding it there as a shield from Erica or as a weapon to pour on her.

His shoulders dropped then. “That’s all over and done with,” he said, glancing at me.

Erica was in guard-dog mode. I loved my roommate. My trust was renewed. I’d been stupid to let my old issues sneak up on me.

“Come on, Erica. What is this?” he asked.

Her voice sharpened. “What are you doing here, Jake?”

He spoke to her, but he was watching me, “I wanted to see Jo—”

“Let me stop you right now,” she cut him off. “No explanation is needed because I know what you’re doing. And I’m going to say one thing to you. Don’t hurt my friend again.”

My grin slipped away. I’d been enjoying watching her do her thing, but she was right. I *had* been hurt. It took me months before I got Jake out of my system. He was the first guy that I’d let in after...

Remembering again, I found myself looking up. I didn’t want to, but I knew it was there. I knew *he* was there, and yes, there he was.

The news was on. There were eight different television screens all around the bar, probably more, and most of them had sports or music videos on, but a few were turned to the news.

“Jordan! What happened that night?”

“Miss Emory, are you in love with him? How do you feel about Kian Maston? Were you two having a sexual relationship before he killed your father for you?”

Someone laughed. “Are you having one now?”

They all laughed at that one.

So many reporters. So many cameras. They were always in the way—anytime I’d had to go to school, had to go to work, or had to go home even. I had known they were waiting for me, hoping I would mess up and yell at them. Head down, eyes forward, arm inside my jacket at all times—those were the only instructions the police had given to me. They hadn’t been worried about my safety, not when the nation had fallen in love with Kian and blamed me.

“Jo.”

“Jordan! Are you thankful to Kian Maston for saving your life?”

“Jo.” A hand touched my shoulder. A hand waved in front of my face.

I jerked back to the present day. Both Jake and Erica were frowning at me.

Erica pulled her hand away from me. “Where did you go just now?”

“What?” I glanced up.

It was like Kian was staring right at me, watching me again, like he had watched me through my bedroom window that day.

I grabbed Jake’s drink and gulped half of it down.

“Whoa. Hey...okay.”

It burned my throat. Good, the memories couldn’t come back. I’d burn them away with booze, or I’d try. “Can I get

another one?”

“Uh, that was straight whiskey.”

I handed him the cup and said hoarsely, “Yeah. Thank you.”

“Wha—okay. Be right back.”

As he went to the bar, Erica leaned close to peer into my eyes. “You in there?” She held up a finger and asked, “Can you follow this?” Her finger went from side to side.

I rolled my eyes. “He offered me his drink in the first place.”

“Yeah, but we both know that was a lame line to make a dramatic entrance. It’s Jake. He’s trying to woo you again.”

“And it won’t work.” I pulled her in for a hug. “And want to know why?”

“Rrhy?” Her voice was muffled against my shirt.

“Because you’re the best friend I could have. Even if I slip and forget how he hurt me before, you’re not going to let him do it again, Miss I’m Going to Literally Stand Between My Friend and the Big, Bad Dick.”

She frowned. “I did not...did I?”

“You did. And I’m not an idiot. He wanted to use me to get back at Tara.” I gestured to where Susan’s group was standing. They needed to be farther away.

“Tara is evil.” Erica snorted.

“No, Susan is evil. Tara’s nice.”

As her features tightened, I instantly regretted my words. *Well, fuck.* I touched her arm. We were there because of Susan, not me. She shrugged off my hand and then nodded behind me. “Dream Boat is coming back.” Her mouth turned down, and she glanced around. “Where’s Wanker?”

We both scanned the room. Erica covered her mouth and started laughing a second later. She pointed to the bar where Wanker was in line. He was standing behind a group of people who appeared to be in line, but they weren’t. They were just standing there and talking to each other, but he was reading the closed-captioning on a news channel. As a person from the group left, Wanker moved aside and then resumed his place behind them.

They never left.

And he never moved up in the nonexistent line.

“We have to get him. He has no idea.”

Jake arrived at that moment, holding one of the cups out to me. “Here you go, and I remember our days of drinking. You’re not a whiskey girl, so I ordered a rum and diet for you. I hope that’s all right.”

It was more than all right. I could smell the rum as I took the cup from his hand. It was plenty strong and just what I needed, and because he got it for me, I’d give him a pass for the night. Just this once, though. “Thanks. This doesn’t mean you’re off the hook, you know.”

He hid a grin. “Got it. I know.”

Giving him a small salute, I started to drink the whole thing, but Erica grabbed my arm and began pulling me in

Wanker's direction.

“Hey.”

She kept tugging. “Let's grab him and find somewhere to sit. If we're going to be here, I want to be able to relax. I can't do that if we're standing in the middle of a drunk herd.”

I leaned closer, so Jake wouldn't overhear. “When are you going to let Susan have it?”

Erica shot me a look. “That's currently being processed in my head. I'm going to need more alcohol to help figure everything out before I do anything.” She glanced over her shoulder to Jake. “I take it that you're going to let him sit with us?”

I shrugged and lifted my drink up. “He got me this, after all.”

She let out a sigh, rolling her eyes. “Okay. You're kind of a sucker, you know?”

I knew, but we walked underneath a television screen at that moment, going into a back section of the bar. That night, I didn't care about being a sucker. I was going to need all the distractions I could use to keep Kian out of my head, and all my old baggage with him.

“There's a spot.” Jake came around us and pointed to an empty table.

Erica wrinkled her nose and scratched her forehead. She shrugged. “Wanker will find us eventually. I'll keep a lookout for him.” She waved her hand in front of us. “March on, dude. Lead the way.”

And he did.

Jake led the way, even moving to hold his arm backward in an effort to shield me from a few drunks. Seven months ago, that would've sent the butterflies buzzing in me. Not now. All I could feel was the anchor in my stomach. When we got to the table, I glanced down and smack dab in the middle of it, Kian was looking right up at me. A television screen was inside the glass.

A breath hitched in my throat. It was a close-up of him, and I'd forgotten how powerful his eyes were.

“Wanker!” Erica shot forward, waving her arm in the air.

Kian's mug shot was staring at me on the left side of the screen. His eyes were stormy, hostile even, and he was scowling at the camera. He looked furious for being there, and I could understand it. Everyone could understand it. That was why he was loved.

He saved me.

My foster father had put a knife to my throat. He would've killed me, but Kian saved me. He was then arrested and charged. The nation was enraged.

A bottle was set down next to me, bumping me back to the present day. I looked up, a little dazed, but all attention was on Wanker. He'd brought three bottles of wine with him. A server trailed behind with empty glasses. Taking the empty seat beside Erica, he scooted his stool a little closer to her.

“Wine?” Erica's eyebrow arched high. “Wine?”

One of the bottles was uncorked. Erica motioned for the server to do the rest, but I wasn't waiting. I grabbed the first

bottle and took a long drag, ignoring the empty glass Wanker offered me.

“Oh. Whoa, Jo!” The eyebrow lowered, and a smile lifted my roommate’s cheeks. “Okay. Well, right on. It’s that kind of night, huh?”

Jake laughed.

Wanker nudged his glasses back up his nose. “That was for Erica.”

“Who cares?” She grabbed one of the other bottles. “I’ll take this one.” After putting the third one in front of Wanker, she narrowed her eyes at Jake. “Where’s your drink?”

He pressed his lips together and tilted his head to the side. Jake was giving her the come-on-really look. Erica just smiled back at him. Neither looked away for a second. Wanker glanced between the two, his finger shoving his glasses up to his forehead now, before he cleared his throat and poured some of his wine into a glass.

“So, it’s like that, huh?” Jake asked softly.

Erica lifted up a shoulder. Her hand was gripped tightly around her wine bottle, and she leaned forward over the table. “Just saying. You came here with the enemy.”

“Erica,”—he gave her a disappointed look—“that was an excuse, okay? Tara and I broke up, and you already gave me the riot act.”

“That wasn’t a riot act. That was the disclaimer for the riot act. No, no, Jake dear, I’m just warming up.”

He let out a sigh, glancing over his shoulder. “I can leave, if I’m upsetting you that much.”

That shut her up. Her mouth flattened, and she sent me a look. I didn’t know what to say. I wasn’t processing a lot that night, so I held up a hand and waved it around. He could do what he wanted. Her eyebrows dropped, all in one line, and she gave me an incredulous look. Yes, I was chickening out. I did not want to make any decisions about Jake then and there. My energy was being used by avoiding a certain other face, one that was literally smack dab in the middle of our table.

There was a standoff between Jake and Erica, but Wanker decided. He poured some of his wine into one of the glasses before nudging it to Jake.

Dipping his head low, he pointed to it. “There you go. It’s a white wine, but it has some sweetness too.” He waited until Jake took a sip and then nodded enthusiastically. “Right? Can you taste the sweetness?”

As if sensing I didn’t want to talk, Erica turned her attention to Wanker, and soon, he was explaining what a tannin was to Jake.

With the attention not on me or about me, I glanced down at the table. Kian’s face was still there. The news had a video looped in, showing when he was released. He was shown leaving the prison administration office and hurrying into a waiting vehicle. I recognized the others with him—his mom, sister, and two of his lawyers.

That was...lovely.

During the trial, Sonya, his mother, and Felicia, his sister, were the two who had always sat in the courtroom. I hadn't gone every day. I didn't remember seeing his father there, but he must've been.

As dark as Kian was, his mother was the opposite. She had beautiful, sleek almost-white hair, but it wasn't white from her older age. She was only in her late forties. That was just the natural color of her hair. It was shiny and fell to her shoulders, and that was where the differences ended between herself and Felicia. While Felicia had the same dark hair as Kian, she had the same graceful and petite body frame as her mother.

I remembered hearing that Felicia used to ride horses for shows, and I could imagine it—with the white pants, gloves, sophisticated boots, and a riding helmet with the strap secured under her chin. She gave off a prestigious Hamptons air.

I never spoke to them. They never spoke to me. They never even looked my way. There I had been, the girl their son/brother had saved and the reason he was going to prison.

Seeing them now at his side, my insides were a mess. The storm that I had been trying to ignore was threatening to spill to the surface again. I was going to lose it. Even now, the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I felt I was being watched, just like back then.

“Jo.” Erica's voice broke through, and she took the bottle of wine from my hands.

No, make that an emptied bottle of wine. I'd drunk that whole thing while glaring down at Kian's press release.

“What?” I asked her.

She held the bottle out to the waiting server and asked me, “Do you want another bottle...or maybe not?”

Wanker tugged at his shirt collar. “I think we should have champagne next.”

Erica’s eyes lit up, and like that, I was off the hook.

She clapped her hands together. “Champagne! Yes, please.” She turned to the server. “Two bottles. I’ll pay with my cr—”

“You will not.” Wanker’s hand jerked out, but it wasn’t steady.

He was reaching for the credit card Erica was handing to the server. Instead of hitting it down to the table, he had some extra oomph, and it fell to the floor instead. The redness from his face and neck spread to his hands now.

He winced. “I didn’t mean to do that.”

Erica shot him a confused look before hopping off her stool to grab her card.

When she straightened back up, Wanker said, “Put it all on my tab.” When the server left, he said to Erica, “I gave them my card already. This is your night.”

“My night?” She gestured to me. “We’re all drowning our sorrows tonight.”

The two started a debate about if we were celebrating or not that night, when Jake leaned closer. “Hey, uh...are you okay? You don’t seem like your normal self.”

I almost started laughing. He didn’t know my normal self. No one did.

As Jake was waiting for my answer, I couldn't look away from the most recent image of Kian on the screen. His dark hair had been cut down, almost as a crew cut. He seemed even leaner and fitter than what he had been before going in. Everything about him emanated power. He looked strong. He was always athletic, but this was more. I saw it in his eyes. They could always see through me. I never noticed before it had happened, but every time he'd looked at me in the courtroom, it was the same thing. He knew me. Somehow, he could see inside of me. I felt it again, but there was an edge to him. He was like a feral animal that had been leashed.

As Jake's dark eyes stared back at me, I felt him talking to me. I felt him saying to me that they didn't know the only me that mattered—the broken me. They didn't know the me that only he seemed to know.

“Yeah,” I forced out. “I'm fine. Just had a bad exam, that's all.”

CHAPTER 4

Kian's face was everywhere so I went back into hiding. Erica invited me to get sushi with her and Wanker the next night, but I stayed home. If I didn't go out, I couldn't see his face plastered on magazines and newspapers. He was on my email site, so I used my phone to check emails. I wouldn't have to see the ads or news then. It was dumb and maybe a little immature, but I still wanted to hide.

The media speculation about where I had gone would spark up again. It was only a matter of time. And my small sanctuary lasted until Sunday morning when *that* phone rang. It wasn't my cell phone. It wasn't the landline that Erica had insisted we get. It wasn't her cell phone. There was only one other phone in the apartment, and only I knew who was on the other line.

I didn't say anything when I accepted the call. I didn't need to. The other person said, "Mel's Diner. One hour." They hung up, and the hope I'd had of remaining hidden was gone.

That phone had been given to me by a federal agent who was assigned to me. The case drew enough national attention the FBI were called in, and when everything was done, he helped me hide and start a new life.

When I got to the diner, he was in the back booth, reading a newspaper. Kian's face was plastered on the front, staring at me as I made that trek past the few other diners. Our booth was set far apart from the others and as I slid into my side, he

folded the newspaper down. Kian's face was on the outside, staring up at me.

I sighed. I'd never get away from him.

"Long weekend?"

I shot him a look. "Not funny, Snark."

He laughed, but there was no smile or grin on his face. His entire face remained stone-like.

I wasn't joking when I called him Snark. That was his last name. He had introduced himself to me three years ago as Agent Snark. I'd asked one time if it was a nickname.

He'd looked at me, deadpan, and responded, "Why would I joke about my name?"

That was the last of that conversation, and he'd been Snark ever since.

He took off his reading glasses now and inspected my face, taking his time with his perusal. He finally said, "You look different."

"You told me to look different."

"You lost weight?"

"I *gained* twenty pounds."

I was inspecting him, too, but he looked the same—graying brown hair and eyes that still looked dead. I knew they were blue, but the flat look he had in them outweighed any color they might've had. He just had dead eyes to me. His skin was wrinkled, showing signs of aging. He kept himself trim, like he had back then, but I saw the wedding ring was gone from his hand. I bit the inside of my lip. There was no way I

could ask him what had happened, if he'd divorced or if he was a widow. Snark did not share information—ever.

He asked now, “You’re healthy?”

“I didn’t go to the gym before. I do now.”

“Good. That’s a new habit then.”

“I also drink coffee now.” I used to drink tea before.

“That’s good, too.” He asked, “Boyfriend?”

“How’s that your business?”

He didn’t answer me. I should’ve known he wouldn’t, so I reached for a napkin and started to shred it piece by piece, but he took it from me. He slid it to the side, and I remembered—*new habits*. That was an old one.

I shook my head. “No boyfriend.”

“Not even that Jake guy?”

“How did you...” He was FBI. “Have you been watching me the whole time?”

“Since he was released, yes.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. “Tell me about this Jake guy. What’s he like?”

“Why?”

“Because *he* wants to see you.”

That halted everything. I had guessed, but hearing it made the floor open up beneath me. “Are you serious?”

“As a bullet to my forehead.” His eyes narrowed, still studying me. “Now, tell me about this Jake guy.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s new. Your other friends are not. Erica. That kid nicknamed Wanker, and by the way, I’d like to know how he got that nickname.”

“For my file?”

“No.” He grinned. “For my own enjoyment, but that’s not important right now. Start reporting. Get on with it.”

“No.” My friends weren’t new. “I moved in with Erica this year. I was in the dorms my first two years, and my roommates were assigned. Jake’s not new either, and I’m not spending time with him anymore.”

“You spoke to him yesterday and again last evening.”

“Wha—” My head was swimming. “Jake hung out with us last night. That’s it, and it won’t be a recurring thing. I dated him briefly in December. It ended when he decided to go back to his previous girlfriend. I don’t understand why any of this is important. Am I in danger? Does Kian want revenge on me or...” Nothing was making sense. “What is going on?”

“The judge was dirty.”

“What?”

“The judge was dirty. That’s why your boy was released. His lawyers broke the case, but as they know, that means their client can be retried.”

“But double jeopardy? Isn’t that what it is?”

“Not if there wasn’t a fair trial. And a dirty judge—that’s not a fair trial. The District Attorney wants to put him back in. They want him to serve the rest of his eight years, and we

think Kian's team is going to use anything they can to throw that possibility out the window."

"But—"

"You."

"Me?" What did that mean? What was he talking about?
"Me what?"

"If and when Kian is taken back to trial, we think his legal team is going to go after you."

My mouth went dry. I sat still in that booth, feeling my heart slow. I was being led down a path, and I didn't like where he was taking me. "What are you saying, Snark?" My voice had grown hoarse.

"They're going to blame everything on you."

CHAPTER 5

One second.

Two.

There is no way.

Three.

I couldn't think.

Four.

Did he really say that?

And five—

I jerked forward. “How?”

He looked around and hushed me. “Settle down. You need the least amount of attention as possible right now.” He stopped talking and leaned even closer. “Good. You have colored contacts?”

“What?” My mind was racing. “Yes. Why?”

“Does your school know your real eye color?”

“No. I used the fake birth certificate you gave me. I have brown eyes on there.”

“Good. Good.” He nodded in approval. “You’re doing all the right things. What are your eating habits?”

“My eating habits?”

“They can track you like that. You have to be a completely new person.”

“Who’s tracking me?”

“Who do you think?” His eyes narrowed.

A waitress came at that moment with food and coffee. Two glasses of water were poured next, and she waited a second to ask, “Anything else?”

Snark looked around, poking at his toast. “Jelly?”

She gestured to the window. A whole tray of jelly and jam was there, pushed up against the window frame beside us.

“Ah, gotcha.” Snark grinned at her. “Thank you. I think we’re good.”

She glanced to me, but he said for me, “She’s not a breakfast eater. She’s good to go.”

I glared at him as she left. “I am too a breakfast eater.”

His eyebrow went up as he reached for the creamer for his coffee. “That’s new, too?”

“No. That just happened like normal. I have early classes.”

“Oh.” He sounded disappointed and then shrugged. “I thought maybe you were really selling all the new changes. Really dedicated, ya know?” He winked at me as he stuffed a forkful of eggs into his mouth. Eating around it, he said, “I was coming to warn you. Kian has definitely made it known that he wants to see you. He wants to talk to you.”

My mouth went back to being dry. It was the damn Sahara Desert in there now. “And if he finds me?”

He took a big bite of his toast, ripping it off, and he pointed the end at me. “Don’t tell him anything. You remember what I’ve always told you. Don’t trust anyone. Got it?”

“Even you?”

He grunted. “That’s probably a good idea, too.”

I sighed. Right before I went into hiding, I asked Snark for advice. That was Snark’s last words to me. Don’t trust anyone. It wasn’t hard to follow his advice, but it wasn’t funny when he said I couldn’t trust him. I had to trust someone. Right? An old emotion was starting to settle on my shoulders again. I didn’t want it there, but I knew once it got there, it wasn’t going away.

Hopelessness.

“If he shows up...” He swallowed his food, jerking his head up and down. He took a sip of his water next before clearing his throat. “And we have to face the fact that he’ll probably find you.”

“But you just said—”

“I know what I said, but his family are some rich bastards. Powerful, too. They’ve got the means to find you. Hell, they might’ve even tracked me here. I could’ve led them right to you, for all I know, but I’m telling you...” He stuffed the rest of his toast into his mouth and went right back to pointing at me. “If that happens, if he shows up, you don’t say a word to him. I don’t want you to incriminate yourself. You got that?”

“Incriminate myself?” I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t even remember what day it was. “How could I do that? I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know that, they know that, but you don’t know what his lawyers are thinking. Trust me, Jo—”

He was going to say my name.

I pounded on the table in my rush. “Joslyn.”

“What?”

“Joslyn. That’s my name.”

“I know.” He frowned at me, swallowing the rest of his food. “You go by Jo, right?”

“Oh.”

His eyebrow lifted. “You’re strung tight.” A look of approval flashed in his eyes. “That’s good. You might get through this without too much damage then.”

The way he’d said that was like I was preparing for battle.

“What?”

I lifted my head. “Huh?”

“You made some sound. What’s wrong with you?”

“Just...this.” I waved at the table, gesturing to my eyes and then to the coffee in front of me. “I got free of Edmund, but I’m still hiding. I’m starting to think I’ll always be hiding.”

“Probably.”

I was scared. Right then, I was really and truly scared. I didn’t want to hide for the rest of my life. I didn’t mind my life as Joslyn, but hiding and always looking over my shoulder? I didn’t want to do that. And for what? Why? Was Kian really that much of a threat?

“Yes.” Snark’s hand fell to the table.

I had said that last thought out loud, but I didn't take it back. I couldn't. I was really thinking that. What danger was I really in?

“Listen to me, Jo.” He had his hand back up, pointing right at me, as he spoke with urgency, “Whether the kid helps them or not, he's got an entire team behind him. His father wants him back in the family and back to being groomed to take over that entire empire they run. They don't have another son for that global enterprise. If they could blame all of this on you, his old man will die a happy man. Maston's team wants your head. They have another chance at a future for Kian, and they're going to do everything to make that happen. You got it? They don't give a shit about you. Who are you?” He almost spit at me from across the table.

“You're no one. Literally. You've got no father, no mother, no siblings. You've got no one. You took a new name and a new life. They're going to use that and say, *Why is she hiding?* They don't care that your life was turned upside down or that you're hiding because you'd like to live normally, like they do every day.

“Their son was worshiped and declared a hero. People want to say he didn't know what he was doing. They want someone to blame as the villain, and you—a girl who grew up on the wrong side of the tracks in poverty—are the perfect scapegoat. If they can find you, they will do everything in their power to serve you up on a silver platter.”

“Well...” I had nothing to say to him. *My God*. I was already strung tight, and now, hearing that, I was close to

losing it. A shrill laugh started to bubble up my throat. “A week ago, my biggest problems were my final exams.”

“Yeah.” He grew quiet.

Hiding from a media storm was one thing, but being blamed for what Kian had done for me was a whole other thing. “Could they convict me somehow?”

He shook his head, but his eyes were sad. Those dead eyes—I had only seen one other emotion in them, and that was a flicker of approval—just now looked depleted as he said to me, “I don’t think a DA would charge you, but I won’t lie to you. If Maston’s legal team is successful with spinning everything on you, however they might do that, your life could be utter hell.” He waited for one second and then added, “And that’s the best-case scenario if they do what they want to do.”

I was screwed. That was what he was saying. “I should’ve gone to college in Panama.”

He looked around. “I don’t know why you picked this school. This was where he wanted to go, right?”

Because *I* wanted to go here. It wasn’t just because Kian wanted to go here or because the media wouldn’t think to look in the most obvious place, but now, I realized how stupid it was for me to come here.

I didn’t say any of that to Snark. All I did was ask, “Will you give me a ride back to my place? I took the bus here.”

And he answered with, “I can’t, kid. The less we talk, the better it is for you.”

There was that then.

I nodded, hearing myself thank him for half a cup of coffee, before I walked out of that diner.

Kian was going to find me and there was nothing I could do about it. I felt it in my gut.

CHAPTER 6

“Being optimistic is the worst attitude in the world to have.”

Escape was an exclusive restaurant that I’d been working at every summer since becoming Joslyn Keen. This morning was the first time I was being trained at the same job I always had as a hostess. The trainer, who looked two years younger, decided to bestow his infinite wisdom onto me.

I scratched behind my ear and leaned in, making a show of reading his nametag. “Really, Henry?”

He clipped his head in a nod. “Yes. Be realistic. Don’t be optimistic. That way, you’ll always exceed everyone’s expectations.”

That made no sense to me, but I wasn’t going to argue. Henry looked ready to bite my head off if I dared to smile. With a fierce expression, he towered over me at six feet two. His hair was brushed to the side, and he was a gangly guy.

He was also new to Escape.

Even though I’d picked up hours during college breaks, today was the first day I started back full-time again, and I didn’t recognize any of the staff. I called Paul last week to double check that I could still work for the summer, and my manager assured me that it was fine.

When I came in and found that I would be training for my usual job, I couldn’t find anyone who remembered me to make sure it was correct. Paul was out for a few days, and the

assistant manager was new. When I dared to broach the topic, thinking maybe I should be training the new guy instead, the assistant manager braced herself for a battle. Recognizing the signs, I held up my hands and backed away from that fight. I would train. That was fine. So, here I was, being told where the menus went, the layout for the tables, and how to roll silverware during downtime.

Not that we would get a lot of downtime.

Escape was a popular high-end restaurant. If people dropped in to get a seat, they usually couldn't. It was one of those restaurants where a customer needed to make a reservation a day ahead, and that was one of the reasons I was surprised by all the new employees. Escape was good to their employees. There wasn't a big turnover rate. As Henry snapped his fingers to get my attention, I didn't think I could ask him about that question.

Oh well. Time to go with the flow and learn my old job again.

“Okay.” My host trainer touched the Bluetooth in his ear, nodding, and then said, “On it. It's ready in the back?” A pause. “Got it. Thank you, Tamara.” He said to me, “I know we're slammed right now.”

There was one couple waiting for a table.

He continued, “But Tamara is coming up to help host for us. A special order came in, so we need to deliver some food to the newspaper.”

My eyebrows went up at that. “We do delivery now?”

He bent down to stuff some menus into the back of our hosting stand but paused. “When have we not?”

Touché.

I almost saluted him. “Got it.”

After loading the food into his car, he explained, “Every delivery is handled with special care. We don’t deliver to many places, but the newspaper is one of those that we need to wine and dine, so to speak, for obvious reasons.”

Yes, for obvious reasons—that I couldn’t think of at that moment.

“Amazing publicity.” He gave me the reason.

Another item that I didn’t know Escape cared about because they never had. I frowned. “There seems to have been a lot of changes with the restaurant since I worked last.”

“Really?” My trainer didn’t sound too interested as he turned the car into traffic.

I knew we were only a few blocks away, so I didn’t answer.

As he parked, he paused and frowned at me. “Did you say something before?”

“Nope.”

“Oh.” He unclipped his seat belt.

I flashed him a grin. “Where do we go, boss?”

“Uh...” He got out, shut his door, and opened the trunk.

The food was loaded up in our arms, and he led the way to a side door. After his foot tapped the bottom, the door was

pushed open from the inside...and I looked up to the smiling face of my roommate's archenemy.

"Susan..." My voice died.

Her smile vanished, and she straightened back from the doorway. "Jo."

My trainer looked between the two of us, readjusting the food trays in his arms so that he would have a better grip. "You two know each other?"

Susan's smile returned, but it was forced. She moved back, holding the door so that we could get through. "I didn't know you were working at Escape."

I said as I passed her, "Only every summer."

But Susan didn't care. She didn't respond as she let the door close, and then she went before us, leading the way down a hallway. "We have a meeting tonight, so we wanted to order some food. You guys can bring it this way."

We were led into a conference room where people were sitting around a bunch of tables. Susan had us unload the food on a back table. I assumed Erica would be somewhere else since Susan was promoted above her so when I heard my name, I was surprised.

Erica came over from one of the tables.

I said, "Hey."

Erica frowned as she skimmed me up and down. "I forgot you were working at Escape again this summer. You started today?"

I nodded and patted some of the food containers, grinning. “I’ve been promoted to delivery now.”

Susan had been standing by, waiting for us. She let out a sigh when Erica came over, too, but leaned forward and studied all the food. Seemingly appeased, she cleared her throat now. “Excuse me for a minute. I need to grab the money.”

As she disappeared, Erica stepped closer and said to my trainer, “Go away. I want to talk to my friend.”

His pale cheeks reddened, but he smoothed a hand over his hair. He was trying to make it look casual, but he was failing.

I added, “I’d listen to her. She might be short, but she can be a big bully when she wants to be. I’d run, run far, my friend.”

He threw me another frown but moved backward a few steps. When he was far enough so that he couldn’t overhear, he made a point of stopping, leaning against the wall, and folding his arms over his chest.

Erica laughed to me. “I think he’d keel over if he realized I ate boys like him for breakfast.”

I gave him a look. “Yeah. Come to think of it, he does look like a younger version of Wanker, but he’s more cutthroat. I can already tell, but forget him. You’re still working with Susan? I thought you two went your separate ways at work.”

“God,” she muttered under her breath.

Susan came back, digging out money from a black bag. She went to Henry.

Erica lowered her voice. “I wish. No. I can’t escape her just yet. I’m still just part-time, but her full-time promotion has gone to her head. She offered to pay for all this food, and she’s acting like she’s the boss of everyone.” She perused the group waiting by some tables. “But I can’t really fault her. It’s because of her that I was even included on this project. For the next few weeks, we’re all working on an interview.”

“An interview?” I grinned at her, batting my eyelashes.

She laughed, nudging me in the side with her elbow. “Don’t make fun of me.”

I dramatically sucked in my breath and held a hand to my chest. “I would never.”

“Ha-ha.” She didn’t sound amused. “I can’t tell you anything yet, but it’s big, and it’s worth putting up with Susan for now.”

“That’s good then.”

“Uh...” Henry raised his hand, waiting for me at the doorway, while his other hand held our emptied delivery bags to his chest.

I smirked. “Mr. Happy Pants forgot my name.”

Erica barked out a laugh.

He made another impatient gesture to the door.

I waved at him. “Yeah, I’m coming.” Moving toward him, I threw over my shoulder to Erica, “I have to go. I’ll see you tonight.”

She grinned, heading back for her table. “See you later.”

CHAPTER 7

It was past closing time, and Henry called after me as I was about to walk out the door, “What are you going to be?”

Turning around, I pushed open the door with my back and thrust my fist in the air. “Not optimistic!”

“I’ll see you tomorrow or whenever you work next.” He gave me an approving grin and wave.

I was tempted to give him a double thumbs-up sign with a cheesy smile, but refrained. I wouldn’t have meant it, and God forbid, I would be fake. Though Henry would’ve lapped it up. He was all about fake and circumstance. It could’ve been his graduation song.

“Jordan.”

I had opened the second set of doors, and it was swinging shut behind me when I heard my name. I stopped mid-step. My foot was literally in the air, and it came down roughly as I twisted around. I thought I would be ready, but nothing could’ve prepared me. This was fitting in some way. He’d been out a week, and I had been waiting every day. I lifted my head, but the sight of him in front of me didn’t seem real.

But he was there.

He was staring at me, looking at me like he knew the only me that mattered, the real me.

“Kian.”

He was wearing a black leather jacket.

That was the first thought that stuck out to me, but I couldn't get past it. I didn't know why, and I started laughing in my head. Yes, I was nervous. Yes, I was a little scared, and yes, a part of me had been waiting for this meeting to happen for too long. Now, here he was. In a black leather jacket. Really?

I grinned. "Could you get more typical bad boy than that?"

He moved his head to the side, narrowing his eyes.

I didn't want to drink in the rest of him—how his dark eyes seemed even more alluring in person than on the television, how there was an air to him that pulled at me, which was weird and wrong, especially in how it also pushed me away. I wanted to run, but at the same time, I couldn't do a thing while he was looking at me like he had during the trial.

Kian hadn't been allowed to speak to me, not after he'd killed Edmund. Before the trial, during the trial, and afterward, there'd been no exchange between us. In some ways, Kian was as much of a stranger to me as he was to everyone else. And in other ways, I felt like I couldn't be more exposed to him if I turned my insides out. He knew me. That was how I'd felt all this time even if it wasn't validated, and I was feeling that again.

"Jo!"

Footsteps sounded from behind me, and I twisted around. Jake was across the street. He lifted an arm up and stepped out, turning to check the road. He was coming over to me.

No...

He couldn't.

I didn't want him here.

What was he even doing here?

I looked back with an apology ready for Kian, but it died on my lips. He was gone.

Jake hurried past the cars beside me and stepped onto the sidewalk. "Hey. Glad I caught you."

"No."

"What?"

No.

He couldn't be gone, but he was.

"Jo," Jake softly prompted. He moved close, so he was standing right behind my shoulder.

If I swung around to look at him, I would've touched his chest. I sucked in my breath. Kian had been here. He'd actually found me.

I had to call Snark. He'd tell me what to do now.

But Jake was still here. Jake was familiar. Jake didn't have a team that wanted to blame me for my foster father's death.

I let out some air, deflating my lungs, and hoped to calm my nerves before I moved back a step and turned around until I was facing him.

He was frowning at me, and he cocked his head to the side. A small strand of his hair fell over his forehead, and he raised a hand to push it back, his eyes warming as he did that

absentminded gesture. The corners of his mouth lifted in another grin, transforming his face from concern to caring.

“Sorry. I’m just...I thought I saw someone I used to know.”

The truth felt lame as it stumbled from my lips, but I followed one of Snark’s guidelines. *“Stick to the truth, but be vague. It’s the best form of lying there is.”*

Jake nodded, his grin curving higher. He glanced up and down the street. “I hate when that happens. Used to happen to me all the time after our thing ended.”

I shoved Kian to the back of my mind and made myself shake all the lingering tension away. “Yeah?”

His eyes darkened. “All the time. It was...annoying.”

“I’m sure Tara loved that.”

He smirked, but a smidgen of pain appeared in his depths. “She wasn’t too happy about it. I think she knew. I kept thinking I saw you, and then sometimes, I actually would—you know, if you were walking to class or something. Messed with my head. I kept wanting to talk to you, but...”

His gaze fell to my lips, and he moved closer. I could feel the heat from his body, and he was looking down at me, looming over me.

This was how we’d been before. I would close my eyes and rest my forehead to his chest. I’d rest my hands there or tug on his shirt, pulling him the rest of the way to me, and then we would be touching. Jake would hold back, his hands in his pockets. He’d let me dictate if we would touch, and there was

something heady about that feeling. He made me feel powerful.

But the old want to touch him...wasn't there anymore.

I was cold, dejected somehow, but I moved away to hide it. "What are you doing here, Jake?"

His eyes were fixed on my lips. "What do you mean?"

"You, me, standing outside my job at night. Just the two of us."

He chuckled, and his hand lifted to graze against my cheek before he moved another step backward, his hand falling away. "Okay. I'm sorry. You got me. I came to find you on purpose. I knew this was when you used to get done with work, and I took a chance, figuring it would be the same tonight." He held his hands in the air, surrendering, with a half smirk on his face. His hands dropped, and so did the smirk. He grew somber. "We didn't talk about it at the bar the other night, but I wanted to explain what happened. Tara and I broke up. She and I—we don't work. We're toxic, and something had to change. I don't know if it was because of you, but I can't stand here and say that I don't still have feelings for you."

Nope. I shook my head and held a hand to his chest, pushing him back a step. "Jake."

He had a twinkle in his eye. "But I promise you, as an oath from Jake Alexander Monroe to you, Jo...slyn..."

"Really?"

"Joslyn Jo." He winked at me. "Why don't you ever use your full name?" He put one hand over his chest. "I solemnly swear, that I am here, in the attendance of your company, not

as a future fling, one-night stand, or one-year stand”—a second wink—“but as a person with the sole agenda of becoming friends.” His hand lowered, as did his voice, and he moved back to me. “I just want to be your friend again, Jo. For real, I miss that most of all.”

“Just friendship?”

“Really.” He touched his finger to his mouth, and then he made the shape of a cross in the air. “My promise, before God and all.”

I groaned, but I couldn’t hold back the grin that was fighting to be let out. “I have a feeling that your promises aren’t going to hold up.”

“Yeah, well...” He shrugged. “Everyone sins, right? That’s what confession is for.”

I shook my head. “Just friends, right?”

“I promise.”

It wasn’t going to last.

Jake stepped close, lifting his arms in the air before circling them around my body. He waited before I nodded, then hugged me tight to him. I breathed him in. Pine and vanilla—his old scent. A month ago, my alarms would’ve been going off but not anymore now.

Something had changed.

Still holding me, he rocked me back and forth and asked close to my ear, “You okay?”

I clasped on to him and whispered back, “I think so.”

“Good.” One more tight squeeze, and then he let me go. He tapped on my chin. “You’re back at your old job, huh?”

Laughing, I hit his arm. “I am. Want to walk me home?”

He made a tsking sound and shook his head. “You’re a little slow on this friendship thing. Walking home with you is a requirement of being the best bud.” He cocked his head to wink down at me. “Especially if there’s wine at the end of the walk.” He held his elbow out, and after a slight hesitation, I linked mine with his. My apartment was a few blocks away, and after a really long time, I was glad that Jake was with me. As we headed down the sidewalk, I couldn’t help but glance over my shoulder.

Was Kian still out there? Was he watching?

More importantly, what did he want with me?

The liquor store was on the way home, so we stopped to get wine in case there wasn’t any at home. I couldn’t remember, and when we got to my apartment, Erica squealed over the wine. She didn’t seem excited to see Jake, but didn’t say anything. As soon as there was an opening, I excused myself and slipped away to my bedroom. Grabbing my phone, I perched on my window frame. There was enough room, so I could completely sit there. I pulled my knees to my chest, and then I opened my phone.

I needed to call Snark and report Kian’s arrival, but when I opened my phone, instead of seeing the blank screen that I usually did, there was a text message.

I didn’t recognize the number.

I'd like to talk.

That was it, nothing more, but I knew whom it was from. A little flutter started in my chest.

"They're going to blame everything on you."

Hearing Snark's reminder, I ignored Kian's text and sent Snark a text instead.

Need to talk. He texted me.

I held the phone, waiting, and it buzzed seconds later.

Same booth. Now.



I knew if I made up an excuse to leave the apartment, Jake would go with me. He'd even go to hold tampons if I used the feminine hygiene route, so I went a different way.

I ninja-ed my way from my bedroom. Literally.

I faked being sick, even pretending that I had to vomit suddenly from the doorway. My performance was Oscar-worthy. I grabbed my stomach, held my breath long enough to start seeing some stars, and made a mad dash to the bathroom. After that, Erica did all the work. If there was one thing my roommate hated, it was puking. She was the one to ban me to

my room for the night, and once that was done, I was good to go.

Still. To be safe, I locked the door and shoved a chair underneath the doorknob. Heading for the window, I climbed onto the fire escape and left a quarter between my window so it looked closed, but wasn't. It would shut, but it wouldn't lock me out.

Hurrying down till the last step in the stairs, it wasn't close enough to jump, so I climbed the rest of the way. My building was old, so there were grooves in the brick wall, big enough where I could put my hands and feet. Once my feet touched ground, I grabbed a cab, and when I got to Mel's Diner, Snark was already there. Again.

Sliding into my side of the booth, I didn't ask. I grabbed his cup of coffee and put some creamer in there.

"Hey." He dropped a newspaper he'd been reading. "That's mine."

"Not this time." I placed my phone onto the table.

Snark's gaze fell to it, and the issue about the coffee was dropped. He pointed to it. "That's how he contacted you?"

"He texted me." I slid the phone to him.

He picked it up and read the text before writing down the phone number and giving it back. "That was it?"

I opened my mouth, ready to tell him about the visit, but I couldn't. The words died in my throat, and I lifted the coffee to take a sip instead. What was I doing? Even though the liquid was likely burning my throat, I didn't feel it. I was withholding information from him, information that I knew he

would freak out about if he knew. Gripping the mug tighter, I forced myself to lower it back to the table. I couldn't tell him. But why? Why couldn't I do it?

“Jo?” His eyebrows lifted. He folded his hands in front of him on the table and pinned me down with his gaze. “Was that it?”

“Yes.”

His eyebrows furrowed. “You sure?”

My throat felt pinched, and I swallowed painfully. “Isn't that enough? You said he'd get in touch with me. Wh-what should I do if he gets in contact with me again?”

“Like if he tries to see you?”

I glanced away. “Yeah. What then?” My fingers curled tighter around the mug.

“Well then, we'd have a different situation on our hands.”

I swung my gaze back. “What do you mean?”

“That boy sliced and diced your foster father. He's a whole different creature than what the media has said he is, and his team knows it. *He* knows it. And you and I both know it. If he does find you, do not talk to him.”

I jerked my head up and down. “Okay.”

“You'll let me know if that happens?”

My eyes fell down to my lap. It was like he already knew. I could hear the suspicion in his voice...but, no, there was no way he could know.

I put my phone into my pocket. “I will.”

He pointed at where I had put the phone. “Do not text him back.”

“I won’t.”

Reaching over, he took my coffee back. “This is mine.”

“Okay.” I let out a soft laugh.

A waitress came over with her pad and pen ready. As she asked for my order, I looked to Snark, and he nodded. He said, “Go ahead. Get something to eat, and I’ll give you a ride back home.”

“Really?”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s too damn late for you to be traveling alone anyways.”

“Thanks.” My lips twitched, a grin forming, as I gave my order.

When the waitress left, Snark didn’t bring up the text message. He didn’t push to see if there was anything I was holding back, and I was thankful. Leaning back in the booth, I relaxed for the first time all day.

It wasn’t until he pulled into my alley when he brought Kian up again. His hand was resting on the steering wheel, and I’d just unbuckled my seat belt when he asked, “You sure there’s nothing else?”

“What?” I had started to reach for the door, but dropped my hand back to my lap.

His eyes were pinned on me, and he sat there, mulling over something in his head, before his eyes narrowed. “You can’t lie to me.”

“I’m not.”

“He’s going back to prison. He’s going to try anything possible to make that *not* happen. This is your future we’re talking about.”

“I thought you said his team wanted to do that.”

“Jo, if you think he’s separate from his team, you’re crazy. That boy is the one who will be sitting in a cell again. Not his lawyers or his folks. Him. I just hope he doesn’t do anything stupid.”

My lungs stopped working for a moment. “Stupid?”

He shook his head. “He’s been evaluated. Do you want to know the logistics of what they found?”

My mouth went dry. “What?”

“Just don’t let the image on-screen fool you, and don’t romanticize what he did. He killed for you, but he’s had two years to think over what he did. He threw away his future while you got a new one. That would sting even Mother Teresa.” He gestured to the door. “Now, go on, and do the ninja thing you told me about. Crawl up the wall.”

“What am I supposed to do now? Just live life normally?”

“You do that. Me? I’m going to pay his folks a visit tomorrow. I think all contact will be cut off after then.”

That was good. That was a relief.

After I said good-bye, I climbed up the fire escape and then slunk through my bedroom window. I should’ve been happy after hearing that from Snark. Kian would stay away, for sure, after Snark saw his parents.

Yes.

That was a good thing...

CHAPTER 8

“What’s up with you and Jake?”

I knew that question was coming. I’d been prepared for it over the last month, but Erica had been quiet on the topic.

Then again, she’d been coming home so late that I wasn’t sure if she’d come home half the time. She was always up and back at the office by the time I’d get back from partaking in my new guilty indulgence. A new coffee shop had opened up a couple of blocks away, so I’d begun walking there in the mornings to get a latte to start the day.

I worked late mornings till early evenings at the restaurant. There’d been no more delivery jobs, and when Paul returned from wherever he’d been, I was immediately yanked off of training. Once that happened, my life settled into a small routine.

Erica was finally bringing up the other new habit that I had formed. And that was spending time with Jake.

Erica and I were walking to the local market held in the community park. It was the first time we really had to talk. She’d say hello and visit with Jake whenever she came home before heading to bed while he was watching movies with me. The first time, she had paused. I saw the confusion, but she let it go. The second time, there was more confusion. The third was when she began to grow wary.

“It’s just a friendship.”

She snorted, dodging around a couple holding hands. “And I love working for Susan with this interview thing. Try again, Jo.”

I grinned. “That is the truth. We’re friends. Only friends.”

“No mushy stuff, like those two?” She jerked a thumb over her shoulder, indicating the couple we’d just woven around.

“No. No touching. No holding hands. No back rubs. No hugs.” I stopped and shrugged. “Well, we do hug, but that’s it.”

The local market had grown since the last time I was there. Before, it had been three booths of food, but now, there were three lines of booths with four booths in a row.

As we got to the edge of the park that was situated between two brick buildings, tucked away in a corner, Erica paused beside me. “Damn,” she noted under her breath. “This has tripled.”

I nodded.

So had the clientele. Children were running around with their paper bags for groceries, ducking and dodging around older kids, parents, and a few grandmas and grandpas, too. The whole scene looked like an image torn out of a children’s book.

This...this was why I loved living in Hillcrest and going to their private university. I knew places like this existed, but after finding a community with a little park like this, a thriving local market, a new coffee place, my job only a few blocks away, and a liquor store where I wasn’t scared to go at night, I

couldn't leave this place. Somehow, somehow, this had become my new home.

“You good?”

Erica had gone toward the market but paused when she saw that I hadn't followed.

I broke from my little reminiscing moment, shaking off the feeling that this could be taken away from me. It couldn't. I wouldn't let that happen.

“You coming or what?”

“I'm coming.”

As I got to her, she teased, “Don't tell me you're having daydreams about your not-future boyfriend.”

I shot her a look as we came to the first booth of strawberries. “Was that sentence supposed to make sense?”

Erica laughed, moving around to the next booth where she picked up a container of blackberries. After paying for them, she said to me, “Not really, but your whole thing that you're only friends doesn't make sense to me either.”

I wanted to tease her back about Wanker, but I bit my tongue. Erica would get prickly on that subject.

She moved down the line and headed for the vegetable row.

She was in denial about Wanker.

I was in denial about...everything.

Hell, was everyone denying something?

Erica came back around and shot me a confused look.
“You coming?”

I started forward. “Yeah.”

As I got to her, I stepped on something and glanced down. Kian’s face was looking back up at me. It was an old newspaper, and his story was on the front page. Someone had discarded it, or it had been brought to wrap items with it. I bent down and picked it up. I hadn’t allowed myself to read whatever the reports said about him, but the headline, “He Gave Up His Future,” caught my eye, and I couldn’t look away.

Erica came to stand beside me. “Uh, Jo? You know that thing was on the ground, right? You’re going to have to go to the hospital to get all those germs off of you.”

“Yeah,” I murmured. “Uh-huh.”

The paper was two weeks old. That was a week after I’d seen him, a week after he’d disappeared again from my life.

Kian Maston was released three weeks ago and given a new lease on life.

“Hey.” Erica stopped my reading, gazing down at the newspaper. “I shouldn’t tell you this, but you know that interview I’m doing in a few weeks, the one I’m working with Susan on?”

Oh, no.

My heart started pumping.

She continued, “It’s with him.”

“What?” My throat couldn’t work. That word had barely squeaked out.

She nodded, her eyes filling with excitement. “Can you believe it?”

“With this guy?” I had to be sure.

“I know. I can’t believe it either. I’ve been dying to tell you about it, but Susan and the senior reporter threatened us. If we say a word, I’m off the project. We’re not supposed to say anything, but, man, this interview is big. He’s only done one other interview. And get this”—her voice rose—“he reached out to us. I guess he always wanted to come to Hillcrest or something, so he offered to do an interview here.”

My mouth was so damn dry. “When?”

Her eyes got big. She shook her head. “I can’t say that but soon, very soon.” She moved closer, dropping her voice. “This could be huge for me, Jo. *Huge.*”

Oh my God.

A hand was pressing down on my chest.

I asked, unsure if I wanted to hear the answer, “Who’s interviewing him?”

The gleam in her eye slightly dissipated at my question, and she moved back a step. “Um...the senior reporter is doing most of it, but so are we—Susan and me. I shouldn’t have said anything, though. Crap. Don’t say anything to Jake. I know Susan still talks to him. She says she’s keeping tabs on him for Tara. Promise you won’t say anything? Please, Jo.”

“No.” I shook my head. “Of course not.”

Kian was coming back. He was going to meet my friend. I couldn't get that out of my head.

“Thanks, Jo.” Erica rolled her eyes. “I shouldn't have said anything, but I was excited. I *am* excited. I mean, this guy is everywhere. Journalists all over are clamoring for an interview with him, and he's coming to our school to do one. Susan thinks it's a weird angle for him to get into Hillcrest.”

“To get into Hillcrest...” I couldn't have heard that right.

We resumed going through the market as Erica nodded, gripping her bag tighter. “Well, he's out, you know? I mean, it makes sense. He'll want to go somewhere for college. Everyone needs a degree, and his name attracts mayhem now. It can't be easy, being him. Anywhere he goes, reporters show up, protesters start lining the streets, and who else knows what?” She shrugged and then stopped to pay for some corn on the cob. “The interview's going to attract a lot of attention to our school. I think that's why he's doing it, showing the university what his name could do so that they'll let him in.”

“I...”

He hadn't been back since that night, since Snark had said he was going to go see Kian's parents. I considered that the door was closed since it had been a month with no word from him. But, now, knowing he'd be coming back, a whole slew of sensations were bombarding my system. And I didn't want to focus on any of them.

“All the hard questions are going to be asked, that's for sure. Like where's Jordan Emory, for one. The girl's been

missing for three years. How can someone like that, with eyes like that girl has, stay hiding? You know?” She bought a bag of kale, then saw my one bag of strawberries. “Is that all you’re getting?”

“What?” I couldn’t hear her. There was a pounding in my eardrums.

She indicated my bag. “I thought we were stocking up for the week. That won’t hold you.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

Erica chuckled, shaking her head, and moved to the next booth. “You’re being weird. Why are you being weird?”

“No reason.”

Kian would talk to Erica and Susan, and then he would leave again. But, my God, if he actually came to school here...

I felt sick to my stomach. Glancing around the little park, at the food market, I realized that all of this would go away. I’d have to go away. The media attention would be absurd.

Or would it? Did I dare hope...

I grabbed Erica’s arm. “You have to find out if he’s really coming here or not.”

She glanced at me, startled. “What?”

“Find out if he’s coming here to stay.” I was insistent.

Maybe it would be next year. Maybe I would have a whole year for the media buzz to fade away. But, no. I was fooling myself. If he came here, somehow, I would be discovered.

“Okay, but we were planning on doing that anyway.” She cocked her head at an odd angle. “You’re not one of those stalker types, are you? Granted, we know he’s got ‘em. He’s gorgeous and deadly, and he saved that girl. I know those types of girls, the stalker ones, are a big reason why we want to interview him. We want that attention, but please tell me you are not one of those girls.”

“Oh.” I flushed. “No. I’m the furthest thing from that.”

“Good.” Her shoulders relaxed again, and we headed away from the market and went back to the sidewalk. “I think you would’ve had to compete with Susan for him, if that were the case.”

Walking side by side with Erica, I glanced at her. “Susan?”

Erica gestured to her own eye. “Every time we have meetings about the interview, because there’s a lot to work out, she gets this gleam in her eye. I wouldn’t be surprised if she cornered him or something. I’m sure the guy’s used to girls throwing themselves at him. But with Susan, who knows? She could drug him just to make sure she would have her way with him.”

“She wouldn’t pull something on him at the interview, would she?”

Suddenly, Erica stopped. Her arm was thrown out, and I walked into it from the abrupt motion.

“What—” The question died in my throat.

Erica was thinking. Her eyebrows were fixed together, and her lips were pinched as she was chewing on the inside of her cheek. That was the brainstorming I-had-a-sudden-light-bulb-

thought look on her face, and I sat and waited. Sometimes, her ideas were genius. Other times, they were not.

She muttered, “Oh. My. God.”

I would’ve normally said, *What?* But I didn’t. It wouldn’t have mattered. Erica was in her own world. If Wanker had been there with us, he and I would’ve shared a look.

I waited again.

Her fingers turned to grab ahold of my sleeve. “You’re right, Jo. You’re totally right. She’s going to make a move. In the meeting last night, she said that there should be a dinner with the college higher-ups and his team.”

“Oh?” I frowned.

“Yeah, and I have a feeling she’s not going to want me there.” Her head jerked to attention, and she looked right at me. “We have to be there.”

“Uh, what?”

“Yes, we do.” She pointed at me. “You, too. Susan hates you. I know what you’re thinking.”

“I don’t think you do.”

“It’s not like I want to cockblock another girl. To each their own—but not her. I hate Susan. She’s so condescending, and she makes everyone feel like they’re dirt under her feet. I would *hate* if she got this guy—although, he’s a killer, so maybe that would be Karma for her. But still, I hate the thought of her getting this guy. I hate her for even trying.” She snapped her fingers. “I’m getting you to that interview with me somehow. This will be great. Just you being there will

annoy the hell out of her. If she thinks she can scoop me in some way...hell nah, that's not happening.”

Erica started forward, but my feet stopped working. I stood there, watching her talking to herself, as she hadn't noticed that I wasn't at her side. She wanted me at the interview—with her and Kian. So many scenarios were running through my mind. This could be bad, really bad, for me. But Erica had her mind set. I'd heard the determination in her voice. She was going to see it through, no matter what I did.

Kian couldn't tell anyone. I would have to plead with him, make him see reason, but even at that idea, ice plunged through my veins. That meant I'd have to see him. I'd have to talk to him. It'd have to be in private. He couldn't act like he knew me. If he did, all the attention would go to me. Step one for Blame Jordan would be successful.

My God.

My heart started racing again. The media storm that could happen—from the discovery that I was at the same college he was being interviewed by, that I would be in the room when it happened—would be disastrous.

“Jo?” Erica had clued in that I wasn't at her side.

I looked down. From the distance of her voice, I had a few seconds to clear my mind and make all the panic go away.

Three.

“Hey.” She started toward me.

Two.

“Jo?” A weird laugh slipped from her.

One.

I looked up, and she was right in front of me, frowning at me, as she scratched her nose, flicking her glasses back up.

She asked, “You okay?” She looked around. “Were you talking to someone?”

“What?”

Lie, Jo. Do what you're best at. I forced a smile at my roommate. Snark's voice sounded in my head. “*Stick to the truth, but be vague. It's the best form of lying there is.*”

I said, “I don't know if I can go to the interview with you.”

“Why not?”

The newspaper was still in my hand, and I held it up. “Because he scares the shit out of me.” *Truth.*

“Oh.” Her frown deepened. “Others will be in the room. You won't be alone with him. I promise. You don't even have to talk to him. I just have to ask him general background questions and get that on camera. He'll be with the senior reporter for the harder questions. Susan's supposed to be the meet-and-greet one. You can take a breather and watch from the green room for that.”

I shook my head. “No, Erica. I don't want to be there. I don't want to be around him.” *Not the truth.*

“Please, Jo.” Her eyes were pleading with me. “Okay, yes, I think it would be amazing if you were there. Susan hates you. She'll be on edge if you're even in the room, but for real, I could use a friend, too. This interview is going to be huge,

and the more allies I have around, the better. I'm scared Susan's going to take all the credit. That can't happen."

She needed me. She needed her friend. I had to go, but damn, I didn't want to.

"I don't know..."

"Great!" She tugged me to her and hugged me. "Thank you so much, Jo. You're the bestest roommate in the world. Now, enough about me and the Destroy Susan plan. Let's get to the other part that is rubbing her crotch red—Jake. Or"—she playfully nudged my arm—"the friendship that we all know is going to develop into more between you and him. That's driving her nuts already. She asks if he's been over to our place every morning."

"There's not, for real."

"Okay. For real, should I be concerned? You're not acting all besotted like last time, so I haven't been all up in arms, but if I need to be, you say the word. Jake Monroe will go down."

I shook my head. "We're friends. I couldn't..." I hesitated at what I should say here. I ended with, "It's been too soon after how it ended with him. It was only seven months ago. I...we're just friends."

"Okay." She held my gaze, making sure.

I nodded.

She dropped it. "Say the word, and I'm all about the Hate Jake parade. I'll do my own float if I have to."

I grinned, saying lightly, "Thank you."

She nodded as we began walking again.

I couldn't do the interview. There was no way I could even risk the exposure, but I had a few days to think of an excuse. I needed a good one. Erica wouldn't be swayed by anything except if I were on my deathbed. I hoped it wouldn't come to that.

After putting the food away, she was off to work, and I needed to change before heading to the restaurant. After showering and changing, I reached for my purse. When I lifted it, *the* cell phone was tucked underneath, wedged beside a book. I had forgotten it was there. I'd pulled it out of the drawer the night before to check that Snark hadn't tried to contact me, and he hadn't. In my mind, I figured his talk with Kian's parents had worked.

But I saw a message on it now. There was only one word in it.

Tonight.

CHAPTER 9

Two hours later, the nerves started to settle in. By the time my shift was over, my insides were doing complete somersaults. Henry took over for me, and I was leaving when I saw Jake outside the door.

“Hey.” He opened the door for me.

I ducked under his arm, stepping out to the sidewalk. “You’re waiting for me?”

He let go of the door and fell in step beside me, grinning down at me. His eyes crinkled at the corners in an adorable manner. “I was hoping to walk you home again?”

“Oh.” I blinked up at him. “Sure. Thank you.”

We started down the sidewalk, walking the few blocks to my apartment. As we swung around a group of laughing people coming out of a bar, Jake touched the back of my elbow. He tightened his hold and steadied me as a woman’s shoulder bumped into me.

She whirled to us, her hand covering her mouth, and giggled. “Excuse me.”

I started to tell her it was fine, but a guy she was with suddenly stepped wrong, and he came hurtling at us. My eyes got big. He was huge, and he was falling fast, but Jake yanked me back and stepped in front of me. He caught the guy and shoved him backward. Before the guy could fall the other way,

Jake stepped with him, still holding him, and righted him, so he wouldn't hit anyone else.

The woman next to me made an appreciative sound while the guy seemed dumbfounded.

Jake patted his shoulder twice and murmured, "Steady on your feet, mate."

"Thank you." The guy looked at me. "I'm so sorry. I almost nailed you."

One of the other guys in their group barked out a laugh. "That's what she said."

The guy who Jake had helped steady turned around, his eyes darkening in anger. He shot back, "Bad timing, Bart. I could've really pounded the girl."

The woman next to me started snickering, and her hand covered her mouth once again.

The whole group, all probably in their older thirties, were laughing, or their shoulders were shaking from repressed laughter. The smell of booze was ripe on them, and I caught the bar stamps on their hands. They were on a pub crawl.

"Come on." The first joker stepped forward, holding his hand out to Jake. "Thank you, sir. We'll keep an eye on him for the rest of the night. He won't be slamming into your girlfriend any longer. We promise." The corner of his mouth dipped down and then the other corner. He was biting hard on his lip.

Jake narrowed his eyes.

I registered the joke, but it was old by now. The disrespectful undertone had my heart rate rising.

These people were all dressed in business suits or business skirts for the women, and I recognized their type. They'd come for happy hour from their middle-class white-collar jobs. I actually recognized one of the couples since they often stopped by the restaurant to get a reservation, but they never heeded the advice to call the day ahead to reserve a table. We were always booked out a day in advance, but this couple never listened. They would get miffed when they were denied.

As both of them were watching me, I knew they had recognized me as well. I stiffened and tried to keep myself from glaring at them, but I didn't think I was succeeding. The woman's eyes sharpened, and she started to glare back at me. The guy didn't seem to like me much more. Slowly, one by one, their group of friends noticed the exchange, and they grew silent.

One of the guys asked, "You know these two, Harold?"

Harold. I snorted. He looked like a Harold—old and stuffy with an ego that didn't match his bank account.

Harold's wife hissed at me, "You have a problem, little girl?"

I drew upright, slowly going to my fullest height.

"You're nothing but a little girl who's going to be a gone little girl." Edmund's sick taunt washed over me.

I started shaking.

This woman had no idea what she'd said, but I was right back there.

I was in the bedroom as Edmund started forward, but Kian was there. He stepped inside. I saw him, saw the complete calm over his face, and I couldn't look away. His eyes were dead. A part of me knew that I should've been scared. I should've cowered, run away, but I didn't. I stayed there, and I knew, somehow, that I would be safe. When Edmund realized someone else was in the room, it was too late.

For him.

The flashback ripped through me. The old fear crept up inside of me, mixing with the rage that was really directed at Edmund. I jerked forward, my nostrils flaring, and my hands were in fists. This woman and her husband had become Edmund to me. I wouldn't take their disrespect. I had taken it for too long from him, and I never would again.

They were talking.

But all their voices faded to the distance.

I just heard their laughter. I saw the mocking looks on their faces. They thought they were above me. They thought I was dirt beneath them because that was how they treated people. They thought they could hurt me.

Never.

Again.

Then I was swinging. I was ready to take them on, all of them, but that one couple in particular. Suddenly, there was shouting, but I still couldn't make out the words. They were moving away from me. Someone yelled out. Satisfaction surged through me. Good, I wanted them to be scared. I'd been scared for too long.

An arm was around my waist, and I was being picked up. Someone carried me away, and a hand started rubbing down my back. That someone, whoever was holding me, was trying to soothe me as we hurried away from the group at a fast clip. The group was almost running, coming after us.

I felt the tension from whoever was holding me. I reacted to it, going with him and slowly, the anger started to leave me. A buzzing sound dissipated in my head, and I became aware of my surroundings.

Jake was running down the sidewalk with an arm tucked around my waist. He kept an iron grip on me, and his other hand touched the top of my head, covering it every now and then. He ducked around groups and then into a building's doorway. He dropped me but kept his hands on my waist. I felt them digging into me.

He was saying something to me.

The need to protect myself was still strong, and I stared up at him, unable to fully make out what he was saying. The buzzing was still there. I shook my head. I needed to let him know, but he shouted something and dug into my pockets. My phone fell out, but he pulled out my keys and started looking through all of them. He produced my building key and shoved it into the door. After unlocking it, he swept us both inside.

My phone was on the front stoop.

I couldn't leave it there. Kian's number was on there. Ducking from his hold, I darted outside. That was when I heard the shouts from the street.

“Where did they go?”

“That bitch was going to hurt my wife.”

They were in full pursuit. I couldn't believe that.

Jake hauled me back inside and whirled both of us behind the door, so the group couldn't see us. Just as he did, they ran past us. He clamped me to him, one arm firmly holding my head to his shoulder and the other on my waist. He wasn't letting me go. I didn't fight him. As everything began to register in me, I felt the fight starting to leave me, and I became exhausted.

What had I almost done?

I started to pull back, but he tugged me back against him. “Hold on.”

We heard outside the door, “Where did they go?”

Someone else answered, “Who knows? Bart and Harold are so far down. Even if they find those kids, what are they going to do? It's not like we can hurt them. I suppose we can report her for what she tried to do. Attempted assault, right?”

“I'd like to scratch that little bitch. She was about to claw my eyes out.”

A woman laughed. “You looked like Casper. Honestly, Renee, I thought you were about to pee your stockings.”

The other woman laughed but hissed at the same time, “Shut it, Helen. That stuck-up girl works at Escape. Harold and I go in there sometimes.”

“Really?” The other woman sounded envious. “Man, oh man, I love that restaurant. We got in one time. My boss

reserved the back room for a small holiday party. It was divine.”

“I know. I’m going to report this little shit. She’s going to lose her job, and Harold and I are going to get the star treatment. If they don’t, I’ll sue their establishment.”

I tensed against Jake, but he shook his head.

He mouthed down to me, *Don’t*.

I didn’t. What I was going to do, I had no idea, but I didn’t do it. I stayed in his arms, and I held my breath, still listening.

“Can you do that?”

“Why not? You saw her. She must’ve come from work. She still had on her employee badge.”

“Oh my God, Renee. If you follow through...well, at least take me with you.”

Both of them cracked up at that joke, and they moved on. We still waited, but we didn’t hear any others from their group for the next few minutes.

Jake slid his hand into mine and whispered into my ear, cupping the back of my head, “Follow me. We can slip into the stairs, and they still won’t see us.”

I nodded and let him pull me past the doorway and into the stairwell. If we had waited for the elevator, they could’ve seen us. We were in plain view of the glass doors, but I lived on the eighth floor, and I didn’t care about the climb.

Jake started to open the door on the second floor, and I shook my head.

“We can use the elevator here,” he said.

“I need the exercise. I have to calm down.”

He paused, studying me, and then shrugged. Letting go of the door, he fell in step behind me. “Okay.”

“You can use the elevator.”

“Nope. Where you go, I go.”

My throat swelled up, and I gripped the stair rail hard. I managed to get out, “Thank you.”

His dark eyes washed over me, warming as they did, and he noted softly, “No problem. Let’s get up there. Your balcony overlooks the street. If they’re still on the street, we can throw water balloons at them.”

I laughed, my chest feeling a little lighter. “Or rotten fruit. I’m sure Erica’s got something rotting that she hasn’t thrown out yet.”

“Or that, too.” Jake laughed from behind me.

We trekked all the way to my floor. Once we got there, neither of us was out of breath. We were silent as I unlocked my door, and we went inside. I reached for the light, but Jake held my hand.

“Let’s see if they’re down there first,” he said.

I nodded. “Good idea.”

When we got out on my balcony, we didn’t see them. Instead, it was the two of us, in the dark, alone, and the rush of our near escape had us both short of breath. Well, maybe that was just me. It probably was just me.

I should leave. I should turn on a light, not remain in the dark with Jake, who had saved me from a group of middle-

class thirty-year-old gangster wannabes.

He asked so quietly, “Are you okay?”

My heart plunged at that one. He sounded concerned, and I hadn’t had someone feel like that about me in a long time.

Feeling my throat swell up again, I nodded. “Yeah.”

He raked a hand through his hair, grinning at me, as his eyes turned sad. He leaned against the side of the balcony and slid one hand into his pocket. He looked casual, cool, and slightly worried. “I don’t know what that was, but you might want to call your boss. Get ahead of the freight train, ya know?”

I cleared my throat and rasped out, waving off the concern, “Paul hates that couple. They always cause problems, and I was off the property. They have nothing against me. He won’t fire me.”

“You sure?”

“I am.”

“So...” Jake started as I began saying, “So...”

We stopped and laughed. It was weird. Whether he knew it or not, he’d just caught a glimpse of the real side of me. That man and woman hadn’t registered with me. The only thing I had known was the hurt and the humiliation. Edmund had terrorized me, but he’d laughed at me, just like how they had. I hadn’t endured being the butt of a joke in a long time, so I had lashed out. If Kian had been there, he would have understood.

Well...

I laughed to myself, looking back to the ground.

Maybe Kian wouldn't have. He understood the humiliation from Edmund. He saw the torture my foster father put me through. Maybe I was romanticizing it, what Snark had warned me against doing. I didn't know.

What was I doing?

Jake saved me from them, and I was thinking about Kian.

Then he started toward me. He was going to kiss me. I saw the intent in his eyes. I saw how he was looking at my lips.

I was torn. To stay or to hide, to be kissed or not to be kissed. Those were my choices.

This was Jake.

He was here. He helped me run from a pack of washed-up rich pretenders.

He was so close now.

I closed my eyes. It was now or never. I should leave or let it happen. I knew Jake. He was familiar. He wasn't who my stomach was in knots over the entire night, who I shouldn't even be seeing that night.

His hand caught mine, and I looked up as he said, "Jo."

I bit down on my lip. If Erica were here, she would've been raging at me, but he was the better choice.

She didn't know that yet.

His voice was hoarse as he tried to remain in control. "I really want to..." His hand lifted and cupped the back of my head. He tilted my face up, my lips waiting for his. He continued, "I really, really want to kiss you right now."

He was standing over me, his dark eyes black as they looked down at me. I saw the lust there. I closed my eyes. I was waiting. The decision was made.

Jake was good. Jake was sane. Jake was—

My phone buzzed in my pocket.

And the decision was made. A wall slammed down inside me. I knew who had just texted me.

Erica was at the newspaper. She wouldn't have texted. If she wanted something, she would've called. There was only one person who would've texted me, someone whom I'd known was going to text, and I had been waiting for it all day.

I stepped back from Jake's hold.

The moment was gone. I couldn't kiss him, not knowing what I would be pulling him into. I pulled my phone out then and read the one-worded message.

Roof.

CHAPTER 10

“What is it?”

“Huh?” I was still looking at my phone.

He was here. He was waiting for me.

Jake gently nudged my hip with his hand. “Jo? You okay?”

Looking at him took work. My neck felt like it was pulling my head through waist-deep wet cement. When I could finally focus on him, his gaze went back to my phone.

“Is something wrong?”

Yes, very wrong.

I tucked the phone against the palm of my hand, so he couldn't read the screen, and I slid it into my pocket.

“Uh, yeah—no, I mean, no. Nothing's wrong.”

“You sure?”

“Very.”

The lies were spilling from my lips, but I needed to get Jake out of here. Even knowing he was so close to Kian sent a cold blast through my body.

“Um, I—thank you for walking me back to my place.”

“Walking?” Jake grinned, following me back inside from the balcony.

There was something off about his response to my comment. A buzzing sound was filling my head, so I couldn't

stop and pay attention, but I registered that. I shook my head. I couldn't concentrate on what happened between us. My blood was coursing through me, picking up speed, as I made my way to the door.

The lights were still off, and there was a different feel to my own apartment. It felt alien, surreal. I knew it was because Kian was above. Fear was mixing with a sense of urgency, and I just wanted Jake gone. That was all I wanted at that very instant.

“Yeah.”

Pulling open the door, I fixed a fake smile on my face. “I, uh...we should do this again someday.”

Jake's head reared back as he stared down at me, pausing in front of me by the open door. “Do this again? Are you sure you're okay?”

“I'm fine.” More lies. “Completely.”

“Okay...” He stepped into the hallway, still watching me. “You're sure, sure?”

“Absolutely.” I started closing the door, still smiling around it. “Thank you, Wanker.”

“Wanker?” His eyebrows shot up.

I shut the door with a click, turning my back against it. I let out a breath of air, then drew another one in even more slowly. I closed my eyes. I needed to calm down. *He* was up there. And he was waiting. The meeting was finally going to happen.

There was no way I was going to calm down.

I grabbed my key and patted my pocket to make sure my phone was there, and I lingered on my bedroom door. I had a Taser in there. Erica never knew about it, but old habits died hard. I'd kept it just in case, and Kian was a killer.

Do I—I gulped—need it for him?

No.

A voice sounded in my head. It was final and strong.

As soon as I heard it, some clarity started to peek through the storm in me. It was a smidgen, enough to calm some of the jitters in my stomach. The Taser remained hidden in my room, and I stepped out into my hallway before locking my apartment door. Moving to the side hallway and then up the stairs for the roof exit, there were two sides inside me.

One was yelling at me to turn around, leave my building, and call Snark, call the cops, call the cavalry. The other side had a Zen-like calmness to it. I was going where I was supposed to go. Seeing Kian was the right thing. He wouldn't hurt me. He never had. He had only protected me.

Both sides weren't quite rational, but I kept climbing up those stairs until I was standing in front of the roof door. It looked locked, but I knew I could go through it.

I'd been up there once when I first checked out the building before moving in. I had come with Erica to look at the apartment. Upon Snark's urgings to make sure I knew all the ways in and out of the building, I had gone back a second time, alone, and finding the roof door had been on that agenda.

The door was old and heavy. I stepped out and looked around. The roof was empty, except for two worn-down lounge

chairs set up by the roof's edge, overlooking the city, with two big rocks on the bottom to anchor them down from strong winds. Beside the door was another large rock. I didn't know if it was used to prop the door open—well, that had to be the only reason, so I started to roll it into place. The door was open by a good foot in length, and I stepped forward.

Goose bumps littered my arms, up and down, and I started shivering before I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to hug off the chill.

“Kian?”

I stepped farther out from the door and looked around. The city cast a hue from below, giving the roof's edge a light that looked like it was hugging the building. It was beautiful. The night was clear with stars blinking from above. I would've appreciated the sight more if I wasn't focused on all recesses of the roof's shadows.

“Kian?”

He wasn't here. I stepped even farther away from the door and slowly felt myself rejoining my body. The euphoric high that I was riding on, that was so closely mixed with panic, started to ebb, and I became more grounded.

He wasn't here. All of this had been for nothing.

My shoulders settled down an inch, and I turned back for the door.

“I was waiting for your boyfriend to leave.”

I stepped in his direction and saw him. He was at the edge, and he shifted toward me. His words and where he was clicked with me. He was standing at the side of the building that

overlooked my street. He'd been waiting to see if Jake left the building or not.

“He's not my boyfriend.” My voice didn't sound attached to my body. It was hoarse and high-pitched, like I was nervous and breathless at the same time.

Kian was still in the shadows. The hue from the street was behind him, so I couldn't make out his face, but he started for me.

I fell back and then caught myself. My teeth sank into the side of my cheek. I forced myself to stand there, waiting for him, but half of me wanted to run away while the other half was leaning toward him.

He moved closer, and the light from the door illuminated his face. The door was behind me, so the light was mostly blocked, but there was a small slit from where the door was attached to the doorframe. It wasn't a lot, and the small light disappeared as he moved even closer, stopping just in front of me. I still couldn't fully make out his face, but that split second of vision had been enough.

Dark.

Brooding.

Deadly.

Gorgeous.

Molten dark eyes, angular high cheekbones, a strong jaw, lips that seemed to rest just perfectly while waiting to be curved high into a smile or to be pulled down into a frown.

As he came toward me, his lips showed neither emotion. He was just watching me back. My eyes traced his silhouette. He was still tall and lean, but his shoulders were bigger than I remembered. His shirt hugged to his form, showing how cut he was. He looked even more like a deadly weapon than he had been before going into prison.

His eyes narrowed, and I could feel him assessing me. I glanced down to the floor, wondering what he was thinking as he took me in. The streetlights were behind him but facing me. He could make out my face, my body, my everything.

My teeth sank even more into my cheek. What did he see when he looked at me?

He murmured, "He's not?"

"He's not." That came out like an annoyed huff. I flushed, not intending it to be like that.

I could hear Snark yelling at me in my head. I needed to get away. I couldn't see Kian. He was a part of his team, the evil lawyers who wanted to blame everything on me.

I began to edge for the door. What had I been thinking?

"You look different."

I stopped. "So do you."

Through the darkness, I caught how the side of his mouth lifted into a half-grin. It moved back down, and he stepped closer to me. He was looking down at me. There was still space between us. I couldn't feel his body heat. Another person could've wedged their way between us.

“Why did you come see me? How did you even know where I was? Or recognize me?” There. Finally, I was sounding like an adult. There was the golden question that I wanted answered.

He didn't answer.

He continued to study me. I couldn't see his eyes, but I felt his scrutiny.

“To make sure you were all right. I hired a private detective, and I helped him out. I thought you might be going here. I remembered one of your speeches in school was about how much you loved this school, and I knew it was you.”

I was stunned. “Really?” *He remembered that? And he just knew it was me? How do I digest all of that?*

“And to let you know that you don't need to be scared of me.” His voice softened, and he closed the distance.

I could feel his body heat, and I could make out his face. Those eyes, I gulped again, I'd forgotten the power they had in the courtroom. He was looking into me, like only he could read my thoughts, know my feelings, and understand me. He knew me. That was how I was feeling again. A sense of feeling sheltered flowed through me. It pushed out the fear and coldness. I was beginning to grow warm, wanting to close the distance.

I never touched him before.

Not a hug. Not a handshake. Nothing.

Well, that wasn't true. He gave me his shirt after killing Edmund. Mine ripped, so he lent me his. I never gave it back. It was a secret that I never shared with anyone. That shirt was

still in my room, in the same box as my Taser. The irony wasn't lost on me. One keepsake from him next to a weapon to use against him.

He kept going, "My parents and my lawyers don't want me anywhere around you, but I had to come. I needed to make sure that you knew not to be scared of me. I...what I did, I know it was shocking. I shocked myself. I still don't quite know what happened. I remember what I did. I remember doing it, but before it happened and the events leading up to it, those are still a blur, even after two years."

Hearing him now, I was surprised. The lawyers hadn't let him take the stand.

"I've seen doctors who told me that my brain doesn't want to feel whatever I was feeling before it happened. I remember hearing you and opening the door. Then it's blank. I-I just don't want you to be scared of me. That's all."

I was right back in that room, not on the roof with Kian.

Edmund's hands were on me again. Then the door opened...

I began to back away again. "I can't."

Edmund had one hand around my throat.

"Jordan." Kian reached for me.

"No, I can't do this. I'm sorry. It's—I'm feeling *him* again, Kian."

I knew it was Kian. I knew he was there, telling me not to be scared, but I wasn't feeling it was him. The flashbacks were

too much, and they were coming in at breakneck speed. I couldn't handle all of them, not all at once.

I shook my head, and my back hit the door. I reached behind and felt for the door handle, then moved around the door. The back of my legs hit the boulder.

I started to fall backward, but Kian caught me. He lifted me and held me to him for a second. I felt him kicking at something, and then he set me back down. He had moved the rock out of the way. And he was holding the door open, so it wouldn't hit me.

"Okay," he said. "I just wanted to talk to you before..." He hesitated. He was raking over my face. "Never mind. I didn't intend for this. I'm sorry, Jordan."

"It's Jo," I murmured. "I'm using the name Joslyn."

"That's right." A resigned sigh slipped from his lips. He looked haunted. "Go ahead. I'll wait and make my way from the roof. I am sorry. I didn't realize my presence would bring all those memories back. I never intended for that."

He sounded in pain, and for a second, I stopped.

Everything was pushed aside for a split second, and I could clearly see him. He felt bad, but I still felt danger lurking from him. The image of him, right before he had taken a knife to Edmund's throat, was in the back of my mind.

I wanted to leave. I wanted to stay. "Thank you for coming."

He nodded, his face becoming a mask. "You don't have to be scared of me, and I know what your FBI agent thinks. My team won't blame you. I'll go back on trial, and I know what

he's said to you. None of it is true. You were the victim. I wouldn't let them victimize you again."

"You know?"

He nodded again. "I know that you're hiding, and I understand why. The media would crucify you."

"I couldn't have a normal life again."

"I know. I do. That's why I disappeared that first time on the street. Your boyfriend, or whoever he is, would've seen me. I..." He paused and glanced away for a second. "I think I just wanted to talk to you for me. I needed to reassure myself that you weren't scared of me."

"Never."

His gaze jerked back to mine, and I was caught, once again held by him. Something deeper was happening between us, but I couldn't name it. I didn't think I even wanted to. If I did, I'd have to make a decision to let it happen or stop it completely. I didn't want to do either of those things, so I let it go. I silenced the voice second-guessing everything in my head. He had killed to protect me. I needed to be grateful, and that was it.

"If I hadn't been born into the family I have, this wouldn't have been such a big media frenzy. For that, it's my fault. What I did, who I am—all of that created this whole thing. I know the news is starting to focus on you, and they're asking questions about where you are, et cetera. I just wanted to come and apologize for that, too. They put a romantic spin on it, but now that you're missing, I'm worried they're going to turn on you. I hope they don't."

I knew what he was saying. I was waiting for it to happen, too, but that was why I was still hiding. I reached out and touched his arm. “If they turn on me and if they find me, I’ll have to deal with it. Until then, thank you, Kian. For what you did, thank you.”

“You’re not scared of me?”

I shook my head. Most of the fear was dissolved. “You saved me.”

“He threw away his future while you got a new one.”

Snark’s words were taunting me. I should’ve paid them more attention, but I couldn’t.

The storm inside of me was for Kian. My brain was telling me to get away as fast as possible. Logic wasn’t winning right now.

My phone starting buzzing, and I pulled it out. Erica was calling me.

“I’m sorry. I should take this. She doesn’t usually call unless the world is ending, or she needs wine ASAP.”

He chuckled. “She sounds fun, whoever it is.”

I started for the stairs, but I didn’t want to go. I wanted to stay up here, and I wanted to get to know someone whom I felt like I had known all my life.

I sighed. My phone kept buzzing, and I clicked *Answer* as I was going down the stairs. “Hey, what’s up?”

“You will never believe what she did.” Erica’s anger was like whiplash.

I kept going down the stairs, but my mind and everything was still on the roof. He'd wanted to make sure I was okay, that I wasn't scared of him. I had never considered that possibility.

"She's such a bitch."

I tuned back in to what Erica was saying as I got to my floor and went through the door. "Who's a bitch?" Wait, she'd already said that. I had heard it. "Susan. What did she do again?"

"First, she backstabbed the senior reporter. She's out. Susan got her kicked off the project, and I have no idea how she did it, but she's trying the same with me. Susan's trying to scoop me."

I frowned as I got to our apartment and pulled out my keys. Fumbling through them, I found the right one and unlocked the door. As I did, I stopped. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, but I didn't feel fear. I felt him. Slowly, I straightened upright. The phone fell away, and I looked where I'd just come from.

Kian was standing there. He was watching me.

This would've been creepy if it were anyone else, but remembering the stark need on his face while on the roof as he'd said he wanted to make sure I wasn't scared of him pushed everything out of me. I held up a hand to him.

He waved back. "Making sure you got there okay."

I nodded. "I know."

"Jo?" Erica was calling from my phone.

I held it back to my ear, but I was riveted by Kian. I could see him better now in the hallway. With the lean cut of his body, the jeans he was wearing, the black sneakers on his feet, and even how the whites of his eyes seemed to stand out from how tan his skin was—he was gorgeous.

The corner of his mouth lifted, and I knew he'd caught me checking him out. Ducking my head down, my cheeks got red, and I shoved inside my place. The door swung shut behind me, and I leaned back against it.

I was so stupid, checking him out after everything. I shook my head at myself, but then heard Erica's voice again.

“Jo! Hello? Jo, where are you?”

“Sorry. There was a guy in the hallway.”

“You weren't home? I thought you got off work an hour ago. Where were you? Wait.” She paused. “Is he hot? Please tell me he's a new neighbor.”

“I'm home now, and no, I don't think he's a neighbor.”

“Oh.” She sounded disappointed. “Wait. How'd you get home?”

I sighed, pulling open the fridge to grab a water. “Jake walked me home.”

“Was that Jake? Please tell me it was because I'd like to rub that in Susan's face. I swear, she's just as possessive of him when he's not Tara's boyfriend than when he was.”

Sinking down on a chair, I put my water on the table and gripped the phone tighter. “Erica, you called me for a reason. You don't usually call to vent when you're working.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m not working. I’m at the Wine Cellar. I was more calling to have you come down here, so I could vent to you in person. Wanker couldn’t come. He said something about throwing up. I don’t know what he meant. He’s never sick, so it couldn’t be because of that, but whatever. Can you come down?”

“To the Wine Cellar?”

Kian was probably leaving the building right now.

Erica kept talking. Venting. Wanker. Wine Cellar. It was all jumbled together.

I turned toward the balcony.

Could I see him?

“Uh-huh,” I murmured to the phone as I stood from the table.

There was no conscious thought. My body moved that way. The light was left on. If he looked up, he would catch me. I didn’t care, and I sank down on one of the chairs. I’d just been there, not even an hour ago, hiding from people who had been chasing after me. I was back, and I was the chaser now.

There he was.

I leaned over the railing, and Kian came out the side door. As he did, he stopped in the sidewalk. His hands searched inside his jeans pockets, and then his head straightened. He twisted around. He was gazing up. I ducked down, but I could still see a little bit.

He was staring right at my apartment.

I was eight floors up, and it was dark out, but he continued to look up. My forehead pressed against the railing, and I gripped my phone so close to my head that Erica could probably hear the street sounds through it.

“Jo?” she said.

“Yeah?” I murmured, clearing my throat.

Going back to my knees, I peeked again, but he wasn't there anymore. I couldn't see him up or down the street. I shouldn't have been surprised. He was a ghost now.

“Will you?”

I cursed. I'd missed so much in this conversation. “Yeah. Sure. No problem.” What had I agreed to?

“Great! I'll save you a seat, but I have to warn you that some of the others from the newspaper are here, too.”

I'd agreed to head down to the Wine Cellar. “Oh. Yeah, give me ten minutes to get there.” I glanced down at my uniform. “Make that twenty.”

“I'll have a drink ready for you. Thank you, Jo!”

“Yeah. Okay.” I hung up, and I couldn't help myself. I looked one last time before heading back inside.

There was no Kian below.

CHAPTER 11

It was the next morning.

Erica was hungover, and I was late for work. I rushed from my bedroom, but stopped at the sight of Wanker stretched out on our couch. Somehow, Wanker had slept over. His shoes had been kicked off. His shirt was pushed up as he was idly scratching at his chest, and he had his other arm flung over his face, his nose stuck into his elbow. He was snoring, too.

Erica came out of her room at that same time. She made a beeline for the coffee pot.

I held up two fingers. “One, I need a cup of coffee, too. And, two, how did he get there? He wasn’t at the Wine Cellar with us last night.”

She grinned, filling a cup. Before pouring the second cup for me, she lifted her mug and took a good whiff of it. “Heaven. My God,” she groaned, tipping her head back with a dreamy smile, “I need this to keep me awake today.”

“Hey.” I held up my hand. “Don’t make me jealous. Pour me a cup, too.”

She poured me one as well, and when I grabbed it, Wanker moaned from the couch. He sat up with his hair sticking in the air and a nice bulge in the front of his pants. He looked down at it, up to us, back to it, and then sighed.

He muttered, falling back to lean against the couch, “He says good morning, too.”

Lovely.

I ignored his member's good morning. "How is it that you got here? You weren't at the Wine Cellar last night." I leaned back against the counter. I had picked the morning shift, so I was late, but a good cup of coffee couldn't be rushed.

Erica rolled her eyes. "He called a few hours ago, convinced that he needed to go to the hospital."

Last night, Erica had been falling over wasted.

I asked her, "You were steady enough to take him?"

She snorted. "Hell no. I talked him into taking a cab here, and when he got here, he suddenly felt better."

He grumbled, yawning and stretching at the same time, "I thought I was dying. Thanks for the sympathy, too. Good friends you are."

There was enough coffee in the pot for one more person.

"We're the best kind of friends there are, if you want the last cup."

"The best. The very best." He stood up and began scratching at his chest again as he continued, "The one-of-a-kind best—unique and rare and"—he moved closer to the pot, leaned down, and took a big whiff before a dreamy smile came over his face—"the kind that I just want to hug."

He had morning breath.

Before I could retreat, Erica held up a hand. "Back away from my roommate. You're sick. You were throwing up." She paused and amended, "We were both throwing up at the same

time. He got the toilet. I took the garbage bin.” She shuddered. “*Not* good times.”

The image flashed in my head. “Gross. I didn’t need to know that.”

Erica grinned over her cup. “It’s one of the perks of being my roommate. We’re close, Jo. You get to know *everything* about me.”

Wanker grunted, moving back to the couch with the whole coffee pot. “I do, too, and I’m not your roommate.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I don’t?” He looked at her in surprise.

“Nope.” Erica grabbed her bag and then her purse. Putting her arms through the straps, she secured her bag onto her back and then reached for her cup. Pausing at the door with her keys in hand, she frowned at him. “I have to go. It’s our last day for prep before the interview.” Her eyebrows shot up, and she said to me, “You have to be there today.”

“Me?”

“Yes. Oh my gosh, that was the other thing I needed to vent to you about. Susan rescheduled the interview. She’s going to meet with him tomorrow. I found that out last night. I was supposed to do my questions on the original date, two days from now. Oh, man.” Her palm hit her forehead. “That was the whole reason I had you come out last night.”

She had been hanging all over one of the other reporters when I got there, so I hadn’t been filled in on whatever was wrong. Remembering that, I met her gaze, and she looked toward Wanker before giving me a slight head shake.

Message received. I would keep my mouth shut, so I took another sip of my coffee instead.

After a second's pause of silence, Erica continued, more quietly, "So, yeah, that was why I was upset. Susan wasn't going to tell me. She was going to have her assistant do the background questions."

"That other reporter is out?"

"Susan got her completely kicked off the project. It's a big scoop for Susan. She tried saying that it got moved up a day because of his team's request, but she could've told me. This is all we've been working on for the last month." The ends of her mouth pinched together, and the lines around her eyes strained. "But we're doing a meeting today to go over everything one last time. She knows that I got you on the approved list to be my assistant, so you have to be there."

"I have to work."

"You have to get out of it."

"But—" I remembered launching myself at that couple and the woman's threats that she was going to get me canned. *On second thought...*

I lifted a shoulder. "I could call in sick."

"Perfect." Erica beamed at me. "Okay, the meeting starts at three, so when you come to the building, just text me. I'll come down and grab you in the lobby."

I nodded. "Sounds go—"

The door slammed shut, and it was down to two. I glanced at Wanker. He stared back at me over the coffee pot.

He grimaced, his hand moving to his stomach. He muttered, “I should’ve held off on the coffee.”

“Too soon?”

He stood, passing me the pot, and he headed for the other pot. “Much too soon. Much.”

A second door was slammed shut, leaving me alone.

I said under my breath, “And it’s down to one, folks.”

When the barfing sounds started, that was my cue to leave, but first, I needed to make that phone call. Paul wouldn’t believe me, not if that woman had already called or even if she’d call later. He’d know I was lying, but I wanted to avoid that storm, even though I’d be going into a different one.

After putting the coffee cup into the sink, I headed for my bedroom with my phone in hand when Wanker opened the bathroom door behind me. The toilet was flushed before he turned off the sink.

He returned to the couch, wiping wet hands over his mouth. “Sorry. I...sorry you had to hear that.”

“You going to be okay?”

He didn’t answer that question. Instead, he leaned back against the couch. “I know she was with someone last night.”

Oh, whoa.

I shrank back against my bedroom doorframe.

He lightly rubbed his hand over his stomach. “It’s why I came over. I had to see for myself. I think that’s why I felt sick.” He cringed, turning a light shade of green. “Or why I felt sicker.”

He looked up at me. He didn't know, no matter if he'd said he did. I knew he didn't, and in that one look at me, he was checking for confirmation. I steeled myself, ready for his inspection, but when those eyes met mine, I wasn't prepared for the sadness there.

He was speaking the truth. He really did know.

My shoulders relaxed. "I'm sorry, Wanker."

He waved me off. "Nope. Trust me, I get it. She doesn't have those feelings for me. She made that perfectly clear."

With his shoulders slightly drooped, he got up and went to the sink. He dumped out the rest of the coffee that he hadn't drunk and washed the cup. He dried it, too, and then put it back inside the cupboard. All the while, he didn't look at me. I didn't talk. I had no idea what to say. I still didn't as he collected his keys, wallet, and phone.

Going to the door, he paused before opening it. His back remained toward me. "I think," he started, his voice low, "it's time I pull away a little bit. She should be able to have a guy over and not worry that her best friend might drop in and get jealous."

"Wanker." I took a step toward him.

He waved me back, still turned away. "Watch out for her when she's doing that interview, would you? That guy is dangerous."

I let out a silent sigh. "Yeah, I will."

"And can you not say anything to her? About what I just said to you." He glanced over his shoulder to me. The pain was evident. His eyes were stricken.

I nodded, feeling a lump in my throat.

“Thank you.”

Then he was gone.



I wasn't sick, but I did feel a little ill when I got to Erica's news building. When I got inside, I let the front desk person know who I was and five minutes later, Erica was calling my name from a side door.

I hurried over and hissed, “You guys aren't ordering food, are you?”

She turned and started up the stairs but frowned over her shoulder to me. “Uh, yeah. We usually do if the meeting goes long. Why? We'll order for you, too. You don't have to worry about paying.”

“Tell me you're not ordering from Escape.”

“Oh.” She stopped as she was rounding for the next level of stairs and turned with big eyes. “No.”

Oh, no.

“Crap. I didn't even think of that, and there's already been a request put in for Escape. One of the head honchos here is buddies with the new owners of Escape. That's why you guys deliver to us.”

She started back up, but I caught her arm. “Wait. New owners?”

“Yeah.” She frowned at me. “You didn’t know?”

“No.” And why didn’t I? But I didn’t have time to ponder that.

Erica was through the door and heading for the conference room. The tables formed a U with the opening having a podium and a marker board on the wall. Susan was standing behind the podium, talking with a few other people. She glanced up at our arrival and stiffened. I felt her eyes on me, but I ignored her and slipped into the chair beside Erica.

I couldn’t quite remember the reason Erica wanted me there—oh, yes, I was there to distract Susan by just being there. My presence pissed her off, and as she kept staring at me, I could tell it was working.

Score one for Erica.

Susan cleared her throat and held a hand up, drawing attention from everyone in the room. She pointed to the door. “Marcus, can you shut the door? Let’s get the meeting going, shall we?”

A guy did as she’d asked.

Erica leaned toward me and whispered, “Told you she’s on a head trip. Hope you’re ready for some nausea. Her ego trip makes me want to hurl on a daily basis.”

“Erica,” Susan called out, her beady eyes fixed right on my roommate.

Erica straightened in her seat. “Yeah?”

Oh, snap. I was ready for some drama to ensue.

Susan was going to call her out, but she pointed to me and asked in a tight voice, “Would you like to introduce Jo and explain her presence to the team? And while she’s doing that, has everyone put in their orders on the sheet? We scrapped the order for Escape. We’re ordering pizza instead. I’m going to make the call right now.” She held up a piece of paper. “It looks like pepperoni, cheese, taco, and Hawaiian? Any other requests?”

And I missed a hit with that one.

No one voiced a different opinion.

Susan narrowed her eyes, staring at me. “Go ahead, Erica. Do your introduction. Since I know what you and Jo like, I’ll be right back.”

She sounded polite.

She looked polite.

But I did *not* get the polite vibe from her. Susan left the room, but my tension remained on my shoulders. No way was I going to be the fool and relax around her. That would be like a snake playing dead, pretending to be an ugly-ass necklace. Hell no.

Erica held up a hand and pointed to me. “This is Jo. She’s going to be my assistant during the interview tomorrow.”

Someone started to raise a hand, but she shot him down with a glare.

“And, no, she’s my assistant, not yours, Geoff. She won’t be getting you coffee or sandwiches during the day.”

His hand went back down.

Some of the group laughed, and someone asked, “What about back rubs? She looks like a good masseuse.”

I wrinkled my nose. “No way.”

They laughed again as that one person groaned. “All the pretty ones don’t like to give back rubs. Where did the good assistants go?”

“To Human Resources,” a woman called out, “to report sexual harassment, Bob.”

He grumbled, grinning, as he waved a hand, dismissing her. “Yeah, yeah. What about the men? I would never claim sexual harassment. What do you say, ladies? New girl?” He looked right at me, as did everyone else. “You ever want someone to be your assistant, you let me know.”

I had a feeling this was some form of hazing. I never looked at Erica. I knew she wasn’t going to say anything, so I lifted my chin and stared right back at him, and I was honest. “I will tell you right now. If I ever find myself in a position where I need an assistant, you’ll be the very last person I consider.”

The group remained silent.

They were still testing me out.

Bob asked, “Why?”

I didn’t hold back. “Because I absolutely *hate* back rubs.”

The group laughed then, and Bob nodded, grinning at me. “You’re all right, new girl. Erica, you did good with your choice, not that you really need an assistant. But, hey, if my

best girlfriend wanted to come see the new celebrity, I would have gone that route, too.”

Erica stiffened in her seat. “Jo’s here to help me out, and that’s it.”

Someone snorted, “Not like she could even get close to Kian Maston. The guy’s going to be surrounded by his team of lawyers and his publicist.”

It was my turn to stiffen in the chair.

Erica gestured to the other person. “Exactly. My assistant won’t be leaving my side. Bob, you’re just cranky because my request to have an assistant was approved—unlike *your* request. Everyone knows any assistant of yours would sue for sexual harassment within the first week.”

Bob let out a dreamy sigh. “Ah, but that would be one glorious week.”

The group started laughing again, but I wasn’t hearing them. I wasn’t enjoying the camaraderie they all seemed to have while teasing each other.

Kian’s team of lawyers and his publicist? Or maybe he has more than one?

He wouldn’t be coming alone tomorrow. He would have a team with him and maybe even his family, who all knew me.

I couldn’t be there.

There was no way.

I looked at Erica. How could I stop this train wreck from happening? And I was seeing now that it would be a train wreck. *I* was the wreck. This would ruin my life. I would be

exposed, and Kian would have nothing to do with it. It would be all my own doing because I'd let my roommate talk me into attending her interview and because the truth was that I wanted to come for myself.

I wanted to see Kian again.

A raging headache was coming on. I felt it pushing at my temples, and it was growing more and more by the time Susan came back and started the meeting.

I wasn't paying attention. I was screwed.

CHAPTER 12

I was on the roof again that night, but I wasn't there because Kian had called me. I called him, and I did so with shaking hands. To have gotten the text was one thing, but to be the one to initiate the meeting was a whole other level.

That was me.

I had gone to that level, and I still could imagine Snark yelling at me. Before, it was like I had committed a crime by omission. There was wiggle room for a defense team. Not now. I was planning, concocting, and being the mastermind of my own crime. There would be no room for a defense if I were caught red-handed.

And why was I thinking that I'd be prosecuted? For what? A text message? Because I'd forgotten that Kian would probably be surrounded by a team of people tomorrow? Because I still had to go to that interview with my roommate, or she'd have my head on a stake?

I was so screwed.

“What's wrong?”

I screamed, lurching in the air, as I grabbed at my chest. I was where he'd been, waiting at the side of the building, perched on the edge, so I could see when he arrived. It should have given me time to prepare. Nope, that hadn't happened. I'd had no time to prepare.

I swung heated eyes to him.

Kian was standing behind me with an amused grin on his face. He tilted his head to the side with his hands at his sides, and he seemed relaxed. As I patted my chest again, feeling my heart palpitations starting to lessen from my heart trying to climb out of my chest, I couldn't stop myself from checking him out again.

He really was so gorgeous.

I didn't recognize the brand of his clothes, but I knew they were custom-tailored. He had on that leather jacket from before. It was zipped up with a button that stretched across the collar, giving him a lean and sleek look. He wore jeans again. The others had been dark while these were faded, but they were fashionably faded, and they fell over his legs perfectly. They molded to the tops of his thighs, and even though I'd only gotten a glimpse of his backside, I could tell his jeans smoothed over his ass in a delicious way.

This...this was why I wanted to see him tomorrow. I was attracted to him, and—holy shit, I couldn't be. That was not good, not at all.

His eyes narrowed as he patted the side of his face. "Have I grown two heads?"

"No." I let out a shaky smile. "Sorry." *Get it together, Jo. You two are not freshmen paired together for a class project.* "I, uh...never mind. I called because I didn't know what else to do, and I thought maybe the only thing I could do was see if you had any ideas."

"Okay." He moved a little closer.

I should've backed up, but I didn't want to. It was exciting to be standing this close to Kian. I was beginning to sound like a love-struck moron. Snark would be cursing my head off if he could see us now.

Kian added, "Tell me what's going on."

"It's your interview tomorrow."

I felt his surprise. He didn't show it. His face was still unreadable, but I felt he was startled.

I continued, "I know about it. Actually, this is the problem. A friend of mine is one of the reporters, and she asked me to be there to help her out."

"Ah." His head bobbed up and down. "And my sister will be there."

I gestured to my face. "I know I look different, but—"

"If she's looking hard enough, she'll recognize you," he filled in the rest. "And you don't want to risk it."

"I have a life here, a normal one. I can't..." Oh, boy. Here came the emotions again. I stopped and glanced away for a second. "I can't risk losing that, but I also can't risk not being there for my room—friend." I'd figure out later why I'd referred to Erica as only my friend, not my roommate. "This interview with you is a big deal to her."

"No, I understand." A small grin flitted across his face. "I got a lot of offers for interviews, but my team was selective of whom they'd choose. They don't understand why I want to interview at this college. No one does."

My chest was getting tight. “Why did you? Why are you, I mean?”

He lifted a shoulder and shifted to the side, so he was gazing out over the city. “I don’t know. I think maybe because this was where I wanted to go to college.” He glanced down, kicking at a small rock on the floor. His hands formed into fists before he shoved them into his pockets. “I think me coming here was a way to fool myself, like I could still have a normal life after everything.” He looked back to me. His eyes traced over me and fell to my lips, lingering there. “But even if there is a retrial, I’m starting to realize that some things have to be let go.”

I licked my lips and felt myself leaning toward him. He was still looking at my lips, and his eyes darkened when my tongue flicked out. It was dark, but he was close enough that I could see his eyes melding with the night color. My hands started to reach out. I was going to touch his sides, almost like I wanted to anchor him and go to him.

I caught myself, and my hands fell down to my sides. I had to pull my eyes away from him, but it ached. All I wanted to do was look back up at him, move closer to him, feel him, touch him.

But I did nothing.

I calmed my breathing, and I held still. The emotions would dissipate. They had to. This was nuts. Him and me? There was no way...

He’d said *if* there was a retrial...

I looked back up. “You mean, there might not be a retrial?”

His eyes flicked to mine. The corner of his mouth lifted again, and a smirk flared for a second. “I’m told they can retry me, then I’m told they can’t, and the latest is that the district attorney is just bluffing. They want to go after me for something else.”

“Can they do that?”

“Who knows?” A hard twinge sounded. “All I know is that my life is fucked up.”

And that was my fault.

Pulling away, I needed some space. I needed to think clearly again.

Swallowing over a lump in my throat, I asked, “You think you can make that work tomorrow? So, I can be there and not worry.”

I looked up and was caught by his eyes. He was staring down at me with a hard edge to him. I felt like a hand was inside my chest, squeezing the life out of me. My mouth was suddenly dry again, and I had to bite down on my lip to keep from saying something or licking it. Heat rose up in my body. I felt it spreading to my cheeks, and that lump in my throat doubled in size.

He blamed me...

Did he?

I was too scared to ask.

He broke first, his eyes darting away. “I’ll make it work. You shouldn’t have to worry about your life being upended because of my team. I’ll ask everyone to let me go in alone.”

“Will they be there? I mean, outside of the room? Are they still going to be hanging around you?”

“I’ll make my sister stay home. She’s the only one who could identify you. My lawyer and one of the publicists will be there, but you don’t have to worry about them. They’ve already preselected what questions will be asked, so they aren’t expecting any surprises. Your friend—is she the main reporter or one of the other ones?”

I laughed. *Susan*. “No. Uh, the main reporter hates me.”

His gaze sharpened. “She does?”

“I’m not quite sure why, but she does. Erica says it has something to do with Jake—”

He didn’t know Jake. Well, he did, but he didn’t know the circumstances. I didn’t know if I wanted him to know either.

“Jake,” Kian murmured. “That’s the guy I saw you with?”

“Uh...”

“He is.” A small grin tugged at his lips as he said quietly, “You don’t have to be scared of me knowing these things. You don’t have to be scared of me at all—ever. I’m just...I’m curious. Our lives are intertwined so much, but you’re almost a stranger to me. It feels wrong not to know certain things about you, like everyday things, when I know...other things.”

He knew my deepest and darkest secrets.

He knew what Edmund had done to me.

A shaky laugh slipped out. I couldn’t hold back the edge in my tone. “You’re right. You do. You know things no one should know. You know things I’m ashamed of—”

He surged to me. His hand caught my shoulder, and he said forcefully, “You never have to be ashamed. Never, Jordan.”

Edmund was there. I felt his presence between us.

I looked down, but I didn’t move from Kian’s hold, even though I should’ve been scared of it.

I wasn’t.

He continued, his voice softening, “He did that to you. It happened to you—not by you, not because of you, but *to* you. You had no choice. You have no accountability of what was done to you. Your foster dad was a sick bastard. I might not remember killing him, but I’ll never regret that I did. No one should have that horror happen to them. Guys like Edmund don’t rehabilitate. They just learn how to hide it better.” He sounded like he wanted to say more, but he let go and jerked back a step.

I sensed a raging battle inside of him. It was for me, not because of me.

Right there, hearing that, my reservations about Kian disappeared. He protected me. He didn’t blame me. Snark’s warnings were for nothing. I couldn’t explain it. There were no words that I could utter to make another person feel it, too, but I knew then.

I had nothing to fear from Kian.

A tear formed in the corner of my eye, and I brushed it away before he saw it. I didn’t want him to see that he had affected me. I wanted to be seen how I saw him—strong.

“Thank you,” I whispered. I wasn’t just thanking him for the interview.

He nodded, stepping away again. “Yeah,” he murmured. He took in a deep breath and let it out. “I’ll make it work tomorrow. You don’t have to worry. Your friend is the other reporter? Erica?”

“She’s going to be the feisty one.”

He grinned. “I look forward to meeting her.”

Here it was—the awkward good-bye. We had talked about what I’d asked him to come for. There was no reason for more talk. I knew he should go, but I didn’t want him to, and I knew that I should let him go, but I didn’t want to. I wanted him to stay—at least for a little longer.

He was right. He knew the deepest regions of my soul and what had happened to me—that touched inside of me—but we were almost strangers. It didn’t seem right.

He sighed. “This is where I go.”

I nodded. “I know.”

He didn’t leave.

I didn’t either.

We stayed and stared at each other for another minute, and then he began backing away.

I turned around and looked out over the city. I heard the roof’s door open and close, and I knew he was gone, but I’d see him again tomorrow.

CHAPTER 13

Kian

The hotel suite was dark when I got in, but there was a soft glow coming from my sister's room and another from the living room. As I passed the doorway, I noticed the French doors had been left open, and a small lamp on the desk tucked back in the corner had been left on.

I shared this suite with Felicia.

Our dad hadn't wanted to stray from his offices for too long, and there'd been too much traveling done already from the *Primetime* interview and all the appeals courts. He remained back home with our mother.

It was just my sister and me in this suite while my lawyers and all of Laura's publicist team stayed in their own rooms. There was security, too, but only one remained inside the suite while the others stayed out in the hallway. They'd switch off every few hours, and a new set of guards would come in the morning to relieve them.

Felicia liked to turn in early—or that was what she'd claim before retiring to her room at nine every night. The smell of booze that emanated from under her door said otherwise. I was

fairly certain my sister was a closet alcoholic. I only hoped it was alcohol and that she wasn't addicted to anything else.

After going past her room, I was about to close the door on mine when her door opened.

“Kian?”

I paused and closed my eyes.

She'd forced herself on this trip. I didn't want her here. My lawyers didn't either, and I knew Laura thought my sister was a publicist's nightmare. But Felicia had demanded that she come, and I hadn't had the time to fight her, so here she was, waiting up for me.

I prepared myself for one of her lectures. I said, “I'm here.”

She came out to the hallway, so she could see me. Our rooms were right next to each other, and I hadn't stepped back out to answer her question. I made her come to me. As she stood between our doors, she wrapped her blanket around her form. Her makeup was smudged, and she was unsteady on her feet, swaying a tiny bit before she caught her balance fully.

She asked, the rank smell of tequila wafting over to me, “Where were you tonight?”

“I felt like a walk.”

She wrinkled her nose. Walks were beneath her. “You shouldn't do that. Or you should take some of the guys with you. Everyone was worried about you.”

No one was worried about me. “I was fine, sister dear.”

She rolled her eyes and reached for a glass on her table. “You're placating me.”

“Of course, I am.”

“Stop doing that,” she warned in a low tone. Her blue eyes flashed in anger. “I’m not helpless, and I’m not stupid. You’ve been disappearing a lot since we got to this town. If you’re going for walks”—she pointed to my face—“at least wear a hat.”

I flipped up my sweatshirt’s hood and pulled it low. “Look, ominous and threatening. I know you’re scared of girls flinging themselves at me, but when I’m dressed like this, they tend to run away.”

“You’re so annoying.”

“And you’re wasted,” I shot back, but regretted it. My sister had reason to worry. “I’m fine, Felicia. Nothing’s going to happen to me.” I wasn’t going anywhere. That’s what she was concerned about. I lingered on the glass in her hand. I didn’t know if she was drinking more since I left for prison and more since I got out. All I knew was that it was steady and constant. She was a problem the family would have to face sooner or later, but not now. What happened to her wasn’t my problem, at least not anymore. The small fight I had in me was gone. I raked a hand over my face. “Go to bed, Felicia. I’ll fetch you in the afternoon for lunch.”

“Lunch?” Her eyebrows furrowed together, and she pulled her blanket tighter. “Aren’t you doing that interview tomorrow?”

“No. It’s been moved to another day. You can sleep in and go shopping even. I’ll be back at the hotel around two for our lunch together.”

“Where will you be before that?” She sounded relieved, eager even.

I added to my lie, “I’ll be at the gym, and then I’m meeting with Parson and Ethan. I’m sure Laura will be joining us as well.”

Felicia snorted. “Your lawyers. I don’t know why they sent two of them with us. One would’ve sufficed.”

“I’m sure the fact that Ethan has recently stopped leaving your room in the morning has nothing to do with your attitude?”

She froze, her gaze searching mine.

I lifted an eyebrow. “I might have been in prison for two years, but that’s made me more aware of my surroundings. I can recognize whose footsteps I’m hearing tiptoe past my bedroom door at six in the morning.”

She huffed out, rolling her eyes, “We stopped, okay? You don’t have to lecture me about it.”

I kept quiet. They had only recently stopped, and I was going to have a word with Parson in the morning. I had no doubt his associate would be heading back to their law firm within the next twenty-four hours, and I was hoping that I’d concoct a plan to send Felicia flying after him. I had other plans to remain in town—at least for a few more days, if not a few more weeks, if I could make that happen somehow.

No one knew Jordan lived here. No one would know. I saw the interest in her tonight. She wanted to get to know me. The feeling was mutual. I wanted to understand her more than I already did.

“Fine,” Felicia groaned. “I’ll stop seeing him altogether. Would that make you happy, brother mine?”

I still didn’t say a word.

She snapped out, “Whatever. Fine. Be mad at me. I don’t care. I’m going back to bed. I’m so glad you’re okay, you know? I worry about you. I’m your sister, and you’re not exactly *not* known. You’re goddamn famous. I wish you’d just accept that and stop this disappearing act you always do. I’m just concerned, is all. Is that a crime? For a sister to be scared someone might try to hurt her brother? Because some people want to kill you, Kian. They don’t love you or worship you like all those insipid females who write to you. There are quite a few threatening letters in your fan-mail pile. You just don’t want to accept that they’re there or that you’re not invincible, but you are. You’re weak. You can be hurt, too.”

She kept going, but I tuned her out. This was a nightly occurrence, and when she lost steam, she would begin crying. Then she would say she was hurting, too, that her life had been wrecked by the family and by me leaving her. She never got sympathy. Everyone paid attention to me. No one paid her attention.

And when she began faltering, I couldn’t stomach any more for the night.

I went to my room and shut the door, but I paused on my side and waited. She would either retire back to her room, sobbing, or she would raid the liquor cabinet in the main room.

When she slammed her door shut and I heard the lock click, I knew she must’ve stocked up earlier in the night. That was when I slipped out of the suite again, heading to my

publicist's door. I knocked once and stepped back. Laura was a light sleeper, and she never used anything to help her sleep. Her door opened within moments.

“Kian?” She looked at me in surprise.

“I lied to my sister. I don't want her to go with us tomorrow. Can you spread the word that no one is to go to our suite or inform her that we're doing the interview?”

“Oh.” She frowned, pressing a hand to her temple. She rubbed there. “Uh, what was the lie you told her? We need to make sure everyone knows the answers, if she asks questions.”

“I will be in the gym tomorrow morning, then a meeting with my lawyers. The interview was moved to another date.”

“Did you tell her what day?”

“It doesn't matter. My sister will be flying home tomorrow evening anyway.” *Even if she didn't know it herself.* “Thank you, Laura.”

“No problem.” Her hand fell from her forehead. “This is what I do, and I'll let Parson know, too.”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

I went back to my suite and to my room but not to bed, not yet. From my window, I stared out over the city. Tomorrow was one more step in my plan.

I would see Jordan again.

CHAPTER 14

Jo

When I got up the next morning, the nerves hit me hard, but I ignored them and got ready. I was doing a good job of pretending to be normal.

Erica was not. She flew out of her room and gestured to the coffee with a savage motion. “I need that. Now. Now. Now.”

She reached for it.

I held it away from her. “I think not. You’re ready to go boom. You need to calm down.”

I glanced to the couch. No Wanker. He wasn’t here when he was needed. As Erica let out a curse and then a pent-up scream before grabbing an energy drink from the refrigerator, I knew he would’ve known exactly how to handle her. He always knew if a joke would work and what type of joke, too, or if he needed to piss her off. Either way, he was the Erica Whisperer.

She slammed down the empty can. “We have to go. Now. We’re late. Why are we always late?”

I grabbed my bag and got in line behind her. After unlocking our door, she stepped through and held it open for me. When I didn’t immediately sprint behind her, her hand

started waving me in a continuous spin. I frowned at her but held my tongue. A wise roommate knew when to enter a battle or when the opponent was too crazy to beat. Erica—judging from the fraying hair, wild lines around her eyes, and dilated pupils—could go off on a homeless person for sharing her sidewalk space.

I was very wise in that moment.

And I continued to be as Erica huffed and puffed throughout the entire bus ride. When she pulled the cord, I looked out the window but didn't see the newspaper building. The ritziest hotel in the city, Seton, was there instead.

I grabbed Erica's arm after we got off.

“What?”

I gestured to the hotel. “What are we doing here?”

“This is where the interview is being done.”

“Here?”

I fought to keep the panic from my voice. “Is he staying here?”

He couldn't be. If he was, his sister was, too.

“I don't know, but I doubt it. His family owns that other one—and don't ask me why we're not interviewing there either. When big celebs do interviews, even with us lowly newspapers, they pick somewhere they're not staying. More anonymity that way.” Her lips pursed together. “Or I'd imagine. I don't know.” She shrugged. “I'm not a celebrity, and I'm probably never going to be rich, so who cares?” She grabbed my hand and yanked me after her. “Let's go.”

I couldn't move. I was terrified that he hadn't held up his promise, and the cameras were going to point my way instead.

However, Erica didn't care. She dragged me behind her, through the swinging doors and past the luxurious lobby. There were couches, gold-plated statues, a fountain, and lots of stuffy people. This seemed like a hotel where Kian's family would stay.

Erica swept past the front desk and into the elevator. We rode it to a middle floor, and as we got out, I saw a bunch of banquet rooms. Erica slowed, craning her neck to peer into the smaller conference rooms, until she grabbed my hand once again and swung an abrupt right into one of the rooms.

“Here.”

A table was set up against the wall with water, soda, juice, and coffee along with different food choices—pizza, finger sandwiches, vegetable trays, fruit platters, and lots of other dishes that I would've salivated over if I wasn't ready to pee my pants. Not the literal way, the nervous way. My stomach felt like it was still riding the Crazy Erica Train.

“Okay.” Susan cleared her throat from the back of the room. She clapped for everyone's attention. “All eyes on me. Right here.”

When people quieted, she signaled to someone. “Can you shut the door?”

She turned back to us. “Okay. Here's the game plan. We've gone over it before, but we're doing it again. Kian Maston is going to be arriving in the next hour. I want all the teams set up and ready to go. As soon as his team walks through those

doors, you've got cameras on him. Your recorders are primed and rolling. Pencils are at the ready. You get my drift. We're not here for an exposure or a hatchet job. We are going to tell Kian's story with respect. He's loved by a nation, and we're going to capitalize on that love. Everyone is going to be watching us and asking why we got the story they wanted. We got it because we're a damn good paper. We're going to prove that to the nation. We're going to make psychopaths cry. I'm fucking Barbara Walters today. Erica?" She snapped her fingers in my roommate's direction.

"Yes?"

"You're Meredith Vieira. You got it? Are you channeling her?"

Erica's jaw set in a firm line. Her eyes were determined, and her nostrils flared. "I'm ready. I woke up with my Meredith hat on this morning. We are going to do an amazing job."

"Damn straight."

Susan kept going, calling on each individual, getting every single one prepped and ready.

I was amazed. If she called on me, I would be too stunned to respond. This wasn't the Susan that I'd met as Tara's best friend, who hated me, or who wanted to keep tabs on my friendship with Jake. This was a leader. She had charisma. She stood there with confidence, and a buzz was filling the room. It was contagious. Everyone wanted to do their best work, even Erica, who hated Susan but didn't hate her on this day. Every other day, yes, but not this day.

They were a team that day.

I almost wanted to be a part of their team, but then I remembered this was the media, and my sanity returned.

Someone tapped me on the elbow, and I looked to see a hotel employee.

He leaned close as Susan was still calling on people. “Are you Joslyn Keen?”

“Yeah.”

He handed an envelope to me. “I was asked to give this to you.”

After I took it, he left, scurrying away with his shoulders hunched forward. I frowned at him and then looked down. The envelope was the hotel’s stationery.

Erica leaned over. “What was that about?”

I shrugged. “I have no idea.”

Moving away, I went to a corner before I opened it. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust Erica, but I was standing in a room of media. I ripped open the envelope, and I was thankful there were no prying eyes. A key card was inside along with a note.

I reserved this room for the day. No one knows about it. It’s intended to be used if I need a hideout from people, but you can use it, too. This day might be hard for you. They always are for me.

Room 914

—K

The doors to the conference room burst open at that moment. A heavysset man rushed inside, closing them behind him. He gasped for breath, his chest heaving up and down. Everyone quieted, waiting for him.

He said, “They’re here.”

Kian had arrived.

The room went nuts but in a controlled sort of way. They were already doing their jobs, but a quiet, intense concentration permeated the room. They were nervous.

Erica found me in the crowd. Her eyes were lit up and dilated. She clutched on to my hand, the same one that held Kian’s note, and she squeezed. “Are you ready? It’s happening. And, holy shit,”—she moved closer, lowering her voice—“he is really freaking hot. Cripes. He’s gorgeous on TV and in the pictures, you know, but it’s another thing in person.” She pulled her collar out and pretended to fan herself. “And I’m going to be alone in a room with him soon. Well,”—she nudged my elbow—“you and I will be in that room with him.”

“And camera people, right? And sound people and people for lighting? Right?”

“Oh, yeah.” Erica craned her neck as a crowd had formed around Kian by the door. “Them, too.”

Suddenly, everyone paused. The doors opened again, and it was surreal. A blanket of stillness settled over everyone, even to some server in the corner, who was sneaking a handroll from the buffet table.

Kian walked in.

Everyone in the room all seemed to be holding their breaths, just watching him.

He looked refreshing, to be honest. He was relaxed and confident. A group went to him, and I could only see the top of his head. There were a few people with him, and I tensed, trying to see if he had followed through. I couldn't see his sister.

When Susan joined the group, they migrated to the front of the room where two chairs had been set up. The whole production was top-notch and professional. I hadn't been joking about the lighting, sound, and camera people. Bright lights were centered on the two chairs in the front, and cords ran all over the place, leading to cameras and other video machines.

That was when I clued in. I asked, "You guys are videotaping the interview?"

They were a newspaper. I hadn't considered why cameras were there, but I was now. They didn't usually videotape their big interviews.

"Yeah. With this one, we are. We're doing a normal interview, meaning that we're going to write it up, but Susan wants to see if a video would bring in more revenue." Her head moved close again, and she whispered, "Personally, I think she wants to shop it around and see if we can get on a big network and have them show it."

"And Kian's team was okay with that?"

Erica lifted a shoulder, riveted, as Kian was shown to one of the chairs. Susan was standing by the next one—touching

his arm, smiling at him, laughing, leaning closer to him, showing the side of her boob to him. I was gritting my teeth before I'd realized it.

Erica answered me.

I registered her voice but not her words.

Kian was smiling back at Susan—or that was how it looked to everyone else.

My eyes sharpened. I saw the flatness in his eyes, and they began scanning the room, moving from person to person. He was looking for me. Realization flooded my body, warming it, and before I knew it, tingles were shooting through me as well. They started low in my stomach, but I felt them spread all the way to the back of my throat. He couldn't see me in the far back, and my feet started moving of their own accord. I went to the outskirts of the crowd. Erica was next to me, holding tightly to my elbow. I was just as engrossed with Kian as she was.

Then, he saw me.

His eyes warmed.

There was no other change on his face. He was still smiling at whatever Susan was saying, but without a doubt, I knew that he wasn't paying her attention. All his focus was on me, and he saw the envelope in my hand. His eyes darkened even more. An alarm started going off in the back of my mind, but I ignored it. It felt right to be standing there as he was about to be interviewed and having him just as captivated with me as I was with him.

I stepped back, jarring myself from the staring spell, and I looked away. No one was paying attention to me, except for Kian. Even that small bit of looking at each other shouldn't have happened. This was wrong. I shouldn't be here. We were going to be discovered—no, *I* was going to be discovered.

I started for the door, but Erica tightened her hold on my arm.

“Where are you going?” she hissed under her breath.

“I...”

Kian was still watching me. A flicker of concern showed in his eyes, and he stopped smiling at Susan. She would notice and then look for the reason of his attention. The room was suddenly so hot, and I started panting. I couldn't catch my breath. Beads of sweat formed on my forehead. I felt the room starting to blur at the edges of my vision.

I had to get out of here.

“I...” My throat wasn't working.

“You can't leave.” She firmly held me.

Her feet were like cement, holding me in place. “Jo! What are you doing? You're bailing on me.”

“I...” I was going to pass out. I felt it coming. I shoved her away and unlinked our arms. “I'm sorry, Erica. I have to go.”

I didn't think about where I was going.

I was in the elevator and pressing the button for the ninth floor before I could catch my breath. There were others in the elevator with me. When I stumbled out on the ninth floor, I bent over and took gaping breaths. I was alone, for the

moment, but I knew someone might come along at any moment. Someone from the paper could be coming after me.

I couldn't linger, so I found room 914. Once inside, I blasted the air conditioner and stood over it. I didn't pay attention to the room. I needed cold air on my face. I needed to calm down. My God, what if someone had been paying me attention? Or worse, since all eyes had been on Kian and he'd been focused on me, someone could've noticed and then started to wonder why he was staring at me with such intensity.

And if Erica found out, I'd lose her. I'd lose Wanker, too. They never questioned my lies, so they were my only friends I'd held on to. All others had been let go. If people got too close, they would want to know too much.

I was so stupid.

No.

I was reckless.

And it was all to see Kian again, all to just be around him.

This was wrong. This was dangerous. No more visits.

As I started to calm down, I sat down on a chair and wiped the tears from my face. My legs were still trembling.

My head folded into my lap, and I let the tears free. I was soon sobbing. I couldn't stop myself. I didn't want to stop myself. I sank to the floor and curled my arms around my knees, hugging them to my chest.

I still wept.

I'd stopped living the lie for one moment. That was why I had gone to see him—because I could be Jordan Emory again,

not Jo Keen. For a split second, I'd stopped feeling like I was hiding.

I was fooling myself.

The nation loved him, and they would turn on me. It'd happened over and over again. Victims would get blamed, and the public already blamed me. It'd happen again.

This thing I was doing with him—meeting him on the roof, then meeting him again, and then seeing him at my roommate's interview—had to stop.

Kian had to cease to exist for me again.

CHAPTER 15

I wanted to stay in that room.

The longer I did, the more I thought Kian would come find me. I wanted that, and being in a room that was a secret between us, it was hurting me to write the letter that I did.

I left it on the desk, so he'd see it immediately. It wasn't long. I'd thanked him for offering me the room. I'd thanked him for reassuring me on the roof, for making sure I was okay. But I had to go back to my old life, and that meant no Jordan, no Kian, and certainly no history that could harm either of us.

I had wanted to sign it as Jo, but I'd signed it with my real name. It'd been so long since I had written Jordan, and it felt right, but like Kian, I had to let that go, too. That also included seeing Snark since I wasn't technically in the Witness Protection Program. He'd used his resources to help me get a new life. I needed to not see him again and stand firm in who Jo Keen was, not who Jordan Emory had been.

Avoiding the elevators, I left the hotel by going down the stairs. When I got to the lobby, one of the newspaper people was there. He was the guy who had given me a hard time, Bob, and he was scanning the entire lobby. I was guessing that Erica had sent him to look for me, but I didn't want to hear any message she might've sent with him. Erica thought her life was going to die if I wasn't there just because Susan would find some way to stab her in the back. It was a lie. Erica would

do just fine. Their interview would do wonderfully. Erica didn't need me to hold her hand to make that happen.

When Bob went to the restroom, I slipped through the lobby. I didn't see an approaching bus, and I didn't want to wait, so I grabbed a cab. Once I gave him the address, I sent Erica a quick text.

I'm okay. Panic attack. Going home to feel better.

I hit *Send* and then added another one.

You'll do great! Kick interview butt!

I was a few blocks from my apartment when I got a text back. Expecting a response from Erica, I saw it was Jake instead.

You okay? Went to your job earlier. They said you were sick.

Jake.

Good Jake.

Normal Jake.

The Jake who ran away from a bunch of thirty-year-olds.

Jo's Jake, not Jordan's Jake.

I changed my mind and sent a quick text to him.

Where are you?

My place.

I leaned forward and told the cab driver, “I need to go somewhere else.”

After giving him the new address, I texted Jake.

I’m coming over.

I expected a text back but never got one.

When the car pulled up to the house Jake shared with a bunch of guys, I saw why. Ten cars were lined down the street, and another six were squashed in the driveway.

Jake was having a party.

Once the cab left and I headed to the front door, I had doubts. Maybe I should leave? He hadn’t texted back.

Hearing loud music and shouts from inside, I opened it and bypassed the doorbell. I doubted anyone could hear it anyway.

It’d been so long since I was at Jake’s house. He had four other roommates. I’d met two of them during our brief fling but not the others. Jake hadn’t been close to them, only the two I’d met. Stepping into the living room, I didn’t recognize

anyone here. A baseball game was on the television, but only three guys were paying attention. They lounged on the couch while others in the room were talking among themselves. A group stood in one corner, and another stood in the doorway leading to the kitchen. I glimpsed a full kitchen and then stepped aside as four more guys ran down the stairs behind me and went around into the kitchen, through the kitchen, and out the back door.

This was a full party, like a real party. It wasn't a shindig or a gathering.

I moved into the kitchen, grabbed a mini bottle of wine, and headed out to the backyard. Was Jake going to invite me to this? Was that why he'd stopped by at my job? I doubted it. I still didn't see anyone I recognized.

I noticed Jake was in front of his garage. A basketball hoop was nailed to the top of it, and he lined up for a shot. The ball went through the net and bounced, and then it was caught by a guy and passed right back to Jake. He hadn't texted back because he was shooting hoops.

But then I saw Tara standing on the sidelines, watching him.

I stood there, just staring.

I should leave, but he'd see my text whenever he checked his phone. He'd know that I was there—or at least that I was going to head to his house.

Seriously, what was I even doing here in the first place?

I came so I wouldn't think about Kian, the interview, or angry Erica. That was why. I was using Jake, and remembering

the last time I saw him, shame flooded me.

I needed to go. I shouldn't be here.

Before I could though, Jake turned and spotted me. His eyes got big, and he caught the ball, freezing in position.

Another guy came up, hit the ball out of his hands, and dribbled to make a layup. He pointed at Jake. "In your face, Monroe!"

Jake wasn't paying attention. He started for me, lifting his hand, as if to touch me. "Jo."

Tara's head whipped around. An instant glare formed in her eyes, and she crossed her arms over her chest. The two girls with her looked, too. They all seemed confused until she leaned over, and her lips moved. I was sure my name was uttered, and the other two adopted similar glares. All three stood as if they were facing off against me.

"Hey." Jake raised his arms, as if to hug me. A second's hesitation, and then he did. Stepping back, he glanced over his shoulder and then touched my arm. "Want to get a drink?"

I lifted my little wine bottle in the air.

"Ah. Uh..." He flashed me a grin, moving me back toward the house. "Want to come with me while I get a drink?"

"Sure."

"Thanks." He chuckled near my ear as his hand fell to my back.

Reaching over me, he pulled open the door. I ducked underneath. He moved around me again. He grabbed a case of

beer, hooking it with his finger, and took my hand with his free one.

Some of his friends in the kitchen said hello, calling out to him and patting him on the arm or back as he maneuvered us through the rest of the kitchen. We headed down the basement stairs. It was the same scene below. A band was setting up in a corner with couches all around. At one end, a media station was set up. A flat screen television was mounted on the wall with the shelves filled with DVDs and video games. And the same thing happened as he led me down the hallway to a back bedroom. They all shouted hello to Jake, and he lifted his hand up, the case of beer dangling from it, in greeting back to them.

We got to his room, but the door was locked. Jake let go of my hand, felt above his doorframe, and came back down with a key. He grinned at me before he inserted it into his door. Then, we were inside, and the door was locked once again.

He tossed the key onto the nightstand by his door and gestured around the room. “My casa.”

The room consisted of a desk, a large bed, built-in bookshelves, and his own bathroom through a walk-in closet.

I perched on the desk chair. “It’s a nice room.”

“Thanks.” He stood in the middle of the room, raking a hand through his hair, as he glanced back at the door. “I don’t know what to say. I guess I’m just surprised to see you here.” He looked at the door, at me, and then back to the door. “Shit. I forgot my phone up there. I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere. Promise me, you won’t go anywhere.”

I laughed. “Go get your phone.”

“I will be right back. I swear.” He hurried out but popped back into the room. “Seriously, don’t leave.”

“I won’t. Get your phone before someone goes through it.”

He groaned but disappeared in a flash.

It’d been so long since I was in his room. Back then, I would’ve been so nervous, and now...Kian was in the back of my mind. This was stupid. I was using him to help get another guy out of my head. This wasn’t right. I was wasting Jake’s time, and I stood to go. I got as far as the stairs.

Jake came back down. “Where are you going?”

“This was a mistake, coming here. I should go. I’m sorry, Jake.”

“Wait.” He caught my arm and then glanced at the audience we were attracting. He tugged me toward his room again. “Just come and talk to me. That’s what friends do, right?”

The half-grin he gave me was meant to look appealing, but it looked sad. I didn’t know the backstory of Tara being at the party, but Jake was still interested in me. I saw it then. And my decision was reaffirmed.

“Jake, I really should go.”

“Okay, okay.” He let me go but jumped in front of me. He backpedaled as I walked forward. “How about this? If you don’t want to hang out in my room, I’ll come with you. It won’t be like you coming to find me, if you know what I mean. Think of it like me tagging along, and you’re not doing anything wrong because, hey,” he patted his chest, “it’s me

following you. Not the other way around.” He tried for his most charming smile. “What do you say?”

We were at the top of the stairs and moving through the kitchen. Tara stood inside the backyard door. A pained expression was on her face.

I didn’t know what to think about that look from her. She was still in love with him. I got that. They dated since their high school years, so I really did get the history, but there had been a note of desperation in Jake’s voice.

I wondered if he was doing the same thing with me that I was doing with him—using each other to forget someone else.

Before we moved into the living room, Jake saw her, too. He stopped, straightened, and dropped his hands back to his sides. A dark look passed between the two.

Decision made.

He was hurting. I’d do the friend thing and get him out there. I grabbed his hand, linked our fingers, and tugged him behind me. “Come on.”

He fell in line behind me, his shoulders and head dropped slightly, as his hand squeezed mine. He murmured close to my ear, “Thank you.”

I nodded. He was trying to get her out of his system.

“I can relate.”

Once outside, I called a cab, but Jake took my phone away and ended the call.

He said, “My car’s on the street. I can drive.”

“Have you been drinking?”

He shook his head. “Tara showed up too early for me to start partying.”

He pulled his keys out of his pocket as we headed for his car. He went to the driver’s side, and I got in on the passenger side.

After the doors were shut behind us, he added, fitting the key into the ignition, “When the ex showed up, I knew the normal thing would be to start drinking, but I couldn’t. My mind was racing too much for me to get drunk. I get hyper and restless.” He pulled into the street. “Plus, I like to have a clear head in case we get into a fight.” The corner of his mouth lifted. “Is it like that for you and whatever ex I had no idea about?”

I laughed. He wasn’t upset. I relaxed into my seat and shrugged. “He’s not an ex, but yeah, there’s someone else.”

“I wondered about that.”

“You did?”

We paused at an intersection.

Then, he pulled forward. “I’m going to sound like an ass here, but I’ve kinda wondered about it since the beginning, especially when we raced away from those old people. You seemed extra charged that night, and then when we got to your place, you got that text, and there was nothing for me. You called me Wanker.”

“I did?” My mouth fell open.

He laughed, turning onto the interstate now. “It was sort of a blow to the ego, but, hey, I’m the one who fucked up. I had a shot with you, and I went back to Tara. It was a mistake. The

two of us..." He shook his head. "We're bad. I thought she knew that, too, and accepted it. I don't know why she came today, but she's friends with some of my buddies. They invited her. She's got friends who are friends with my friends."

"She wants you back, but I don't have to inform you of that." I leveled him with a knowing look. "You already knew that."

"Yeah." He sighed. His jaw firmed, and his hands clenched tighter on the steering wheel. "Doesn't matter. No matter how much we loved each other, it's over." He glanced through the side of his eye to me. "For good. I have to move on."

Now, I smiled. Before, I would've squirmed, wondered if he'd meant me, but I shook my head this time. "Are you serious? We just told each other that we were trying to forget other people, and you're flirting with me again?"

He laughed, his hands relaxing on the wheel. "You're right, but I can't resist. You're gorgeous, Jo. Seriously. All those guys back there were checking you out."

And cue the squirming. "No one noticed me, except for you." I paused and then relented, "Well, they noticed us when we walked out, holding hands."

He barked out another laugh. "You're right. Tara's going to be fuming about that for months. I'm sure she's on the phone, bitching to Susan already."

Susan.

The interview.

Erica.

I cursed.

“What?”

“I’m in trouble.”

“Why?”

“I was supposed to be at that interview, and then I ditched it.” I cringed. “I told Erica I went home because I was sick.”

“Well...shit.” He turned on the blinker and turned right onto my street.

“She’s the kind to hear that I went to your party instead of being there for her, so she will jump to the conclusion that I ditched her to hang out with you instead.” I groaned. “I’m in such trouble. Fuck Ki—” My hand clamped over my mouth. I’d almost said *Kian*.

Oh my God. My heart started pounding.

I felt the blood draining from my face as I stuttered, “Uh—fuck-*ing* hell.”

Jake was quiet, swiveling into a parking spot a block down from my building. I waited, my heart pounding, to see how he’d react to that slip.

After he turned the car off, he took the keys out and regarded me for a moment. “Ki, huh? Tell me the truth.”

Oh my God.

He cocked his head up and smirked, a flirty gleam in his eyes. “Did you go and fall in love with Keetan Birches behind my back?”

Keetan Birches?

It clicked. Keetan was in our class, and he'd given me a rose one day. That was when Jake and I'd first begun to see each other. Jake hadn't thought it was funny, but Keetan was a clown. He'd pretended to propose marriage at the end of class, too, all for a show and all to get to Jake.

I burst out laughing and grabbed on to Jake's arm. "No, no. *Fucking hell*. I meant to say, 'Fucking hell.' Not Keetan. But you know that was all to piss you off back then, right?"

He started chuckling with me. "I know. He had a thing for Tara during our freshman year."

He got out of the car and resumed as we approached my front door, "To be honest, I think he's the one who screwed us up."

I unlocked the door, and we headed for the elevator. "What do you mean?"

Jake leaned against the wall as I hit the button.

He folded his arms and shrugged. "I think Keetan asked Tara out. When she told him about us, he told her about you and me. That was why she suddenly wanted to get back together. That's my guess anyway."

The elevator arrived, and we waited until we got to my floor. As we walked to my apartment, I couldn't shake the feeling of comfort. We seemed like actual friends. When I unlocked my door and we went in, I started grinning. I couldn't stop.

"What's that look for?" Jake helped himself to the refrigerator and grabbed a water. "That's when I should've listened to my instincts, you know."

I tossed my bag and keys onto the table. “How so?”

“I knew I shouldn’t have let you go. I was dumb back then.”

My eyebrows arched up. “That was seven months ago.”

He slid into a chair across from me. “Yeah, I was a whole other person back then. I thought I was God’s gift to women.” He tipped his water to me. “Thought I could let you go and get you back with the snap of my fingers.”

I frowned. “That’s...mildly insulting.”

He waved that off and winked. “Don’t be. I’m the one with a good kick to my ego. I don’t know who the other guy is, but he’s an idiot. He shouldn’t let you go. You’re going to get snapped up by some guy.” He patted himself on the chest. “I’m not that lucky.”

“Shut up.” But I was grinning. It felt nice, hearing all of this, even though I knew it was smoke going up my ass. “You’re the one who’s going to be back with Tara by the end of the month.”

“No.” He scowled and shook his head. “No way.”

“That’s my prediction. I’m just smart, knowing to get out of the way of your epic love story with her.”

“No, no, no.” He kept shaking his head. “That will never happen. Never again.”

“Never again, Jordan.” Kian’s voice sounded in my head.

He was standing beside Edmund, and he paused, saying those words to me, before he gripped the knife tighter. I knew he was going to do it. I saw it. I felt it. I had a moment to stop

him. I could. I knew it. I couldn't explain how I knew it, but he would stop if I'd utter just one word. I didn't, and he didn't. I closed my eyes now, jerking in my chair, as Kian's arm moved in one smooth motion, slicing Edmund's throat. It'd happened so quickly, not even in the blink of an eye. It had been faster. Then, it was done. Edmund stood there with a confused look in his eyes. It was like he didn't realize what had happened. He hadn't felt it then. One more second, and then he did. I saw the pain fill his eyes. His hands lifted to his throat. He made one gurgling sound, and then he fell to his knees.

He crumbled to the floor after that.

“Yo, earth to Jo. Come in, Jo.”

I shook my head, shoving the memory away. Jake snapped his fingers in front of my face and waved his hand up and down.

“Hello in there.” He gently tapped the side of my head with his knuckles. “Knock, knock.”

I shoved his hand away but grinned slightly. “Who’s there?”

“Uh...” He narrowed his eyes at me in another flirty manner. “Some perv who wants to get in your pants.”

I groaned, getting up to grab a water bottle. “You have a healthy sense of realism, player, and confidence. You know that?”

“Like you said,” A second wink at me, “I’m a realist. I might not be in the front, but I’m right behind whoever the guy is. I’m going to be hot on his heels for as long as you’ll let me.”

“I was just thinking that we were actual friends when we were coming down the hallway.”

“Coming, huh?” A sly smile spread over his face. “I can make you do a different form of coming, if you get my drift?”

“I do, and it’s not going to happen.”

The light banter between us vanished.

Jake leaned forward, his eyebrows bunching together, and an intense expression flitted across his features. “Jokes aside, I think we should make a pact, hold each other accountable about our exes.”

“What do you mean?”

“You said it yourself. We’re both trying to forget someone else. Let’s help each other out.”

I cocked my head to the side. It sounded okay, but I bit down on my lip. Something about it didn’t seem right to me. “I don’t know.”

He winced. “Tara’s like my Achilles’ heel. She’s a smoking habit that won’t go away. I need help to kick my addiction, and it sounds like you need the same thing.”

“Jake...”

“Think about it. Just think about it. No lies. No hiding or avoiding. A hundred percent honesty between us. If we feel like talking to the ex, we call each other instead. We help each other to get the other person out of our heads. There’s a big part of me that doesn’t even want to see her or talk to her. I start remembering the years, the sex...you know how it is.”

I didn't. Bringing my water bottle up, I pressed it against my head. Maybe the condensation would clear my thoughts because he was starting to make sense to me.

"I don't know, Jake."

"Okay." He shoved back his chair and held his hand up. His little finger was extended to me. "Pinkie swear. If we start dealing with our people, we tell the other. That's the only way this is going to work. You need help, too. You wouldn't have come to see me today if you didn't."

My gaze jumped to his, and I saw the knowing look there.

He lowered his hand. "It didn't take a genius to know you were running from some dude today. You never drop by. You never even did that when we were actually dating before. And you don't skip out on Erica. You're a good friend. You're loyal. You never lie either, Jo."

Oh, boy. He was so wrong.

His hand extended to me again, his little pinkie just waiting to be shook. "Come on. What do you say?"

I had no idea what this was going to entail. "This is the worst idea in the world." I reached up and wrapped my pinkie around his, and we shook.

His smile grew. "Let's kick these bitches together."

I scowled.

CHAPTER 16

Jake and I were hanging out until my phone started going off. I had it on the side table beside me since we were in the living room and grabbed for it, not wanting to think about *him*. I hesitated before picking it up. Was I ready to get a text from him? My stomach double-knotted and then lurched to the bottom of my throat.

Here goes.

I picked it up and looked at the screen.

Wanker's name was lighting it up.

I frowned and then answered, "Wanker? What's up?"

A burst of loud music came from his end as he shouted into the phone, "I need backup!"

Ice plunged through my veins. I jerked upright on the couch and pressed the phone tight against my ear. "What's wrong?"

"It's Erica." The loud music faded abruptly, and his voice grew clearer. "She called me hours ago. She was already at Sids, and she's going crazy. I've never seen her this upset."

"Oh, no."

His voice gentled. "She's not even making sense anymore. Something happened at the interview today."

"This is all my fault."

"What? She didn't say anything about you."

My head went back up. “Say what?”

“She’s upset about Susan.”

“She didn’t say anything about me?” I needed to make sure. “Like, not a peep about me?”

“She said something about a panic attack, and she felt bad, but that was it. She’s been ranting and raving about Susan. I’ve never seen this side of her. Jo, I’m concerned. She goes from laughing hysterically to almost crying to planning Susan’s murder. I don’t know exactly what Susan did to her, but this isn’t the normal Erica or even the normal pissed-off Erica. Can you come and help?”

I gestured at Jake and then to the door. “Yeah, I’m coming. You’re at Sids?”

“We’re in the back left corner by the big booths. I got her back there since she was yelling. I figured she could go nuts there. It’s more private, you know.” He let out a sigh. “I have to head back. I went into a closet, so I could call you.”

“Okay.” I grabbed my bag and keys.

Jake had already gone out the door and was waiting for me.

“We’re on our way.”

Right before I hung up, Wanker said, “We?”

Hanging up, I shut the door and locked it. I said to Jake, “Susan did something to screw Erica over. We have to go and calm her down.”

“I’ll drop you off. If she sees me, she might get all vengeful. We both know she’s not a big fan of mine.”

I didn't think Erica cared about Jake much anymore, but I didn't say anything.

When we got there, the line was around the corner again. I wasn't a regular. They'd let me in that one time because of Erica. I didn't think I'd have the same luck.

When Jake was going to drop me off, I asked, "You come here a lot, don't you?"

"Uh..." His eyebrows bunched together. "A fair amount. Tara and Susan know people who work here."

"You're going to have to come with me. I need you to get *me* in."

He did, nodding to the bouncers, and we were allowed to walk past them.

He hunched closer to me as we went through the door. "This is not going to help the situation. Erica really won't want to see me."

"Come on." I scanned the nightclub.

It was just like the last time—dark with techno music playing and neon lights flashing everywhere while crowds of people were packed inside.

I spotted the big black booths in the back and grabbed Jake's hand, tugging him behind me.

He turned his hand upside down to lace our fingers together. He pulled me to a stop and stood close as he peered down at me. "You know she's not going to approve of me."

I murmured, "One dilemma at a time." The first one to deal with, my roommate and when I spotted Erica, her hands were

flying in the air as she was talking. She was trying to punch a hole in the table with her finger when we got to the booth and was glaring at Wanker, who sat across from her. “That’s what she thinks, but she’s wrong.” Her lip curved up into a menacing glare. She punched the table again with that one single finger. “She’s wrong, Wanker. Wrong.”

I moved within eyesight of her, but I was still cautious. Was she mad and hiding it?

Her eyes grew bright and then went out of focus. Squinting, she shook her head and tried to focus again on me. As she did, the recognition lit up her face. A smile stretched from ear to ear. “My roommate!” She held her arms out wide but fell backward against her seat and started to pitch to the side.

Wanker shot over the table and grabbed her right arm. I jerked forward and grabbed her left arm. We steadied her, and then I slipped in next to her. Jake sat next to Wanker.

Erica gazed at Jake. Her lips stuck out in a pout. “You.”

Jake sighed. A server went past, and he lifted his hand in the air. “Drink, please.”

“You.” She started to get up, rising to stand where she sat in the booth. Her finger pointed across the table. “It’s your fault.”

Jake lowered his hand and shot me a look. “Told you my presence would be a bad idea.”

I waved that off and pulled Erica’s hand down. “Stop. Whatever’s going on has nothing to do with Jake.”

“Yes, it does!” She closed her eyes, lifted her head, and shouted, “I’m drunk, Jo! I’m drunk. Drunk. And you...you had

a panic attack, and I didn't know." She patted my arm, still with her eyes closed. "I'm so sorry you had a panic attack. I didn't know. Did I know?"

I caught her hand and held it. "You didn't know."

"Okay." Her eyes opened, and when she saw Jake, they lit back up. "You!"

Her hand started to go up once again, but I caught it and snapped my fingers in front of her face.

I said, "Right here. Over here. I'm here."

"You're here. Oh, Jo! You're here. Are you feeling better? I was worried, but I couldn't leave, and you had a panic attack. Where did you go? I sent Dickhead to look for you."

"Uh..." I remembered Bob had been in the lounge. "Oh, yes. We must've missed each other. I went home, or I was going home. I started to feel better, and then I went to Jake's house. I thought he could..." What was I going to say here?

Jake lifted an eyebrow, a slight grin peeking at the corner of his mouth.

I rolled my eyes at him and said to my roommate, "I thought he might have special medicine for my anxiety."

Jake lifted a hand in frustration and muttered, "Oh my God."

Erica's eyes got big again. "He does. He has drugs. I knew it!" She pointed at him again. "You're the type to have those steroids and shit. Wait, does Susan know? I could use that against her. Does she take steroids, too?"

Jake's hands spread out, palms upward. "I don't have steroids. No one has steroids. Jo wanted booze. I had booze, but we left and went to your place instead."

Erica sucked in her breath. "You brought steroids to our place?"

I started laughing. I couldn't help it.

Jake shot me a look. "Thanks. This is probably the only thing she's going to remember from this night."

"You..." Erica rose from her seat. "You gave steroids to my roommate. Is she on steroids, too?"

"Oh, for God's sake," Wanker burst out, standing. He grabbed Erica's hands and pushed her back down, and then he shot a look at Jake and me. His eyes were beady under his glasses. "You two are not helping. You were supposed to come and help her."

Jake frowned. "She's drunk. What else do you want us to do?"

"Five minutes before you arrived, she was planning murder. Said it'd be a double exposé since they just interviewed that killer guy."

Jake's frown deepened. "That killer guy? What killer guy?"

Erica grumbled, sliding down in the seat so that her feet were almost in Wanker's lap, "That hot killer guy. You know who I'm talking about. I am sober enough to admit that I'm drunk enough not to remember his name. That guy."

"Oh." Jake nodded. "That guy. I remember." His tone was sarcastic. His hand lifted in the air, and his fingers spread out.

“It all makes perfect sense *now*.”

Erica glowered at him as she hunched down, and stuck her bottom lip out. “I don’t appreciate your tone. I don’t know what it is right now, but I don’t appreciate it.”

I wanted to hit my forehead. This was my roommate. This was Wanker, who was fine. And this was—I gazed at Jake—my friend and accountability partner. This was my team, whom I’d chosen to hide away with in my new life, and they were arguing over...I had no idea what they were arguing over. For some reason, I was fed up, and my patience was gone.

I started to stand up. I wanted to deliver some lecture, and again, I had no clue what I was going to deliver, but Wanker beat me to it.

He jerked forward in his seat and spread his hands in the air. His movement was dramatic, as was the look of disgust on his face. He looked from Jake to Erica and back again. “You two, shut the fuck up.”

Erica’s bottom lip popped back out in a pout.

Jake rolled his eyes.

“I mean it. The two of you are being horrible to each other. And why?” He indicated me, too.

Jake expelled a breath of air and leaned back.

Erica narrowed her eyes. She mumbled, “Wanker, whass your poind?”

“Great. The slurring is upon us,” Jake grumbled.

Wanker started to turn on him.

I beat him this time. I hissed at Jake, “Stop it. Susan screwed her over, and she’s only mad at you because you screwed *me* over, remember?”

That shut him up.

Erica thrust a fist in the air. “Yeah!”

Wanker told her, “Drop that hand right now.”

She did. Her hand landed with a thud on the table, and she seemed mesmerized by Wanker’s take-charge attitude. I had to admit, I was impressed, too.

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table, and he shoved his glasses up with one savage movement. He pointed at the table. “Now,”—he hit the table with his finger, like Erica had done when we approached—“I have no idea what happened. She still hasn’t explained it to me, but I vote we go home, and we all partake in a rather passionate round of Go Fish.”

“Yeah!” Erica’s fist went back in the air. She lowered it right away. “No, we can’t. Susan’s here. I’m spying on her.”

That got all our attention.

Jake sat upright.

I froze.

Wanker’s glasses slid down his nose, and he left them there.

“Wait.” Jake leaned across the table. “Susan’s here?”

“Yeah.” Erica pointed to the second level. “She came here with that killer guy and some others.”

“Where?” I was close to hyperventilating. Kian was here?

“In a private box up there. That guy was snuck inside through the back. He’s famous. People would go apeshit if they knew he was here.”

“Are you sure he’s here?” I had to make sure.

“I think so. I mean, he might’ve left already.”

If he did, a thought occurred to me, has he texted me?

I felt the outline of my phone in my bag. I wanted to pull it out and double check. Was Kian here? Or did he leave? I had no clue how I felt about either. I just wanted to know if he’d texted me.

Erica said, “Susan came in with a bunch of head honchos from the paper. They have a private box here. I’ve heard things at the paper, that they use it with their biggest sponsors or whoever. I thought it was just all talk at the office, but when I saw that she’d come here with all the editorial staff, I knew it had to be true.”

“But you didn’t see”—she’d called him *killer guy*—“killer guy with them?”

“No.” A long, drawn-out breath of air left her. “But I overheard his driver say that their next stop was here. He was talking to one of Kian’s lawyer guys.”

Jake scowled.

I chewed on my lip. My stomach was in knots.

“I know they’re up there.” Erica pointed above us. “Go, and make your presence known. I have no doubt that Susan will welcome you with open arms.”

Me? No. There was no reason. Wait. She was talking to Jake.

Jake fixed her with a dark look. “For the tenth and umpteenth time, I’m not with Susan. I’m not with Tara either.” He pointed to me. “I’m with her now.”

Erica’s head swiveled to me. Her eyebrows lifted.

Wanker’s head dropped to his hand, and he began shaking it back and forth. “Oh God, no.”

Jake continued, with an extra bite to his voice, “Get used to it, Erica. I’m not going anywhere.” He paused. “I’m her accountability partner. You know what that means?”

“You want to get into her pants.” Erica rolled her eyes. “Everyone knows that.”

“Wha—,” Jake’s mouth fell open, then closed. He tugged on his shirt collar, leaning forward over the table. “No. I mean, yes, but we’re holding each other accountable. That means we’re friends, and you can’t do anything about it. From here on out, I’m going to be around a whole lot more.” He looked so proud as he said that, until we heard someone else speak up from beside the table.

“Is that right?” A soft and feminine voice spoke up behind my shoulder.

I closed my eyes. This was the worst timing ever.

Jake tensed and cursed under his breath.

Wanker continued to shake his head.

And Erica sat rigid for one second, and then she launched herself in the air, going over me. “You!” she screeched. “You

kicked me off the story!”

Susan stepped backward, and the person who spoke was standing right next to her. It was Tara. Her face was pale, and a flash of pain flared in her eyes.

CHAPTER 17

Tara and Susan weren't alone. A whole group of friends stood behind them.

Susan was dressed to the nines.

I took in the sleek black dress that looked like it had been created just for her body. A pendant was woven into the material resting between her breasts, and her clutch matched the pendant's turquoise color perfectly. She was the image of sophistication and wealth. Her blonde hair was swept to the side where a mass of curls rested on her shoulder.

Behind her, Tara must've changed from the party at Jake's till now. She didn't look as sleek and elegant as Susan, but she was close. She wore a flowing blue shirt that was light enough so that a black camisole could be seen underneath, and her black leather skirt had a slit up to the top of her left thigh. She stood there, looking like she was posing for a modeling shoot, with her leg pushed out so that most of it was visible to us.

I didn't recognize the others.

Erica was up from the booth, pointing at Susan. "You're a horrible coworker."

Susan rolled her eyes, looking with disdain at her. "Your job was to ask him background questions. That was it, and before you get all bent out of shape, I was promoted. The senior writer wasn't objective, so then it became my project. *My. Project.* You were brought on because his team requested

you.” She pressed her lips together. “And we both know you went behind my back for that to get done.”

Wait...

Erica drew to her fullest height. “I had nothing to do with that. I never emailed them or called or whatever you’re accusing me of. I swear. They requested me because they must’ve done their homework and figured out how much of a vapid bitch you were.”

Erica was requested?

“Hey.” Jake stood. “Whoa.”

Susan shot him daggers instead. “We don’t need your interference, Jake. Thank you. You’ve done enough damage for the day.”

She glanced over her shoulder to Tara, who had moved back a step. Tara’s head lowered.

Susan added, “You didn’t have to invite *her* over, you know.” With the scathing tone, it was obvious whom she meant by ‘her.’ Me. But my head was whirling to pay attention.

Kian’s team requested my roommate for the story?

No. That couldn’t be. That doesn’t make sense.

Jake glanced at me. “I didn’t, but that doesn’t mean she’s not welcome. Jo can come over whenever she wants to see me.” He said to Tara, “We’re not together anymore. I don’t owe you anything.”

“Except for some decency,” Susan shot at him. “And I wasn’t talking about Jo. You invited Tara to your party, and then you left with *her* after she ditched on helping Erica with

the interview, with whatever she did to help. I have no clue what that was or even why she was there.”

“Don’t attack my roommate and she was there because I needed help.” If looks could kill, Susan would be bleeding all over the floor. Erica added, “She had a panic attack.”

“She went to Jake’s party. She ditched you.”

No.

I was becoming aware of the looks coming my way. This was going to get twisted, but I was reeling. Kian had actually requested Erica. But what did that mean? I had talked to him. He said he didn’t know her.

“When?” My voice stood out from the others.

They were hot and angry but not me. I was strangely... calm.

“I did the math. The time frame from when you disappeared from the interview and showed up at Jake’s wasn’t even an hour overlap. You were dressed like that at the hotel, so I’m assuming you went straight to Jake’s.” Susan sneered, raking me up and down.

“No, no.” I needed to deal with that, too, but I couldn’t focus. I had to know. “When did they request Erica to be on the story?”

Say within the last week. Please say within the last week.

Susan snorted, rolling her eyes. “Who cares? She was requested. Yes.” She sent that last word to my roommate. “You were. I never promised you’d be on camera. You were assigned to ask him background questions, and you did.”

“From behind the camera,” Erica argued.

Susan pretended a yawn and shrugged. “My promise was fulfilled. I never said you’d be on camera. You just assumed.”

“And you didn’t correct me.”

“I didn’t have to. No one thought you’d be on camera. Why would you have been? I mean, look at you.”

I tensed. The argument was getting dirty. I felt the insult coming for Erica. Everyone did, too. They all seemed to freeze as Susan gestured up and down Erica’s form.

“You have to look good on camera. The camera has to love you. I’m not saying this to be mean, but the camera doesn’t love you.”

“Hey.” Jake stepped forward, frowning. “That was uncalled for, Susan.” He looked at Tara. “You’re going to let her outright insult someone? I didn’t think you were like that.”

Tara lifted a dainty shoulder before folding her arms over her chest. “Like you said, we’re not together. I don’t owe you anything, and I *really* don’t owe your new girlfriend’s roommate anything either.”

Girlfriend? We’re accountability partners.

Erica seemed paralyzed. She couldn’t look away from Susan, who was still glaring down at her. I waited, expecting some cutting remark from my roommate, but it didn’t come. I moved closer to peer at her. She was fighting back tears. A wave of fury rolled through me, and I lifted my head, ready to blast into Susan. Fuck whatever else was going on. She couldn’t talk to someone like that.

Wanker took off his glasses, drawing everyone's attention. He was the tallest, and he straightened to his fullest height of six-three. He cleared his throat as he put his glasses back on and slid them up to the top of his nose with his middle finger. He held it there before extending his middle finger toward Susan.

"This," he said, moving it closer to her face, "is how I feel about you right now."

Her mouth opened. No sound came out. She closed it back up, blinking a few times.

A small grin grew on Erica's face.

I grinned, too.

Wanker added, still holding that middle finger to her face, "You can have a work disagreement. That is fine, but you hit below the belt with your last insult. And, my dear," He took his glasses off again and looked her up and down before putting them back on, "don't fool yourself. You might look pleasant on camera, but you're not in the same league as others here."

Erica nudged me with her elbow. "He means you and Tara."

I didn't care who he meant.

"Looks don't matter," I said to Susan, "Maybe you'll go to the top, but you'll do it by being a horrible, ruthless person. Erica's a better person than you any day of the week."

"Don't insult my friend." Tara sidled up to Susan's side.

"She shouldn't have insulted *mine*," I sent back.

"Hey, uh...whoa." Jake moved between us again. His arms lifted like he was going to break up a fight.

Erica rolled her eyes and knocked down one of his arms. “Chill, lover boy. They’re not going to come to blows. We’re not that low.”

Jake met my gaze. We were both remembering another time when I launched myself at an old lady.

I cleared my throat. “I think we should all go our separate ways—”

Erica interrupted, “Is *he* still here?”

I went still again. Erica wasn’t talking about Jake or Wanker.

Susan shook her head. “He left through the back.”

“Oh.” Erica glanced down to the floor.

“Well.” Susan seared all of us one last time with her gaze. “I think this is a good time for us to go our respective ways. You’re right. Insults are below us, all of us. Erica, we can discuss your complaint further at work tomorrow afternoon. We’re all celebrating tonight, and we all have reason to. Your name will still be attached to the story, even though you weren’t on camera.”

Erica’s throat was moving up and down, and she bit down on her lip. She was holding a comment back. Susan waited, but Erica kept it in, and then they moved past us, one by one. As Tara passed Jake, she looked right at him, but he turned away. He didn’t meet her eyes. She switched her gaze to mine next, and I felt a warning passing from her to me. I didn’t know what kind of warning it was, and I didn’t care. I didn’t owe Tara anything.

When they were gone, no one said a word.

Thirty seconds passed until Erica slouched back down in the booth, and Jake looked at me. I avoided his gaze, focusing on my roommate for that moment.

Wanker broke the silence. He cursed under his breath. “Well, you heard the blasted woman. Let’s all get drunk. Champagne or straight to the wine bottles?”

Erica looked up. A small smile teased the corner of her mouth.

Jake laughed, leaning over to clap Wanker on the shoulder. “You put Susan in her place.”

“I did, didn’t I?” Wanker’s shoulders stretched out. He nodded to himself. “I’d like a merlot myself.”

“Not many cross her and get away unscathed.” Jake lifted his arm for a waitress. “Your next three drinks are on me. I’ve wanted to put Susan in her place for years now.”

“She does think she’s all holier-than-thou, doesn’t she?” Erica murmured. “I hate her. I hate her so much, and I hate that she’s right. She never promised that I’d be on camera. I just assumed. I can’t even fight that.”

“That’s a big deal, right? For you to be on camera for this interview?” Jake asked.

Erica nodded. “A huge deal. This guy is national news, and he’s only agreed to three interviews. We were one of them. She’s going to shop that interview around, and this could make her career.” She seemed to shrink as she added, “It could’ve made my career, too, but not now. My name will be on the credits, but that’s it.”

“I’m sorry. That seriously sucks, Erica.” Wanker and I nodded, agreeing with Jake.

I sighed. “I’m ready to get drunk now.”

Erica’s head bobbed up and down. “Bring on the shots. My feistiness is gone. I want to wallow. Wallow with me, friends.”

I slid out from the booth. “Save me some of those shots. I have to go to the restroom first.”

“You pee, you lose.” Erica grinned at me. “Tell your bladder to man up. It’s first come, first served with this company tonight.”

I laughed. For whatever reason, Erica wasn’t mad at me. I wasn’t sure what I would say, but I wasn’t going to question it. “I’ll be right back.”

Susan and Tara’s herd went to the right side of the club, so I headed for the left side. I was passing through a hallway to the back restrooms that most people didn’t know about because they were obstructed by the back stairs when I was grabbed from behind and pulled into a dark closet.

I tried to scream, but a hand clamped over my mouth.

A voice whispered against my ear, “It’s me.”

It was Kian.

I stopped breathing for a second as so many sensations washed over me—shock, fear, and excitement. I pushed him back and tried to look up at him, but I couldn’t. It was too dark. His silhouette was the only thing I could make out.

“They said you left.”

“Who did?”

“Susan and her vipers.”

His teeth showed as he grinned. “Vipers? I take it you’re not a fan of Susan...what’s her last name?”

“Hollister, and no, I’m not. She screwed over my friend. Speaking of Erica,”—I poked his chest—“Susan said you requested to work with her. Was that after I talked to you about Erica?”

He caught my hand and held on to it. He murmured, stepping close, “I didn’t know anything about her until you brought up her name, but I did ask Laura about her. She might’ve requested Erica for a reason.”

“Who’s Laura?” That wasn’t jealousy in my voice.

His fingers slid against mine, entwining our hands even more. “She’s my head publicist, and she runs everything from the PR aspect.” He tapped my chin, lifting my head. “I got your note.”

My breath caught and held in my throat. “You did?”

“I did.” There’d been a lighter note in his tone, but his voice dropped low. “Did you mean it? You don’t want to see me anymore?”

“Yes.”

He hadn’t asked the right question. He hadn’t asked if I wanted to mean it. I didn’t.

Right there, being in a dark closet with him, holding his hand, the desire to be with him was increasing in me. I didn’t want to mean it, not at all, but I bit back those words. Normal

life meant no Kian. I wanted to be normal more than I wanted to be with him.

I murmured, "I'm sorry."

The finger that tapped my chin rested there before it moved to smooth over my cheek in a soft caress.

A shiver racked through my body, filling every pore and cell with pleasure. I wanted to move into that touch, move into him, but I held back. I had to.

I whispered, "Kian."

"I shouldn't be in here with you then."

I heard the regret from him. I heard the yearning, too. My own lurched to my chest and began to mount.

"Why did you grab me?" I winced at the sound of that. "You know what I mean."

He chuckled, releasing my hand, only to cup the side of my face. I felt him leaning closer and closer until his breath coated my cheeks, my eyes, my lips. His forehead softly touched mine, and he rested there.

He murmured, "I shouldn't be touching you like this. It's dark and private in here, and I can't help myself." His thumb touched my lip.

My heart wanted to burst out of me. That touch...I was struggling against licking his thumb. It was right there. I began to pant.

He kept going, "Miss Hollister insisted on bringing me here to their private box for a drink. I didn't want to, but Laura made me. Said it'd help with getting a positive angle on the

story. I stayed for as long as I could handle it, but I've been wanting to find you since I saw your note. Are you absolutely sure, Jo?"

With his forehead resting on mine, he guided me backward until I touched the wall. I felt the space between our chests, but as soon as I felt the wall and I couldn't move back anymore, he began to close the distance. The rub of his jeans grazed against my thighs. I could feel him through my pants. It was just a slight touch. He wasn't pressing against me, but I wanted him to. I wanted to feel all of him.

"Kian," I whispered. I was beginning not to think.

His thumb rubbed back and forth over my cheek. "When we were leaving, one of their friends arrived. They said you were here with that guy you'd said wasn't your boyfriend."

"Jake? What?"

"I snuck back in. I had to try."

"But..." My mind was muddled. What was he talking about?

I couldn't help myself. I touched a hand to his chest. He sucked in his breath, and I felt his heart lurch to my touch.

"If you want me gone, I'll go."

As he spoke, I felt his heart racing like mine.

He moved his mouth, so he was whispering right into my ear, his lips grazing my ear, "Change your mind. Please change your mind, Jo. I'm showing all my cards here. I have no shame. We're connected, no matter how much distance or fake names are between us. That day in your bedroom put our lives

together, and we have no say about it. I've always regretted that you saw what I did, but if I were put in the same situation again, if I saw him doing what he was doing to you, I'd do it all over again."

I closed my eyes. He was saying the words I'd wondered about.

He kept whispering, "We don't know each other, not really, but I just know how I feel right now."

The last of my strength gave way. I leaned into him, sinking against his body, and Kian adjusted. He was now holding me in place. He was holding all of me.

His hand left my lips and curved around the back of my neck. "I understand why you're scared. I'm scared for you, but I would never do anything to hurt you."

My hand curled into a fist, resting on his chest.

"You don't understand. I've only ever wanted to protect you. Since Edmund, every time I saw you in the courtroom, all I've known is that I have to protect you."

Oh God.

He was saying everything I wanted to hear. Everything.

A small voice whispered in the back of my mind, *But...*

With Kian came the threat of being exposed. Even though every fiber of me wanted to agree to whatever he wanted, to go with him, to get to know him, somewhere in me was an inkling of strength that pulled me away. I had to cling to that last little bit of reservation and make it stronger. Doing that, I felt it spread inside me, and I looked up.

I saw into him and said, “I can’t, Kian. I...just...can’t.”

This was the second time I was saying good-bye.

My jaw hardened. I whispered, cupping his face as he was holding mine, “I want to, you know I do, but I can’t. Please, please don’t push this.”

I knew then, if he found me again, I wouldn’t have the strength to turn him away again. I would succumb.

I left the closet, but I had to admit that I wanted him to try again.

CHAPTER 18

Kian

“You’re a dick,” Felicia greeted me as I headed inside our suite.

Her bags were packed and by the door, and she was glaring at me with hate in her eyes.

I walked by her and drawled as I flicked my coat off in my bedroom, “And you’re supposed to be on a plane right now.”

“Oh, I will be. You made sure of that, didn’t you?” She sneered at me. “You had Daddy call and make an appointment for me, you ass.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I postponed my flight till later. I wanted to make sure I was here to deliver my message in person. You were supposed to be back an hour ago.” She moved closer, her eyes taking on a dangerous glint. When she was close, too close for my liking, she whispered as her eyes narrowed to slits, “I know you had Ethan sent home. I know you’re having me sent home. And you know that I’ll be back. I will get you back, brother mine.”

A threat from her would’ve scared me when I was a boy, but I wasn’t a boy any longer. I reached up to grab her wrist.

She gasped, but I only pushed her away.

“Go. Home. Whether you believe me or not, you need help. You’re a drunk, and I’m sick of being a part of it. I don’t give a damn if you’re sleeping with Ethan, but I do give a damn if you’re sleeping with my lawyer. So, yes, sister mine, he’s been let off my case. Go home. Fuck him sideways, for all I care, because I don’t care who you have in your bed just as long as that person is not in a position to screw me, too.”

“You’re sick, Kian.”

“No.” I shook my head, stepping away from her.

I saw the pain in her now. It clung to the heart inside of her, and I knew some of that was from me, from what I’d put the family through, but I knew some of it was just her, things I had no idea about.

“Go home, Felicia. Get better. Be happy with Ethan if he’s the one for you.”

Misery cut through her. It flashed over her eyes before she looked away. As she did, the door opened and shut. Laura headed inside, her eyebrows bunched together. Seeing the sight of Felicia and the wine bottle dangling from her fingers, Laura stopped and cast me a quizzical look.

I stepped farther away from my sister. “What is it?”

Laura cut her eyes to Felicia again.

My sister harrumphed, but it lacked the usual fire she had. “Oh, please. Anything you have to ask him, you can do it in front of me. Unlike your publicist ass, I know all the dirt on my brother, and trust me, he ain’t the saint that everyone thinks he is.”

“I went to prison for killing a man.”

She rolled her eyes, taking a long drag from the wine bottle and wiped the back of her hand over her mouth. “And even with all the gory details, you’re still loved. If only they knew the shit I knew about you”—she waved her hand at me, the wine bottle tipping back and forth from the loose motion—“they’d view you in a whole different light, Kian.”

“You have no reason to hate me, Felicia.”

“Please. Your words might be pretty, but I saw the crime-scene pictures.” She raised her chin, daring me.

For what, I wasn’t sure.

Laura sighed. “Not to interrupt your sister’s adoring fest here, but I came to ask if there’s anything I should know about since you went back into the club and sent our car home. You were in there alone.”

Felicia burst out laughing, pretending to hit her leg in an exaggerated motion. “You’re just now figuring out that he takes off on his own? Kian’s been disappearing at all hours of the night lately.”

“Kian,”—Laura ignored my sister, watching me with raised eyebrows—“do I need to worry about anything?”

“Shut up, Felicia,” I snapped. Then, I gentled my tone to Laura. “I like to be alone. Yes, I shouldn’t. Yes, I’m aware of the dangers. And, yes, you should maybe worry, but I’m very good at getting around, undetected.”

“Catlike reflexes.” Felicia pointed at me. “It was annoying in high school, and it’s a fucking nightmare now.”

“Ignore Felicia. She’s pissed that my catlike abilities have extended to my hearing as well. I’ve sent her recent boyfriend home”—I gave my sister a meaningful look—“where I know she can resume her relationship with him *there*, not here.”

“Fuck this.” Finishing the rest of her wine, she flung the bottle across the living room and grabbed her bags. She threw over her shoulder, opening the suite door, “I have a flight to catch. I know what’s waiting for me at home, but I swear, Kian, I’m coming back. I’ll get you back for this.”

The door shut behind her, but it wasn’t enough for her. She opened it back up and heaved it shut once again, so it slammed against the doorframe.

“Well,” Laura noted under her breath. “Would you hate me if I went and locked it just to make sure she didn’t do that again?” She pressed a hand to her ear. “I have sensitive hearing.”

“Not at all.”

As she did, I picked up the bottle from the floor and placed it on the counter.

Laura moved into the living area and perched on a chair’s arm. She was wearing a large wraparound sweater that engulfed most of her petite body. She had dressed for the night already, wearing silk pajama bottoms underneath the sweater.

Laura wasn’t my first publicist. In the beginning, my family had hired a different one who helped spin everything so that everyone focused on my face and the fact that I’d saved Jordan. However, that publicist hadn’t been up for another

media storm, saying it had put undue stress on her marriage. So, my father had hired Laura instead.

She didn't look too aggravated at my sister's tantrum, but I still felt the need to apologize. "About my sister—"

She waved that off. "Don't worry. To be honest, I only allowed her to come because I thought you'd need the family support. If I'd known she was like that behind closed doors, I would've banned her from the beginning. She's always been quiet and polite to me."

"Really?"

"If you hadn't made the call to your father, I would've. Having said that, though, I am glad you're the enemy in her mind and not me." She shuddered.

"And speaking of phone calls," I segued into what Jo had asked me earlier. "That reporter, Erica, you requested to be on the story? She wasn't allowed on camera tonight."

Laura frowned, tightening her sweater around her form. "Is that a problem? She's tenacious. She's a good one to have on the team. You want to request a new interview—just with her?"

Did I? No. But should I?

Helping Jo's roommate would be ideal to helping Jo out, but I remembered her last words. She'd already said good-bye to me once. The second time was tonight.

I let out a sigh. "No, we should just leave it alone."

"Okay." She yawned and covered it with a hand. "You know they're going to shop that around and get a big network

to show it?”

“I know. That’s fine, as long as the university gets credit.”

“You’re doing a nice thing. You didn’t have to interview with the school’s newspaper, especially after they’d already rejected your request to come here as a student.”

“I know.” I’d wanted to come here to be near Jo. That was the only reason. “It was an easy way to get my side out there. It narrows any spin a big network might’ve done.”

“That’s true.” Another yawn escaped her. “Okay. I’m starting to crash after all the craziness today. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“I won’t be going back with everyone.”

She had started for the hallway but swung around. “What?”

“I’m going to stay behind.”

She lifted an eyebrow.

“Alone.”

“Kian,” she started, “please tell me I don’t have to worry about another story hitting the media? That you’re not doing something to cause unnecessary attention on you? Tell me that at least, so I can take a Valium for the plane ride home. If not, I’m going to be on edge the entire way home, telling myself I never should’ve left you.”

“I’ll be fine. I promise.”

“Your sister said you’ve been disappearing at night. Is there something else here that I need to worry about?” She paused a beat. Her eyes darkened, and I knew who she was going to

bring up next. “If there’s a certain...person...we need to be aware of...”

She meant Jordan.

“No.”

“They had a lot of questions about her today.”

And I had handled every one with perfection. “Again, no.”

“One last time.” She leveled me with an ominous warning. “Are. You. Sure?”

“I’m sure, Laura.”

“Okay.” Both her hands lifted in the air, surrendering. She took a step backward. “This is me, backing off, but please, if anything happens, you call me immediately.”

“I will, but nothing will happen.”

“And I’m also assuming that Parson is okay with this?”

He hadn’t been. “Of course.” But he had no say in it.

She was all the way to the door now and she reached behind her, turning the knob. “All right. I guess I won’t see you in the morning then.”

“Good night, Laura, my publicist.”

She flashed me a grin. “Good night, Kian, my pain-in-the-ass client that I hope won’t be a pain in the ass in the future.” Then, she stepped into the hallway and closed the door behind her.

CHAPTER 19

Jo

The story was written up and received national attention.

Erica's name was in the byline, so she took everyone to the Wine Cellar to celebrate the newspaper part of the story. The taped part of it was still being shopped around.

One night over drinks, Jake asked why it was taking so long. It'd been two weeks since Kian's interview with them, and Erica explained that there was not much of a rush. He hadn't scheduled any new interviews for them to be scooped, and they wanted to wait till more time was put between his last interview and the one with them.

She'd said, "If we hear that he's interviewed with someone else, trust me, that tape will be bought, paid for, and released within a day. They'll want to hear what he said in our interview."

I'd been puzzled by that last statement, but I hadn't asked any questions. When Jake let it go, I felt relieved. I didn't want to know what else Kian had said. And since he'd left town, I went back to avoiding the news and even my email.

His face wasn't everywhere as much as it had been. There was no news about a retrial, so the coverage was beginning to

die down, but I knew when they sold their interview, it would cause another buzz. Erica promised there was stuff in that interview that he hadn't shared anywhere...and again, I wasn't asking. I didn't want to know. Well, I did, but I was keeping a clear head on my shoulders. Not knowing was better.

No Kian meant no risk of losing my normalcy.

I liked being normal. And normal meant I couldn't be late for work. I glanced at my phone and saw I was already five minutes late. I screamed.

"What's the drama?" Erica appeared in my doorway.

Flying to the closet, I grabbed the first uniform shirt I saw and stuck my arms through the sleeves, yanking it over my head. My jeans were hastily pulled on. "I'm late for work."

"Oh." I could hear her grinning. "Not me. I'm on vacation this week." She sighed. "It's been wonderful."

I gave her a two-second warning. "I'm going to be sprinting out of here, so if you're in the doorway, I suggest you move aside."

Erica laughed but stepped back as I barreled past her.

Keys. Purse. What else?

A phone started ringing in the apartment, but I had my phone. It wasn't mine, and I didn't have time to figure it out. I dashed out the door. "Have a good night getting drunk!"

"Will do!" Erica hollered after me. "Wait—"

I was already at the stairwell and hurrying down. Skipping the bus, I paid the extra money and hailed a cab.

When I got to work, I braked in the entryway.

Henry had taken my place. He saw me coming and had a smug smile for me. “You snooze, you lose.”

No customers were waiting.

“Fuck off. Where’s Paul?”

“It doesn’t matter. He appointed me here himself, and he said that you’re on silverware duty when you get in, so have fun being bored for the rest of the night.” He sang the last part, “With no tips.”

I growled. “You sound like a mosquito. You’re a pest like them, but it’s too bad I can’t step on you.”

He rolled his eyes. “Whatever. You might be my nemesis this year, but who knows what will happen in a year? You still have two year of studies, whereas I have three more years to climb the ladder here. If you come back next year, I’ll be your boss.”

“Right. You’ll be Head Busboy. *So* threatening.”

He sniffed and looked down his nose at me. “Threaten away, Jo, but you have to admit, I have a point. If you come back as a hostess again, after graduating in a couple years, I won’t be the pathetic one.”

The pip-squeak had a point, but I took a page from Wanker’s book and flipped him the bird anyway. If only I had a pair of glasses to push up my nose, it would be the cherry on top. As it was, I just extended my arm as I walked to the bar section.

The bartender was polishing a wine glass when I tossed my bag into a cupboard and grabbed the case of silverware. Bruce gave me a weird look when I hopped up onto a barstool.

Reaching for one of his washcloths, I asked, “What? There are no customers in here. I’ll go in the back when they show up.”

“That’s not it.” He gestured toward Paul’s office. “He’s been looking for you the whole morning.”

“I’m only thirty minutes late.”

“Forty minutes late.”

I shot him a look. “Thanks for the correction.”

He winked, smirking at me, before he put the glass away and leaned both arms on the counter. Bruce was already fit since his other job was modeling for fitness magazines, but that pose made his arm muscles pop out even more, and he took on an imposing air. “I’m serious, Jo. He didn’t look pissed. He looked worried.”

“Really? I know he’s pissed about that crazy lady threatening to sue because of me, but I thought he’d gotten over that.”

“*Jo!*” Paul had spotted me. Standing in the hallway opening that led to his office, he jaw was clenched. He pointed behind himself. “My office. Now.”

Bruce gave me a pitying look, sliding the silverware to his side of the bar. “I’ll put these away for you.”

“Thanks.”

Sliding off the barstool, I couldn’t think about why Paul was so angry. He’d been angry about that one lady for a week, but that had faltered off at the beginning of this week.

Is it really because I was forty minutes late?

Being late wasn't a norm for me. This was my first time being late.

When I got to his office, I refused to sit. I stood against the wall and crossed my arms over my chest.

He pointed to the chair across from his desk. "Sit."

"I'll stand." *This treatment because I was late one time?* My teeth gritted against each other. *Seriously?*

"Sit." He gentled his tone. "I'm not upset with you. I was worried."

"What?"

He pointed to the chair again. "Please sit, Jo."

"Fine." Once I did, I asked, "What's going on? Why were you worried?"

Instead of answering, he leaned back in his chair and watched his phone. So did I. Nothing happened.

"Uh, Paul—"

Then, it rang, and he grabbed it. Gripping it against his ear, he said, "Yeah. Yeah, she's right here." He held it out for me. "Some guy named Snark has been calling for the last twenty minutes."

"Oh...shit." I had no time to react. My fingers went numb as I took the phone. "Snark?"

"Where are you?"

"Uh..."

He'd called here.

He cut me off, "Never mind. Stay put. I'm coming to you."

“Why? I mean, what happened?”

“They’re going after you. Have you not been watching the news?”

“No, I avoid the news. You know why.”

“Well, if you have a television nearby, turn it on. You don’t look like your old self, and thank goodness. I’ll be there in ten minutes. Wait by the back for me.”

Hanging up, I saw the television mounted in the corner of Paul’s office. “Can you turn that on for me?”

“You okay?”

I nodded.

I’d have to leave work, but I wanted to see what was going on first. Big boulders of lead lined the bottom of my stomach. They weren’t moving, just getting heavier and heavier. I knew what I was going to see, but when Paul turned on the television, I hadn’t been prepared.

I was looking back at myself, as Jordan Emory, not Jo Keen. The girl on the screen had long black hair. It was straight, no curl like what I wore now, and my cheekbones were sunk in. My face now was more filled out, but the old me still had a heart-shaped face with high cheekbones, and her eyes—I sucked in my breath. Thank God I had kept my brown contacts the entire time at the university. If anything would give me away, it would’ve been my old eyes.

When I saw my old reflection, my hand flattened against my stomach. I couldn’t make this go away. It had happened. Snark predicted it. They were going after me.

Paul murmured, “Gorgeous.”

“What?” I jumped, forgetting that he was there. My hand pressed even tighter. This wasn’t happening.

He lifted his remote to the television. “I always felt bad for her during the trial back then, but those eyes, though.”

“*Eyes for the soul,*” Edmund had whispered so many times to me.

I heard him once more. He was there again. His rank hot breath coated my face. I could feel him.

“Jo?”

“What?” My heart was trying to jump out of my chest.

Paul was frowning at me. “You’re damn near shaking like a leaf. What’s with you?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “And who was that guy? He said it was urgent that he got ahold of you. You in trouble or something?”

Paul didn’t know.

He didn’t recognize me either.

Until that moment, I didn’t know that there were different layers of relief. I was feeling seven different shades of them at that moment. “Um.” I grabbed my arm, and he was right. It was trembling against my body. “I don’t feel good.”

“You’re never sick, and you’ve been sick twice in the same month.” He looked at me from head to toe, lingering on my middle section. The corner of his mouth twitched up, then back down. He was fighting from grinning. “Are you going to need maternity leave in the future?”

“No!” My hand was pressing against my stomach. I ripped it away now and wiped at some sweat on my forehead. “I don’t know. I’m not pregnant, I know that, but I don’t feel good. Maybe I have a stomach bug that won’t go away.”

“You sure you’re not pregnant? I need to know if you are. You have to apply ahead of time for maternity leave.”

“I’m not pregnant.”

“Okay, okay. Jeez.” He wheeled his chair backward and held his hands in the air. “I’m just saying, Jake Monroe’s been coming to visit you on your breaks a whole lot lately. It’s okay if you are. I won’t look at you any differently.”

“Stop talking.” I pressed a hand to my forehead. I was still sweating, and my boss wasn’t making it better. “I’m leaving work. I’m sick. I’m not pregnant, though. Just sick. That’s all.”

He nodded. “Got it.”

And I was out the door when he called after me, “But when you decide you are pregnant, let me know as soon as possible. I need a heads-up for maternity leave—that is, if you’re still going to work during school.”

“Shut up!” I yelled over my shoulder.

My bag.

I needed it before going to the back door. Snark was probably there already. Bruce had my bag in the air, waiting for me, as I swept into the bar. I ducked, pulling one of the straps over my body, and he only smirked at me.

I rolled my eyes. “Not you, too.”

He kept quiet. Smart of him.

Word had traveled fast. A couple of the cooks asked about my due date, and I flipped them all the middle finger, too. Henry was coming from the back section after seating some new customers in the private room.

He bypassed me, right before I reached the back door, and he gave me the thumbs-up. “I approve, too, my nemesis. And you’re right. I won’t get promoted when you go on maternity leave.”

Violence is bad. I tried telling myself that, and then—screw it.

His back was to me, but I stuck my foot out and hit it against his ankle.

Henry stumbled and almost went down. He caught himself, grabbing ahold of the wall, but he shot me a glare. “That was mature.”

I was out the door, and it slammed shut behind me. I was grinning when Snark pulled up and waved from inside.

“Get in. We have to talk.”

Then, I remembered. My old face was plastered all over the news now.

Oh, boy.

CHAPTER 20

Snark didn't say much once I got inside.

When he didn't take me to my apartment or to the diner, I asked, "Where are we going?"

"To see your boyfriend."

I groaned. "Jake is not my boyfriend, and we're not pregn—"

"Kian Maston." He leveled me with a frown. "And I hope you're not pregnant because you already have a nightmare on your hands. A kid would make it ten times worse."

"Good." *Not good*, I meant. "And I'm not. I'm not pregnant, that is."

"I wasn't saying you were."

"I know. The guys back there—" I shut up. Snark didn't give a damn about my work issues. "Did you say we're going to see Kian?"

"Yep, and don't even think about lying to me. I know you've seen him a few times, and you've been in contact over the phone."

"It wasn't like that, and he's gone. It doesn't matter anyway."

"It does matter, and he's not gone. Your boy never checked out of the hotel when his PR and legal team checked out. And, yes, Jo, I know all about the interview he did with your

roommate and the school paper.” He opened the console and pulled out a folded paper, tossing it onto my lap. “Did you actually read what your friend wrote?”

“Um...”

Erica thought I had.

“My summer hobby has been avoiding all news outlets. Why?”

“Because there’s a huge section all dedicated to you, and I’m assuming his legal team was successful with turning the investigation in your direction, not his.”

“What? How can that even be? He said he killed Edmund. That’s irrefutable.”

“Not if he was set up.” As he pulled into a parking lot, he gave me a meaningful look.

“By me? Kian and I didn’t even really know each other before Edmund. I knew of him. He was popular, but I wasn’t.” I tried to glimpse the front of the building. I assumed it was a hotel because that’s where Kian was staying, but there was no sign on the front. There was nothing that really identified what hotel it was, and I was distracted by what Snark was saying to study it any more. He drove quickly to the back of the hotel.

“Were you invited to their parties?”

“My boyfriend was. I went once because of him.”

“Did the other girls hang out with you?”

“No, they didn’t like me. They made fun of me, called me Charity Case at that party. It’s why I only went once with my boyfriend.”

“Kids can be cruel. I’m sure it’s the same nowadays.” After parking, he gestured to the door. I followed his cue and got out as he did the same. “Actually, I bet they’re worse nowadays. I’ve got a kid in school, but she’s in the sixth grade. I don’t know what I’ll do when she gets older.”

“You’re FBI. I doubt she’s going to be looked at like a charity case,” I murmured as I craned my head back to take in the entire hotel. The entire hotel was made up of dark mirrored glass.

“True.” Snark reached for the door and held it open for me.

When we got to the elevators, I asked, “Where are we?”

“Your new boyfriend’s ritzy place. The Maston.”

“Oh.” My eyebrows shot up.

I’d forgotten Kian’s family business wasn’t just in restaurants but also hotels. I thought the Seton was the ritziest in the city, but I’d forgotten all about The Maston. If a hotel could be a six-star, this one would’ve been. It was exclusive. Even some celebrities couldn’t get rooms here.

The elevator door slid open and revealed a glass box. A pool glistened up to us from beneath, reflecting the light from the sky above us. As we traveled to the top floor, I noticed each floor had a different theme. The lobby was extravagant with fountains and gold lining everywhere. That was the only glimpse I got. Then, we were going past the second floor, which was blue. The third was red. The fourth was silver. The fifth...

I got dizzy from trying to take everything in, and I closed my eyes. When we stopped, there were three doors in a small

hallway.

The far one opened.

Kian stood there. “Snark.”

Forgetting the impressive setting or how gorgeous Kian looked in a lightweight hoodie that molded to accentuate his broad shoulders and trim waist, I looked between the two as we went inside Kian’s penthouse suite. “You two know each other?”

Snark didn’t answer. He went into a living area, complete with two couches, a fireplace, a desk, an entire wall of books, and a wet bar at the other end.

Kian followed behind and took a small breath. His eyes narrowed, resting on Snark. “Only by reputation.”

Snark grunted, glaring right back. “His family asked enough higher-ups to figure out that I could have been one of the agents who had helped you disappear. But, no, we’ve never formally met.”

“Until today.” Kian hid a grin.

Snark’s lips pressed in a flat line and he acknowledged, with a clipped head nod. “Until today.”

“Okay.” A headache was pressing against my temples. “Kian, what are you still doing here?”

“I wanted to stick around.”

“Why?”

Snark grunted. “To be close by when his team threw you to the wolves.”

Kian's eyes narrowed to slits. His face wore an unreadable mask, but I caught the dark heat stirring in his eyes. A shiver wound down my spine, but I wasn't sure if it was the bad kind or not.

His voice was low and controlled. "They're searching for Jordan, not Jo. They have no idea who she is now."

"I got a phone call this morning from one of my supervisors."

"You did?" My chest was so damn tight. "What did your supervisor want?"

"For me to give you up, but I don't have to, and my supervisor knows that. I have no legal obligation to hand you over, and even if the police issue a warrant for your arrest—"

Kian cut in, "Which is highly unlikely. There's nothing to incriminate Jordan for the angle they're going toward."

Snark kept talking as if he hadn't been interrupted. "The FBI doesn't have to help out the local police department, but having said that, you didn't officially go into the Witness Protection Program."

I was left hanging. "So? What does that mean? I know I'm not officially in the program, but you helped hide me anyway. What does that mean?"

Kian stepped toward me, turning to face me squarely. His back was now to Snark. "That means"—his soft voice turned my shiver to the bad kind, the really bad kind—"that they can find you."

"Fuck that." Snark came around. "They *will* find you. This one found you. I take it, the guy you used isn't on your daddy's

payroll?”

Kian cast him a disdainful look. “No. I learned long ago to employ my own people and”—a glimmer of a smirk showed—“my people are better.”

“You haven’t given her up yet, or her new name would be plastered all over the news. Why not?”

“Because I don’t want that to happen.”

“So, this is okay? It’s your team who got the DA to go after her. It’s your team who spun everything around, and it was you who did that interview.”

That interview...Erica’s interview. I was still holding on to the paper. I looked down at it. What had Kian said in it? What had I avoided that I could’ve been prepared for by now?

Kian took the paper from me and threw it on the couch. He pointed at it, his jaw clenched tightly. “What I said signified nothing. They’re reaching for a crapshoot.”

“They have a witness. They’ve talked to someone who’s backing up the new investigation.”

“They have nothing. If they do, it’s someone from high school who has an agenda and wants to be famous. That’s it. The witness will be discredited. It’s only a matter of time before that happens, and, no, they won’t find Jo. I’ve made sure of that.”

“Wait, what do you mean?” A buzzing started between my ears. I shook my head, trying to clear it, but it only grew louder.

Snark ignored me, his voice rose. “*Your* team is behind this.”

“Not *my* team. I’ve instructed them to leave Jordan alone.”

“So, they did try to go after her?”

“They asked in the beginning, but I made it clear that I wouldn’t ruin Jordan’s life. This is my life. I killed Edmund, and she had nothing to do with it. If they’re going to try to blame her, they will fail.”

Snark started to argue, “An eyewitness—”

“Stop!” My hands clamped over my ears. That buzzing sound was too much. My headache was pulsating against my temples now. “Stop, you guys.”

Kian moved to me, taking one of my hands in his. He pulled me to him, wrapping his other arm around my back. He began rubbing at my temple, easing the headache away, and I should’ve pulled away. This was weird—or it should’ve been weird, but it wasn’t. That was the weird part of it. It felt so right to be in his arms, to have him pull me to his chest, to have him soothe out my pain. Like in the nightclub closet, I didn’t want to pull away. I wanted to burrow closer against him.

Kian is going to protect me. My insides were blaring this message to me. I wanted to believe it. I really did.

As if sensing my struggle, he held me tighter.

I relaxed into him, tuning out everything, as his hand continued to rub in a circle over my temple. Slowly, so slowly, the headache began to dissipate. My chest loosened, and I clung to his side as he talked to Snark.

His voice reverberated through him as my ear was pressed to his chest while he said, “I didn’t say anything in that interview to incriminate her. Trust me, no one knows she’s here. No one. Not my team, not my family. The only one who knows, besides those in this room, is my private investigator, and no one knows about him either.”

“Your father never got to him?”

For the first time since we’d arrived, Kian relaxed. He was amused. “My father is the last person who would help me.”

I frowned and pulled back. “What do you mean?”

He frowned back at me, rubbing my arm.

Snark distracted us. “If you’re saying the truth, why are you here?”

Kian glanced down at me. He looked torn.

I pulled all the way back, stepping away, so he couldn’t touch me. Folding my arms over my chest, I said, “Answer him, Kian.”

“Staying in this hotel wasn’t thought-out. I needed the best security, and my father’s hotel has it, but you’re right. I’ll check out and go somewhere else tonight.”

Snark pointed at me. “You need all the footage of her wiped from this place.”

“You came in the back way?”

“Like you instructed.”

So, they had talked, at least before we’d arrived today. I wanted to know what else had been spoken between them.

Kian raked a hand over his hair and moved to the phone. “The only footage would’ve been the back elevator and parking ramp. I’ll have my investigator sweep the footage. Any direct order from me will be suspicious. He’ll have to sneak in to do it.”

“Can he get it done?”

“He can.” Kian was grave as he dialed the front desk. “Yes, I’ll be checking out within the hour. I’ll need transportation arranged. No. I’ll instruct them from the vehicle. Thank you.” He studied me. “You need a hat.”

He started to leave the room.

Snark stopped him. “No.” He shrugged off his jacket and gave it to me. “Put that on, and pull the hood up. When we leave, you keep your head down.”

I nodded. *Fuck*. The more we talked, the more this was getting really real.

The boulders were back in my stomach. Snark started for the door, and I followed, but Kian caught my arm. Before opening the door, Snark looked back and paused.

Kian asked him, “Mind if we have a moment?”

Snark’s eyes went flat, but he said, “Fine. One minute, and then she’s leaving with me.”

As soon as the door shut behind him, I whirled to Kian. “What did you say in that interview?”

He hesitated. “You haven’t read it, I take it?”

“No, I avoid everything with the news. Since you got released, that’s all I’ve been doing. I stick my head in the sand,

and I walk.”

A flicker of a smile appeared, but it disappeared as he grabbed the paper and pushed it back into my hand. “Read it on the way to wherever you’re going with him. Call me, if you want.”

“Kian?”

“Read it. Then, call.” He paused and added, “If you want.”

“You’re acting weird. What could you have possibly said in there to get the DA to want to find me, to get Snark acting like a bee had stung him on the ass, and to have you acting almost...” *Self-conscious*. “Never mind.” I swallowed over a knot in my throat. “Read it. Got it. I’ll call.”

“Are you okay?”

“I have no idea how I am.” That was the truth, but I was mostly scared, terrified even. “I’ll be fine.”

“They don’t know where you are. And whatever they’re saying on the news isn’t true. No warrant has been issued for you. They just want to talk to you. That’s all. They want to ask questions, but if they can’t find you, they can’t ruin your life.” He visibly grimaced. “I’m sorry this is happening.”

Again.

He held that word back, but I knew what he meant. I heard it anyway. A media frenzy was coming my way. Whether I announced myself or not, they’d find me.

“They’re going to crucify me, aren’t they?”

He pulled me to him and held tight. “Not if I can help it.”

“Where will you go?” I asked after I pulled away and went for the door.

“I’m not sure yet. I would’ve gone to the Seton, but they know I did the interview there. Too much attention.”

I held the paper up. “Call after I read, right?”

“If you want.”

“Okay.” I waved with the paper in hand. “I suppose it’s see you later now? We’ve moved on to that.”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “I suppose so.” He paused, and then the other corner lifted, too. “It feels nice.”

A knot lodged in my throat again, and I couldn’t talk around it. As I pulled the door shut behind me, I knew I’d call, no matter what. I’d see him again.

That felt right, too.

Snark reached over me and yanked up the hood of his jacket. “Head down, and here we go.”

It was later, as Snark pulled up a block away from my apartment, that I thought to ask, “Why did you take me with you? Why did you go to see him?”

“Because I had to know.”

“Know what?”

He held my gaze steady. “If he was the one who had set you up.”

I swallowed tightly. “And?”

“I still have no idea.” He gave me a sad smile.

But that means...

“You think he’s pretending?”

“I don’t know what I think anymore. I really don’t.”

The right feeling I’d had with Kian was washed away with those few words. I was back to square one again. I still didn’t know if I could trust Kian or not. I crumpled the paper up in my hands. I needed to read it, I knew that, and I would, but damn, I just wanted to avoid it for now.

“I can’t hide from this, can I?”

“You can try. They might drop their angle, and your life might not be upended. That could happen, so chin up, kiddo.” He tapped under my jaw. “No one’s going to start looking at you like you’re Jordan Emory unless you wear a shirt that says you’re Jordan Emory.”

“Right. No T-shirts with my old name.”

“Damn straight.” He gestured to the sidewalk. “Now, get walking. I dropped you off, so you can walk in without my car being on any footage.”

“Thank you, Snark.”

“Ned.”

“What?”

“My real name is Ned.”

Ned. Ned Snark. I grinned at him. The name fit his old and cranky self.

“Thank you, Ned.”

“Yeah, yeah. Get going, you little hussy. And stay out of trouble. Oh...”

I paused, again.

He was serious. “I know you’re not asking, and I know my opinion might not hold any weight with you, but I’d pick the other guy.”

Jake. Not Kian.

I knew whom he meant, but I didn’t reply as I got out and shut the door. When I walked through my apartment door a few minutes later, Jake stood up from my couch.

I stopped, surprised.

He was in my apartment, waiting for me, with a grave expression on his face.

Then, he said two words, “Jordan Emory.”

Oh, fucking hell.

CHAPTER 21

Kian's voice came from the television screen before I could say anything. "People want me to blame Jordan, but I never will."

What the...

Jake flashed me a grin and sat on the couch. Erica was on the coffee table. Her leg was resting on her knee, and she was holding a notepad, hunched over it.

Jake said again, "Jordan Emory. That's her name?"

"Yeah." Erica was writing something on the paper.

Kian's voice continued from the television, "She had no part in it. People are fixated with what I look like, my last name, who my father is, and my promising future, my supposed promising future. But those people are wrong. They're forgetting one small detail. Jordan."

"What are you watching?" My breath was stuffed in my throat.

Erica grabbed the remote and hit the pause button. "I'm going over the interview before we send it off."

"Going over it?" I swallowed painfully, edging closer to them.

"We sold it. I'm just doing the final edits for another piece I'm going to write up myself. I'm going to a different paper with it."

“Can you do that? Won’t Susan get mad?”

Erica shrugged. Her eyebrows locked forward, and her chin hardened. “I don’t care. His team requested me, not her. This story is just as much mine as hers, and I can write my own spin on the whole thing.” She pressed *Play*.

Kian’s voice sounded again. “She wasn’t rich. She had no family. Her home was her prison. She dated Justin Cavers because of one thing. He took her away from that hell. My life is no more important than hers. Who my father is doesn’t matter when compared to the lack of hers.”

Jake snorted, folding his arms over his chest. “Easy thing for him to say. He’s got a privileged future ahead of him, no matter what he does.”

Erica held a hand up. “Shh.”

Kian continued, “My future would have meant nothing if I had done nothing. She wouldn’t have had a future. I believe that. She wouldn’t be here if I hadn’t stepped in. I know everyone is asking where she is, but it doesn’t matter. She’s safe. Her life is as important as mine, and honestly, I think her future is *more* important than mine. Who am I? I grew up rich. I grew up spoiled. I was given all the blessings in the world—looks, charisma, personality, intelligence. Everything.”

Jake rolled his eyes. “What a douche. Girls fall for this shit?”

Erica fixed him with a glare and paused the recording again. “Do you mind? I need to get all this information before Susan realizes it’s gone.”

I gritted my teeth. *Press Play. Press Play, Erica.* I needed to hear what he had to say.

Jake stood, raking a hand through his hair. His shirt lifted from the movement. Seven months ago, I would've salivated at the little peek, but now, I was transfixed by the screen.

Even when Kian was paused, his eyes were mesmerizing. He wasn't looking at whoever had asked him the questions. He was gazing right into the camera. There was a somberness in his eyes, and it was like he was speaking to me. I knew millions of other girls would feel the same way as I did. That look from him dug deep into my chest. It was like he was burrowing a place for himself right inside my chest.

"This is unreal. Females are dumb."

"Dude." Erica smacked his arm. "Shove it. This is journalistic gold. He's right. The only reason his story got national attention is because of his face and his family's wealth. That's it. There are a lot of murders that happen, but none get the accolade he's received. And so what?" She shrugged again. "Who cares if he's feeding us bullshit? For what it's worth, I do think he meant what he said. He cares for that girl."

"Then, where the hell is she?"

"That's the point of our story. He's opened up about her, and he's never done that before. That's the big question. Where is Jordan Emory? He's not really the story anymore. It's her. People want to know about this chick, and she's missing."

“Can you blame her?” Jake threw me a frown as he said to Erica, “I’d hide, too, if I had to deal with this guy.”

“Well.” Erica lifted the remote again. “And the media. I mean, seriously, the girl’s going to get her ass ripped apart whenever they find her.”

“You think she went into Witness Protection?” Jake was still studying me.

“Who knows? It’ll all come out eventually.” She pressed *Play*. “It always does.”

Kian continued, “I couldn’t have survived what she did. She persevered...”

Jake moved closer to me, tugging me further from the television. He lowered his voice, bending close to me. “Hey, you okay?”

Erica was right. It was going to come out. I had to stop hiding and face it. My jaw was trembling. I felt wetness on my cheeks, and I raised a hand, feeling the tears there.

“Hey, hey.” Jake caught my face and lifted it. He was peering down at me. “What’s wrong? Talk to me. Wait, aren’t you supposed to be at work? I was going to come and take your break with you.”

Erica glanced over, but she was distracted by the interview. A small frown marred her face before she resumed taking notes.

I sucked in a hasty breath. If Erica noticed something was wrong, she’d dig into me and demand to know what it was.

Turning my back so that she couldn't see my face, I looked toward the floor, keeping my voice low. "I'm fine. I...wait, if you were going to come to my work, what are you doing here?"

Jake straightened abruptly and jerked back a step. "I came here to look for you."

"No, he didn't," Erica called over. "He's not telling the truth. He was at the paper to see Susan. I made him feel like shit for that, so I asked him to bring the DVD here."

"Why?" I frowned. "They don't frisk you, do they?"

She snorted. "Susan would love it if they did. Nope. I incriminated your boyfriend for two reasons. One, he owes me, and two, when Susan asks me if I took the DVD home for any reason, I can honestly say that I didn't."

"Are you serious?" I couldn't tell sometimes with her.

She grunted, turning back to the television. "As a heart attack. I need as much extra advantage over Susan as possible. I'm in the battle of my career...before my career has really started."

There was a break in the conversation as Kian's voice carried over. "She didn't persuade me to do it. She didn't brainwash me to do it. She didn't blackmail me. She didn't even ask me. She did nothing."

A lump sat at the back of my throat. It was permanently lodged there.

"She did nothing."

Erica's voice added to his. *"The girl's going to get her ass ripped apart whenever they find her. It'll all come out eventually."*

An image of Kian holding me flashed in my mind.

"They're going to crucify me, aren't they?"

He had pulled me tighter to him. *"Not if I can help it."*

"I have to go," I choked out.

"What?" Jake asked.

Erica paused the tape again. She didn't say anything.

I turned back for the door.

"Wait. Jo, come on." Jake was right behind me.

"No."

His hand came down on my shoulder.

I shrugged it off, opening the door. "I have to go."

"But—"

Erica was standing up from the coffee table. She was frowning at me, but she wasn't as concerned as Jake. A ripple of fear started inside me. What if she was starting to piece it together?

I blocked Jake from following me. "Don't. I have to go."

"Where are you going?"

I started down the hallway. He was coming right behind me.

"Stop, Jake!" I yelled over my shoulder. "I mean it. I..."
Think, Jordan, think. "I have to go and do something. I'll be

back later.”

I didn't think.

I ran.

Grabbing a cab, I didn't think again when I told the driver where to go. When he pulled up outside of The Maston, I caught sight of a car heading to the back of the hotel. “Follow that car.”

“You sure?”

No. “Yes.”

And I was right. The car pulled up to a back door. A driver got out, went to the side, and opened the rear door. The hotel door then opened, and Kian walked out.

I dug out some money, tossed it to the driver, and said, “Thank you.” I was outside then and hurrying forward. “Kian.”

He handed his bag to the driver and bent down to climb into the back, but he paused. Seeing me, he straightened back up. He didn't say anything until I was right in front of him. His dark eyes raked over me, but there was no reaction to seeing me.

I hesitated then. Maybe I shouldn't have come?

His head lowered a fraction of an inch. His eyes became lidded. “What are you doing here?”

I flushed. His tone was quiet, but he didn't seem upset. He sounded worried. The lump in the back of my throat was swallowed, and I felt like I could breathe easier. “I'm going to be found, aren't I?”

He didn't answer. That mask was so unreadable.

I wanted him to give me something. "Kian?"

He sighed, his shoulders dropping. "Probably."

"I want to come with you," I blurted out. *What the hell?*

I should have regretted my words. I didn't. They were true. If I was going to be discovered, I needed to be with someone who had endured everything before, too.

"We can be a team, you know? If you're supporting me, maybe they won't destroy me, or as much as they would've if you weren't with me. It could work." I winced, hearing a twinge of fear in my voice. I couldn't mask it.

"Jo..."

I shook my head. "I'm scared, Kian. It's going to happen." I echoed Erica's words. "It'll all come out eventually."

He looked behind me and frowned. His hand came to my shoulder, and he urged me to the door. "Get inside."

When I started to, he didn't move to follow me.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

His frown deepened. "I'll be right back."

Scooting over to the far side of the car, I twisted around, so I could see out the back window. It was shaded black, like all the windows. No one could see in, but I could perfectly see Kian. He approached the cab, his hand in the air in a greeting. The cab driver rolled his window down, and Kian gestured to the dashboard.

Shit.

There was a dash camera, and it had been aimed right at us.

My hand curled into the back of the seat as I waited.

The cab driver nodded, and then Kian reached inside his pocket. He took a wad of money from his wallet and handed it over. The cab driver pulled off the dash camera and handed it to Kian. My hand let go of the seat, and I started to relax again, but, no, Kian didn't leave. He pointed inside the cab again. The cab driver shook his head. Kian didn't move. The driver continued to shake his head, and Kian leaned further down. The driver went stock-still, and he didn't look away from Kian. Slowly, the driver reached down and then handed something to Kian. Taking it, Kian put it into his pocket and came back.

When he got inside, he touched a button on the door. "You can go, Emile."

Our car slid forward.

Something about his exchange with the cab driver sent chills down my back. I waited, wondering if he would share what was in his pocket. He didn't. He rested back and closed his eyes. In that moment, Kian wasn't the guy I had met on the roof. There was no outward change to his appearance, but a sixth sense reared up in me. The promise of violence clung to him. Butterflies kicked up in my stomach again, but caution was in there, too.

"What did you take from that guy?"

He didn't look at me, but he reached inside his pocket and held out a flash drive. He held the dash camera to me, too.

“So, there’s no evidence of you with me.”

“You bribed him.”

“At first.” His eyes found mine.

I was wrong. This was the Kian who had killed Edmund. He was right next to me. All of that same cold intent was packed in his eyes. The shiver wound its way through my body again, but there was something else. The fear was gone. That shiver was a different kind. It was intoxicating.

“At first?” My voice was hoarse.

“If I only paid him, he would’ve sold something else—what you look like now, where you live, that you had him drive you behind my hotel to meet with me.” His jaw clenched, and he turned to look out the window. “I did what I had to do.”

He’d threatened the driver.

I waited a beat, but there was no fear, no judgment, no warning. Nothing.

He looked back to me. “Are you okay with that?”

I said the truth, “You protected me.”

He held my gaze. He was testing me, seeing if I meant what I’d said. I did. I would’ve been discovered and because of a cab driver. I’d made the mess, and Kian had cleaned it up for me.

I leaned back to him. “Thank you.”

He didn’t reply. He didn’t need to. The tension in the air lifted.

As his car drove us to his new place, for once in a really long time, I felt like I wasn't alone. It almost felt just right.

CHAPTER 22

Kian

She came to me.

That realization reverberated deep within me. I was too scared to say much. I didn't want to scare her off.

That cab driver...I'd recognized the look in his eyes. It was opportunity.

What I'd told Jordan was correct. A bribe wouldn't have worked. I'd asked for his name. I'd asked if he knew my name. I'd asked if he knew the name of the hotel, the name of my family's company, the name of my father. I'd waited once he answered every single question. It hadn't taken long until he began to connect the dots. I could get to him—through his work, through his boss, through his home. I could get to him. That was the bottom line, so no real threat had been issued. It was just the knowledge that there could be a threat.

It was enough.

He had given me the USB cable along with the reassurance that he wouldn't say a thing. It was enough—at least until I could call my private investigator.

When we got to the other hotel, we drove to a back entrance. It had been discussed before Jo came to me. We would be taken through a back maintenance shed and through a tunnel that led underground and opened to a far loading garage. From there, an elevator to a penthouse was off to the side. The hotel manager was waiting for us, just to show us the way. There were two elevators for the floor, and this side one was the more private. No cameras were present once near the elevator, but I took a page from Snark's book.

I gave Jo a sweatshirt to wear with the hood pulled low over her head. Dark sunglasses hid her face, covering most of her cheeks. The hotel manager glanced at her a few times, but didn't say a word. I was there for privacy and exclusivity. If my presence were leaked, I would sue.

It was one massive floor with a large living room, a kitchen with a dining room that extended against one wall of the floor, a balcony wrapped around the entire floor, one office, three bedrooms, four bathrooms, and our own pool. The walls surrounding were made of glass but tinted so no one could see inside.

Jo's hand grabbed mine at the sight of the pool. I glanced down, but she had been captivated by the water. She didn't know she reached for me.

This meant something. It had to mean something.

I struggled against squeezing her hand. Fearful she'd realize what she had done and pull away, I let our hands dangle loosely. And I felt like a schoolboy with a crush. It was ridiculous. It was her effect on me.

When the tour was done and the manager got our orders for food and beverages, Jo wandered through the place. She kept looking up and down. She kept biting down on her lip, trying to hide her smile, but I caught it. I wasn't surprised.

"I have no idea what to do now." Jo had wandered back, still hugging herself.

The elevator buzzed.

"Those are my bags. One second."

Emile brought the bags in, placing them right inside the door. He paused, his gaze sweeping to Jo. "Is there anything else you need, Kian?"

"No, thank you." I clapped him on the shoulder. "Take the night off."

"Um..." Jo surged forward but stopped herself. Her hand covered her mouth. "Sorry."

Emile frowned in her direction. He was wondering if he'd need to drive her home later or not.

I explained for both of them, "She can stay here, if she wants, or I can drive her home."

His gaze snapped to mine. "Kian."

"It'll be fine." I patted his shoulder again. "Go home. Go see your little granddaughter."

My driver shook his head, giving me a rueful look. "I'm too young to have grandbabies, but—"

I finished for him, hitting the elevator button, "But you do, and I know you've been spending all your free time with them since we've been in town. It's nice to have your family here."

The doors slid open, and he stepped inside. “You sure I have the night off?”

A look passed between us. Emile was worried. He knew who Jo was, and he disapproved of her presence.

“Have fun tonight. I’ll be fine. We’ll be fine,” I said.

“Kian—” he started.

The doors slid shut before he could say any more. I lingered there. Emile’s concern meant more to me than I’d let him know.

“He knows who I am.”

I nodded, turning around. Jo was leaning against the doorframe. One of her arms was crossed over her chest, holding on to her other arm. It was like she was shielding herself from me, but she had come to me.

That said so much.

“Kian?” The corner of her lip dipped down.

“Yes, he knows who you are.”

“And he doesn’t approve that I’m here?”

My eyebrow rose. “Anyone in your camp approve of you being here?”

Her cheeks pinked, and she looked away. “Stark is my camp.”

I raised my eyebrows.

She laughed a small little laugh. “Point taken.” It wasn’t much, but its power spread through me, warming every coldness inside me. I felt myself thawing in places that I hadn’t

realized were there. That was the effect she had on me while in my presence, while in my penthouse, where I would be living for the next few weeks.

“Kian?”

She bit into the other side of her cheek. I was almost mesmerized, taking in all her little details. Every tiny gesture said so much about her. I wanted to learn all of them. I wanted to understand everything about her—why she kept herself from speaking sometimes, why she was still shielding herself from me, why she’d reached for my hand and had no clue about it.

I forced out a deep breath of air. *One thing at a time.* “I trust Emile. He’s been my driver since I was little.”

She frowned. “You make it sound like he was the nanny who raised you.”

“He did, in a way.” Hearing the door, I moved past her for the front entrance. I murmured, “He’s the only one who would put up with me. My nannies all hated me.”

“Why?” She laughed, turning so that she could still see me as I went through the living room.

Pausing before I moved down the hallway that went to the front entrance, I flashed her a grin. “They were hired for my father’s bedroom, so I liked to call them does.”

“Does?”

“The plural form for doe. I thought I was so smart, adding Daddy and hoe together.”

Two seconds later, she burst out laughing. I went for the door and opened it to find the food and beverages had been brought up. The manager started to push the cart all the way inside, but I stopped her because Jo had taken my hooded sweatshirt off.

“I can do that. Thank you for bringing all this up yourself.”

The manager moved back from the cart. “Oh. Of course.” She went back to the door. “Is there anything else you’d like?”

“This is fine. Thank you again.”

She lingered before leaving, glancing over her shoulder to me. If I’d been standing beside my father, I would’ve assumed she was hitting on him. I wasn’t, though, and the sexual interest was evident. My eyes flashed a warning. She needed to go. Registering it, she gave me one last professional smile before slipping through the door.

Jo was leaning against the kitchen counter when I brought the cart in. “Let me guess. She slipped you her number?”

I shook my head, lifting one of the covers to reveal a platter of vegetables and fruit. “Uh, no.”

“She was young enough to be interested.”

My eyebrows furrowed together. “I’ve learned that age doesn’t matter. Lots of older women are seduced by my family name.”

“Even though you went to prison?”

“Jordan.” I reached out and touched the bottom of her chin. I couldn’t help myself. I’d been holding off from using her

given name, but as it slipped past my lips, it felt good. It felt natural.

A small cleft was there, and it became accentuated when she was worried. I remembered watching her during the entire court proceedings and noticing it.

I said softly, “Sometimes, I think the prison thing turns them on even more. They know I’m not a psychopath. I killed one man, and it was to save a girl.”

She held still, her eyes holding mine.

My gaze fell to her lips. “They’d like to delude themselves into thinking that I’d do the same for them.”

“You wouldn’t?” Her chest rose but never went back down.

I moved closer to her. “No. I did it only for one person.” I looked back up, right into her eyes. “And I’d do it again.”

Her throat constricted, swallowing. Her chest fell abruptly down and jerked back up. I was breathing heavily, too.

Her phone started going off then.

Of course. It was like clockwork.

“Sorry,” she exhaled out, raking a hand through her hair. Crossing the room for her bag, she gestured to one of the bedrooms. “I’m going to take this in here.”

I nodded and waited until she closed the door. She wasn’t the only one who needed to take a call. I went to the back patio and pulled my phone out.

Cal picked up on the first ring, like he always did. He greeted, “How do you like the new digs?”

“So far, they’re working well: small, private, exclusive. As long as the staff remain discreet, I might use them again.”

He grunted, popping something into his mouth and chewing. “You know what else you should use? Security. They’d be useful to have around.”

“I can move around easier on my own.”

Another grunt. He kept chewing. “Don’t be calling my ass in the middle of the night when you have some stalker breaking in to rape your behind. I do a lot of services for you, but personal security is not one of them.”

A small grin formed at the corner of my mouth. “You’re one of the best private investigators I know, but I can hold my own with fighting.”

“Yeah, sure. All that time in prison really hardened you, huh?”

A slight chuckle slipped out. “It didn’t make me softer.”

His own laugh faded, and it was time for business. “So, what’s up? You don’t call for social chats.”

“I had an incident earlier. A cab driver recognized Jordan.”

“Are you kidding me? She’s there?”

I ignored that part. “I got his dash camera and his USB cord, but he could be a problem.”

“You got the number of the car?” After I told him, he said, “All right. I’ll track him down and see if we need to put precautions in place or not.” He was quiet for a beat. “If I were your family or on your legal team or, hell, even on your publicist team, I would advise against having that girl

anywhere close to you. But I'm not, and I know that you're going to do whatever you want. Just be smart, Kian. You're a good kid. Hell, you're not a kid with the shit you've gone through. You're damn smart. I wouldn't want you to throw away your freedom for a piece of vagina."

I grinned, checking over my shoulder. Jo was in the living room with the television turned on.

"Cal, if I were going to throw away my freedom for a piece of vagina, it'd have to be yours. Shriveled up, smelly—"

"Shut up." He laughed. "All right. I'll check on all of this. I mean it, be smart. I know you want to protect this girl. It landed you in trouble, but sometimes, you have to do what's in your best interest. She doesn't have anyone hurting her this time."

After saying good-bye, I waited outside. Jo was sitting on a side couch, so I could see her profile. She didn't know where I was. She kept glancing toward the front hallway and then to the back hallway leading to the back elevator. She wasn't guarded in this one instance. I absorbed every inch of her, as much as I could.

Cal was right. There was no Edmund hurting her.

Her current boyfriend, whomever he was to her, wasn't violent. He came from an upper middle-class background. The worst secret he had was a cheating father, or so Cal's report had told me. She wasn't in danger from him or her roommate, the overzealous reporter.

I lied to Jo before. I knew who her roommate was long before I decided to interview with the school's paper. I set

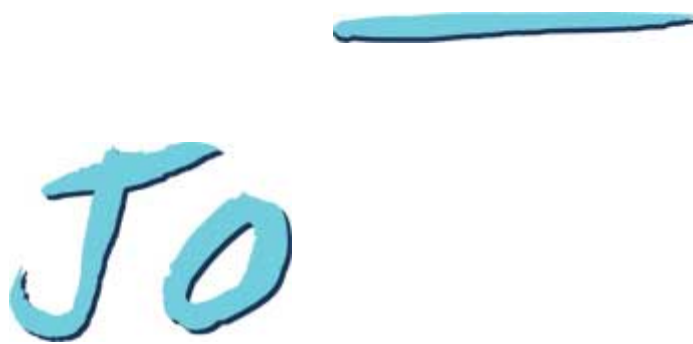
everything in place. No matter what, Jo had to be taken care of.

And here we were.

I was the danger to her now.

I needed to decide what to do—or what not to do. If she stayed at my side, I wouldn't be able to hold back from touching her. Then again, if I told her the truth about everything, that wouldn't be a problem.

She'd want nothing to do with me.



Jo

Jake was concerned and Erica wanted to make sure everything was fine. Neither of them seemed suspicious, and Snark told me that I'd need to wear a shirt with my old name on it for people to put two and two together.

“Is everything okay?”

Kian appeared from some corner of the place. His phone was in his hand as he sat on the coffee table in front of me.

Fuck. I couldn't look away from him. Those dark eyes of his could look right into me and know me. With everything about him, I wanted to be right where I was, with him. My

mind was telling me to go. Discovery was not imminent—at least, not yet. I'd worked myself up. I'd panicked and bolted for him.

What was I doing?

My legs didn't move. My arms didn't move to push myself up from the couch. My feet weren't going to walk me out of there. My ass stayed in place. I did not want to leave.

Oh, screw it.

I blurted out, "I'm attracted to you."

His eyebrows shot up, and he leaned back. "Oh." That was his reaction, that one word. That was it.

I held my breath. *That's it?*

I blinked. "Um." *Backpedal. Retreat. Run.* "I'm sorry."

"No." He shot forward, his hand held up, reaching between us. He looked at it. I looked at it, and it went back to his lap.

"Uh." He shook his head, blinking a few times. The laughter started with one small chuckle. A second, and a third that was louder. He kept shaking his head before he looked up. He saw the non-laughter coming from me and sighed. "Sorry. I'm laughing at myself, not you. This is..." His hands clasped together on his lap. "I'm so controlled, and you've punched right through everything. There it is, and I'm here thinking how much I want to hold you, but I'm too scared to tell you."

Wait.

He kept going, "Hearing those words, I'm...at a loss."

Did he say...

“But this whole thing, with the media, it’s your life now that we’re looking at. My team will get me off. They’re going to argue that I should’ve never been convicted in the first place. It was self-defense—I mean, it was defense for you. That was proven. A dirty judge was the real reason I was convicted, and, yeah, maybe they’ll go the double-jeopardy route. I don’t know their angle, but I trust them. I won’t be convicted again, but, Jordan...”

He kept talking, but his voice became distant and low.

He wanted to hold me. That was what he just said. The warmth of those words began to spread through me. I had known it. I’d thought it, but to hear those words...and he was so close, but still sitting so far away.

He kept talking, something about his legal team’s agenda. His voice grew clear again, and he finished with a final resigned note, “I don’t want anything to happen that could hurt you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“What?”

I blurted it out again, “I’m attracted to you.”

“I know.”

My eyebrows shot up. *That’s it?* “You just told me you wanted to hold me. I mean, doesn’t that mean something?”

He grew wary, and his lips moved into a straight line. His hands tightened on to each other, as if he were holding himself back.

I didn't understand any of this. "I don't care about the legal aspects. I don't care about the ramifications—"

"But you should," he said so softly as he cut me off. He leaned forward again. "This is your life, Jordan. Your. Life. Yes, I am attracted to you. Yes, I want to hold you. Yes, I want to kiss you. Yes, I want to pick you up and carry you into that bedroom."

My eyes got big. Every word he had said was spoken with conviction. My fingers curved into the bottom cushion of the couch. I wanted to jump into his arms. I was holding myself back. There was a *but* coming after he had said those beautiful words, and the emotions were building in my throat. Another lump was forming there.

He leaned even closer across the small gap between us. His eyes were peering right into mine as he said in a fierce whisper, "I want to protect you. I want to take care of you..."

I closed my eyes. It was coming.

"But..."

There it was.

"We have to think long and hard before we do anything."

I was holding my breath. I knew there was more coming.

There was silence.

I peeked a look at him. He was staring at me, studying every inch of my face, and his gaze dropped down to my lips. He lingered there.

I licked them. His eyes jerked to mine, darkening in lust.

I wanted him. I didn't give a damn about what else he said. "Kian." I started to rise from the couch.

He murmured, his voice hoarse, "You don't know what you're asking for."

"I do."

This was why I kept coming back to him. I should've run as soon as he found me, but I went nowhere. I went to him. This was why I ignored Snark's warnings. I wanted justification—no, I wanted excuses to go to him.

My fingers curled into my palms.

I didn't even think I'd cared about the cab driver. Maybe a part of me wanted to be caught. It would be done. The running. The hiding. Everything. I wanted it all done, and if it meant I could be with Kian, so be it.

You're an idiot, Jordan. An inner voice laughed at me.

I hushed her.

"I want you," I said it again, scooting to the edge of my cushion.

"Jordan." His head dropped low, but his eyes clung to mine.

His shoulders were tense, and he was fighting himself. I saw the struggle in him. His jaw clenched. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down.

"I don't care what happens."

His eyes narrowed. "You should."

I sucked in my breath and leaned across the last bit of space between us. I was right there, right in front of him. One small inch and his finger would be resting against mine. The heat radiated off him. His eyes were glued to mine, fierce, as they seemed to be daring me to touch him. But his hands never lifted. He didn't lean toward me. He held himself still, just watching me.

I lifted a hand.

Both of us looked at it and then at each other.

I reached for him, and as I bit down on my lip, I touched his chest. His heart was racing, pounding underneath my hand. He was trembling. I hadn't noticed it before, but I felt it. This was because of me, of my touch. Power surged through my veins. The adrenaline of knowing that he'd reacted like this to me made my blood flow rapidly through me. I was almost drunk from the feel of it.

He didn't push me away. I grew bolder, sliding my hand down his chest, feeling the dip of his muscles. My fingers grazed over each of them, and even though his shirt was on, I knew he was a masterpiece. My fingers fell to the top of his jeans, and I looked up. His eyes were closed. His forehead was close to mine, almost resting on top of me if I were to move up on my toes. He was breathing in and out, letting me explore him how I wanted.

My chest rose up and down. I started to breathe deep, and I swallowed as my fingers slipped inside his jeans. I was telling him what I wanted. Hell, I didn't know what I wanted for sure. I just wanted him. I knew that much, but I wanted him to touch

me back. I wanted him to press against me. I wanted him to touch his lips to mine.

His eyes opened. He was looking right into me, his gaze bearing down on me. His eyes turned black, and his hand lifted to cup the side of my face. His thumb rested at the corner of my mouth. He didn't touch my lips. He held me there, staring into me.

A flashback from the courtroom flitted across my memory. He was always watching for me, and when I stepped inside the room, his eyes would hold mine, and it was like he knew me intimately. It was him and I. We were one.

I saw the same look now.

He could see inside me.

It was like he was a part of me. Again.

He lowered his head, and I closed my eyes. His lips hovered above mine.

My heart was trying to come out of my chest. The room was spinning. My cheeks were bright red. I felt feverish, and damn, I wanted that one touch from him.

It was there, right there...and then it was gone.

CHAPTER 23

Kian ripped himself away. “No, Jordan. No.” He stood, moving toward the kitchen.

“What? What happened?” *No way*. I rose and went after him. He was about to kiss me. He *wanted* to kiss me. I felt it from him.

His hand lifted, as if to warn me away, but it changed. Everything about him changed. His face cleared, his eyes found mine again. “No, Jordan—fuck it.” His hands caught my face, and his lips were on mine in the next instant.

I gasped, but his lips were touching mine with a smooth pressure. I was lost in the feelings. His hands were gentle on my face, and then he paused. I felt him grinning against my lips.

He breathed out, “Is this okay?”

Winding my arms around his neck, I surged against him. “Hell, yes.”

He caught my waist and lifted me onto the table. His mouth became more demanding, applying more pressure, and desire was building throughout my body. The flames were licking inside me. They were twirling, rising, and spreading from my face to my toes. He leaned into me, angling his head for better access. My lips opened, and he entered, but I felt him hesitate again. I almost sighed in contentment.

It felt so right.

I didn't question it, not anymore. This was right. There could be no wrong.

My legs parted, and he moved between them. As his tongue slid against mine, his hand caught the back of my neck to hold me. Even anchored, I was slipping away. My mind was turning off. I was feeling only him, feeling the two of us. This was what I'd wanted to do since I'd learned he had been released.

His other hand fell to my hip, and he strained even more against me. He was still trembling, trying to be gentle. His tongue rested against mine, and his hand went back to cradling my face. His thumb brushed over my cheek. "Jordan."

I shook my head, my mouth fusing against his. No words. Just him. Just me. Just us.

Grabbing his shirt, I held him close and then slid my hands underneath. He sucked in his breath, and I felt how tense he was. He was still holding himself back. I growled. I wanted to stop thinking. I wanted him to stop thinking.

"Stop." He pulled back, panting, as he rested his forehead on mine.

"Kian."

"Jordan." His hand caught the back of my neck again, and he held me still, forcing me to look into his eyes.

Desire swirled there along with fury, regret, and something else...*control*? I swallowed tightly. He was barely holding on to himself. I saw it then. He wanted me, too, maybe even more than I wanted him. Why—

He roughly answered me, “I want nothing more than to tear into you and fuck you on this counter, but”—his voice gentled—“we have to slow down and think about this.”

“No.”

His hand tightened on my neck. “Yes,” he ground out.

“No.” I shoved his arm down.

This wasn’t me. I wasn’t hotheaded and demanding, but for some reason, I was liking this new Jordan. For once, I knew what I wanted. For once, I wasn’t holding back. I wanted Kian. He wanted me, too. What was the problem?

I reached for him again, but he caught my hand and held it in a tight grip.

I gasped. A rush went through me. This tug-of-war between us was a battle of who was going to dominate whom. The intoxication from being with him kicked up a notch. My blood was buzzing.

I tried with my other hand. He caught that one, too, and a steel look came over him. His jaw tightened with a new expression, one that brought tension to the air. I stilled, waiting to see what he would do next.

There it was. The dangerous side of Kian was being unmasked to me. He was furious, but he wanted me. I didn’t know why he was mad. Maybe I should’ve, but an innate part of me knew he wouldn’t hurt me. It wasn’t in him. Not toward me. Others, yes, but never me.

“What are you going to do?”

He still had my hands pinned down, and then his eyes moved to slits. He lowered his head, raking me up and down. I felt his gaze, and the lust was almost blinding me to everything. His eyes snapped back to mine, and a predator was looking back at me. If it had been anyone else, I would've fought back. I would've pushed the person away and ran but not Kian.

I wanted this. Hell, I was relishing this.

He moved into me. Still holding my hands in his, he pulled my hips out to the edge of the table, and then he slowly leaned closer to me, dominating me. I began falling back, but he caught me. He lowered me until I was lying on the table before him. I was displayed to him. He could do anything he wanted.

My one hand was still pinned to the table beside my head as he gripped my other, still on my hip. His thumb began moving up and down over my shirt, sliding over my stomach and jeans. My pulse was racing. An ache had formed between my legs. I wanted more of him there, and as if sensing my last thought, he rubbed himself against me.

I gasped again but bit down on my lip, silencing myself. I didn't want him to go away. I wanted *more*.

His hand rested on my zipper. I wanted him to take it down. I wanted his hand to go inside, to touch me. I wanted more, but I was damn near melting just from that intimate touch.

“Kian.” His name slipped from my lips.

His head lifted, and he saw me watching him. A small smirk appeared, and as it did, he transferred my hand to my

other one. His left hand took my hands, so I was pinned down and splayed out for him. His free hand went back to my pants, and he pulled the zipper down.

Oh God.

I closed my eyes and tilted my head back. I wanted to get lost in his touch.

“No,” he said, catching my head.

My eyes opened, and he was watching me.

He said, “I want you to see.”

I looked down right as his hand left my chin and flicked my jeans open. The ache was building. His hand rested above my underwear, and then he moved them aside, too. I looked back. He wasn't looking at what he was doing. He was just looking at me. That sent a surge of new pleasure through me, and I opened my legs even more for him.

His finger rubbed against the top of me.

Yes.

He bent down, his eyes still holding mine captive. They switched to my lips at the last second. His mouth touched mine again as his finger slid inside me, and I cried out into his mouth. He plunged his finger deep into me, and I almost lifted off the table from the power of it. I screamed into his mouth, and it was the primal kind. I wanted him to go harder, deeper. I didn't want him to pause, but as he did, I started panting. I wanted to beg him to go again, and he did, in and out. His finger moved into me as he kept kissing me. His tongue slid inside as a second finger entered me. I felt him reach all the way to the back, and he upped the pace.

I was coming undone, and I couldn't do anything about it. I couldn't participate. He held me down with his one hand still. My legs lifted to go around his waist. He shifted, so his hip kept me from closing the distance to bury his fingers in me, but I wanted that. I wanted him inside me.

He kept going, in and out. His mouth kept moving over mine. He was holding me prisoner to his touch. Right before I was going to come, he paused, and his fingers slid out of me.

“No.” I ripped a hand free and grabbed his. I pushed it back. “Do. Not. Stop.”

He lifted his head, gazing down at me in question.

I flashed him a warning. “I mean it.”

The corner of his mouth slowly curved into a delicious grin, but instead of thrusting back inside me, his hand slid under my hip, and he lifted me in one motion. My legs wound tighter around his waist. His left hand released my hands and caught the back of my neck. He held me rigid in his arms as he carried me to the bedroom. He laid me down onto the bed, and I was still panting.

I needed him.

He reached for my shirt but paused, looking at me again. A switch happened. He frowned. A flash of something—*regret?*—appeared in his eyes, dimming the fury, and he shook his head. He pulled back.

“Kian.” I grabbed his wrist. I was dominating him now. “No.”

“Yes.” His chest was rising up and down.

The need for him was clawing up my throat, but I recognized it in him. He needed me, too, but his hand gentled on my neck.

He stood away from the bed. “What did I do? What if I hurt you?” He began shaking his head.

I sat up and caught his arm. “Kian, no. I still want this. You wouldn’t have.”

He kept shaking his head. “No, I—no, Jordan. I…” He faltered. His eyes closed, and he rubbed at his forehead.

“Stop it, Kian.” I yanked on him. My pulse was still going. My blood was still buzzing.

Holy shit, I still wanted him, but he thought he had hurt me. It was the opposite.

“I could’ve hurt you.” His hand lifted in a helpless gesture before falling back to his side. “I wanted to fuck you. Hard.”

“Good.” I jerked my chin up. “The harder, the better.”

He frowned, and then a grin appeared. “What?” His hand rose to grip his hair, and he held it there. “My God, Jordan. You don’t get it. I don’t think you ever will.”

He wanted to screw.

I didn’t see the problem. “What are you talking about?”

“I could’ve lost control. Me? I can’t lose control. Ever. You don’t get it.”

“Losing control is the whole purpose of fucking. No, I don’t get it. I want you to lose control. I still want you—”

“I lost control once and went to prison.”

I stopped.

A chill went through me now, and I saw the desperation in his eyes. He was still trembling. I shook my head. No, it's not the same.

“It wouldn't be the same way.”

“You don't know what I'm capable of.”

I advanced toward him, touching my chest. “I am the only one who knows what you're capable of, just like you're the only one who's seen me at my most vulnerable. You've seen me stripped bare. He could've done whatever he wanted. I was the most helpless that I'll ever be in my life.” A ball grew in my throat.

The words didn't want to come. Hell, I didn't want to say them, but this was important. Everything in me was screaming to let this out. It needed to be said, and somehow, I hoped it would help him. Somehow, it had to.

“Kian,” I murmured, moving with caution toward him. I was nearing a cornered wild animal, one that was wounded. I needed to go so carefully. “You lost control with Edmund because he was hurting me. You stopped him. Losing control that day and losing control with me—they're two very different things. This is something else. It's life. What you did to Edmund was to punish him. You saved me. You ended a life. Two completely separate things.”

“I can't ever hurt you.” He shook his head. “I was in prison for two years. Thinking of you...I wanted to be with you even then. You were the first thing I thought about when I got out. I could finally see you. I realized you were hiding, and I had to

find you. It felt like it did in high school—” He bit off his next words.

What? I frowned. My voice was hoarse again. “Finish that sentence.”

He didn’t. He waited, holding my gaze steady.

“It felt like it did in high school,” I started for him. This was important, whatever he was holding back. “What about high school? How was it like in high school?”

His gaze was lidded as he watched me. There was yearning there, but anger sparked, too. It flamed up, and his jaw clenched once again, but he still said nothing.

I had to know. “Kian.”

“Nothing.”

“Kian.” I reached for him.

He brushed me off, retreating from the room. He’d moved with such litheness that I stopped from going after him. It hadn’t been a big movement, but it was how he’d moved.

I remembered how fast he’d sliced Edmund’s throat. At one moment, Kian had stared at me. I had seen the intent in his eyes, but before I could register it and say something or even consider saying something, it had been done. He’d held Edmund in front of him, his arm paralyzing Edmund against himself, and then his arm had slashed in one smooth motion. It had been done. Edmund had watched me, too, his eyes wild and frenzied. He had tried to struggle against Kian’s hold, but Kian brought the knife across Edmund’s throat and then let him fall.

Kian was a killer.

The reminder was glaring to me. Caution and warning mixed with the lust swirling inside me.

It didn't matter. I still wanted him. "Kian." My throat was filled with emotion. It hurt to call for him. When I stepped from the room, he was pulling on a jacket by the back door.

"Where are you going?" I asked, bracing a hand against the wall.

His eyes were tortured. The fury and desperation were gone. He was haunted now.

"I need to calm down because I'm two seconds away from grabbing you and taking you against the wall."

Yes! My eyes lit up. I started to grin.

I wanted nothing else, but he clipped his head from side to side and reached for the door. He was outside in the next second. I hurried to the door, grabbing the handle. It wouldn't open. He was holding it from the other side.

His voice came through the door, low and quiet. "You can't follow me."

"Kian." I hit the door with my fist.

"When I'm *with* you, it won't be while we're hiding. It won't be when I can't hold your hand in daylight. It won't be when I have to call you a different name. And it won't be fucking. It'll be tender. It'll mean something."

I closed my eyes, resting my forehead against the door. With each statement, the fight left me.

He added, his voice rough, “It’ll be when I can call you mine to the world. Until then, let me cool off.” He quieted for a beat. “I’ll be back. Don’t go anywhere.”

I felt his absence more than hearing him walking away from the door.

I took in a gasping breath, feeling the tears burning at the corners of my eyes, waiting to be shed. I didn’t let them fall, but they burned me, just as his words had singed me. Turning against the door, I slid down to the floor and bent forward, my head hanging over my knees.

I let the tears fall.

They weren’t falling because Kian had left me. They were falling because, for once, I didn’t have to hide.

CHAPTER 24

Kian was gone for an hour when my phone started ringing. I moved to the couch earlier and grabbed a blanket. My phone was next to me on the nightstand, and I grabbed it, bringing it to my ear.

I hit the *Answer* key. “Hello?”

“Dude, where are you?”

It was Erica.

I yawned into the phone. “What time is it?”

“It’s one in the freaking morning.”

“It is?” I sat up on the couch and checked my phone.

She was right. Kian had been gone longer than an hour.

“I must’ve fallen asleep.”

“Yeah, about wherever you fell asleep, you need to give me an answer to give to Jake—in, like, two seconds.”

“Why?” Alarm filtered in. “Is he there?”

“Uh, yeah. He’s been going crazy since you left.”

“He called me earlier, but I told him I was fine.” I frowned, trying to remember what I had said to him. I’d been too distracted by Kian. My thoughts had been jumbled when I was on the phone with Jake. “Didn’t I?”

Her voice lowered. “You told him you went back to work, but, Jo, I called your job. You weren’t there, and they told me

what happened. I covered for you, but I don't know what to say to Jake anymore. Are you in a hotel or something? I mean, you didn't go and do something crazy, did you?"

"What?"

"The baby," she hissed into the phone.

I jerked to my feet, pressing the phone even tighter against my ear. "What?"

"Jo, don't lie to me. I know about the pregnancy. That host guy told me all about it. He sounded worried about you, but between you and me, I wouldn't trust that kid as far as you could shot-put him. He had a wicked look in his eyes the one time I met him."

I wanted to smack myself on the forehead. My head fell back, and I groaned, "Oh my God, that stupid rumor."

"Come on."

"No, no, no. That's all a rumor, Erica. I swear."

She grew quiet on the other end.

"I called in sick twice this last month, and my boss jumped to the worst conclusion ever. I think he partly did it to joke with me. Worst joke ever." I laughed. "I haven't even had sex since Jake."

She remained quiet.

Oh, no! "Since the first time *with* Jake, last Christmas time."

"Are you sure?"

"*Yes.*"

“Well, you and Jake—I don’t know what you’re doing, but you’re doing something.”

“No, no, no.” I couldn’t say it enough. “We’re accountability partners, but we’ve just been hanging out. That’s all it is. He,” I hesitated to what I revealed here, “He needed help staying away from Tara.”

“For real?” Her voice was suddenly louder and clearer. “Are you sure there’s nothing going on?”

I gripped the phone tighter. “Nothing’s going on. I mean,”—there was, and it was Kian—“Jake’s still not over Tara. And, I don’t know, I haven’t been feeling the same attraction as I did before.”

“*Oh*. I gotcha.”

“You do?”

“Once bitten, twice shy. That sort of thing.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Okay. Well, whatever. Back to the problem at hand. Your boy toy, who’s not really a boy toy, is here and looking for you. What should I tell him? And where are you, for my own nosiness?”

“I...” I glanced around. I needed a lie and quick.

Kian spoke up from behind me. His voice was soft enough so Erica wouldn’t hear. “You had an upset stomach, so you stopped to grab some food.”

I whirled around, taking in the sight of him, as his lie stumbled from my lips.

His hair was wet. His clothes were soaked, but he had never looked so good. His eyes were stormy and heated, holding my gaze. His jaw clenched, making the air snap with tension between us. I licked my lips and averted my eyes. Erica would hear the lust in my voice. I didn't need a new interrogation from her.

Erica believed it and questioned once more if I was pregnant. She wanted to make sure.

"No," I said into the phone, staring right back at Kian. "I'm not. I just had an upset stomach. I'm fine now."

"Are you coming home soon? If you aren't, I'm coming to eat with you. Where are you at?"

"Uh..." I had no idea.

My eyes got big, and Kian moved closer.

He murmured into my other ear, his hand touching my hand at the same time, "You've not been discovered yet. You should return home and be there for as long as you can."

"I-I'm coming home," I stammered into the phone.

"Well, good then." Her relief was obvious. "I have to warn you about the other part. If your stomach really is okay, Jake wants us all to go to a house party with him. Apparently, we're his new best friends, even Wanker, too. I'm guessing Susan and Tara have officially cut the strings. Doesn't he have other friends? He's adamant that we come with him. What's that about? Wait, I know. No matter what he says, it's you. He still wants in your pants."

My tongue lay heavy on the bottom of my mouth. I had no words for her. Kian was standing so close to me, watching me

the entire time. He could hear everything my roommate said. The tortured look from before was gone. It was replaced with something else, something ominous, something I wasn't going to like.

His hand left my hand and fell to my hip. A tingle started as his thumb slipped under my shirt and rubbed over my skin, back and forth, back and forth. And Erica was still talking. I couldn't hear her anymore. My pulse was so loud with my blood rushing through me.

“Tell her you'll be home in a few minutes. I'll give you a ride.”

The words fell from my lips.

She said good-bye, and so did I. The phone call was disconnected, and then Kian took the phone from me. I noticed all of this in the back of my mind, but the forefront was fully focused on Kian. He was so close. I wanted to close the distance again.

Instead, I asked, “Where did you go?”

“To clear my head.” His gaze lingered on my lips. His eyes darkened, and then his hand caught the back of my head in a commanding hold.

I did nothing. I waited, my heart about bursting out of my chest. “And?”

“And”—his forehead rested against mine—“I meant what I said. If I take you, I want you to be mine all the way. Not mine in hiding. Not mine when you have a separate life. Mine. Just mine.”

“Kian,” I whispered. My hands found his arms, and I held on to him. “That—”

He cut me off, his chest heaving up and down, “Can’t be done until you’re forced to go public.” His hand squeezed my neck.

He paused, dipping down so that his lips touched mine. It was so brief, so quick. It was a fleeting graze. My heart skipped a beat.

He added, “And I could never ask that of you. I won’t. I’ll do everything in my power to help hide you.”

“Kian?” I pulled back. What was he saying? I sensed a different urgency from him.

Tilting my head to the side, I gazed at him. He did look different. A resignation had settled on his shoulders, and it kicked up a flare in me.

What was happening? “What’s going on?”

His hand pulled me close. “I came here to watch over you. I wanted to be close to you, and, yes, I wanted to be with you. I was wrong.”

“What?” *No...*

His hand gentled on my neck, and his thumb began rubbing up and down in a soothing caress. “I shouldn’t have come here. I should’ve left once I knew you were fine. You were happy, Jo, and I messed that up.”

“You didn’t.”

A voice inside my head said, *He did. Let him go. You can still be free.*

I shut it up.

“All those times in the courtroom, I felt like you knew me, like you were the only one who *could* know me. I wanted you to be let free. I didn’t want you to go to prison, and you’re out now. And you said your team will do everything possible to keep you from going back.”

“This is your life.”

No.

My heart pressed against my rib cage. It wanted out.

He added, “If you’re found, your life will be ruined. If you hide again, I won’t find you a second time. I’ll have to let you go, so I’m doing it now. I’m letting go. I booked my flight. I’ll be returning home, and I’ll make a public statement.”

“What will you say?”

“The real scandal is the dirty judge. The DA is trying to cover it up by making the media look for you. I’ll tell them the real story. A dirty judge is a bigger story than where you are. You’ll be forgotten in a week. And I’ll stay away.”

“No.” My heart was splitting in two. I closed my eyes.

“I’ll stay away and make sure that you’ll never worry about the media finding you.”

“No, no, no.” I grabbed on to him.

He cradled me to him, his hand leaving my neck to smooth down my back in comfort. He propped his chin on top of my head, his other arm holding my shoulder, holding me to him.

“This is for the best.”

I winced, closing my eyes even tighter, as I burrowed into his chest. I didn't want to let him go and even thinking about it, I wrapped my arms tighter around him.

CHAPTER 25

Kian

I drove Jo home myself. She was quiet on the way, and a few times I looked over. I felt like I should say something, anything, to ease her pain, but it was weighing on me, too. And when she held my gaze, right before getting out of the car, I saw the same pain in her eyes. There was nothing to say. Anything I said would've cheapened the situation, or taken away what we were both feeling, but when she got out without a word, it was like a silent rejection.

I drew in a shuddering breath, gripped the steering wheel tighter, and tried not to think about who I was driving away from as I went back to my penthouse. Once I got inside, my phone rang. It was Cal, and he never called with good news, not this late at night.

“What’s wrong?”

“She’s public.”

My blood turned cold. “How?”

“You didn’t tell me that she’d left a note for you in the hotel room.” His tone was accusing.

My eyes narrowed. I bristled. “Because that was none of your business.”

“Yeah, well, it’s my business now. A housekeeper had to go back into the room. She’d left something from cleaning it in the morning, and then she saw the note. She was *so* kind to take a picture of it, and Jo had signed it as Jordan.”

“It’s been days. Why is this now going public?”

“It took time. She sold the note to a local news station. They went to the hotel and got the tapes. There’s a tape of her leaving the room. They backtracked from there, and you guessed it.”

Shit!

“They found Jo Keen, and they think it’s hilarious that her roommate was one of the reporters who interviewed you.” Cal paused, grunting into the phone. “Find her. Call your lawyers. Call her lawyers. Shut this down now.”

“I dropped her off at her place.”

“Did you put the tracking app on her phone?”

“She was sleeping when I got back before, and I did it then.”

“Hold on. I can trace her from here, and...she’s on the move. She’s not at her apartment.”

“Her roommate mentioned a party. Give me the address. I’ll get her.”

“No, I’ll get her,” Cal argued.

I was already out the door and hurrying for the stairs. “I’m already on my way.”

“Damn it, Kian. Your face is going to make it worse. Let me do this. I didn’t alert you, so you could run after her. I called you, so you could call your team and start devising a plan.”

It didn’t matter. I was already down the stairs and through the garage door. The penthouse had the closest parking spot—perks of the wealthy. So, I was in the car within minutes. Jo wouldn’t have wanted to go to the party, but she would’ve gone to make her friends happy.

“I need the coordinates,” I said to Cal.

“This is crazy. You’re going to make it worse. Let me get her.”

“I’m already in the car. Coordinates, Cal.”

After he gave them to me, he grumbled, “I’m going to meet you. You’re going to need help.”

I didn’t argue. I might need him after all, but I’d learned a few things in prison, like how to be discreet and how to disappear.

When I pulled down the street, it wasn’t hard to find the party. Thirty cars lined the sides of the streets along with eight cars packed into the driveway of a lit, large house. The music wasn’t too loud, but after parking and heading down the sidewalk toward the house, conversation and laughter became clearer. In the back were a beer-pong competition and a group throwing a football around. I stayed on the outside of the house but close to the shadows. Most of the windows were open, and I thanked the partygoers for that small blessing. It would make my job a lot easier.

I saw Jo, and the wannabe boyfriend was hovering over her. His hand was on her back, and my teeth gritted. The need to wrench his hand off her was rising quickly in me. I scooted closer to a window. They were moving to the kitchen. I followed. A group had taken up the space by the back door. A girl saw me, but I pulled my hood over my head and lit up my phone. Holding it to my ear, I turned my back to her and waited. Glancing back, I saw her attention had returned to her group, and I moved closer to the side of the house.

She wouldn't be able to see me from her angle, but I could still see Jo. I couldn't then. She wasn't there anymore. Scanning the kitchen from my view, the wannabe boyfriend was there. Another guy I saw with Jo before was there.

Wanker?

I looked for the roommate. I saw her earlier, too, but not now. Jo must've been with her. Leaving my view of the kitchen, I moved further to the front of the house. I couldn't find her. That raised my alarm. I'd have to go inside. I was regretting that I hadn't grabbed a baseball cap, but I would have to proceed without it.

Spying an open window on the second floor, I stepped up on a closed window frame and hoisted myself the rest of the way, grabbing ahold of the house's jetty to swing my legs up. Once I had a secure foothold, I moved to the window and removed the screen. I slipped inside a bedroom. The hallway was lit up, and I heard voices.

A girl giggled. "Oh, Rob."

The guy laughed and pressed her against the door. The door handle started to turn.

I quickly locked it.

“What the hell? Trent locked it?”

“That was smart of him.”

“Fuck. Hold on. I’ll be back. Don’t go anywhere.”

“I won’t.” She giggled again. “Hurry back.”

I had to move. On the way, I grabbed a baseball cap. A connecting bathroom led to another bedroom. A quick scan showed it was empty, and I hurried to the next door. It was only a matter of time before Trent would come this way to get to his room. Peeking into the hallway, I saw that the girl wasn’t looking my way. I snuck across the hall to another bedroom. It was the same layout. The bathroom was attached to the next room.

I’d have to wait till the hallway was clear.

The guy returned. His voice drifted through the door. “Trent said he didn’t lock it, but we can go this way.”

“Oh, good. Oh. Hi!”

A guarded response came next. “Hello.”

It was Jordan. I held still. She was here. She was within reach. We could sneak out and head back to the car.

“You’re Jake’s girlfriend, right?”

I reached for the handle but paused.

“Uh...well...it’s complicated.”

The girl laughed. “Well, good on you. Seriously, I’m sick of the Susan-and-Tara show.”

“The Susan-and-Tara show?” Jordan didn’t sound impressed.

“The two think they run the campus. Susan keeps bragging that she’s going straight to a big network ’cause of that interview, but I heard the guy only interviewed here because of the other chick. What’s her name?”

“Erica.” Jordan sounded even less amused.

“Yeah, her. She’s a scrappy little thing, isn’t she? Wait, I saw her with Jake downstairs. Are you guys all friends?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, whatever.”

“Gabby,” the guy groaned, “we were in the middle of something.”

“Chill, Rob. I want to give this girl my support. You have it, you know,” she said the last part to Jordan. “Tara and Susan are not liked by everyone. They think they are, but they aren’t. I know they’re both trying to sabotage you and Jake, but you have friends. Just reach out. My girls and I will have your back.”

“Oh. Well, thank you. When the showdown happens, I’ll holler for you.”

The girl laughed. “You do that. My name is Gabby.”

“Come on, Gab.”

“Okay, okay.”

“That sounds lovely. Uh, the bathroom’s this way?”

“Are you supposed to be up here?” His voice dipped low. The guy was suspicious. “The upstairs area is off-limits.”

“Some guy told me I could come up here.”

“Who?”

“Not Trent but some other guy. Blond hair. His shirt said... I don't know...Mass U?”

“Oh. That's Erik. He's a good guy. Yeah, the bathroom's at the end of the hallway.”

“Thanks.”

I wanted to grab her, but the couple was still in the hallway. They would see me if I opened the door. Her shadow passed the door as she went to the bathroom. I heard a door open and close, followed by a second door, and then there were no voices in the hallway. Everyone was in a room, so the hallway was clear. I leaned against the door.

I'd have to wait until she came back out, and then I'd grab her.

CHAPTER 26

Jo

Minutes Earlier

I had no clue why Jake insisted on going to the party, but so had Erica. She'd wanted to celebrate because she'd finished her piece on Kian's interview. Wanker had come along for the ride—or that was what I'd assumed until we got to the house that was packed to the brim, and Wanker was the first to get a drink. He'd downed three shots before the rest of us could get our own beers.

Wanting to slip away, I nudged Erica's arm. "I'm going to the bathroom."

She followed me from the kitchen. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I just have to go to the bathroom."

Her eyebrows were high. "No...sickness...of any kind? None at all?" She felt my forehead and frowned. "You do seem a little sweaty. Are you sure? You know, about the no-kid thing?"

I removed her hand. "Erica."

"Yes?" Excited anticipation filled her eyes, and she leaned even closer.

“I would have to have sex to get pregnant.”

“Oh.” Her eyebrows dipped down. “But—”

“Seven months ago. That was it.” I patted my flat stomach. “And you would have definitely seen a bump by now if I were about to pop in two months.”

“I suppose.” She sighed. “I’m sorry. You’ve just been distant lately. You’re quieter and always leaving.” She shrugged to herself. “Then again, I’ve not been around too much either. We should do a roommate dinner or a roommate weekend. Wait.” She latched on to my arm. “What about a roommate slumber party? We’ll drink wine, watch ’80s movies, and eat lots of pizza. We can sleep out in the living room—or in our rooms. Maybe we should get a nice hotel suite, and do that? Yeah, let’s do that.”

She was still concocting new ideas, but I saw the wistfulness in her eyes. She was missing the old camaraderie we’d had, and so was I. Too much of Kian. Too much of Susan. Too much about interviews. Even too much of Jake, whatever was going on with him.

I took her hand from my arm and held it, squeezing it. We needed to get back to basics. I could use the distraction from Kian anyway.

I said, “When you sell your piece to a major paper, you and I will celebrate, and we’ll do our roommate-weekend thing.”

“You and me?”

“You and me.”

Her eyes welled up, and she flicked a tear away with the back of her hand. “Thanks for saying that. Sometimes, I think

I'll never get out of Susan's shadow. She's so evil."

I laughed. "You're a good person. She's not. You'll be fine in the long run. I really think that."

"You think a big paper will buy my story?"

"I know they will. You have a different perspective on it."

"Thanks, Jo. Sometimes, I think Susan gets me blackballed from projects at the paper. She got a major promotion at *The Forum*. I had been up for it, too, but they had chosen her. She'll be gone next year."

"Well then, next year is when you'll shine. Screw Susan. She'll be gone."

"Yeah." Erica's head lifted. "You're right." She sighed, glancing over her shoulder. "I should get back to Wanker. He told me he wants to talk tonight. He's already three sheets to the wind. Can't imagine how that talk will go."

The corner of my mouth curved down. "Be gentle with him."

"What do you mean?"

"Just"—*he's in love with you*—"be easy with him. Whatever he wants to talk to you about must be hard for him if he's drunk already."

She groaned. "He shouldn't do the serious talks when he's pissing in the wind. That was our last big talk. He got drunk just like this when he told me not to room with you. Can you imagine how that went over? With his dick in his hand while watering the campus pond. The security guards weren't amused."

“He advised against you living with me?”

“Yeah.” She rolled her eyes. “Don’t worry. He had some trumped-up idea that you were hiding something. He’s an idiot. He’s apologized five times to me since then. He realized I would’ve missed out on a good roommate and friend.”

I had tensed but relaxed. Still, hearing that Wanker had been suspicious of me didn’t sit well with me. He’d picked up that I had a secret.

“Uh, yeah. Good thing you didn’t listen to him.”

“Go pee. I’ll have a drink ready for you.” She pretended to shove me toward the back hallway.

“Nope. No way, ladies.” A big guy materialized in front of us, blocking the hallway. He held his hands out to both sides of the wall, one hand still holding his drink. With curly blond hair, a shirt that said *Mass U*, and cargo shorts, he looked like one of Jake’s friends. “All the rooms are blocked off. If you need to use one, you gotta see Trent.”

He pointed to a guy with jet-black hair in the living room, holding court with a group of guys and girls. He was wearing similar cargo shorts and a shirt that said *Boston*. Both were tall and handsome with an athletic physique.

“I have to piss.”

“Oh.” He frowned, raking me up and down. “We’re using the first-floor bathroom for something else. Most chicks are sent downstairs, but there’s a bathroom upstairs. You can use that one, if you want.”

I shrugged. “As long as there’s a toilet, I don’t care.”

“Use the one upstairs. It’s at the end of the hallway, and if you run into anyone, just be discreet and quiet. A few of the rooms are occupied, if you get my drift. I’m Erik, by the way.”

Erica and I shared a look. Was this a party or a brothel?

She pointed to the kitchen. “I’ll, uh...get you a drink then.”

I nodded, heading for the stairs.

“Jo!” Jake was coming my way, holding two drinks in the air as he moved through the crowd.

Erica waved me off. “Go,” she said. “I’ll tell him you’re coming back.”

As I went up the stairs, I glimpsed Erica placing a hand on Jake’s chest, stopping him. He listened to her and then looked at me. He waved one of the drinks with a big smile on his face. I nodded, letting him know I got the message. A drink was waiting for me. Good. I’d need more than that one.

Right before I disappeared from sight, Wanker rushed up to Erica and shoved his phone in her face.

Then, I was upstairs. The hall was dark and quiet. A couple was standing in the hallway, and the girl was too chatty for my liking.

I have to go, people. Yes, yes, lots of love my way. She hates Susan and Tara. Don’t we all?

I slipped into the bathroom and sank down onto the toilet.

I needed a breather.

Kian dropped me off a block from my place. Erica warned me, but I hadn’t realized how insistent Jake would be when I got inside my apartment. The only thing he kept talking about

was the party. I hadn't been looking forward to it, but Erica promised we could leave after an hour. Once we had gotten here, the idea of getting a buzz on and forgetting about Kian had started to become more tempting.

Kian was too much in my head. Being open with him, hearing my name again, stirred up a hornet's nest in me. I wanted to come clean. I wanted to be myself. But the media, the damn media, would hunt me. They would stalk me. They would invade my privacy over and over again and then do it all over once more.

Erica, Wanker, Jake—all of them would go. I didn't even know if I would have my job. Henry would be ecstatic.

I checked my phone. I'd been in here for ten minutes. I needed to finish up and go face the music. After washing my hands, I reached for the door but paused. I took a deep breath.

One more night. There's nothing different about tonight. One more show for the Oscars, just like I've been performing since I became Joslyn Keen.

My hand opened the door.

And here I go.

I stopped short.

Erica, Wanker, Jake, along with ten others squished behind them were all standing in the hallway. I glanced over my shoulder, but their stares were focused on me. They were waiting for me. An uneasy sensation began in me. All of them had different expressions. Erica's eyes were wide, accusing, angry...and then I looked closer to see...hurt.

Oh, no.

When my eyes met Wanker's, he looked away. His hand rested on Erica's shoulder. He was there for her, not me. Jake's eyes were shrouded in the same anger as Erica's, but he looked more hurt than she did. And—I frowned—a little bit excited? That didn't make sense.

“What's going on?” I asked. But I knew.

Even before I came up to the bathroom, a sixth sense was nagging at me. It was in the back of my mind, almost laughing at me. My time was up. I felt it but shoved it back.

Maybe it was because of the cab driver. Maybe it was because of the hotel manager. Maybe it was because I'd just wanted it to happen.

I knew what I would see even before Erica held up her phone in response to my question.

There I was, smack dab in the middle. It wasn't my old face. It was my college yearbook picture from this past year. And above the photo were the words, *Jordan Emory Has Been Found*.

My old name.

My new face.

And my loved ones looking at me with the accusations.

I was no longer Jo.

I had to think.

I was at a party. There were too many people, and I was trapped on the second floor. I needed to get to safety. The media circus had been notified. I had a few minutes, by my estimation.

“Is it true?” Erica sounded wounded, her eyebrows furrowed together. “Is it?”

“I...” A lump formed in the back of my throat. I couldn’t talk. I could only stare at her.

Betrayal stared back at me.

My God. My worst nightmare was coming true. I was living it right now.

The longer I stood there, gaping back at them, the guiltier I looked. I knew I needed to say something—apologize, come clean, say it was a mistake. I had to say something, but nothing left my mouth. I tried to remember the speech I prepared so long ago for when this happened, if it would happen.

My memory failed me.

“I’m so sorry, Erica.”

Hurt flooded her gaze before she looked away.

Shame and guilt overwhelmed me.

She was gone. I saw it in that instant, felt it in my gut. No matter what, that friendship was done. I’d lied for one year as her roommate and another year as her friend.

I looked at Wanker beside her. I’d expected the same look of betrayal as I started for them, for her, but I stopped. There was nothing in his gaze—at least for me. He was concerned as he looked from me to Erica.

It hit me then. He had known, but I didn’t have time to process that.

I reached out for Erica, and then a door opened behind me. A hand wrapped around my arm, and I was yanked into a

room.

“Jo!” someone shouted from the hallway.

I screamed. A hand clamped over my mouth as the door was locked.

I tried to claw at the hand until a voice said into my ear, “It’s me. Stop.”

“Kian.” I pulled back.

It was him. He was dressed in the same clothes—a black sweatshirt with a hood over his head. Underneath the hood, a baseball cap was pulled down over his eyes. A shiver wrapped its way up my spine, awakening me.

I asked, “What are you doing here?”

“They know.”

“Let us in!” a voice hollered from the hallway. Someone was pounding on the door. “Let her go!”

That wasn’t Erica.

I held my breath, waiting for her voice, but it didn’t come.

Jake was yelling. There were others.

I tuned them out and asked Kian, “What’s the plan?” I’d wallow later. We needed to escape first.

Kian grabbed my arm and went to the window. Throwing it open, he let go of me as he took the screen off. Pointing to a tree, he said, “I’ll climb down. You wait and then jump. I’ll catch you.”

“Uh...” I was skinny, but I wasn’t a lightweight.

“It’ll be fine.” He pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Wait for my signal.”

A news van rushed down the street. As Kian made his way to the tree, jumping over and catching a branch, the van pulled onto the lawn. The media was going to catch us. Kian wrapped his legs around the trunk and then slid down in seconds. He was beneath the window, raising his arms. Before he said anything, I pointed to the front of the house. Seeing the media, he waited.

A reporter and a camera guy rushed inside.

Kian called out, “Jump. I’ll get you.”

I took a deep breath and climbed onto the window frame. My eyes clung to his. “Are you sure?”

His arms went higher. His voice was strong. “Trust me.”

After a second breath, I pushed off and jumped.

Kian caught me. A flutter filled my stomach. It rose to my throat, spreading to my fingers and toes, as I slid down his body. His hand took mine, and we started to head to the back.

A man appeared in front of us, and Kian braked.

“It’s me,” the stranger said.

Kian shook his head, tugging me behind him. He grinned ruefully at the man. “Perfect timing.”

“Yeah, well, we might still be screwed. Someone from the party must have alerted the media. There’s another news van in the back. I think they went inside already, but two more channels are heading to us. We have to move quick.”

“Jo!”

I looked over my shoulder. Jake was in the window, staring at us in disbelief. As his gaze touched on me, another wave of guilt swept over me. He looked to Kian, and then his eyes fell to our linked hands. A second wave crashed over me.

I couldn't think about that, not now. "We have to go. Now."

The stranger scanned a shrewd eye over me. His lips lifted into a slight smirk. "We're aware. Follow me."

He turned and led the way. No one was in the backyard, but the stranger and Kian kept to the side of the yard. They hugged close to the neighbor's fence and then paused when we got to the back alley.

The stranger waved us ahead. "My car's at the end. Go, and get in the back."

"They're back here!" someone shouted from the house.

I didn't look back. Kian started down the alley, and I was right behind him. The news van didn't look like anyone was inside, but the side door opened. I didn't have time to react. Kian reacted for me. He caught my waist and pulled me behind a garage door. It blocked us from their view, whomever it was. He held us there. As we waited, he was pressed against me, shielding me.

He nuzzled against my ear. "They didn't see us. We'll go when they're gone."

I closed my eyes, inhaling the scent of him for a second. This was all sorts of wrong, all sorts of bad timing, but I grabbed the front of his shirt and pressed myself against him. It was a tiny gesture, but Kian went still, and he looked down, gazing at me under lidded eyes. His hand lifted to cup my

cheek. His eyes darkened, and he started to bend down. His lips hovered over mine, breathing into me, but he didn't touch them to mine. I wanted it. My hands grasped him tighter. Neither of us could look away.

We heard a whisper, "Clear. Go."

Kian fell backward, back out to the alley. I fell with him. It was like breaking through cement to pull my gaze from his. Then, we were off and running for the car. Kian got there faster and had the back door open and ready for us. I dove inside, and he was right behind me, his hand going to my hip. He guided me down, all the way below the seat, and he flattened himself over me.

His mouth was above mine. His face was right there. My heart was pounding—from the jumping, from the running, and now from the close proximity.

"Jordan?"

"Yeah?" My breath was stuck in my throat.

"There's a blanket underneath you. I'm going to grab it."

"Oh, yeah." I moved as he reached underneath for it, lifting up my body so he could pull it clear.

Kian spread it over both of us, and we waited.

"You think they'll see us?"

"No, they won't be looking here." He grimaced. "I hope not anyway."

"Who's that guy?"

"Cal, my private investigator, but he's my go-to guy for everything."

“What’s he doing?”

“He’s waiting behind to see what they know. That’ll help us get a jump on damage control.” A second grimace from him. “I hope.”

That made sense. A second question formed. “Kian?”


“Hmm?”

Erica’s face flashed in my mind again along with how Jake looked at us as I ran with Kian while we were holding hands.


“What am I going to do now?”

I was no longer Jo Keen.

I was Jordan Emory.



"In breaking news, Jordan Emory, the girl who Kian Maston saved before he was acquitted for killing her foster father, was discovered a few hours earlier. We have confirmed that she went into hiding after Maston was sent to prison. She has been living under the alias Joslyn Keen or Jo, as some of her friends call her. More details to come as this case is quickly unfolding before our eyes, but first, a word from our sponsors."



CHAPTER 27

Jordan

Cal didn't stick around.

He dropped us off—or he dropped me off. Kian remained in the car, and whatever they had to say, it didn't take too long. I waited in the doorway before going into the hotel through the back way.

When Kian approached, he took his cap off and gave it to me. With a guiding hand on my back, he walked beside me. I kept my head bent down as we maneuvered to the private elevator. Once inside the penthouse, I went straight to the liquor cabinet.

Kian pulled his phone out, but he held it in his hand as I poured a healthy shot of whiskey. It burned but not enough. I switched to tequila, and three shots later, some of the storm started to ebb. I was hoping to be numb.

Kian moved, so he was leaning against the counter, right behind me. He lifted an eyebrow. “Better?”

I swallowed. Nope, I could still feel it. I poured another. “Getting there,” I rasped out.

“Jordan.” He reached for the bottle.

I held it away, using my hip to check him. He would have to reach around me to get it. Our eyes met and held.

I winced, seeing the sympathy in his gaze. “Stop it,” I ground out.

No sympathy. No pity party. No *I’m sorry*. None of that shit would do. My life was done, but I was going to get drunk before I had to face it.

I reached for the phone. His fingers tightened on it, but he used the touch to move closer to me. He was now crowding me against the counter. Desire pooled inside me, and I swallowed, licking my lips, as I reacted to the smoldering in his eyes.

I murmured, “One night. Give me one night before you call in the cavalry.”

His fingers moved, so he was holding my hand as I was holding his phone now. “One night?”

I nodded.

The tequila was finally working. I felt the world slipping away. The flames he’d lit inside me were getting higher and higher. They were scorching me from the inside out, and I was so close to forgetting why I was asking for one night.

A tear slipped down my cheek. I wanted to forget. I wanted it all to be pushed at bay. “Kian,” I whispered, “they all know.”

He cupped the side of my face. “That just means they’ll know the truth.”

Maybe. Maybe not. I was too scared to hope.

I put his phone on the counter, and my hand went to his side, and I held on to him there, as if he were going to slip

away.

“I need to call my lawyers and my publicist.”

I pressed against him.

He raked a hand down the back of my hair, soothing me. “But it’s just to tell them where I am. They have to get everything ready and fly here. They’ll be here by morning.”

Morning.

I wasn’t ready. When they came, the small hideaway we had would be gone, but I nodded, letting go of his side. “Call them.”

He didn’t move away. His hand still clasped me to him as he took the phone and dialed the number. He pulled me to his chest.

I could hear his voice through him as he called the lawyers first. An Ethan person wasn’t allowed to come. The lawyer on the phone was fine with that. The second call was to Laura and her publicist team. She asked about Felicia. Kian hesitated and then said he’d call her later. His third call was to Cal, and he only relayed that his team would be coming.

When he was done, I expected him to put the phone on the counter, but he didn’t. After dialing another number, he held the phone to me.

“What?” I took it.

“Call Snark. Tell him whatever you want.”

I was dumbstruck. I had no family and no friends now, but he was right. Snark would be concerned.

When he answered, he grunted into the phone, “I’m already on my way. Where is she?”

“It’s me.” I smoothed a hand down my hair, turning sideways but still in Kian’s arms.

My shoulder and side rested against his chest. One of his hands fell to my hip, anchoring me in place.

Snark was silent and then asked, “Are you okay?”

“I’m drinking tequila.”

“That’s a no?”

I snorted. “I’m at Kian’s.”

“I’m already on my way.”

“You are?”

“I was coming to have a word with him anyway. You’re at the hotel? I’m pulling into the lot right now.”

Kian felt my tension and murmured into my other ear, “What’s wrong?”

Covering the phone, I replied, “He’s downstairs.”

A curse left him, and he straightened away from me. While he was still holding my hip, his eyes didn’t leave mine. “I need to call my lawyers one more time. Can you stall him?”

I nodded.

My eyebrows pinched together, but I hung up and gave him the phone. He went into the back with it as I went to let Snark inside from the elevator. He rushed past me, looking all around. He was wearing a brown trench coat, and his hair was sticking in the air, like he’d been grabbing at it. Worry lines surrounded

his eyes and were at the corners of his mouth. He seemed to have aged ten years. The smell of cigarettes and cologne clung to him.

“Where is he?” He started for the living room and then the first opened bedroom door.

“On the phone.”

He smirked, rounding back to me. “With his lawyers?”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Yeah. Why?”

He rolled his eyes, grabbing at his hair. He surveyed me and then gestured for the door. “Come on. I want you to come with me.”

“With you?” I stepped back against the counter.

Kian was still in the back room. The door was closed shut, but the thought of leaving him sliced me up inside.

“No.”

“This is enough!” His voice rose. “This romantic bullshit you have going on with him is going to put you in prison. I don’t care what he’s said to you, but his team is behind the leak. They’re *his* team, not yours. You are not their client. They want you front and center for the public, and they are willing to crucify you. He’s going back up before a jury, and it’s out there. He’s let the world know that he killed Edmund—”

“That was never in debate,” I cut him off.

The party. The look on Erica’s face. Hiding again. Running. The tequila.

All of it was rising together in one angry tornado in me. My voice started to shake but not from fear. “He has *only* said that

he defended me. Edmund was torturing me. I fought and threw a book at the curtain. Kian was there. He was right outside and got a glimpse of what was going on. The right place, the right time. A second later, and he wouldn't have seen a thing. Just one second later. But he was there, and he *saved* my life.”

“Good,” Snark clamped out. “And you can testify to that when you're called to the stand because he *is* going back on trial.”

“No.” Kian's voice was low, smooth. He moved from behind Snark, rounding to stand beside me.

Kian's face was like granite, closed off but so strong. His shoulders were tense. His hands were in fists as they folded over his chest, and he narrowed his eyes at the FBI agent.

“I'm not actually. The district attorney just got off the phone with my lawyers. The case has been dropped. It borders too much on double jeopardy, and”—he skimmed over my face from the side of his eye—“they're not going after Jordan either.”

Snark flung his hands in the air. “But the media knows who she is now!” A nerve bulged out on the side of his neck. “They know her name. They know her new face. She's ruined, Maston. There's no going back for her.” He jerked forward, but his body rocked backward just as quick. He was shaking his head, glaring. “Why did you release the note? Why did you release her name?”

“I didn't.” Kian's voice rose, but it was still low. It was still deadly.

A shiver racked down my back. He was becoming colder with each accusation Snark flung at him.

“Did you not want her to live without you? That’s what would’ve happened, right? You would’ve had to let her go. Can’t be with her when she’s got a different name and face. Can’t be with her when she should be with some other guy.” Snark kept shaking his head. Disgust filled his tone. “That’s why, isn’t it? It’s not to throw her to the wolves, try to pin Edmund’s death on her. It wasn’t to save your own ass. It was about her, and you’re not doing the right thing.”

My heart was sinking lower and lower. I closed my eyes and started to turn away.

Snark continued, “You couldn’t let her go. That’s what this is about. Why were you the one to save her from her foster father? And again, you saved her a second time. Why? Both can’t be coincidental.” He stopped, letting his words hang in the air.

“You’re right.”

Snark fell quiet, blinking at Kian.

I moved forward, my heart lurching up to my throat. “He’s right?”

Kian swung those dark eyes my way, making my chest feel punched.

He said so quietly, “It wasn’t a coincidence. I mean, the first time. I wasn’t just walking by your house that day.”

“You weren’t?”

My heart was thumping hard.

“Justin Cavers.”

My head cocked to the side. “My ex-boyfriend?”

His eyes were pinned to mine, so intense and so hypnotic. “I was coming to warn you about him.”

My mouth was suddenly so dry. I licked my lips. “Why? He and I broke up a few weeks earlier.”

“Because he was going to ask you out again.” He glanced in Snark’s direction, as if gauging his reaction. When there was none, he looked back to me. “Justin was an asshole to you.”

I almost snorted. He didn’t have to tell me that. I fully knew.

He added, “He was bragging to a lot of guys at a party the weekend before. He was going to ask you out again, but he had plans for you.”

A second shiver slithered down my spine. I wanted to ask him what he meant, but I had a feeling that I already knew. Justin hadn’t been the most sensitive or gentlest of boyfriends.

“The guys were teasing Justin that you’d gotten away.” Kian’s voice dipped low once more.

My head lowered. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to even hear what he had to say.

“He said he was going to rectify that at a party the next weekend. He told my best friend that he was going to ask you out that night. That’s why I came to your house that day. A few hours later, and he would’ve been there. I just got there first.”

Snark asked, “What was he going to do to her?”

I felt Kian's gaze lift from my head as he answered Snark, "What do you think?"

I knew.

Justin had been so rough so many times.

And I would've gone. I was ripped open from the inside as I realized that. I would've gone. I would've been ecstatic to leave the house and get away from Edmund. And it would've happened because Justin always got me where he wanted.

Kian didn't answer Snark, but I lifted my head.

My voice was hoarse as I said, "He would've raped me."

Snark's eyes widened.

I said, "That's why we broke up. He'd tried to force me other times. I always stopped him, but the last time"—I winced, remembering the feel of his hands on my arms—"he was too rough. I broke up with him because of it."

Snark nodded to Kian. "How did you know he would've done that? Did he say those words?"

"He implied it pretty clearly." Kain hesitated, his chest lifting in a small breath. "And because I knew someone else he raped."

My gaze whipped to his. He did?

He was watching me, remorse filling his eyes, and the corners of his mouth curved down. He was grimacing. "I couldn't let him do that to you, too."

"Who?" Snark's voice rose. "Who did he rape? And will she testify?"

“My sister, and no, she won’t.”

“Your sister...” I trailed off, remembering the times when Felicia went to the courtroom. She was always with her mother, always with her head down, and her shoulders drooping slightly. She never looked at me. Ever. “I thought she hated me, she and your mother.”

“Felicia knew why I was going to your place, but it was never talked about again in my family. I told my parents and the lawyers why, but my dad forbade letting my real reason get out.”

I never saw his dad in the courtroom. “Why didn’t your dad come to the hearing? I don’t remember seeing him there.”

“Because he was upset with me. He didn’t do a thing when Cavers raped Felicia. Justin’s dad was”—he scowled—“a business colleague of my dad’s. That didn’t mean I could let Justin do it again. That’s why I went to your house.”

“You testified that you were going to a girl’s house though.” Snark crossed his arms over his chest. “It was a friends-with-benefits thing between you and the girl. She was expecting you to show up, too. She gave a statement backing you up.”

Kian lifted a shoulder. “I could’ve gone to her house. It was across the street from Jordan’s house. It would have been a good enough excuse for why I was at Jordan’s house.”

“The other girl didn’t actually know you were coming?”

“Someone called her later, told her that I’d been planning on going to her house. She was told what to testify about. It was how it was. I could go over whenever I wanted. She had no

problem with backing me up. I'm sure she even believed it, too."

Snark grunted, shaking his head. "The hardships of being young, wealthy, and good-looking."

Kian's lips pressed together into a flat line. "My dad forbade me to testify with the real reason I went to Jordan's house. Couldn't put 'undue stress' on a 'beneficial alliance.' Those were my dad's actual words."

My head was swimming.

He'd saved me from Edmund and from Justin. One just tortured me, and the other intended to rape me. What was worse was that I didn't know if I would've gone to the police about either. If Edmund stopped, I would've convinced myself that he'd just snapped. He would've apologized, and nothing would've been said about it again. His wife, their two kids—they blamed me for Edmund's death, and they never would've supported me if I'd gone to the police. Same thing with Justin. It would've been my word against his.

Shame filled me, making my insides form knots.

I would've allowed myself to become victimized. I wouldn't have stood up, not like Kian had.

Feeling the burning in my throat and tears threatening to spill, I said huskily, "Thank you."

He'd been waiting, and at my words, his shoulders slowly lowered. A silent sigh left him at the same time. As his Adam's apple jerked up and paused at the top of his throat, he gave me a stiff nod. "You don't hate me?"

How could I? He'd saved me in more ways than one.

I shook my head. “Never.”

CHAPTER 28

“This is all fine and dandy, but we have serious issues to talk about.” Snark’s sharp tone broke my reverie.

I was pulled from the past and brought back to reality.

He added, “You have a roommate and an apartment with all your stuff. I suggest you deal with that before his team gets here.” He jerked a thumb in Kian’s direction and then threw him a shrewd look, his eyebrow arching up. “I’m assuming you’re going to demand that she stay here and not go with me?”

Kian threw me a questioning look, but his jaw hardened. “That’s up to Jordan.”

Jordan.

That was the second time he called me by my real name. The feeling washed over me, sending warmth through my body. It was my name, given to me by my real parents. It was nice, hearing it again, and I let myself savor the sensation.

“Jordan?” Snark added, his voice gruff.

Savoring moment was done. It was time to deal with real life. I clipped my head in a firm nod. “I ran from that party, but it might not be a bad idea to get back to my apartment before the media shows up, if they aren’t there already. I might not get another chance.” I glanced to Kian. “You probably shouldn’t come—”

He didn’t let me finish. “I’m coming.”

“Well then, okay, I guess.”

He shouldn't go, but I was glad that he would. It didn't make sense, and I didn't care. The shitstorm that was called the media was about to descend on my life once again. I was going to endure everything I had before. I was about to be blamed for Kian going to jail.

I needed to go to hell. I was a whore. I was a cunt. I was a seductress from the ninth level of hell. I didn't deserve happiness or to be alive. I should have died. And those were all the comments that would be yelled from non-media people. The media would paint me how they had before and during the trial, showing that I manipulated Kian into killing Edmund. Somehow, it was all my fault.

I was about to be hated once more.

“I'll go.” Snark moved to grab my arm. “You stay.” He swept his eyes to Kian, too. “Both of you stay. I'll get a team in there. I can pull some strings from work.”

“You sure?”

He nodded. “I'll call when it's done. We'll get everything out.”

After Snark left, Kian and I stared at each other. The air was so heavy and thick that I didn't think I could talk. He had known about Justin. He came to save me from my ex. I couldn't get that out of my head.

I heard myself asking Kian, my voice hoarse, “You knew about him?” It was already answered, but somehow, I needed to ask again. He knew how he was. Others knew. Justin hurt me back then.

No one cared, or I thought no one cared.

He nodded, his eyes lidded. “He didn’t deserve you.”

My mouth was dry. “You knew me before that happened then? I thought it was a freak accident, that you saw me through the window.”

Kian met my gaze. Gone was the cold, mysterious, and almost deadly guy I knew for the last three years. It was the old Kian, the high school Kian. But even then, he was always reserved, a loner at times, yet a respected leader. No, this was a different side to him.

I tilted my head to the side, narrowing my eyes, and I moved closer. He was exposed to me, like he opened a window and I was seeing the little boy inside of him.

Hurt and a tiny degree of raw anger flared in his depths before switching to uncertainty. He was letting me see inside of him. I felt my heart surge against my chest then, wanting to climb out to him. The feeling was overwhelming.

I asked so quietly, “Why?”

He gazed at me, questioning me.

“Why didn’t he deserve me?”

I suddenly needed to hear something loving, something I hadn’t heard from anyone all my life. I moved another step closer so I was within touching distance of him. I could see his pulse pounding through a vein in his neck.

He held himself still, just watching me back, before he murmured, “Because you were good. He wasn’t. He was beneath you.”

“You’re nothing but a whore,” Edmund said. “I’ve seen you with that rich boy. I’ve seen you two kissing. His tongue going down your mouth. I’ve seen it all, and I knew it would be my job to save you.”

His breath was hot, rank, as he brought the knife to my throat. He was excited and aroused. I felt him pressing against my leg.

He coated my face with his spit, saying, “You’re going to be saved today, girl. One way or another, you will be.”

I blinked back a tear and swallowed a sudden lump in my throat. “How do you know?” I could only whisper. *How did he know I was good?*

Kian’s hand lifted, cupping the back of my neck, and he leaned down so that his forehead rested against mine. I felt the struggle in him then. He was holding himself back, trying to keep control.

I wanted to yank it out of him. Whatever the consequences, whatever happened, I wanted it to happen. An ache was in me, one that I wanted him to fill. There was a hole inside me, one that his words, his touch, and his protection could heal. I was leaning into him, my forehead pressing back, and my eyes clung to his. I was starving for him.

He said so softly and gently, “Because I’m not good. Because I’m like Justin, like Edmund. I’ve hurt. I’ve killed. I’ve stood by when people I loved were hurt.” His hand trailed around my neck in a soft caress and went up to rest against my

cheek. He wasn't holding me. He was just touching me. "I couldn't do it again. I couldn't let you get hurt, not when you weren't like the rest of us. You're good. You were then. You are now."

My heart pressed even more to my chest, wanting to go to him if it could.

He said, "He hurt my sister, and after it happened, I couldn't do anything. I wanted to make him suffer. My dad wouldn't allow it. Justin started dating you, and I knew it was going to happen again. I knew of you from school. You were quiet and stayed to yourself, stayed in the background. That was why Justin picked you—because he could hurt you and get away with it. No one was going to protect you. But you were good. I saw it then, and it's still in you. You're still good, Jordan. When you broke up with him, I was relieved, but it wasn't because he hadn't hurt you."

His head lifted. Blinding pain and regret flared up. It was fierce in his eyes as he said, "I was relieved because I didn't have to stop him—" His voice broke as guilt flooded him.

His head lowered. His eyes left mine, but I reached up. I caught the side of his face, and I made him look at me again. Our eyes met, and I saw a stark need for something was there, inside of him. I couldn't place it, but it struck deep inside me, as if I could heal him like he'd allowed me to heal, too.

"Finish it." *Please.*

"He hurt my sister, and I couldn't make him pay for it. If he hurt you, too, I couldn't have lived with it. Any other girl..." He looked away again.

I didn't let him. I made him look at me, my fingers sinking into his skin.

“There's something about you.” His eyes rounded, looking in wonderment at me now. “I don't know what it is. I felt it back then. I didn't care about other girls, even the girls in my group. They were all the same. People just hurt people. I didn't care. But when he started with you, I cared. I cared too much. I couldn't let him hurt you, but it meant going against my father and my family. I would've lost them. If I said or did anything, I would've been exiled from them.”

Kian went to my house that day, knowing what would happen. “They would've kicked you out?”

He nodded, his head moving against my hand. “I shouldn't have given a damn, but you broke up with him, and I was so fucking relieved that I wouldn't have to fight my father. Justin started bragging again. He was going to wine and dine you and take you to the party that next weekend. He was going to finish what he'd started. Those were his words.”

I winced, but that sounded like my asshole ex-boyfriend. *My would-have-been rapist.*

“Like I said before, he was going to your house that day to ask you. I wanted to tell you not to go out with him. I didn't know if he'd already be there. I didn't know what I would be walking into, but I had to stop him. You couldn't get hurt.” He shook his head, saying to himself, “Not you.”

I didn't know what to feel. So many emotions were going through me—relief, gratefulness, anger, pain. But there were others, ones I didn't want to name. So, I didn't.

I moved, pressing my lips to his.

It was a soft kiss, almost like our first one, but this one was different. There was something new about it, something tender. Warmth swept through me, filling every part of my body, and it pushed all those other emotions out. It was just us, just this touch. That was the only thing that mattered.

And, my God, I wanted more.

I moved closer to him and opened my mouth. He took over then. His hand held me still, and he moved his head, his mouth coming to mine. He wanted *more*. His mouth ground on mine, but I wanted it. My body was thirsting for it.

Kian

Jordan thought this was just about sex. It wasn't.

As I took over the kiss and guided her around, switching our positions, I knew this was so much more.

I hadn't been lying when I told her about Justin. He was an animal, and he deserved to be put down. I couldn't do that. I couldn't do anything that I wanted. People got hurt. They remained hurt, and the people who did it, the ones who hurt them, would always walk free. That was all I saw time and

time again. Hearing Justin, knowing what he was going to do, I couldn't keep quiet any longer.

And now—feeling Jordan beneath me, her mouth arched upward, moving against mine—it was worth it. Everything had been worth it.

I felt more for her than she was ready to hear.

Feeling it now, feeling that emotion and that need to possess her in so many ways, I started to tremble. I wanted to carry her to bed, rip her clothes off, and make her forget any other person's touch. I wanted to be imprinted on her, so no one would touch her again. I'd always be there. I'd be in the back of her mind. When another's hands reached for her, she'd feel mine instead. When someone else pressed her into the bed, it'd be my presence haunting her.

I wanted her.

I had for so long.

If Justin had been there, if he'd been hurting her, I would've done the same to him as I had with Edmund. Nothing and no one would hurt Jordan. She didn't realize it, but she'd never feel suffering again. I wouldn't allow it—whether I was with her or not.

But, right now, having her in my arms, I never wanted this to end. I wanted to take her over and over again. I wanted to make her come again and again, for as long as she would let me.

Thinking about it, feeling the need sweeping up and nearly choking me, I moved her against the wall.

The back of her head rested there, and then her body followed until she was completely glued between the wall and me. There was no escaping. She was mine. She reached up, and her hand slid around my neck. She began to pull down, and at the same time, her body moved up. I bent and grasped the back of her leg. She lifted herself with me, and her legs wound around my waist.

I could touch her now. My fingers could go between us and undo her jeans, and I could slide right in. But I held back. I wanted to savor this, and I wanted her to relish this.

As her body was rippling with need, her mouth never leaving mine, my fingers went underneath her shirt. One remained on her thigh, even though I didn't have to hold her in place. She wasn't leaving me. My other eased over her skin, up the side of her back, and she bucked. Her body jolted, and a moan left her as her legs tightened even more around my waist.

She tried to go higher, her body moving against mine.

I pulled back and rested my forehead to hers. We were both panting. Our pulses were racing.

Holding her gaze, I said simply, "I want to be with you."

Her eyes darkened.

Those contacts—I wanted them off. I wanted to see the beautiful eyes that she'd been hiding from the world. They bewitched Edmund. I almost couldn't blame him. She never knew the power she had. She thought she was a nobody, but she was the somebody everyone wanted.

Justin claimed her first. That was his mistake. I would've taken her, no matter who might have tried to stop me. But I held her now. I was claiming her now. I didn't think I could give her up, not anymore—not after holding her or touching her and not after I would be inside her.

My thumb rested on her bottom lip.

She gasped from the touch, her eyes clinging to mine, and she nodded. She swallowed and then murmured, “I want you, too.”

I stood back from the wall, holding her to me, and I carried her to the bedroom.

Setting her down onto the bed, she rose to her knees. We paused for a split second. I needed to make sure this was what she wanted. I didn't know what she was searching for, but her eyes were raking mine. She was looking inside me, maybe for the same reason.

I was there. I was on board. I more than wanted this.

Lifting a hand, I cupped the side of her face to make sure she felt the same.

It appeared. Any of her hesitation slid away, and in its place was the same need that was inside of me. I couldn't wait any longer after that.

I became lost in her touch as my mouth bent down to hers. Her scent, how soft her skin was, how she felt beneath me while writhing for more—it would all become burned in my memory. I never wanted to forget this.

I was hers. Whether she realized it or not, I was giving all of myself to her right now.

As I slid inside her, I watched how she reveled in the sensations. I'd thought she would close her eyes, but she didn't. She looked up at me. There were no walls between us. I let mine down.

I was a bad guy. I had done bad things but never to her. I wanted her to know that. She was the exception. She was the one, the only one, my soul would uphold above all else.

When she found out how bad of a guy I was, I only hoped she wouldn't leave me. Though, if she did, I wouldn't stop her.

CHAPTER 29

Jordan

Being with Kian changed everything.

My fingers curled into my thigh. After last night, I couldn't leave him. I had so many emotions about being with him, but they'd have to be processed later. All I knew was that I couldn't go away or hide anymore. That meant I would have to fight. And that meant I would have to face this storm on my own two feet, but Kian's team wasn't my team. I needed my own—Erica and Wanker.

I glanced down at Kian, who was sleeping next to me. His delicious long body was curved slightly toward me. The sheet snuck down, so it was barely covering his hips, and his arm was lifted, lying on the pillow, cushioning his head.

Holy crap. He's gorgeous.

In the early morning, light was starting to creep through the window. The curtains were pulled shut but not completely. A small crack allowed the light through. It wasn't a lot. It was still too early in the morning, but it was enough where I could see his arm tattoos. His arm was full of them. The arm that had been resting on my own arm was lying on the bed now between us.

I moved a little bit as I made a mental note to ask him about the meanings behind his tattoos, each and every one of them. A tribal tattoo merged with a wolf. A gun was pointed toward his hand.

Kian wouldn't have those tattoos unless they meant something deeper, and one day—My eyes jerked to his lips. I was suddenly hungry to hear their meanings. I wanted to know everything about him. I wanted to understand everything about him. But first, I started edging off the bed. I had a friend whom I hoped would still be my friend.

A hand caught mine right before I slipped from the bed. I glanced back.

Kian's eyes were open, and he was watching me. A small grin lifted his lip as he asked, "Where are you going?"

Oh, boy. Even right there—with how he was watching me, all dark and deadly—that ache that was only for *him* was acting up again.

I cleared my throat, cooling my loins, and grabbed the bedsheet that had been kicked into a ball at the bottom of the bed. I wrapped it around me, making sure my girls were nice and tight, before I stood. "Uh..."

I needed a lie.

I saw my phone was flashing from a text. After grabbing it, I read it out loud, **"Everything is out of your apartment. Call me for storage information. Your key was slipped underneath the hotel door. Snark."**

"That went off without a hitch." Kian sat up. His flat stomach bending seamlessly, his muscles gliding underneath

his skin.

I averted my eyes. “Yeah.” That wasn’t helping my getaway at all.

“Where were you going to go when I woke up? Tell the truth,” he said.

I looked back at him and saw the knowing look from him. “I have to go make things right with Erica.” I needed to know if she hated me or if I could trust her. I couldn’t turn my back on her until I knew for sure. “We’ve been friends for the past two years. I have to try.”

His eyebrow lifted as his hand rubbed at his jaw. “Now?” He started to get up and glanced at the clock.

It was 5:24 in the morning.

My head bobbed up and down. “Yep. No time like the present.”

His grin went up a notch. “You want to get there before my team arrives?”

“Yeah.” I nodded again.

He stood and reached for his jeans. “Okay. Hold on. I’m coming with you.” He disappeared into the bathroom but popped his head back out a second later. His eyes pinned me down. “Do not leave. I mean it.”

I’d intended to, but I shrugged, looking away. “Yeah, no problem. Of course.”

He went back into the bathroom, and his voice called out, over the sound of running water, “I mean it. Everyone’s out there. They know your face. They’re going to be looking for

you. I can maneuver around people. I can get you to your roommate without them knowing.”

Fuck.

His words brought the real world back to me. It fell at my feet with a resounding boom. I crossed my arms over my chest, holding the bedsheet even tighter, while thinking of the media storm that would be camped out in front of my apartment building.

“You were kinda stalkerish, hanging out in the shadows before. How did you get to my building’s roof?”

He came back out a moment later, his jeans on and his hair was slightly wet, like he’d wrung his hands through it a few times. Flicking a hand through the strands, he let them dry in a mess, even though I had to admit it was a sexy mess.

Going to the closet, he said over his shoulder, “Through the main door.”

My eyes went down his back, watching his muscles shifting, as he turned the light on and reached for a shirt. Yep, my hormones were not listening to me. He came back out with a black shirt and pulled it on. As the material fell against his body, I saw it was a perfect fit. He reached inside the closet again and pulled out a few more pieces of clothing.

He placed them onto the bed. “You’re going to have to blend like I do.”

My loins were all about blending. “Huh?”

His eyes narrowed. “I don’t have any parlor tricks. It’s still a little dark, so that means we can dress in dark clothing. Put

the white shirt on underneath the sweatshirt. You can pull off the sweatshirt if it's light outside when we leave.”

Going to a dresser, he pulled out a white baseball cap and a dark one. He held up the black one. “You wear this underneath your hood and pull both of them down. When we leave”—he held up the white cap—“you put this one on. And shades. You always have to wear sunglasses.”

“We’ll still get recognized.”

He shook his head, a slow grin tugging at the corners of those dangerous lips. “Trust me.”

I did, and that was how I found myself in the passenger seat of a black sedan, wearing a press badge and watching an entire army of media camped out across the street from my building. If we ran inside, they’d see us. We were screwed.

“How are we getting in there?”

Kian pulled out his phone and started typing on it. “The press are people, just like you and me, but when they have to work, they’re not paying attention. So”—he held up his phone—“we’re going to give them something to report.” As he said that, his thumb hit the *Send* button on his phone. “Now, we sit and wait.”

It’d already been thirty minutes. And we continued to wait again.

“Kian.” What had he done?

Then, I saw it. A pizza delivery car pulled around the block and headed for the media. I frowned, thinking he would go to my building, but he didn’t. He parked right in front of the closest media teams and started walking to them. Kian’s phone

buzzed, and at the same time, a frenzy came over them. Cameras that had been pointing at my building were whipped around. Reporters took their places in front of them, studying their phones for a moment. And in the midst of it, a second, a third, and then a fourth food delivery car descended before the media. All of the drivers were walking around, delivering food to surprised media crew.

Whatever happened, I knew Kian had something to do with it. For one second, we got an opening.

Kian said under his breath, “Now.”

Moving as if we were synced together, we got out of his sedan, quietly closed the doors, and went to the front door of my building. On the drive to my apartment, Kian said we’d be using the front door. They wouldn’t be expecting it. As I inserted my key and the door opened for us, they weren’t. No one yelled. No cameras were flashing pictures. There wasn’t a stampede coming from across the street for us.

We took the stairs, hurrying upstairs with only the scuffle of our shoes sounding from us. When we got to my floor, Kian stopped me before going through the door. “You ready for this?”

My heart was racing. I should’ve been out of breath, but I wasn’t. I was on an adrenaline high. We were about to sneak into my ~~apartment~~ old apartment, and somehow, I was going to talk this out with Erica. That was my hope.

It might’ve been a grandiose one, but when I’d woken up next to Kian this morning, I had to try. I just had to. Being with him last night did something to me. It changed me somehow. My outlook on life wasn’t in hiding anymore. I didn’t care if

the nation was going to hate me or blame me or crucify me. They did it before, and I survived, and that was when I had no one. I had people this time. Or I hoped I did. I had a roommate. I had a friend who was obsessed with my roommate, and Jake...well, I didn't know where he fit in, but I used to love him.

Well...

Maybe friendship was a lofty goal with him.

Either way, I needed to talk to Erica face-to-face, and I needed to apologize for lying all these years. And the running-away part wasn't good either.

Thinking about it all, about talking it out with Erica, my hand reached for Kian's. It fit perfectly, and I squeezed. "I'm ready." I remembered his phone when he reached for the hallway door. "Wait, what did you text before? To make the reporters react like that?"

A smooth low chuckle was my reward as he opened the door. "I had Cal send a credible anonymous tip that we were seen at the train station."

The train station?

But it didn't matter.

Kian opened the door, and he pulled me right behind him. When we got to my apartment, it was my turn. I sent a small prayer up that Erica hadn't changed the locks in the last few hours, and was rewarded when my key went in, unlocking the door.

She hadn't.

Two major roadblocks down. One more to go.

I would have to wake up Erica without causing—

As we slipped inside, she was up and at the patio door. The curtains were pulled, but she was peeking out. When she heard the door open, she twisted around, and a bloodcurdling scream came out of her throat.

Kian reacted before me.

He rushed forward, clamping a hand over her mouth. His other hand caught the back of her head, holding her in place so that she wouldn't fall backward from the sudden pressure against her face. As he quieted her, I shut the door and locked it. I rushed to her.

Her eyes were wide and straining, looking up at Kian, but they got even bigger when I came over. Her eyes were glued to my sweatshirt's hood, and I realized she didn't know who we were. I was lifting a finger to my mouth, about to tell her, when another problem happened.

Two doors opened at the same time, and two more bodies hurled themselves into the living room. Wanker came from Erica's room. Jake came from mine. He stopped and took in the scene in one second, his gaze skimming over me and landing on Kian, who was still holding Erica. A snarl formed over Jake's mouth.

I saw it happening and tried to stop Jake. I held my hands in the air and stepped toward him. "No, Jake—"

"Get away from her!" He lunged at Kian and started to shove him against the wall.

Kian reversed the hold. He stepped aside, letting Jake's body move past him, and then Jake slammed into the wall instead. He was stunned for a moment.

I raised my voice. "Stop! It's me."

They all turned to me.

No one reacted.

I cursed. It was my disguise. Ripping off my sunglasses, I pulled the cap and hood from my head and let them see me. "It's me. It's Jo."

I turned around, my arms held out, so all of them could see me. Wanker was still standing in Erica's doorway.

"Holy—" Erica started.

Jake finished for her, "Fuck." He glared at Kian in silence, still being held up against the wall.

I said to Kian, "He's fine. Let him go."

He stepped back. His hand loosened its hold on Jake, and as it started to fall away, Jake shoved it away, snorting.

"So, this is Kian Maston." He looked Kian up and down, his snarl returning to his mouth. "The infamous murderer. *Great* to meet you."

I ignored Jake, and so did everyone else.

Instead, I looked back at Erica. When she realized it was me, hurt flashed in her eyes before she lowered her head.

"Erica?" I stepped toward her.

Her head snapped back up. "Stay away from me." She was seething.

“Erica,” I started again.

“Get out.” She pointed to the door. “A team of federal agents took all your stuff. There’s nothing left for you here. Go.”

I moved forward a second step. I wasn’t going anywhere. “You’re here. My friends are here.”

“Oh, yeah?” Her nostrils flared. “The friends who you ran from.” She threw a dark look in Kian’s direction and said, “And the ones he came to save you from. Yeah, your friends, huh?”

Kian took off his sunglasses, cap, and hood as well. “I didn’t come to take her from you. I came to get her away from the media.”

The hostility level in her gaze dimmed just a bit, but she bit back, “I am the media.”

“Not anymore.” Kian pointed out the windows. “You’re the story.”

Erica’s lips flattened together. She didn’t have a response to that.

I looked at all of them. “I’m sorry I ran from the party. The media made my life hell, and I’m sorry that I had to keep—”

An alert from Jake’s phone went off. He checked it, hit a button on his phone, and stuffed it back into his pocket. He said to Erica, “It was her again.”

Erica cursed under her breath, raking her hands through her hair. “She won’t leave it alone.”

“Who?” I asked, my head skirting from Jake to Erica and back again. “Who texted you just now?”

“Oh, right.” Jake gave me a glaring look. “‘Cause we’re friends still? That means, I owe you an answer.” The glare turned to ice as his eyes switched to Kian. “I don’t owe you a goddamn thing, Jo.”

“Jordan.”

We all looked at Erica.

She folded her arms over her chest, her chin rising in a challenge, as her eyes centered only on me. “Her name is Jordan.”

Oh, boy. My hand pressed against my side, trying to calm myself down.

It wouldn’t work though. I knew this wasn’t going to be easy. They were angry. They were hurt. And they had every reason to be.

“I’m sorry.” I looked each one of them in the eyes—Erica, Wanker, Jake, and back to Erica again. “I have never trusted one person in my life. Ever. The people who I should’ve... well, my foster father tried to kill me, and my foster mother let it happen.” I pointed to Kian. “He is the one person who protected me. And he’s done it over and over again. I lied to you all because I had no idea if I could go against everything I’d been taught in my life, and that was not to trust anyone.” I moved closer to Erica. I was within arm’s length now. “I am sorry if I hurt you. I really am.”

She was wavering. I saw it in her eyes. A softness was entering there. Her arms fell from her chest, and her head went

back down, but she didn't say anything. She was still so silent.

Maybe this was a mistake?

Since waking up, I knew I had to try, but maybe my lies were too much to overcome. I glanced at Kian, and I started to go toward him.

Erica said, stopping me, "Okay, okay. We really don't have much to be pissed about."

My eyes widened. A weight lifted from my chest. "Are you su—"

Jake muttered, "Fuck this." He went for the door, shaking his head. His shoulders were tight in anger.

As he reached for the door handle, Erica called after him, "You can't say a word, Jake!"

He stopped, but he didn't turn around. "I won't, but that doesn't mean I have to stay here and listen to this bullshit either." Yanking the door open, he threw over his shoulder, "Your secret's safe. I won't tell a soul you're here." He was gone then, and the door closed behind him.

Erica flicked her hand at him in a dismissive manner. She rolled her eyes, saying, "His ego is bruised. Seriously, like he's got a leg to stand on. He was with you when he got back with his ex-girlfriend, and you two only started hanging out again. The way I see it, the only person who can be upset is me."

Wanker cleared his throat.

She said to him, "She's my roommate and friend."

He folded his hands together and looked down at them, but his soft voice sounded. "She's my friend, too."

My heart melted then.

This was Wanker—the Wanker who had always been there; the Wanker who, if we’d ever needed anything, he would be there in a heartbeat; the Wanker who had loved Erica for two years and never said a word, never got upset when she picked another guy over and over again; and the same guy who would always be there for her, no matter who she picked.

Erica was very lucky to have Wanker in her life, and glancing at her now, I saw the softening on her face.

He took his glasses off, cleaned them with the bottom of his shirt, and put them back on. A rueful nod came my way, and the corner of his mouth lifted. “Thank you for coming back, Jo. Even if she doesn’t say it, Erica’s glad, too.”

“Thank you, Wanker.”

Kian was watching the exchange, and I found his gaze now, but he was focused on Wanker. I was surprised. Instead of the normal reserved and walled-up expression that I thought he’d have, his eyes were narrowed slightly, and his head was inclined forward. He was curious about Wanker. When he turned to me, a look of approval flashed over his features, and he gave me the slightest of grins. Kian liked Wanker.

I liked knowing that. I wanted him to like my friends, and thinking of that, I still owed Erica the explanation of all explanations.

I asked Kian, “What time is Laura coming?”

Erica frowned. “The publicist, Laura?”

Kian answered me, “She’s here. She texted. She’s at the hotel, waiting for me.”

Me.

Not us.

I didn't think he meant to say that or maybe I was being sensitive, but I remembered Snark's words. "*They're his team, not yours. You are not their client.*" He was right.

Laura was Kian's publicist, not mine.

CHAPTER 30

“Well,” Erica said as soon as the door closed behind Kian, “he was hella hot for the interview before, but seeing him up close and personal and when he looked at you”—she pretended to fan herself—“a volcano would’ve melted itself. The chemistry between you two is hot.”

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t stop from grinning. Erica was adamant that the media didn’t know I was there. They knew I hadn’t been earlier. The rumor was that I was holed up somewhere with Kian, so they were hoping for a lucky break. The plan was that I would stay and hide. Kian slipped out because that was what he did, and he was going to meet with his team. We’d connect later during the day with a better plan of how to handle my life being upended.

I sat down at the kitchen table as Erica started the coffee.

“I know there’s a lot of stuff being said in the news, but what’s the real scoop?” she asked.

I held my tongue, unsure of what all to say.

When she heard silence, she glanced back at me. “I’m asking as a friend. I won’t share any of this to anyone. I promise, Jo...rdan.”

Wanker pulled out a chair and plopped down. Raking a hand through his hair, he let it fall to the table with a thud. “She’s Jo. We met her as Jo, and she’s still Jo to us.” His head

bobbed my way. “We’ll call her whatever she wants to be called.”

Both of them were quiet now, waiting for my choice.

It took me a moment to process this.

Jordan or Jo?

For so long, I’d been forced to be Jo. For so long, Jordan was met with scorn and judgment. There was none from either of them. My throat closed up as I choked out, “You can call me Jordan again.”

“Jordan, it is.” Erica finished the coffee and took the third chair at the table. She looked from Wanker to me and nodded to herself. “This feels right, the three of us together again.”

And...cue a litany of apologies and explanations.

I started, “Erica, I am so, so sorry—”

She held up her hand. “Look, I wasn’t born yesterday. I watched the case in high school. You were crucified back then. It was like you killed your foster father, not that deliciously hot mysterious guy who just left here. I get it. I do. I was just”—she lifted a shoulder in a shrug—“hurt that I didn’t know. And can I say, kudos for a dramatic exit from the party? That had everyone spinning. I mean, Kian came in and saved you *again*.” She pretended to fan herself once more. “If I had one romantic bone in my body, I’d be swooning.”

Wanker’s eyebrows pinched forward together. “Yeah.” He frowned across the table at her.

I bit down on my lip. Making things right with Erica was the first goal, but after that, I was clueless. For the first time in

a long time, I had no idea where to turn to or run, if I should even run.

Clearing his throat, Wanker asked quietly, “What’s going to happen now, Jo...rdan?”

A slight chuckle left me, bouncing my shoulders up and down. It’d be a while before my given name would become normal to them, but that was the least of the changes I’d be getting accustomed to now. I let out a sigh and fell back against the chair, gazing around the table.

Wanker was concerned. Erica looked troubled as she was biting down on one of her nails.

I shook my head. “I have absolutely no idea.”

Erica’s hand fell from her mouth. She suddenly jerked forward in her seat, her elbows landing on the table, as the coffee pot was spouting behind her. It was almost done with the first pot. “What exactly is the problem? I mean, I get it. You were hiding from the media—”

I interjected, “And the nation.”

She kept going, waving a hand to me, “And the nation. I get that. But people can’t blame you anymore. Kian is out. He got out early, and they’re not prosecuting him anymore, so that means you’re in the clear, too.” Her head moved back and forth from Wanker to myself. “Right?”

He lifted his shoulders. “The public isn’t forgiving. They blamed her when the case unfolded. From the reports we caught earlier, it sounded like it was going in the same direction.”

Snark said I'd be blamed as a distraction from Kian's retrial, but that wasn't going to happen. He said the police weren't searching for me anymore either. Those worries were done and put away. There was one big one though. Wanker had hit it on the head, the public.

"I might get kicked out of school."

"No way." Erica frowned. "They can't do that. You were a victim three years ago. And you had to go to school while the case was in trial, too. They can't kick you out for being a victim."

Victim. I winced at that word. "I'll probably lose my job."

She started to protest.

Wanker stopped her. "She'll cause a disruption if she works there. They could fire her for that. I don't know about school, but I'd imagine they could kick her out. A trumped-up reason is all they need, and I've no doubt the administration could find one to justify their actions."

No school. No job. What would I have then?

These guys. That's what.

And Kian, a voice said in my head.

But would I?

We'd been together. He saved me over and over again, but Snark's words were in my head, too.

Did Kian's team have anything to do with the note going public? It led to my discovery.

No.

I shut that down.

I couldn't go there.

“The public hates her,” Erica said. The sputtering from the coffee pot died. “Let's change their minds.”

My head started to fall down, my hands folded together in my lap, but I looked up. Her eyes were clear and bright, determined.

She gazed at me to Wanker and back again. “What do you think?” Her voice was almost upbeat.

Wanker frowned, taking his glasses off. “What do you mean?”

“I mean...” She searched for the words. “We do a live interview. Yeah, it could work. Susan got in touch with the local news station when we did that interview and when she was shopping it around. They wanted to buy it. My email was attached on a bunch of those group messages. I know one of the camera guys. We've hung out at the Wine Cellar together. He'd help us, or he'd get us in touch with who could help us.”

“You mean, you'd do the live interview?” Wanker's elbow was propped on the table, and he pointed his glasses from Erica to me. “You would interview Jo...rdan?”

Her head bobbed up and down. “Yeah.” As the idea grew, so did her excitement. Her eyes were brimming with it. “And we'd go live, so nothing could be edited out. This is a great idea, you guys.” She clapped her hands together and extended them to us. “Why aren't you more excited? This could change everyone's opinion of Jo—Jordan. She's never spoken out before.”

“I wasn’t allowed to.” I’d been advised against it.

“But you’re not a kid anymore. You’re of legal age. We should do it. This could take care of everything, if your side is out there. No fires will be started, and no one can twist your words if they’re already out there.” She scooted back her chair. “I think it’s the only option, or Jordan’s going to have to live in fear again.” She stood to get some coffee.

I could already hear Snark in my head, telling me not to do it. And Kian’s team...they’d protect him first. I doubted they would want me to say anything. I didn’t know what Kian would say, and a side of me didn’t want to ask. I should. He deserved the chance to voice his opinion, but in that moment, I was tired.

All the years of hiding.

All the years of being scared.

All the years of holding my tongue.

Erica was right. I’d never been allowed to speak out before. I felt hushed, by both sides of the case, by the social worker, by the police, by everyone. I was tired of keeping quiet. I was tired of listening to everyone else, and right then, right there, my decision was made.

I looked at Erica. Bringing a poured cup of coffee to the table and halfway bending down to sit on the chair, she paused. She held still in the air, her hand a few inches from the table.

Before I said a word, she read my decision. A wide grin appeared on her face. “Yeah?”

I nodded. “Yeah,” I said to both of them, “I want to do it.”

Erica dropped the coffee cup on the table, letting the liquid spill out, but she didn't care. She thrust a fist in the air. "Yes!"

Wanker only frowned. He only slowly put his glasses back on, sliding them up his nose.

I felt good about this. I was doing the right thing...right?

Erica wanted to move as fast as possible. The media was already going full steam about me, and more and more reporters would be arriving throughout the day. The storm was going to triple, but she didn't need to tell me that.

I already lived through that nightmare.

After she emailed the camera guy, he gave us a time and location to meet. Everything was being set up on his end. He would be bringing along a news reporter, but she swore to secrecy, and it was someone Erica trusted. If Erica was okay with the person's presence, I was, too. I was giving her all my trust.

As we were getting ready to leave the apartment, I checked my phone for the fifth time in the last few hours.

No call or message from Kian.

I wasn't sure if that was good or not, but I was still going to do this. I was done hiding. I was done doing what others wanted. Telling my side, this was what I wanted to do. It was what I had to do. It was my way of fighting for my life again, or at least trying.

An hour later, Erica's phone buzzed with a text. The other reporter and camera guy were sending a car, but the same instant she read those words to us, a commotion sounded from

the street. It had been building the longer we sat inside, but I was ignoring it. I didn't want to think what it meant.

When a police siren ripped through the air, I knew it was happening all over again.

I was back there in the police station as they carted Edmund's body off. Kian was being questioned in a separate room, and I was taken back to the hospital for more tests.

A detective opened the door, and they were all there—media and people from the town. I felt their hate. I felt it instantly.

“Kian Maston is a good boy!” someone yelled at me. “Why did you ruin his life?”

“Were you sleeping with both of them?”

“God's not going to save you. You're going to hell.”

“You're the murderer!”

Once Kian's name and face had been released to the press, my life had ceased to be.

Hearing that siren, I knew why they were there, and I went numb. I turned it all off.

Wanker went to the patio and peeked out. He frowned back to us. “It's completely packed. There are two cop cars downstairs—”

The apartment intercom buzzed.

Wanker stopped, turning to it. “Well...” His hand rose to take his glasses off, and his other hand raked through his hair.

He didn’t say anything else.

Erica glanced sharply to me. “What do I do?”

Everything was dull for me, but I answered, “Let ’em in.”

They knew I was there.



Snark texted earlier, asking if I went back to my old apartment. I was right. The word was out, and I replied with a, *Yes*.

His next text came.

I sent you a gift. Let them in. They’re shadowing you for the day. That’s all I could get them for.

I asked where he was, but he didn’t respond. The two police officers were the ones who informed me that Snark had been called back to federal headquarters. That was all they knew and all they could say. I was conflicted. Snark would hate that I was *with* Kian now, but I also wanted to talk to him about the interview. I needed Snark’s approval or maybe just his reassurance.

One officer added, “Someone tipped off your location. That circus is only going to double the longer you stay. You have somewhere else to hide?”

“Yes,” Erica said before she disappeared into her bedroom. When she came back out, she dumped three bags at their feet. The bags were packed to the max, protruding out. She caught my look and lifted a shoulder. “I have no idea when I can come back here. You heard Kian. I’m a part of this story now, too. I figured we’d have to leave sometime. I wanted to be prepared.” Her arms folded over her chest. “I’m ready to go. And I know our first stop.”

Erica went to the door first, and her bags remained behind. As she led the way out, Wanker picked up one. The second officer picked up a second, and I took the third. If anything, I figured I could use it to shove people back or block anything thrown at me.

We got down to the main floor and were heading for the front door, when we were stopped once again. Susan appeared with a camera in her hand. She pointed it at me.

I had two seconds to brace myself.

“Jordan Emory, are you in love with Kian Maston?”

Erica started for her. “It was you, wasn’t it?”

Wanker cursed under his breath beside me, and he shifted so that I was behind him.

Erica lifted her hand, as if to grab for the camera, but Susan dodged her. She backtracked, saying, “Come on, Erica. I have to do something. The paper is being laughed at. We had her right under our nose. Did you know?” She swung the camera to Erica, and her finger pressed a button. She was zooming in on Erica. “Have you been lying for her the entire time?”

A guttural growl came from Erica, sounding from the bottom of her throat. “Back off, Susan.”

Wanker jerked forward two more steps. At the same time, the police officer who was behind me moved in front with a hand extended toward me. He was holding me back without touching me. The other officer was watching the exchange.

Wanker snorted. “The text to Jake. It wasn’t a text, was it?”

Susan’s nostrils flared. Her eyes were dilated, like she was on something. Her cheeks were flushed, and the ends of her hair were wet from sweat.

I saw it then. She thought she had the scoop.

She was wearing a smug smirk. “I’d been calling Jake the entire time. He doesn’t know what he did, but he didn’t reject my call. He accepted it and stuffed his phone into his pocket, or I’m assuming he did. I could hear everything. Imagine my surprise when I heard *her* voice.” She pointed the camera to me, lifting it higher to see me over the officer’s shoulders. “And I heard Kian’s voice, too. Where is he?” She raised her tone, sending the question to me. “He was here before. Where is he now?”

Erica muttered a curse and then started forward. “Fuck this.”

“You can’t touch me!” Susan jerked backward, her back hitting the wall.

Erica ignored her, reaching for the door behind her. Susan realized her mistake then. She had been pushed into a corner. The door opened, and it blocked her in even more. She was flat behind the door. Erica started to hold it, keeping her in that

corner, but Wanker nudged her forward. He held the door open as the rest of us formed a line, going past one by one. All the while, he had his back to us.

As I went by, Susan turned the camera to follow me, and I looked over my shoulder. I got a glimpse of Wanker's face. He was staring hard at Susan. His eyes were flat as his lips moved. He was saying something to her, but as Erica opened the front door, the sounds from the street flooded us. I couldn't hear what he was saying, and she shrank down. Her arm dropped down, and she almost let the camera fall to the ground. Her jaw slacked, and her mouth fell open. She could only stare at Wanker before he turned and followed behind us.

After that, everything happened so fast.

People were yelling my name as I was ushered into a police car. I scooted in next to Erica, Wanker plopped next to me, and the door was slammed shut. The second officer hurried to his squad car, and then we were moving. The crowd was forced to move aside for us, but there really was no going back.

I had to do the interview.

CHAPTER 31

Kian

After a three-hour meeting with the lawyers and Laura, everyone was on board. My body was tired, but I wanted to find Jordan again. I knew she was safe with Erica—or at least hidden—but I still wanted to hold her. I was leaving the bedroom, after washing up and changing clothes, and I was about to call her when Laura stopped me in the hallway.

“You knew about this?” Her tone was sharp.

I frowned. “About what?”

My phone lit up. For a split second, I thought it was Jordan, but it wasn't. It was Cal. He never called unless he had to.

I held a finger up to Laura as I answered the call, “Cal?”

Laura took the phone from me.

“Laura—”

She listened for one second and then marched to the living room. She grabbed the remote and hit the *Volume Up* button. As she did, I stopped. Jordan was there on the screen. In some dark, private room, she was sitting all alone with one lamp shining behind her.

Laura said to me, still gripping my phone in her hand, “It’s one camera on her. One person is asking her questions. Your girl, who you just went to bat for, is selling you out.” She stabbed the remote in the air toward the television. “She’s doing a live interview, Kian.”

My jaw hardened, and I grabbed my phone from her. “You don’t know that she’s selling me out. All retrial charges have been dropped. I’m in the clear, and so is she.”

“It’s the public’s opinion. She’s going to turn them against you. What then? You’ll be screwed if she does.”

I wasn’t listening. Whatever Jordan was doing, it wasn’t that. Jordan had feelings for me. I felt them from her hours earlier. I felt them inside her. There was no way.

I grabbed my keys, and I headed out the door. No one stopped me. They didn’t dare. As I hurried down the hallway, I brought my phone back to my ear. Cal was still there.

I asked, “Where is she?”

Jordan

“You can talk to me and look at me. It can be as if we’re having our own private conversation,” Erica said, sitting right next to the large camera.

It was easy for her to say, and I got it. I did. She wanted me to be the most genuine I could be. It was going to be live, and I had no doubt that other channels would pick it up immediately, but this wasn't her life. It was mine, and these were my words.

There was one light above, shining on me. A blanket was thrown over the backdrop behind me, covering two paintings in our motel room. I felt the gazes coming from the rest of those in the room. The two officers remained outside. This wasn't their job. They were assigned to keep me safe for the day, but even with their absence, the tiny room felt cramped. Wanker sat on the bed, to the side. The camera guy was behind the camera, taking directions from Erica, and the other reporter Erica trusted was standing behind her a few feet away, in the open doorway for the bathroom.

All eyes were on me.

I already felt hot.

Millions of eyes would be on me within minutes.

My pulse sped up, and I had to fan myself with a magazine.

Did I really want to do this?

I'd never spoken out before. I wanted to talk to Snark about it, but his phone was off. I didn't know what happened to him, but he'd been the only other constant during all of this. Kian was the other.

Kian.

I had to call him—but no, I was getting confused. I shook my head, feeling a fog coming over me.

I had called him. I texted him and then called him again.

The reporter said we needed to go live now. The sooner, the better. “We have to get ahead of the story,” was how she put it. Erica agreed. So, here we were, about to go live.

I was going to pass out.

“Jo?”

I looked up, hearing Erica. She was the reporter now, not my roommate, but she gave me a soft smile. There. She was still my best friend. It was small, but it was enough.

I nodded, clearing my throat. “I’m ready.” My fingers dug into the underside of my chair.

She still gazed at me for a moment longer, studying me, and then nodded herself. She signaled to the camera guy. “Okay, let’s do this.” She twisted around to the other reporter. “Your station is a go?”

The lady clipped her head in a quick movement, up and down. “They’re good to go. You can start whenever, and they’ll jump in after a quick introduction from their end. It’ll be fine.” Her eyes darted to mine then, widening with the same excited rush that Susan had earlier.

I didn’t want her there, but Erica said it was necessary. They wouldn’t broadcast the interview if one of their reporters wasn’t present.

I just wanted to get it over with.

“Okay.” Erica gentled her voice. “Jo, you can start whenever you want. This is for you. It’s your time to address us. Tell us what you want us to hear.”

The light on the camera went from clear to red. He was taping me. This was now live.

And I couldn't speak.

My throat wasn't working.

Erica scooted forward. Her chair protested, groaning, and the other reporter held her breath.

Erica didn't care. She said so calmly, "Let's start with an easy one. What's your name?"

"Jordan Emory." My heart was trying to pound its way out of my chest, one heartbeat after another. I needed to calm the fuck down.

One breath.

Two.

I closed my eyes and pretended it was only Kian and me, just us two, just like earlier in the day.

I started again, my voice stronger this time as I opened my eyes. "I've been hiding as Joslyn Keen for a little under the last three years. I tried to finish my senior year, but couldn't. I ended up quitting and finishing with my GED."

"Why did you have to hide?" Erica was subdued.

She was trying to draw me out, but she couldn't. I had to choose to come out.

My nails dug even further into my chair, but I was trying. I really was. "I had to hide because people hated me."

"Why—"

I didn't need her prompting anymore. "Because, a long time ago, a very rich and good-looking boy saved my life. He killed my foster father, but instead of people focusing on what my foster father did or that the rich and handsome boy *had* to kill him in the first place, they focused on me. They blamed me."

They blamed the victim.

Erica cleared her throat, fidgeting on her chair. I didn't know what was making her uncomfortable. I didn't care.

I kept going, looking right into the camera this time. "My parents died in a car accident when I was little. I wasn't adopted, so I went from foster home to foster home. It's the same old system that only foster kids understand. I moved in with Edmund's family during the summer, and the first part of the year was fine." I took a breath. Here was the hard part. "Until I got a boyfriend. I had no friends, so when Justin started paying attention to me, I was grateful. Someone cared. Someone was interested."

Maybe someone would love me.

My voice dropped to a whisper, but I never looked away from that lens. "Edmund didn't like that I was going out on dates. He and his wife were having problems, and he liked looking at me, but that was all it was. He just *watched* me."

I could feel him again. He was in the room. He was seeing me once more, just like back then. He was always there, always waiting, always watching.

I had to stop talking for a moment. My breath hitched in my throat. I pulled my nails out of the chair and smoothed my

palms down my jeans to wipe the sweat off there.

“He began drinking, and then he started drinking at work. That led to him being fired, and then he drank every day at home. He would go through a bottle every night. Sometimes more. His wife hid it all. She’d keep him out of the house when the social worker came, not that it was often. It happened more in the beginning, but then not as often toward the end. His wife was nice and warm...to others.” I refused to say her name. My tone hardened. “They had two biological children, who kept the secret, too. None of them talked.”

“What about the day Kian saved you?” Erica leaned forward, resting her elbows on her legs. Her head lowered, her focus so intent on me. “Tell us about that day.”

That day...

I felt myself slipping away. I was in my bedroom again.

I was there, not in the hotel room. I could hear my voice speaking, sounding far away. “I broke up with my boyfriend a few weeks earlier. He started to get more and more demanding when we were together. He wouldn’t ask. He would just grab my body whenever he wanted. Edmund would ask me every day if *that boy* was going to come back again. I told him he wasn’t, that I broke up with him. He was asking me about Justin again that day, but I don’t remember why...”

Wait.

I stopped.

I was reading a book on my bed when the floorboards creaked from outside my door. There was no reason to be

scared. Edmund stood outside my door all the time. He never did anything. He never came inside, but that day, I was scared. I knew, somehow I knew, even before he opened the door and came inside. I didn't remember moving, but then I was at the window.

I was watching it happen again. I was removed from my body, watching from the other side of the window, and it was like that then, too. I was a spectator to what happened.

I watched from where I was safe.

I turned around so that my back pressed to the window. Edmund was inside my room. He was shutting the door. He never shut the door when he came inside. It was always left open. That was one thing his wife insisted on, but he turned the lock on it now.

I reached behind me and held on to the window frame.

I said to Erica, "I was so scared."

"Tell us what happened. What are you remembering right now?"

I told her as I experienced it again.

He was drinking. I could smell the beer on his breath. His shirt had two beer stains on it, like he'd used it to wipe his face off. His face was sweaty. And, my gaze dipped down, his pants were undone.

There was an added gleam in his eyes. It was twisted and dark, and I knew then. I knew what was going to happen to me.

A switch turned off in my head.

I said, "I didn't know if I was going to live." My voice was so quiet now.

"What did you do?"

"I had to get out of there."

"How?"

I remembered forcing my fingers to let go of the window frame, but I didn't release it.

I still held on.

The window was locked. Edmund kept every window locked, but there were two locks. One was at the top, and I kept that unlocked out of habit. When he checked the windows, he'd only check the bottom lock. He was too lazy to move the curtain aside to check the top one.

I said, "I unlocked the window behind me, but he was staring right at me."

"Did he say anything to you?"

I frowned. Had he? It'd been so long since I had to remember this all. "I think..." Wait...I remembered something new. "He came up because I had a phone call."

“That boy called today.”

“Justin called earlier.” That was why he was in my room. “Edmund was angry with me, saying the same stuff as always.”

“What did he always say?”

“He liked to ramble about my eyes.”

“Your eyes?”

The confusion from Erica pulled me back.

I slipped away from my old bedroom and came back to the hotel room. I was once again sitting in my chair, staring at a camera and a friend, but it felt like they weren't there. I shivered, feeling Edmund there.

I gestured to my face. “I have colored contacts, but my real eye color is unique. He would think I was a demon when he was really drunk. He'd rant about it and how I was sent to tempt him.” My gut shifted, sinking low. I felt sick. “Some days, he'd say I was a goddess, and other days, Lucifer sent me. But that day—” I stopped. My mouth grew dry. I was almost too scared to continue. “He wasn't saying any of that on that day.”

“What happened, Jo?”

Jo. Not Jordan.

I shook myself awake. I was doing a live interview. *Wake up.* I had to focus.

Drawing in a short breath, I shoved the memories aside and concentrated on the camera again. “He was saying things about how he needed to eradicate his temptation once and for all. He wouldn’t be unfaithful. He was a loyal servant, but he was at his end. He had to take care of me. I knew I didn’t have a lot of time, but then I heard the front door open. I thought someone was coming to save me, and I hoped. I looked, but —”

I felt something trickle down my cheek.

I gazed down. A tear fell to my arm.

“No one was coming. They were leaving. It was his wife and the kids. They were in a hurry because she always had them dressed nice whenever they left but not that day. They were in sweatpants and T-shirts. They didn’t even have their coats on.”

There was dead silence, both in the hotel room and that day in the bedroom.

She had abandoned me. “I was going to die. I knew it then.”

“How did—” Erica’s voice choked off before she coughed, clearing it. “How did Kian see you that day?”

“They left in the car the same time he was crossing the street. He saw them go. I thought that was what made him come and see what was going on.” I knew better now. “He looked up and saw me in the window.”

I flinched. It had only been for a second, but I still remembered when our eyes met.

He saw me, and something turned off in him. His mouth flattened. His face grew hard and impassive, but it was his eyes. I knew what he was going to do when he came, and when he started for the door, I turned back around.

Kian was coming.

Edmund didn't realize it. He was behind me. He didn't know whom I saw in that slight moment. But then he drew closer to me, bringing the knife up to my throat and whispered, "I cannot take you anymore."

He bent close, so his breath was coating my face. I bit down on my lip to keep from cursing at him. I needed him to wait. I needed time to pause.

"He started cutting me." I looked down to my lap. My nails were bleeding, so I tucked them under my legs. I couldn't look into the lens anymore. "He was going to have fun torturing me. He wanted the demon in me to come out, and then he was going to pour salt into my wounds. He thought that would anger the demon even more."

A small cut to the hands. A mild cut to the wrists. As he kept going, the cuts got deeper and deeper. The tops of my arms. Edmund lifted my shirt. He made me take it off, and he cut where my ribs were. Across my stomach. My hip bones. He turned me around then. At the same time, he reached around and pulled the curtain all the way down to the window frame. No one could see us.

Where's that boy?

I remembered wondering that.

He began cutting my back. He was carving a pattern into my skin. When he was done, he turned me around again, and stepped back to admire his work.

His gaze fell to my breasts.

“I think he would’ve cut them off.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “That was when Kian burst into the room.”

He saw the blood.

“What happened then?”

I didn’t want to remember, but I forced myself to look back up to the camera. “He killed Edmund. That was what he did. Edmund threatened to kill me if Kian didn’t leave. He grabbed me and brought the knife to my throat. He was going to slice my throat then and there.”

“But he didn’t?”

I shook my head. Everything was so painful. “Kian lunged for Edmund, and they fought.” I closed my eyes. Kian knocked him down, then he moved so fast. He grabbed the knife and sliced Edmund’s throat instead. I said, “Kian was alive. I was alive. Edmund was dead.” No one needed to hear me recite what happened after that.

“The police reports say that Kian stabbed Edmund seventeen times.”

“I don’t care.” That was the truth. “Kian saved my life. I didn’t ask him to. I didn’t seduce him. I didn’t even really know him before that day. I had no idea that he even knew I existed, but I am thankful he did. He saved my life.

“Everyone wants to spin this so it’s something more, but it’s not. Even if Kian hadn’t killed him, Edmund might’ve killed someone else. He was sick.” And twisted. He deserved to die. “Kian probably saved someone else’s life, too, that day. That’s it. That’s all there is.”

The silence was so deafening. It was thick, heavy like my heart.

Erica pointed to the camera and asked softly, “Is there anything else you want to say? A nation is listening.”

Was there? A resounding *yes* sounded in my head. I made sure I was looking right into the camera, and I sat up. I wanted people to hear this. It was my one-time plea to them, but there was something missing, something else I needed to do. It hit me then. My eyes. I was still hiding, and I couldn’t. Without letting myself second guess myself, I reached up and took my contacts out. There was a soft gasp in the room. I skimmed a fleeting glance at Erica, whose eyes widened, but I looked steadily into the camera. I couldn’t mince words. “This is me. This is all of me.” I waved a hand to my face. “I’m not hiding anymore, and I’m not going to be blamed for what happened *to* me anymore. From here on out, I would like to live as normal of a life as possible. That’s all I want. I just *want* to be normal.”

“And,” the other reporter moved forward, signaling to the camera guy, “that’s a wrap.”

CHAPTER 32

Erica still had to finish something up with the camera guy so Wanker and I were waiting by the door when the reporter came over. She smiled, looking up from her phone. “You did so well. Honestly, you were amazing. I checked, and your interview is already trending on social media.”

I nodded. She was saying words, and they had meaning, but I was hollow. Nothing was getting inside and staying there. It was all bouncing around and then leaving me again. I supposed I would care later after I could process what I just did.

“And most of it is positive,” she kept going, scrolling through her phone again. She was beaming down at it. “With Erica’s name on it, I know you just made her career.” She paused to glance up, and waved to my eyes. “And those are breathtaking. You’re going to be a hit.” If our station can do anything further for you, please let us know. We just want to support you.”

Wanker grunted.

She glanced to me, frowning slightly. “What?”

“Nothing.” Wanker said as his hand curled around my shoulder, and he pulled me to his side.

For right now, he was shielding me from her. That much registered with me. I leaned against him, so damn thankful I

had gone back to the apartment. She gave us another smile and wandered back to Erica and the camera guy.

Wanker muttered under his breath, “Oh, yes. I’m sure they’d love to support you, and reap the benefits from it, too.”

I closed my eyes. “We had to use someone.”

“I know. Erica said they were the best ones to work with, but still. They’re using Erica, her friendship with you, and you most of all. I’ll be happy when all of this is over.”

I looked up, the corner of my mouth turning down. “You don’t get it.” I pulled away, facing him directly.

“Get what?”

I shook my head. “There’s no going back, Wanker. This is it for me.” I gestured to the camera and where I sat moments ago. “I did all of that for one reason. I need to make things just a tiny bit better. That’s it.” I wasn’t dumb. I knew how people would react. I was known. I’d always be known. “I did that to *maybe* get people to do things not as much. Not hate me as much. Not bother me as much. Not want to call me names when they see me in person as much. That’s it. I’m not fooling myself. It won’t all go away, but I want some of it to go away. Just a little part of it.” That was all I could ask for, that was all that would realistically happen.

“What about you and Kian?”

I cocked my head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“I saw the looks between you two. You’re together.”

It wasn’t a question. He knew, just like he had known before.

I let out a sigh. “When did you figure it out?”

“When you both came to the apartment—”

I waved that off, shaking my head. “No, not that.”

“Oh.” His head straightened up, and his shoulders rolled back. “I knew you had a secret. You didn’t like crowds or people in the beginning. I figured something happened. You looked a little more like your old self our freshman year, but not enough where I’d put two and two together. I mean, who would? That case was talked about in every house, and why would I question a girl who looks a tiny bit similar to her?” His glasses slid down, and he pushed them back up. “Your contact fell out one day.”

“My contact?”

He nodded. “It was real quick. It came out in the library when we were studying. You took off right away, and you kept your head down, but I saw the color of your eyes. It’s unmistakable.”

I frowned, remembering that day. “That was a year ago. You’ve known for this long?”

He never said a word.

“Yeah. I mean, I understood why you were keeping quiet.” He lifted a shoulder before looking at Erica over my shoulder. “I was going to tell her. I had it all planned out, then a story about you came on the television. It was a coincidence. They were running those stories more often back then, but I watched it differently that time. I knew you and I put myself in your shoes. I got it. I did. I knew why you were hiding, but Erica started going off about you. She thought there was more to the

story, how you must've manipulated the whole thing and I knew I couldn't say a word. She wouldn't have understood back then." He paused, skirting from me to her and to me again before saying, "She still doesn't, you know."

"What?"

I went still. Erica had said she was okay with it, understood why I lied...but she got over it so quickly. I was surprised, but I didn't want to press my luck.

He nodded, taking off his glasses. I noticed the bags under his eyes then.

He murmured, "She's trying to be a supportive friend, but she's hurt."

Erica was shaking the reporter's hand and then the camera guy's. Everyone was smiling. They seemed almost giddy. I didn't see a hurt friend, but if Wanker said it, it was true. He knew her the best.

"Well, shit."

"Erica loves you. She's hurt that you lied to her, but she understands *why* you lied." He peered over my shoulder, also watching the woman he loved. "If it's any consolation, I don't think it will take much to make her feel better. Probably an extra few words about how your friendship means the world to you."

"It does." She was family. I realized that now. "It really does."

"Tell her, and she'll love you forever." His voice dropped, filled with pride. "She's a good person like that."

I looked up at him and saw the love for her in his eyes. “You need to tell her how you feel.”

He looked down, meeting my gaze. He let out his own sigh. “I know. Maybe one day. Maybe when I think she’ll return the words.” His hand squeezed my shoulder. “I’m going to wait outside, talk to the officers, and see where they suggest we head to now.”

I nodded as he slipped out the door, and I didn’t wait for long. Erica came over right after. She saw Wanker leaving. Although sounding out of breath, she was glowing. “Where’s he going?”

“He left, so I could tell you how much—”

“Ah.” She held up a hand, stopping me. Her head bobbed up and down. “I got it. And I know what you’re going to say, but you don’t have to.”

Well, damn.

She added, “I was hurt, yes, but I get it. I do. After hearing what you said just now, how could I *not* get it? I’m just hurt that you were hurt and felt like you couldn’t trust me, if that makes any sense.” A rueful grin appeared, and she rolled her eyes. “Not to toot my own horn, but I did *good* with that interview. I was on point, and now listen to me. Bumbling idiot”—she pointed to herself—“right here.”

And I wouldn’t have her any other way. “Thank you.”

She reached for my hand and squeezed it, then pulled me in for a tight hug. She held me close. “You are so beautiful and kind and amazing, and I just wanted to tell you that.” She let me go and fanned herself, blinking rapidly. “I can’t cry, not in

front of those two behind us, but Jo,” her hands fell to my arms. “When you took your contacts out, I couldn’t believe it! That was amazing.” A fond expression entered her eyes. “Thank you for trusting me.”

I was the lucky one. She had no idea.

“Okay. For real. We have to go or I’m going to break down.”

I nodded. “I’ll be right behind you. I need to check my phone quick.”

She raised her voice, calling over my head, “Thank you for everything, guys!”

They waved.

I wanted to see Kian. He was next on my list to make sure everything was right between us. I called him and texted. There was no response before the interview. Checking my phone now as Erica went to the door, a lump lodged itself in my throat when I saw one simple and solitary text message.

Outside.

There was something hot and delicious about that one word, but I was also nervous as hell. If he was angry, if he was disappointed, if he was hurt—I couldn’t think about those scenarios.

I followed Erica outside, but leaned close once the door shut behind us. “He’s here.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Who?” But she leaned her head close, dropping her voice. “Kian?”

I nodded.

She glanced at the door. “Let’s go before they do. They’ll use him being here for part of their package.”

“Package?”

“Yeah.” Her eyes narrowed a tiny bit. “The interview went live, but they’ll use this footage in their own package, too. I’m sure they’ll broadcast it tonight.”

“Oh.” That made sense. “Okay.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure they’ll spin it in a positive way.”

The two officers were standing next to the door. Wanker was leaning against the wall, his hands in his pockets. All three of them regarded me. There was no Kian, but he was here. He was somewhere. I could feel him.

I started for the corner, but paused. “Erica?” I looked at her.

She waved me off. “Go. Be with your man. I’m going to get drunk to celebrate.”

That was all I needed, and immediately, the warmth of knowing I’d see Kian shortly filled me up. I started walking around the corner.

“Uh...” Wanker started to say.

Erica hushed him. She said, “He’s here. She’s looking for him.”

“Uh...” One second. “Oh!”

“Miss Emory.” One of the officers cleared his throat. He was behind me, following. “We should get in the car.”

I didn’t stop. I knew Kian was here.

“Ma’am?”

I was almost to the corner. The interview was done. I did what I had to do. It was time to see Kian again. A low buzzing sensation started in my stomach. I couldn’t wait to see him. I couldn’t wait to be in his arms once again.

“Miss Emory, I’m going to have to insist that we go back to my car.” The officer was beside me now.

He was moving forward, and I felt him closing in. He was going to try to stop me. At the same time, his hand lifted for his radio. Then I rounded the corner.

There *he* was.

There was no car. Instead, he wore a leather jacket, and he was waiting on a motorcycle. The kickstand was out, his bike resting on it. His face was hidden underneath a helmet, but it was him.

I started for him, not thinking anymore. I was done thinking.

“Miss Emory,” the cop started again.

I went to Kian. As I walked toward him, I felt *it* in me. I didn’t know when it happened. I didn’t know what would happen in the future, but he was there. A helmet was in his hand and I knew it was for me. I reached for it, starting to pull it on. He stopped me. His hand fell onto mine, and he turned my face up to his. He stared at my eyes and after a moment, a

soft grin tugged the corner of his lips up. A look of pride filled his gaze, and it swelled in me too. I really was done hiding.

His hand fell from mine and as I pulled on the helmet, the cop sighed. “We’re supposed to keep you safe all day today. We’ll follow you then?”

I swung my leg up and climbed behind Kian. My arms wrapped around him.

He spoke for me, “We’ll be at my hotel.”

I stopped listening. He told the cop where we would be. They would come. They’d do their job, be around me so the public couldn’t hurt me. They did it before, and they’d do it again. Until things settled down, they would continue doing so, but I wasn’t considering them anymore. After the interview, saying my side, and having Kian waiting for me, everything would be okay.

It had to be.

He had come for me, and when I went to him, I knew right then and there... I was in love with Kian Maston.



If someone told me three years ago, as I was covered in blood and sitting in the back of an ambulance while watching Edmund’s covered body being wheeled past me on a gurney, that I would be riding on the back of a motorcycle with Kian Maston, I would’ve laughed my ass off. From the hysteria, the absolute perplexity of it, that both of us would be infamous, that we’d be hiding under black motorcycle helmets, and that I

would've just realized I was in love with him—I would've laughed, cried, and punched whoever told me that.

But here I was.

Kian's hand would cover mine whenever we stopped at a stoplight, waiting at an intersection. It was completely ludicrous, what we were both doing, but I didn't care. If we were together, the media would never stop. If we went our separate ways, maybe we would have a chance for a normal life, but I couldn't walk away from him. That was all I knew. It'd been this way for a while, ever since he came back into my life. I hadn't been able to stay away, much less walk away.

We went back to his hotel. I was tense going in, but no one was there.

Seeing my look, Kian chuckled. He still held my hand, and he tugged me farther inside. "When I saw the interview, I asked everyone to leave. They went to their own rooms for the night."

"The whole night?"

He nodded. A shadow fell over his face. He asked almost tenderly, "Is that okay?"

I couldn't talk. My throat closed up, but I moved my head up and down. It was more than okay.

Feeling his gaze on me, I felt shy for some reason. My cheeks warmed, and I glanced to the floor, fingering the bottom of my shirt and tugging it down. This was ridiculous. We had sex. I just went on national television and bared my soul, but now, after realizing I was in love with him...

I eyed the floor beneath my feet. Could it swallow me up? Was it too ludicrous for me to wish for that?

“Jordan?” Kian moved closer, his voice dipping low.

I mustered up a smile, looking up. God, he was gorgeous.

His eyes were intense and focused on me. His lips were pressed together. I remembered how they’d felt and tasted before, how his hands had caressed me and trailed over my body, how his body had felt on top of mine. Every little caress, ministrations, kiss, tender touch from him—I was remembering all of it in one overwhelming moment. Had I loved him this whole time? Had I not known it?

“I did that interview today.”

“I saw.” His finger touched beside my eye. It was the slightest of touches. “You took your contacts out.”

“I needed to be all of me. I felt it was the right thing to do.” Even more emotion swept up and lodged in my throat. “I didn’t do it just for me. I did it for you, too.”

His voice dipped even lower, so soft. “How so?”

“People think I seduced you. That’s always bothered me. It wasn’t just that they blamed me. It was that they were putting the wrong spin on it. You didn’t go in my house because you were mindless or brainwashed, like you were under my spell or something. That’s beneath what you did. You went in and saved me. That was it. There was nothing else to it.”

“Jordan.” His hand lifted back to me, but he held it still.

I sucked in my breath, knowing he was going to touch me. I was ready for it. I almost closed my eyes, waiting to relish

the feel of his hand on me again, but he pulled back at the last second. I looked up to find him staring at me with a wondering look on his face.

“What?” Had I said something wrong?

His head gave the slightest shake, but he still moved back another step. “Nothing. I...my parents hate what I did. My sister, too. Justin raped her, but when she heard what I did and the real reason behind it, she was angry. How could I save you and not her? She’s been resentful ever since, but just now, hearing you...thank you.”

“What for?” My lips parted from confusion.

“I’m not the hero.”

“You saved me.”

His head clipped from side to side. He didn’t move, but I felt him retreating even further. “I’m the bad guy. Don’t you get it?”

“What kind of bad guy saves people?”

“The kind like me. I didn’t do it out of the goodness in my heart.” A stricken look passed in his eyes. “I didn’t give a shit about anyone until you came to school. I didn’t care about any girl, any friend, or even my own family members.

“People hurt people. That was my motto. Everyone and anyone deserved what was coming to them, but you came to school, and all of that went away for me. You were good. You *are* good. It would’ve been the worst goddamn thing to happen. You matter. Your life. Your soul. Your heart. Everything about you matters: the breath you breathe, the tears you cry, the smiles you give, the sound of your laughter, how

your mind thinks, the values you hold dear.” He was fierce. “They don’t matter, Justin and Edmund. You gave. They took. They hurt. You heal. You are worth both of them, a thousand times over. You, Jordan. You are worthier than anyone I know, including me. You are pure. You don’t use people. You don’t have hidden agendas. You don’t misuse your friendships. That’s all I saw while growing up, until you. What you say, you mean. There is nothing hidden with you. You are good.”

I frowned, gazing up at him.

“Edmund was evil, but I’m *still* a bad guy. I just hurt someone who was worse than me. That’s all I did that day. I can’t let you turn me into some hero that I’m not.”

“Stop.” My head was buzzing. “So what if you’ve done bad things? So what if you were a shitty person at some point in your life? That doesn’t define you. You did a good thing. Saving my life, that was good. Don’t twist that. Please.” My chest was aching. “If you say that wasn’t a good thing, then what am I? If you cheapen what you did, you cheapen me. Don’t you see that?”

His mouth opened, but no sound came out. His eyebrows furrowed together.

I was good.

Saving me was good.

Therefore, that made him good.

It was so simple in my mind. I didn’t want that taken away from him or me.

I choked out, “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier about the interview. It happened so fast. I just wanted a chance at a

normal life.”

“My publicist told me.” Some of the intensity lessened a bit, and he gave me a rueful grin, raking his hand through his hair. “She thought you were going to throw me under the bus.”

“What?” I started to shake my head. *Never.*

He nodded, stopping me. “I know, and it was a good move. You needed your message to be out there. I get it. But when they find out that we’re together...” he started, holding off.

My stomach churned. I knew what he was saying. “I’ve worried about the same thing.”

“What then?”

“What we are isn’t—” But I was wrong. It was their business. I’d just gone on national television and projected how it was. We were no longer just the two of us. “Maybe we could—”

“You told your story,” he said.

I held his gaze, frowning slightly.

He added, inclining his head toward me, “Maybe we could tell our story now?” He gestured from me to him. “That is, if we have one?”

My tongue was heavy, lying on the bottom of my mouth. Oh, yes, we had a story. It was one that I couldn’t quit reading, no matter how hard I tried.

“Tell people that we’re—” I stopped.

This was it. This was the talk.

My cheeks were hot now, but I had to say it, “That we’re together?” I wanted to avert my eyes, but I didn’t. I held fast and watched him back.

He nodded, his rueful grin slipping to something intimate, one that started an excited flutter in my stomach. “We are, if you want us to be?”

“I do,” I blurted out.

“Good.” His shoulders lifted, as if a weight had disappeared. “I want that, too.”

“You do?”

He moved toward me, and his hand touched the side of my face. He tilted my head back, his eyes so tender. “Being with you last night was the best night I had ever had.”

“Really?”

He leaned down, so his forehead was resting on mine. He gently moved his head up and down, rocking me with him. “Yes. And it meant more than you could ever imagine.” His hand dropped and rested over my heart. “I don’t know when it happened, but I fell for you.”

My heart clenched.

He said, “I was angry that day because Justin wanted you back, but I wanted a chance with you. I didn’t want him to take it from me. I saw Edmund hurting you then, and I blacked out.”

I reached up and grabbed his hand, my fingers curling around it. “You testified in court—”

“I know.” His forehead was heavily resting on mine. “I told the court exactly what happened. I saw you, went in there, and all I thought about was saving your life. That’s what I said, and to an extent, that’s what I remember. I didn’t testify that I *wanted* to kill him. When I kicked open the door and saw his knife on your throat, I knew I would use it against him.” His eyes held mine. “He was going to take your life, so I took his instead. I’m still a murderer. You can’t pretty that up.”

I shook my head, my hands cupping his face, and I raised my lips to his. “Shut up.” I touched his mouth, and I closed my eyes. I was going to show him how good of a person he was.

CHAPTER 33

As he slid inside me for the second time that night, my hips moved down on him, and I held still. I saw the lust darkening his eyes before his gaze skimmed down my body, lingering on my breasts. His hands went to my hips, and I began to move, up and down. I started the pace, and I kept it.

This was what I wanted. How fast, how hard, how deep—it was all me.

Kian moved with me, sitting up to kiss my shoulder and trailing his mouth up to my throat. His other hand left my hip to cup the back of my head. He tipped my head down, and his lips were there. He was waiting for me.

His mouth moved over mine as I kept rolling my hips forward, backward, and forward again. My mouth opened, and he slipped inside, sweeping around my tongue. He was starving for me. A rush went through me, hardening my nipples.

I would never get enough of him.

That night, both times and a third time later in the morning hours, that time was our sanctuary. We created our own universe, and no one could intrude.

When I awoke again, I lay still. The early morning was creeping toward us from underneath the curtains. I glanced at the clock and saw it was around six.

Thud!

Hearing that, I sat up. My heart pounded a little bit harder, and I frowned, hearing a second thud. That was what had woken me up. Someone was inside Kian's suite.

Slipping out of his arms, I grabbed one of the robes. I pulled it on, but a flash caught my eye from the nightstand. His phone had a message. I touched the screen just to see if it was someone important. If it were, I'd wake him up, but I couldn't see whom it was from, so I left it alone. It wasn't my business.

Hearing a third thud, I turned toward whomever or whatever it was and snuck from the bedroom. The intruder was trying to be quiet. A feminine curse sounded next.

I was forcing myself to keep calm. Kian had an entire team of lawyers and publicists. It could be any of them, and a voice in the back of my mind told me to wake him up, let him deal with this person. My feet weren't listening. They kept moving across the plush carpet, barefoot and padding silently down the hallway. I approached until I was against the wall that separated myself from the kitchen, where the person was.

I held back for a second.

"Shit. Mother of—" She hushed herself, groaning out loud. "Seriously, the least he could do is have a good rose or even a merlot."

My eyebrows pinched together. She was looking for alcohol?

"Fuck it." She kept grumbling, "I'm ordering. Thank you, little brother, for your American Express."

My eyes got big. I sucked in my breath. This was Felicia Maston.

Memories from her during the trial flashed through my mind. She was gorgeous. I remembered that from Fosston. Two years older than Kian, she looked similar with sleek dark hair. Her eyes were blue, and she had modeled briefly. She suddenly stopped modeling one day, but after hearing Kian's explanation about Justin, I wondered if my ex had been the reason for her career's demise. Had he broken her?

Realizing that I was about to come face-to-face with Kian's sister, a whole slew of nerves broke out. I almost felt like throwing up, but it was what it was. If Kian and I were going to be together, I shouldn't be scared of talking to his family member.

She was ordering mimosas to be delivered to her bedroom, which wasn't in Kian's suite. It was a few doors down. She sounded so chipper until she hung up the phone. Another curt curse left her lips before she swung around the counter, and there I was. My hand was flattened against the wall. It was obvious that I had been eavesdropping with my head folded down. My teeth sank into my lip.

"Oh!" She reared back, her hand flattening against her chest. "Shit. I didn't expect a chick to be here. My brother doesn't usually let them sleep over..." Her voice faded, and she tilted her head to the side, getting a better look at me. "Wait a minute."

I geared myself. It was coming...

Her eyes lit up in recognition, and her head lifted backward. "Holy shit. You're..." Her mouth fell open. "He's actually boning you now? I can't—" She shook her head

before laughter peeled from her. “Oh my God.” Her shoulders started to shake with more laughter.

Apparently, I was funny, just from being here. “How did you get in here?”

She kept laughing. “I’m a Maston, honey. I can go anywhere I want just because of whose blood is in me. It’s the same with Kian. He can go anywhere, do anything...do anyone.”

The nerves were leaving me. Irritation was taking their place.

She held up a hand and wiped at the corner of her eye with the other one. “I can’t get over this. I mean, it’s you.” Her hand gestured to me, up and down. “I...just...whoa.” The amusement was lessening, but she wiped at her eye once more. “My parents are going to flip.”

My teeth ground against each other. Kian’s sister was a bitch. I forced myself to be nice. I had to try. “It’s nice to formally meet you.” I didn’t hold my hand out.

Her eyes flicked down, but she didn’t hold hers out either. “Yeah. You, too. I guess.”

“Guess?” A hard edge slipped out from me.

Her eyes shot to mine now. Oh, yes. She heard that from me.

She swallowed and nodded. “Let’s just cut the bullshit between us. I’m not trying to be hurtful here, but you’re a joke.”

Forced laughter spewed from me this time. “Really?”

“I’m not saying that to be a bitch, even though I know I can be.” Her eyes rolled upward, searching. “Like, eighty percent of the time, I’m an ungrateful and self-righteous pain in the ass. I’m spoiled. My parents pay for everything for me. I’m having an affair with a married guy, and I’m a closet alcoholic.”

“Closet?”

She lifted a shoulder, her head bobbing up and down. “I’ll give that to you. I’m pretty in-your-face about being an alcoholic, but I’m not any of those things *right now*. I’m being a good person when I say that you’re a joke.”

A hard boil began deep inside me.

Her hand flattened against her chest. “I’m to blame for most of this. Did Kian tell you about Justin?”

My neck was stiff, but my head clipped forward a little bit.

“Kian felt horrible about what happened to me. He wanted to rip Justin’s head off his shoulders. I wanted that, too. Our dad forbade it. It would’ve messed up a multimillion-dollar deal, and I hadn’t helped the matter at all. I cried to Kian every night for so long. I pleaded with him to go and kill Justin. I wasn’t thinking about Kian or about our dad. I was being selfish. I hurt, so I wanted everyone to hurt.”

My eyes glanced back to the floor. I murmured, “That is understandable. Justin raped you.”

“Yeah.” Her tone was wry. “Our family didn’t see it that way. I’m telling you this to help you understand Kian’s head. He saved you that day from Justin, but it was really me he was saving. All the aggression he had toward Justin came out on

your foster father. I'm to blame for most of this shit. Me." She mused to herself, "I almost wonder if it would've happened to any girl, and if you were just the lucky one?"

I lifted my head, feeling dislike and loathing for this person standing in front of me.

"You don't use people. You don't have hidden agendas. You don't misuse your friendships." I heard Kian's voice again.

His sister was hateful. That was what was going on here. She was angry. She wanted to hurt him by hurting me. I wasn't just some girl.

"That's all I saw while growing up—until you. What you say, you mean. There is nothing hidden with you."

I murmured, "You're wrong."

She stopped. "Oh, honey." A genuine laugh barked from her.

That word again. It was condescending.

She added, "I'll admit that I came here to be a pain in my brother's ass. I saw your interview, and I had to come and congratulate him. Me being nice to him is how I piss him off. If he's talked about me, I'm sure he's told you that the two of us don't get along, at all actually. He kicked me out of the hotel a couple of weeks ago. Well..." She paused, grinning to herself. "He kicked me out of the city, but he did the impossible, or I thought it was the impossible. I had to come and give him his dues."

"What are you talking about?"

“The interview, how you went on TV and proclaimed to everyone how much of a hero he was. A job well done for Kian. He got you to do the interview, right?”

I shook my head. “I spoke the truth. That’s all I did.”

“Oh...” She was so damn sympathetic.

It was making me want to rip the hair out of her head.

Her entire demeanor changed. Her eyes were haughty. “He’s not said anything about the family business to you?” Her voice dropped to a quiet murmur, like she regretted to break the news to me. “The business, the same business that my father wouldn’t risk endangering when Justin raped me, is the same for Kian. My dad was furious when Kian killed that guy. My mom and I knew why he did it, but our dad didn’t. He kicked Kian out of the family—‘unofficially.’” She lifted her fingers to make air quotes.

“It’s been that way since Kian went to prison. Dad had such high hopes for him, and my brother flushed those hopes down the toilet, but time’s passed. Kian’s realized what a mistake he made, and since he got out of prison, he’s been trying to find a way back in. He’s still out of the family, though.”

Her eyes rolled to the ceiling. “*Unofficially*. What a *joke*, huh?” She winced. “Sorry about that word. I suppose that’s harsh. You’re not the joke. My brother is the joke. My brother was told that he had to change the investors’ minds about him. If he didn’t, no billion-dollar job for him.”

“What are you talking about?” My hands curled inside the robe’s sleeves. I tugged down on them as hard as I could. I

hated hearing anything she was saying, but I had to wait. I wanted to hear everything before I clawed back at her.

“No convict is going to be the CEO of the Maston Empire.” Her lip curled up. “Could you imagine that? What would that do for the stocks? My dad’s company would crash the stock exchange all on its own if Kian took his place at the head of it, but that’s what he’s been angling for since he got out of prison.”

I didn’t believe her.

“But,” Felicia gave me a bright smile that looked hideous, “that’s all over now. The public loved Kian before, but the investors didn’t. All that’s changed now. I mean, he got you to go on national television and proclaim that all he did was save a girl. Is that how you put it? Damn. With an endorsement like yours, you just handed Kian the family jewels again.

“The investors met last night. I was coming to play with Kian a bit, tell him he needed to do better than that, but he should be hearing from our dad soon.” Her eyebrows pinched together. A speculative gleam formed in her eyes. “There might even be a message on Kian’s phone right now.” She nodded behind me, toward the bedroom. “Check his phone. The code to get in is two thousand twelve. Kian’s dark humor. That’s the year he went to prison. I bet you anything, once Daddy and the board members let him back in, he’s going to change his code to two thousand fifteen, the year he got back his life. That’s how he views it anyway.”

“You’re lying.” But even as I said it, there was a look in her eyes. I grew up with liars, and there was something truthful

coming from her. And I hated that. I didn't want to wonder what part was true. I refused to believe all of it was.

Still. I didn't have to take her condescension with a smile.

She laughed, saying, "I can see it in your eyes. I'm not, and you know it."

She moved past me, but I moved so I got to the door first. She paused, a question in her eyes as she watched when I grabbed the door handle, but I opened it, a nice fake smile plastered on my face. Her eyebrows knitted together. She wondered what I was doing, so I stepped back even more. The path was open. She could exit freely.

Her eyebrows cleared then, and she moved forward a few steps. Once in the hallway, she turned around. "I'm a lot of things, but right now, I'm being the best friend that you've never had. Leave him. Don't let him use you anymore—"

I shut the door in her face, and I slammed it hard enough to make a bang.

Then I stared at it. She was Kian's sister, and a part of me felt obligated to let her talk, but after hearing what she said, I didn't like it. I didn't like her. I didn't like how she drove a knife into her own brother's back. Justin raped her. I felt bad for that, but the rest of her actions, I crossed my arms over my chest. Hell no. I did not have to feel sorry for the kind of person she had become. A bad past doesn't make a bad person. She could've done better, but even as I was thinking all of that, a nagging voice was in my head.

Kian wasn't using me. There was no way. I remembered what he said earlier. "*You are good.*"

But then I heard her parting words. *“Don’t let him use you anymore.”* And I remembered another thing he said. *“My father is the last person who would help me.”*

Snark’s words were next. *“Don’t trust anyone.”*

My stomach dropped to my feet because I knew, right then and there, that I was going to read that message. I had to. I had to make sure I wasn’t being used, but as I went to the bed, my body started to shut off. I wasn’t sure what I was going to read on his phone, but whatever it was, I couldn’t let it break me.

Kian was still in bed, sleeping. Sprawled out, lying on his stomach, his head was turned toward my empty spot. He had an arm out, as if he searched for me but fallen back asleep before realizing I wasn’t there.

The room was warm, but I didn’t feel it. A full-fledged shiver wouldn’t stop going up and down my spine, and my teeth were damn near chattering, but my focus was on that phone and whatever the message said.

My hands were slick. I rubbed them off on the robe and picked up the phone. My hands were shaking, too. I willed them to stop, as I keyed in the code. The phone unlocked, and I hit the unread message. It had been sent from Carl Maston. I paused for a second, my eyes flicking to Kian once more. I felt a pang in my chest, but opened the message. I had to know.

It worked. You’ve been voted back in. Call me ASAP to go over everything.

A second message came through as I was holding the phone. I almost dropped it but tightened my grip.

It was from the same Carl Maston.

Well done, son.

CHAPTER 34

I left.

I called Snark, but he couldn't come pick me up. He suggested not going to Erica and Wanker. They were known as my friends now, so the media would be on them. When Snark asked why I needed another hideaway, I didn't answer. He just heard a slight snuffle from me and said I should go to the one place no one would think to look for me.

I called Jake.

He sounded surprised on the other end, but he'd be there in ten minutes. I was waiting in the back entryway of the hotel. If anyone looked for me, they could easily find me. My nails were digging through my sleeves and into the palms of my hands as I waited. I needed Jake to get here now.

I called Snark back. I didn't want him to worry.

"What did he do?" Snark asked, distracting me.

I knew he didn't mean Jake. "He used me."

He was silent on the other end.

My frown deepened. I didn't know what to think of his non-response.

He asked, "Are you sure?"

"Snark."

"I just..." He let out a sigh. "Look, I've not been a fan of that kid since I heard he wanted to talk to you, but since

dealing with him during this whole debacle, he doesn't strike me as the using type."

"I don't," I clipped out. But I had to ask him a question. "You said that Kian's dad wanted him back for the company. You were going to go and see his parents to talk about keeping Kian away from me. Did you?"

"Oh." He got quiet.

My eyebrows lifted. "Oh?"

"I don't know what it means, but I never told you about that meeting because it didn't happen."

"You don't think I should've known that information?"

"*Want* and *should* are completely different. I think you should've known, but I didn't think you wanted to know. It doesn't tell us anything, except that his dad is a jackass. That's it, but we all knew that already."

"And you're telling me that you don't think Kian's using me after that?"

"What did he use you for?"

"To give him a recommendation or something. His sister said the investors of his dad's company didn't want Kian in, but now that I've spoken out, they're letting him back in."

"His sister?"

"Yeah, Felicia Maston."

"Ah, cripes. She's a piece of work herself. Are you sure you believe her?"

I leaned back, resting my head against the wall. “No. She’s shady. I can tell that much, but she was telling the truth about this. She didn’t strike me as the loving kind of sister, but...” I couldn’t shake my gut. She told the truth. “I’m over being hurt.”

Not from Kian, not after I gave him everything.

“Well, okay.” Snark was resigned. “I mean, if this is what you want to do, I’ll get back as soon as possible to help you.”

“No.”

Jake’s car turned around the corner.

I straightened from the wall. “I’m okay. My ride’s here.”

“Listen, I got called back to headquarters. I don’t know. Maybe that was the kid himself, or maybe his pops called in a favor and got me hauled back here, but my supervisor is stalling. The case they want me on isn’t panning out, and I’m on leave. Technically, I don’t have to stay here. Do you want me to come out there? I’ll fight them here, if you want me to.”

“No.” That was his job. “Stay. Do what you’re supposed to. I’ll be fine.”

Jake’s car slid to a stop, and he opened the passenger door, waiting for me.

“Thank you, Snark,” I said before hanging up and stuffing my phone into my pocket. Hurrying into the car, I asked Jake one question before I closed the door, “Did you intentionally answer Susan’s phone call before?”

“No.” He held my gaze. He didn’t seem surprised what I asked him, and he wasn’t being defensive. There was no

eagerness in his eyes.

“Okay.” That answer would do for now. “Can you take me as far away as possible?”

He nodded. “Close the door.”

I did.

And he took me to a park.

Once the car stopped, turned toward a river that surrounded the park, I threw my hands up. “The park? You took me to a park? Jake.”

His mouth twitched. He was trying to hide a grin, and then he stopped trying. A big grin broke out along with a slight laugh. “Come on. It’s kinda funny.”

“No.” *Not at all.* “I’m not amused. I need to stay hidden.”

“Oh, yeah.” He undid his seat belt and leaned his seat back. His hand dismissed that notion. “Your interview made everyone love you. You don’t have to worry about getting tomatoes or flour thrown at you. You’re golden. You’d get lifted onto shoulders and hoisted in the air, if anything. You’re just fine. Plus,” he looked me up and down before smirking, “you’ve got your whole disguise look going on.”

I hadn’t thought about what I grabbed when I left, but I was dressed in one of Kian’s black sweatshirts and my jeans. I hated to admit it, but the smell of Kian was driving me crazy. I tried blocking it out. It was starting to hurt too much.

“Why here, though? Why not your place?”

“Because Tara’s there.”

I could only look at him. Those words...

I smacked him on the arm. “After all that time with me, you’re back with her?”

He chuckled softly. His smirk turned into an actual grin, and he shrugged. “I know. I realized I was a dumbass, and by the way, Tara ended her friendship with Susan.”

“She did?”

He nodded. “Tara found out what had happened, that Susan called me to get info on you for a story. Tara wasn’t happy about it. She saw it on the news. The whole thing’s there, Susan trying to ambush you guys. Someone caught it on camera.”

“Really?”

“And Wanker cornered her and had a standoff against her. Susan was seething. She was so pissed, said she’s going to sue.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, please. Who’s she going to sue?”

He shrugged. “Anyone. You? She’s saying you ruined her career, but she’s the jerk-off, not you.” He quieted, growing serious. “I mean, yeah, a lot of people were pissed at first, but I get it. I know why you hid. Everyone knows why you hid, especially after hearing your interview. Tara was bawling like a baby. She said I had no right being mad at you, and she followed that with a threat, saying I could never try to hook-up with you again, even if she and I break up.”

He was grinning again. It was infectious.

I found myself grinning back, and I teased, “Let’s face it...”

He waited for me.

“You’ll probably break up in six months.”

He held up some fingers. “Three. My bet is three.”

“Of course. I should’ve known.”

“And we’ll be together again in six months.”

I pretended to hit myself on the forehead. “What was I thinking?”

He pretended to be disappointed, shaking his head and making a disapproving tsk sound in his throat. “I don’t know. What am I going to do with you? It’s like we don’t even know each other.”

That warranted my first real laugh in a long time, a really long time. It felt good. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For”—*letting me relax*—“making me think the world isn’t going to end.”

“You could make it up to me, you know.”

My eyebrow arched up again, and I waited, my grin still in place. “Oh, yeah?”

“Next time you do an interview, let it slip that I am the greatest stud you’ve had in bed. My cred will go through the roof. Tara will either be the most envied girl, or I’ll be the luckiest guy, depending on if we’re on a break at that time or not.”

My insides were aching from the laughter. I shook my head, pressing a hand to one of my ribs. “We have to stop

joking. I'm beginning to hurt."

"Eh." Jake winked at me, his tone unforgiving. "You're the one who called me. You should've known."

"I should've?"

"Yeah." He made one of those disapproving tsks again. "I mean, especially the last time you saw me...two days ago? If you didn't know that we'd be rolling in giggles here, you're just stupid."

I barked out a loud laugh. I wasn't even trying to hold it in now. No other cars were in the parking lot, and it was early. Any morning joggers or walkers would be distracted by their headphones or dogs.

Jake had been furious with me the last time I saw him. And now, seeing him like this. He was with Tara, and he was happy. And this was how we were at our best, as friends.

Once my laughter faded, I asked, "You're not mad at me?"

"No." He shook his head, growing somber with me. "My ego was wounded. Hell, my ego took a nosedive underground once I saw you with him, but no, I'm not mad anymore. I wasn't mad before either. I was madder at myself. I knew there was a guy, remember?"

Kian's voice came to me again. "*A guy knows. He knew someone else was in the picture.*"

Jake began to pick at his steering wheel. "I mean, that was our whole thing. We were going to be accountability partners."

"I know, but—" He wanted more. I knew it. He knew it.

“I had no reason to be mad,” he said with more force. He wanted to make sure I got it.

Holding his gaze, I nodded. “Thank you.”

He nodded. “Yeah, no problem. But since we’re here, what did the douche do? You didn’t call me to hash it out at six in the morning.”

Gone was the teasing and precious camaraderie. It was down to business now.

I pressed my lips together. “He used me.”

“Bullshit.”

I frowned, my eyebrows bunching forward. I didn’t know what I’d expected, but it wasn’t that, not from him. “Huh?”

“I call bullshit. That’s the biggest piece of stinking diarrhea I’ve ever heard. Who told you that?”

“His sister.”

“Is she a royal bitch or something? A spoiled princess or something like that?”

I tried to figure out if he was joking. I didn’t think he was.

Shifting in my seat, I crossed my arms over my chest. I uncrossed them then and picked at the imaginary lint on the bottom of the sweatshirt. My head folded down. What did it mean that both Snark and Jake weren’t buying it?

“I mean it, Jo...rdan—whatever name you want me to call you. I meant what I said. I saw how he looked at you in the apartment. And I saw how he looked at me. I was competition. He was jealous of me. Since that was the first time I saw him

up and close, I'm inclined to think he was jealous about the time I got to spend with you. There was no agenda from him.

“Whatever was told to you that got you running out of his place at this unholy early hour, it's bullshit. Go back, and listen to him. The guy's almost obsessed with you. I could tell. Even though I'm not on the same level as him, I could've been, if we had been given a real shot. If I'd killed someone for you and then found you again later, I could have felt what he was feeling for you. I don't know for sure what it is, but it's real.”

I...couldn't talk. My throat closed up. My fingers curled up into balls, and I only sat there, feeling a small seed of hope taking root.

That was all I wanted.

I was too scared to believe, though.

Jake started the car and backed it up before pulling onto the road again. His apartment was in the opposite direction.

“Where are we going?” Even my voice was barely above a whisper, and I thought it held yearning, too.

“Where do you think?”

I knew. I didn't have to ask anymore.

When he pulled up to the same door I'd left moments earlier, he let out a pocket of air. “I'm sorry for being angry before. I'm sorry for accidentally letting Susan know where you were. But for this,” he gestured to the hotel, “I'm not sorry for bringing you back. Go get your guy.” He patted my leg. “Go get your happy.”



Kian

I woke up because the bed was empty, and then I heard the door shut. I knew it was bad even before I rose out of bed.

Judging from the clothes on the floor, she left in a hurry. No note had been left in the suite. I called Laura and my lawyers, but no one knew anything. No one saw her, and Jordan hadn't texted me. I felt it in my gut. She was gone.

I was changing to go look for her when I saw my wallet on the windowsill. I went to grab it, and that's when I saw him. Jake Monroe. He was in the driver's seat of his car, and he was driving away. I caught a glimpse before his car turned the corner.

My hand fisted the window curtain. *Fuck this*. If he had called her—*No*. I shook my head and closed my eyes tight.

If he called her, that was on her. She decided to answer the call. She decided to leave my bed, to go to him. That was on Jordan. I couldn't fault him.

Shit, I waited two years in prison for her. I had so many reasons to leave her alone, but I hadn't. I should've, and I still should, but I wasn't going to. With that, I knew my decision had been made.

Fuck me if I was looking like an idiot in love, but that was what I was.

I loved her.

And I never told her.

I gritted my teeth. I'd told her I had feelings. I shook my head and started for the door. I was going to go after her. I was bringing the phone up to my ear. Cal could use the tracker to find her, but my door opened then. My sister walked inside.

Seeing the smug look in her eyes and the smirk on her face, it clicked. This was her. Whatever it was, whatever had been said, I knew Felicia had something to do with Jordan leaving.

I gutted out, "You did that, didn't you?"

"Hell to the fucking yeah." She raised her head. She wasn't even going to deny it. She was gloating.

"You bitch."

She lifted a cold shoulder. "In my defense, it wasn't like I came in here, looking for her. I wanted to order some food and booze off of you, but there she was. When I came around the corner, she was lined up, ready to come and meet me." A dimple showed in her cheek. "I couldn't help myself."

Fuck.

She eyed me. "She swallowed it, hook, line, and sinker. Maybe I saved you from her. Maybe I'm actually being a nice sister?"

"You're delusional."

"Meh." She lifted her other shoulder and headed for the kitchen. "Life could be worse. Think of what you have in your future. Daddy called me this morning. He said your proposal for the building for the foster kids was approved.

Congratulations. That's good news, right?" She called from the kitchen, "You're acting like your cat just died."

"Felicia." My teeth were permanently grinding against each other now. "Get out of my suite."

"Relax." She came back around the corner, her arms filled with food that I'd ordered for Jordan the night before—food that we never got around to eating.

I was raging inside, but this was Felicia. This was how she was and had been since the court case. "What did you say to her?"

"Nothing." She moved for the door. So did I.

I blocked her. "Felicia."

She backed up a step and readjusted her hold on the food. "Kian."

I was done. "I'm sorry your boyfriend hurt you. I'm sorry he forced himself on you and that someone you loved hurt you in the worst possible way."

She flinched, looking away.

I kept going, "I'm sorry our parents did nothing to stand up for you."

Her eyes closed, and her chest lifted, holding there. Her teeth sank down into her lip.

"I'm sorry I went away to prison. I really am." I did mean all of that, but I was done with her. "But please stop hurting me back. You need to tell me whatever you said to her."

"Why?" Her face scrunched in confusion. "It's not like you love the girl. You want her to help with the press for the new

foster care building. I get it. That's why you're here. Seriously though, Kian, whatever this little obsession you have with her, you need to drop it. Mom and Dad aren't amused."

"Mom and Dad have no say in it."

And it wasn't an obsession. It was love. The more I felt it slipping away, the more I realized how real and overwhelming it was. I loved Jordan with almost everything inside me.

Felicia rolled her eyes, moving around me for the door. She started to open it, and—

Fuck it.

I was there in one second and slammed it shut.

She fell back a step, her eyes wide, as she could only gape up at me. "Wha—" she started.

I growled over her, "What did you say to her?"

"Kian?" She didn't look away from me. She wouldn't dare.

"I mean it. I've let you come here. I've let you charge all your alcohol, hotel movies, food, clothing, whatever you wanted on my credit card. Fine. I figured I owe you.

"I wasn't there for you, not when you needed me, and then I got locked up. You started sleeping with my lawyer, and I'd had enough. You come back here now, and what? She hasn't left me since I got out, and *you* were able to send her away after one conversation. What did you say, Felicia?"

Her bottom lip started to tremble before she snapped back, "I did you a favor. Yes, I thoroughly enjoyed sticking a knife in her chest and turning it around. The girl was acting like she

was in love with you, which is ridiculous. You'll thank me for running her off one day. Trust me." She reached for the door.

I moved her back. "Felicia." I gave her one more warning growl.

"Okay. You're crazy, you know that? It's like you—" She stopped as understanding dawned in her depths. A light switched on, and her mouth fell open again. "Oh my God, you love her, don't you?"

My eyes narrowed to slits. "If you don't start talking—"

She waved that off. "What, Kian? Are you going to hurt me? I'm sorry. You think you're the baddest piece of shit around, but I've got you beat by a long shot. You might huff and make a call to throw your weight around, but that's all you'll do." Her voice gentled. "I know you'll never hurt me. You never have. I didn't know that you loved her. I thought you were only here to...I don't know...get her help with the foster care building. I knew you wanted her to help with the planning and promotions for it. I'm sorry. It's not much, but for what it's worth, I am sorry."

A headache was forming. She still hadn't told me. "Felicia!"

"I lied to her. I said you hadn't been accepted back into the company, and you needed her to make the hail of all Hail Marys, proclaiming how great of a guy you were to change the investors' minds."

"You did what?"

"I know. I know. I'm sorry."

"I'm already in."

“I know, but she didn’t know that. Neither does the public. And...” She grimaced, looking away, before saying, “I knew Daddy texted you. I told her the code to get in your phone, and...”

I closed my eyes. Jordan would’ve needed to know if it was true, if I was using her or not. She would’ve looked, and she would’ve put two and two together but formed the wrong ending.

I groaned. “Do you know what you’ve done?”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s a hiccup. Go find her. I know you have a tracker on her phone. And by the way”—she went to the door again, her hand closing on the door handle—“if you don’t want her to think you’re some crazy stalker, you might want to get rid of that program.”

I didn’t even ask how she knew about that. Nothing would surprise me now. “It was for her safety. I was worried about her.”

“Yeah, well, speaking as a girl, I highly recommend you come clean about that ASAP.” She opened the door but paused once more. “When did you fall in love with her?”

I didn’t answer. When she saw I wasn’t going to, she left. I was alone with my realization.

I’d been in love with Jordan since I saved her. I just never knew it.

CHAPTER 35

Jordan

Kian was sitting on the edge of the couch, leaning against the back of it and facing the door, as I went inside. His hands were on the couch, his head down, and it was like he was bracing himself from me. He lifted his head, and those eyes were stricken and so haunting. I paused for a moment. My chest tightened.

My throat choked up, but I had to know. “Do you love me?” I had two questions to ask. That was the first.

There was no hesitation. “Yes.” He meant what he said.

My knees almost buckled.

I had one more. “Enough to leave your family for me?”

There it was—the second question. I had to know. No regrets. If he lied, I’d see it. I would have to see it, so I moved closer, watching his eyes. There couldn’t be any flicker of emotion there. Forgetting everything else, this was why I came back.

“Yes.”

It was so quick, so instant, and there was no inflection from him. He meant it.

Kian was staring right back at me, letting me see inside him. I saw love there. It was powerful and consuming. I felt it come into me, and it swept over me. Tears slipped down my face, he wiped one away.

If he were lying...

If he were, then I'd deal with it. I loved him so damn much.

He asked in a whisper, "Do you love me, too?"

"Yes." A thousand times yes.

His eyes darkened. The corner of his mouth lifted before falling flat again. "I know what my sister told you. It was all a lie."

My knees really did buckle then. Kian caught me. His hand grabbed my arm and steadied me. I clasped on to him.

"There were some investors who didn't approve of me, but they left the company. They were bought out, and the proposal that my dad congratulated me on is for a new foster care building. I want to build an entirely new building, just for the foster-care headquarters, and I want your input. It's something I wish you'd had. I want it to be a place where foster kids can go if they want. It'll be their constant over the years, like you should have had."

He tugged me closer to him, so I was standing between his legs. One hand rested on my hip, and the other cupped the side of my face. "That was why I came here, or that was the first reason. I wanted to get your help. I want you to help me with raising awareness about the building, letting everyone know about it."

My hand closed over his on my face, and my fingers sank in between his fingers. Our hands laced together.

“Why didn’t you just say something in the beginning?”

“Because you were hiding. How could I ask you to leave your normal life?”

I closed my eyes, drawing in a breath. *My God*. I’d almost left him. Hearing this...an ache tunneled its way below my chest. “I’m sorry.”

“No, Jordan.” He leaned forward, his forehead resting on mine. “I didn’t tell you, and I should’ve. I should’ve prepared you for my sister, too. She’s somewhat apologized to me.”

A slight laugh left me. I looked back up to him. “Your sister’s a bitch.”

He grinned. “That’s an understatement.”

My hand tightened around his. This, right here, was mine now.

His thumb caressed over my cheek, tenderly moving up and down. “Jordan, I have some things I have to come clean about.”

I sucked in my breath, but I waited.

He started so quietly, “When I saved you, it wasn’t all about you. Some of it was about saving my sister, or at least that was why I went to your house. I saw you in that window, and something came over me. I didn’t know what it was then, and to be honest, I didn’t ever analyze it. I just knew that I had to protect you. If I didn’t, I knew I’d be losing something integral to me. It was like I’d be losing a part of me. When I

went to your room, I stopped thinking, and I only *felt*. I was acting on a deep primal level in me.

“The trial happened then, and you came to watch. You were there most of the days. I never told you how much I appreciated you coming, but I did. You never said anything to me, but I knew you were supporting me.”

I was. He’d saved me.

He kept going, his chest rising as he drew in a pocket of air, “I was watching you when they gave the verdict. You started crying when they said I was guilty.”

More tears fell down my face.

He wiped them away and smiled up to me. “That meant more than anything to me. Honestly.”

“You gave me a life,” I whispered to him, looking away. “And they were taking yours.”

His hand tightened on my head. He tilted me back to see him. There was nothing—no resentment, no anger, no bitterness. Nothing. Only warmth. Only love. I was becoming a blubbering idiot because of it.

His eyes roamed over me. “Going to prison sucked. I can’t say otherwise. When I was in prison, I never blamed you. I stabbed him seventeen times. A part of me *should’ve* been there in prison. Seventeen times is excessive. The verdict was right. I’m not saying I wanted to be there, but I understood it.

“Getting released early was a gift, and it’s not one I’m taking lightly. I have bad stuff inside of me. What I did was bad. That was dark and maybe even evil, but I want to do right. I have to. That’s what the foster care building is for me.

It's my way of giving back. It sounds cheesy, but it's true. I want to build a place where it's better, where foster kids can go any time. It'll be their constant when they move from home to home. I wanted your input on the building, and I was going to ask if you'd help me raise awareness for it, but then I found you and I knew I'd be asking you to 'come out.' I would be ruining your life again."

"You wouldn't."

"Asking you to come out of hiding? You wouldn't be normal. You won't be now either, but somewhere down the line, it stopped being about the building, and it became about seeing you. I was falling for you more and more.

"I wanted to protect you, then and now. I sent my team away. I didn't want their input. They were there to help protect me in case the DA tried to charge me again. They wanted to make sure I wouldn't do anything that could incriminate me. They were never about hurting you. I swear to Snark, I never would've allowed it either."

I nodded, letting his words wash over me. My lips twitched. Snark would've loved that comment.

"I fell deeper and deeper in love with you."

"Really?"

He nodded, cupping both sides of my face now. "Yes. I think I fell in love with you the moment I saw you in that window."

That moment...it was the worst one in my life. Now it was the best.

My throat wasn't working. No words could get out. My entire face was wet from my tears. I couldn't get them to stop either. Nothing was working, so my hands closed over his, and I just held on.

"I love you, Jordan," he said. "I should've said all of this to you last night, or hell, even before then. When I woke up this morning, I felt it in my soul that you were gone. I just can't lose you. That's all I know. I love you, Jordan Emory."

A baseball-sized lump was at the bottom of my throat, but I needed him to feel how much I felt the same. My hands gripped his so hard. "I love you, too. I don't know when it happened, but I realized it after the interview. I haven't been able to stay away from you."

Relief showed on his face before his lips were on mine.

After that, as I wound my arms tight around his neck, pressing myself to get as close to him as possible, nothing else mattered. Everything would be fine. The public, the media, school, and even my job would all work out. It would have to because, for once, I wasn't going to hide anymore. I loved Kian. I was going to stay by his side, no matter who came after us. There was just no other way. I couldn't stay away from him.

I clasped on to him tighter, and I wasn't going to let him go. As if feeling everything I was thinking, Kian lifted me. His lips never left mine. I knew where he was taking me, and my legs wound around his waist. I'd stay all day with him in bed. All day. All night. All week. Just us. That was it. Screw everyone else.

As he took me to the bedroom, laying us both down onto the bed, I welcomed his weight. I savored it because he was here.

He was mine.

CHAPTER 36

When Kian told me he wanted to take me somewhere, I didn't question the time. Three in the morning was almost normal for us now. That was when we went places, like earlier in the week. We filmed our first interview together. It was kept a secret. I was nervous, but Laura said it went great. And if Kian's publicist approved, that was all that mattered. I was learning it was better to get along with the petite and feisty bombshell, then go against her. She proved to be invaluable. Since my own interview, when I mentioned Justin by name, social media exploded. Someone found out his full name, and outed him where he went to college. A girl came forward, saying he raped her. A second. A third, and two more. Laura sent someone from her team to the town to monitor the situation. She worried Justin would speak out against Kian or myself. He had no grounds to speak publicly against us and she had no idea what he would say, but she was waiting to see if he threw any retribution our way.

That was the reason we went out this morning. Kian told me we had a meeting with Laura, but he turned into my old job's underground parking lot.

I was mystified. "We're meeting her here?"

Kian only grinned. "Come on."

My frown grew when he pulled out keys for the restaurant. It deepened when he led me to a back private banquet room. I didn't want to meet with Laura where I used to work. It was

after closing time, but sometimes the employees stayed behind. Someone could find us, and eavesdrop. I opened my mouth, ready to tell Kian my thoughts when he flipped on the light.

Erica was standing five feet from me. “Surprise, Jordan!” Her hands spread wide in the air.

It’d been five months since my interview, and life hadn’t lessened up. Instead of being hated and blamed, people were enamored with me. Well, they were enamored with Kian. He never left my side. Anytime I had to leave the hotel for something, he was always beside me, holding my hand and shielding me if he could. We hired official security, too, but everyone could see his love for me. They were enthralled with it, much like how I was.

A lot changed over the months. I worried I would lose my job and my scholarship for school, but I was reassured by both that my positions were still there whenever I could return to normalcy.

Erica laughed when she found out I wanted to return to being Escape’s hostess. She shook her head and waved her finger at me, saying, “If you think you’re going to be a hostess again, you’re not looking around you, Jordan. You’re a full-blown celebrity. The attention hasn’t faded, and I don’t think it ever will, especially because you don’t want this. That’s so obvious.” She’d grunted in laughter. “I swear, that makes the public love you even more.”

I sighed when she said my name.

There were still some mix-ups with her, Wanker, and even Jake. They all started to say Jo first, faltered, then attached the rest of my name. This was the first time Jordan came easily

from Erica's lips, and it brought tears to my eyes. It felt like a part of my old life was still there, with me. It was like my old self hadn't completely vanished.

And Erica said my name now, she beamed at me.

My mouth dropped.

She wasn't alone. An entire group of people stood behind her. Wanker was next to Erica, smiling, as he readjusted his glasses. Jake was behind them alongside Tara, who gave me a tentative wave and smile.

I gazed around the group.

My old boss, Paul, was standing to the side. Bruce, the bartender, lifted his drink in the air. Even Henry was there. He was standing next to the bar. There was no welcome on his face though. He had a glazed look in his eyes, and his mouth was twisted, so he was half-smiling and half-frowning. Bruce noticed the look and cleared his throat. When Henry glanced to him, Bruce gave me a pointed look. Henry's eyes widened, and a forced smile was plastered over his face right away. He was dressed in Escape's uniform. A tray was set on the bar between Bruce and him, and I realized then that he wasn't there for the party, whatever party it was. He was there to work.

Genuine laughter bubbled up then.

Henry had to serve me. I was going to make his night hell. Well, I'd make him take a few drinks back to the bar for me. Bruce would know it had nothing to do with the drinks but making Henry sweat a bit. My former work nemesis had it coming.

Erica came up to hug me then, whispering, “Happy birthday!” She squeezed me harder. “Kian told us your real birthday date.”

“Oh.” I laughed lightly. That’d been another lie from me. New person, new life, even a new birthday. “If it makes you feel better, I forgot it was my birthday today.”

Pulling back, she gripped my hand. “Don’t forget some things, not the important things. You don’t have to hide anymore, Jordan.”

I held her hand back. “Thank you.” I meant it.

A wave of emotions rose up in my throat, choking me, but she moved aside. Wanker was next, then Jake, and finally, Tara, who seemed tentative while hugging me. Her body relaxed when I hugged her back.

Before she stepped to the side, she said, “I know Jake told you, but I wanted to tell you myself. Susan and I aren’t friends anymore. I just wanted you to know.”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

Susan hadn’t gone away like I hoped. Even though everyone got over the fact that I’d been right under the paper’s nose, Susan hadn’t. She was trying to dig up any dirt she could on me, despite that everyone knew my worst secret—Edmund. That wasn’t good enough for her.

I was worried about how far she would go, and I told Kian, too, after receiving an ominous email from an unknown address the other night.

It said, *You’ll pay.*

Kian's private detective found the computer it was sent from—one of the paper's computers, and the most obvious person who sent it was Susan.

Kian reassured me Susan would be taken care of. When my eyebrows arched up at those words, he gave me a small grin before placing a tender kiss on my forehead. He added, his lips a caress before he pulled away, "Not in that way, but she will be handled. She can't hurt you. I won't let her."

I hadn't asked, and I hadn't heard from Susan again, but one never knew with her.

"I'll admit..." Snark stepped in front of me, bringing me back to the present. Folding me in his arms, he held me for a second before letting go. "I wasn't a fan of your boyfriend, but he's grown on me."

I glanced over my shoulder. Kian had migrated to the back corner. He saw me looking for him and gave me a reassuring nod. Paul stepped toward him, and Kian's attention was pulled toward my old boss.

Watching them now for a moment, I wasn't surprised Kian removed himself to the back. That was how he operated. He was always at my side, but if I was okay, he'd return to the shadows. Not that he really was in the shadows with how he looked—his dark features, his black hair, the high cheekbones, his lean physique, and the pure deadly aura that clung to him. He was powerful. People were drawn to him. He liked to step back when it was possible, but he was never really hidden.

Looking around the room, even now, everyone kept glancing at him. They watched him like he was a beautiful but

dangerous predator. Catching a slight look that Tara sent him, a wave of possession and pride rolled over me.

He was mine. And I was his.

Snark mused into my ear, distracting me, “He owns this place.”

“What?”

“Oh, yeah. You didn’t know?” Snark shook his head, a good-natured grin on his face. “Why am I not surprised by that fact either? He bought it right before he was released. I don’t think he knows that I know, but I followed the paper trail back to him. You might want to talk to him about it.”

“I will.” Feeling that Snark was going to step aside and someone else was next in line, I gripped his arm. “Thank you for coming to my birthday party.”

A small breath left him. His eyes washed over me, a different look appearing in them. He murmured, almost too quietly for me to hear, “You’ve become like a daughter to me. I wouldn’t be anywhere else.”

We were both starting to tear up, so he moved aside.

After that, the party became a blur. Some of my old coworkers were there. Some of the paper’s staff that Erica got along with were there, too. It wasn’t too big of a party, but Erica told me later that phones weren’t allowed inside. Each person got snuck in with security, and they were searched. If anyone refused to be searched, they were asked to leave. It was that simple. Follow the rules and join the party, or don’t and leave.

A cake was brought out and they made Henry sing. His voice was good and it surprised everyone, but then the drinks *really* started flowing and everyone forgot about my nemesis. A second bartender, Kami, slipped behind the bar to help Bruce, and I got some satisfaction from seeing Henry being put through the wringer. He was sweating within an hour.

He brought over a single drink on his tray and held it out to me. “Made just for you, from Bruce.”

“Thank you.” I took it. “Tell Bruce thanks, too.”

Henry nodded, tucking the tray under his arm. He started to leave but turned back. “I had no idea who you were.”

“That was the point.”

“I know, but...” His eyebrows knitted together. “I was an asshole to you. I’m sorry. I was—I’m sorry. I was trying to make myself needed so much that they couldn’t fire me.”

My head moved back. “Why would they have fired you?”

“Because I wasn’t needed. You worked here for so much longer. I knew that before I met you. I was intimidated by you.”

“Henry.” I leaned close.

So did he.

“It’s a hostessing job. It’s not like the presidency where there’s only room for one. You didn’t need to worry.”

“I’m aware now.” His pale cheeks flushed, and they became a bit redder. “And thank you for not asking your boyfriend to fire me.” He looked toward Kian, who was still talking with Paul.

Judging from how Kian was leaning against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest while he was watching me back, I had a feeling he was using Paul as a shield so no one else would approach them. Paul didn't seem to mind, if he was even aware of it. His head was thrown back, and his arms were moving around in the air to make his point. Whatever Paul was saying, it was important...to Paul.

I gave Kian a grin. He returned it, his eyes darkening.

Just like that, with that one look, the world melted away. We were standing a room's width apart, but we were together. We were connected and on the same page.

I wanted to be with him and at his side. The party was nice. I'd enjoyed being snuck out to see my friends, but I really only wanted to be curled up next to him, like we had been before leaving the hotel.

“Go to him.”

“What?”

Erica was standing where Henry had just been. He'd disappeared somewhere.

Erica nodded in Kian's direction. “It's obvious that you want some time away with him, so go.”

“The party's for me.”

She waved that off. “That twerp sang to you. You cut the cake. Everyone's said a few words to you, and your bartending buddy is getting everyone drunk. If you left, I don't think anyone would notice.”

I started to smile at her. I really missed being her roommate.

Erica finished her drink as she looked to the side. “I’m feeling a little frisky myself.”

“Frisky?” I turned.

She was looking right at Wanker, who was gazing down into his drink, as Jake and Tara were talking to him.

“Yeah, so…” Erica gave Kian a pointed look. “Nothing against everyone here, but I don’t trust anyone besides myself or Kian at your side, and”—her eyes cut back to Wanker—“I’m thinking I’m long overdue for making a move myself, so please, go and make your move. Take your still-mysterious-hot-guy to some empty office here and make love.” She muttered under her breath, “I know I’m about to.”

I didn’t say a word. I wouldn’t dare. If I did, I was afraid she’d change her mind, and this whole thing with her and Wanker, it was how she said it. Long overdue. I’d contain my excitement for them until the next day, but when she stayed rooted in front of me, I pushed her toward Wanker. One firm nudge. That was it.

She let out a breath. “Oh, boy.” She handed me her empty glass. Tugging her shirt down, she smoothed her hands down her front before starting for him. “Okay. Here I go.”

She cast me one last look over her shoulder.

I was still too scared to jinx it, so I gave her two thumbs up. She laughed, but rolled her eyes. I held my breath until she stepped next to Jake and Tara. I migrated toward Kian then, but waited to see what would happen.

Kian watched with me as Erica took Wanker's hand, gave his drink to a Tara. She didn't say anything. He started to reach for his glasses, but she grabbed that hand too and holding both of them behind her back, she dragged him from the room.

Kian murmured near my ear, "It's about time, right?"

I nodded. He had no idea how true his statement was. "Thank you for this."

"Happy birthday." His eyes darted to my lips and stayed there for a moment before jumping back to my eyes.

I smiled. He knew what I wanted.

He wanted the same thing, but he said, "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." I took his hand.

Paul was still standing there. Whatever conversation he'd been having with himself slid away. He was looking at us with confusion.

I said to him, "Thank you for letting us have a party here."

His eyes skirted to Kian's.

I ignored the look. "And please make Henry feel secure. My former nemesis said he's worried he'll be let go. Who knew he was annoying because of his insecurities?"

"Nemesis?" Paul was still staring at Kian before he cleared his throat. He chugged the rest of his drink and gestured to the bar. "Okay. Yes. Well. Happy birthday, Jo...rdan. And I've no doubt you'll be fine from now on, and remember, give me a call whenever you want your old job back." He tried to hide a grin.

It was silly, wanting to return to my hostessing job, but hearing those words made me feel good. Maybe someday I could be a normal girl again.

“Thank you, Paul.”

He tugged at his shirt collar. “On that note, I need another drink. I’m off the clock tonight. Might as well make the most of it.”

I waited until he was gone and signaled for one of the guards. He dispatched from the wall immediately and came to our side, turning so that he was blocking everyone from coming over. Kian watched me, knowing there was something on my mind.

I shifted closer to him. “You own this place?”

Kian stilled, holding my hand. “Who told you?”

I gave him a look. “If you were to guess?”

“Snark.” His eyes rolled upward. “He really is your father figure.”

“What do you mean?”

“He confronted me about it a while ago. I asked him to keep quiet. I was going to tell you, but I wanted the right time.”

“Why?” I leaned in close.

I could almost feel everyone’s eyes on us, but I was getting used to it. Even in this room, I knew these people, but the sight of Kian and me being together still drew attention. It was one of those things that I didn’t think would change anytime soon.

Kian looked down into my eyes, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. His hand lingered there for a moment before going to touch my lip for a split second. He lifted a shoulder. “I didn’t want to scare you.”

“Being my real boss would’ve scared me?” But I thought about it. It would’ve made me wary, if I hadn’t known his feelings.

He nodded. “I bought it for two reasons. The first was to piss off my dad.”

His father had been approving of me more lately, but Kian told me that he hadn’t been in the beginning. He still didn’t want his father anywhere near me.

“Did it?”

“Yeah.” His hand rested on my hip, pulling me a little closer to him. “My dad didn’t understand why I wanted to see you or why I wanted your help with the building. He just listened to his advisors, and at that time, his advisors weren’t pro-Jordan. They wanted me to have nothing to do with you.”

I knew all of this.

The advisors changed their minds when Kian stated he wouldn’t leave me. They either accepted him with me or he’d leave the company. He had a similar showdown with his parents, and it was enough to change their minds. His parents reluctantly became pro-Jordan.

“And the other reason?”

His hand tightened on my hip, his fingers sinking into my skin. His eyes darkened with lust. “Because I wanted to make sure you always had a job, if you wanted it.”

A lump was on the bottom of my throat. “I wasn’t working here when you were released. I started a few days later.”

“Cal told me you worked here every summer. If you came back, there’d always be a spot.” A quiet laugh left him. “I wasn’t looking for you that first day, when we ran into each other outside of here.”

I tilted my head up to him. “You weren’t?”

“I didn’t even know you started working here. I was coming to look over the place.” His eyes switched, trailing over my shoulders. He nodded toward where Paul was at the bar, talking with the bartenders. “I had a middleman between your boss and me, so even he didn’t know about me, not until your real identity came out. The next day, he found out who I was. I’m glad I bought it. It’s a good investment, no matter what, and you can always work here.”

“As a hostess?” I teased.

“No.” He grew solemn again, glancing back to my lips. He moved closer, his face only a few inches from mine. “You can manage it with him, if you want to. I don’t care. I just wanted you not to have to worry about one more thing. That’s all. I wanted to take care of you.”

“Thank you.” Suddenly, I didn’t want to be there. I didn’t want to be in a room full of people, even if they were people I knew. I wanted to be with him and only him. I lifted my lips and grinned up at him. “Can we leave?”

Kian’s eyes darkened, and he grinned. He murmured right before touching his lips to mine, “I thought you’d never ask.”

The End

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