



I won't let
her have him...

W. Dine

portia moore

MINE



HER BOOK 2

PORTIA MOORE

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Megan

WIFE. He just said *wife*.

The air has left my body. I'm dizzy, and I feel like I'm going to vomit.

My throat is dry and tight. The boy—not boy, man— with bright blond hair and his eyes...I'm not sure if they are light grey or dark blue, but they are amazing. He's a beautiful stranger, but *stranger* is the key word. I don't know him, despite the fact the first time I laid eyes on him my body warmed up and my heart jumped into cardio mode.

He is a gorgeous man. Pretty, but in the roughest way possible. Strong jaw, large muscular arms beneath his tight grey shirt, tattoos wrapped around them. But his eyes are soft, and his lips look softer, and I can almost remember how soft they felt on mine. How fragile I've been in his arms...but no, that can't be right. Not *remember*. *Imagine* is the right word.

"Alana...?" I hear his voice but it's muffled, like I'm underwater. The floor feels wobbly as if I'm going to fall through it, or maybe it's my legs. Ian's hands—large, firm, and in control—grip my body.

"Get the hell out of the way," he tells Blue, ushering him to a small corner of his large sofa and giving me space to sit down. This seems so familiar.

"Katie," Blue mumbles through his drunken stupor.

I sit down, glad to have something beneath the legs that seemed so weak before. He stands near the edge of the arm of the couch. I fight to not stare at him, forcing my eyes to remain glued to my lap. It's the hardest thing I've ever done.

Wife? It's insane! But those words aren't coming out of my mouth. Nothing is. A dull headache is coming on. I massage my temples and try to steady my breathing. What do you say to something like what I've just heard? What do I say? He's wrong, he has to be! It's impossible. I'm not married...I don't even *know* him. His expression is confusing, somewhere between what I can only describe as furious and desire, and I'm starting to tremble. If he thinks I'm her, if he really believes it, he would be beyond angry. I have to convince him I'm not her. I have to make him believe me.

"I know I look like that woman in the picture, but I promise you she's not me. I'm not...not her. I don't know why this is happening and it has to seem like the biggest coincidence imaginable but I am not your wife." His eyes are narrowed and the longer he stares at me, the harder it is to breathe. My throat is becoming tighter. The room is closing in.

"Alana are you okay?" That causes the hair on the back of my neck to stand.

"What?" I ask him, afraid for my eyes to find his.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" he says again, more concerned than furious, as his eyes read earlier. That name... Alana.

"Why the hell are you doing this?" He fumbles over his words. His skin is flushed, his arms seem tight, his muscles clench as he pushes his knuckles into the thick flesh of his thigh.

I move away from him. He looks dangerous, like he's almost ready to attack. But there's something in his eyes that lets me know he's more hurt than furious. "My name isn't Alana!" I shout. His eyes are still wide, his expression hard, but it softens a bit when tears come to my eyes.

“My name is Megan,” I say so quietly that I’m not sure if he hears me until his eyes widen.

If I was going to be anyone’s wife it would be Kam. Kam, who is my first love, who has stuck by me, who makes my heart swoon and the future look pretty decent. Even if it’s all a fairytale, a fantasy that’s never meant to be. This guy...that’s it! He’s Blue’s cousin! What is going on? Why is this happening to me?!

“I’ll be honest, I’m a little high right now. More than a little high,” he admits. A flicker of embarrassment passes through his expression.

“You more than look like her.” Ian’s voice is confident and strong, as if he has no doubt. And from the picture I can understand, but it’s not true. I laugh and it’s clipped and nervous, but what else can I do when I have this man staring at me with confusion, anger, and a passion that is radiating off of him? My nerves are on overdrive, my throat completely dry, and one of the only two people who could help me figure this out is drunk out of his mind and heartbroken. And the other... if I tell him, he’ll be the same. I clasp my hands together, not sure what else to say.

“This is insane,” he mutters under his breath, sweeping his hands through his light blond hair. It’s long, almost down to his shoulders, but thick and full, not styled like some of the preppy friends Kam has. It’s rugged but perfectly so, and I’m in horror at the butterflies that are lining my stomach.

“I don’t know what’s going on but I’m leaving. I shouldn’t be here.” I stand and he jumps in front of me. I instantly sit back down.

“No, please, I’m sorry, I...this is just...you can’t go.” He’s blocking my path and even though he does seem inebriated, I know I can’t run. I won’t be fast enough and I feel like it’d heighten an already emotionally charged situation. I steady myself and try to remain calm. He seems to have calmed down the tiniest bit.

“Blue is drunk and it’s almost three in the morning. We don’t have to talk about this now,” he promises desperately,

but there is an authority behind his voice, wrapped around a genuine plea. This isn't a good idea, I know it, but...what if she *is* my sister?

"You can take our—*my* room," he quickly corrects himself.

"I'll take the other couch," he continues.

"Just...please don't go." His voice is so deep but it's vulnerable. And he's right. I'm in a city I know nothing about, with nowhere to go, and if I leave it defeats the purpose of me coming in the first place.

"Okay. I'll stay the night," I tell him reluctantly.

"Great." He lets out a held-in sigh, while I'm holding a breath in that just might make me float away if I let it out. We both stand almost perfectly still, my hands in my jean pockets, his across his broad chest.

"I don't have to take your room. I'll be fine on the couch." The couch is much better, especially if I have to leave to get away.

"Come on," he says brushing past me, his energy almost swallowing me up as he does. I glance back at Blue, who is dead to the world, and try to swallow my last reservation. It's going to be okay.

The apartment isn't big so the walk isn't far, but it seems like it takes forever. The room is enormous, not what I expected from the small living room with a shared dining area and even smaller bathroom. The ceilings are high, and all around the room are photos; big, beautiful black and white portraits, some of buildings, others of people's faces, and all seem to tell a thousand stories. They're captivating and I try not to stare at them. They seem private, too personal to be seen by anyone but the artist's eyes, like a private diary entry.

"This is the bed...obviously." His voice wakes me from my daydream. It's deep but shaky. He's just as nervous as I am, and I'd rather him be that than angry. His skin is flushed, neck and arms red. I don't know him well enough to know any other tells but I couldn't imagine looking at someone who

looked like my husband but it not be him. That picture, it was me, except it wasn't. He quickly starts to pull back sheets, attempting to make the jumbled mess more presentable.

"You don't have to do that," I tell him but he continues anyway.

"These are really nice," I say, even though *nice* is an understatement. They're mesmerizing, breathtaking.

"Thanks." He gives me a small grin and that's breathtaking too. I quickly look away, wondering how I'll go through an entire day in this apartment without looking at its owner.

"I'll let you get some rest," he says, backing out of the room with a reluctance that's palpable.

"Thank you for...I can't imagine how this...if I were you I don't know if I'd be so calm," I stutter, trying to gather my words to not sound like a complete idiot. He only presses his lips together and gives two distinct nods.

"Goodnight," is all he mutters before he disappears, shutting the door behind him. What else could he say? What else can I say? I stand around a few seconds before carefully sitting on the bed. It's softer than I thought it would be. I look aimlessly around the room again. He just gave up his room to a complete stranger...

I ignore the small voice in my head that says *You're not a stranger to him.*

Because I am. Regardless of me having a possible doppelganger. My phone vibrates in my pocket.

It's Kam.

My hands immediately begin to shake. Can he feel this? Can he sense I'm in another man's bed? Even if I'm alone and it's completely innocent? I finally take a deep breath and text him back.

I'm okay. Please don't worry.

The bubbles immediately appear on the screen.

Call me please. I'm losing my mind. I love you don't do this.

Tears fill my eyes as I picture him, his phone tight in his hands, gripping it for dear life. How much sleep has he gotten? Has he gone to work? To class? The one good thing that came out of us running into his sister is that he knows I'm okay. *Am I okay? I'm alive, at least.*

I pull my knees to my chest and put the phone to my heart, wishing it was him. When my head hits the pillow something strange begins to happen. The smell of it, woodsy and masculine, is almost intoxicating, but it's not only that it smells really good—it's familiar. I tell myself that maybe he wears the same cologne Kam used to wear, but Kam has worn the same cologne since I met him, a few sprays of Armani Code, and this is different. I'm not even sure if it's a cologne or a shampoo but it's overwhelming. My heart is beating faster and tears are coming to my eyes. I push myself out of the bed so quickly that I fall out of it.

"Get it together," I whisper to myself.

So what, the smell is familiar. There could be a million reasons for that. But there aren't a million reasons for this man to have a picture of himself with my doppelganger in his phone. The smell of him shouldn't bring tears to my eyes. It's been a long, emotional day, and I try to convince myself that if I can just get some sleep then tomorrow will be better.

IAN

“Fucking. Fuck!” Blue shrieks, jumping out of his skin from the cold water I’ve poured on him.

“We need to talk!” I tell him, pulling him by the arm through the apartment and outside our door.

“What the hell is your problem, have you lost your mind?” he asks frantically, finally having climbed out of the drunken coma he was in once we hit the fresh air. I tried to wait for him to wake but I have to talk to him before she wakes up...or at least leaves the room. I think she’s been awake but probably too afraid to come out, this girl, whoever she is. My girl has never been afraid of anything.

“That’s Alana,” I tell him, trying to calm the intensity in my voice. He’s still scowling, looking annoyed and confused.

“What?”

“The girl you brought here is Alana. I know it’s her,” I tell him with absolute certainty. Even though I haven’t slept in over 24 hours I’ve been going through every second of our conversations. It’s her, not a sister or a relative that looks like her. It’s *her*.

“The chick you married?” he asks through a chuckle.

“She’s not just some chick.” I push him in the shoulder and he feigns a noise, rubbing it.

“Dude, I don’t know what you’re on, and I never met your...*wife*. But that is Megan, I know her!” He almost laughs at me and I feel my face growing hot.

“Calm down before you go all hulk mad on me,” he says, throwing up both hands. I’ve been working on my temper, I really have, but today seems like I’m going to relapse if he doesn’t stop taking this for a fucking joke.

“Where is this coming from? How did you even come up with this?” I let out a deep breath and instead of trying to catch him up on all that’s happened I pull out my phone and show him the picture of us. His cynical grin fades into complete disbelief.

“Holy shit!” he exclaims, pushing his hand through his mohawk.

“Is this for real? You guys aren’t playing a prank on me right?” he asks, but when he sees my deadly serious expression, he nods and hands me back the phone.

“Did you show her this?” he asks.

“She admitted it looked like her but she didn’t admit to it being her.”

He takes the phone from my hand and looks at it again.

“When did you take this?” he asks, finally starting to look at me like I’m not insane.

“A little over a year ago, right before she left,” I say, sitting on the steps in the stairway we’re in. Blue and I both let out a simultaneous breath.

“I don’t know, fuck I don’t know...” he exclaims, looking as confused as I am.

“That’s my wife sitting in there with amnesia or something!” My voice is loud and strained and I immediately hush it.

“If it was anyone else I’d say she was a scam artist, scamming you or Kam,” he says through a hushed breath. “But Megan’s not like that. I believe her, and you know I don’t believe most people. And if she was, she wouldn’t come here!”

He’s right. I rest my arms on my knees.

“This Kam dude...who the hell is he?” I ask. Blue clears his throat.

“Katie’s brother. I told you about him a while back. He’s her boyfriend and they were pretty serious, man,” he says somberly. I bite my lip and squeeze my knees together. My blood is boiling with the thought of someone else touching her, possessing her, when she’s only supposed to be mine.

Were is the only good thing I hear him say, which still makes me feel like a complete pussy. She’s been screwing some other?!

“She left him...Megan...she has a lot going on.” He rubs the back of his neck.

“What do you mean?” I ask him urgently. He throws his head back.

“It’s not really for me to say.”

“Like hell it is. You saw the picture! I’ve told you she’s my wife, you brought her to my house.”

“She’s here looking for her family. Her past, and...” He trails off.

“What?” I ask him desperately.

“She...she told me she doesn’t remember things.”

A shiver crawls down my back.

“What do you mean?”

“I didn’t have a lot of time to get into it with her...she just told me.”

I swallow hard and grip my forehead, feeling anxiety rising and wrapping around my throat.

“Still that doesn’t...it wouldn’t explain why she wouldn’t know me at all, why she has a completely different name.”

“I hacked into her records to find her family, and I like Megan. She’s awesome, but she’s messed up man. And coming from me that says something.”

I feel my face contort in anger. “She’s not messed up,” I say defensively.

“I don’t mean like that. You know what I mean...” he fumbles, fiddling with his lip ring.

“Who isn’t messed up? I just—you can be intense, and that’s probably not what she needs right now.”

“You think it’s her too.” I ignore his previous negative shit and focus on the glimmer of positive.

“Look, I don’t know! It could be a sister or a distant cousin for all I know. The point is, if it’s her—Alana—and she’s not full of shit, and she really is this Megan person, then it’s a bigger fuckin problem than her pretending not to know you. Aside from the fact that she’s in love with my girlfriend’s brother...ex-girlfriend,” he utters with an angry laugh.

“You know me man, I don’t fall in love. I have fun, and she came in like a fuckin whirlwind and made me different. Blue, I can’t just forget her, pretend she never existed. Every day since she left me I wake up feeling numb, anxious, dead. Nothing drowns her out. Not other women, alcohol, or weed. I hate her for disappearing. I hate her even more for telling me to let her go, like she was just some bad habit I had picked up, instead of the woman I fell more in love every day with, who etched herself in all of who I was and who I am.” There’s a stretch of silence.

“When did you grow a pussy?” Blue bursts into laughter and I feel my face heat up. I nudge him hard in the stomach.

“I wasn’t the one crying some girl’s name all night. Katie...I loved you...” I exaggerate and it’s his turn to look away embarrassed. He lets out a small sigh.

“I did love her...” He trails off, glancing up at me briefly and squeezing his knuckles.

“What happened to us? What happened to me?” I ask, looking up towards the ceiling for answers.

“Fell in love with the wrong girl,” he answers.

Even though I can't say it out loud, because I'd feel like a complete idiot with the way things look, my girl's not the wrong one. She's the right one. Even if she doesn't know it yet.

After listening to Blue catch me up on his own personal *The Young and the Restless* drama, we make our way back upstairs to the apartment. My thoughts are on the girl on the other side of this door, in each of my dreams every single night. Before my hand reaches the handle he grabs my arm.

"Take things easy. We really don't know what's going on, and chances are she doesn't either. She has enough going on. Just be cool, or at least try, okay?" While his voice is full of empathy he still gives me a look of warning. That's easy to say. It took every single fiber in me to not act like a psycho, shake her, tell her to stop playing games, to not kiss her and tell her how much I missed her, to demand she tell me what the hell is going on, to thank her for coming back and not giving up.

But, even through the drug haze I was in, what I saw in her eyes stopped me. The way her gaze avoided mine, how fast she breathed, how nervous she was. I've never seen her like that and it's the one thing that makes me second-guess that it's her, but only for a second, because the moment I set foot in my apartment and see her sitting at my kitchen table, I fall in love with her all over again. Her eyes dart between me and Blue and it breaks my heart when they settle on his.

"Breakfast!" he says excitedly, and I note the small crooked grin on her face, one I haven't seen before.

"I hope you don't mind." She shrugs slightly and looks at me briefly before gluing her eyes to the plate of bacon she sets on the small table in my kitchen.

I start to open my mouth to say something, but the way my throat is burning, I know what comes out will be what Blue would call *intense*. So I shut up.

"He doesn't mind," Blue answers for me, ushering me to the table. As hard as it is, I make myself take the seat across from her instead of beside her.

“I figured you’d need it after last night” she says lightly, taking a small bite of toast.

“Thank you for giving me your room,” she tells me quietly, but her eyes don’t leave her plate.

I finally manage to pick up a piece of toast and take a bite. I don’t even like toast, she should know that...or not. But it gives me something to do that won’t freak her out. I notice her and Blue are both staring at me...oh, I didn’t answer her.

“It’s fine,” I manage to choke out. She clears her throat, slicing through the awkward tension in the room.

“I take it you’re up to speed on what happened last night.” She looks over at Blue, who is devouring the breakfast she made.

Alana never cooked.

Blue glances at me before turning his attention to her

“He glossed over it,” he says half-jokingly. Her eyes meet mine, only for a moment, but I wonder if she feels the electricity that I do.

“I did a lot of thinking last night,” she begins. I cross my arms across my chest to prepare myself for whatever she might say.

“I’ve racked my brain to try to figure out how it’s me in that picture...if it is me. He called me Alana, which is pretty close to Ally, the name the guy called me in the diner.”

“Fuck!” I can’t even hide my anger but she flinches, and it makes my heart sink.

“I’m sorry,” I say more calmly.

“I just...if someone....” I trail off, realizing I can’t say what I really want to say to her.

“Let her finish,” Blue interrupts, his voice tight and his glare telling me to shut up.

“It was just some guy yesterday, but the point is he called me Ally...if she is my sister and we share the same face, I have to know more about her. We have to find her because if

she's pissing people off so much that they're threatening to kill me..."

My insides twist. I grip my knuckles and rub them. When Alana and I first met she was into a lot of shit. I prayed every day after she left she wouldn't go back to that life.

"When I looked up your records, I didn't see any record of there being another baby born to your mother or father, Megan." Her eyes widen and her skin goes pale.

"Not that it's impossible for you to have a twin, but there should have been a record of it..."

"Check again." There's an edge to her voice that reminds me of the girl I used to know.

"I will," he answers quickly. The hardness on her face breaks.

"I'm sorry Blue," she says apologetically, "it's just, this is all so...unbelievable. Maybe it's not even my sister, but a relative or something." She takes a short breath and covers her face with her hands.

"Did you see the picture?" She turns to Blue after throwing me a quick glance. Blue nods.

"I know it looks like me...but...it just can't be me." Her plea is beyond desperate. She then turns to me, for the first time giving me her full attention. Her eyes that are usually dark grey are lighter, almost green, and the sadness in her eyes makes my stomach clench.

"You told me that the person in the picture was your wife. I-I don't have the best memory but I wouldn't forget an entire life like that. No one would." At this point her words are fast and frantic, tumbling into one another as if she's trying to convince herself. And that's what hurts more than anything. Her voice catches and I can tell she's trying to steady herself. She closes her eyes briefly before they land on mine.

"I *can't* be her." This time her words are steady and solemn, and they hit me like a truck. What if she just doesn't want to be her, and if this is Alana and if she really doesn't want to be with me, what am I doing? Who am I to make her?

I love her enough to let her go, but why would she do this? Why would she come here? Is she fucking insane?

I have to calm down because she's driving me there quick.

What if she's changed who she is, how she talks, how she dresses, because she's not who she wanted to be? Maybe I'm not who she wanted.

If she can cut off what we had and look at me like a stranger, why should I even want her? She left me and never looked back and I have no fucking clue why she's here, why she's *still* here, why she's back and doing this to me. But I'm starting to think she's a sick twisted bitch for putting me through this!

I squeeze my knuckles. My eyes are stinging and I can't sit here with her another minute playing this sick game.

"I've got to go." I push myself away from the table and make a beeline to my bedroom and let out the longest breath I've ever held in. I fight the urge to destroy my room and everything in it and suck in as much air as my lungs can take.

Why is this happening? What cosmic force did I piss off for them to put the perfect girl in my path, give me enough luck for her to fall in love with me, then snatch her away...but dangle her in front of my face, wanting nothing to do with me?

I grab my camera bag and head out to do the one thing that no one can take away from me, the one thing that won't ever leave or let me down, and go to work.

Megan

“I’ll be gone for most of the day. There’s an extra set of keys in my bottom drawer.”

His voice is calm and his expression is completely blank, at least from what I can see from the quick glance I steal. My heart feels like someone’s fist is around it. I have an urge to say something to him, and I don’t know what, but words are almost fighting their way up my throat. His tone is even, though slightly raised, as he speaks. There is what seems to be anguish that is radiating off of him, and I try to tell myself that it’s not because of me even if he thinks it is.

I can’t be the one to help him. I can’t make him feel better because I can’t be who he wants, who he sees. He glances over at me and my heartbeat slows. As hard as I try I can’t look away from him, and the hurt in his eyes causes tears to come to my own, but I don’t say anything. I won’t. I know anything I say will make it worse, so I remain quiet. I’m a coward.

You’re a bitch. The worst kind.

What the hell was that?

“Cool, thanks Ian,” Blue answers, breaking the life-sucking tension in the room. When he’s out the door I let out a cough that sounds more like a sigh and quickly wipe the tears from my eyes.

“Megan...” Blue’s voice is steady but cautious.

“I know Kam’s told you how good I am...” he starts and I already know what he’s going to say. IF I had a twin, he would have found some trace or clue about her. But I don’t want to hear that now. She doesn’t have to be my twin, just related to me in some way.

“I need to get a hotel room. I can’t stay here,” I interrupt him, playing with the food on my plate.

“You have to admit this is a little more than a coincidence,” he says tensely.

I bite my bottom lip.

He’s right.

What if this was all a setup?

I feel anger start to course through my entire body.

“Did you know...did you bring me here knowing how much I look like her?” His eyes grow wide and he laughs as if what I said was ridiculous, then frowns when I don’t join in.

“No! I wouldn’t do anything like that to you, to anyone... and especially not to *him*. I swear I had no clue what his wife looks like. I’ve never met her, obviously, and just found out this morning—after being woken up from sleeping off a raging hangover—that he thought she was you.”

I stare at him, searching his expression for some hint of a lie or smudged truth, but I don’t find any. Just the short length of time I’ve been around his cousin, I can’t see him springing it on a man like Ian or putting me in a situation like this. Not before he broke up with Katie. He knows Kam would kill him, and what would he get out of this?

I let out a deep sigh and nod to let him know I believe him.

“None of this makes any sense,” I say while resting my forehead in my hands.

“Well, I think it makes more sense with what happened yesterday.” I look up at him, confused.

“You had a gun pulled on you by someone who thought your name was similar to Ian’s wife, who disappeared from his

life around the same time you started college.”

My stomach lurches and I look away from him.

“You don’t think...you can’t really think that it’s...me.” My voice cracks at the last part of my sentence. Blue takes a sip of his orange juice and shrugs.

“You told me you woke up in a strange apartment in someone’s bed and had no clue how you got there.” His words are sharp but his tone sensitive. I swallow hard.

“I-Is it possible that Ian was that guy?” My body stiffens in the chair and all the food I ate earlier feels like it’s threatening to come up. “I think he’d say something.” I laugh and he nods in agreement.

“Look...I know you love Kam.” His words are low and quiet, like they may break me.

“But...are you even open to considering that the girl in that picture is you?”

I bite my lip and laugh. It’s mirthless and hollow.

“Do you think I’m lying? That I would have come here if I really was her?”

There’s a deep line etched between his eyebrows and his eyes narrow in on me.

“If you loved him.”

I shoot up from my chair. I can’t sit. It’s as if electricity is flowing through my body.

“I don’t know him!” I shout, but my voice is pleading. I want him to tell me that he believes me, and saying things like that isn’t helping this situation at all.

“You know me Blue!” I say trying to soften my voice, but everything on his face reads he’s confused.

“You say you don’t remember things,” he mutters quietly. I let out a long breath, regretting sharing that with him earlier.

“What if...”

There's a long awkward, gut-wrenching pause. My eyes are blurry now with tears I can't stop from falling. I grip the counter near the sink and squeeze down on it. I feel him come over beside me.

"I wouldn't change my name if I had amnesia, Blue."

"Megan..." he says and I bite my lip.

"When you've had these 'blackouts'...how long were they for?" His tone is soft and cautious the way a doctor explains a treatment plan after diagnosing you with an illness.

I slam my eyelids together, breathe deeply through my nose, and clear my throat.

"It used to be hours, the longest a couple of days. Never over a week, that I remember." The words sting my throat. I'm afraid to look over at Blue, to see his eyes widen with horror, so I keep my eyes on the backsplash behind the sink.

"Days?" he asks, unable to keep the shock out of his voice. I only nod.

"Christ Megan, you never talked to anyone about this?"

"Of course I did!" I try to defend myself, but there isn't a defense. It just is what it is.

"When I was younger no one really believed me. They thought it was for attention. The doctors who wanted to shut my foster parents up gave me medication that didn't do anything but make me want to sleep all day or kill myself. I've had CT scans and nothing is wrong with my brain or anything else...so I make the best of it." Silence stretches between us.

"How could you live life like this?"

"I just sort of accepted this is just how things would be. Life has always been harder for me, but doable." I remember how tough the start of my senior year was, taking tests on material I didn't remember learning about. Missing so many days of school it was impossible for me to graduate on time. So I dropped out.

"One of my foster sisters had diabetes and had to take insulin shots all the time, and I remember being younger,

thinking not remembering things was like having diabetes just something you deal with.” I shrug off the look of empathy on Blue’s face.

“You’ve been dealing with this your whole life?”

“Almost,” I admit. “After I dropped out of high school I ran into my school counselor and told her about it. She was the first person I shared that with. She said the symptoms I had sounded like her sister, who had epilepsy. I knew I had never had seizures before but I was willing to try anything at that point. I couldn’t afford to see a doctor but I researched the pills and bought them from a guy. Not smart, I know, but it worked. I stopped having blackouts as often. I was doing well enough that I was able to get my GED and I completed my core college courses at a community college. I had a 4.0 and got into our school, was able to work part-time.” I smile, remembering how good it felt to accomplish something, to not have my life interrupted anymore.

“Then what happened?” he asks, his confusion warranted. I fight away the tears coming to my eyes now.

“The guy I bought them from went to jail and when I ran out I thought I had beat it, that it was over. Then I met Kam.” Blue looks at me confused.

“The side effects of the medication I was taking included infertility with long-term use.” My throat tightens and the burning comes as I fight back tears.

“Kam has always talked about having a big family.” I cover my face out of shame and sadness, but most of all regret.

“I had been doing so well, I just thought”—I wipe away the tears in my eyes—“the universe would give me a break and I’d be okay without it. Holding on to a naïve notion that I could be normal. Kam made me feel like life didn’t have to be so hard or dark, and that I could have something normal.” A tear slips from my eye as I think of Kam.

I look over at Blue. He seems to be contemplating something, going over his words before he says them.

“I get it Megan. I know what it’s like to love someone so much you’d risk everything for them.” I instantly feel guilty having Blue here wading through my problems when he just found out the love of his life has betrayed him. I wonder if Kam thinks I betrayed him?

“I’ve been thinking about something.” His voice is steady but cautious. I nod to let him know to continue.

“Ian says that, about two years ago...” he says and my entire body is still.

“That would mean that *she* met him before Kam.”

“Possibly, if this is you,” he adds on quickly. “Think back to that time frame. What was happening with you then?”

My first instinct is to deny, to refuse to entertain the possibility of it. But where will that get me—or us—because now there are more people involved than just me. It’s not just Kam, as much as I want to disentangle him from this, but now there’s Blue and maybe this Alana person. And Ian, the man with the stunning blue eyes who looks at me sadly as if I’m the lost love of his life. I try to think back to the time before Kam.

I was working as a brand ambassador for a new alcohol product. It was perfect because I worked mostly on-call and it gave me plenty of time to complete my online classwork. I was too afraid to commit to any on-campus classes. My blackouts were more frequent then, however, they weren’t as interruptive as they had been previously.

But they were bad.

“Is it possible you could have...?” Blue’s voice is full of innuendo.

“Married someone and not remember?” I ask incredulously.

“To have built a life as someone else, Megan.” His words are soft but cut deep.

“Was there time...I-I don’t know. It would be impossible to not have an inkling, for there to be no clues. Did something major like what you’re implying happen and I just don’t

remember any of it? That is what is impossible Blue. She married Ian so she obviously had an ID, a birth certificate.” He shoots me a knowing glare, both of us more than aware of how easy it is to get those things when you know the right people.

“What if it’s not impossible?” he asks pointedly, and my hardened face softens.

“What are you talking about?” There’s a long pause. Blue’s hesitancy scares me because he’s not usually hesitant, but pretty blunt, typically speaking first and thinking later.

“Have you ever heard of DID?” he asks, and I shake my head.

“Multiple personality disorder?” he adds. I squint at him.

“Like in the movie *Split*?” I laugh but his expression is serious.

“Do you think I have superpowers too?” I almost grunt.

“It’s a real thing,” he says almost scolding me. He walks back over to the breakfast table, grabs his phone, types something into it, and hands it to me.

“Dissociative Identity Disorder.” I read the words in bold at the top of the screen. My eyes scroll through them.

DID is a complex mental illness. Its defining feature is the presence of at least two alternate personalities, or alters. My eyes meet his and the urgency in them scares me.

“You’re serious?” His face is deadpan.

“I’d rather you think I had amnesia!” I let out a sharp laugh, but he doesn’t flinch.

“You’ve just told me you’ve had memory losses that happened to you for days, Megan! That shit isn’t normal!” He laughs but it’s pointed, and I hate myself for telling him that.

“Memory losses, but not...I couldn’t...I would know something. Ian would!” His eyes don’t meet mine.

“I’ve seen doctors, Blue. I’ve talked to psychiatrists since before I had a training bra and no one has ever suggested this!” I’m yelling and I’m angry and I don’t know why.

There's no reason to get angry if none of this is true...and it's not!

"Who were crap or probably didn't give a shit!" he exclaims. I run my hands down my face. I think back to Doctor Johnson and what happened in his office that day when I almost killed him all those years ago. How I ended up miles away after that. But there's no way. I'm messed up, but I'm not *that* messed up.

"It can't be real. This isn't a thing, a real thing, what you're talking about...it's crazy!!"

"Megan, my cousin has a picture of *you* and him together that you don't remember taking. And a guy pulls a fucking gun on you calling you something similar to her name!" His words slap me in the face hard, and I now know that he doesn't believe it wasn't me in the picture. He thinks I'm lying.

"You don't believe me?" I ask, unable to hold in my sob.

"I do!! That's what I'm trying to tell you," he pleads.

"Why does it have to be me? It doesn't have to be me, does it?" I'm begging him, pleading with him to be on my side, the side of reason...because his side is Crazytown. His side destroys every hope I have for myself, for me, and for Kam. His side ruins everything.

"Where did you even come up with this, Blue? How did we get from looking into my family, me having another sibling, a twin, to this being all in my mind?" I laugh angrily.

His jaw flexes and he lets out a sigh, looking away from me guiltily.

"Your mom..."

I feel myself holding my breath.

"She...she spent time in psychiatric facilities..."

Blue has my heart in his fist and is squeezing.

"I wasn't going to say anything at first...at least until you had some good news," he explains. I grip my temples and

begin to rub.

“But...I think...with all that’s happened and what you’ve told me...”

It’s hot and stuffy in here. I can’t breathe. My chest is becoming tight. Kam... I’m gasping for air, but none is coming in

“Oh shit!” I hear him say, but his voice seems so far away. The room is spinning, I’m going to throw up.

“Breathe Megan, breathe!” I’m trying but it’s as if I’m not doing it fast enough. Blue leaves my side and I place myself on the floor, and close my eyes. I feel a paper bag being stuffed in my hand and he tells me to breathe into it, but he’s fading away. Everything is....

I’M ON THE COUCH. A bottle of water in my hand and a small throw on my lap. Blue sits beside me as my vision comes back into focus. I don’t even remember him bringing me to the couch, but the feeling of my ribs being sat on and someone trying to yank the air I did have out of my lungs is gone.

“You okay?” Blue asks and I nod, trying to fight away my embarrassment, my anger, the disbelief and disappointment that is flooding back into mind.

“So my mom was crazy?” I push out the dryness in my throat.

“No one’s saying that.”

“What type of people tend to be in a mental hospital Blue?” I ask while attempting to mask the tears coming to my eyes with a smile.

“And I guess she’s passed it right along down to me,” I chuckle.

“She wasn’t there long...just a few spells here and there.”

“Do you know what her diagnosis was?” I ask, wringing my hands together.

“No...” he says and I glare at him, wondering if he’s trying to hide a painful truth from me. He throws up his hands.

“I swear!” he promises.

“I don’t believe this.” I cover my face in my hands. I feel the couch shift and he puts his arm around me.

“Oh God,” I say but it comes out as a whimper, and soon I’m sobbing, unable to stop. This is bad. So bad. “I don’t know how to fix this. If this is all true how do I fix this? I can’t go back to Kam like this.”

“Megan, it’s going to be okay. We don’t even know if this is the answer to all of this. It could be a coincidence. Alana could be someone else, what the hell do I know? You know I can be an idiot sometimes,” Blue says, trying his best to comfort me.

“Kam, he’ll be devastated. How could I do this to him?” I stand from the couch not knowing which way to turn first.

I shriek, my hands shaking. “What if I stole that guy’s money! What if I’m a thief, some type of criminal!”

“Megan—calm down!” he says and grabs me to hold me in place.

“We’re going to figure this out!” he promises me.

“I can’t drag you into this. I’m not your problem. None of this is your problem. You’ve gone above and beyond for me.”

He frowns at me.

“Megan, you’re my friend, and if this does all turn out to be legit...then I’m sort of involved already...we’d technically be family,” he laughs and I’m guessing it’s an attempt to lighten the mood but it doesn’t.

“If this is true...oh God, oh God, I’m married?!!”

Ian forces his way into my thoughts. Seeing him in the bar, how he was so familiar it was eerie, that I’ve been trying to attribute it to him looking like the guy from *Sons of Anarchy*. It wasn’t me being familiar with him.

Was it?

Could it be this is all true? Could this be what’s been happening to me for years? I’m about to vomit.

“I’m going to throw up.”

I must have said it out loud because Blue’s pushing a garbage can in my arms. I grip it and hug it to my chest. I sit down on the couch and a few seconds later Blue is pushing a bottle of water in my hand. I’m quiet, the sheer craziness of this making my hands shake before I take a sip.

I have to think. I have to get a grip. I have to. The more I know about whatever he’s talking about, the more information I can use to rule it out and get all of this straightened out.

“W-what else do you know about DID?” I ask hesitantly.

“It was covered in a psych class I took but let’s consult father Google,” he says, his voice light but unsurprisingly as tense as my body is.

Blue grabs his bag and pulls out his laptop, sitting beside me on the couch. I wring my hands together tightly as he pulls up Google.

“You’re cool?” He asks for confirmation.

“Let’s just look,” I say shortly. He types in the words and I swallow hard as the screen populates.

My chest tightens at what the highlighted image on the right side of the screen says. I read the first sentence on the screen aloud, even though my mouth is dry and my tongue feels like a thousand pounds.

“Dissociative Identity Disorder, previously called Multiple Personality Disorder, is usually a reaction to trauma as a way to help a person avoid bad memories.”

I don't remember the first six years of my life, but...it's not from me avoiding them. I was a child.

My eyes continue along.

“Condition RARE. Fewer than 200,000 cases a year.”

I let out a long sigh. So not many people have it, but enough do. *Too* many.

“...it could be why no one treated you when you saw them.” I realize Blue's talking to me. I try not to frown.

“Dissociative identity disorder (DID) is a severe condition in which two or more distinct identities, or personality states, are present in—and alternately take control of—an individual. Some people describe this as an experience of possession. The person also experiences memory loss that is too extensive to be explained by ordinary forgetfulness.”

I read the sentence over and over again.

This is real?

This is a real thing?

Two people in one body? More than two? The same person?

If I took everything that's happened to me—all my memory losses, losing time for days or weeks—and took the time to total it all up, it could possibly equate to years if I started from when I was a little girl. I instinctively cover my mouth with my hand. I look over at Blue and want to apologize for treating him so badly. Could this be what's been plaguing my life, what's ripped me away from Kam?

My breath catches when my eyes read the next words.

Treatment can help but condition cannot be cured.

“What!” I say in horror.

“Can't be cured?” My heart has dropped into my stomach.

I look to him and his eyes avoid mine.

“Let's not think about that now, you're jumping way the fuck ahead.” He shuts down the laptop and turns towards me.

“What did you come here for?” he asks, and tears are welling in my eyes again, blurring out everything in front of me.

“To meet my brother,” I answer pathetically.

“To find out who I am. To connect to something...” I say before my voice breaks.

“Why did you come to me?” he asks quietly.

“To find out the truth?” he says, and I nod. “What did you tell me when you came to me?”

I thought if I found out about my family, that if I knew my past, where I came from, then I could see a future with Kam. A real one—not one undeserved or on borrowed time.

“What did you tell me Megan?” he asks again.

I’m fighting through tears now.

“That regardless of what you found out, I wanted to know, no matter how bad it could hurt.”

“I don’t know if this is what you’re up against, but I know you haven’t had it easy. When we met I was fucking elated because you weren’t one of them, some rich kid who had it easy their whole life and their biggest problem was choosing which country they were going to travel to for vacation.” He chuckles and I look up at him.

“I love Katie...” he shakes his head. “I *loved* her, but we’re from two different worlds, and so were all her friends and Kam. Not that that makes them bad people but I saw in you what’s in me. Someone who fought their way through all the shit life threw at them and after all of it is still fucking here. We’re still here, and I don’t know about you but I don’t plan on going anywhere.” He nudges me and gives me a smile that’s contagious.

“I’m not saying it’s going to be easy, but hell if you give up now.”

I wipe my tears away and take a deep breath.

“Open it back up,” I tell him trying to muster up some type of determination. He smiles widely before whipping it open.

“DID reflects a failure to integrate various aspects of identity, memory, and consciousness into a single multidimensional self. Usually, a primary identity carries the individual’s given name and is passive, dependent, guilty, and depressed. When in control, each personality state, or alter, may be experienced as if it has a distinct history, self-image, and identity. The alters’ characteristics—including name, reported age and gender, vocabulary, general knowledge, and predominant mood—contrast with those of the primary identity. Certain circumstances or stressors can cause a particular alter to emerge. The various identities may deny knowledge of one another, be critical of one another, or appear to be in open conflict.”

We read and read and read—me on my iPad and Blue on his laptop—from several different websites. We find online support groups for people who have it, for family members of people who have it. We find articles supporting the diagnosis, those who debunk it. Each word engrosses but terrifies me.

So many people, so many stories, so many different accounts. It’s overwhelming.

“Let’s take a break,” Blue finally says. I rub my eyes and glance at the clock. It’s been three hours.

“We should get something to eat. I saw a bar and grill on the corner,” he says, standing and stretching.

“Uhm, I’m going to keep reading a little while longer,” I say quietly.

“You need to eat,” he insists and I shake my head.

“If you can just bring me back a burger or something,” I say, giving him the best smile I can muster. He lets out a sigh but nods.

“Okay,” he relents. When Blue leaves out the door the tears I’ve been holding in fall freely, fast, and seem as if they won’t stop. Tears I’ve been trying to hide from him, from

myself. I head into the bathroom and splash water on my face. I grab a towel and dry it.

I can't have this.

God please don't let it be this.

I look up and catch my reflection in the mirror and stare at myself. Is it really not just me? Could it be someone else staring back at me, hiding...waiting? Has she—have I been here before? The doors shut in the living room. Blue must have left something. I take in another deep breath and head out when I see...

Him.

He's back and seeing him now is just as surreal as the first time I saw him.

“Hey.”

He's holding a black bag across his broad frame. His eyes are avoiding me though, and why wouldn't they? That's explainable. But what isn't explainable is why my heart goes into overdrive, my breath becomes shallow, and every muscle in me tightens at the sight of him. That is not explainable.

Well, maybe, because he's gorgeous, and one of the most beautiful men I've ever seen in person. But not in a perfect model sort of way; a visceral way, like he was created to be every woman's fantasy. Not the guy who fixes and mends your heart, but the guy who overtakes you, overwhelms you, and breaks it. I'd say it's just lust but lust doesn't feel like this.

I fell for Kam quickly, beautifully. It was innocent and pure. This man, the one who stands before me, is like a Greek god—one I don't ever remember seeing before yesterday—and stirs something in me. And now after learning everything I have today, what might be wrong with me...I'm afraid of what he's stirring in me will come out.

What do I do? What do I say to him? This man who could be my husband. If I believe all of this, proceed with Blue's hypothesis, that's what he is! Could he know me in ways that I'm unfamiliar with? He looks at me like he does, but does he see me, or does he see...her?

“I’m sorry I’m still here!” I nearly yell. What else can I say to him? There is nothing else. I’m confused and my emotions are a hurricane inside of me. He doesn’t say anything, like he’s searching for what to say, but at a loss. I can’t stand the silence between us.

“I-Is it hard on you, for me being here...?” I feel like an idiot the moment the words leave my mouth. Of course it’s hard, why would it be easy? I look like the girl who he was married to. He looks caught off guard by my question. His face is void for a second and then he gives me a lopsided grin that’s boyish, charming, and reminds me of Kam. Guilt wraps around my heart. He runs his hands through his thick dirty blond strands. I’ve never really been into blond guys, well any guy before Kam, but it’s perfect on him. His eyes meet mine for a second before they glaze over my body, and I feel myself blush.

“Yeah...” His word is breathless, like it took everything for him to push out, but it’s light.

“I’m going to go I just...I’m sorry I’m here, I never would’ve came if I knew that you, if I...” I’m incoherent and barely making sense, but it’s hard making words while looking at him, while feeling like this.

“No, don’t apologize,” he tells me quickly, stepping towards me in big long strides. And I will myself not to faint. We’re less than a foot apart, and even though I’m 5’7”, I have to look up at him. His face is a mixture of joy, pain, and confusion. His cologne wafts around us, understated but strong, the scent that took over my senses while I laid in his bed last night. A scent that’s more familiar than it should be.

“You just...you look so much like her.” His eyes are on mine, searching for something. Or someone.

I try to look away but I can’t. There’s a pull between us that’s almost magnetic and it’s taking everything in me to fight it, which makes sense because he has his own atmosphere and I’m being sucked in.

“But...your eyes are different,” he says, clearing his throat, almost breaking the trance I was falling into. He steps an inch

closer towards me and my body awakens in a way that only Kam has made it.

“A different color,” he tells me sadly. My eyes widen, a glimmer of hope beginning to flicker in me.

“They are!” I say trying to keep the joy out of my voice. Maybe all of this is wrong...just maybe.

“Hers are grey.” He takes a small step back and I don’t understand the disappointment I feel when he does.

“You’re not wearing contacts?” he asks, sounding defeated. I shake my head no, and he nods slightly. He closes his eyes and grips his hair.

“This is really fucked up.” He laughs but there’s no humor in it.

“I’m so sorry,” is all I can manage to say. Our eye colors are different.

Alana’s is grey.

Mine are green. She’s not me.

I’m not her!

“I’ll help you find her,” I say and his eyes briefly meet mine.

“She doesn’t want to be found,” he says dejectedly. “I’ve looked *everywhere*, and when she left, all she left me was a letter. A fucking letter! Can you believe that?” There is anger and bitterness underneath his tone.

Guilt pours over me when I realize I did the same thing to Kam, but it’s different. I had to leave Kam so I didn’t end up hurting him...and I have every intention of being back with him.

“Sometimes people leave because they love you.”

He chuckles and goes to sit on the couch. He removes the black bag from around him and sets it beside him, then leans his long body over his lap and rests his arms on his knees.

“Or because they don’t give a fuck about you,” he snarls, shaking his head. I watch him open the bag and he pulls out a professional-looking camera, and I think of the beautiful photos around his bedroom that are almost as beautiful as he is.

I’m in the same spot I’ve been in since I walked out of the bathroom and feel aimless, useless, and confused about what to do. The apartment is small and I feel trapped as to where to go. Ian takes up the entire room—his pain, his anger, his disappointment—and it doesn’t feel big enough for me to exist in it with him. But it’s not me he’s angry with, not me he’s disappointed with. I don’t have her eyes. I’m not the girl he’s mourning, and that gives me a little more confidence.

He loves someone who shares my blood though. He loves my family. He misses her, he knew her. I’m relieved, as everything I read earlier that was heavier than a mountain is moot now; I can breathe. Even though I’m back to square one, you never realize how lucky you are until you see what hell can really be like. I saw it and for the first time I’m catching a break. I cautiously make my way to the couch he’s on but sit on the opposite side.

“I think it’s a sign...for me to be here, for you to be Blue’s cousin,” I say quietly. “My sister...” It feels so good to say that, it makes sense to say it, and is so much better than the alternative. Not only my sister but...maybe my twin.

“Maybe I can help you get her back...it sounds as if she was running, maybe...she left to save you.”

He looks up from the camera at me with an amused look and those sad eyes light up for a moment.

“Do I look like I need to be protected or saved from anyone?”

His voice is raspy, rugged, and makes my stomach muscles clench. His grin is dangerously sexy and my mouth drops open a little, but then it’s gone. Thank God it’s gone.

“Alana knew that if she had any problems they’d have been fixed. Hell, she knew how to fix them herself.”

I don't know how to respond to him. I don't know him, or anything about him, but what if he deals with the people Blue deals with, the type of people I've crossed paths with growing up in foster care, people I carefully avoided, people who knew people who could fix things, who grew up to be the people to fix things. If Alana lived a parallel of my life choosing to go left when I went right, the people she'd know, the things she'd do...it sends a chill down my spine.

"She left because she wanted to, not because she had to. She never *had* to do anything. She never answered to anyone, wasn't afraid of anyone but herself."

"I know what it's like to be afraid of yourself."

He tilts his head to one side and his eyes squint at me.

"Do you?" he asks softly but there's a challenge to it and it makes my heart do a jumping jack. I don't know why I said that aloud.

I didn't intend to. I clear my throat and shift in my seat.

"Yes," I admit, keeping my eyes locked on his. He sets the camera down and turns towards me, giving me his full attention.

His stare is intense and enveloping. I wonder if he looks at everyone like that, or was it just her? And if he did, how could she just leave when eyes like that worshiped her?

The same way I left Kam.

Her and I have more in common the more I think about it. I tear my eyes from his and they fall on his camera. That's why he's looking at me like that. He probably looks at the world as if it's a work of art.

"How long have you been taking pictures?" I ask, trying to get away from the heavy subject we should be delving into, because I'm not ready. I want to stay in shallow water with a life jacket. He smashes his beautiful lips together briefly, taking them into his mouth before releasing them, and I feel heat spread through me.

“Uhm, since I was about sixteen I got a camera. My mom gave it to me. She said that I could do more with my hands than beat the shit out of people,” he explains lightly. I look at him confused.

“I got into a lot of trouble when I was young. Grew up in a not so good area. My stepdad taught me to fight, how to defend myself.” My eyes trail over him. He’s about 6’3” and at least 230 pounds, lean, wrapped in muscle, covered in tattoos. I couldn’t imagine the type of damage he’d do if he decided to put the camera down. He looks like he could easily be an MMA fighter.

I think to ask if it’s a hobby but after seeing the photographs in his room it seems like a stupid question to ask.

“Alana grew up in foster care,” he says cautiously and I nod.

“She was from here?”

“No. She was from Indiana, or grew up there.”

My heart slams against my chest. Were we all sent there for some reason, even though my birth certificate says I was born in Michigan?

“Where are you from?”

I pause.

“Indiana,” I whisper, gluing my eyes to my lap. I hear him shift in his seat.

“You don’t remember anything about your family?” he asks.

“No. Blue found out more than I have in my entire lifetime. If there’s anything to know, he’s the one to find it out.”

“But...he didn’t find anything about Alana?” he asks, confusion in his voice. My stomach knots.

Alana’s eyes aren’t green like mine.

He said it himself. We’re not the same. Blue’s theory is invalid.

“I’m sure he will when he keeps digging,” I tell him, reassuring both of us.

“I should have asked him about her when she first left...I was just...I was too embarrassed.” His voice is so sullen it makes me want to reach out and hug him and apologize, even though I’m not the one who should.

I’m not Alana.

He glances up at me and I see now his eyes are emerald green pools that almost any girl would want to jump into.

“I didn’t want anyone in my family to know, in case she came back. I didn’t want them to look at her differently.” I fight the urge to put my hand on his. He seems like a such good guy, a handsome man who is deeply in love with her, who even after she left him fiercely held on to his loyalty for her.

Does she deserve him?

Do I deserve Kam?

“I’m sorry about all of this.”

He chuckles. “It’s not your fault.”

Alana and I have different-colored eyes.

“And if you’re Alana’s twin sister, we’re sort of family right?” he asks, forcing a smile as I do the same.

“Why didn’t you divorce her?”

Too personal, but I couldn’t stop the words from coming out of my mouth. His answer is important to me, maybe because I see him like how I see Kam.

If he can still love her, after all she’s done, maybe Kam will still love me. That she left him how I did Kam. And in some way he gives me more hope that we’ll get our happy ending...the other reason is one I stuff down deep inside of me.

“I’m sorry if that’s an inappropriate question.”

He's quiet for a moment as if trying to find the right words to say.

"There's no point; she took the best parts of me with her when she left. It'd be unfair to ask another woman to just take what's left over."

My heart flinches and I feel lightheaded.

The door opens and I thank God Blue's here. He's interrupted a moment that was starting to feel too intimate.

"Am I interrupting anything?" he asks with a quizzical look on his face.

"No, we were just...getting to know each other," I tell him brightly. Maybe too brightly.

"Yeah," Ian adds but it's dry and almost forced.

"I got food!" he croons and heads to the kitchen. I jump up, glad for a distraction. I go with Blue to the kitchen, where he lays out the food. He hands me a turkey burger with bacon and hand-cut fries.

"I thought you'd get pizza since it's Chicago and all," I joke with him.

"Their pizza's not that good," he whispers and winks.

"You're full of shit Blue," Ian tells him, his voice easier than it was earlier and a bit more playful.

"So, what's on the agenda for you guys?" he asks looking between Blue and I. I ignore the goosebumps that attempt to break out on my skin. The kitchen is small so the table area isn't large and it puts us closer to one another than we were on the couch.

"Well, we're going to go pay Megan's brother a visit."

"Yup, we're all about the ambushes it seems these days," I try to joke and he grins but it's slight.

"Where does he live?" he asks.

"Some high-rise downtown," Blue replies.

“Oh I didn’t tell you, he’s pretty much a Crestfield,” Blue adds, and I glare at him. Ian looks unimpressed.

“And that means?” Ian scoffs at him.

“How are you clueless about the movers and shakers in your city man?” Blue laughs.

“He’s not moving or shaking shit for me,” Ian replies, grabbing a pile of fries from Blue’s carton.

“Well that means Megan’s brother is rich out the ass is what that means, which means by association she is.”

“That’s not what it means Blue. It means he’s probably grown up to be an arrogant prick and won’t want anything to do with me,” I mutter.

“Wow, negative much?” Blue counters whimsically.

“He doesn’t know you’re coming?” Ian asks me, his face full of concern and confusion.

“What was she supposed to do—just ring him up?” Blue asks as if it’s obvious.

“So you plan on literally ambushing this guy?” Ian asks and his eyes light up in amusement. I laugh, embarrassed.

“It’s not an ambush. It’s just a meeting he has no clue is going to happen.” Blue shrugs.

“Well I hate to tell you, Cousin, but if he is as rich as you say he is and stays in an expensive as shit high-rise, you’re not just going to be able to waltz in the building and get on the elevator to his floor.”

“Duhh, we’re not going to do that. We are going to wait in the lobby and when we see him...”

Blue trails off and I realize how stupid this plan sounds, now that I’m hearing it out loud.

“Well how it works...I think is that if he has a car he’ll probably go through a private entrance in his garage,” Ian says condescendingly.

“Okay. We’ll go to the lobby and have the person call him, or we’ll call him if they have one of those electronic things,” Blue answers swiftly.

“And you’re going to say you’re who?” Ian asks sarcastically.

“Look, everyone isn’t as fucking suspicious and paranoid as you are,” Blue retorts. Ian laughs and shakes his head.

“He’s right Blue. Maybe I should write him a letter or something and wait to see what his response is.” Blue throws his head back dramatically.

“No, what if he doesn’t respond? What if he thinks you’re a crank or doesn’t even open it?” Blue counters.

“Well if he responds that way to the letter, imagine how he’ll respond in person,” I reply.

“Hey...no, we’ve come all the way to Chicago for you to meet this dude and we’re meeting him!”

“Maybe. I’m just thinking she can send him a letter, tell him what you’ve found out, and in the meantime we put our focus on finding Alana,” Ian says authoritatively.

Blue shoots a confused look at me and I look away awkwardly.

“Ian says that Alana’s eyes are grey!” I spit out tightly, trying to keep my voice even. “Mine are green so obviously what we thought earlier was wrong.”

“What did you think earlier?” Ian asks, glancing between Blue and me. I stare at Blue and hope he reads that I don’t want Ian to know about what we thought could possibly be an option—because it’s not—and it won’t help this situation at all if we give Ian an inkling that it could possibly be.

“I really think that Alana is my twin,” I say, avoiding Ian’s question. Blue looks at me with disappointment all over his face, and I feel embarrassed and guilty. But him announcing that I could possibly be Alana isn’t what we need at all right now, especially since I can’t be.

“Blue told me what you said about thinking I have amnesia,” I tell him, and he lets out a breath.

“But...that’s not it,” I say, his face stoic. “I wouldn’t need a different name if I somehow had amnesia. I’ve always been me, Megan. It’s who I’ve been since I can remember.

“And you just told me that we have different-colored eyes and that solidifies that I have a sister or cousin out here... somewhere, who needs our help.” I’m trying to keep my tone soft, almost pleading. Ian’s eyes are searching mine and I want to look away, but I can’t seem to. There’s something that keeps my gaze there.

Why are they so familiar?

Because they are, bitch. I push the invasive thought from me. I don’t even know where it came from, loud like words being spoken into my ear.

“Wait a minute! Am I the only person here whose eyes change colors?” Blue butts in and I want to kick him in the throat.

“Her eyes were never green!” I say pointedly to Blue, who is slowly turning from ally into enemy.

Why is he pushing this?! I know Ian is his cousin but he came here to help me, and throwing out these crazy theories won’t help Ian. It will only hurt him.

“I didn’t say that,” Ian cuts in, his voice quieter than I’ve heard but growing stronger

“I said your eyes are different, hers were usually grey... but...they were green sometimes, just not often,” he adds, and my blood pressure has started to rise again as I see the glimmer of hope that was extinguished earlier now catching fire.

“We’ve got to tell him, Megan,” Blue utters, pleading, and I glare at him, mouthing “no.”

“Tell me what!” Ian’s voice is demanding now but I can’t say a word.

“We’re not for sure, we’re not halfway sure even, but we’re exploring the possibility that...” Blue begins, and tears fill my eyes and he stops.

“What the fuck is going on?” Ian shouts, now out of his chair, anger and desperation filling up the entire space.

“Megan has to tell you,” Blue relents, and in a second Ian’s grabbed Blue out of his chair and has him pinned to the wall.

“You better start talking right now!” he growls.

“Get the hell off me bro!” Blue warns.

“Stop it!” I plead.

“Get the hell off me Ian!” Blue yells again.

“Talk little cousin!” Ian says through clenched teeth.

This isn’t what I wanted! I don’t want them to fight.

“I’m not going to say it again.” Blue’s face is turning red. I see his fist balling up and if the two of them clash in here, this apartment will be destroyed.

“I-I might have DID!” I yell. Ian looks back at me confused and Blue uses that opportunity to push Ian off of him.

“Asshole!” he spits, but Ian’s attention is fully on me.

“What-what is that?” he asks cautiously.

“It’s a disorder where...where I may say and do things I don’t remember as...almost a different person,” I tell him, my voice wavering. I’m cringing at how unbelievable this sounds. He cocks his head to the side, studying me before looking back at Blue for confirmation.

“We don’t know but...it’s something we’re checking into. It might help all of this make sense,” Blue adds.

He lets out a deep breath and grips the kitchen chair. If he holds it any tighter it might break in his hands. I’m not sure if he’s confused, in disbelief, or angry. Maybe it’s all three.

“It’s Multiple Personality Disorder,” Blue reiterates.

“Do you know what that is?” he asks again even though Ian is silent. He scowls at him.

“I’m not a fucking idiot!” Ian snarls. He releases the kitchen chair from his grip and runs his hands through his hair. His gaze finds mine and the intensity in his expression softens slightly.

“You’re saying you’re...Alana...but don’t know it?” he asks, but it’s more like a statement.

I look away from him and glue my eyes to the floor. “I’m not saying anything,” I mutter.

I listen for Blue to interject in my defense, to pivot to a more logical explanation that would be easier. But he doesn’t. The silence is suffocating. I’m afraid to look at him. I’m drowning in a pool of uncertainty and I don’t want to take anyone with me.

IAN

THEY'RE FUCKING WITH ME, they have to be. This is some sick twisted game. *How far can we push Ian until he fucking explodes!* is what they're playing and they're close, really close to finding out.

“Multiple Personality Disorder?” I let out an angry laugh. Blue has his arms folded, still pissed from me snatching him up, but there isn't a hint of a smile on his face.

Then my eyes go to her, whoever the hell she's pretending to be. I have to say she's gotten some good fucking acting lessons because I *almost* believed them. Her mannerisms and temperament are different, but I knew it deep down. I've tried to make myself believe she could be Alana's twin but it doesn't make sense. I wouldn't feel how I feel for her sister even if they shared the same face, but personality disorder? They must think I'm a fucking idiot!

“Really, Alana?” I scream, and her eyes widen. She steps back as I approach her, like a nervous little mouse, and it's so damned confusing.

“I promise you I'm not her! I don't know anything about her,” she pleads and backs into the couch. Blue is behind me as if he's ready to restrain me. I glare at him, and back at her. Do they think I'd hurt her? I'm pissed as fuck, confused as hell, but I'd never hurt her! Not in a million years. Alana knows that...Alana wouldn't be afraid of me. She wouldn't back down. But there's fear and panic in eyes I've looked in a thousand times, and have never seen this in them before.

“You guys better not be fucking with me,” I warn them, trying to calm myself down. Personality disorder? I don’t get it.

“I’m confused too. I’m angry I don’t know what is going on and hope to God what we think it is isn’t, but just please know I’m not. I just found all of this out, trust me. I’m not playing you...or fucking with you,” she promises, tears now streaming down her face, her voice broken.

God, even the way she swears is different from Alana, like it’s forced or she doesn’t do it often.

I scratch my head trying to figure out how this is possible, if this is real. But I have a crying, trembling girl in front of me. And my cousin, who knows I’ll rip him in shreds if this is some type of game, is looking at me with...shit, this pitying look on his face. He pities me, or Alana. I don’t know if it matters which but that makes my stomach drop.

They’re...they’re for real.

Blue’s handing Alana a handful of tissues and she takes them, her gaze glued to her lap as she wipes her face and blows her nose. I’ve never seen her like this before—so readable, so vulnerable. So scared.

“You guys don’t think this is a coincidence, for her to be my wife? And you just happen to bring her here of all places?” I ask Blue directly.

“I know! I know, but I think that maybe...deep down she wanted to be here. Alana did,” Blue says and she looks at Blue like he’s betrayed her.

“We still don’t know if that’s what this is! I came here because we’re low on funds and my brother is here, not because some...some *psycho* led me here subconsciously!” she fires at him.

“Look we don’t know anything, just that this is real messed up for everyone involved,” Blue says.

“How do we find out? Is there some sort of test? How do we get this cleared up?” I ask them, trying to contain the

conflicting emotions battling within and threatening to spill out. They're both silent and it pisses me off.

"We didn't want to tell you until we knew for sure. At least I didn't," she explains, quietly glaring at Blue.

"I don't know much about this, and he doesn't either. Alana could be my sister and we've gotten you upset for nothing," she says, her voice strong and on edge.

"If I found out later it wouldn't have been good," I tell her and give a nod of thanks to Blue.

"Fuck!!!" I shout, and fight the urge to kick over the coffee table sitting in the middle of the room because she's already afraid of me. Or she's not and went and got her degree in dramatics or something.

Think. Think. Think.

What would she get out of this lie?

Alana always played fucking games though.

What would Blue get out of it?

Nothing.

I look at Alana, or whoever this girl is—Megan, I think—and she's still here but she doesn't want to be, and now they're both saying she could have some sort of mental disorder. I always thought Alana was insane but not literally, clinically.

What do I do now? Where do I go from here?

I'm still in love with Alana.

Do I want her back?

I hate her.

I need her.

What if this is legit? What if she has this shit, what if she doesn't know me, what if she never does?

"I-I think we should give you space. That you need time to think. And so do I. This is a lot. For everyone" Her voice, *not* Alana's voice, *this* girl's, similar to Alana's but so different, is who I hear.

She wants to leave.

I can't let her leave but it probably won't be good for her to stay. I need to think but I don't want to let her go. What if it is Alana?

"I think you're right," Blue agrees, letting out something between a laugh and a sigh.

I frown at both of them.

"No..." I'm shaking my head furiously, my arms folded. I know I must look like a kid about to throw a tantrum.

"You guys aren't dropping this shit on me and leaving," I inform them, trying to even out my tone. She looks up at me quickly then locks her gaze back on the floor.

"Show him," she mutters quietly, her arms now folded across her body. I look towards Blue confused.

"You should sit down," he says, cautiously.

That's never a good sign.

I walk past *this* girl...and sit on the opposite side of the couch from her. Blue grabs his laptop and hands it over to me. I adjust in my seat as I start reading. Blue takes her position. He doesn't say anything, his arms clasped over his knees.

I start to read, my eyes scanning the pages faster than I have read anything in my life.

Words stick out on the page.

Alter.

Trauma.

Host.

Unconsciousness.

Memory loss, mood swings.

Dramatic differences of characteristics.

"Personalities may deny knowledge of each other."

Dissociation is a mental process that causes a lack of connection in a person's thoughts, memory, and sense of

identity...

Unique personality, name, and history.

“200,000 cases reported a year. What the fuck?”

Blue guides me to a different page and I devour the information.

This page is different, with testimonials and personal accounts. There are so many. I stare at the page. Blue takes the laptop and clicks on one and I read aloud.

“I lived with DID for six years before being properly diagnosed. I previously was misdiagnosed with Schizophrenia, PTSD, and epilepsy, and only became aware of my alters after I moved in with my then-fiancé, now husband...” I look over at her, her skin pale, her knees tightly drawn together, her arms locked around them. I look back at the screen then towards Blue. My heartbeat is rocky.

I slide the laptop over to Blue. I can't read anymore. I can't digest anymore.

“You guys think this is what...” I trail off, trying to get my thoughts in order. She's not looking at me, but I notice her hands slightly trembling.

There's no way I'd miss this. How could I not know? If Alana has this...how could I not know? I shake my head.

“I would've known.”

Blue looks at me with that pitying look that makes me sick.

“I would have known if Alana was different fucking people man! That's what this shit is saying!” I gesture angrily to the laptop and look at both of them. Her head is still down.

“Can you look at me!” My patience is starting to dwindle with her.

“Bro,” Blue says in a warning voice.

My tone is aggressive and I'm trying to tame it with everything in me but I'm losing the battle.

She lifts her head up and her eyes meet mine. They're full of tears, sadness, despair. I feel like my stomach caves in on itself. This is definitely my girl. Her eyes, face, lips...I *know* it's her. But there's a disconnect, a vacancy almost.

"I'm not her." Her voice is quivering as tears fall down her cheeks. "Even if this is true. I'm not *her*, Ian. I don't know who she is. I don't know who you are. But I'm Megan," she says quietly but her voice is more confident.

She stands from her chair and glances at Blue. "I don't know if this is real. God, I don't want it to be. I don't want it to be for me or you. The person that you think I am, or want me to be, this *Alana*. I know nothing about her and to be completely honest with you...I don't want to know. I didn't come here for this. I came here to find my family. To meet my brother and to figure out what's wrong with me."

Her voice breaks and she covers her face briefly.

"This, I'm not prepared for! This isn't what I want or expected. I don't know what to say to you other than...I-I'm sorry. If this is it. I am so sorry but the person you know isn't me, and I don't *ever* want to be her. I am terrified of who she is, and I can't deal with this. I can't!" She turns and heads to the door. "I-I've got go. I can't stay here. I'm sorry. This is too much..."

"Alana no!" is all I can think to say but she shakes her head and bolts out the door. I shoot out of my seat.

"I'll go get her. Just—let me bro." He's pleading. He's lost his mind if he thinks I'm letting her leave like that.

"Her purse is still here. She's coming back. She won't get far," he says but I'm already out the door heading down the steps. When I'm outside I look around for her but she's nowhere in sight. I feel sick.

Not again. She can't get away again.

I turn back to head upstairs and get my car keys.

"I can't stop you?" Blue says while blocking the entrance of the hallway.

“What do you think?!” I push past him and run up the stairs, back into the apartment, and grab my keys.

I race out of the apartment and down the stairs, head to my Challenger, and jump in the driver’s seat. Blue’s hopped in the passenger seat.

“So when you find her, what are you going to do?” he asks, his tone a mix of irritation and sarcasm.

“Bring her back,” I mutter, pulling off.

“What if she comes back here and we’re gone?” he asks.

“You’re right. Get out,” I tell him, unlocking the doors.

“You think she’s going to just come with you if you find her?”

“She’s not going to have a choice,” I tell him plainly. His face twists in frustration.

“Damn it Ian. Don’t you get it? After reading everything, after seeing her upstairs. She’s not the girl you know, Ian! She’s not your wife. She’s scared and has no connection with you. And you charging after her is just going to make things worse.”

I swallow the lump in my throat, gripping the wheel so hard my knuckles are white.

If I have to drag her back I will, but that’s if she’s mine, if she’s Alana. But what if she’s not? No, it doesn’t matter. She’s still Alana.

“So what am I supposed to do?!” I shout at him.

“Do you know how much it fucking hurt to hear what she said?”

I slam my hands on the steering wheel and fight the burning sensation in my throat.

“The way she’s been looking at me like I’m a damn stranger is *killing* me.”

I try to get a grip of the emotions that are about to spin out of control. I let out a few breaths. I won’t cry in front of my

cousin.

I don't cry.

I didn't until I lost her.

Silence passes between us, and I try to push out the thought of her not knowing me, being afraid of me, and the worst part is her loving someone else. That she's someone else.

"If you love her, you'll help her."

"I want to help her," I reply as if it's obvious.

"Not like this, not with how you are now. It's too intense!" He lets out a sigh.

"Take a minute to step back from how you feel and what you want and just think how she has to be feeling. Dude, imagine not remembering stuff in your life and this alter ego taking over and doing whatever the hell it wants and you not having any control," Blue says cautiously.

I frown.

"You're saying Alana's her alter ego? That she's not a real person?" I ask, keeping my voice steady.

"I'm not an expert on any of this, man. I just...I don't know who you know."

"If you knew Alana you wouldn't say that. She's not a figment of someone's imagination. She's real! She's smart, and sexy, badass, strong, fearless, and she loved me. How do we know this version of her isn't the fake one!"

I can tell he wants to argue but he knows better than to argue with me now. I know I'm being a jerk and unreasonable but none of this is fair

"I want her back Blue." It's simple and I know it won't change.

"I need her," I say, unsure of what his response is going to be. Honestly I really don't give a fuck, but I owe it to him to know that.

“If this is what we think it is, then she has a mental disorder,” he says and even after everything I’ve read today I cringe at the words.

“She needs help and support. This isn’t just a quirk,” he says seriously.

“I don’t care. I promised her no matter what that I’d be there for her, and if her name is...Megan, or whoever she wants to be, it doesn’t matter. I keep my promises. I can’t lose her, not again.”

Blue lets out a long sigh of his own and wipes his hands across his face.

“I’m going to be straight with you man. Megan, she’s... she’s been pretty serious with Kam...”

I rotate my shoulders and try to pretend the words don’t sting—fuck sting, that they aren’t kicking me in the chest. Kam, what the hell type of name is that?

“I’ve been with other girls since she left,” I admit, attempting to downplay his words.

“No, she...he was going to propose to her, and before this I’m pretty sure she would have said yes.”

I press my eyes shut. The thought of someone else touching her is gut-wrenching. But to think that she could *love* someone else is unbearable.

“But she didn’t.” It’s all the comfort I can give myself.

“Whose side are you on? I’m your cousin, your fucking blood!” He knows I don’t want to hear about this. This isn’t helping me.

“Hers. And if you love her, that’s whose side you should be on too.”

He pulls his phone out of his pocket. “I’m going to see where she is.”

I wonder if she’ll answer for him. She does.

“Are you okay?” he asks, and I let out a sigh of relief that she picked up for him.

“Yeah,” he answers and I wonder if she’s asked if I’m with him.

“You don’t need to be wandering around Chicago without your purse, Megan,” Blue says in a big brother-type tone.

“I know you don’t...” he says, and I wish he’d put the phone on speaker so I can hear but I know he won’t do that.

“He’s going to be fine,” he continues and I wonder if she’s asked about me.

“Okay, I’ll meet you there in a half hour.” He hangs up before turning towards me.

“She’s going to check into a hotel.”

I nod.

“And it’s probably not a good idea that I don’t come, right?” I infer with a dry chuckle.

“Not right now,” he responds quickly.

“We got married, Blue. She had an ID and a social security card.” He looks at me knowingly. We both know how easy it is to get those things.

“It’s not concrete. It’s still possible that...” Blue trails off weakly, his tone not having an ounce of conviction in it.

“So who’s in whose head?” That’s what it comes down to right?

I know it’s not fair to be demanding these answers from Blue but he’s the one who brought this shit to my door.

“I don’t know how this works. I just know that...if this is what she has then she’s going to need people in her corner that don’t want something from her.” I can’t look at him.

“My marriage might not even be real?!” I laugh in disbelief.

Blue is quiet. He doesn’t have any answers for me. Why would he? He’s not a doctor, he didn’t know Alana, he knows this...Megan...and she has no fucking clue about me.

MEGAN

I don't get far—I can't, not with the way my heart is pounding. All I know is that I need to get away. Away from Ian and Blue and everything that's happened; the information, the case studies, the diagnosis. I can't breathe. I'm leaning against a nearby building wall as I try to catch my breath.

I see Blue coming down the street, and for half a second I want to take off again, run and not stop, but what happens then? I keep running? I stay this damaged, shattered girl whose mind is broken?

Trying to make it through life alone has gotten me exactly where I am now.

And it's not good.

Blue stops in front of me, his eyes full of pity. "Megan?" he says tentatively, waiting for me to speak.

We don't need his fucking pity.

The voice in my head isn't me. It isn't. I don't think like that, feel like that. But my head is aching, and I'm suddenly very afraid I might have another blackout. I now know when that happens I'm not dormant. Someone else comes alive. But I won't let her. She's caused enough trouble.

"I can't go back to that apartment," I say quietly. "I can't face Ian right now. I need to get myself together."

"I've got a friend who rents out an Airbnb down the street," Blue says quickly. "It's not cheap, but it'll cost much less than a hotel. Walk with me. I'll make the phone call."

Luckily Blue's friend's apartment is available. I have to figure out what my next move is, how I deal with this, and I can't do that with Ian around, with him looking at me with those eyes that vacillate between hurt and angry. The hurt is worse—I don't know who he is, but it breaks something in me every time he turns that pained gaze onto me, as if I'm torturing him intentionally.

I'm not. I don't want to hurt anyone. Not him. Not Kam. But that's all I do, apparently. Being in the same house isn't good for either of us.

I don't have an unlimited budget, but I have some savings, and now that I have my things again, I can at least access my money. Staying in an Airbnb is going to eat into it, but I don't have a choice. I can't focus on that right now, so I put it out of my head. I'll be okay for a little while, I'm sure.

The apartment is only a few blocks from Ian's, but even that space is welcome. Blue fishes the key out of a lockbox with a code texted to him, and unlocks the front gate, and then the door. The apartment is two floors up in an older, charming building with wood floors and whitewashed walls. One of the walls inside of the living room is exposed brick, and the floor is covered with thick multicolored rugs. There's plenty of well-loved furniture and some abstract art on the walls, and the overall feeling is warm and homey. I relax a little at the aura of it. At least there's no man who thinks he's in love with me here.

In the bedroom there's a full-sized bed with a fluffy blue duvet and wood blinds on the windows, another exposed brick wall, and a thick faux sheepskin rug on the scratched wooden floor that looks like it came straight out of an IKEA catalog. It's small, but better than anything I've lived in before Kam.

I sink down on the edge of the bed. "I'm going to take a shower," I tell him, pursing my lips as I look around the room. "Blue, I need you to call Kam and let him know that I'm okay. And..." I let out a long breath, knowing how much I'm asking of Blue. Is he going to get sick of playing nursemaid to me? "...can you get my things from Ian's? I don't want to go back there," I say in a small voice.

“Megan...” Blue runs his hand over his mohawk, letting out a long sigh. “Kam isn’t going to just say ‘okay,’ and let this fucking go. He loves you. He’s going to want to know where you are, why the hell we’re together. Especially since I bet my life Katie’s told him about what went down...he’s not going to just give up with finding out what the hell is going on.”

“I don’t have any answers for him right now, Blue. And I don’t want him knowing about...” I pause, my heart thundering in my chest. “I don’t want him knowing about my mental health, not yet. Not until we know for sure what’s wrong.”

I can tell Blue doesn’t want to lie, but I need him to. “Please,” I whisper. “I just need to figure out what’s going on with me. I’ll make things right with Kam, I promise.”

“Alright,” Blue relents. “I’ll take care of it.”

I practically run to the shower the moment Blue is out of the room, making it as hot as I can stand. I sit on the floor of the small iron tub, the hot spray of water cascading over my hair and skin, and squeeze my eyes shut. I think back to all the years of lapses, all the time I’ve lost, all of the blackouts and unexplained circumstances, the years that I’m missing. I always thought there was something neurological—narcolepsy, or something else wrong in my brain...physically wrong. Crossed wires or something that couldn’t be detected. But now it seems more and more likely that it’s psychological, and that makes me afraid more than anything. It makes me crazy, and out of control, I can’t trust my own body, my own mind. I’m trapped inside a shell, powered by something that will do whatever it wants, that takes me along for the ride with no concern as to who I hurt or if I really want to do the things I’m doing.

How can I tell Kam that? My beautiful, sweet Kam. He’s perfect and I’m anything but. How can I explain to him that the woman he loves is only one facet of me, that I am unpredictable and dangerous? That if he stays with me he’s going to have to live his whole life waiting for me to explode, to shift, to become some other person that he doesn’t

recognize or love? How can I ask him that? Will he even forgive me for what I've done to him already? Do I even *deserve* forgiveness if I don't even know what I've done?

A million emotions wash over me in waves, overwhelming me. I know it's dangerous to let myself get like this, but I can't help it. I'm aching for Kam, longing for him, for his reassuring words and steady presence, but I can't help but think that it isn't fair or right of me to want it. I've hurt him so much already. I can't make promises anymore, because I don't know if my brain will let me keep them. My life was always difficult, but it's become so messy, so undefined, that I know running back to Kam is only going to make things worse. Because it's clear that I don't have the control I thought I had.

I can hear Blue through the thin door, arguing with Kam in the hallway. "I'm not telling you where we are," I hear him say sternly, and then: "Because you'll come and find us! I know you Kam, and I know how you feel about Megan. No, this has nothing to do with Katie. This isn't some kind of revenge because your sister is a cheating slut." I hear him stop and take a deep breath. "No, no Kam, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. Well...look, I know she's your sister. But how could she do that to me? I promise, what's going on with Megan is something else. And it's platonic. I'm just helping her. When she's ready to tell you what's happening, she will."

I'm sitting on the side of the bed now, wrapped in a robe that I found in the closet, and still toweling off my hair when Blue knocks and walks in. "Thanks for handling Kam," I say quietly, setting down the towel and looking directly at him. "I know you didn't want to do it but thank you."

Blue shrugs, sitting down on the bed next to me. I go back to drying my hair, and there's silence for several moments until Blue finally speaks. "What's the plan now? Find Cal?"

"I don't know. I need a day to think. To make a plan, without anything else worrying me." I pause for a second. "How was Ian? After I left?"

Blue narrows his eyes and glances sideways at me. "Do you really care?"

“Of course I care!” I can’t help but feel offended. I’m not a monster, I don’t want anyone to be hurt in this. “This is all my fault...whatever the truth is about all of this, me showing up has him hurting and it’s because of me...or her. There’s no difference right?”

Blue is quiet. “You don’t remember anything about him, feel anything towards him?” he asks finally, his eyes imploring me to tell the truth.

“No,” I answer quickly, confidently. But it’s a lie. Though telling the truth would only convolute things more. And I need Blue on my side. He’s the only ally I have now.

“Alright, then.” Blue stands up decisively. “I’ll go get your things. You get some rest. We’ll figure something out tomorrow.”

When Blue leaves I grab my laptop and start scrolling through more and more pages on Dissociative Identity Disorder.

Loss of time.

Multiple alters.

Alters can be different ages, different genders...

Can have no memory of each other...

Can be entirely different personalities...

I shut the laptop after an hour or so, frustrated. Even the websites said that psychiatrists and other mental health professionals are hesitant to diagnose DID. Some don’t even believe it exists.

I set the laptop aside and flop back onto the bed, still in the robe, pull a throw blanket over me, and hope for sleep.

I hear footsteps, and then the door opening. I open my eyes. The room is dimly lit from the moonlight and streetlights coming in through the cracked blinds. I can see the shape of a slender woman with dark hair, and when the light hits her features, they are beautiful but cruel. She sneers at me, her upper lip curling, her arms crossed over her breasts. “Well, well,” she grinds out, her teeth clenched. “This is just like you,

Megan. You're such a fragile little flower. Always running away at the hard part. Leaving it for me." She walks towards the bed, and I can feel my heart pounding so hard that my chest hurts, but I can't move. I'm frozen in place, and all I can do is watch as she walks towards me, hurtling insults.

"Prissy fucking little bitch! Do you know what you put me through? What I've suffered because of *you*? And when I finally get a *life*, a happy life with a husband who loves me, you ruin it."

It's Alana. But how? How can she be here, if she's me? I want to scream for Blue, for anyone. I want to fight back but I'm paralyzed.

She's shouting now, her face flushed and almost skeletal in the light. Ghoulish. "I won't let you have him, Megan! I won't let you take him away from me! I won't let you hurt him. Do you *fucking hear me*? I'll kill us first."

I look up and there's a knife glinting in her hand. She's leaning over me, still screaming about Ian. In another second she's going to stab me...

I bolt upright, gasping, my heart pounding so hard that it feels as if it's going to break through the walls of my chest.

She's gone.

I'm in a cold sweat, my hair plastered to the sides of my head. I look around frantically, but no one is there. No knife, no screaming Alana.

It was a dream.

A nightmare.

I fall back onto the bed, gasping.

I'm scared...*terrified*. And I can't tell anyone.

Ian

DEVIN AND SHAUNA talked me into having dinner with them but I don't want to go. After everything that's happened with Alana/Megan I just want to drink but I haven't been over to see them in weeks and after sending Devin the picture I know he's worried about me. Besides, Shauna can cook her ass off so it should be good.

They're both thrilled to see me, and I'm right about dinner—their whole apartment smells amazing. Shauna's stepdad is Italian, and her cooking is phenomenal. She plants me at the kitchen table with a glass of red wine—where the hell is the vodka? But I don't complain it's free alcohol—and Devin faces me as Shauna busies herself at the counter.

“So, what the hell is going on, Ian? Was it her?”

I let out a long sigh. I might as well tell them; it will come out eventually.

“Alana's back,” I say, and quickly. His face is shocked, and Shauna is frozen in place halfway through slicing a loaf of fancy bread.

“Well, this girl looks like Alana, exactly like her. Like... if I didn't know better, I'd say it was her twin...” They look at me both dumbfounded and I let out another sigh before downing the glass of wine.

“She claims that she has some kind of medical issue—where she loses time, blacks out, does things that she can’t remember. I can’t believe someone could lose a whole life... months and months of shit... but it seems like there’s this disorder that can cause it, gives people different personalities, makes them block out whole sections of time. I don’t understand it, but Blue thinks it might be the reason for what’s happening.”

Devin is looking at me as if I’ve grown two heads.

“Dude, what the fuck? She’s fucked up, or she’s lying to you. Just divorce her and wash your hands of all that shit. Do you hear yourself? Multiple personalities? Do you really want to go to bed with a woman every night, not knowing who you’re going to wake up to in the morning? Jesus, it’s hard enough knowing.”

Shauna shoots him a dirty look, and he throws his hands up.

“I mean every girl except you, babe.”

“Mental health issues are real, Devin,” she scolds him. “They’re serious, and if this is true she needs his support.” She gives me a serious look. “In sickness and in health, right Ian?”

The words hit me like a slap in the face.

She’s right.

I took vows. And Alana broke hers, but if it wasn’t Alana who did it, but this other personality, this other person in her body... Megan, the imposter it doesn’t count, I think. What the hell do I know?

“I work at one of the largest hospitals in Chicago,” Shauna says calmly. “I can give you the names of some psychiatric nurses I’ve worked with. There are a lot of misconceptions about what Alana may have, but there are good doctors who will believe her and can help her. Don’t give up hope, Ian. We can help you, and we’ll support you. If you love Alana, you need to stand by her mental health disorders are real; it’s not a joke, and it’s more widespread than you could believe.”

Devin looks more looks apologetic after Shauna's speech. "Of course, we'll support you, Ian, if that's what you want to man," he says. "I'm just concerned about you. Is this something you want?" he asks seriously.

"When Alana had left, she broke me. I didn't divorce her because it felt like admitting that she was gone forever, and why did it matter? I wasn't going to marry anyone else. There was no one else for me, not like her. Not that I could love.

Sex is one thing, and I've done plenty of that, hoping in some dark part of my mind that she'd know about it, that it would hurt her to think of me fucking other women, being with other women while she was alone.

But she wasn't alone; she'd been in this other guy's bed. Kam. Whoever the fuck he is. I was Alana's first, her only. Now she's fucked some other guy, and not just a random hookup, but someone she's serious about.

Someone Blue thinks she'll marry.

It makes me sick.

Some how I get through the meal and manage to talk about things other than Alana. It's delicious—spaghetti Bolognese, thick hunks of toasted bread with butter, garlic and herbs, red wine and a salad with some crumbly cheese—but it might as well have been made of cardboard because I couldn't enjoy any of it. I didn't want to make the night all about me, but even as Devin talks about his shows, I can see Shauna's pitying gaze across the table, and it makes me feel shittier than ever.

I don't want anyone's pity.

I just want my life back.

But my life is sleeping in a bed blocks away from my apartment, with no memory of me. Us, my everything and I have no clue how to fix it.

MEGAN

We've been looking for him and waiting for three days—waiting outside of Cal's work and apartment in hopes of catching him. Blue tracked down the address of his workplace, and I found the apartment complex that matched the address on his ID, but we haven't seen a single person coming or going that looks like him or fits his description. For three days, I parked myself outside of his job from seven-thirty in the morning until after five in the afternoon, heading to his apartment afterwards.

By day four, I'm sitting on a bench when Blue pops up with a bag of sandwiches and chips, lemonade bottles balanced in one hand. I take a bottle and he fishes out one of the sandwiches and a bag of chips and hands them to me, along with a brownie. "Thanks Blue," I tell him gratefully. I don't know where I'd be if I didn't have him here. In another town maybe, running from the truth...or even scarier, would *she* be back?

Blue shrugs, his mouth already full of tuna melt. "I don't have anything better to do." He gives me a playful grin before his expression turns serious. "And I brought you here, so I sort of feel responsible," he admits solemnly.

"I went off the medication," I remind him. "This was bound to happen sooner or later. None of this is your fault"

"It's no one's fault," he says sternly. I sigh.

"Maybe we shouldn't be doing this, though," I say, setting my sandwich down. "We haven't seen him once. Maybe it's a

sign that we're not supposed to be here, that I shouldn't meet him."

"You can't give up!" Blue says this with unusual force, setting down his sandwich as well. "We'll catch him. We just have to be patient."

"He isn't a fish," I tell him dryly. "Look, Blue, I don't want to be a charity case. I don't want you taking care of everything while we're here, and I don't want Cal to think I'm asking him to take care of me. I need to be able to take care of myself."

Blue presses his lips together. "Megan...you should know that Ian's been paying for your Airbnb room. He said he wasn't going to let you drain whatever savings you had just because you felt like you needed to find your brother." He looks down at his lap. "Something about not being able to take care of you since you left," he mumbles.

I don't know what to say. Ian has been paying for my place? My first instinct is to say that I don't want it, that he shouldn't do that, but the bigger implications of it keeps me from saying anything at all. If Ian is helping me, it means he believes that I'm Alana, but also that he doesn't hate me—*her*—as much as he lets on. That he still has feelings for her. Well that isn't news. He's tried to hide it but it reads all over him.

"He called me," he reveals and I hold my breath. "He got a referral for you to a psychiatrist. Someone his friend's wife knows," Blue says, looking across at me. His face is serious now, and I'm again stunned into silence.

"What??"

"She works for the Cook County hospital. She's got some connections and got him a referral to a doctor who doesn't think this dissociative disorder is some kind of joke. If you do have it, she'll try to help. When you want to see someone."

Ian is doing this. I've been such a bitch to him. I shut him out, not wanting to think about the repercussions of who I am to him if this person—Alana—is really a part of me. How it

could turn my life upside down if she married him. If she loved him.

I still love him!

Shut up!

“Kam’s been blowing up my phone, too.” Blue’s voice thankfully echoes over my thoughts. “I can’t keep fending off both of these guys. Kam wants answers and he deserves them. Ian is losing his fucking mind over this. I’m only one man, so you’re going to have to do something,” he says but shrugs as if he’s just as much at a loss as I am regarding what should be done.

“What am I supposed to do?” I ask softly but my tone is clipped. “I’m terrified. I don’t know *what* to do. I don’t know what’s right. Kam doesn’t deserve this kind of chaos in his life, but I can’t change the fact that I’m so in love with him. But *if* I’m Alana...do I have some kind of responsibility to Ian? Even if I don’t remember him?” I rub my hands across my face.

Blue lets out a slow, shaky breath. “I don’t know if you’re going to like this idea,” he says hesitantly, “but what if you try to find out more about Alana? See if anything about her connects for you, seems familiar, or brings back any memories. See if there’s anything about her that makes her feel like *you*. Maybe that will help.”

I want to shut the idea down immediately, as soon as he says it. But I know deep down that what he’s saying makes sense. I can’t run away from this. There’s other people’s feelings at stake now, not just mine.

“I don’t know,” I say reluctantly, “but I want to thank Ian for what he’s done anyway. I’ll talk to him.”

“I’ll call him,” Blue says cheerfully, clearly happy that I’ve decided to take his advice. “We’ve still got a few hours left on this stakeout, maybe he can come and meet us.”

By the time Blue gets off of the phone, Ian is set to come and meet us in the next half hour and my nerves are on overdrive.

When Ian arrives, Blue takes off to give us some space, saying something about wanting a drink. I push the remnants of our lunch to one side and look at Ian as he sits down, trying to quiet my racing pulse. He's so beautiful, his strong jaw and thick long blond hair, and I can't help but look at the smattering of chest hair at the top of the V of his shirt. His piercing eyes, the way he looks at me, and the way he smells...

It's familiar, just like the smell of the pillowcases in his bed.

"I wanted to thank you," I begin quickly, wanting to push away the unwanted thoughts, the feelings of familiarity. I want him to be a stranger. The more of a stranger he is, the less likely that any of this is true. "Blue told me that you've been paying for the place while I'm staying here. It's not necessary, but I do appreciate it. It's kind of you."

"I wanted to help," Ian says, and his deep voice ripples across my skin like silk. "Anything you need, Ala—Megan—I'm here for you. In fact, I don't know if Blue has mentioned this yet, but I got a referral for you, if you want it. One of my friends—his wife works in the hospital, and she knows a really good psychiatrist, someone who might be able to help. I know you're still unsure about whether or not this identity disorder is what's causing your problems..."

I flinch at *problems*, and he holds up a hand. "I'm sorry, fuck...Megan." He's getting better at using my name, and it makes me feel a sense of warmth that he's trying. "I don't mean that *you're* a problem. But what's happening to you—I've researched the condition more, and if it turns out to be what's going on...well...I just want you to know that anything you need, I'm here for you. Maybe even as a friend."

I look at him, at those penetrating eyes that steal my breath. I breathe in the smell of him, and I know that being friends isn't a good idea. Ian and I getting closer isn't a good idea. But he's being so sweet, and kind, and I'm touched that he is trying to help me, regardless of how he feels, and I know it isn't friendly.

“I’d like that.” The smile on his face is worth whatever worries I have.

She's not Alana, she's Megan. Technically not my girl, but she is. She just doesn't know it yet. I'll call her by the name she wants me to right now. I can put my own feelings aside to try and make her comfortable. On the surface, it's easy to see her as someone else. She doesn't have a lot of Alana's mannerisms—the edgy temper or smartass mouth, or the sort of sexual magnetism that Alana exuded. If she didn't have her face I wouldn't even think they were the same person.

But what makes it so fucking hard is that there's still this magnetic connection between us, at least for me. *Megan* has to feel it too. Whatever drew me to Alana from the start made it impossible for me to forget about her no matter what psycho tricks she pulled...that's still there. And I still love her.

It's impossible for me to deny it.

Shauna's words stay in my ears, telling me that I vowed in sickness and in health, telling me that I need to be there for my wife, if I love her. And I do, to the depths of my blackened, hardened soul.

So I sit there, and I call her Megan, and I tell her the information that I've found. And when I ask to be friends, I see a weight lift off of her, her eyes softening, her shoulders relaxing, and I know that I've done the right thing. If I push for more, if I tell her how I know for a fact that she's Alana, she's going to run from me. I can't lose her again.

“How have things been going?” I ask as casually as I can, trying to shift the topic to something besides us.

“It's like a vendetta for Blue now.” I try to keep my tone light but I'm jealous as fuck. I don't want to be out here, waiting on Megan hand and foot while she tries to find her brother—but I hate that another man is. That she's closer to Blue now than she is to me. I used to be the closest person to her. We were *it*. And now I'm closer to being nothing to her.

“Not good,” she admits. “We've been hanging around outside his job and apartment for three days and haven't seen him once. I don't even know if we should keep looking. It feels like the universe is telling me something, you know?”

Give up, maybe.” She seems almost hopeless as she hands me a black folder. I don’t know how I can help but I know if she finds this guy it’ll keep her here, and I don’t want her to leave—I want her here; I want her to remember. I want her to be my Alana again. And if she doesn’t find her brother, there’s nothing keeping her here.

When I open it, I can’t believe my fucking eyes.

“Cal Scott is your brother?” I ask in disbelief. She nods, her eyes widening in hope.

FUCK ME.

This dude is fucking psychotic. I laugh at how fucked up this is and she looks at me expectantly.

“I know this dude.” I hate what I’m about to say.

“I kicked his ass.” Her face crumples.

“What?!” she asks confused.

“His wife owns the gallery that did my first show. She still features my stuff. I have a show coming up before the end of the year with her, actually,” I admit reluctantly.

“You fought my brother?” she asks tentatively.

“Trust me, he deserved to get the shit kicked out of him,” I tell her, but then I remember this is her fucking brother.

“He put up a hell of a fight if that matters.” I’m trying to downplay what went down, but the truth is her *brother* is a fucking psycho who ruined the show and was for some reason dead set on fucking up his wife’s gallery.

“Look, this dude doesn’t have it all. You sure this is the guy?” I ask, hoping for almost anyone but this dude.

“I don’t know, but Blue is pretty sure. You fought him? Are you sure?” Her voice is shaky, but determined. I nod and she throws her head back in frustration. Her long neck reminds me that my lips have been on every inch of it.

“He’s the only family that I really think I have a shot at connecting with. This is so important to me. I’ve *never* had a family. If I can get to know part of mine...”

I suddenly feel like shit. Why this dude? Anyone but him! I have no idea how the hell he'll respond to their ambushing him. I'm going to have to kick his ass again.

"I'm going to have to go with you to see him." I hear the anger creeping into my voice.

"Ian," Megan says calmly, and I hear a hint of Alana in her voice, that patronizing tone that would always piss me off. I breathe steadily, trying to keep my calm. "Ian, I appreciate everything you've done for me, but this is something I have to do alone and if you've met him like you say, you shouldn't be anywhere around." She's staring at me more determined than I've seen her since meeting...*her*.

"Look," I plead, softening my voice. "I know his wife if you're going to do this... Just...meet with Lauren first, please? I can get you a meeting, tomorrow if you want. It'll be better that way. You won't be springing this on him, and plus she'll be easier to talk to." My voice is stern but I try to keep it as light as I can. I don't want her to have anything to do with any of them. Lauren's sweet and all but she's connected to such a prick. I want Alana...Megan...*especially* Megan to be as far away from those people as possible. If anything, I know that Alana could handle herself but Megan is soft and kind, and almost fragile.

Her face softens in a way Alana's didn't do often.

It's beautiful.

"Alright," she relents. "Tomorrow."

MEGAN

The next morning I wake up and Ian and Blue are both waiting for me.

Ian drives us to the gallery which is where my brother's wife works. This is happening, there's no turning back now. The block is beautiful and treelined but with an almost urban warehouse district feel. Ian makes a move to get out of the car, but I gently touch his shoulder. I feel him flinch at the touch, and I regret the intimacy of it immediately. "Ian, this is something I have to do alone," I whisper. "I'm going to go in alone without you and Blue, okay?"

They both begin to protest.

"Please. My nerves are already shot, so please don't make me use any more emotional energy than I have to." Blue nods and Ian follows his lead. I quickly make my way out of the car before I change my mind. Or they do.

Pink.

White.

Violet.

My heart is pounding as I walk up to the door, and my palms are sweatier than they've ever been. What happens in the next few minutes is going to be the difference between me finally having a family member, or being shut out again, alone and untethered.

What if *she* doesn't believe me? What if *he* already knows about me, somehow, and doesn't care? He has his family

already and I'm not exactly bringing sunshine and rainbows to the table. Is it fair of me to even ask to be invited into his life?

This meeting could either be my salvation or my damnation, and I have no idea which way it's going to go.

I reach for one of the steel and smoked-glass doors, but they're locked. I ring the bell, my hands trembling, and hold my breath when it opens. When it does there's an attractive, tall blond man standing there, his brow furrowed, but he's wearing an easy smile. "How can I help you?" he asks lightly.

My voice has left me. I don't know what to say. I wasn't expecting another person to greet me for some reason, to ask me what I wanted. From behind him I hear a woman's voice call out, "Aidan, who is it?"

Aidan looks amused but is clearly waiting for an answer. I need to push these words past the anxious lump in my throat. "I—I'm looking for Calvin Scott," I manage, and as the door opens wider I see a collection of people in the room: a pretty blonde woman, a beautiful dark-haired woman, and next to her the man I think I've been looking for...my brother.

Calvin Scott.

The striking brunette looks sharply at Cal, some undefinable emotion passing over her face, and she pushes herself off of the sofa and steps towards the door, her eyes fixed warily on me. "I'm sorry, who are you?" There's concern in her voice and maybe even a hint of jealousy. I have to say something quick before she gets the wrong idea.

"I know this might be...it might seem strange but...I'm pretty sure I'm his sister." I gesture towards him.

She freezes, a look of utter shock crosses her face. Her hands go to her stomach—she's clearly pregnant—and I'm scared I might have just sent her into early labor. She recovers quickly and smiles at me, albeit hesitantly. "You can come in," she says with a small smile.

"We'll be...outside," Aidan says, looking quickly between the three of us, and reaches for the blonde woman's elbow. He

tugs her out of the room, whispering to her as they go, and then it's just me, Cal, and the dark-haired woman in the room.

"I'm-I'm Lauren," she introduces herself nervously.

"Megan," I say quickly. "I'm sorry to just come here like this, I didn't really know what else to do..."

"Hold on." Cal, who was still sitting towards the back of the gallery, stands. He's tall, about the same height as Kam and Ian. He doesn't look happy to see me, or angry, but weary and reluctant. The closer he gets to us the more my chest tightens. His presence is intimidating, his eyes cold, but they're grey with a hint of green, and striking like he is. His dark hair is cut short but messy, the kind people pay for.

"You're my sister?" His eyes narrow on me. He's smiling now but there's no warmth to it.

"I think so yes." My words are muddling together and he laughs coldly, his eyes surveying me quickly.

"Did Dex put you up to this, or Aidan?" he asks playfully, stroking his jaw. "I admit I see some resemblance." He glances at Lauren, who seems to be taking this a lot more seriously than he is.

"The nose, the hair...you're tall for a chic. How much is he paying you?" he asks lightly and I swallow every nerve in me.

"I don't know who Dex is but I'm not joking. I wouldn't do anything like that." The lightness in his eyes that was there momentarily has gone dark, his expression hardening as he stares at me. Lauren touches his shoulder gently as if to calm him, and I think back to what Ian said about how angry he can get.

Cal snorts. "How did you find me?" he asks abruptly, an eyebrow raised.

"Uhm, I have a friend," I explain quickly. "His name is Blue. He helped me...uhm but his cousin Ian knows you and asked Lauren."

“You knew about this?” He pulls away from Lauren’s touch. Her face freezes. She’s obviously hurt.

“Of course not!” she fires back at him.

“No. No she just, Ian asked her to meet with me, that’s all. He didn’t tell her anything.” I’m hating the friction I’ve caused between them already.

“What the fuck does he have to do with this? Is this some type of scam?” His anger’s directed at me now and I take a step back.

“No. No...it’s just...I’m sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have come,” I say, backing towards the door. This isn’t how things were supposed to go, this isn’t who I wanted him to be. I know he’s shocked but does he have to be so mean and rude?

“No. Wait,” Lauren says softly and scowls at her husband.

“Will you hear her out at least? Cal, God you’re being such a jerk.”

He eyes her defiantly “That’s me, the jerk! Right?” He laughs coldly.

“Don’t start,” she mutters.

Now he’s glaring at me.

“Talk, go ahead and start talking,” he demands, his arms now folded across his chest.

I try to breathe. This is going bad. I knew there was a possibility that he wouldn’t believe me, but now that I’m here, I realize that I really had believed he’d be excited to meet me, that he’d be happy to have found his sister. We may have physical similarities but—I don’t recognize anything of myself in this guy.

Run away like the scared little coward you’ve always been. Go ahead, I can handle this. Let me.

No. Go away! I rub my throbbing temples and push the words out.

“Is your mother’s name Isabella Rice?” I ask, my voice shaking slightly. If what I’ve said has affected him at all he

doesn't show it. His lips just press tighter together and I look to Lauren, whose eyes have widened, and I notice she's let out a small gasp.

"If this is a scam," he says slowly, enunciating every word as he steps closer and towers over me, "I will ruin you, and every single person connected to you and this little story you're spinning. Do you get that, *Megan*?"

I'm on the verge of tears, and I'm angry. I won't give him the satisfaction of seeing me cry. "I'm not some scam artist," I whisper, and I can't keep the hurt out of my voice. Lauren looks at me sympathetically, but I'm focused on Cal. I reach into my bag for the file and hand it to him, willing my fingers to stop trembling. "I just wanted to meet my family," I say, my voice growing louder as I speak. "I know you've been lucky and had a good life, and a good family who loves you, but I wasn't that lucky! I just...I hoped..." My voice breaks off and I can't finish because I know I'm going to cry if I keep talking.

I can't believe I pinned all of my hopes on this, for there to be a connection. And I see he wants nothing to do with me. No one has.

Except Kam

Except Ian.

The words ring in my head and I push them away. Thinking about either of the men who love me isn't going to do anything but make things worse right now.

Cal flips through the file, but his expression doesn't change. He barely even glances at me again, only looks at Lauren. "I'm going to go check on the girls," he says quietly, an edge to his voice, before he turns on his heel. He doesn't look at me again, doesn't say goodbye, or anything. He just leaves me alone with Lauren, and the room seems colder than ever.

I can't stop the tears from welling up in my eyes, and as a few of them start to trickle down my cheeks. I angrily wipe them away.

You're so fucking weak.

I don't want Lauren to know how hurt I am so I turn to leave. But she reaches for my hand and squeezes it.

"I'm sorry Cal was so rude to you. I'm going to make sure he looks into this," she reassures me, letting go of my hand. She breathes out slowly, her other hand making small circles on her stomach as she speaks. "Cal can be difficult," she admits. "His life hasn't been as perfect as it might look to you, but he has a good heart."

"I know it's complicated," I admit with a shrug.

"How do you know Ian?" Lauren asks curiously, and I flinch. She's sweet, and clearly wants to believe me, but there's no way that I'm going into my story about Ian with her. I'm not even entirely sure myself how I know Ian, if everything he says about Alana is true.

"It's a story that's more than complicated," I say carefully, and I can tell from the way she looks at me that she's not going to ask anything else. It relaxes me a little, and I feel as if I could actually like her. In different circumstances, we might have been friends.

"Congratulations on the baby," I say, gesturing towards her stomach. "The two of you must be very happy."

"It takes work," Lauren says softly, and I'm surprised. I wonder if things are more complicated about them than they seem. Is she more than just a pretty little wife? Is there more to him than being a condescending jerk? I hope so. I start to leave

"I'll make sure Cal reaches out to you, Megan. I promise."

I don't say anything in return, but give her a small smile.

It doesn't matter how well-meaning the promises are these days. I just can't bring myself to believe them.

Megan

“GET IT TOGETHER.”

I cannot let Blue or Ian see me like this, especially Ian. I don't know much about this man but I can tell he's protective and if he knows how Cal treated me in there, who knows what he'll do, so I take a few cleansing breaths and wipe my eyes before heading back to the car.

I open the door and slide in and before I'm fully in it, the anxious energy threatens to swallow me whole. I've barely buckled my seatbelt when Blue turns and starts hammering me with questions.

“Well? What did she say? Is she going to help you? When do you meet him?”

“I met him...he was there,” are the only words I can get out. Ian's eyes widen in horror, probably already imagining how terrible it went. Blue is clueless.

“That was quick. What did you think of him? Did he believe you? What happens n—”

“Blue, shut the hell up.” Ian glares at him, and a wave of gratitude washes over me. “She'll tell us about it when she's ready,” he says authoritatively.

I give him a small appreciative smile. Blue mutters obscenities at Ian under his breath and I feel bad. Blue

deserves to know everything after how much he's helped. It's just not the right time for me to say it. I'm still recovering from what happened, from the voice in my head antagonizing me that seems to get clearer and louder than it's ever been.

Once we're back at the Airbnb, I sink onto the living room couch as Ian and Blue sit across from me. "What happened?" Blue asks again, this time not as frantic.

"He didn't believe me," I say softly, knotting my fingers together. "He thinks someone is setting me up to do this, paying me to scam him. He was really angry. His wife—Lauren—seemed to believe me, or at least wants to know more, but he just took the file and left. He was just so... callous." I sound as defeated as I feel. My shoulders slump as I lean back against the couch. "All of this might be for nothing..."

"No," Ian says sharply, and I look at him, surprised. "Cal is an asshole," he says firmly, enunciating each word, and I can see his piercing eyes practically giving off sparks as he speaks. "You don't need him. Blue and I have your back. He's the one losing out, not you."

Blue nods, and then grabs his phone as it buzzes next to him, interrupting whatever he was about to say. "Shit. I've got a work emergency," he says as he glances at the screen. "I have to go, but I'll come back this weekend, okay Megan? We're going to figure this out." He squeezes my hand as he says this; I squeeze it back. I know he has a life to get back to but he's my only ally in this. Everyone else has an agenda of some kind.

"Yeah," I say, sighing as I sink further into the couch. "I'm going to be fine."

"I don't like leaving you alone," Blue says as he stands up, clearly anxious. "What if something happens?"

"I'll be here," Ian interjects casually as if reminding us he's here. I give them both a small grin.

"Alright," Blue relents. "Just...let me know if anything happens, okay? Both of you. The slightest thing changes, I

want to hear about it.” He looks at me emphatically, and I nod.

“I will,” I promise. He’s up from his seat and out the door before Ian or I can even stand.

I close my eyes as he walks out, trying to get my bearings. What am I supposed to do? I can’t go back to Kam, not right now. Not until I’ve learned more about what might be wrong with me, when I can give him some real answers. I can’t hurt him any more than I already have. And with things so open-ended with Cal...I can’t help but hold on to a fragment of hope that Lauren will get through to him, and he’ll contact me. That he’ll want to see me and maybe welcome me into his life, have some answers about our parents that might give me clues to what’s wrong with me. The energy has changed the moment Blue leaves. Ian looks more than uncomfortable and it’s awkward, the two of us being alone now.

“Do you want me to go?” His deep voice echoes through the room.

“I’d rather not be alone right now if that’s okay with you,” I tell him, and the way his eyes brighten after I say this makes me feel awful. How can I have an effect like this on a man I don’t even know?

“If you can stay a little while that would be great,” I say. A little time is fine, but too much is just that. He nods understanding. I grab the remote and turn the television on. It’s on a movie I’ve never seen before but it doesn’t matter since I doubt I can pay attention to anything but my own thoughts right now.

“Blue gave you the number right?” Ian’s voice cuts through my thoughts and I open my eyes to see him looking at me concernedly.

“For the psychiatrist?” I remember, knowing I’ve been stalling, almost avoiding the inevitable.

“No. It sort of slipped my mind. I’ll do it right now though.”

“You don’t have to...” Ian starts to say, but I’ve already grabbed my phone and am digging through my purse for the

piece of paper with the number on it. It gives me something to do with the nervous energy building inside of me. I dial it quickly and it goes to voicemail.

“Hi,” I say, hearing my voice take on that shaky quality again that I hate. “This is Megan, I’m calling with a referral for the resident psychiatrist at your practice. I’d like to set up an appointment as soon as possible. Thank you.” I give my number and hang up.

“You hungry?” Ian asks with an adorably shy grin. That I can make a man like him shy is mind-boggling.

“There’s a great Chinese place around here.”

His voice is so innocent and hopeful that I can’t turn him down. He’s not talking to Alana, at least it doesn’t seem that way. He’s talking to me, Megan, and it makes me warm to him that I think he’s different with me than her. He’s trying, and that means I can try too.

“Who doesn’t like Chinese?” I say with a laugh, and I feel the tension between us ease just a little bit more.

By the time the food comes, I’m starving. I dig into the sesame chicken that I’ve ordered, and glance over at Ian, who is attacking a carton of Mongolian beef. “How did you manage to become a full-time photographer?” I ask, swallowing a piece of chicken.

Some undefinable emotion crosses his face, and he waits a beat before answering. “A photo of mine went viral,” he says finally, spearing another piece of beef with his chopsticks. “A picture of...” He bites his lower lip.

“Anyway, I started getting all this work mostly from people wanting pictures of their kids, family events, and stuff like that, but then I got an offer from the gallery to do a series. Scenes of life in the city. Since then the work just hasn’t stopped coming in. I save as much as I can for a rainy day. Freelancing is never the most secure gig, but it seems like I’ve got a good thing going for now. With work, at least. It’s all I’ve got left.” He takes another bite of his food and shakes his

head. A wave of guilt almost overtakes me, and I notice his eyes widening.

“I didn’t mean...shit. I’m okay, just forget what I said. What about you?”

This man is so strong, to think how he’s asking for *my* story, Megan, as if he’s never heard it before, admitting he doesn’t know it. If Alana and I really are the same person, I have no doubt there’s going to be overlap, but the way he’s asked it is like I’m a stranger, someone he’s just getting to know, and I can’t express to him how that makes me feel. As if he sees me, and not just the person he thinks is hiding somewhere inside of me.

“I grew up in foster care, shuttled from home to home. It wasn’t a great life. I don’t remember my early childhood at all. I had the blackouts that I told you about, lost spaces of time. Men tried to take advantage of me a lot, since they thought I was just a helpless victim, but I managed to evade them for the most part. I stayed a virgin, if you can believe it, through all of that.”

A sudden look of pain crosses Ian’s face, one so intense that for a moment I want to apologize, but I’m not sure what I would be apologizing for, or why what I said hurt him so much.

And then I realize, with a suddenness that’s almost a physical blow, that if I’m really Alana, Ian and I were married. And if we were married, we had sex. He might have even been my first.

Which means Kam wasn’t.

I know the look on my face must mirror his in that second, but I don’t ask what he’s thinking, and he doesn’t ask me either. I look down at my food, swallowing hard and trying to get a grip on myself so I can continue.

I would have known if you’d had sex, that’s not something you blank out.

I’m not Alana.

Kam was my first.

It was special and beautiful and meant so much to us. That's the truth.

It is.

It has to be.

Wrong, Bitch.

“One of my psychiatrists tried it,” I continue, my voice quiet now. “And I blacked out, and attacked him. So I wound up having to go to school online because I was considered dangerous and needed to be kept away from ‘stressful situations’.” I laugh shortly. “As if every aspect of my life wasn't already stressful. But I threw myself into my work, and I got really good grades, and a scholarship to Purdue. I decided that I was doing well enough to try going to college for real, to try to have some semblance of a normal life. And that was when, well...that was when I met Kam.” I speak so quickly the last part slips out by accident, almost automatically.

I breathe in slowly, glancing at Ian with an apology in my eyes, but he just takes another bite of his food. “And then what?” he asks, and my heart skips a beat slightly, trying to think of how to explain what happens next in a way that won't hurt Ian. Because I don't want to hurt him any more than I already have.

“He accepted me, everything that came with me, something I thought would never be possible,” I whisper, and though he's trying to hide it, I can see the hurt still on his face. But he recovers quickly.

“I'm glad you had someone to be there for you,” he finally says, and I'm shocked by the genuineness of his statement.

“You mean that?” I ask but it's more of a statement. I feel my throat starting to burn. No matter how good of a job he's doing at treating me as if I'm Megan, he looks at me and sees Alana. And I've just finished telling him how I fell in love with another man.

His piercing eyes steady on mine. “When I look at you,” he says softly, “I see Alana. I see my wife. And to be honest, it kills me to think of *you* with anyone else, to know that you

loved someone else. That you wanted, or *want*, a future with him.” His eyes are burning into mine, his face passionate, and there’s something in the air between us, something thick and tense, and I feel myself shiver. “It kills me to think that someone else touched you.” His eyes rove over me, and I see the desire in them, the memory of the girl he used to know... and something more. *Knowledge*. There’s a possessive knowledge of my body in his eyes that makes my blood heat and forces me to look away.

“But you don’t remember being her,” he whispers. “You’re Megan, so yeah, I’m glad there was someone with you. Because no matter what, I’d rather be in hell than think of you hurting and being alone.”

I swear when I look back, I see tears in his eyes. And then the room seems to swim in front of me for a moment, my head aching with that dull pounding that I know so well.

I’m sitting on a different couch, in a different room. Ian’s apartment. There’s Chinese food in front of us, like now, but my order is different—it’s Mongolian beef, like Ian’s. I don’t really like beef. But it looks and smells delicious, and I’m starving. I’m wearing clothes I don’t recognize, too—tight black jeans and a low-cut, cream-colored tank top with buttons that tie below my breasts, revealing my pale, flat stomach. Ian is sitting next to me, so close that I can feel the heat of his skin, and I can smell his cologne. I know it hasn’t been all that long since our first night together, not long since I gave in and let him possess me completely, but the scent of him has already become one of my favorite smells in the world. It’s sharp and spicy and it sends a wave of desire through me, remembering the scent of it mingled with our skin and sweat on his sheets.

“If you keep looking at me like that you’re going to be for dessert.”

“Well you already know how sweet I taste,” I purr at him. My nails are longer, too, pointed and painted black. I scrape them delicately up his arm and he bites his bottom lip.

“We have to make it through the other courses first though?” I tease.

“I wasn’t aware Chinese takeout came in courses,” he quips.

“This is the first one,” I say, holding up an egg roll and moving it towards my lips. I take a bite, half of it disappearing into my mouth, and the sexiest grin I’ve ever seen spreads across his face.

“Now the second course.” He scoops up a piece of beef and peppers with his chopsticks and extends it towards me. The sauce drips before he can catch it, landing on my chest, and he winks at me. “I’ll take care of that.”

Before I can say anything his mouth is on the upper part of my breast, his tongue delicately flicking across my skin. I can’t breathe—and I don’t want him to see how much he’s affecting me. I don’t want to give him that power over me. But I can’t help it. I want this man more than I’ve ever wanted anyone. I want him enough to risk trying to stay still for once, in one place, and all the risks associated with that. Because suddenly I can’t stand the idea of never seeing him again.

“What’s the third course?” I ask hoarsely as he lifts his head, and his eyes glitter mischievously as he looks at me.

“You,” he whispers, pushing me back onto the couch, the rest of dinner forgotten. I start to tell him that the food will get cold, but as he moves down my body, his fingers at the zipper of my jeans as his mouth brushes over my stomach, I can’t bring myself to care.

I’m pulled out of the flashback...memory...whatever it is with a force that leaves me gasping. I’m back on the couch in the Airbnb, Ian sitting across from me with a concerned look on his face.

What the hell was that!

I’m trembling and my body is hot and warm and I can barely breathe.

I can still remember it, hazily, looking at him—the worn couch in his apartment and the smell of takeout and the feeling

of his mouth on my skin. It makes me feel hot and cold all at once, afraid of what it means, afraid of the desire that's still biting along my skin like tiny ants.

“Are you okay, Megan?” Ian asks, and the sound of my name—*my name, goddamnit*—brings me back down to Earth.

“I’m just really tired,” I say, trying to sound as convincing as I can. “It’s been a really, really long day, and it didn’t go the way I hoped. I appreciate the food, but I think I want to be alone now, if that’s okay?” I look at him, hoping he won’t be offended, that he’ll understand. And it seems like he does, but the concerned look doesn’t leave his face.

As I walk him to the door, I can see that he wants to say something. He turns towards me, his mouth making the shape of my name, but I shake my head.

“I can’t talk anymore tonight,” I say, kindly but firmly. “I’m okay, I just need some sleep.” He only nods, and turns to leave.

I hurry back to the couch, a cold sweat breaking out on my forehead, and snatch up my phone. I dial the most recently called number, the referral, and when the voicemail comes on the line again my tone is approaching panic.

“This is Megan again, I know you’re closed, but please call me back as soon as you can. I really need an appointment as soon as possible; I need to talk to someone. I know you have other patients but I’m really scared...” I try to calm myself down. The last thing I need is to end up in the psych ward because I’ve scared the nurse.

I leave my number again and hang up, sinking back onto the couch. It’s all I can think of to do.

I won’t let you have him!

THE RINGING of my cellphone wakes me up the next morning even though I don’t remember sleeping. The now distinct voice I heard echoes through my thoughts.

“How’s it going Kid?” he asks me, and his concern is heartwarming. It makes me feel like I’m not so alone in the world, even without Kam. Just thinking that hurts, but I know it’s something that I’ve got to start thinking about.

“Are you going to see Kam?” I ask hesitantly as I sit up in bed.

“Maybe,” he replies. “I’ve got to get some of my things I left at Katie’s, so I might run into him.”

“Please don’t tell him where I am or what’s going on,” I plead. “If he asks, just tell him I’m safe and doing okay, will you?”

“Is that the truth though, Megan?”

I don’t answer, not directly. But after a moment, I tell him, because I have to tell someone. “Blue...I think I had a flashback yesterday. Or a memory...or something.”

“What?”

“Ian got Chinese takeout for us and stayed for a little while after you left. He asked about my past, and I told him a condensed version of it, including about Kam.”

“How’d he take it?” he asks grimly.

“He said he was glad that I had someone there for me, but that it killed him to think of someone else being with Alana, even though he knows it wasn’t her...if I am her at all. And then...” I close my eyes, trying to think of how to explain it. “I started getting one of the headaches, and everything got blurry, and then it was like I was somewhere else. I was *her*.”

“I was sitting on Ian’s couch, and I was wearing clothes I’ve never owned, and we were eating. But it wasn’t *me*, it was *her*...” I break off, flushing red, my words all running together. “What if it was a memory, Blue? What if everything I’ve thought about myself is wrong? What if she’s trying to come back?” I can feel myself starting to panic.

“Calm down okay, do you need me to come back?” he asks urgently.

“No, I’m okay I think. I just, I’m so scared. And you can’t tell Ian!” I shriek. “We’re just now getting along, and I don’t want it to be weird, and I don’t want to get his hopes up, either. I called the referral that he gave me and left voicemails, and when they call me back and I can get an appointment I’m going to go, and find out how dangerous this is and if I can control it.” My voice is shaking again. “I’m scared, Blue. I’m scared of Alana taking over again and not being able to control her, and I’m scared of what that’s going to do to me and Ian and Kam and everyone else around us. I have to get a handle on this before I tell anyone else anything.”

“These are a lot of secrets, Megan,” Blue says quietly. “But I’m going to try.” Relief floods me at his words. “I’ll be back soon,” he promises me. “Just try to keep it together until then, okay?” From anyone else that would sound condescending, but from him it’s just concern.

My phone rings again and it’s an unknown number. I’m hoping against hope it’s the hospital calling me back.

“Is this Megan?” The voice is masculine and familiar.

“Yes,” I say hesitantly.

“This is Cal.” I pause and suck in a needed breath.

“Can we meet? I’d like to talk in person if that works for you,” he says dryly but at least he’s not angry.

“Sure. Okay.” I don’t want to sound too eager, too hopeful, but I’m shocked that he’s calling me, especially this soon after how he was yesterday.

“I’ll meet you where you’re staying in about two hours if that’s cool.”

“O-okay,” I say, trying to keep the hesitancy out of my voice. I start to give him my address but he cuts in before I can.

“I’ll see you then.” The line goes dead, no pleasantries or apologies, and I’m learning to not expect them from this guy. I’m suddenly nervous. He’s coming here and it’ll be just me, and I realize I barely know anything about this man other than he’s mean and has a bad attitude. I shouldn’t meet him alone.

He didn't mention bringing Lauren and I doubt he's going to drag his pregnant wife to be here to referee. I sigh.

I don't want Ian to come over.

I don't want to risk another flashback, not until I can talk to a doctor, but Blue is gone and if there's anything I know about him it's that he'll protect me if need be. So I call Ian. My heart starts pounding the minute his voice comes over the line.

"Hey," he says and butterflies start to wake up inside of me.

"Hi, are you busy?" I ask reluctantly.

"No, what's up?" he says eagerly and it makes me smile.

"Cal called me. He's coming here to meet me. I don't know how he even knows where I live..."

"I'll be right over," he announces before I can even finish explaining.

"Get it together," I mutter to myself.

When Ian arrives, I'm a nervous wreck. I'm practically wringing my hands by the time he walks through the door, and the minute he sees me he walks straight over and puts his hands on my shoulders. His touch sends electricity through me, and it's all I can do not to pull away. For a second it's as if we're fused together, and it's harder than ever for me to believe that there's never been anything between me and this man.

"I'm sorry," he says quickly, realizing he shouldn't have touched me. He lets me go and steps back. "You've got this. If Cal doesn't want you in his life, it's his loss, not yours. He only has something to gain by having you as a sister, and if he doesn't see that, he's an idiot."

I don't know if I believe his words but they calm my nerves slightly. It only lasts until the knock comes on the door. Ian gives me an encouraging smile.

"I'm right here," he says, his face already hardening and his strong arms crossed over his chest.

I open the door and it's Cal of course. Today he's in slacks and a dark grey button-up. He must have left work early but his face isn't as hard as it was yesterday. He seems more calmer, like a normal guy.

"Come in," I say, trying to sound relaxed, even though I'm anything but.

The moment he sees Ian, his face goes hard and stony again, the way it was at the gallery. "What's *he* doing here?" he asks unimpressed.

Ian answers before I have a chance to. "How did you know where she was?"

Cal only grins. "You'd be surprised what I know," he answers arrogantly. His expression softens a tad when his eyes land on me.

"Can we talk?" he asks, ignoring Ian.

"Talk," Ian cuts in. Cal rolls his eyes.

"Without your bodyguard?" He laughs callously and gestures towards Ian.

"Can you wait in the next room?" I ask Ian with pleading eyes.

Ian groans but nods. "I'll just be in the bedroom, okay," he says shortly, and heads down the hall.

When he's gone, Cal looks at me. "You caught me off guard yesterday. I was kind of an asshole," he admits with a shrug. It's not an apology, but it's adjacent to one at least, and I soften a little. "Things in my life can be kind of crazy and with the news stories about my dad and everything..." He trails off, only half explaining.

"I get it. I did sort of ambush you."

"I looked at the file you left and made some calls. It's *possible* that we're related," he says noncommittally with a shrug. I let out a small sigh. This is a good start. He reaches into his messenger bag and pulls something out of it and offers it to me.

It's a DNA kit. I suddenly feel like we're on some kind of cheap daytime television show. I don't know why my first instinct is to be offended but it is, but then the rational side of my brain kicks in. He doesn't know me, and he has a family to protect.

"Fine," I say shortly. I rip open the box and pull out the swab. It's innocuous, just a plain white stick, but the implications of it are overwhelming.

I know that Cal's my brother. Blue's information is too good to be false, but still, there's always a chance that someone's gotten something wrong somewhere, and it'll come back negative. And then I'll be where I was before—with no leads, no one to try to anchor me to my past, and a guy whose bad side I don't want to be on who thinks I've tried to scam him.

I quickly swab the inside of my cheek and stick it in the tube, peering at him. I notice we have the same nose and the same almond-shaped eyes. It's not enough to base blood ties on, but that paired with the records Blue pulled up is enough to quiet my nerves.

I hand him the test, and he nods. "Tell me what you know about my parents," he asks as he stuffs it back into his bag.

I lean back against the couch, crossing my arms beneath my breasts. "Blue told me that we have the same mother, and that you were adopted by a couple of farmers. He wasn't sure if you're my full or half-brother."

"If all of this checks out, I can try to help you find your dad. My father wasn't Clayton Rice. And considering our mother's...issues...yours might not be either. Just because he's on your birth certificate doesn't mean he's your blood."

"I know." It hurts to hear that my mother was...if not the same as me, at least plagued with some problem that messed her up, too. Enough that there's really no telling who my father might be.

"We have two sisters. One of them...she's in jail right now for fraud, petty theft. But our oldest sister, Mariah, she turned

out okay. Kind of like you,” I say quietly but he scoffs.

“Well, it’s good to hear that one of us got out of it without being fucked up.”

I narrow my eyes at him. What does he mean? It looks like life has been pretty good to him, at least on paper.

Cal leans on the arm of the sofa opposite me. “You’ve got to understand, Megan, honesty means everything to me. I have a family, and they’re more important to me than my own life.” His tone is serious.

“I have a little girl and twins on the way. They and Lauren are my priority, and I need you to understand that. I’m careful about who I let in because I can’t endanger them, or risk them being hurt in any way. I’m going to do a background check on you, so know that lying to me isn’t going to get you anywhere.”

Some of the coldness has started to creep back into his tone, and as much as I don’t want to spill everything to him, I feel with absolute certainty that this might be my one shot. If Cal leaves feeling like I’m too big of a risk, he won’t be back.

“It’s...been rough,” I admit. “I don’t really remember the first few years of my childhood. I was in and out of foster homes, never in the same one for long or had anyone who really wanted to adopt me. There was always an uncle or brother or husband who was too interested in the wrong things, and then I’d be shuffled off to the next place.

“I work jobs here and there, enough to pay the bills, but getting my degree is really important to me and before I came here I had a 3.8 at Purdue.” I want to emphasize this, for him to know I’m not a complete disaster, which is what I sound like based on what I’ve just told him.

“Nothing else I should know about?” His tone drops an octave and his eyes are dead set on mine. I’m going to have to tell him.

I don’t know how far his reach goes but according to Blue he has a lot of money and connections, and who knows what he’ll find out. I might as well tell him the truth.

“Ever since I can remember. I’ve had blackouts...time lapses, or whatever you want to call them.” I focus on the ground to avoid his eyes.

“There’s times I don’t remember things, and it’s as scary as it sounds.” I nod as a tear comes to my eyes. I wipe it away quickly and meet his gaze, prepared to see a look of disgust or confusion on his face, but instead I see what almost seems like compassion—something I would have never expected from him based on our few interactions.

“It’s why I think I was never adopted. No one believed that it was really happening, just that I was some screwed up kid looking for attention. But it’s real. Something I just dealt with but now it’s destroying my life. I-I have a boyfriend...*had* one...and he’s been the one steadying presence in my life. But when they started again I left him, and I love him, but there’s a lot that’s happened that I don’t remember...and how can you put someone you love through...”

“You don’t remember anything from when they happen?” he asks, and I notice his tone has become a tad softer, his body a little more relaxed. I try to think of how to answer him.

“I don’t. I didn’t. I don’t know. To be honest with you, I’ve just started to. I think I’m starting to remember things but I don’t know for sure.” I shrug sadly.

“I understand if this is too much for you to deal with. It’s too much for me.” I laugh but it’s joyless.

Cal looks away and I can see that he’s mulling something over. Finally, he looks back at me and clears his throat, his expression visibly rearranging itself as he stands up. “I’ll expedite these results,” he says brusquely. “The sooner we know for sure, the better. And once we have them, if they come back as what we think...my sister-in-law, Helen, is a psychiatrist. One of the best. I think she can help you.”

He looks at me appraisingly, and there’s a tension in the air that I can’t explain. There’s something he’s not telling me, I know it. I feel like I’m walking a tightrope—one wrong word or move, and I could lose him before I’ve even really gotten to know him.

“Thank you,” I say, my mouth dry. “I really appreciate it.”

Cal looks down at his shoes. “No problem,” he says gruffly. “Again, I’ll get a rush on these results. I’ll call you once I have them. You’ll hear from me soon.”

And just like the phone call, he leaves without pleasantries or anything other than a brief wave goodbye, leaving me bracing myself against the couch, my stomach in knots.

Ian

THERE HASN'T BEEN any arguing, which I guess isn't too bad. I'd hate to have to crush her brother's face in. They've been in there about twenty minutes so it's a good start. I hope it works out for her, if it'll be good for her...but with this dude, I just don't know.

Megan opens the bedroom door with a weak smile, but she's pale and shaky.

"Is he gone?" I ask, standing immediately and moving towards the living room.

"Yeah," she calls from behind me.

She lets out a long breath. "He had me take a DNA test," she says, laughing. "It's the first time anyone's ever asked *that* of me."

It makes sense but still had to seem shitty to her. "I guess it makes sense, really, from his point of view. What if I were a scam artist? Better to find out than risk your family."

"Yeah."

"What else happened?"

"He says he's not sure we have the same father, or even that the guy who I think is my father really is him, but that if the results come back positive, he'll try to help me find out. And also, if they do..." she sighs and rubs her hands over the knees of her jeans. "He says his sister-in-law is a really good psychiatrist. He thinks she can help me."

She's optimistic and I want to be happy for her, not skeptical or afraid her brother's a lunatic with anger issues that I wouldn't trust for a second. This is the closest thing she's had to hope so far, and I won't be the one to crush it. Besides, this means she'll be here longer and that's a miracle.

"What are you doing today?" She changes the subject and I'm thankful as hell for that.

"Nothing much," I tell her with a shrug.

She hesitates. "You want to have a drink?"

It's not a good idea.

I read that drinking isn't good for her condition, but I'm more worried about the two of us together under the influence of alcohol.

Me, mainly.

I've been doing a good job referring to her as Megan and try not to think of her as Alana, but with alcohol involved, how the hell am I supposed to pretend like she's not my wife? That I don't love her with everything in me, and that there isn't a chance in hell I'll let her go?

"A drink sounds good," I say, trying to conceal my excitement. "At a bar other than the one I live above."

"Yeah," Megan agrees, grinning. "I don't think that bartender would be very happy if we showed up there together."

I shudder a little, thinking of how crazy Teresa acted. "I know a better one," I say. "They've got good bar food, too, if you're into that."

Alana was.

"Well, let's find out," she says with a genuine smile.

Twenty minutes later, we're in a booth at the Black Dog, a dive bar with slightly better lighting than the usual dives I go to. I order a beer, Megan does the same.

"On second thought, I'll have a burger and onion rings too," I tell the waitress. "The one with blue cheese and

mushrooms.” I add on an order of jalapeno bites right before she walks away.

“Can I try one too?” Megan asks.

“Absolutely.” I grin.

“So,” Megan says, settling back into the vinyl-backed booth. “You and Blue have been focusing so much on me lately. How are you doing, with all of this?”

That’s a hell of a question. The truth would be that I dream about her—Alana—that I want her in bed with me. That I put her out of my head for the most part for months, and now all I can think about is the way her dark hair tangles around her face when she sleeps. The way she stretches in the morning when she wakes up. The way she always wore just a tank top and panties to bed and how that morning stretch would press her breasts against the thin fabric so I could see the outline of her nipples. How I woke her up most mornings with my face between her thighs.

How, now that I know she’s been with this other dude, Kam...all I can think about is if Megan does the same shit with him.

Does he fuck her awake how I did?

The thought makes me want to hit something.

I pray Megan is different, that she hates sex and would cringe at sucking dick, well...unless it’s mine. I want to tell her that the only thing keeping me sane is clinging to hope that somehow *Alana* still belongs to only me.

But I don’t say any of that. I take a sip of my beer and shrug. “I’m alright, I guess. Busy. Freelancing is always feast or famine, so when there’s a feast like now, I work from the time I get up to the time I fall asleep to get as much work done as I can. Plus, Lauren is planning another showcase of my work soon and I want to show her more landscapes. So I’ve been trying to beef up what I have to show her.”

“You normally photograph buildings?”

“I prefer people.” I think of the folder in my apartment of all the candid shots I have of Alana—of *her*—in color and in black and white, photos of her smiling and laughing, angry, fully dressed, and some of her nude, photos of her in a towel coming out of the shower on the balcony of our apartment and on the street in restaurants and on the beach and sitting on the hood of our car...after I just made her come for the fifth time...hundreds of photos of the woman I love more than life.

I can't look at them anymore.

“What kind of people?”

“Everyday ones.” My basket of jalapeno bites comes and I push it to the middle of the table. She eyes it nervously, and I pick one up, extending it towards her. “Here, take a bite.”

She hesitates at first but then complies, her teeth sinking into the middle of it, and I wish I had my camera out then to capture the expression on her face. She considers it for a minute as she chews, and finally nods. “That's really good.”

“I know this can't be easy for you,” she says quietly.

I sigh and shrug while shaking my head. “I'd rather have you in my life in some way than not at all,” I reply, and I realize as I say it how deeply I really do mean it. “Even if it's just as a friend.” Do I mean it?

Can I have her as just a friend?

I can't imagine not having her at all.

Megan's gaze is resting squarely on me when I look back up, and I see the unspoken thought between us: *Friends? With everything that's going on between us?*

I wonder how long I can keep this up, how long I can keep telling myself that Megan and Alana aren't the same person. How long could I look into the same eyes that had held mine while we whispered *til death do us part* and not beg her to come back to me?

We make small talk for the rest of the meal—largely about my photography, which she seems really interested in, and when I pull up in front of the apartment where she's staying

she hesitates before getting out of the car. “I really appreciate everything you’ve done for me,” she whispers, her huge green eyes fixed on mine. “I know this is hard for you, Ian.” She presses her lips together, and I fight with everything in me to stop myself from leaning across, cupping her face in my palm, and pulling those lips against mine.

“You’re a good man,” she whispers. And I don’t do it. I just look at her, the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, and feel the knife work its way deeper into my heart.

It’s the worst pain I’ve ever felt.

MEGAN

I call Blue the next morning and catch him up on everything that's happened.

"That's great Meg," Blue says. But there's something else in his voice, and I let out a sigh.

"What's going on, Blue?"

"Kam has been at me nonstop since I came back. He's showing up at my classes, at my job before and after work. I get why you want to wait to tell him, but it's getting out of hand. He's practically stalking me at this point, and I can only tell him to give you time for so long." He pauses.

"Megan, he's miserable. I don't care what you tell him, but you've got to give him something."

This is what I didn't want to happen. My heart is cracking into pieces. I close my eyes briefly, trying to think of what I could possibly tell him. "Alright," I relent. "I'll call him, I promise."

"Now?"

"Yes," I sigh. "Now."

"You're doing the right thing. I'll be back this weekend."

"How are you doing Blue, with Katie?" I ask and he lets out a sigh.

"I'm *doing*. Thanks for asking, Megs," he answers sweetly before hanging up.

I sit and look at the phone in my hands after Blue hangs up. I have no idea what to say to Kam, but I promised Blue. And if he's hurting, how can I not? But hearing from me is only going to make it worse.

He picks up on the first ring. "Megan?" His voice is breathless, and it hurts to hear it.

"It's me." The moment I hear his voice, I'm flooded with guilt. I still can't forget waking up in someone else's bed with some stranger, and I know the scene I caused at the gala must have humiliated him. And yet...the worst is knowing that I just ran out on him, that I left him with no explanation or knowledge of where I'd gone.

Which is exactly what Alana did to Ian.

"Megan! Thank God you're okay. What are you doing baby, why have you shut me out? I don't know what happened and I don't need to know. Just please, please come back. I've never missed someone so much..."

If my heart was breaking before, it's being shattered now. I can hear his pain. Sense it.

"Kam..." I interrupt the flow of pleas gently. "Kam... there's something wrong with me. Really, really wrong. I'm trying to get help, but until I can do that..."

"Megan, we'll get you the best help there is. Money's isn't a problem, you know that. Whatever's wrong, we'll get you the best doctors, the best medicines, the best care. Whatever's happening we can work through it together. We can get through anything, as long as we're together. Just tell me. Stop shutting me out. I'm fighting for you...for *us*..."

"Please, Kam, just give me some time. I'm going to see a doctor soon. I'll know more then, and then I can move forward. Just please give me some time to figure this out, and stop harassing Blue, he's only trying to help..."

"Megan, you've got to tell me what's going on! Christ, do you have something terminal? Is it cancer? Are you *dying*?"

"I'm not dying." I let out a long, slow breath. "I think I have some kind of psychological disorder that might explain

what's been happening to me for a long time. But I don't want to base my decisions off of a self-diagnosis. I want to be properly diagnosed by a psychiatrist and start treatment for it. And I don't want to drag you through all of that. It's going to be exhausting and stressful and right now I don't have any answers, just the vague hope of some answers. I need to figure this out before *we* figure anything out. Can you understand that?"

"Just tell me where you are, Megan. I'll come to you and I'll help you through all of this. I just want to be by your side. I want to support you. Why won't you let me help!"

"Kam, you have responsibilities at home that have nothing to do with me, and I can't get in the way of that. It's not right, and it isn't healthy for us. As soon as I know something for sure, something concrete that I can tell you, I'll contact you and let you know everything that I can." I pause for a second. I can hear him breathing on the other line, and I press my cheek to the phone, wanting more than anything to be in his arms. "I love you, Kam," I whisper. "I do, I promise that I do. I'm just not the normal girl that you need right now. I can't be what you need until I understand what's happening to me, and I don't want to hold you back. I want you to be free to have the life that you want, with or without me."

"You *are* the life that I want," Kam whispers, and it hurts.

"I know. But I can't be right now."

I don't cry until I've hung up the phone and toss it on the bed. I bury my face in my hands, my shoulders shaking as I sob. It hasn't hit me, until right then, that I might not ever see Kam again. I might not ever be well enough to go back to him. Or he might move on before I am. There's no guarantees anymore, no solid footing for me to rely on.

But I know I've done what's best for Kam, and I cling to that, the only consolation that I have. If you love someone, let them go, they say. And I have.

Because I do love him.

I just never thought love would be the worst pain I've ever felt.

Ian

I'VE BEEN WORKING for an hour, tracking down old churches and landmarks in town. I went viral with a photo of Alana but it's hard to look at anyone right now and not see her, so I'm trying to come up with some spectacular landmarks to showcase instead. As I'm taking my final photo for the day I see the last person in the world that I want to talk to approaching me.

Cal fucking Scott.

I don't need his shit today. I've never seen someone with so much going for him who always seems to be pissed off.

"What do you want?" I ask, keeping my attention on the building in my focus. He stops next to me and just crosses his arms, glaring down at me.

"What's going on between you and Megan?"

"I don't think that's any of your business," I say easily. He then decides to step in front of my camera.

Now *I'm* about to get pissed off.

"It's my business," Cal says sharply, "because she's my sister."

Damn, she's stuck now. But I feel glad for her. No matter how I feel about Cal, I know that any other news would have crushed her.

“It’s complicated,” I say coldly. I’m not telling him shit about us. I don’t know if Megan even wants him to know yet and besides, it’s for her to tell when she’s ready.

“I bet,” he says condescendingly. I roll my eyes at him and start packing my bag.

“You’re Megan’s brother, not mine. We don’t have shit to talk about,” I say flatly. “But if you want a rematch just let me know so I can put the camera down.”

“Look...” Cal runs his hand through his hair, shaking his head. “I just want to help her. If there’s something more going on...” He stares at me pointedly.

I look at him, my face set in a scowl. It’s clear he knows more than he’s letting on, but I don’t want to tell him about our suspicions without Megan there. It’s her business, however much it might be affecting me. I let out a long sigh. “Are you really going to help her? Are you really planning on getting her treatment? Good treatment?”

“Yes,” Cal says flatly. “I know someone who can help. If she’s suffering from what I think might be going on, she’s going to need support. Mine...and yours if you even care. If you’re not prepared to give her that, if you can’t support her in the way *she* needs then get the fuck out of her life right now. You understand me?”

His tone makes me want to square up with him right here and now. “You’ve just fucking met her,” I snap, “and from what I got, you were a dick to her. So it must be you who doesn’t give a shit.”

“She’s my blood,” he says sternly, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at me. “That’s all I need to know, it’s all that matters. Family is everything. She’s never going to be on her own again now that she has me and my family. *Nobody* is going to fuck her over.” I think he means to be intimidating but it’s the first time I’ve ever respected him.

“Here,” he says, handing a business card to me. “That’s my cellphone number. Bring Megan to dinner at my house

tonight.” He sees the *what the fuck* look on my face, and sighs. “Please?”

I take the business card and shove it into my bag. “That’s up to Megan,” I say coolly before he turns to leave.

I GO straight to the apartment where Megan is staying. When she answers the door she’s a mess. Her hair is tangled, her face tear-stained, and she’s still in her pajamas. The minute she sees me I can tell she’s trying to hide it—she forces a smile on her face and runs her fingers through her hair, tying it back with a hair tie that’s on her wrist—but it’s impossible to hide it from me. I know her well, whether she believes it or not.

I always have.

“Cal came to see me,” I say as casually as I can once I’m inside. *He was stalking me*, I want to say, but that’s not going to help things.

“What did he want?” she asks tentatively.

I follow behind her down the hall and perch on the edge of the bed as she digs in one of her bags for a fresh pair of jeans and a t-shirt with a graphic design.

“I’ll be right back.” She hurries down the hall to the bathroom, and I try not to think about the fact that she’s changing in there, about the curves of her body that I remember like the back of my hand. I have to think of her as Megan, someone I’ve just met, someone I’ve never seen naked. But it’s getting harder and harder for me to keep this up. I wring my hands together.

She comes back into the room and sits down on the bed next to me. “What happened?”

“He got the results back. They’re positive, Megan. He’s your brother. I don’t know whether to say congratulations or I’m sorry.” I mutter the last part jokingly. She smiles and her eyes are bright, and for a second she’s happy without a care in the world. Then she hides her face in her hands and is crying so hard her entire body is shaking. What the hell just

happened? “Megan, what’s wrong? I thought you’d be happy. This is good news, isn’t it?”

She nods, but she’s still crying, choked, breathless. In a hurry I reach for my phone and text Cal: *I don’t think we’re making it tonight. Let’s reschedule for tomorrow.*

“Megan, what’s going on?” I pull her closer to me. In that moment, I’m not thinking about her being Alana, or how I miss her, how much I want her. I’m just thinking of her as my friend, and right now she’s fucking miserable

“I broke up with Kam,” she manages between sobs, and I can’t help it. My heart starts to dance in my damn chest.

She’s left him.

This other man, who made her love him after she’d forgotten me—she’s done with him. It’s over. And at last I see a light at the end of the tunnel, a tiny sliver of hope that maybe my Alana will come back to me.

That it’s not all lost.

But she keeps crying, her body shaking as if her whole heart is splintering into pieces. I swallow hard, pressing my forehead against the side of her head. Her hair smells like herbs and vanilla, not the candy-scented shampoo that Alana always used. I remember that whatever memories I have, Megan doesn’t have them. She doesn’t remember loving me, going to bed with me, the special moments that I’ve stored away, all of the joy and sorrow and passion between us...none of it is real for her. What’s real for her is this man, *Kam*, and she’s lost him. For her it’s an earth-shattering heartbreak. And I should know because I’ve felt the same thing.

She loved him, the way I loved her.

The way I still love her.

And so, I do something I never thought I could do. I never knew what it meant to love unconditionally until now, I realize, because nothing about this has to do with getting her back, or making her love me again. I just can’t stand for her to be in pain. So I gently lay back on the bed with her, holding her against me as she cries into my shoulder, while tears

spilling from her for another guy are soaking my favorite hoodie. "It's all going to work out," I whisper, stroking her hair. "I promise." I push down my hurt, my pride, and I say the things that I think will help, even though I hope to god that none of them ever come true. "If your love is real it'll get through this."

I whisper these things over and over into her hair, against her skin, until at last her sobs start to fade, and she goes still in my arms, her body curved against mine, her face pressed into my neck. I feel her soft, even breathing as she falls asleep, worn out from her breakdown. I keep my arms around her.

I'm pathetic because this is the closest I've been able to get to the girl I love more than any other in the world and it's only because she needs me to pick up the pieces of her heart that's breaking for another man.

Love is the coldest bitch that ever existed.

MEGAN

When I wake up the next morning, I'm still in Ian's arms. I can smell his cologne, that familiar scent I breathed in on his pillowcases that first night, and it washes over me. All of it is familiar—the way I'm laying against his chest, the feeling of his arms around me, the soft noise he makes as he shifts in the bed, grunting his disapproval at having to wake up. It's comforting, too. Somehow, it no longer feels as if my world is ending. And then I remember what he told me the night before. I sit up, prodding him gently. "Ian?"

"Hm?" He blinks his eyes open, staring at me groggily. "Megan? I'm sorry, I must have fallen asleep too. I didn't mean to..."

"It's okay," I reassure him quickly. "I'm glad you stayed."

"You are?" There's an unreadable expression on his face, and I realize that saying that might have meant more to him than I meant for it to, but it's too late to take it back now.

"Yes," I say. "Ian, what you told me last night...I didn't imagine that, did I? About Cal?"

"Nope." He pushes himself into a sitting position, clearly stiff from the way he fell asleep and being in his clothes all night. "Cal is your brother. The results came back positive. And he wanted us to come over for dinner last night, but I texted him and rescheduled it for tonight. I didn't think you were up for it last night."

"I wasn't," I admit. "Thank you. And thanks for...for being there."

“No problem.” Ian’s face is carefully neutral. “That’s what friends are for, right?”

“Exactly that,” I assure him.

I feel good as I start to make breakfast for us both. I scramble eggs and start a pan of bacon, thinking about how much brighter things seem this morning. I have a brother! Cal is my brother! And with that comes the promise of a psychiatrist—a good one—and answers. Things are getting back on the right track, and if everything keeps working out the way it is, things might work out for me and Kam. Ian’s right; he won’t forget me, and he won’t move on right away. He’ll wait for me to find some answers. And now that it seems they’ll be coming sooner rather than later...I’m hopeful, almost ecstatic.

Ian doesn’t look quite as excited. “What’s going on?” I slide a plate in front of him with bacon, eggs, and toast.

“I just hope we don’t kill each other at dinner,” he says jokingly with an innocent shrug. I smile at him.

I cover my hand with his own, and the feeling of it is warm and comforting. Just like waking up in his arms this morning. I push that thought away and another comes immediately.

I won’t let you have him.

SHUT UP!

I spend longer than I need to getting ready for the dinner. I want to impress them. I put on light makeup and throw on a cream blouse and a pair of ballet flats, along with pearl earrings. When I walk out, Ian can’t take his eyes off of me for a moment.

“You look beautiful,” he says, and there’s a depth of feeling to his words that I’m not ready to explore. I follow him out to the car without saying anything, and we’re quiet during the drive. I don’t know what to say, and my stomach is rolling over and over with nerves until I feel so tangled up inside that I might choke if I breathe too deeply. Ian looks amazing, just

as he does every day I've seen him. A fact I try to ignore but is so hard to as we ride up the elevator, the lighting highlighting every perfect feature on him.

Cal's house is beyond anything I might have imagined. He lives on the penthouse floor in one of the tallest Chicago high-rises, and when Lauren opens the door to let us in it's all I can do not to look around bug-eyed. The apartment is glamorous and beautiful, clean and modern with steel and glass fixtures, and one wall in the living room is entirely glass, overlooking Grant Park and the rest of the city. It's dark, and all I can see is the glittering skyline. It takes my breath away.

"It's good to see you. I'm glad you're here." Lauren welcomes us, giving both me and Ian warm hugs as best as she can with her protruding belly.

It hits me that those are my nieces or nephews in there and I can't contain my smile. Ian is watching us and has an amazing grin on his face. Lauren leads me by the hand into the living room, which is also very modern, with a long glass coffee table and sheepskin rugs. It definitely isn't baby-proofed. Well, from what I know of babies. Which isn't much.

When Cal comes in his demeanor is cold which is surprising seeing as he's the one who invited us here. He shakes my hand. His grey eyes are cool as they look down into mine. "Thanks for coming," he says, a tad warmer than he looks.

"I'm so glad to be here." Something in his demeanor makes the nervous excitement in my stomach stop churning—and it's replaced with a mild sadness. I want him to feel how I do, but Lauren seems more excited about finding out that Cal's my blood family than he does.

"You have a really great apartment," I say, trying to diffuse some of the tension. "It's beautiful, and the view..."

"I'll miss it when we move," Lauren says sorrowfully, and I glance at her, confused.

"We're moving before the twins come," Cal explains. "It's not the most baby-friendly place to begin with, and we've

decided to go out to the West Suburbs. It'll be better for the kids.”

I'm not sure what to say. “I'm sure the new place will be amazing too,” I murmur hesitantly, and Lauren smiles and nods almost sadly, stroking her belly.

“Dinner is ready,” Lauren tells us. The food already smells fantastic. We all sit down at the table; Lauren sits with us and Cal serves us. I'm a little surprised by this but I guess it's the least he can do since his wife is about to deliver sometime soon. I wonder if he cooked or if this is catering. When he sets my plate in front of me my stomach begs for it—beef tenderloins swimming in a red wine sauce, garlic and blue cheese mashed potatoes, and a side salad with a vinaigrette, berries, and goat cheese on top.

“Do you like wine?” Lauren asks, and when I nod she pours me a glass of something rich and red that smells expensive.

“When are the twins due?” Ian asks, breaking through the tension in the room. Lauren looks for Cal to answer.

“Two months,” he says as he sips from his glass of water. I notice there's no alcohol near him.

“Congratulations man,” Ian says with a smile he can't help but reveal.

“Thanks,” Cal replies, holding Lauren's hand in his. It's the first time they've ever spoken to each other without irritation.

“That must be so exciting,” I say after taking a small sip of wine to calm my nerves. “Do you know what they are yet?” I ask Lauren.

“We want to be surprised but we already have our little girl so at least one boy would make it fair for Cal, with so many women being in the house.” She laughs and the smile he gives her is almost heart melting. It's the first time I've seen him look happy.

“We have a little girl, Caylen. She's with Aidan and his wife Lisa; you met them briefly at the gallery. And Willa, my

little sister, is here a lot too.” I nod, a little disappointed that I won’t get to see her today but there will be time for that hopefully. I really hope this is the first of many dinners. Cal lets out a breath and I see Lauren’s smile dim a bit. I wonder what he’s about to say. The brief warmth in the room has almost disappeared.

“I guess we’re wondering what exactly your relationship is with each other?” Cal asks, looking between Ian and I. My stomach drops. I guess the question was bound to come up sooner or later, seeing as they have some familiarity with Ian because of their business relationship with him. How do I explain this? Ian lifts his glass and downs his beer, giving me a little shrug as if to say it’s up to me to explain.

“Is that a hard question?” Cal asks amused.

“She’s friends with my cousin, and I’m looking out for her while she’s here,” Ian responds matter-of-factly, and the knot in my stomach loosens even though it’s just partially the truth. Cal arches a disbelieving eyebrow. I think back to what he said earlier about doing a background check on me. Could he have ran one on Ian? Could he have found out that Ian was married before, and to a woman who looks just like me? Will he think that we’re lying to him? My anxiety is starting to spike. If we’re going to have a relationship I don’t want it to start on lies and half-truths.

“Actually, there’s more to it than that,” I blurt out and Ian gives me a look that’s somewhere between sympathetic and embarrassed.

“I told Cal that I’ve suffered from blackouts since I’ve been a little girl.” Lauren gives me a gentle smile and nods for me to continue. I run my hands through my hair.

“I just met Ian less than two weeks ago, but when we met...” I trail off, trying to figure out how to put it. Ian cautiously takes my hand and squeezes it. It brings tears to my eyes at how supportive he’s being.

“Ian recognized me...”

“She looked like my wife, Alana...she left before I met you both. She didn’t know me...but I know it’s her and with her having these blackouts, we think she might have a disorder we’ve looked

up—”

“—DID,” Cal finishes for him and me and Ian look at each other in shock. When I look back at Lauren and Cal they don’t seem shocked at all. Lauren’s eyes are on her lap and Cal looks sympathetically at the both of us.

“You know? How? Did you find something, did our mom...?” My words come out fast but stoically. He shakes his head.

“I’m not sure what all Isabella had but we’re not all too unfamiliar with it around here. Apparently she fucked us all up, whether by nature or nurture,” Cal says tightly.

No. No. No. I can’t breathe.

Everything I’ve thought just went from fiction to reality.

I’m stunned into silence. My brother has the same condition that we think I might suffer from? It’s all so much more real now, realer than the memories, the voice in my head. It’s in front of me, and while I feel relief that maybe we have an answer after all, my stomach knots when I glance at Ian. Because now there isn’t a question that I was also Alana. I slip my hands from his. I need space, I need time to think. Ian shifts in his seat, barely able to sit still. I can almost feel the energy of his emotions—hope, peace, confirmation of what he’s been holding onto all along—and all I feel is fear, panic, the need to run and not stop...but my body won’t move.

I breathe in, slow and shaky.

Lauren is looking at me carefully, as if she wants to say something but isn’t going to, and Cal’s eyes are narrowed.

Next to me, I hear Ian breathe in shakily. “Excuse me,” he says, his voice choked, and he pushes his chair back, so fast that it almost tips over. He stalks out of the room, his shoulders hunched.

Across from me, I can feel Lauren and Cal looking at me,
but all I can do is stare after him.

All I can think of is that this time he's the one leaving me.

IAN

I'm standing on the balcony. Cold wind is whipping across my face but I need it.

I didn't expect coming to dinner would do this, but it's changed things. Cal has what *she* has and it's made it all the more real. It confirms what I knew all along. Things are different now. I can't be her friend. I won't. I have to make her remember. I need to get her back...she's Alana!

I hear the glass door open and I prepare myself to see her but try not to be so "intense," as Blue calls it, but I'm not in complete control of my mind right now. I admit I'm running on only adrenaline and emotion right now. I have to convince her that she's mine, that we have a life together. If she can just fucking remember! But when I turn to see her it's Lauren, not Alana. She leans on the railing next to me, her back to the cityscape, and glances over.

"Are you alright?" There's genuine concern in her voice, and I try to push out everything I was about to let out on Alana. I laugh and grip my hair.

"No. I'm not." I reply, trying to get a grip. She only nods and lets out a short laugh.

"I know exactly what you're going through right now," she utters quietly. I shake my head because I really doubt she does. She's here, with Cal, and with babies on the way. He's not sitting next to her with no memory of their life and wishing he was someone else.

“It might not seem like it to you right now but I went through hell to be here with him. To get to how we are now,” she says tensely, as if she just read my thoughts. I look at her more closely and when our eyes meet, for a second I see a glimpse of what I’m feeling, and shit...I wonder if she’s still going through hell now.

“Oh Ian. I wouldn’t wish what you’re going through on my worst enemy, and you just found out two weeks ago. You’re holding up a lot better than I was when I found out,” she explains quietly.

“Alana...is that how you know her?” she asks and I can only nod.

“She doesn’t know who that is,” she says firmly. “She might not remember anything and probably doesn’t want to. You’re fighting an uphill battle that will be the hardest thing you’ve ever been up against.”

“I want her back,” I say cutting her off. “And with all due respect, Lauren, I don’t need to hear how fucking hard it’s going to be. It doesn’t matter. I’ll fight every day if I have to. She’s mine and I’m not going to give her up.” My tone is harsh but I can’t hear yet another person tell me to let her go. I expect her to be offended but now she’s smiling at me.

“That’s what I needed to know,” she says gently, “because if you felt anything less of what you just said, it’s not going to be worth it. Even if Alana comes back, that’s when it gets harder than you can even imagine.”

“It can’t be harder than this,” I say defiantly. “I’m losing my mind. She doesn’t know our life! It’s just a story to her, something we’ve told her, a piece of a puzzle leading to a diagnosis. But *I* remember it. I remember *all* of it—the way she drove me fucking crazy from day one, how insane she was—nothing like Megan at all—and how she was like a fucking drug, an addiction I couldn’t shake. She was bad for me and good for me, and together we were amazing. We were on fucking fire. And when she left it was like she took every good thing I had in me. I walked around corners expecting her to be there. I woke up thinking it would have all been a bad dream

and I'd see her there when I got up, and God I've lived every single day since then in pain. Now Megan's going to think of Alana as a *symptom* of something, and I know she doesn't mean it but it's like she's shredding me to pieces all over again." I'm gasping, the words spilling out of me in a painful torrent. I see the sympathy on Lauren's face and that makes me feel even worse.

Lauren lets out a long, slow breath. "This is no doubt going to be the hardest thing you've ever done, and it'll continue to be the hardest thing that you'll ever do. Because when you live with someone with this condition, you've got to understand that they're not always going to be the person you love. Sometimes they might be someone you don't. You might not even like them, and God help you if they don't like each other."

"So how do you live with it?" I stare at her, the wind stinging my cheeks. "How?"

"Because when you love someone, *really* love them, you commit to be there for them no matter what. In good times and bad. For better or for worse, right?" She laughs, but her face is serious. "You made those vows, too, Ian. If you love her, if you mean those vows, then you're going to keep doing this and helping her, because it's what you promised to do. But it needs to be what you *want* to do too, deep down. Not always actively, because believe me, there's days I just don't want to deal with it. But deep down, there's always that love, that desire to be there for the man I promised to spend my life with. And I cling to that on the hard days, because I know there's going to be better days. There's *always* better days."

"What if Megan, and the life Megan wants, doesn't include being with me?"

Lauren bites her lip, looking away for a moment.

"You need to decide if you can see yourself living without her, if you can be happy without her. If you can live without her, if you think you can breathe without her, then move on and have a happy life, and let her go. No being friends, no

hanging on in hopes that things will change. Just go, and move on.”

“And if I can’t do that?”

Lauren turns to face me then, looking deadly serious.
“Then fight for her.”

MEGAN

I'm left facing Cal across the table as Lauren goes out to check on Ian.

"You're in for a hell of a ride, Sis." He says it jokingly but there's no humor in his tone. Tears are falling from my eyes now. Everything has changed. Everything after this moment is going to be different. I don't hear him get up but a moment later he's handing me a tissue.

"I have so many questions but I can't even think right now," I tell him, wiping my eyes.

He lets out a slow breath.

"I'm not going to lie...it fucking sucks for you and everyone around you," he says and my heart cracks.

"There's really no cure?" I want something to look forward to, a light at the end of the tunnel. He lets out a dry chuckle.

"If you mean integration," he says dryly.

"That's a joke..." he says, unenthused. I look up at him and he shrugs.

"You learn to live with it and compromise, and you call it *integration* for the people you love but..."

"So I can't get rid of her!?" I ask almost angrily. "I can't compromise with her, I don't know her—it...I'm not her. This is just so confusing." I start to cry.

"You're gonna have to get a grip. I know this is new for you but if you keep breaking down like this you're going to

lose control,” he says sternly. I frown at him. How can he be so cold about this, so matter of fact?

“I know you might think I’m being harsh but it’s the truth. Pull it together.” He sits in the chair beside me. I start to mutter my colors and he looks at me strangely but doesn’t ask me about it. What does pull it together even mean? How do I just pull it together? I try to stop crying.

“So are you and this Blue guy together or...” he asks, rubbing the back of his head.

I laugh.

“No, Blue’s just my friend.”

“So there isn’t anyone that you have in this equation?”

“Kam,” I say quietly.

“Right...” he says sadly. “And he doesn’t know?”

I shake my head sadly, looking down at my hands. I know what he’s going to say next.

“Lauren’s going to tell you that love can overcome anything. And God knows her love is has kept me together. But I won’t lie to you. It takes a special kind of person to stand by someone with this...complication. It’s a lot of baggage, a lot to ask someone to take on. You need to be prepared, if this really is your diagnosis, that he might not be ready to do that.”

“I already broke up with him for exactly that reason,” I whisper.

“But you want him back.” Cal’s eyes are keen, digging up all my secrets.

I nod speechlessly. “More than anything,” I say, trying to steady my voice.

There’s silence for a moment until he breaks it again. “I’ll help you in any way I can, of course, while you’re here. You’re family, you can count on my support. I’m making you an appointment with my sister-in-law, who’s also treated me. She’s the best in the field and she understands it. A lot of

psychiatrists are skeptical, but she's not. She'll take you seriously."

"Thank you," I say before taking a sip of water.

"How are you making it here? Chicago's expensive."

"I have some money saved up." I know I sound a bit defensive, but I don't want to come off as a charity case. I don't want to tell him that Ian has been subsidizing my rent yet.

"Well, there's no point in blowing through your savings." Cal straightens up in his seat, "I own a few properties in the city, some of them furnished. You can stay in one of the empty units for now. Don't worry about rent."

I'm blown away by his generosity. "I...can't." I refuse and he frowns. "It doesn't sound like you have another option. You're not going to get the help you need in Indiana," he counters back and I'm silent. "Thank you." I don't know what else to say to him. No words can convey how much I appreciate what he's offered and it has nothing to do with the monetary value of what he's doing. It's that, in his own way, he's showing he cares.

"I can get you a job in my firm once you're settled but right now you just need to focus on figuring things out..."

I blink at him. "I don't know what to say."

"Well, it's settled." He looks at me with a satisfied expression on his face, calm and cool, as if he's just solved an equation presented to him.

He's just offered me a place to stay with free rent—and a job on top of that! Against all odds, my brother has swooped in and become my fairy godmother, and I'm blown away by the insanity of it all. "I don't think you know what this means to me," I murmur, looking at him, still stunned.

"We're family, Megan," he says calmly, still as unruffled as ever. "Family takes care of each other."

And then it hits me, and I want to cry—but this time with tears of joy.

Family.

It almost makes all of this worth it.

Megan

WHEN LAUREN and Ian join us again it's clear that no one is in the mood to entertain anymore. We say our goodbyes. Lauren envelops me in a deep hug and I notice she does the same to Ian. Cal gives me a shoulder squeeze and he and Ian exchange short goodbyes. Once we're back outside and in Ian's car, he looks at me cautiously. Things have changed. The feeling is palpable now; if I thought there was a possibility that Ian wasn't as affected as I was after hearing Cal's admission, that theory is dead now. It's changed everything.

"That was a lot, huh?"

I give myself a second before answering. "Yeah," I say finally. I want to ask him how he is, what he's thinking. But I'm afraid of what the answers to those questions are.

"You and Lauren were talking awhile."

"She gets it," he says after letting out a long breath. My stomach flips. I wonder what she told him. She's stuck it out with Cal so did she tell him the same? To not let Alana go, to keep the faith...or did she tell him I'm a real person that has my own life and to be understanding? Or to run? I don't know if I want to know the answer to that either.

"I'm...um, I'm going to be moving out of the Airbnb tomorrow," I say hesitantly. "I can't thank you enough for all you've done but you're off the hook."

"What?" he coughs out and I glue my eyes to my lap.

“Yeah, um...Cal is letting me stay in one of his apartments, in one of the buildings he owns. For free.” I blush a little, realizing how extravagant it sounds. “And he offered me a job with his company, when everything gets sorted out,” I add quietly, tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

“It’ll be my first time living alone. I’ve always had roommates.”

Ian flinches a little, and I can’t quite read his face as I speak. The words that come out of his mouth say that he’s happy for me, but there’s something else there too. Some hesitancy—or fear. Anxiety.

“You’re staying in Chicago...” The anxiety is clear in his tone now, but underneath it there’s hope, and I’m not sure which one I’ve caused is worse. There’s an undercurrent to the question, a double meaning. Am I staying here to explore things with him? Am I staying because I want to learn to embrace Alana, her life, or am I just trying to force her down and run back to Indiana? I don’t have the answers to these questions, but I know I’m going to have to come up with some soon for everyone’s sake.

“I’d like to go back and finish school eventually,” I say hesitantly. “I want to get my life back together, and my life was in Indiana. I know that’s hard for you to hear, Ian, but right now it’s the only life I remember. But my family is here, in Chicago, and my doctor is going to be here too. So I’ll be here for a while...longer-term, but I can’t give you the answers you want from me now.” I tell him this as gently as I can. It’s the best I have, but I can see from his expression that he’s relaxed a little and that gives me some solace.

I’m being pulled in so many different directions right now that it’s hard to know what the right thing to do is. But I resolve to try to sit back and enjoy what’s happening now, just a little. I have a brother, and a place to stay, and people who care for me.

It’s a start.

A good one.

IAN

It's early the next morning when Blue shows up. I'm in the kitchen making a pot of coffee and burning toast when I hear the front door open and slam shut, and footsteps. I'd be a liar if I said I didn't wish it was Alana, but I know it won't be, and it sure as hell wouldn't be Megan. Which basically leaves Blue.

"Morning," he says gruffly, tossing a bag onto the table and flopping into a chair. "How's our girl?"

"I'm fine," I say with a bit of an edge, crossing to the table and peering into the bag. There's two hot wrapped sandwiches from my favorite deli down the street, and I fish one out, grateful for something edible to eat.

"You *can* be a such a girl sometimes," Blue jokes, "but I'm talking about Megan. And who said one of those was for you?"

"Me," I say flatly, unwrapping it. It's bacon, sausage, egg, and cheese with a salsa verde sauce and I practically groan as I bite into it. I can't cook worth a damn, but I figured it was worth a shot. It's been good for my wallet, but bad for my palate.

"Megan is better. I think she's happy, hopeful," I tell Blue between bites, filling him in on what's happened.

"And you?" Blue looks at me shrewdly.

"I don't know." I shrug, trying to pass it off as less than it is. "Time will tell." I check my watch, wolfing down the last few bites. "I'm supposed to meet her in about twenty minutes to take her over to the new apartment."

“That’s why I’m here. Let’s see how generous big bro’s being.”

Once we pick Megan up, she’s so busy chattering to Blue about his work and what happened with Cal while he was gone that I’m able to just detach from the conversation a little. I’m happy for her, but it feels like she’s getting further away from me—both geographically and emotionally. I know that’s not fair, that I’m only one part of a much bigger equation, but the little hope I’ve been clinging to is becoming more and more fragile.

We ride up to the fifth floor, and Cal is waiting for us, the door propped open. The apartment is fucking phenomenal; even with my photography success I’m not sure I could afford this. It’s near enough to Lincoln Park that there’s a great view from the small balcony, and it’s two bedrooms, entirely furnished. It’s probably a model—neutral colors, with cream walls hung with copies of art I recognize from the gallery, mid-century modern furniture, and sleek steel fixtures. Everything is gleaming and beautiful and new, and Megan is so excited she looks like she’s about to piss herself.

“This is amazing,” she says, but from her breathless tone I can tell that she’s thrilled. “It’s huge. It’s beautiful!”

“I’m glad you like it,” he says gruffly but a small smile creeps across his face. “There’s about a week’s worth of groceries in the fridge and pantry, too. Lauren went shopping. It should get you started.”

“Thank you so much!” Megan says enthusiastically.

“You hit the genetic jackpot,” Blue says when Cal is slightly out of earshot, running one finger over the black quartz countertop.

Megan’s cheeks turn red and she raises a finger to her lips quickly as Cal walks back in our direction. “Don’t forget you’ve got an appointment with Helen tomorrow,” he says brusquely. He hands her a thick, embossed business card. “Address and contact info are on here.”

“Thank you again,” Megan says sincerely. “All of this... it’s overwhelming, Cal. I appreciate it so much.”

“You’re family,” Cal replies. “I take care of my family.”

He glances at me as he starts to head out, and I square my shoulders, looking straight at him. “Thanks, man. For doing this for her.” It almost pains me to say it, but I do appreciate him taking care of her.

I just wish I could be the one doing more, but she wouldn’t accept it anyway.

The second he’s gone, Blue lets out a whoop of excitement. “I leave for a few days, and everything’s changed for you! Look at this place!” He shakes his head. “I’m so damn happy for you.”

“I know, it’s really crazy.” Megan bites her lower lip, looking away for a second. “I’m really nervous about my appointment tomorrow, though. It’s been such a long time since I’ve gone to see a doctor.”

“You’ve got this,” Blue says encouragingly. “This is a step in the right direction, Megs! Everything is going to be just fine. You were shitting yourself a few days ago, and it’s all going in the right direction now. Better than we even expected. I mean, really—look at this apartment! You’re going to be okay, I know it.”

“I know.” Megan chews on one of her nails for a moment, sitting on the edge of one of the bar stools. “I’m going to apply for a leave of absence from school, once I see the doctor. Once I’m officially diagnosed, my condition—whatever it really is—should be enough to qualify for that.”

It hits me, what she’s just said, and I feel thrown off balance. Yesterday she was talking about going back to finish, and now she wants to take a leave of absence? For how long? What does that mean? I suddenly feel like I’m on the outside of the party looking in. She’s going to be here, closer...but she’s starting to feel further and further away.

“I’ve got a shoot early this evening I need to get ready for,” I say trying to sound easy. “Glad to see the new place is

good, Megan. I'll see you later, okay? You too Blue."

Blue looks at me strangely. "I'll walk you out bro, I need to get something out of the car anyway. Megs, I'll be right back, okay?"

She nods, and I see she's surprised at me leaving early but she doesn't say anything, just gives me a little wave.

"What's up with you?" Blue asks as we get in the elevator. "Something's off, I can tell."

I don't look at him, or reply.

"Dude." Blue shakes his head. "You should be happy. Megan is staying here. In the same city as you. And it sounds like it might be a for a while. This is going to make things easier for you, it's..."

"Easier how?" I cut him off sharply. "What is it going to make it easier to do, exactly? Be her friend? Be her caregiver? What am I going to be to her, exactly? I don't know what my place is!" I shake my head grimly.

"I need some time, Blue. I got to get my head together. I told Megan I'll be there for her, but what does that mean? Does it mean I just give up hope? Does it mean I expect that I'll never get Alana back, and I just have to be satisfied with memories and what little bit of Megan lets me in on? Does it mean I watch her ride off into the sunset with some other guy? Jesus, Blue, this is fucking hard, and I don't know how to handle it. What if getting better means she gets rid of Alana altogether? I should want that, right? I should want her to be better." I run one hand through my hair, my throat dry and my chest aching from the sudden rush of words and emotion. "I miss Alana. God, I miss her every fucking day, Blue. I want her back. Christ, I just...I can't pretend anymore"

"Easy, man." Blue pats me on the back reassuringly. "Look, take a couple days to yourself, okay? I'll tell Megan you're booked solid if she asks. Get your head together, figure out how you're gonna move forward with this. I'll take care of Megan in the meantime, get her to her appointment, be supportive. You need a break."

“Yeah, I do.” It’s all I say as the elevator hits the floor and I step out. I don’t look back at Blue as I walk out through the lobby because the truth is the only way I see me winning in this is to get Alana back. And I have no fucking idea how to do that.

MEGAN

I try to distract myself by exploring the apartment while Blue is out with Ian, but I'm practically jittery with anxiety by the time he walks back in. "Is everything okay with Ian?" I ask as soon as I see him, drumming my nails on the countertop. "He left really fast."

"Yeah...he's just a little overwhelmed by how fast things are moving, that's all," Blue says, clearly trying to reassure me. "He's booked up with shoots for the next few days and he's worried about you—worried about the doctor's appointment and how that will affect you...and Alana. He still loves Alana, Megan, you gotta remember that."

I bite my lip. "I feel terrible," I whisper. "Like I've been using him, because I know he wants to be with Alana, and I'm still sort of her. Like I look like her...and I know he sees that...I just can't connect with him in the way he wants. I don't feel anything about her." It's honest. I *didn't* say I don't feel anything towards him.

"You've got a lot ahead of you, Megan, a lot of work to do, and you need to focus on yourself. That's what you told Kam, and it was true. It goes for Ian, too. He's a big boy, he'll be alright. You have to know what you want for yourself." He's trying to reassure me and I'm so thankful to have him in my corner.

I nod wordlessly.

"Now that things are going better, do you want to get back together with Kam?"

Do I? My first instinct is yes, and that makes me feel guilty. Because if Alana is me, then I'm another man's wife, well I made the vows at least. "Yes," I whisper, and I know the guilt is obvious in my voice. "I do. But I want to wait until after I see Helen. I want answers for myself before I try to give them to anyone else."

"That's fair." Blue looks at me sympathetically. "It's going to be okay, Megan. We're going to figure this out."

—

I try to keep those words in mind as we arrive at my doctor's appointment. Blue drops me off and is going to come straight back when I'm done. I ride the elevator up to the second floor with my hands shaking, and that only intensifies until it's hard to fill out the paperwork that the friendly receptionist hands me. There's so many questions. There's blanks I can't fill in, since I don't know all of my family medical history. But I answer everything as honestly as I can. I'm here for answers, to finally understand what's going on with me, and I know I have to be honest if I'm going to get better—whatever that means.

It seems like forever before I hear a kind voice call out, "Megan Rice?"

The woman speaking to me is very beautiful, tall, and slender with long brown hair that she's pulled back into a low, sleek ponytail. She looks to be in her mid-thirties, with warm eyes and an elegant, professional demeanor. She's wearing fitted black cigarette pants, a teal silk blouse with the sleeves rolled up, and light makeup. Everything about her is sophisticated without being cold. It makes me already like her a little. She seems like an older sister, someone whose dresses I might "borrow" for a really nice date, and who would teach me what exactly lip liner is for.

"I'm Dr. Lyce," she says as I approach, holding out her hand to shake mine. "I'm here to help you, Megan. Let's go into my office and we'll get started, alright?"

I nod, following her down the narrow hallway and into a spacious room. It's nice, not like any doctor's office I'm

accustomed to—psychiatrist or otherwise. There’s plush carpet and a navy blue couch with large throw pillows, a huge window overlooking the city, and a desk in one corner. Across from the couch is a low armchair that Helen sits down in, gesturing for me to take a seat on the couch.

I’m trembling as I sit. What comes next? Tests? I’m used to getting a battery of them every time I see a new doctor, and they’ve never told me anything useful yet. I sit down, waiting for her to hand me more forms or quizzes or start drilling me on why I think I’m here.

“This first session is really just for me to get to know more about you,” she says, and the warm, soft tone of her voice starts to put me more at ease. “So tell me about yourself. Whatever you think I should know. Just talk freely, there’s no judgement here. Cal says that you’re concerned about having Dissociative Identity Disorder, so tell me what makes you feel that way. Tell me about how it might affect you if you do.”

At first I’m not sure what to say, but then I start speaking, and it’s like the words pour out of me. Everyone I’ve talked to so far has had a stake in this—Kam, Blue, Ian—even Cal, to a certain extent. Helen doesn’t—she’s just here to listen, here to help...ostensibly, anyway. And so I start talking, because I desperately want to tell someone without a stake in my life what I’m feeling about all of this.

“I’ve had blackouts...for a long time,” I say. “I was pulled out of high school after I attacked a doctor who tried to touch me inappropriately, but I don’t remember how I got from him approaching me to me pinning him to the floor. After that I wasn’t sure how to go forward, but after years of online school and getting good grades, I wanted to try college for real. I met this guy there—Kam...and he made me feel like there was a chance at a normal life for once. He’s kind and funny and smart and from a good family who really loves him...all the things I want in a person. His family loved me too, well...his immediate family, anyway, and I thought things were going to be okay. I thought I was past all of it. But then I blacked out again—woke up in a strange person’s bed, naked, in Detroit, with Kam’s truck and no idea how I got there or what

happened. And then I come here, to Chicago, to try to find my brother...and I find out that I look exactly like Blue's cousin's wife who disappeared. He thinks I'm her, that I had this whole other life that I dissociated from and forgot. And I've got to find out the answers, because I still love Kam. I love him so much, I thought he was my first...and if this is all true, it changes everything about who I thought I was and who I've told him that I was. I need to be honest with him, but how can I do that if I don't even really know who I am? I don't want to hurt him. He has so many responsibilities already, people depending on him, other people who love him, and I don't want to just drag him down. I want to be the kind of person he deserves. Our time together was so good, and so...normal. It's what I always hoped for and never thought I could have. It was real. I know it was."

"And this other person that you think you might be, also, does she have a name? What do you know about her?"

"Alana." Saying it makes my heart pound faster, makes my head feel thick and dizzy. "Is there any way for me to get rid of her? Some...things have come back that make me think it's true...can I subdue that part of me? Can I make it so that I don't have this...alter?" I swallow hard, my nails biting into my palms. "When I was okay...I was taking medication. But it had side effects that could make me infertile, and when things got serious with me and Kam, well...I know he wants a family. And I want that too someday."

"Well," Helen says calmly, "for patients with Dissociative Identity Disorder, integration is the goal. For these patients, their alter, or alters, are parts of their personality. They are part of who the patient is. So Alana is a part of your personality, Megan. She *is* you, and you are her. With therapy, you can learn coping mechanisms, ways to coexist together, and function normally in life. That's the end goal of treatment. Trying to force these alters away can cause trauma and more difficulty down the road."

My face falls immediately. That isn't what I wanted to hear! I realize in that moment exactly how much I was hoping that Helen would tell me that I could remove Alana, that some

combination of medication and therapy could make her leave me alone forever. I feel the fear rising up again, the sensation that my body isn't my own. This isn't happening. This isn't what I came here for. Cal warned me. He said it's all BS.

You're not getting rid of me that easy, Bitch.

"Can you tell me more about Alana?" Helen asks gently. "Do you remember anything from her life?"

I bite my lip, chewing at it for a moment before answering. I want to say no, but I know I have to be honest. What's the point of lying? And if I'm not, Helen won't be able to help me. "I had a nightmare," I say finally. "I dreamed she was in my room, that she was angry with me for hurting Ian—Blue's cousin, the one who says he married her—she said that I couldn't have him. That he was hers. And she was going to stab me...she had a knife...and then I woke up. It was terrifying."

"Of course. These things can be very frightening. But the more you fight her, the more aggressive these encounters can be. Is there anything else?"

"I...I had a flashback, I think, when I was with Ian one night. Just eating dinner. But I had a moment where I didn't feel like I was me any longer, and I was remembering a memory that wasn't mine. It was Alana, it was a romantic moment between them. It was...it was sweet."

"And that's all?"

I nod wordlessly.

"Do you think that maybe you're afraid of remembering?"

"Of course I'm afraid!" It's the first time in the session I've raised my voice, and I immediately try to calm down. "I don't want to remember her! If I remember her, if she's really me, then nothing is real. It means that the person I thought I was with Kam isn't real, that I married someone else, that what I thought was my first time really wasn't. She's invading my body and if I remember her she's going to live in it. Permanently."

“This is why we need to learn how to best help you cope,” Helen says softly. “You say Kam is a very important person in your life. I’m hearing that a lot of your fear is about tainting the memories you have with him, that accepting that you are also this other person, that you’ve had a life you don’t remember, that that makes what the two of you have less real. What if you invite him here, to sit in on a therapy session? You can explain to him, with my help and in a neutral space, what this disorder is and what it means. And perhaps Lauren would talk to him about what it’s like to live with someone who has it. After all, she and your brother have a very successful family and marriage. It’s not impossible to live a normal life with this condition, Megan. But you do have to learn to accept it, and only then can you begin to learn to cope.”

Seeing Kam again! My heart leaps at the thought. I immediately envision his face, his eyes, the expression in them when he sees me again. I think of him holding me, and my entire body is warm. I want to see him, I miss him so much... but then I realize what it could mean. It means telling him the truth, telling him about everything—and that could be the end. It could be too much for him. I remember what Cal said, that it takes a certain kind of person to live with someone like him and I. What if Kam can’t do it? It’s too much to ask of anyone, I think. There’s so much baggage that Alana comes with, and if I have to let her be a part of me...I look at Helen, my heart pounding. “So you think it’s true? I really do have it?”

“From what you’ve told me today, it certainly seems like that is the case. There isn’t a more scientific test, I’m afraid. I think we should move forward with that diagnosis and start to treat you appropriately. It’s gone untreated for a very long time it seems. I don’t think hesitating is the right choice in your case.”

I expected to feel nothing but relief at receiving an official diagnosis, but whatever relief I do feel is mostly masked by fear. Fear of Alana, fear of the future, fear of losing Kam. My emotions are a tangled disaster, and I don’t trust myself to speak without bursting into tears.

“Try to take this one day at a time,” Helen cautions. “I’ll see you again before the end of the week. Cal has asked for twice-weekly sessions for you. This was just a beginning; we’ll start to delve a little deeper next time.”

As I thank her and leave, I can’t get those last words out of my head. *Delve a little deeper.* What does that mean? Does it mean bringing Alana out? Does it mean making her more a part of me? I’m frightened beyond belief, but at least I’m beginning to get some answers. And I know the next thing I have to do.

I have to call Kam.

8 MEGAN

I DIAL the number with shaking fingers. I miss Kam like crazy but I know there's no going back after this. However he handles the news, there will always be a "before" and an "after" once I make this call. And our before has been beautiful, almost unfairly perfect, and it will never be the same after this. The thought brings tears to my eyes.

His voice comes over the line, and my heart flutters the second I hear it, a voice that used to soothe me and made me believe everything would be better. "Megan! Babe, are you okay?"

"Yes, Kam...hi." I say, letting every emotion I have sit in the word.

"Do you know how much I've missed your voice?" I also hear every emotion in his words: the joy, hurt, and hope. I can't even hold it in any longer.

"Can you come?" I burst out. He lets out a beautiful laugh full of relief and humor.

"That isn't even something you need to ask. It's us against the world, babe, we can handle anything as long as we're together."

Hearing him so confident makes me believe in us. His enthusiasm has reinvigorated me, and the tiny spark of hope I have starts to grow. "I'm staying at an apartment in the city, so you don't have to get a hotel..."

"Megan, don't worry about anything. I'll be there in a day or two. I just need to take care of some things, okay? And then

we're going to figure everything out. I can't wait to see you." I wonder if Blue has cracked and told him what's happening. If so, that'd actually be good because it means he knows what he's walking into and he's still coming. But knowing Blue I doubt he said anything.

"I can't wait to see you, too," I whisper into the phone. "I love you."

"I love you, too. Everything is going to be okay, I promise."

I press my forehead against the screen as he hangs up.

He's coming here.

I'm going to see him again.

Even if it all goes bad I'll at least get to see him one more time.

And maybe it won't.

I have to believe in us, in our love.

Helen can help us. It's worked for Lauren and Cal. Kam pursued me even knowing I had problems, though neither of us knew to what extent.

He wanted me.

I think of all of our time together and he's never been less than supportive. He's always been perfect. He made me feel normal so I don't know why I'm doubting him being able to handle this now. He loves me, I know it, and if he knows and understands...I don't even know or understand everything. I just have to be positive and hope for the best. I don't get to decide what he'll accept. I can only tell him the truth.

That you married a guy and he wasn't your first. Yeah, let's see how that goes.

Shut up!

Thank God for the knock at the door. I yell, "Come in." I've been waiting on Blue.

He comes into the apartment like a whirlwind, with three plastic grocery bags. “I got you some things to stock you up for the week,” he says before heading for the fridge.

“Blue, you guys really don’t have to keep doing this. Lauren bought enough food to feed a family of four for a week.”

He peers at me with those ice blue eyes I bet Katie misses desperately, but his forehead is creased and his lips are pressed tightly together.

Something’s not right.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

“What about you?” he asks, playing with his lip ring. Maybe he’s just reading my energy and right now it’s all over the place.

I press my face into my hands and let out a small burst of breath. “Helen—my doctor— is going to move forward with treating me for DID. She thinks that’s what’s wrong and will treat me accordingly, but there isn’t really a test or anything concrete to diagnosis it,” I say and he nods almost expectantly but waits for me to continue.

“She also suggested that I ask Kam to come to a therapy session with me. She thinks we should explain my condition to him together—”

His nods and his body begins to sway.

“And...when is this session supposed to happen?”

“In a few days, actually. Kam is coming this week.”

Blue freezes in place, his jaw goes slack.

“I’m happy for you, Megan,” he says quietly but he doesn’t look happy. He looks stressed, stressed out of his mind.

“But?”

“Ian. He’s gonna...” He grimaces, stopping mid-sentence. “I’m not saying that to make you feel bad, Megs. I promise. If this is the right thing for you, and especially if your doctor is recommending it, then do it. But Ian’s my family, and my friend too. I don’t know how he’s going to take this. Shit.”

My chest is burning and I’m trying to stop it by nodding in understanding. I know Blue isn’t trying to make me feel bad, he doesn’t operate like that. But the magnitude of what this will do to Ian hits me like a pile of bricks and I’m thrown off by how much it’s affecting me.

“I’ll break the news to him, tell him to steer clear of the apartment for a while,” Blue says, nodding to himself almost.

That’s the moment when I burst into tears.

Why is this so hard! Why does someone have to get hurt in order for me to be happy? I want Kam to come. I’ve missed him more than anything...my entire reason for finding out what’s wrong with me has not only been to get some peace for myself but also to be able to get back to normal so that I can move forward with my life—and that includes him. But I can’t stop crying, thinking of what this will do to Ian. I cover my face with my hands, my shoulders shaking as I sob.

“Hey, hey.” Blue comes around the counter, reaching out to rub my shoulder like he’s soothing a horse. “It’s alright, Megan. Ian’s a tough guy, he’ll be alright. And he’ll understand. If he doesn’t, I’ll get him to. You just focus on yourself, alright? This isn’t about either of these guys. Just be focused.”

“What do you mean?” I hiccup, my throat clogged with tears. I’m trying to control myself.

“You’re here to find out who *you* are, and what *you* need,” Blue says firmly. “Don’t lose sight of that.”

After Blue leaves, I get into the shower, trying to numb the thoughts in my head, the anxiety spreading from my chest to my neck. I stand in the shower under the hot spray of the water, counting the white hexagonal tiles on the floor next to the blue ones. It keeps me from crying again, and I try to focus

my mind on positive things. I try to remember all of the good times I had with Kam, and remind myself that just because I didn't know about this other part of me, it doesn't mean that it was any less real. It wasn't a betrayal. Ian is a wonderful person and he'll find someone else, someone without all of my baggage, who will love him more than Alana ever could.

I get out the shower and throw on a t-shirt, and am wrapping my hair up in a towel when there's a knock at the door. "Who is it?" I call out as I walk out into the living room.

"It's Kam."

I freeze in the middle of the living room. My heart has dropped into my stomach, and I can't breathe.

Am I dreaming?

I make myself move, step by step to the door, and I unlatch it, opening it a crack.

It is Kam. His magnetizing eyes are shining at me. When I open the door wider he drops his bag and picks me up, holding me against him as he hugs me. I wrap my arms around his neck, breathing in his scent—soap and cologne—and for a moment all the worries, dread, and fear are all gone. I'm transported back to before the blackout, before Detroit, before Ian and my diagnosis. All is right with the world again. It's just us, and it feels so right.

When he sets me down, I remember that he wasn't supposed to be coming for a few days. "You're early," I say, blinking at him. "Is everything alright?"

"I couldn't wait to see you, babe." He puts his bag down next to the couch and turns to face me. After everything, he still looks at me like he's the luckiest man in the world.

"Megan, it's been all I could do not to come here for weeks now. I wanted to respect your wishes and give you space. But once you said you wanted to see me...I couldn't wait anymore."

It's the sort of romantic gesture that's typical of him—a grand gesture that lets me know he's my prince, that convinces me to believe in magic and fairytales, that I might get my

happy ending. In this moment I know Kam will understand when I tell him what's wrong.

"I don't want to push you about everything that's happened," he says carefully.

"Whatever you want to say, though, I'm ready to listen." He takes my hands and begins to stroke them with his fingers.

What did I do to deserve this man?

I let out a long, slow breath, and gesture to the couch. "You might want to get comfortable."

It's awkward here, in this space that both is mine and isn't mine. Kam sits back on the plush grey couch, facing me. He looks so happy to be here, to be reunited with me, and I wish more than anything I could give him something better than the news I'm about to dump on him.

"I blacked out," I begin hesitantly. "After the charity gala. Blue gave me some information about my family, and I guess I freaked out, and took your truck and wound up in Detroit. I'm sorry for that, by the way. I really am. I know how worried you must have been."

"Worried isn't the word. But it's in the past, Megan." He brings my hand to his lips and kisses it softly.

You're leaving stuff out, aren't you princess?

I continue ignoring the condescending voice in my head.

"I called Blue and he found me, and he told me more about my family. He said I had a brother here in Chicago, and out of all of my siblings, he seemed like the best one to try to contact. And Blue has family here too." I hesitate.

I should tell him about Ian.

But you won't because you're a scared little coward.

Shut up!!!

I try to imagine how he'll take it, that I might have been married to someone else even if it was fraudulent. That a twisted sick version of me lied and made vows she couldn't keep.

BITCH.

That some of the things we shared—things we thought belonged only to us—might not have been the truth. I don't know how to explain it so that he'll understand, and I can't stand the thought of hurting him right now, especially before we've even had a chance to talk with Helen. He'll understand if I don't tell him all at once.

He said I could go at my own pace.

Whatever makes you feel better, you lying cunt.

I have to focus.

“I met Cal—my brother—and it was a rocky start, but once we were sure of the family connection, he warmed up. He has a wife, and she's so sweet. He's helped me with all of this—this is his apartment complex he's letting me stay in, and he has a job for me when I'm ready, and he's set me up with a really good doctor.” I pause. “That's why I asked you to come, Kam. Cal has the same condition that I believe I have, and my psychiatrist thinks that you should sit in on a therapy session with me. She can help walk you through my diagnosis, and we can try to come up with a plan for how to handle it.”

“You're not coming back to Indiana?” he asks, his face falling. I squeeze his hand.

“Eventually. I just want to come back when I'm better. When I feel whole,” I tell him and he smiles at me encouragingly.

Kam leans forward then and takes my hand in his. “Well it's only a car ride away,” he says lightly. “I just want to understand what's going on so that I can help you through whatever this is. I'm so glad you let me back in.”

I breathe out, feeling relieved. I can't believe he's taking it so well.

Because you're lying to him. Your perfect prince, your sweet Kam. He'll never understand, he won't accept you like this. And when he doesn't, just remember that Ian's mine. I won't let you have him.

I massage my temples and let out a cleansing breath and say my colors. Thankfully the voice has shut up. I realize now more than anything how much I hate her.

“Babe...” There’s concern littering Kam’s beautiful features.

“I’m okay,” I tell him quickly with a weak smile.

“What’s the condition? If you want to tell me,” he adds quickly.

“I think it’s best if you hear it from Helen—my doctor. She can explain better, or help me explain. Is that okay?”

“Okay,” he says reluctantly and threads his fingers through mine. “I talked to my professors and made arrangements to stay for a week, as long as that’s okay with you. And there’s only a few weeks left before spring break. I can come back and stay with you then too. We can start to adjust to this new normal.” I smile away my tears. I don’t deserve him.

He leans forward then, his other hand grazing my cheek. He’s going to kiss me, I know, and there’s some small part of me that realizes that it might not be the best decision, that we need to take things slow. But I miss him, all of him—not just having him with me but everything that goes along with that. It’s been so long since he’s touched me this way, and the feeling of his hand on my cheek, stroking the soft skin with his fingers as his mouth moves towards mine is too much for me to deny. I lean forward too, and the instant his lips brush over mine I breathe in sharply, the sensation washing over my skin and through my body. I want him desperately, and I reach up to run my fingers through his hair, pulling his mouth against mine.

My lips part, Kam’s tongue brushing over my lower lip and sliding into my mouth, and when we finally break the kiss he’s gasping. “Bed?” he asks, tugging me up from the couch to my feet, and I nod wordlessly, leading the way.

It’s been too long, but not so long that he’s forgotten what I like. His fingers slide under my shirt, brushing over the sensitive skin at the curve of my waist, and I hear him groan

when his hands slide up my ribs to my breasts, finding nothing under the shirt. My hair is wild around my face, only half-dried, and I start to reach to take his shirt off too, but he gently pushes me back onto the bed. “Let me do this,” he murmurs, and I can’t find it in myself to deny him or to argue.

When my shirt is gone he reaches for the waist of my leggings, pulling them down over my hips, and he kisses each hipbone and then the smooth skin between. His mouth moves lower, the warmth of his breath moving over my cool flesh. I gasp, and spread my thighs for him. I whimper, closing my eyes at pleasure that starts to build between them, but a thought crashes loudly in my mind.

Ian did this to Alana.

COULD it be true that Kam wasn’t the first man to do this to my body?

I try to focus on the sensations, on the pleasure that’s radiating through my body, but there’s small flashes of images, memories...I don’t know which. Ian’s blond hair falling over my—Alana’s—thighs, the shine of his eyes as he rolls them upwards to gauge her reaction, her thinly veiled protests and complaints that turn into gasps and sighs and moans as he possesses her with his tongue and fingers.

I try to push the thoughts away, my skin and muscles twitching as I try to focus, to pull myself back into the moment. And as I come I see that she does too; her body convulses while mine stiffens in pleasure. I whimper and she lets out a loud moan as pleasure overtakes both of us.

I want to throw up.

He’s moving up my body, stripping away his shirt as he does so. I focus on his lean and muscular chest, on the fine peach fuzz across the broadest part of it, on the flex of his muscles as he strips the shirt off and tosses it aside. I hear the clink of his belt buckle as he bends to kiss me, undoing his jeans, and then the press of him between my legs, hot and hard and wanting. He is practically throbbing, his body tense and

anxious with it, but the image of Ian and Alana on his couch, as he pushes her back down onto the sofa, hard and aching against her as she wraps her arms around his neck...

I can't do this!

My stomach is lurching. I can't be with Kam, with them in my head.

They're invading our moment. I've wanted this so much, missed it so much, but now I can't seem to focus. This isn't right.

My heart is pounding, my head aching as I press my hands to Kam's chest, and I'm suddenly terrified that I might black out. "Kam, stop, please," I whisper, and I feel him react immediately.

He moves off of me, his face concerned in the dim light. "Are you alright?" he whispers, reaching out to touch my hair. "What's wrong, did I hurt you?"

I shake my head. "No, you didn't, it's just the stress of everything...all the changes...I can't right now. I'm so sorry. I'm just too anxious."

"Okay." He reaches down for his boxers, pulling them on, and I see out of the corner of my eye that he's having some difficulty. "It's okay." I feel so guilty.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what's wrong with me..."

"No. No, babe, you don't need to apologize," he says firmly. "I understand. I can't even imagine what you're going through right now." He touches my face again, brushing my hair behind my ear. "I'm going to go get my sweatpants and um...cool down a little." He gives a short laugh, and I can't help but glance down again. He's still clearly very aroused. "And then I'm going to come back and we can cuddle and go to sleep, alright? Everything is okay, I promise."

He's true to his word. In ten minutes he's back, wearing the grey sweatpants that I'm so used to seeing him laze around the house in, and he crawls under the covers with me. I've put my t-shirt and panties back on, and he pulls me into his arms,

pressing his face against my hair and breathing in. "I'm here," he says softly. "I'll be here when you wake up."

I believe him. And it makes me feel all the more guilty that I haven't told him the complete truth yet. A tear slides down my cheek I'm thankful he can't see. How is he going to feel when he realizes that a version of me might have loved and planned a life and a family with someone else? That if she could leave one husband, how will he ever believe that I won't leave him? Will he understand she's not me?

I hear him snoring softly next to me, his arms holding me closely against him, and I close mine, trying to subdue the guilt that's wracking my entire being. I have to come clean, and I will eventually. I'll wait until we talk to Helen.

It's better that way.

That calms me down enough to sleep, and thankfully, I don't dream.

It's a small mercy, but it's something.

IAN

I'm editing photos in the living room when Blue comes in through the front door. He flops down on the couch next to me, and I glare at him. "Have you forgotten how to call? Or knock?"

"I practically live here now," he says sarcastically.

"So what's up?" I ask, my eyes still glued to my laptop. When he doesn't say anything the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I turn towards him; from the slump in his shoulders and how he's faced my way but isn't really looking at me, I know whatever he's about to say is going to be shitty.

"I brought some Tequila, you want to have a drink?"

"Spit it out," I say. Whatever he's stalling to tell me I just want it out now.

"Kam's here with Megan now," he mutters, not meeting my eyes.

"I wanted to give you a heads up. She...ah...she was going to tell you herself, but I told her that I'd do it. Thought maybe it would be better coming from me."

The intensity of the anger I feel come over me scares the shit out of me. My pulse is slamming against my neck.

That's my wife fucking wife he's with.

Megan—Alana—both, or neither...that body belongs to me. I can't stop the flood of images that rush into my head. This man, kissing Megan. Holding her. Fucking her...

“Ian,” Blue says warningly. He can see I’m about to explode. He takes the bottle out of his bag and opens it, thrusting it in my face.

“Have a drink dude.” I stare at it wanting to take it over there and cram it down *Kam’s* throat.

I grit my teeth.

“Megan isn’t Alana.”

“Shut the fuck up Blue!” I growl.

“Fine but take the fucking drink!” he shouts back.

Tears are coming to my eyes. The anger I feel is changing to something else, a debilitating sadness. I won’t let Blue see me cry so I snatch the bottle and gulp it down.

“I know you want to kill him...” Blue starts to say, but I shake my head.

“Just get drunk with me,” is all I say. I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to hear Blue say it’s the best thing for Megan, or how she has to be sure, or how she’s not Alana right now, how it’s not the same.

I thought I could separate the two, that I could think of her as Megan, a different person, and not my wife, until this all gets fixed. But in this moment, knowing that there’s some other man in her apartment and in her bed, the distinction doesn’t matter. I pass the bottle to Blue and he takes a swig from it. If I get drunk enough, so wasted I can’t see, it’ll stop me from going over there and getting arrested.

I’m not sure how or when I make it to my bed, but I’m in it. I don’t know how long I’m asleep, but footsteps wake me, and I sit bolt upright in bed. “Blue?” I call out into the darkness, narrowing my eyes and trying to make out who’s there.

“No, not Blue baby.” It’s a soft, feminine voice. A voice I’d recognize out of a thousand that sends chills over my body and down my spine. There’s faint light coming in from the street, casting shadows as she moves towards me.

I'm dreaming.

It's my girl Alana's face in the dim light, her long dark hair falling over her shoulders. She's wearing a loose t-shirt and her legs are bare, and all it takes is one look at them, long and slender, for my body to get hot and tight with lust.

She climbs into bed without asking and straddles me, the warm shape of her body pressing against me. I put my arms around her, breathe her in, and I'm hard as a rock, all of the blood in my body headed directly south in a rush that leaves me dizzy. No whiskey dick here. She bends her head, her mouth brushing over mine. The last time I wanted a woman this much, Alana was still living with me as my wife right before she bolted.

"Is this real?" I whisper. There's some small semblance of sense in me, but clouded by the tequila I've drunk and how much I fucking want her, need her. "Alana..." I whisper her name because this is Alana, not Megan. *My* girl.

"Shh," she murmurs, kissing me again. She tastes sweet, minty, like she's just brushed her teeth. I let her slide her tongue into my mouth, feel her fingers clutch at the back of my head, her hips ride down onto me as she grinds herself against my dick. "I want you," she whispers, rocking in a motion that threatens to drive me mad. "Give me what I need."

It's a dream so I won't waste time asking fucking questions. I've been aching for this for so long, desperate to touch her, the feel of her body around mine. I've been trying to find it in every woman in Chicago who would have me, but no one can measure up to her. There's no one else for me but her.

I grab her waist, flip her onto her back, pressing her into the mattress. Her t-shirt rides up and I reach for her panties, pulling them down over her hips as I shove my boxers down, panting as I kiss her again. She's grabbing for my shirt, pulling it over my head, breathless with desire, our tongues battling. It's rough and there's nothing sweet about it. Her fingers slide over the bare skin of my back, and when I press myself between her legs, my throbbing dick aching to sink into her, I

can feel she's soaking wet already, and it nearly makes me lose it then and there.

She rocks her hips upwards and I sink into her, just the tip of me, and it's the sweetest sensation I can remember. Her legs lock around my waist, drawing me deeper, and I feel her whispering.

I love you Ian.

I missed you.

Whimpering.

I'm so sorry.

I want you so bad.

Don't give up on me.

Gasping.

I won't let her have you. You're mine.

My hips grind against hers, and I slide in and out of her body with long, slow thrusts. I'm going to have every inch of her and she's going to take every inch of me.

I lose track of time; it feels like an eternity and a second all at once. I forget everything but her hands and mouth on me, the sweet heat of her enveloping me, the scent of her surrounding me. I hear her cry out my name and feel her shaking and fluttering around me as she comes, her nails digging into my shoulders. The feel of her clenching around me is enough to send me over the edge. I want it to last but I can't help it, and I spill into her with a desperate moan, plunging my dick as deeply into her as I can manage, until our flesh is fused together, from forehead to toes...and for a moment we're one.

My head is aching when I open my eyes. She's gone, and next to me the bed is empty. There's no evidence of her, no clothes...but my boxers are off and when I reach down it's clear that something happened. Either it was real, or I just had my first wet dream since I was in high school.

I jump out of bed, dragging on my sweatpants. My head is pounding now, a full-on hangover announcing itself, but all I can think about is that I have to get to Megan's house. I have to see her.

Shit, I forgot Blue was even here, and only remember when I feel his hand on my shoulder right as I scoop up my keys next to the door.

"Where the hell are you going?"

I turn to face him, my heart and head both pounding. "I've got to go to Megan's. Alana's back, she was here..."

Blue looks at me like I have a horn growing out of my head. "You think Megan was here? Last night?"

"*Alana*," I insist. "Alana was here."

Blue is looking at me as if I've lost my mind. "Just...sit down a second," he tells me, still hungover himself.

"Move!" I growl at him. "Dude just let me call her!" he roars back.

I almost refuse but I remember I'm just in boxers. I don't even have fucking shoes on.

Blue is already calling her. I hear her voice on the other end. He nods, but I'm still caught up in last night. It was real. It happened...I think.

When he hangs up the phone, Blue is looking at me sympathetically. "Ian, Megan is home. She's been home all night." He hesitates and I immediately shake my head that he's wrong.

"Remember Kam got in yesterday. He spent the night at her apartment..."

The weight of that news crashes into me like a truck for the second time.

Megan was home.

Kam was in her bed, probably fucking her.

It was a dream.

All of those things collide to make one truth and that sucks the air out of me. Someone has punched me in the gut, and to my horror, tears are falling from my eyes.

“Whatever happened, it was a dream, man. I’m sorry.”

I haven’t cried since the day I found that note, but it washes over me like a wave, drowning me. I’m losing the last shred of hope I clung to.

“It felt so real,” I mutter.

Blue is on his feet, crossing to me, and he puts an arm around my shoulder. “Hey, hang in there,” he says, trying to comfort me. But his words are useless.

I shake my head. “I’m good,” I say, my voice shaking, and then I say it again, stronger this time. “*I’m good*. I’ve got a big show coming up. I can’t blow this, not over a girl.”

Except she’s not just a girl. She’s *the* girl. She’s everything.

“Yeah.” Blue pats my shoulder and sounds skeptical but he’s probably glad I’m not running out of the apartment to Megan’s. “You’ve got this.”

I go to take a shower and try to clear my head, make a plan. I’ll focus on work. I’ll stay so busy I won’t think about her. No more drinking. I can’t handle how real that was, how it felt, the reminder of her. It’s torture.

When I get out of the shower I have a missed call from Lauren, and I take it as a sign. I immediately call her back.

“Hey, Lauren. What’s up?”

“Just calling to remind you that we have a meeting about the upcoming show. I want to see what you have so far and if there’s any holes to fill in.” She hesitates. “Are you alright? You sound a little off.”

“Drank a little too much with the guys, that’s all.” I brush it off quickly. She’s too close to the whole situation, plus she’s a client.

“We can postpone the meeting if you’re not feeling well. It’s not urgent, I just want to give us time to make changes if we feel they’re needed.”

“No,” I say quickly. “I’m ready. It’ll be good for me, get my mind off of some things. This is important, anyway. I’ll be there, don’t worry.”

“Alright,” she agrees. “See you soon.”

I set the phone down on the counter, looking into the mirror at my drawn face and the circles under my eyes. I can’t keep thinking about what’s happening with Megan, where the hell Alana is. It’s killing me, and if I’m dead I can’t get her back.

9 MEGAN

I SET the phone down after Blue hangs up, guilt and anger colliding within me. Guilt because it was me he dreamed about, or my face at least, and it was so vivid that he thought it was real enough to come straight over to my apartment while I slept peacefully in Kam's arms? Anger because he came way too close to forcing me to tell Kam the truth sooner than I was ready. And sadness because I can't imagine how he's feeling knowing that Kam is here with me, that I want him here and in the end the plan is for it to be us—me and Kam.

Kam.

It was home being in his arms last night. He's always been my home, and now that he's here everything seems right. I haven't had this peace in so long. It's sinking in that he's here, that he wants to be here...he will continue to be.

I walk back into the bedroom, trying to hide my emotions from Blue's call, but Kam picks up on it immediately. He's sitting up halfway in bed, the sheets pooled around his hips as he scrolls through his phone, his lean body wrapped in muscle that belongs to me. I smile at the thought. He glances up at me, his brow furrowing. "What's wrong?"

I hesitate. "Um...it was just Blue. His cousin's wife left him, and he's having a hard time dealing with it. Blue's helping him through it." It's dangerously close to a lie, but I convince myself that it's true enough. Ian's wife *did* leave him, and he is having a hard time with it since he's getting drunk and having lucid dreams about Alana. I slide back into bed with Kam, cuddling up against him. "I'm so glad you're here."

Kam drops a kiss onto my forehead, setting his phone aside. “I feel bad for the guy,” he murmurs. “I know how I felt when you left me. My whole world broke apart.”

Guilt pierces through me, both for what I did to Kam and for what is happening to Ian, but I try to push those thoughts away.

“I’m here now,” I whisper, and lean up, curling my arms around his neck and bringing his mouth down to mine. My head is aching dully, but I want—*need*—Kam’s mouth on mine, his body against me. I want to be one with him again, experience the intimacy I’ve had with only him. I force out all thoughts of Ian and Alana, focusing on Kam’s lips moving against mine, the way he licks my lower lip just before he slides his tongue into my mouth, the way his hand goes over the curve of my waist and grips my hip as he starts to lose control. His fingers dig into my sides as he pulls me up to straddle his lap, my legs on both sides of him as I lean forward and kiss him again, my hands on his face. I run my fingers through his hair and arch my back so that my breasts rub against his hard chest and my hips press down against his. He’s hard already, pulsing against me, and he quickly pulls off my shirt, his hands sliding over my breasts as I rock against him.

“Are you sure?” he whispers as he trails his fingers through my hair, his lips a breath away from mine. “Last night...”

“I’m ready,” I tell him. And I am. Yesterday I was still overcome by everything, but now I’m awake, and ready to be his again. I reach down, pushing his boxers aside, and I guide him into me, no longer trembling as I wrap my fingers around him.

He gasps, his eyes going wide as I sink down, and he drags my mouth down to his again. Our kiss is slow and passionate and when I find a rhythm, I begin to ride him slowly. I want to savor this, to make it last. I press my forehead against his, my hands cupping his face as I kiss him again and again, feeling the slow, intense momentum as my orgasm builds.

Kam is breathless, one hand gripping my ass as the other rests on my hip, moving me with him as he bucks upwards underneath me, wanting more. I brace my hands on his shoulders, moving faster and faster as we both race towards the finish. I'm on the edge, panting and moaning as I grind myself down against him, his hardness filling me up, I run my hand through his hair, pulling his mouth to mine as I feel the wave start to break over me.

I can't remember the last time I came like this. It's fast and powerful, making my whole body shake and quiver, and I'm moaning his name, crying out as he grabs onto me hard and thrusts up into me, and I know he's there too. I feel him, hard and hot, spilling into me, I cling to him, riding it out, and it feels as if it will never end.

It does, though. We wind up collapsed on the bed, sweaty and breathless, and Kam grins at me. "That was worth waiting for," he says, laughing softly, kissing the skin beneath my ear lobe. "Want to get in the shower again, with me this time? Where did you go this morning, anyway? Please tell me it was to get breakfast. I'm starving."

I blink at him. "What? I didn't go anywhere. I showered and then Blue called."

Kam frowns. "I heard you come in from outside, right before you got in the shower. It woke me up."

My heart slams against my chest and my heart starts to race so fast I can't breathe.

"Babe, are you okay?" he asks urgently with worry spreading across his face.

Blue calling to say Ian had a dream about Alana.

Ian thinking Alana came over and was in his bed.

Kam heard me come in this morning, and I don't remember it.

My body is trembling and I have to calm down because Kam is becoming more and more worried.

I remember being in the shower, but what happened before? I close my eyes and try to think as hard as I can but there's nothing but a blur, darkness, and giggling...*hers*.

What if—*oh God*—did she...could she have...did I black out?

I try to hide my reaction from Kam. I don't want to scare him more than I have. What have I done?

"Megan!" he says, gripping my arm, and I'm snapped out of my thoughts. I pull myself together and plaster on a fake smile.

"I'm okay Kam. Daydreaming is all," I whisper. "A shower sounds good." He looks at me skeptically. I give him a soft kiss on the lips to erase it. He gives me his boyish smile and pulls me towards the bathroom.

"I think I'm about to start my period, my stomach feels terrible," I tell him as his hand slides between my thighs. He lets out a playful groan and brings his hands to my waist before kissing me softly on the lips.

I bet you want to know if you just kissed your golden boy with lips that were just on Ian's dick.

IAN

When I arrive at the gallery to meet with Lauren I tell myself not to think about Alana. I have to focus. I've told myself it was a dream a million times. If I say it enough maybe I'll convince myself. It doesn't matter anyway at this point.

I almost want to believe it's a dream, because the alternatives are worse. Because it's either she blacked out and had sex with me, or she's a cheating lying slut. Today, I'm going to focus on work.

I need a break from all of it. That's what I was supposed to be getting, staying away while Blue handled things. So I pull my shit together and walk with purpose as I head in to meet Lauren, trying to push all thoughts of last night, Alana, and Megan out of my head.

Lauren has the photos spread out on an acrylic tabletop and she's shuffling them around, pushing one into different spaces with her lips pursed. "What do you think, Ian?" she asks without looking up. "I'm not sure what the best spot is for this shot of the old church. Here?" She moves it closer to the center. "Or here?" She shifts it more towards the top.

Here.

Something to focus on. I stare at the photos. "I think that one goes up top, we don't want too many of the old churches together. But I like the Japanese garden photo right here." I move that one to the left. "See?"

Lauren wrinkles her nose. "I don't know. Hillary," she calls out. "Hillary, can you look at this?"

A beautiful, tall blonde comes from around the corner and smiles at me. “Hey, Ian.” She gives me an almost flirtatious smile before looking down at the photos.

“Hi,” I mutter, glancing at her briefly before turning my attention back to the shots. Hillary has always made me feel off—from being around her I see that she’s outspoken, stubborn, and she reminds me of Alana. It’s the last thing I need right now, but she keeps peering over at me, her sky blue eyes almost questioning me.

I push the garden photo up one space. “What about that?”

Lauren shrugs. “I don’t see why not.”

“I like it,” Hillary says decisively. “And I like the church photo at the top.”

I can’t help it, I grin at her. It’s my first real smile all day. “Glad to see someone recognizes talent.”

“Lauren hired me for a reason.” Hillary laughs, and it sounds musical. She glances at Lauren. “Have you told him yet?” she asks with a mischievous grin.

“Oh.” Lauren nods and strokes her belly. “It’s not that big of a deal, and I plan to be around as long as possible. But just in case...”

I glance up at her. “What?”

“Since I’m getting close to my due date, I’m going to have you working with Hillary more for this show. My due date isn’t until two weeks after the show but I don’t know if these little ones are going to cooperate with the schedule.”

“Cool,” I say with a shrug.

“Also, I’ve got a buyer who is interested in some specific shots. He’s a big spender. I’d like to set up a meeting later this week, and we can scout some locations. How does that sound to you?”

“Great!” It’s exactly what I want, more work to bury myself in and drown my thoughts of everything else.

I drag my eyes over to Hillary, who I've been avoiding, but it looks like that's going to be nearly impossible now and she smiles widely at me, and it makes her eyes shine. She's beautiful, with wide blue eyes, slender build, but a killer rack. She's wearing a black pencil skirt with an Andy Warhol t-shirt tucked in, a blazer open over that, and ballet flats. It's not a look that everyone could pull off, but she's doing it.

"I think I want ten more photos for this set," Lauren says, moving the photos to leave gaps where she wants others to go. "I have a list for you, I'll grab it before you leave. Feel free to throw some others in there too, if you have other ideas or want me to have more choices."

I nod. *Good, I think. More work is what I need.*

When it's time to go, Lauren walks me out. She's slow from the pregnancy, and I tell her she doesn't need to, but she ignores me. As soon as we're outside, she looks straight at me. "How are you doing, Ian?" she asks, and it's clear what she's talking about.

She's impossible to lie to. I see why things work between her and Cal. "Not great," I admit. "In fact, I'm kind of a mess."

"I know the look," she says quietly.

"Is it Megan?" she asks.

"Alana, hell I don't know, whoever she wants to be." I shrug hard. She presses her palms to her cheeks and lets out a sigh. What the hell am I doing? She's about to bust soon. I can't unload my problems on her even if she's probably one of the only people in the world who'd understand.

"I just want to focus on work. If I do that, I won't have to think about it, and that's the best thing for me right now."

She purses her lips, and I can tell she wants to say something, but I don't think it's what she actually says. "My hands are pretty full right now, with the gallery, Cal, and the girls," she says pensively. "But Ian, I'm here for you to talk to if you need it. I'm probably the person who understands most

what you're going through right now, and I think talking is a good thing, especially in this sort of circumstance."

"I appreciate it," I say brusquely. "But I don't want to talk. I just want to block it all out and not think about it. There's nothing I can do right. So it's better to just focus on other things."

"Well, if you change your mind, I'm a phone call away," she promises me, gently touching my shoulder before she presses a hand to her back, wincing. "I might be passing off more duties to Hillary sooner than I want to admit." She laughs.

"Are you okay?" I'm concerned but she waves me off. "I'm fine, it's just winding down. You're in good hands with Hillary, I promise. She's been dying to take over this project."

"I'll make sure to provide good work then." I force a smile and offer her my arm to walk her back in. She gives me a grateful smile before taking it.

I think about heading back to the apartment after I leave the gallery but there's nothing there waiting for me. Right now this list of photos from Lauren is my best friend. I'll think about angles and lighting and shadow, and I'll forget how Alana's face looked in the shadows of my bedroom, the expression she made right before I made her cum. How it could possibly be all in my head. I'm going to be the one who needs to see the shrink soon.

MEGAN

When Kam goes out to get us lunch, I snatch up my phone and call Cal. He's the only person I can think of right now who might be able to help me, I try to steady my breath so I don't sound as panicked as I am.

"Megan? Is everything okay?"

"Uhm. Kind of...not really," I say, trying to steady my shaking voice.

"What's wrong?" His tone switched from mildly bored to urgent in a moment.

"Can you get me an emergency appointment with Helen?"

He pauses, and though I don't know a lot about him, I can tell he's not one to pry for answers.

"Are you okay?" he asks steely.

"Yes, I—Kam is here and I really just want her to help me explain. I don't want to keep hiding things from him." I'm partly being honest; I can't exactly tell my brother I think I might have cheated on my boyfriend last night, at least not this early in the relationship.

Cal is silent on the other side for several beats, and I almost wonder if he's hung up. "The boyfriend from Indiana."

"Yes. She thought he should come to an appointment with me."

"And now you need to see her sooner?"

“Yes...Cal...something happened. I’d rather not discuss it with you....” I hope he lets this go and just helps me.

To my relief, he doesn’t ask any more questions. “Alright,” he says, almost gently. “I’ll call her.”

My nerves are so on edge that I can barely eat while Kam and I have lunch. I almost jump out of my skin when the text comes through from him. *Helen can see you, she has a cancellation, but you’ve got to be there in an hour. Can you make it?*

“Helen moved up my appointment,” I say quickly to Kam, setting down the fry I was playing with. “We’ve got to be there in an hour. Is that okay? I know it’s short notice and you just got here...”

“It’s just fine.” Kam touches my hand reassuringly. “We’ll be there in an hour then, or before.”

Thanks to a slow Uber and Chicago traffic, we make it to Helen’s office almost exactly on the dot. She’s waiting in her office lobby when we get there. She gives Kam a warm smile before introducing herself to him.

“I’d like to speak to Megan privately for a moment before we start the joint session, if that’s okay?”

“Of course.” Kam nods and sits down on one of her comfy sofas.

“Kam, I’ll come back out for you in a moment,” she tells him sweetly.

He just nods and smiles, squeezing my hand reassuringly before I follow Helen into her office. She shuts the door behind us and gestures to the couch.

“So Cal tells me that you had an emergency? Why don’t you tell me what happened?” I bite my fingernail, trying to calm my nerves.

“Ian—the guy who was married to Alana—told Blue, his cousin and my friend, that she was with him. He believed it so much he was about to come to my apartment until Blue called me and I said I had been there all night—because I thought

that I *had*. But then Kam said he heard me come in really early in the morning, and go straight to the shower. I just remember getting in the shower...I don't remember waking up or anything else that happened. So now I think maybe what Ian remembers wasn't a dream. That..." I feel my jaw clenching, and I realize that I'm angry. No, not just angry, I'm *furios*. "Alana tricked me," I say harshly. "Or she tried to. That's what it feels like. She came back and she just...took over my body. It's like I'm freaking possessed or something. It's insane, and..." My chest is heaving, and I feel as if I'm about to cry.

I rub my temples. "And I keep hearing this voice...it's mine but it's mean and it says these terrible things...and I think it's her." I'm trying not to cry but she hands me a box of Kleenex.

"When you hear her, what does it sound like?" she asks quietly.

I shrug. "It's not like how you're talking to me, it's more like when you think something to yourself but it's louder, clearer."

She nods. "Her communicating with you is a step," she says calmly but I scoff.

"No it isn't! She's an evil bitch and I don't want her talking to me. She's terrible! I don't know how Ian fell in love with her."

"I'm sorry," I say quickly.

"It's okay Megan," she says calmly with a smile.

"What did Ian say happened with Alana?" Helen asks gently.

I look away, flushing bright red. "They had sex," I mutter. I look up at Helen, thoroughly embarrassed, but she hasn't flinched at all. I guess she's heard worse. "Kam showed up last night early to see me. He was so happy I called, totally on board with coming to see you, just completely supportive. And I told him almost everything...except what Ian thinks my relationship to him is and Alana's life with him. I just couldn't bring myself to hurt him that way yet. And now I'm terrified

that I might have cheated on him..." I'm full on sobbing now, but Helen patiently waits for me to pull myself together.

"Stress can be a precursor to switching," Helen starts to explain, "and it sounds like you had a lot of stress last night... some of it good, like the surprise of Kam coming to see you, but it was still a shock—a change in your routine. Were you intimate with Kam last night?"

"Almost," I admit. "We were close, but I started to have all these thoughts about Alana, and Ian, and I couldn't."

"And how did he react to stopping?"

"He was totally understanding. And that makes me feel even worse! If I turned him down, and then went and screwed Ian..."

"*You* didn't go to Ian," Helen emphasizes gently. "Alana did. But it's fighting her, along with the stress of these changes and the worry of hiding things from someone you care about that likely triggered the change. You need to tell Kam about Ian. I know it's hard, but you don't strike me as someone who keeps secrets easily. This is a big one, and it will continue to affect you if you don't share it." Helen pauses. "I also think you should ask Ian to refuse Alana if something like this happens again."

I stare at her, wide-eyed. "I don't know how I can ask that of him. Alana is...he thinks she's, she's his wife. He loves her...I can only imagine how he felt when she showed up, wanting him. It's going to tear his heart out all over again to tell her no."

"I understand," Helen says sympathetically. "But we're here for you, Megan, not Ian. And this may be your best bet to avoid another circumstance like last night. Next session, if you're open to it, we can try hypnosis to bring Alana out during the session and establish some communication."

I blink. "Hypnosis? I don't know."

Helen laughs softly. "It's not as scary as the movies make it seem. It's a very safe treatment. But only if you're ready for it. What I'd like you to do tonight is write a letter to Alana,

telling her your feelings about her, and bring it to the next session. This can give you a way to communicate with her, and it should help with you hearing those thoughts that are plaguing you.”

I don't want to write a letter to her. I don't want anything to do with her, but I'll do it if Helen thinks it will make things better.

“Do you want to tell Kam about Ian in this session? I can help you, if so. Or if you want help with it later, I can make myself available.”

I shake my head. “No, I think I want to handle that alone, myself. Let's just stick to explaining the disorder, today.”

I'm so nervous I'm trembling as Helen goes out to get Kam. He takes a seat next to me on the couch and holds my hand, and I want to lean into him. He's so solid, and safe. Ian is a wildcard—angry, mercurial...passionate. Kam is the kind of man I always saw myself with, but never thought I would be lucky enough to have. Not with my problems.

Helen begins to explain the disorder to Kam, and I feel myself tensing, waiting for the moment when he's going to shake his head and say that it's all too much, that he's sorry, that he can't deal with this, and walk out. He'd be leaving me with my therapist to minimize the fallout. It wouldn't be like breaking up with me in my apartment and abandoning me alone. He could feel somewhat okay about it. I tell myself all of this as I half-listen, hearing Helen say words like *alters* and *memory loss* and *blackouts* and *personality changes, past trauma*...but instead of getting up and running Kam is just sitting there and nodding, his fingers firmly laced through mine. I can't quite believe what's happening.

“So she has another personality, basically, one that she doesn't remember anything about?”

“She's starting to have some recollections, but they're very few. It's important that you don't ask Megan to share memories or feelings about her alters until she is ready for it. It has to be in her own time, and it's important for you to manage your reactions to any revelations or behaviors she might tell

you about or display. Stress, fear, sadness—all of these negative emotions are triggers for switching, and sometimes the switch can be very detrimental to the mental and sometimes physical health of the host.” Helen gives him a moment to take it in, and then continues speaking. “Being the partner of someone with this condition is difficult because it requires a great deal of patience and emotional regulation on your part. I wouldn’t say it’s walking on eggshells exactly, but some people can feel that way. You have to be cognizant of how your reactions will affect your partner’s mental state to a much higher degree than most people do.”

“And therapy will help?”

“It will help, yes,” Helen says cautiously. “But it’s important that you don’t look at this as waiting for Megan to ‘get better.’ This is a condition she will have for the rest of her life, and the quality of her life largely depends on how well she learns to integrate Alana into her life and cope with the feelings of sharing her body with another personality. You will need to be able to cope with and love all the parts of her personality, not just the one you originally fell for, and be ready for changes and switches. Everyone has to grow with their partner over time, but you will experience this to a greater degree. I would recommend regular counseling for you as well. Do you live here in Chicago? I usually don’t see the partners of my patients with this condition, but I have a colleague who specializes in it as well.”

“Not yet,” Kam says. “But, depending on what Megan wants...” He glances at me, and I stare at him wide-eyed. “I might come here. If Megan wants to be here, close to her family.”

My heart is pounding. This is beyond what I ever expected. For him to be willing to move for me, to change his life for me... “Kam, your family is in Indiana,” I whisper.

“You’re the most important thing to me.”

“It’s a kind gesture,” Helen interrupts, “but we need to remember to take this slow. Big changes are triggers, and you need to repeat that to yourself like it’s a mantra. Grand

romantic gestures aren't always going to be the best thing for Megan. If you do move here for her, you need to be sure, and make sure that it's a choice you make together."

"Of course, I understand."

"Good." Helen looks at me. "Is there anything else you want to talk about, Megan?"

Her tone is pointed, and I know she's suggesting we talk about Ian here, now. Truthfully, it would probably be the best idea. But Kam is being so sweet, and understanding, and kind...and I can't do this to him right now. I shake my head. "No, I think we've covered everything. I just think I need some rest. Today has been a lot."

"Of course." Helen stands up as we do, and shakes Kam's hand. "Thank you for coming today, Kam." She hands him her business card. "I'm a phone call away if you have any additional questions."

We're both quiet on the ride home. It's not a private space since we took an Uber, but he holds my hand the entire time and lets me lean on his shoulder. It lets me know that this is real, what he and I have. He's here, he's in this, and I have to do what I can to fix things. As soon as we make it to the apartment, I tell Kam I need to call Blue back, and step out onto the balcony.

Your little lies are piling up, princess.

I try to ignore the voice as I dial Blue's number. I need to come clean to Kam soon.

Soon...but not today. Not yet.

Blue picks up on the third ring. "What's up Megs?" he asks, already knowing it's me. I just have to say it before I chicken out.

"...the doctor thinks it really was Alana last night. Kam... Kam said that he heard me come in early this morning. So I think I blacked out, and just didn't remember it."

Blue swears loudly. "Jesus. Megan, what are you going to do?"

“I’m going to keep seeing Helen, and Kam is staying for a few more days.”

“Does Kam know?”

I keep my voice low and quiet. “No, not yet.”

“Are you going to tell him?”

“Of course I am! Really soon. Listen, I need your help.”

“Anything.” I can’t help but let out a breath and hope that he means it.

“Helen said that I should ask Ian to tell me if Alana shows up again, and to refuse her if she tries...well, if she tries anything... Like last night. That he should turn her down, and let me know. Can you tell him that for me?”

Blue breaks out laughing on the other side. I freeze, unsure of what his reaction means.

“Blue?”

“Megan, I’m sorry, but I can tell you now that’s not going to happen. Don’t you get how Ian feels about Alana? He *married* her. I never thought I’d see that man walk down the aisle in my lifetime. He wanted a freakin’ baby with her. And when she left...Megan, I’ve never seen him like that. If Alana goes to him, telling him she loves him, wanting him, he’s not going to turn her down. Not for anyone. He wouldn’t be able to.”

“Well then, I’ll convince him,” I say desperately. “Just come with me when I talk to him and back me up.”

“Megan,” Blue says gently, but his voice is firm. “You’re my friend. I care about you. Hell, I’ve even taken your side in almost every instance about this. But I can’t be a part of that conversation. Ian is my family, and I know what losing Alana did to him. You need to talk to your doc and tell her you need a different plan because that one is going to blow up in your face.”

“Please Blue,” I beg him.

“This I can’t do Megs. You shouldn’t either. Find another way,” he pleads but I shake my head. No, there is no other way. He’ll understand. He gets that we’re not the same, that Alana is the symptom of my condition. He wants to be my friend and support me. I’ll talk to him myself.

“I’ve got go, Blue. Kam is waiting.”

“You’re not going to do it are you?” he asks tightly.

“Bye Blue,” I tell him before hanging up.

Megan

CAL CALLED and asked about how my appointment went with Helen, and it feels good to know that he cares. But he surprised me when he asked me to bring Kam over before he goes back to Indiana. I couldn't think of a solid reason to say no. It should be fine and Kam needs to meet my family now. I've met almost all of his but my nerves are on such an edge I have to drink a glass of wine to calm them.

I dress up in the blue capped sleeve fitted dress Kam brought me from our apartment for dinner, and I see Kam's eyes light up when I come out of the bathroom. I haven't been putting much effort into my appearance lately, and it makes me feel good to see his expression.

"You look amazing," he says as he puts his hands on my waist and draws me to him for a kiss. I let myself melt into him for a moment, tipping my chin up as he holds me against him.

We haven't had sex again in the few days that he's been here, not since the last time, and it's been entirely due to me. I'd always imagined us barely getting out of bed when—if—I saw him again, but with what happened last time, I'm afraid that it might trigger another blackout. I started to write a letter to her and it was more difficult than I thought it would be but I do ask her if she sees me sleeping with Kam as her cheating on Ian, and once my mind starts down that line of thinking, it makes my head hurt in an entirely different way.

And Kam has been amazingly understanding. He holds me every night when we go to sleep, kisses my hair and wraps his arms around me, telling me that he's going to be with me through all of this. I don't think he realizes yet just how hard it's going to be—how can he, when he doesn't know the whole truth? He's leaving tomorrow, and I still haven't told him. I know I should...but I can't, the way he looks at me, almost like a goddess, like I'm the best thing in his life. I'm afraid that will change when he knows.

It is going to be their last dinner in the pent house before they make the move to the burbs. We bring a dessert pound cake and a red wine Kam picked.

Kam is, as I expected, the very definition of gentlemanly behavior when we get to the house. He kisses Lauren on the cheek, congratulates her on the baby, hands Cal the things we've brought, and then shakes his hand. He's charming, sweet, and all of the things any girl could ever want from the guy she brings home to meet her family. And this is all the family I have to introduce a boyfriend to.

Cal is warmer with him than I've seen him with anyone. He seems a little different tonight—lighter, easier.

"The Pacers are trash." Cal laughs and Kam waves him off. They're getting along, like old friends. Lauren, on the other hand, is a little cooler than I expected, and when Cal and Kam retreat into the dining room for a drink and to talk, I follow Lauren into the kitchen.

There's a lasagna in the oven, and I pull it out for her, refusing to let her bend over and try to get it herself.

"Cal seems different tonight," I comment and a lopsided grin appears on her face.

"He is different tonight," she says lightly. Our eyes meet and I read a hesitancy in them so I change the subject. "What do you think of Kam?" I ask quietly.

"He's wonderful," she says with a smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes.

"That's what you really think?" I ask her quietly.

She looks at me sympathetically. “Do you want my honest answer?”

“Yes,” I say but I’m not sure if I’m ready for it. I set the lasagna on the counter and dig for plates and utensils. “You’re married to someone with my condition. You have the best perspective on it.”

“I don’t know a lot about Kam yet. But I just hope that he’s going to be able to handle this, Megan.”

I stare at her. It’s nothing I haven’t thought myself but hearing it from her is so much harder. “Why not?” I whisper.

Lauren sighs. “I’m not a judgmental person and Kam seems great. It’s great that his family is very successful, loving and close, and that they give to charity...Kam probably has a trust fund and is set for life. That type of stability would be great for you.”

I nod. “Well, yeah but they’re not snobs or elitist.” I say slightly defensively at what I think she’s implying.

“I’m just saying that Kam has a certain kind of life. Right now, he probably thinks that he could either leave it all behind to be with you, you and him against the world, or he thinks that with time and patience, you’ll be able to integrate back into that world. Maybe it’s a combination of both. But leaving your whole life and family behind, all of that stability and structure, to be with someone who is inherently unstable, who will make your whole life about them—and I don’t say this to be cruel, Megan, because I love Cal deeply and I wouldn’t change one decision I’ve made. But it’s hard. I just worry that if Kam wants to bring you back into *his* life...he hasn’t seen what this condition can do yet. He hasn’t seen more than the slightest hint of the ways you might lash out or behave when Alana takes over. It might be cruel. It might be embarrassing. It might be in front of his family or important people. And he has to be able to cope with that and stand by you no matter what.”

She looks at me sympathetically, and I realize how tired I am of everyone’s pity. “Cal thinks that I believe love can conquer anything, but it’s not true. Cal and I have had to work

really hard at what we have. It's not just love. And I hope that you and Kam can do that. Please don't hate me for telling you this."

"I don't hate you," I whisper. And I don't. What she's saying isn't anything I haven't already thought of myself. I embarrassed him once in front of his family, at a gala. I stole his truck. I disappeared and woke up naked in someone's bed. I left him in my bed and went to Ian, just a few nights ago. What Lauren is saying is entirely true, and I know it.

I just don't want to believe it.

—

THE REST of the dinner goes smoothly as ever and when it's just me and Kam in the car he's beaming, knowing he's made a great impression, and I can't help but feel his elation.

"That went great!" he says, kissing my hand. I smile.

"Yeah, my brother hasn't warmed to anyone else like that," I admit.

"Who else has he met besides Blue?" he asks lightly but my stomach drops.

"Uhm no one really," I add quickly.

"Chris was really cool. I invited them to my parents' fundraising dinner in the city this fall. My parents will love them."

I frown at him. "Chris?" I ask confused.

"Yeah, he asked me to call him that when we were having drinks."

I swallow hard, just because he used another name doesn't mean what I think it could. We haven't talked about how deep his condition goes, just how I haven't really talked about mine. But it's probably nothing...Chris is most likely just a nickname.

—

I wait until Kam is asleep that night before I reach for the journal in my nightstand and tiptoe into the living room. My appointment with Helen is tomorrow, and I haven't written much of anything in the letter to Alana yet.

I can still feel the echoes of Kam's touch on my skin as I start to write. We made love before he went to sleep, knowing he is leaving tomorrow. I can't help but wonder if things will change with distance. Will he change his mind and realize that I'm too much? He's promised that he won't, but he doesn't even know the half of it.

I think about Alana and Ian before getting ready to write. As I start to write, the words finally come.

I wish I knew what you were feeling the night you left a man you loved, a man you married. I wish I understood you, what would drive you to do that. I get it, in a way. After all, I left Kam too because I didn't want to hurt him. But you chose to leave Ian I didn't make you.

Who are you? What do you want from me? It's so weird, to think that I had a whole life that I don't remember—a job, friends, interactions with people, boyfriends, a husband. There's so many blanks that I can't fill in, and unless we come to some kind of understanding, I know they'll always stay blanks.

Were you trying to get back here, to Ian? Is that why I was headed in this direction? Was I you when I woke up in that strange bed, or was I me? Who was calling the shots that night?

If I'm being honest, I want you to go. I want you to leave me and Kam alone. I want you gone. But Helen says that that's not possible, that we have to learn to live together in peace, and I don't know how to accomplish that when we seem to want such different things. Can you forget about Ian? Can you love Kam too, and could we be happy with him? I think that with time Kam could love you too. I know it's unfair to ask you to stop loving someone that clearly meant so much to you. I see why you loved him.

How do we fix this? If we keep fighting each other, we're going to tear each other apart.

I SET THE PEN DOWN, tears filling my eyes. If I think of Alana as a separate person, someone entirely different from me, I realize how cruel this is. I can't quite wrap my head around it, that I can be someone else, with feelings and desires and wants and dreams, and also me at the same time.

Tomorrow Kam will go back to Indiana, and I'll be here, still trying to struggle through learning to live like this.

I DIDN'T SLEEP WELL after writing the letter, tossing most of the night, but I'm excited about today. I want something to happen...that there will be a change, an epiphany, a compromise...I hope. I bite my nail as I sit silently in Helen's office while I watch her read the letter I wrote.

"There's a lot of disconnect between the two of you, as I expected," she says when she finishes. "You don't know each other at all, there's no understanding. The longer you try to exist as entirely separate entities, the more fractured it will become and the more difficult the switches will be on you. Have you thought about my suggestion of trying hypnosis this session?"

I shift in my seat. I don't like the idea, but especially after what Lauren said to me, I'm becoming desperate. I don't want to live alongside Alana, but it's clear that she's going to keep forcing her way back, and I don't want to lose Kam. I haven't even told him about Ian, and I don't want to until I have some answers about what Alana might do in the future. So if Helen hypnotizing me will help...I nod, my hands trembling. "If you think it might help."

"I do."

Her voice is soothing as she goes through the process of putting me under. I can feel my heartbeat slowing, my pulse calming as I lay back on the couch and try to surrender myself

to the process. It's hard, and frightening, but I know that I have to commit to this in order for it to work. So I close my eyes, and I try.

I do fall under, because it seems as if only a second has passed when Helen wakes me up. I sit up, feeling slightly groggy. "So?" I ask, hoping against hope that it went well. "What did Alana say?"

Helen looks disappointed. "It didn't work," she says, folding her hands in her lap. "It's rare that I can't get it to work, but it seems that the divide between the two of you is very deep, and Alana is very stubborn. I tried several times, with no luck."

I feel a sudden rush of hope. "Wait...does...does that mean she's gone? Did she leave? Am I..." I'm afraid to even think it. "Am I free?"

Helen shakes her head. "Unfortunately, it's very unlikely that she's gone. Alters don't usually just disappear like that, especially considering that her last time was quite successful, by *her* estimation. I think she's stubborn, and the lack of cohesion between the two of you makes it more difficult." She purses her lips, considering. "For now, I want you to keep a journal of your feelings, whenever you think about her. Try to write at least something down every day. Hopefully it will help you start to tap in to your connection with her."

Like so many things these days, it's not what I want to hear. But I thank her, and set up the next appointment, going through the motions numbly.

I have to live with Alana, somehow.

We're just going to have to learn to get along.

When hell freezes over, Bitch.

IAN

Throwing myself into work was the right choice. It's been three weeks. I haven't spoken to Megan once, haven't called or texted, haven't gone over there. I don't know if her boyfriend is still there, and for the most part, I've managed not to think about it.

Not thinking about Alana has been harder. Nighttime is the worst, and I can't help but hope every night that the dream will come back, that I'll get to "see" her again. It was so real, so vivid. I could live in a dream like that.

Thankfully, reality has kept me plenty busy, between the high-profile client that Hillary arranged for me to meet and the additional pictures. We've had meetings upon meetings, planning layouts, the ratio of black and white photos to color photos. I've thrown myself into details that I usually don't care about because it gives me something to think about other than Alana. And when I'm not in meetings I prowl the city, looking for that next great photo that will really blow this client's mind.

And there's another distraction, too—Hillary. I've known of her for a while. She's Lauren's best friend and part-owner of the gallery. But I've kept her at arm's length, mostly because of how much she reminds me of Alana, and because in the days when I was trying to cure my loss of her by sleeping my way through Chicago, I knew better than to go after her. It would just complicate my business relationship with Lauren, especially if it went badly—and I wasn't looking for anything serious then.

I'm not now, either. But we've been thrust into working in close proximity to each other by circumstance, and I'm starting to see things about her that make me attracted to her on more than just a surface level. She's outrageously funny, for one thing. She's tough, and no-nonsense, I saw that in the initial meeting with the client she pitched me to. She doesn't take any shit—and I have no doubt that she wouldn't take any of mine, either.

All of those things are Alana. But there's other things too, like the way she absolutely loves butterflies, and looked around the Japanese garden like a kid when she went there with me to scout additional pictures of it. There's the fact that she absolutely hates coffee unless it's eighty percent creamer, but she'll drink tea totally black. These are things that are different from Alana—Alana hated all insects, no matter how cute, and she drank coffee entirely black and hated tea.

It makes me think how it works with Alana being inside Megan's body. Does Megan hate tea? If she drinks coffee with creamer, does Alana get pissed off?

It's confusing, and makes my head hurt, and I try to think about it as little as possible. I've been avoiding Blue. He makes me think of Megan which makes me think of Alana, and that, combined with my focus on work, has left me spending so much time with Hillary that several of our days together are verging on date territory. One night we even discussed photos over drinks at the wine bar next to the gallery she wanted to try.

Today, we're doing the final mockup for the gallery display, and she smells amazing. I've realized she wears two different perfumes—a more mature, powdery scent when she's in important meetings, and a lighter, fruity scent when she's just at the gallery for the day. I like the fruitier one—it smells like rain and strawberries too—and I can smell it every time she moves closer to me to shift a photo. It's intensely distracting, and her hip brushing against mine, that we're close to having to decide whether or not we cross the line that's rapidly approaching.

Or maybe not. Maybe it's just me, and the fact that Alana's visit sent my libido into overdrive again, and once this show is over and Lauren is back to being my full-time boss, things with Hillary and I will go back to being coolly distant with one another.

"Well," she says, straightening and breaking me out of my reverie. "I think that's just about it. I'll go over it with Lauren tonight when I see her, and we'll have one last meeting next week to finalize the menu for the opening night and make any last-minute changes. Does that sound good?"

"Sounds good." My voice sounds slightly hoarse, and she raises an eyebrow, but doesn't say anything. "Oh, I did think this one photo..."

I reach out to touch the one I'm talking about as she leans forward to get a better look, my hand grazes her breast. I yank my hand back. "I'm sorry," I say quickly. "I didn't mean..."

She looks at me amused. "Ian, I won't bite," she almost purrs.

She trails off, and I realize how close we're standing to each other. I'm almost touching her, and she's looking into my eyes, her lips slightly parted, and then before I can say anything at all, or apologize again, she leans forward and kisses me.

It's aggressive and hot as hell.

I respond. I can't help it. I've been aching for days, ever since I dreamed of Alana and remembered how it used to be, what I once had, what I've been trying to forget. I kiss her back for a moment, swaying towards her, tasting lemon on her tongue, feeling the silk of her blouse as my hand goes briefly to her waist.

And then I realize what the fuck I'm doing and I tear myself away.

"Hillary, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have..."

"Why?" Her voice is soft when she asks it. "Is it because of Alana?"

I flinch. “Did Lauren tell you about all of that?”

She nods. “She’s told me about her, what happened between the two of you. And that Alana’s alter is back, or host it’s confusing.”

“So you know what’s been going on?” I’m not sure how to feel about it. On the one hand, this is my personal business, but I know Hillary and Lauren are close. It makes sense that Lauren would have warned her best friend about my past just in case...well, just in case this happened.

“Look, Ian, I can only imagine how hard this is for you. But why on earth *are* you still married? She left a long time ago. Is it even a real marriage?”

Her question pisses me off, but I swallow it down. It’s a valid one since I did just kiss her back. “It’s complicated,” is all I can say.

“Ian, this is your life, and I know I don’t have any right to tell you what to do with it. But think about it. Alana left *you*. She left a long time ago, and the person who came back isn’t her. I know about this condition, I’ve been through it all with Lauren and Cal. I’ve witnessed firsthand how bad this can get. And it *will* get worse. Why are you doing this to yourself?”

I just shake my head, frozen to the spot.

She moves a little closer to me. “You don’t have to put yourself through this. There are other people who would really care about you, who would treat you the way you deserve. I see what Lauren goes through.”

“She stayed with Cal.” My mouth feels dry. I know what Hillary is saying, the undercurrent beneath the words. I know what I could have, if I just gave up on Alana.

“She had a daughter with Cal,” Hillary says pragmatically. “I know she loves him, but it was a different situation. You don’t have children with Alana. You could have a clean break. Start over.”

What she’s saying is true. It’s absolutely true. Blue has said basically the same thing to me a hundred times. Hillary’s in front of me, beautiful, sexy, willing, and smart and

accomplished—the kind of woman who would be a real partner, a woman I do want in this moment. But I can't bring myself to say the words, to close the fraction of a gap between us.

Because I still love Alana.

I haven't let go and I'm not sure if I can.

“I'm sorry Hillary, but I'm fucked up” I say, backing up and turning towards the door, avoiding looking at her. “I'll see you next week.”

And then I leave, guilt weighing on me like a boulder, neither of us saying another word.

Megan

KAM CAME BACK for spring break, just like he promised. It's over halfway through the week, and I'm dreading him leaving this time. It isn't like it was when he came for that first session with Helen. Alana hasn't shown up again. I've started working two days a week at Cal's firm. It's easy stuff, typing memo's, filling in for the receptionist pool. But it makes me feel good to get a routine again. I've gone to my twice-weekly sessions with Helen. I've dutifully written my journal entry every night. They're all pretty much the same—wondering how she feels about this, what makes her choose to come out, why we're so disconnected, why I can't remember having a whole other complex life. It doesn't make much more sense to me than it ever has, but I'm hopeful that the therapy is what is keeping her at bay.

I still haven't told Kam about Ian. Not any of it. As the days pass and things get better and we get closer again, it's harder and harder to think of how I would even broach the subject. I know, deep down, that I should have told him from the start. It's going to have more of an impact in the end, now that I've kept it from him for so long.

But things are good, and I can't bring myself to throw that grenade into the middle of it. He wanders around the city when I go to work, he meets me for lunch, he rides with me to my therapy appointments, and is there when I get done. We eat meals together, we shower together, we go on dates. We've gone to Chinatown to see the famous Chicago Bean and walk

around Millennium Park. We have sex—sweet, loving, gentle sex—and I manage not to think about Alana or Ian most of the time. It's coming very close to being how things were in Indiana, and I find myself fantasizing about Kam moving here. This is his last semester in college. He's going to have to make big life decisions soon, and although we haven't talked about it very much, I know him coming here is a possibility. But he's hesitant to shake things up too much, always remembering what Helen cautioned him about. He's careful with me, sometimes too much so. I want to tell him that I'm not made of glass, that I won't break.

But the truth is I might. His caution isn't unwarranted, and I hate that most of all.

He's gone out for a run when I find it. Kam is adaptable, and has managed to make his own routine in Chicago already around mine. He loves to run, whereas I see it as one of the highest forms of torture, and so he takes an hour in the afternoon and runs a few miles around Lincoln Park, even on weekends. I can't complain—I do love the way he looks. Thankfully he feels the same way about me, despite my aversion to running.

I decide to do his laundry as a surprise, and I'm digging around in his duffle bag for the last of his dirty socks when I find it wedged into a corner—a small, black velvet box. My heart flips in my chest.

I know what it is, and I know I shouldn't open it, but I do. I can't help it. I flip up the lid and gasp.

There's an oval diamond, probably a carat or so, flanked by two smaller round diamonds, set on a delicate rose-gold band. It sparkles and shines in the light from the window, and I snap it closed immediately.

We're supposed to go out to dinner tonight. To a really nice restaurant.

He's going to propose to me tonight. Is he? No, he's not... then why does he have the ring?

What am I going to say?

I know what I *want* to say.

I want to say yes, with everything in me. Despite all of this he wants me to be his wife. Tears of joy fall from my eyes. Then I remember I'm not normal, and that things are quiet but not okay right now.

Shit!

I have to think. What do I do?

I have to talk to Ian! I have to get him to put this thing with Alana to bed once and for all—and I wince at my choice of wording—because if he won't agree to turn Alana away if she pops up again, how can I marry Kam?

I want this. I want this future that I'm holding in my hand, and I need Ian to agree.

I shove the ring back into the bag and hurriedly scribble Kam a note: *Lauren asked me to stop by the gallery, will be back soon, promise* and grab my purse, quickly calling an Uber and praying Kam doesn't come back from his run sooner than expected.

I go straight to Ian's house, hoping against hope that he's there. He answers the door on the second knock, and the shock on his face when he sees me is palpable.

"Megan." He doesn't sound pleased to see me, and how can I blame him? I haven't spoken to him in weeks. "Come in." I rush in, ready to spill all the words I need to say until I see her. A pretty blonde woman sitting on the couch at the coffee table, photos spread out across it. "Megan, this is Hillary," he says brusquely.

"Hi, Megan." Hillary greeting is kind, but there's an undercurrent to her tone that I don't like, and I see her and Ian exchange a glance. Their eyes stay locked for a second, and I can feel the tension between them. There's something there, a chemistry that I can practically feel, and I'm surprised when a sudden wave of jealousy rolls over me, sharp and blistering, almost tipping me over.

"Can I talk to you privately?" I ask, my voice low, and Ian just nods, gesturing for me to go towards the kitchen. "Alone,"

I say tighter than I mean to. He's different. Colder. I haven't called him or spoken to him in weeks, but he hasn't reached out to me, either. Of course—Blue would have told him about Kam. And after the dream...I can't blame him. But I'm surprised at how much it hurts. "Can it wait, I'm sort of working..." He trails off almost irritably.

"Ugh, I'm going to run and get coffee. You guys want anything?" Hillary stands, and I realize she's not just pretty she's gorgeous. She looks like a blonder Margot Robbie.

"No, I'm fine," I say tensely.

"I'll take one." Ian replies, warmer to her than he's spoken to me since I arrived.

"Great. I'll be back in fifteen," she announces before slipping out of the apartment.

"So how have things been?" he asks. His voice isn't mean, but it's not particularly interested, either. He's asking strictly for formality's sake.

It should make things easier, but somehow it doesn't.

"They're good," I say briefly. "Who is Hillary?"

Ian raises an eyebrow. "She's Lauren's best friend," he says coolly. "She helps run the gallery, and she's taking over my show until after Lauren has the babies." He pauses, then a slight smirk curves on one side of his mouth. "You're jealous."

"I'm not jealous," I snap. "Why would I be jealous?"

Ian shrugs. "I don't know. Why would you be?" he asks, a challenge underneath his tone. My cheeks feel hot.

"Look, I came here because we need to talk about Alana." I see his shoulders stiffen, but I push forward. "Helen thinks that what happened *that* night...it wasn't a dream. Kam..." His face darkens at the mention of Kam's name, and morphs into shock from the suggestion that it wasn't a dream, but I can't give him time to process any of it. I have to keep going, or I'll chicken out. "Kam remembers me coming in early that morning. So it's maybe possible that I blacked out and Alana came out and she came over to your apartment and..."

I take a deep breath. “Look, Dr. Lyce thinks that it could happen again. That she might come back. And if she does...I need you to tell her what she’s doing isn’t right and call Dr. Lyce.” I start to tell him her number but I realize he’s looking at me as if I’ve grown two heads.

“You have got to be joking.” His voice rises slightly, shaking with anger. “How could you ask me that? Alana is my *wife*. I love her! I’ve missed her every single fucking second that she’s been gone, and you’re telling me that if she comes to me, willing and wanting me and in love with me, I’m just supposed to tell her to fuck off and change back into you? Are you fucking kidding me?”

His eyes are blazing with fury, but I’m not about to back down. This is too important to me. “Alana isn’t real!” I snap. “And she’s destroying *my* life! I can’t have any happiness, I can’t trust anything, I can’t build a life because I don’t know when she’s going to come back and tear it all down!”

Ian crosses his arms over his chest. “Well, if she’s not real, then why are you asking me to do this? Why does it matter, if she’s not real?”

“Please, Ian.” I can feel tears threatening, but I refuse to break down and cry in front of him. “Please...Kam is going to ask me to marry him. I can’t do that if I don’t know if Alana is going to show up and run off and make me cheat on him. I need to be able to go back to my life. I’m sorry that this is happening to you, but I’m not Alana, and I can’t get rid of her, but I don’t want her life. Please, please just tell me that you’ll let her go.”

Ian glares at me, taking a step forward. “So you want me to deny the woman I love, to tell her to leave me, to break her heart and mine, so that you can have your happily ever after with some other guy? You’re telling me to give my wife to someone else. Do you even realize what you’re asking?” He’s staring directly down into my eyes now, his lips pressed tightly together as he takes in my pleading, desperate expression.

“I want a life!” I shriek and for the first time today he looks like he has an ounce of sympathy for me. Silence is

between us, heavy and brutal. He looks up and those soulful eyes meet mine. He swallows hard and steps a closer to me and all the hardness in his expression melts away.

“Build a life with me. Be with me. I can make you happy. Choose me!” For the first time in a long time I see what I saw the first time I met him. The love, the desire, the determination. And it makes my entire body tense.

He’s *never* going to let her go.

“I love someone else Ian, can’t you see that?” I beg of him, both of our hearts breaking. Visible tears are in his eyes. He grips the counter and I see this man breaking down. I move my hand to put it on his shoulder and his body stiffens. His head snaps towards me and his perseverance is back.

“I’ll make you a deal,” he says determined. “Let me kiss you. If we don’t feel anything, if *you* don’t feel anything at all, then I promise to let Alana go. I’ll never touch her again, and if she comes to me I’ll tell her that we’re over and to let you move on. Deal?”

I’m trembling now. But the promise in his eyes and the look on his face makes me believe him.

What he’s offering could fix everything. But I’m terrified. I know that some small part of me—*me*—wants Ian. But I know that Ian is a man of his word. If I do this and I don’t react, then he’ll let her go, and I can move on with my life. Even if I do feel something, I’ll act like I don’t. I love Kam, and that will get me through this. Desire won’t win out over that, lust won’t beat love. They have lust and passion. Me and Kam have true sustaining love.

“Alright,” I whisper. “Go ahead. Kiss me.”

I can hear his breathing pick up and we’re both still but then his hand slides over my cheek, and my entire body goes warm. His fingers make their way into my hair. He leans down and his lips hover over mine for a breath, and I can feel the warm air against them. I close my eyes, and then his mouth is on mine, gently at first, brushing over me with exquisite tenderness.

This is a man who thinks he's kissing his wife for the last time, and it shows. I'm determined not to feel anything, not to let on even if I do, but it feels so good. I keep my hands at my side, refusing to touch him, but I want to. I can feel *everything* in this kiss. All of the love and sorrow, the desperate aching need. I can feel it in how hard he's holding back, how hard he's working not to grab me and crush me to him, to kiss me the way he really wants to.

His tongue touches the edge of my bottom lip, urging my mouth to open under his, and I realize in this second that *I'm* going to lose control. I want to blame it on Alana, but I know deep down that she's not here, that this is *me*. I can smell his cologne and his soap and his skin—all scents that shouldn't be familiar to me but are—and I know there's a thousand memories buried in this smell. Memories of a life filled with love and desire and passion that could possibly exceed what I have with Kam.

They've had more time than us, more history.

His kiss tells me that I could have it, that there's a whole world of adventure and desire and lust that I don't remember experiencing, but could. I feel my arms going up to circle around his neck, feel my body arching against his, my lips parting so that his tongue can slide into my mouth, tangling with mine.

That's all it takes. I hear him groan, feel his body stiffen, and then his hands are on my waist, crushing me against him. He backs me towards the table, his lips slanted over mine, his tongue tangling in my mouth, and I can feel him hard and throbbing against my thigh. He picks me up and sits me on the edge of the table, spreading my thighs apart as he stands between them, and I don't stop him. If anything I urge him on, my fingers digging into the back of his skull, dragging his mouth hungrily down to mine, and I feel his arm around my waist, feel him grind against me, only our clothes separating us and keeping him from being inside me already.

It's him reaching for the button of my jeans that stops me. I want him, I do. Every inch of me is pulsing with lust, my blood pounding in my ears. But if I do this I won't have Alana

as an excuse. This is just me, just Megan, and I can't. I can't do it.

"Please, please stop," I beg, and he lets go of me as if I'm red hot. I know he'll take me in an instant if I'm willing, but he'll never ever touch me without my consent. This is worse than what Alana did. I could blame it on her but this isn't her, and it terrifies me.

"I'm sorry," I wail as I grab my purse and leap off of the table, shoving past him and running for the door. I ignore his shout after me and Hillary's astonished face as I pass her in the hall. I'm embarrassed and disappointed in myself and heartbroken, and a million other things. I have to tell Kam tonight. I can't keep it a secret any longer after this, and that makes my heart clench with absolute misery as I think about how I know that he is going to propose, and how he never will after he knows the truth. I'll probably never see him again.

I rush out towards the street, making a beeline for the corner where I can call an Uber, but I see a cab across the street and there isn't any traffic. I step out into the road.

You fucking bitch!

Alana's voice screeches in my head, clawing at the inside of my skull as if she's trying to get out.

You conniving stupid whore.

I warned you he's mine!

I grab my head, trying to push her voice out of my thoughts, but her voice is piercing. I can't hear anything else.

I won't let you have him!

And—oh God! Something has slammed into me with such force that it sends me flying, leaves me airless, every bit of breath knocked out of my body. I see the asphalt rushing up to meet me and all I feel is grinding pain.

Everything goes silent.

FUCK! My entire body hurts.

I squint my eyes open but the florescent lights above me hit them like fire.

“Ugggh,” I groan.

“Where the hell am I?” I mutter. I feel dizzy and I’m about to puke.

“You’re at Rush University Hospital. Your family is going to be so thrilled you’re awake,” some woman with frizzy red hair says before shining a light in my eyes.

“Stop, that hurts!” I growl.

“You sure are feisty, Megan.” She chuckles and I scowl at her.

“My name isn’t fucking Megan. It’s Alana.”

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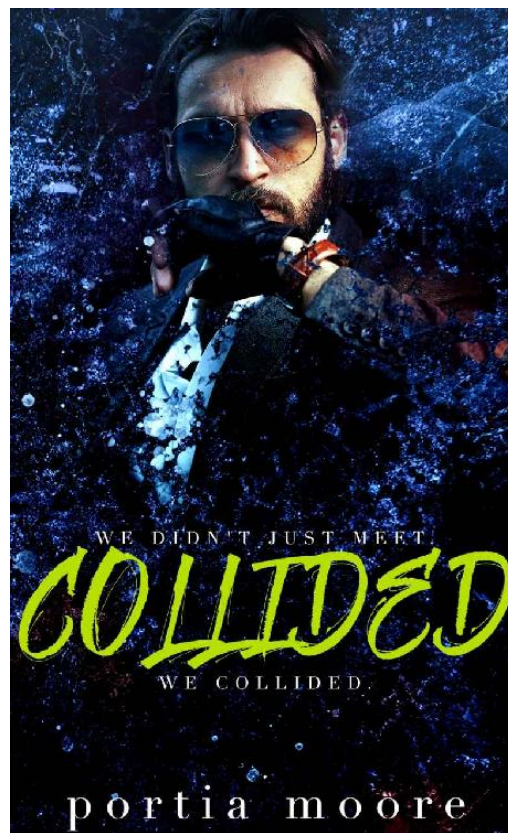
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Portia. Continue to read for a sneak peek into my other work, *Collided*.

COLLIDED



I WAS ONLY six the night it happened.

I remember him being big, not tall enough to play basketball, but broad enough to be a wide receiver. A giant to me back then. He was my hero, my best friend. One of my mom's favorite people. Until he wasn't. And it all changed in one night.

I was in my favorite hiding place, in the coat closet across from their room, the moment it started. The shouting, the clashing, curse words, ones that a six-year-old little girl should

never hear, especially from her parents. I listened, attempting to understand what was happening, my six-year-old thought process working overtime and struggling to find the cause amongst the bad words. I grabbed phrases, trying to pull them out from the chaos.

Another woman.

Did he love her?

How could he cheat?

Leaving.

I didn't know what that meant, as being six I couldn't understand how my dad could cheat if he didn't go to school or play any games that I knew of. What was wrong with him loving another woman?

He loved my grandma before she went to heaven. If he was leaving, where was he going and could we go too? But my mom was furious so I didn't know if she'd want to go. Her tiny fists moved so fast while hitting his chest, her hands attempting to hit his face. I wanted to go out and say something, to make it stop, but I knew I shouldn't. And I was afraid. I had never been afraid of my parents before. They always protected me, but I was terrified then. My parents didn't yell and never fought, and from what I knew they were happy. He gave her soft sweet kisses that made me and Melissa cringe and snicker but we really loved it. When we watched movies she was always in his arms. They were perfect.

At least I thought they were.

Or maybe my six-year-old mind couldn't process things as they were. As a child, I couldn't see the cracks. Maybe I blocked out the hushed arguments. I never counted the times my dad walked in the next morning, after having left right after dinner, saying he wouldn't be gone long.

When it was all over, I scurried from my hiding place and saw Dad smiling but I could tell he was sad.

"Are you okay?" I asked him with tears in my eyes. He scooped me up in his arms and hugged me, it was warm and

tender and I didn't want to let him go. It was probably woman's intuition even at that young age...

"Go to bed princess," he said with a weary smile, and I hesitated until his smile brightened and he gave me his signature wink—one that was familiar and made me believe everything would be okay—but before I closed my bedroom door his feet hit the stairs and headed in the direction of the living room instead of past my room where their bedroom was. I ran out quickly, only to see him leave out the front door.

He left with nothing but the clothes on his back.

The next morning I could hear my mother's sobs fill the void where the screaming had been. At breakfast my sister Mel asked where Daddy was. My mom's eyes were usually the light green that Mel's were, but they weren't bright anymore—just puffy and dull and void. She took a deep breath and said it would just be us girls from then on. Mel looked at me confused and was about to start her endless stream of questions, which we both did when an answer didn't make sense to us, but I kicked her knee under the table and shook my head. I knew my mom wouldn't answer those questions, that she couldn't, and I hoped Dad would be back to answer them himself.

He didn't come back the next day, or the day after that.

He never came back. Ever.

The mother I knew before that day disappeared, as every day that passed seemed like her heart broke into even smaller pieces than the day before.

He broke her.

I promised myself I'd never let a man break me, make me a shell of myself, taking all the love I had to give with him, leaving barely a drop for his own daughters. The first and only man I'd ever loved became the first person I hated. I hated that I had his sky-blue eyes, and night-black dark hair. I used to love when people told me how much I looked like him. When he didn't come back I wished I had my mom's light brown hair instead of his, I wish I looked like her instead of him, and

sometimes I wondered if looking at me hurt her, reminded her of everything that stole her joy, her peace, all the love she had. My father would be the only person I'd ever allow to break my heart.

I wake up and shake the nightmare of the past from my thoughts. Sweat is covering my body, my heart racing just as it did that night. I glance at Ryan. He's asleep and looks so peaceful. He never has night terrors. I guess that's because he's never experienced anything world-shattering, like tiny earthquakes that rock your entire existence.

His parents are still blissfully happy together.

He doesn't know what it was like to look at your front door every day, hoping and praying your father would walk through it. He isn't paranoid about the person he loves deciding in an instant you're not important, that you're worthless. That they don't need you. He doesn't believe it's dangerous to love regardless of how many times I've told him. He always just squeezes my hand and laughs me off.

I won't be able to go back to sleep. I never am after this nightmare.

My mind is too restless.

I don't have a choice but to get out of bed. My feet carry me to the kitchen to see if chamomile tea will help. It doesn't.

There's a need that's calling my name, it creeps from the deepest part of my thoughts. This familiar fear has taken hold of me again and again.

I'm its mistress.

I want to stop myself, I really do. There's no reason for me to feel like this. The tightness in my chest, anxiety gripping my entire body, demanding I take action for relief. There are answers I need to know, protections that need to be put in place, just in case. I don't trust.

I can't

Anyone or anything.

I'm never vulnerable. I don't let myself get hurt anymore.

Ryan could hurt me. He's broken down my walls...*some* of them. I'm not sure how he's done it, but every time he smiles at me it makes me not *want* to be skeptical of him working late hours. I don't *want* to think he's lying every time something comes out of his mouth. But I'd be lying if I said it wasn't difficult.

Ryan's what I need.

He's a good guy from a good home with a good job. *He's safe*, which is why I shouldn't be searching for anything. But I am. Some kind of red flag that things will go bad at any moment. He's done nothing to make me think he has. He goes to work at his accounting firm, hangs out with friends twice a month on the weekend, and then he comes home to me.

This was never the plan, not mine at least.

I still wonder how those soft brown eyes and easy smile hypnotized me into doing something I never imagined doing.

I avoided commitment up until he came along, the only sixteen-year-old who didn't want a boyfriend, who went to prom with a group of friends—not because of lack of options, but fear of anything that could lead to the curse of love.

Sex is great but love is terrifying, and moving in together wasn't planned. It just sort of happened, like a disease. It was naturally the next step to take, according to Ryan. After dating seven months and practically being at one another's house every day, it seemed illogical for us to each be paying rent. That's how he convinced me, because I'm a stickler for saving my coins. Still, even after everything he's done for me...

I don't trust him.

I try, I really do, but at the end of the day he has a penis and I know that overrules everything.

My feet carry me from the kitchen to the office space that Ryan and I share. He spends more time there than I do. I find creating in a designated place more stifling to my creativity than I thought it'd be, so it's more his than mine. I should crack open my laptop and finish the commission I have due in two days. But I won't. But that yearning need won't go away

until I take a look around. Just a little. Not much. I attempt to stop myself, to hold myself back.

If I was a sane person, I'd just go back to bed, or I'd talk to Ryan about how I feel. He'd no doubt listen and comfort me, and do everything a perfect boyfriend would. But I can't do things the easy way.

I swear just a minute ago, I was simply standing in the quiet office space. Now the room is just a blur of papers. I search through the room like a madwoman, systematically going through every inch of it.

I'm not even sure what's driving me to this point, other than the dream. The dream I should be used to by now.

The last time I felt like this, I was being cheated on by the one and only boyfriend I had outside of Ryan. I went through my ex's things and found another girl's thong.

My grandmother always said, "If you go searching for something, you'll find it." I think that's a crock of shit. If there's nothing there to find then you won't find anything whether you search or not.

Needless to say, I went out of that relationship in an intense blaze. I doubt he'll ever cheat on a woman again after the hell I caused. I always knew he was a manwhore, and admittedly I felt safe because of that—comfortable in chaos is what Mel calls it—but it's exactly why Ryan isn't safe. Because he feels safe. It's confusing and doesn't make sense to anyone I've talked to, but it's gotten me this far. And I know it's insane but knowing this doesn't stop me from invading his privacy like a complete psycho. And yes I'm crazy because I've found nothing and didn't really expect to, but the gnawing feeling is still there.

Now, I have to put everything back perfectly or he'll know. He'll know that I had *another* freak out.

Yeah, this isn't my first one.

I turn around to walk out of the room when something catches my eye. His

briefcase is lying by the door, untouched. I want to leave it be, but I'm not going to. I can't. I drop to my knees and instantly start to search through it.

It's just a few papers, some folders. Nothing unexpected. I put the briefcase back onto the floor. That's when I hear a dull thump and I know there is something else in there. My hands are instantly back inside, trying to find the mysterious object. I feel something soft and pull it out. I already know what's inside before I open it.

SHIT.

Nonetheless, my hands work on their own accord and open the box. Shit, shit, shit! It's an engagement ring!

I can't breath.

Fuck!

Ryan isn't cheating.

He wants to marry me.

He's going to propose!

I fight to breathe.

Ryan knows this is a deal-breaker. He has to.

It was like pulling teeth to get me to move in with him.

What the hell is he thinking? When is he going to ask?

I can't say no to him but I won't say yes. My heart is beating a hundred miles a minute. What do I do? I can't pretend I haven't seen it. I'm a terrible liar. I can't talk to him about it.

I can't marry him.

I shouldn't even be *living* with him.

I'm not ready for any of this! I-I have to get out of here.

I'm suffocating.

I creep back into the room. Ryan is still sleeping the night away, unaware that his crazy decision has turned my life

upside down. I frantically but quietly grab shoes, my phone, wallet, my laptop bag, and keys.

And I'm gone. I'm out of the apartment and at the building on the corner waiting for an Uber to get me the hell away.

“SO YOU JUST LEFT?” my sister Melissa asks, her face somewhere between bewildered and irritated. I don’t know why she’s annoyed. *I’m* the one who just left my house in the middle of the night with a few things stuffed in a bag and now is in her little sister’s kitchen having to explain what happened for the *second* time.

“What else was I supposed to do? There was a ring! A ring he was going to propose with, and what then? I tell him, ‘Hey I like you but not in that way and oh are you insane? You’re going to propose to *me*, the girl who you had to practically force into moving in with you? *That’s* smart!’”

She lets out a peeved sigh and rubs her temples with a slight shake of her head.

“I know. I couldn’t believe it either,” I say sarcastically, but my hands are slightly trembling as I stuff one of her homemade biscuits into my mouth. It’s sweet and fluffy and tastes like a piece of heaven in this little version of hell I’m sitting in. Melissa has been cooking since she could reach the stove, and she turned her passion into a lucrative catering business. The taste of these cute little biscuits almost makes me forget the screwed-up predicament I’ve landed myself in.

“I can’t believe you,” she says with a self-righteous huff.

“You can’t believe me?” I ask in disbelief.

“You just left, you didn’t talk to him! You didn’t explain that maybe you aren’t ready, you just ran out like a five-year-old having a tantrum?” she asks, her big green eyes narrowed in on me. Such a contrast from the stark blue eyes that I hate to see staring back at me in the mirror.

“It wasn’t exactly like that,” I say defensively, feeling the color drain from my face.

“No Maddy, that’s exactly what it was like, because this is what you do.” She stands from the table like she’s about to declare war.

“I’m *not* ready...” My voice is shakier than my hands were when holding that ring earlier.

It was beautiful.

“This wasn’t some one-night stand you just get to block out the next morning. This is a man you’ve lived with for months and who loves you, and after invading his privacy, might I add, with a Dear John letter you *disappear?*” she screeches. I don’t want to correct that it was a Dear John *text*.

“What should I have done then, take the ring, feign excitement, and leave him at the altar?” I fire back. God, I get so tired of her self-righteous bullshit, but since I want to use her guest room as my home until I get my life together, I swallow my indignation.

“No, you were supposed to woman-up and let him know that you’re still dealing with a whole lot of shit—that I thought you had gotten over a long time ago, but apparently you have not—and you need time to deal with things. You do this calmly, genuinely, maturely...not like a fucking teenager!” I suck in a breath and lock my eyes on my hands. I’m too embarrassed to look at her.

“Yet, I’m just guessing you’re *not* going to do that,” she says furiously.

“I can’t talk to him right now. I don’t want to hurt him.”

This I mean, and it’s more genuine than anything I’ve ever said in my life. She shakes her head again in irritation.

“You think *this*—leaving and sending him a shitty text— isn’t going to hurt him?” she asks sharply. “Not to mention he’s one of Greg’s good friends. Jesus, Maddy!”

I scowl at her.

“That’s what this is about? You’re worried about what Greg’s going to say?” I fire back. Of course this is about her long-time perfect boyfriend who sort of is the reason that me and Ryan are together. That should have been my first huge red flag. She huffs and throws a kitchen towel down on the counter.

“Of course not, this is about doing the right thing!”

“I’m just not ready, okay!” I bark back and she throws her head back in frustration.

“How many times are you going to do this?” This time her tone is gentler but still sharp, like one of her carving knives.

“Do what? This is the first time I’ve been proposed to that I know of!” I joke lightly, trying to ease the tension in the room. But she’s not backing down.

“Terry!” she says, putting up a finger.

“Terry was not like this at all. We dated for three months and he got super clingy and weird...” I explain.

“Marcus.” She’s holding up two fingers now.

“Marcus wanted kids, you know that’s nowhere in my future anytime soon.”

“Clint...” She’s holding up three now, and I’m starting to feel panicked. I don’t need this shit right now. I came here to get away from the panic, the nervousness, the dread...and she’s making it worse.

“Clint wanted different things than I did!” I yell. Which is the truth. He wanted commitment and I wanted anything but.

“And now Ryan. I thought when you hit a year, you were growing up and outgrew whatever commitaphobia you had, but I was wrong.”

“Jesus, I came here for a little support, some sisterly advice, not to get lectured into feeling like a selfish bitch!” I shriek at her, folding my arms across my chest, fighting the tears behind my eyes. Her expression eases just a tad. She walks over to me and puts a hand on my shoulder.

“I know you don’t mean to hurt people, but you are. You can’t keep doing this. If you do, you’re going to wake up old and alone, and I don’t want that for you. I love you but you can’t keep making these stupid decisions based on one selfish prick’s choice to abandon us.”

“This isn’t about *him*,” I murmur pointedly but she rolls her eyes knowingly.

She gives me a sharp look but then lets out a yawn.

“I’ve got an early morning baby shower I have to set up for. You can have the guest room, since you’re virtually homeless now.” Her words are harsh but she relents, giving me a soft kiss on the cheek and wordlessly leaving the kitchen. It’s just me and the biscuits now, and they don’t taste as good as they did earlier.

MY EYES ARE heavy but I plow them open. It’s freezing, thanks to Mel’s preferred room temperature being frigid bitch. I grab my phone and see ten missed calls and four unread texts from Ryan. I throw my head back onto the bed and wish for sleep, but with the beaming sun penetrating the room through Mel’s large picture windows, it’s hopeless. I let out a deep breath and open the text messages.

The first is a *Hey babe where’d you go.*

Then.

Mads what’s going on?

Finally.

You went through my stuff?

And I assume when he inevitably notices that most of my important things have disappeared, the phone calls begin. I don’t know what to say to him, which is the reason I left. It’s not that I’m afraid of conflict because I had no problem conflicting the hell out of my ex when I found out he was banging his coworker.

It’s explaining to Ryan that there’s nothing he can do to fix it. To fix me.

It’s not as if he had no warning. I let him know in the beginning that I had issues, specifically with trust, and unlike most girls who say that fun is all they want and they don’t need commitment, *I really meant it.*

He just didn’t believe me.

Yes, I feel terrible. Ryan has a routine, one he's followed every day since I met him. Up at 5 am to go for his run, shower/sex time depending on his mood, light breakfast, and out the door. It took some getting used to being with someone so organized. I'm the total opposite. I do freelance graphic design work because I can't stand routine, and I value my freedom over anything. I can't imagine being locked down in an office 80 percent of my life. I crave spontaneity, but Ryan provided structure that I needed, even if it was boredom-inducing most times. I know Ryan cares about me. I think he *thinks* he loves me, even if I'm not quite sure men are capable of truly loving anyone but themselves.

I take the phone in my hand, inhale a deep breath, and brace myself as the phone rings in my ear. It only takes two before he picks up.

"You found the ring." The disappointment in his voice causes my stomach to clench. I nod and squeak out a "yeah."

"I wasn't going to give it to you now. I was going to wait until the right time. I know how you can get. You weren't supposed to see it."

"But I did, Ryan," I tell him, wishing that I didn't.

"I'm not trying to rush you into anything. You should know I'd never do that to you."

"It's a good thing I saw it Ryan, even if you don't think so. We're on two totally different paths and it just reminded me of that."

"I don't care! I love you, and I just want us to be back on a path to each other." Tears fill my eyes and I bite my lip.

"There's never going to be a right time for me to see it Ryan. If you *knew* me, you'd know that," I say quietly.

"With me?" he asks snappily.

"With anyone. It has nothing to do with you."

"Our relationship, a year and a half, has nothing to do with me?" he asks, anger replacing the hurt in his voice. And I'm glad. Anger I can deal with. Pain, hurt that *I* caused...I can't.

“You knew, Ryan. I always told you...”

“You told me? I thought you’d get over whatever issues you have! I thought I showed you how much I cared, that I’d never be like the guys who hurt you. I thought I was breaking through the fucking cement walls you keep up but I was wrong then, huh?”

“I never meant to hurt you. I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“You don’t mean to. You didn’t want to. But you have. How fucking selfish are you being right now?”

“I’m so—”

“Don’t say it.” His words are surrounded by angry laughter.

“*I’m* sorry we wasted so much of each other’s time. *Sorry* that I thought we could build a life together.”

I’m quiet. I deserve this. I deserve his anger, to feel him seething, realize his pain. It’s the least that I can do even though I want to hang up and hide from it. I fight the urge but then I realize I don’t have to. He’s hung up.

I type a long text trying to explain why I am the way I am. How I wish I could change who I am and not feel the way I do and how sorry I am, but then I erase it, because it doesn’t matter and will probably just make things worse. He needs space and time, and maybe if I’m lucky we can be friends, or maybe I should just shoot for him not hating me. I throw my head back into the soft down blanket that Mel probably spent a boatload of money on. She loves luxurious things and has ever since we were kids. She was one of the only twelve-year-olds I knew who actually understood why the thread count in sheets mattered.

When our sperm donor left, things got rough for us. We were able to stay in our middle-class suburban home in our neighborhood but my mom had to work most of the time. We had been used to her working as a nurse in a family clinic near us when she and good ole *Dad* were together. It was part-time so she was able to drop us off at school and pick us up. She

cooked us breakfast and dinner every day and she never worked weekends or holidays. She was always with us.

After he left she had to get a better paying job at a hospital which meant better pay but working a ton, especially nights and weekends. It didn't put us ahead but made it where we weren't drowning with the loss of my dad's income.

Melissa, who is just a bit younger than me, my Irish twin, never quite adjusted to the financial constraints we were under, but I adjusted. I would always rather have had my mom around more than having her gone all the time to make sure we had the latest new jeans or \$300 bed linen. She did what she thought was best and I have no idea how hard it must have been to raise two girls on her own.

She did a good job with us, I think. We turned out okay, aside from my commitment issues, which really have nothing to do with her, and we could have turned out a lot worse. Mel has a super successful catering business that is even more impressive considering she's only twenty-two, though she acts like she's forty sometimes. She just bought her own condo, has good credit, and manages to maintain a steady boyfriend—Greg—who's an okay guy even if he's sort of a pretentious snob. Me? My business is doing pretty well. I make enough money to buy something comfortable for myself...well, if I was good at saving, which I'm not. But when you're a freelancer money tends to fluctuate, but thankfully in four months it'll be three years of working on my own.

It's sort of how Ryan and I met. I had forgotten to send Uncle Sam his cut of what I pulled in for about a year and when Melissa found out and blew a gasket she asked Greg, who is some type of stocks guy, if he could save me from federal prison time...which of course I wasn't facing then. She was being completely dramatic as always, but Ryan came in and got me all set up and official. He did save me, and had a pattern of doing things like that...cleaning up my messes, so to speak. I think it was one of the reasons I stayed with him so long...not because he did the hard things I hated to do when it came to life, sorting bills, doing laundry, and paying my taxes, but I knew with him I was safe...as safe as I could ever feel, at

least. It didn't matter that the sex wasn't amazing, it was nice enough.

I didn't leave because he never gave me butterflies, or that I was so comfortable I maybe sometimes took him for granted. Letting Ryan go wasn't to hurt him. It was to save him from me, because *this* would always have been the inevitable.

I guess I am pretty screwed up. Well, at least I'm not on drugs...yet.

“NOTHING SOLVES BOY PROBLEMS LIKE BOOZE,” Parker chimes happily, pouring herself a glass in her obnoxiously large goblet. I smirk at the deep red liquid swooshing into my own glass. I can practically feel it numbing my guilt. I do a virtual toast with her through our computer screens. Parker’s been my best friend since college. We’ve shared everything from clothes, to money, successes, and defeats with each other for the past five years. If there’s anyone who can make me feel better after the mess I make of things it’s her.

We’re perfectly aligned astrologically. She’s water and I’m an air sign, and when I first saw her she reminded me of a younger Lucy Liu, who played my favorite character in *Kill Bill*. And when I heard her British accent after telling off some frat guys I knew—who were planning some crappy ugly date party, and who I was already tearing into because they had invited my roommate at the time—I knew we were destined to be best friends.

“I think I’m going to need something a little harder to get over this problem,” I admit, swallowing the dry liquid down my throat. I hate dry wine but it’s all Melissa has. It’s official now: I am single, the last year and a half of my life done and over with. Ryan just had my things couriered over, though it took him three weeks. Now I am homeless (sort of) and the thought of starting over—finding an apartment, setting up utilities, and all of the other boring stuff that goes along with it—makes me want to shoot myself.

“I am sending you all kinds of Tequila vibes, my friend,” she says, resting her head on her hand while looking at me with empathy Melissa couldn’t mimic even if I held a gun to her head.

“That’s what I need, but work still calls even when life is in the toilet, and you know how Tequila gets me.” She nods her head in agreement, with a laugh. She leans in conspiratorially, her jet black hair touching her elbows.

“How long is Melissa going to let you stay at her place?” she whispers, as if she’ll walk in at any moment.

“I don’t know. She’s been super busy these past couple of days and I’ve just tried to stay out of her way. I don’t know if I want to rent an apartment yet. It’d be amazing if she’d just let me room with her.” I shrug. Parker bursts into laughter.

“You and Mel living together permanently. Are you both trying to end up on *The First 48*?”

I grin. “Yeah, you’re right about that.”

“You should just come to New York. We’d have sooo much fun. You can work from anywhere. It’s time to upgrade from New York’s cheesy little brother to the real thing.”

I roll my eyes at her. It’s the one point of contention she and I have. We always get into debates about which city is better: her beloved New York or my hometown of Chicago. Which is funny because even though she’s technically a New Yorker since she was born there, she lived in London until she was sixteen. It’s always in fun even though it gets pretty heated when we’re getting shit-faced.

“More like Chicago’s shittier loud mouth cousin.” I wink and she sticks her tongue out at me.

“You know I’m not moving to New York, Parks, but maybe I’ll vacay soon.”

“Have you talked to Ryan yet?” she asks more solemnly.

“I don’t think Ryan will be talking to me anytime soon and I don’t want to push myself on him. He deserves his space.”

“It was just a matter of time anyway Maddy. I’m surprised you made it that long. The ring just brought you to your senses,” she announces before finishing her glass. I frown at her.

“You said you liked Ryan,” I remind her with a pout. She gives me a half shrug.

“Ryan was great but I never thought he was great for *you*. I mean he’s an accountant for God’s sake. You really saw yourself spending the rest of your life with an accountant?” She tries to hold in her laughter.

“Besides, you said the sex was terrible.” She teeters before bringing her glass back to her lips.

“I did not! I said it wasn’t *amazing*. I never said it was bad,” I tell her truthfully. She eyes me knowingly, putting down her glass.

“You know what I think you need?” she says, a wide mischievous grin on her face.

“I know you’re going to tell me.”

“To get fucked. Like a good one. It’s been how long?”

“You’re so vulgar Parks,” I say dramatically though I can’t help but grin at her.

“You’re single now. What’s the point of being sad and guilty over something that was never going to work in the first place? I think what you did is admirable. Just think, you could have kept stringing him along, accepted his proposal, and left him standing at the alter on his wedding day.”

“You think I was stringing him along?” I ask, her statement sobering. Parker waves me off.

“No. Well, not intentionally,” she falters. My shoulders drop.

“It’s just, I know you, and deep down Ryan knew you too. You’re not exactly the poster child for traditional commitment.”

“You think I’m a flake?” I ask, slightly hurt. Her small almond-shaped eyes widen.

“No! Not at all. You know I don’t think of you like that,” she says genuinely. “I think of you like a Siren. You know—those beautiful angelic women who lure men in with their song.”

“And ultimately causes them to die a terrible death at sea?” I ask horrified.

“No. No! You’re being so dramatic.”

“Then what?” I ask slightly offended.

“I just mean that I think you’re gorgeous, and guys like Ryan see this vision of you, this dark haired vixen with these big, sad, blue vulnerable eyes, and they want to save you.”

“But in reality they’re the ones who need to be saved from me.” I turn around; Melissa’s coming in with a big bag of groceries in hand.

“Hi Parker,” she says dryly, setting the bag down with a thump on the counter.

“Hello Mel,” she responds with an equal amount of dryness.

“Want to help me put these away?”

Suddenly we’re back in high school when I let her boss me around because her food started to become better than the takeout Mom ordered.

“I’ll call you back later babe,” I tell Parker. She gives me a knowing grin and we hang up.

“You could have continued your phone call,” Melissa says tightly to me, as we begin to put groceries away. Parker and Mel are complete opposites other than being beautiful and career-obsessed, but they don’t find common ground in it and they’ve never really gotten along, Mel says Parker is a bad influence and an enabler, which is ridiculous, and Parker thinks Mel is always trying to control my life. Which is not entirely the truth. As much as me and Parker are alike are as much as Me, Parker, and Mel are different. Mel is organized, a neat freak, polished, whereas I like to go with the flow, live and let live, and just see where the wind takes me. That does not equate to a good living situation and I need to rectify it sooner rather than later, but right now it’s free rent and amazing food and I can’t complain about that.

“It’s fine,” I reply. “We were basically done anyways.”

“You know, I agree with her,” Melissa says, surprising me.

“You agree with Parker?” I ask, clutching my chest and feigning a heart attack. “Call the Guinness book of world records. No, Ripley’s, believe it or not. But they won’t believe it.”

“Smartass,” Melissa answers, as she puts the groceries away. “I mean, I agree with her assessment. You’re not a siren though, you’re the beautiful creature that lures them in and runs the hell away once they get on land. You have to learn about commitment, Madison.”

“Mel! Honestly, you really want me to marry someone who isn’t right for me?”

“No,” she says, with a sigh. “But I want you to be with someone who I know will keep you safe, on track, and love you. I believe Ryan is that person.”

I sigh and crack open a can of olives, grabbing a fork. Melissa raises an eyebrow but for once doesn’t scold me.

“What are you doing tonight?” she asks. “Other than just hanging around *my* house?”

“What are YOU doing tonight?” I ask right back and she gives me a look.

“I’m working, I told you.”

“Right,” I say and pop another olive in my mouth. “That fancy shmancy party with all those rich folk. Is that what these olives are for?”

“Luckily, I bought an extra,” she says, pointing to more.

“Can I come with you?”

“Where?” she asks, her attention on the food instead of me.

“The party. The fancy one.”

“Like...to work?” she asks, surprised, and I grin.

“Preferably not,” I add, “unless you need me too.”

“I don’t need you to work,” she says dismissively.

“Well, so I don’t spend tonight drinking all your wine,” I say with a shrug. She rolls her eyes.

“Which you didn’t ask for, by the way,” she reminds me, starting to prep containers with food.

“The generous sister I know wouldn’t refuse her heartbroken—” I start and she glares at me.

“Guilt-ridden sister,” I correct myself.

She thinks for a moment. “Sure, if you help me pack up this stuff and wear something to blend in.”

Before I can answer she looks at me pointedly.

“Not that crazy artist getup you wear.” She glares and I roll my eyes and decide not to turn this into a debate of how boring her all-black closet full of designer labels are compared to my trendy, boho chiq finds I like to showcase.

“I’m sure I can manage something,” I say dryly, thinking of her closet and my plans to raid it “Where is it?”

“The Hyatt Hotel,” she says, as she pulls out a serving platter. “Nothing with a tag!”

“What do you mean?” I ask innocently.

“When you raid my closet,” she says knowingly, and I laugh, heading up the stairs.

Mel has a ton of dresses, which I find interesting, because she usually wears all black to work and everywhere else. I spend a good half hour taking every dress she owned out of her closet, and eventually settle on a light blue bandage one that looks as if it landed in her closet by accident since it’s fitted, and she usually wears more conservative (aka boring) stuff. I borrow some of her jewelry, pairing the dress with my blue-stoned chunky necklace I got when I went to Africa two summers ago. After taking a hot shower, making myself presentable with the aid of some lipstick and concealer, I smile at myself. At least I still look nice...

“Wow,” Mel says when she sees me. “You clean up pretty good, don’t you?”

“Well I wouldn’t want to embarrass you,” I say sarcastically.

“Thank you for being so considerate,” Melissa says with a wink. “Besides, you might meet some people you can network with.”

I sit down on her bed, watching her do her makeup. She looks so much like my mom it's insane.

"I borrowed your dress, no tag."

"I know," she says. "If someone hits on you, you should credit me."

I laugh, snap a picture of the two of us, and post it online. It's the first time in a long time I've posted a picture with a smile. Right now, I just want to take my mind off things, eat great food, and drink good booze.

I help Melissa load up her car, jump in the passenger seat, and turn on the radio.

"Do you ever think about doing something else?" I ask, as we head towards the art gallery.

"As in what?" she asks, her brows furrowed.

"I don't know. Like leaving everything behind and going to Europe?"

"No," she says, eyeing me. "Why, you're not planning on doing that are you?" she asks with half a groan.

"Just asking," I say. A few moments pass before she lets out a small sigh, reaches over, and pats my hand.

"You'll figure it out. I know you will."

I can't help but smile back at her touch. It's rare that she says things like that to me. She's more of a tough love, no nonsense kind of sister, and encouragement isn't exactly her thing. But it means a lot and I close my eyes and sure as hell hope that I do.

When we arrive at the hotel Melissa's crew, which consists of a guy and two other women, begin to help her unload and prep for the party.

"Are you sure there is nothing that I can help you with?" I ask as they all move around frantically preparing everything.

"Listen, you can help by not distracting me," she replies almost with a snap.

“I know when I’m not wanted,” I tell her teasingly.

“I love you to death though,” she says as I leave the kitchen.

THE PARTY QUICKLY FILLS UP. There’s hundreds of people here all too self-involved to notice that little old me has crashed their gala. Looking around I start to think maybe I should have paid more attention in home economics because Mel must’ve cleaned up on this job. These people are rich—the women dripping in diamonds wrapped in luxurious gowns, the men all in tailored suits, and wearing shoes crafted out of expensive leather. I find a corner to linger in, which is easy since this ballroom is huge, and decide to people watch. It’s fun to look in at a whole world that you’re not a part of and make up stories, bio’s for people. I wander the room eavesdropping on random conversations but it’s all boring, nothing sordid or interesting like the nighttime soaps that lead people to believe what the rich are really like. It’s just talk of trust funds, portfolio investments, a guy who looked sort of like Joe Biden talking about dropping half a million on a boat without even thinking twice.

“Hello?” It’s a slightly balding overweight man wearing a self-satisfied grin. “I haven’t seen you around here before.” He has a hint of an accent...Austrian maybe?

“Oh,” I say. “I don’t come to things like this often.”

“You should,” he says, his gaze landing on my chest. And you’d think rich guys would be more charming, or at least subtle. At the end of the day I guess dicks overrule everything even when they’re attached to rich bodies. “Are you here alone?” I arch my eyebrow.

“No, I’m actually here with my sister. I’m the hired help.”

I didn’t actually think that would work, but sure enough, his face crinkles up like I just told him I have leprosy. “Oh,” he says almost embarrassed. “Oh, look there’s Janelle.”

I guess he thought I was some trust fund baby looking for an equally rich husband, or maybe he was going to try to sell me something. Wait, rich people don't sell to you, they invite you into an investment opportunity. I guess he's not interested in being the Prince Charming to my Cinderella story.

He leaves me to myself. I make my way through to the half-empty bar, which is my target for the night. I have to admit the competition (if I was competing, which I'm not) is pretty fierce. There are so many beautiful women here. So I'm surprised that I get approached as often as I do but I guess I'm fresh meat. I've turned down four men so far, not all completely unattractive, some mildly interesting, but the last thing I need is another man in my life. Especially the boring, stuffy, Ryan 5.0 kind. I'm sort of over all of this now, my feet are killing me, and I'm glancing at the time every five minutes wondering if I should stick it out until Mel is done or get her keys and call an Uber.

"That's a striking necklace," says a voice off to my left, just after I've sent an adorable guy away who looked no older than eighteen. The sad thing is he was the most interesting person of the night.

"What kind of stone is that?"

I swivel my head, expecting to find a rich ass boring guy in a stuffy suit to pass five minutes with, but I don't find that at all.

Instead, I find sex on a stick, Brad Pitt's long lost cousin.

He's tall, about 6'3", with thick dark sandy hair, a strong jaw, dark stubble lining his cheeks, and brown magnetic eyes that make my heart race. They're the color of honey, of a fine Cognac, and my response causes a delicious grin to set on his face.

He knows I'm interested and damn, I know it too. Whatever cologne he's wearing makes him smell amazing; it flirts with my senses now that we're turned towards each other. He's in a black suit, a navy blue button-up underneath, no tie, and instead of looking perfectly styled and groomed like how most men are here, he looks entirely comfortable in

his casual clothing. And there's something that seems rugged about him. It could be the drinks but my entire body is getting hot just looking at him. Maybe I'll stay another ten minutes.

"Thank you, I'm not sure what kind of stone it is," I say, remembering my question and the bored expression I had on when I looked at him.

"Sorry if I had my resting bitch face on, I thought you were..."

"Going to say something to bore you to tears?" he asks and I nod, trying to fight a smile. "Yeah, I saw the kid from earlier," he says with a beautiful smile.

He's not a boy, that's for sure. He's all man, his face ruggedly perfect. I know he's not my age, so maybe 30ish? The beard throws me off because sometimes it makes men look more mature than they are.

I laugh, taking a sip of my champagne.

"It's fine, really. I'm just here for the food and booze." He grins at this and it's magnificent.

"You're someone's guest then?" he asks, his eyes subtly sweeping over me. I'm glad I chose this dress.

"My sister."

"She's in finance?" he asks.

"She's catering this party."

"Well," he said. "You should pass on my compliments. It's excellent."

"I will." I grin and he holds out his hand.

"I'm Jackson," he drawls, and I detect a hint of a southern accent.

"I'm Madison." I awkwardly shake his hand. His handshake is firm, and he has a glint in his eye that sends shivers through my body. "It's nice to meet you. Or rather, anyone who doesn't want to talk about my legs."

“Mm,” he answered, taking a sip from his own champagne glass. “I can’t blame them.” He drags his eyes down to them. “They’d be a great topic,” he says before taking his lip in between his teeth, and I want to remove it with my own. Shit, what is wrong with me? I glance at my empty champagne glass and try to remember what number it is, three or four, and how strong the shit is.

“Are you from Chicago?” I ask him and his eyes crinkle at me as if surprised.

“No, why?” he asks curiously.

“Your accent,” I tell him and he looks at me impressed.

“I grew up in Nashville but haven’t lived there in years. Good catch,” he says, and I shrug sheepishly. “My turn for a question?” he asks and I smile and give a nod.

“How’d you get past your boyfriend in that dress?” he asks with a playful smile, but it makes my stomach drop and I feel myself start to get emotional thinking of Ryan. God I’ve drank way too much champagne. I’m not a champagne drinker, I’m more of a Tequila and lemonade type of girl, and it’s hitting me in all the wrong ways.

He catches my eye.

“Did I say something wrong?” he asks apologetically

“No, I just uh...” I pause. I don’t know this man, and I’m not the type to share but I can feel it crawling up my throat about to spill out. Thankfully it’s words instead of vomit. “My boyfriend...my *ex*-boyfriend, tried to propose to me. And I ran away. So I’m single, no man to care about what I’m wearing.”

“Oh, I see,” he says warmly. “Must have been a terrible proposal then.” A half a smile dawns his kissable lips.

“It wasn’t, actually.” I feel myself blush. “He didn’t even get to the part where he got down on one knee. I just...found the ring and...bolted.”

“Ah,” he leans against the bar. “I’ve been there.”

“You have?” I asked, surprised.

“Yeah,” he said. “When you know it’s not right, you’ll do anything to get out of it.”

“That’s it!” I squeal. “I just couldn’t...I mean, Ryan was a great guy, he just wasn’t great for me. Men...you guys all kind of suck anyway.”

He lets out a sexy chuckle before revealing an amused smile.

“So, you’re off men for good, huh?”

“Yep,” I say, taking another sip of champagne. “Completely celibate. Forever.” I wink at him.

“Ah, come on.” He meets my eye. “Why not one last hurrah before a final goodbye?”

Our eyes meet and there’s a challenge behind his playful grin.

“With you?” I ask, my tone steady and my face deadpan. He doesn’t flinch but shifts his body ever so slightly towards me.

“If you like.” His voice is low and husky. He locks eyes with me and his gaze is pretty intense, but amused. He then looks around the party. “If you don’t want *me*, I could find you someone else.” Then he turns back to me with a dazzling smile, resting his weight on one elbow against the bar. I could say it’s the champagne, or the fact that I’m still dealing with some unresolved emotional baggage from leaving Ryan, and I’m vulnerable, but it’s none of those things.

He is sexy as hell and I can’t think of the last time I wanted to have sex just out of pure attraction—not routine or obligation—which is what it turned into with Ryan.

What do I have to lose?

What I need now is exactly that—just sex, no strings attached. And hopefully he’s as good at it as he looks.

“Why not have one last hurrah?” he repeats, still making his case, but he’s already won...and from the glint in his eye, I think he knows it...

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