



*twisted little*

**LIES**

**RACHAEL BROWNELL**




*twisted little*  
**LIES**

RACHAEL BROWNELL

Copyright © 2022 by Rachael Brownell

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

 Created with Vellum

# CONTENTS

[Twisted Little Lies](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Get caught up](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Rachael Brownell](#)

[Available in Audio](#)

# *twisted little* **LIES**

**She owns my heart. My goal is to one day own hers again.**

I want her.

What she doesn't want is me. She made that perfectly clear the summer after high school when she broke up with me. That hasn't stopped her from crawling in my bed on more than one occasion though.

Not that anyone knows about us, or our past.

We've kept that secret under lock and key for years. But I'm getting sick and tired of lying to my friends. I'm not ashamed of my love for her.

Yes, I love her.

I always have. And I know she loves me too. She's just afraid to admit it.

When we get caught in a compromising position though, all the lies she's been telling start to crumble around her. And if there's one thing she hates more than me at the moment, it's being vulnerable.

That doesn't stop me from taking advantage of her weakened state. Of trying to work my way back into her heart. Of reminding her why we should be together. But the more she lets me in, the more her lies are starting to get twisted.

The ones she's telling others but mostly the ones she's been telling herself.

If I want my second chance, I'm going to have to find a way to break through the fortress she's erected around her heart.

I know she's the one for me. She has been since we were teenagers.

My first love. My last. My only.

*twisted little*  
**LIES**

DEAR READERS,

ANOTHER ONE BITES THE DUST. ADD COLT AND SCARLET TO the growing list of couples surrounding me. Constantly reminding me of my own misfortune.

Because my girl is pissed!

I'll come back to that in a second. But first, let's get back to the latest hook up.

And no, I'm not talking about Cleo getting caught with her panties off. Though, when I heard about it, I was smiling on the inside. We'll come back to this too.

If I had known Cleo was gonna flip the script and send Scarlet in her place, I would have taken responsibility for the Valentine's gala. I wasn't against the hard work; I just didn't want to listen to Cleo nag me for months. Knowing what I know now, I'm glad I didn't.

Who would have guessed that quiet, reserved Scarlet was harboring feelings for our very own rock star, Colt? Not me, that's for sure. They seem like an odd couple, but they couldn't be more perfect for each other. They remind me a lot of Declan and Kendall – opposites attract I guess – only Colt and Scarlet are quieter.

Now, Cleo and Kane on the other hand...

I know what you're thinking and I'm sorry (not really) but there's *never* been anything between me and Cleo. And honestly, I'm sick of defending myself. The accusations that have been thrown my way over the years when it comes to that girl are outrageous.



Though, I've said nothing to shut them down.

Why?

Because I knew about them. I knew their history. No, I can't tell you that. It's not my story. But I will say this: *my girl* doesn't even know what really happened between me and Cleo way back when. And that's why she's so angry with me. Why she refuses to give me another chance.

I honestly thought fake dating Gia would make her jealous. Yeah, I know. Stupid idea. Hindsight and all that shit. All it did was push her further away. Straight into the arms of another man, in fact.

Our story is complicated. The threadbare string that's been holding our relationship together feels like it's about to snap. Or maybe that's my temper.

Either way, I'm not ready for it to be over.

And I might just have to come clean and enlist a little bit of help to win her back. And since Cleo owes me a favor – didn't see that coming, did you – it might be time to collect.

Our lies have gotten out of hand. We're not the only ones that have been lying to everyone, though.

It's time for Cleo and Kane to fess up.

And since I already know about their past, I'm going to take some time to figure out how to win my girl back while you dive in. Their love story is almost as twisted as mine.

GRAB A FEW TISSUES,

Max

# ONE

CLEO

I'M STRONG. STURDY. FORMIDABLE.

A force to be reckoned with.

My heart is a fortress reinforced with steel walls. Everything I feel is trapped inside. I keep it there, locked away safely where no one can cause me any further pain.

If I hurt, I don't let them see it. When I'm sad, I smile through it. Put me in an uncomfortable situation and I'll battle my way out.

I don't give myself a choice.

To show weakness is to show vulnerability.

That's not an option.

Not for me.

Which is why the only emotion anyone ever sees me express is anger.

Anger at situations. Circumstances. The world.

Mostly, at myself.

It's my defense mechanism, and I've perfected it over the years.

I haven't always been this way. There was a time in my life when I was naive enough to believe in happily ever after, and my smile radiated rainbows as glitter rained down around me.

Those days are behind me now.

Locked away in the past where they'll stay.

Along with every ounce of pain I've ever felt.

*See, stronger than anyone knows.*

Except when it comes to him.

He's been my weakness since I was in middle school. A girl with wide eyes and a pure heart. Standing in front of a boy who was looking at me like he worshiped the very ground we were standing on.

The grimy, stained tiles of the cafeteria floor.

I remember that day like it was yesterday. The way I felt when I first saw him walking in my direction, like all the air was sucked from my lungs just from the sight of him. He was clean cut, handsome, and so much taller than me. I was intimidated... Until he spoke.

That voice.

So deep and sultry.

No boy should sound like that at his age. What happened to boys going through puberty, their voices cracking and their faces covered in acne? Because this boy, this almost-man, looked as if he'd skipped those awkward years, and I was still in the middle of mine.

My chest had blossomed, but I was still a stick figure. No curves to speak of. My butt was flat. And if I hadn't watched enough videos online to learn how to apply my makeup, he would have been able to play connect the dots with the pimples on my face.

My knees threatened to give out on me as he led me across the open room, all eyes on us, to an empty table in the corner. He talked while I nibbled on the overcooked food and sipped my water. I listened intently as he told me all about himself. About the town. The school. And when his words finally trailed off, my heart sank, missing the sound of his voice.

I should have known then that I would fall in love with him. It was clear to everyone around us after only a few weeks of hanging out. Looking back, I fought against admitting what I was feeling until years later when lying to myself became impossible.

Kane Howell was the one for me.

At age twelve, I met my future husband.

At age eighteen, I pushed him away because I lost myself.

And now, at age twenty-two, I hate to admit it, but my heart still beats for him. Only him. The way I'm afraid it only ever will. Because even though I pushed him away, he refuses to leave me alone. He refuses to give up on me. And with graduation six months away, he's pushing me more than he has the last three years.

Which is why I stare at his text, reading between the lines, before carefully responding.

**K1: I'm heading back to campus tomorrow.**

**ME: Drive safe.**

Knowing him, his phone is in his hand, waiting for my reply. It's after midnight. I've been laying awake in bed for hours, my stomach in knots after spending the day with his family. Playing the part of the happy girl they once knew.

Why my parents invited them over for Thanksgiving dinner, I have no idea. It was a shock to walk into the kitchen and find Mrs. Howell putting together a charcuterie board while my mother laid out toasted French bread around her famous spinach dip. The smell of the turkey cooking in the oven permeated the air, bringing back memories, almost enough to cause me to flee out the back door and straight to the Zeta house.

If my mother hadn't spotted me, a sincere smile on her face as she tried to decipher what was going through my head, I may have actually entertained the idea.

We haven't spent the holidays together since Kane and I went away to LSU. Since before I broke up with him, severing the connection our families once shared. Yet here they were. Kane and his father in the living room watching football with my dad and brother, Beckham. Our mothers cooking together the way they use to, chatting and sharing a bottle of wine.

And then there was me.

I felt stuck in the middle. Unsure where to go. Uncomfortable in my own house.

**K1: Since you're still awake...**

I'm not surprised he's more forward with this text. Even though he has to know I'm going to shoot him down.

**ME: I'm in bed.**

**K1: Want company?**

Ha! Of course I do. I'd love nothing more than for him to climb in my window the way he used to when I was in high school. He'd drop me off after our dates, making sure I made it home before curfew. Then he'd park around the block, sneak through the neighbors', yard and climb in my window to spend the night with me.

We got caught once. By my brother who for some reason, never told on me.

**ME: You know that's not a good idea. Goodnight, Kane.**

**K1: I think it's a great idea. It sure FELT like a great idea last time. And the time before.**

Oh, he's gonna go there? Remind me how weak I am when it comes to him. How I bend to his will time and time again because for some reason, my head and my heart can't seem to get on the same page.

**ME: Just because I gave in once doesn't mean I plan to give in again.**

*Lies! All lies!*

He knows it. I know it. I've been lying to everyone around me for years now. Including myself.

**K1: Nine.**

**ME: Nine what?**

**K1: You've given in nine times.**

He's counting? How immature.

Though, he's wrong. It was ten times if you count the night we went for round two. That was a fun night. I wasn't thinking about all the drama between us, or the many reasons we shouldn't have been doing what we were doing. I was focused

on the look in his eyes, the pounding of my heart, and the sweet bliss that I knew would follow.

**K1: What? No witty comeback?**

**ME: I'm tired. I don't have time for this. I'm going to sleep.**

**K1: Why is your light on then?**

*That motherfucker!*

He's here. Probably outside my window. Just waiting for me to open it and invite him in.

Well, I have news for him...

Marching over to window, I quickly throw back my curtains, unlock it, and slide up the old wooden frame, the cool November air assaulting me. It's snowed twice, then melted. It was unseasonably warm last week, and now it's back to feeling like winter here in Michigan. Mother nature always seems to have her panties in a twist this time of year. One minute it's nice out, the next there's a foot of snow on the ground and your eyes sting when you walk outside.

"Hello, bug," Kane says as he approaches my window, the light from my room casting a glow on his face.

"I shouldn't be surprised you'd show up like this. Invite yourself over. Think I'd bow to your request."

"I was actually hoping you might beg tonight," he says, lowering his voice as he leans through the open window. His lips curve into a devious smile as he adds, "Maybe on your knees."

If anyone's begging, it's him. To be slapped.

“Are you serious!” I whisper yell, thrusting my face in his, close enough that I can feel his breath against my lips.

That is my first mistake. Getting that close to him.

“Oh, bug. I’m always serious when it comes to you. I have been since we first met.”

Growling, I quickly retreat and turn my back on him. That is my second mistake. He quickly climbs through my open window, the sound of the curtains being drawn my only warning that he’s inside my room.

My third mistake is the biggest one, though.

Because I turn around, ready to give him a piece of my mind before I throw him out my window, and my eyes lock on his. I’m transferred back to a place in time where this happened almost nightly. Where he would wrap me in his warm embrace and hold me until I fell asleep after we made love.

We’re not those people anymore.

And that’s not our reality.

But in this moment, I forget all the reason why I stopped writing Cleo + Kane on every notebook I own. I forget I’ve stopped attaching his last name to my first name when I doodle. And I forget that I ruined everything amazing we created.

The only man I’ll ever love reaches out and cups my cheek. He pulls my lips to his, and he sears me with a kiss that actually causes my knees to buckle.

He’s there to catch me, though. Swooping me up in his arms and carrying me to my bed after flicking the light off. He



gently lays me down and then covers my body with his, never breaking our kiss.

“Kane,” I mumble as I push him away.

“Yes, bug?” he asks as he peppers kisses across my jaw and down my neck.

“We can’t keep doing this.”

“I know. We have to stop hiding.”

“That’s not what I meant. We can’t keep having sex. We’re not together anymore.” I have to force the words out. They leave a foul taste in my mouth.

Something about them seems wrong. It’s not a lie. We’re not together. We haven’t been in years. Yet, here we are. I’m beneath him, and he’s grinding against me.

My words are a protest, but my body is telling him another story as I rub my thighs together to relieve some of the pressure. I can feel how soaked my panties are. All it took was seeing his name on the screen of my phone for my body to heat up.

Whether we’re fighting or making up, Kane has that effect on me.

“We could be. All you have to do is say the word, bug. Say yes. I’ll remind you why you should be mine. Tonight. Tomorrow. For the rest of our lives.”

This again.

What is it going to take to convince him that we can’t just forget what happened? That the past will always haunt us? That the future we dreamed of is no longer a reality?

“You say that, but—”

He swallows my words, his tongue invading my mouth and demanding my attention. As if it's second nature, because it used to be, my body responds. My tongue collides with his. My hips thrust against him. And then... Clothes are being ripped off.

Mine specifically.

First my shirt, my nipples hardening as the cool air washes over them. Kane notices and takes the opportunity to twist them between his fingers, causing my back to bow.

This gives him better access to slide my flannel pants over my hips, taking my thong with them, and he doesn't miss a beat.

"Why does it suddenly feel like I'm at your mercy?" My breathing is ragged as I stare up at Kane. His amber eyes smile down at me as he breathes heavily through his parted lips.

"You're not, bug. I'm yours. Always have been. Always will be. You can tell me to stop if it's too much, and I'll back off. You know that."

I do. The first time we were in this situation, I freaked out, and he backed away. I could see the outline of his cock in his athletic shorts, but he never complained.

That was five years ago. Two weeks before we made love for the first time, both of us losing our virginity.

"And if I want you closer?"

*Did I just say that?*

"All you have to do is ask."

But I won't be able to say the words, so instead, I wrap my legs around his waist and pull him close. His eyes fall closed

for a brief moment before he regains control of himself and begins shedding his clothes.

I've seen him naked before, but the sight of him always steals my breath. From his defined shoulders to his taut abs and those damn cuts that lead down to his impressive length.

Rolling us so I'm on top, the way he knows I like to be, I brace one hand on Kane's chest and grab his cock with the other, lining him up at my entrance. He tries to thrust upward, but I stop him.

There's one thing I need to clarify before this happens. Again.

“Tonight only.”

“And tomorrow?” he asks, tilting his head to the side in curiosity the same way he always does when we have this conversation—which is only when we're naked. Every time we're naked.

“Tomorrow we go back to the way things are supposed to be.”

“You mean the way they are,” he states.

We see things differently. We probably always will. Which is why I nod instead of arguing with him, as I slowly lower myself, not stopping until I'm fully seated, and Kane's eyes roll to the back of his head.

# TWO

KANE

I LOVE IT WHEN SHE RIDES ME. THE WAY HER PERFECT TITS sway. The way she swivels her hips, driving me crazy. Grinding down and taking matters into her own hands.

Cleo likes control in all aspects of her life. Which is why she likes to be on top. Why I let her. So she has control of the situation. Of her pleasure.

Of mine.

The first time we slept together after she broke my heart, it was an angry fuck. That's the only way to describe it. We were both greedy, taking what we needed from the other person. Pushing them. Growling. Clawing.

There were no sweet words whispered.

No *I love yous*.

We didn't even bother to get undressed. My jeans were around my thighs, pushed down just enough that I could pull my cock out. Her dress was shoved up, her panties pulled aside.

I took her in the laundry room of the Kappa house, against the dryer. At a pledge event we were hosting. It was the end of freshman year, and I'd spent months watching her, keeping my distance, craving her touch.

When we bumped into each other earlier in the night, I had a feeling I was going to snap. Her dress barely covered her ass, and the top dipped too low. Her entire body was on display, and my dick was pressed against my zipper the entire night.

She knew she was making it worse when she started dancing provocatively. Her eyes found mine across the room as her hands skimmed the length of her body. The song was fast, but her movements were slow.

When I saw her make her escape, I followed. I snaked my arm around her waist and pulled her into the laundry room, locking the door behind us. I turned the dryer on to muffle the sounds of her cries after I thrust into her. And mine, when I released inside her without regret.

*"Fuck, Kane! You didn't wear a condom," she hisses as she attempts to push me away.*

*"You have that IUD thing. I didn't think I needed to."*

*"That only stops me from getting pregnant, you asshole. Not from getting an STD."*

*Her words shock me enough that when she pushes against my chest again, I stumble back, my cock slipping from between her slick folds with a soft pop.*

*"Only you, bug. There's only ever been you," I whisper as I watch her adjust her dress before hopping off the dryer.*

We haven't used a condom since that night, and she's never once questioned me again. I've only ever been with Cleo. There's no one else I want to sink into. She knows it.

Whether she wants to admit she's aware is another situation all together.

Cleo likes to live in her own world.

One where I'm a different person than she fell in love with a decade ago. Where all the shit that happened between us—the good and the bad—doesn't exist. Which means all the heartache is erased, but also all the love.

All I get is her body. And that's only when she lets me. Like tonight.

“Kane, I'm close,” she warns, her walls strangling my cock as her rhythm falters.

Quickly flipping us over, I stretch her legs until her ankles are resting on my shoulders and drive into her. This is my favorite angle. I'm able to slip deeper, thrust harder, and watch her come undone.

It's a beautiful sight, the look on her face as she gives in to her pleasure. When she lets go, I'm reminded of the girl I fell in love with in middle school. Gave my heart to in high school. Planned my future with.

And as I release my seed deep inside her, I'm reminded of the girl who broke my heart only a week before the start of that future.

Rolling off of Cleo, we both lay staring up at the ceiling as we attempt to regain control of our breathing. Most of the glow-in-the-dark stars we stuck up there the summer after our junior year of high school are still there.

It's clear a few have fallen, the heart shape they once formed missing most of the right arch. A symbol of our broken hearts, maybe? Or is the fact that most of the stars are still there a symbol of the love that refuses to give up?

I'd like to think it's the latter because I don't think I'll ever stop loving Cleo. No matter how hard I tried at times, my heart has only ever beat for her. Even when that same beat caused it pain.

"We really need to stop doing this," she whispers, pulling the sheet up to cover her naked body.

"Why? It's clear we both enjoy ourselves," I state, rolling to my side so I'm facing her.

"You should go."

"Or I could stay. Hold you while you sleep. Make you breakfast in the morning."

I'm not sure why I offer. She's going to shoot me down the same way she always does. The words slip past my lips before I can stop them, though. Probably because I'm still holding onto hope that one day I won't have to ask if I can do these things.

They will be the norm.

I'll hold her every night after I make love to her. Cook her breakfast every morning. Hold her hand in public. Kiss her when I get home from work. See her belly round with the evidence of our love.

"Kane." She says my name in warning, causing my dick to twitch—he enjoys it when she's feisty— and a smile to spread across my face. "Go."

Not wanting to ruin the high I still feel after being inside her, I honor her demand, slipping out of her bed and slowly pulling my clothes back on.

"When are you coming back to campus?" I ask as I button my jeans, her eyes trained on my hands.

“Saturday morning.”

“Friends-giving dinner?”

“Yeah. Julian invited a few of us from the house.”

Oh, I’m aware. I added her to the guest list, along with a few other girls so it didn’t look obvious.

“Then I guess I’ll see you for dinner in a few days.”

It’s only one day without her. I’ve gone longer. Though, I’d prefer not to spend even one day without her. One moment.

If only she’d stop pushing me away, I might have a chance.

---

**ME: Did you enjoy the show?**

**BUG: If you’re asking me if I enjoyed watching Max get punched, the answer is yes.**

I’M SURPRISED SHE ANSWERED ME SO QUICKLY. NORMALLY, she avoids my texts like the plague after she comes down from the sexual high. I’ll send five for every one response I get. I have a feeling our little roll in the sheets is still fresh in her mind and has her feeling weak.

**ME: What are you up to?**

Silence.

Ten minutes later, when she still hasn’t responded to my message, I throw back my covers and slide in front of my computer, booting it up. I’ll give her five more minutes before I triangulate her phone.

The thought barely crosses my mind when my phone chimes with her reply.



**BUG: We aren't doing this.**

**ME: What? Making polite conversation like we're old friends? Sounds perfectly normal to me.**

I realize I'm pushing her buttons. It's a tactic I've started using the last year or so. Sometimes it breaks her down, other times it just pisses her off. The same way calling her by her nickname does most days.

That's not why I call her it, though.

She's my love bug. She has been for years. I'm just reminding her of that fact when I say it. Reminding her of what we had. Of what she's trying to throw away, hoping that she'll eventually open her eyes and see that I'm still here. Right in front of her, waiting with open arms.

No matter how hard she fights, she'll always be my love bug.

**BUG: I know what you're trying to do, and it's not going to work. I told you nothing is going to happen between us again. We're not together.**

**ME: What about Thanksgiving?**

**BUG: That was a mistake.**

**ME: And the time before that?**

**BUG: I hate you.**

**ME: You say one thing, but your actions say another. I don't think you hate me at all, bug.**

She doesn't bother to reply. When my computer locks in on her location, the urge to rush to the library overwhelms me. I resist, only because I don't want her to know that I can find her with the click of a mouse.

Colt's sitting at the counter when I make my way into the kitchen for a cup of mid-morning coffee before I head off to class. There's a smirk on his face that has the hair on the back of my neck standing on end.

"What?" I growl, keeping my back to him as I pour the rich, black liquid into a mug.

"What has your panties in a bunch this morning? Or rather, who?"

If he only knew ... but he doesn't. No one does. Cleo is my best kept secret.

Our past, our current situation, and the future that I'm still planning for us.

They all think she's a moody bitch, but they don't really know her. They only see what she wants them to, and her entire act is a facade. It's how she keeps everyone at arm's length. A way of protecting herself from getting hurt. If she's dealing out the pain, it can't be inflicted on her.

Turning to face him, I lean against the counter and take a sip of my coffee before answering him. "If I were getting some, you'd be the first to know. Why are you smiling like that? What do you want?"

"A favor."

"Am I going to want to strangle you after you ask?"

"I don't think so. This is right up your alley and will be a great challenge for you. It'll help you hone your skills."

Okay, he has me intrigued. He knows it. We both know my skills don't need to be honed, so he's stroking my ego and buttering me up because this must be important to him.

"Speak. I have a final in an hour."

Colt lays out his proposition, which in all honesty, I do like. It'll be a challenge which makes the deception worth it. I'm not a fan of going behind my friends backs and hacking their phones.

But I'm also a softie when it comes to matters of the heart.

I blame Cleo for that. For loving me and then shattering that love.

And if this is the only way to ensure Brady doesn't fuck things up with Mya, I'm happy to help. That's not what I tell Colt, of course. I have to put up a little bit of a fight. If I didn't, he would have probed me with questions, and as much as I wish I had someone I could confide in about my past and current relationship with Cleo, I made the decision a long time ago to not say a word.

It wasn't an easy one to make. I almost told Colt five or six times that first year. Especially after he caught me staring at her one afternoon. I still remember what she was wearing, how her legs were on display, and the way my heart skipped a beat at the sight of her. He didn't know *who* I was staring at—there were five other Zetas surrounding Cleo—but the fact he caught me and called me out is the entire reason I wear these stupid sunglasses all the time. No matter where I am or who I'm with.

So I can watch her without abandon. Admire her beauty undetected. Let my heart feel the love and the pain.

In the end, I'm happy I kept the situation to myself.

It's given me, and hopefully her as well, a chance to heal. Mostly, it's given me a chance to decide what I want. To clearly see what my future holds. To ensure what I'm fighting for is worth the effort.

And she is.

My doubt barely lasted the first semester of college. The first time I saw her smile it faded and hasn't returned.

If Brady feels for Mya even a fraction of what I feel for Cleo, helping Colt is the right decision.

“You really think this is going to work? Pushing them back together?”

“I think there's a good chance. Am I the only one who ever noticed how he looked at her? He's been in love with her for years, man. *Years!* That says something in and of itself. Plus, I kind of like the idea of them together. They balance each other out. She's feisty, and he's quiet and smug. He somehow knows everything about everyone—”

*Shit! Really? Does he know about me and Cleo? Do I need to be worried that he'll be pissed, and his payback will be to out me?*

“—and it pisses me off. He sneaks around here,” pausing, Colt surveys his surroundings before continuing, as if he half expects Brady to walk through the door at the mention of his name. “Anyway, he needs this. They need this. I'm not sure what happened between them, but I know that given the opportunity, they'll make up. And a little push never hurt anyone.”

A little push.

As if putting them in the same room is enough to change their situation.

Still, I find myself in front of my computer later that night, hacking into Mya's phone. Brady stopped over earlier, and Colt was able to weasel some information out of him. He's meeting Evie downtown at a coffee shop in a few days.

What he doesn't know is that he's also meeting Mya there.

# THREE

KANE

HOLIDAY BREAK IS ALWAYS HARD.

Being back home. Being reminded of what I once had and lost.

Memories assault me from every angle as I make my way through town, attempting to keep my focus on the road ahead. But my eyes drift.

To the bakery Cleo and I used to frequent after school.

To the flower shop I bought Cleo's corsages from for senior prom.

To the park where Cleo and I shared our first kiss, on the swings.

It was the end of our third *real* date. My parents had driven us to the movie theater, and we'd walked to the diner to get pie after. We had a half hour before her mom was picking us up, so we went to the park across the street.

---

*“THE STARS ARE SO BRIGHT TONIGHT.” CLEO’S HEAD IS THROWN back as she stares up at the sky. I want to look, but my gaze is fixed on her.*

*She’s so beautiful. And sweet. My heart hammers in my chest as I take in her profile. I can feel my hands start to get clammy, so I pull mine from her grasp.*

*That’s enough to draw her attention back to me.*

*She catches me staring at her, and I avert my eyes. They land on the rusted set of playground equipment, and I say the first thing that comes to mind.*

*“Wanna swing?”*

*“Sure,” she sings, excitement in her voice, as she takes off in a sprint toward the playground, the hem of her dress floating behind her, lifting slightly.*

*When she walked out of her house wearing the yellow sundress, I thought I was going to pass out. At a loss for words, I smiled at her, my eyes locked on hers, until her father cleared his throat.*

*Message received. Don’t look at her like that.*

*I’m only a few steps behind Cleo when she stumbles to the ground, and I instantly rush to her side. She’s laughing, clutching her chest.*

*“Are you okay?”*

*“I’m fine,” she replies through labored breaths. “I think I tripped myself.”*

*Scanning her body for injuries, Cleo’s laughter dies. She pushes herself upright and my nose brushes against hers.*

*“Kane, I—”*

*Shit. I'm close enough to kiss her right now. I want to kiss her. But will she let me? Is it too soon?*

*We've only known each other for six months. I'm not sure how long I should wait before I try. I've never kissed a girl before. I've never even thought about it until her.*

*"Let me help you up," I rush to say as I scramble off the ground next to her and extend my hand.*

*"Okay." I can hear the disappointment in her voice.*

*Did she want me to kiss her?*

*We make our way to the swings, hand-in-hand. But once we're seated, neither of us push off. We sit there in uncomfortable silence, waiting for the other person to speak. To say what's on their mind. Or to make a move.*

*I know it should be me, but I can't seem to find the words.*

*Finally, Cleo pushes off the sand, her swing moving side to side instead of front to back. She bumps into me, her giggle floating between us.*

*"You gonna sit there all night like a bump on a log, or are you gonna swing with me?"*

*"You're not swinging," I counter. "You're attacking me."*

*"You like it," she states, the momentum from her swing causing her to bump into me again, sending her into a fit of giggles.*

*I love her laugh. I love the way her face lights up when she smiles. I love everything about this girl. And that's what scares me the most.*

*The third time her swing hits me, I reach up and grab the chains with both hands, holding it in place. Cleo's still*



*laughing when I spin both of us so we're facing each other. Our eyes meet, and her laughter catches in her throat.*

*"You think you're funny," I say, moving my hands slowly down the chains to the plastic seat she's sitting on so I can pull her closer.*

*I'm going to kiss her now. I want to kiss her. I know it's going to be awkward, and I have no idea what I'm really doing, but this is the moment. I can feel it in my heart.*

*Now or never.*

*"I am funny."*

*"You're a bully is what you are. Picking on me like that," I tease as I slowly lean in.*

*"You looked freaked out. I wanted to make you smile." Her words are soft, my nose brushing hers as I angle my face.*

*"You always make me smile. Being with you is the highlight of every day."*

*Testing the waters, I let my lips graze against hers. She doesn't pull back, and her eyes have fallen closed, so I take that as a sign I can press forward. And when I do, I feel a fire light inside my heart.*

*With my lips pressed to Cleo's, I freeze, overcome with a feeling I can't describe. She must feel it too because her eyes pop open. And in them, I see everything.*

*My life. My future. Her and me.*

*She places her palms against my cheeks, holding me hostage against her lips, and I wonder if she sees it too.*

*Us.*

---

“HELLO!” I HOLLER AS I WALK THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR OF my childhood home. A place that holds some of my best memories.

It also holds tons of memories of Cleo.

Coming here reminds me of what I’ve lost.

“In the kitchen,” my mom calls out.

Dusting the freshly fallen snow off my shoulders, I drop my bags at the end of the stairs and head into the kitchen to find my mother and Cleo’s mom sitting at the kitchen counter drinking coffee.

“Hey, honey. How was the drive?”

“Fine, Mom. Hi, Mrs. Griffin.”

“How are you, Kane?” she asks, lifting her mug to her lips and taking a sip as she assesses me the way she always has.

When Cleo and I were dating, I use to worry that she didn’t like me. That she didn’t think I was good enough for her daughter.

I know different now. She does this to everyone. Watches their reactions to the simplest questions. Cleo calls her mom a human lie detector. After all these years, I have to agree that she’s on to something.

Which is why I go for the truth. Well, partial truth.

“I’m good, thanks. Tired.”

“You look like you haven’t been sleeping enough,” she states as she sets her mug on the counter.

I'm not tired from lack of sleep. I'm tired from fighting her daughter. From dreaming about her. From struggling to deal with losing her. It's a battle I've been losing for years.

"Maybe you should take a nap," my mom suggests.

Nodding, I let my mom believe that's what I'm going to do and head to my room. Only, the second I close the door behind me, I flop down on my bed and text Cleo instead of closing my eyes.

**ME: You home yet?**

The minutes tick by as I wait for her reply. Minutes turn into hours as I stare at my phone, wishing I could pinpoint her location so I'd know she is safe. It's not until after dinner and an action flick with my parents that she finally replies.

**CLEO: Yes.**

**ME: Want to hang out?**

**CLEO: No.**

**ME: You sure? I bought you a present I think you're going to like.**

Shopping for Cleo has always felt impossible. Until this year. I wasn't planning on getting her anything. She refused my gift last year—a charm for the necklace I bought her for her sixteenth birthday. A necklace she doesn't wear anymore. But this year, as I was attempting to find the perfect gift for my mom, an idea struck, and I knew it would be perfect.

**CLEO: You know I won't accept it.**

**ME: Don't you want to know what it is before you decline the gift?**

**CLEO: Why? So you can make me feel bad about it?**

**ME: I'd never do that.**

I'm banking on the fact that once she sees it, she won't be able to refuse it. But in order for that to happen, I have to convince her to at least open it.

**CLEO: I'll think about it. Goodnight, Kane.**

**ME: It would be a great night if you were cuddled in bed with me.**

**CLEO: Not going to happen.**

**ME: Bad idea?**

Am I pushing her buttons? Probably.

**CLEO: Don't ask questions you already know the answer to.**

**ME: So I shouldn't ask if you still love me?**

The moment I hit send I regret it because I've gone too far. Do I think she still loves me? Hell yes she does. She may not want to. It may be too painful to admit. But at the end of the day, Cleo loves me. She always will. The same way I'll always love her and only her.

I'm not surprised when she doesn't reply. I expected her silence after that. I'm also not the kind of guy who's going to give up that easily.

Which is why I'm standing on her parents' front porch the next morning with her favorite mocha latte in one hand and a piece of pie in the other.

Beck's smile fades when she opens the door to find me shivering, the morning sun at my back. I could have waited another hour or two to barge in on her, but that would have given her time to prepare for my arrival.

Cleo is many things—stubborn, smart, insightful. The one thing she is not is stupid. She can predict my moves as easily as I can predict her reactions.

“A little early for a booty call, isn’t it?” Beck asks with the lift of his brow as he blocks me from entering the house.

“Not a booty call, bro.”

“I’m not your brother.”

“You’ll always be my brother, Beckham.”

He may not understand that right now, but I’ll always think of him as family. Even if Cleo never gives in to the fact that we’re meant to be together.

“She’s still asleep,” he states firmly, ignoring my response.

“I figured. That’s why I brought breakfast.”

“Is she expecting you?”

“Nope.” I pop the P for emphasis and shoulder my way into the house, my fingers gripping the bag with Cleo’s apple pie tighter. In the short time I stood outside my fingers started to turn into icicles, and now they’re stinging as the feeling slowly returns.

“I’m not taking the blame for letting you in if she’s pissed.”

“Beckham, language,” his mother scolds as she rounds the corner into the foyer. “Good morning, Kane.”

“Morning.”

“Cleo needs to wake up anyway. You know the way.”

Toeing off my sneakers, I give her a warm smile as I pass. Her voice follows me down the hall as she chides Beck for being mean to me.

Knocking once, I crack Cleo's door open to find her still sleeping soundly, her covers tucked under her chin, back to me as I enter.

Setting the coffee and pie on her nightstand, I climb onto the bed, pressing a kiss to her temple. That's enough to stir her from the depth. She rolls toward me, cracking one eye open and then another.

"What are you—" Cleo's voice fades, her nose twitching. "Do I smell apple pie?"

"Breakfast of champions."

"I thought I was clear last night, Kane. I don't want any gifts."

"That's not your gift," I state, placing one hand on either side of her head, trapping her body beneath mine as I lean in close.

"I'm not having sex with you," she whispers as she shudders beneath me, her nipples pebbling beneath her thin t-shirt.

"I never said anything about sex."

"I can see it in your eyes," she counters, pushing against my chest, her hand over my rapidly beating heart in a vain attempt to try to slide out from beneath me, but I don't move.

"What you see in my eyes is love, bug."

Cleo's lips part. She shouldn't be surprised by my admission, but she is. Every single time I remind her how I feel. That I still love her. That I'll always love her. And I have no intentions to stop telling her until she believes it again.

"Kane," she starts, pushing against my chest again. This time I move back enough so she can prop herself up on her

elbows. “I have to pee.”

Chuckling, I move so she can slide out of bed and watch as she walks into her adjoining bathroom. When she emerges a few minutes later, her face has been freshly washed, her hair wrangled into a messy bun on the top of her head, and sadly, she’s put on a bra.

“I’ve decided I’ll accept the pie and coffee,” she starts, snatching them both off the table before taking a seat at her desk, “but I won’t accept whatever gift you bought me. Do I need to remind you that we’re not dating anymore? Again. Because you’re not obligated to get me anything.”

“What if I said the gift is for both of us?”

“Then you keep it.”

“Well, I can’t very well get rid of it.”

Cleo’s eyes flick to me as I unbutton my jacket. Letting it fall from my shoulders, Cleo takes in the bow wrapped around my bare chest. It took me twenty minutes to get it tight enough to keep it from falling down.

“I thought I said we weren’t having sex.”

“I’m not the present, bug.”

“Then why are you wearing a giant red bow?” Her eyes devour every inch of my exposed skin, causing a shiver to run up my spine. I know what she’s thinking, I can feel the sexual tension swirling between us, but that’s not what this is about.

“Come here and find out.” I mean for the invitation to sound innocent, but the words come out more of a growl, sending a shot of adrenaline south.

“I’m not unwrapping you,” she states, turning her back to me as she pulls the pie from it’s confines.

“Cleo, please. I swear this has nothing to do with getting you in bed.”

She ignores me for a few minutes as she stabs the plastic fork into the pie, shoveling a few bites into her mouth, a groan accompanying each one. If she’s trying to make me snap, she’s doing a great job. I’m barely holding it together right now.

Do I want to bend her over and fuck her into submission?  
Yes.

Will I? No. Because I was being honest when I said this isn’t about sex. This is about us.

“Fine, but only because you brought me pie,” she grumbles as she takes her third bite, dropping the fork into the Styrofoam container.

Cautiously, Cleo approaches, her hands trembling as she reaches for the ribbon. Slowly pulling until the bow releases, it falls to the floor between us. Cleo’s swift intake of breath and the tears stinging the corners of her eyes have me wanting to pull her into my arms, but I don’t.

Instead, I let her stare as tears run down her cheeks.

“What have you done?” she asks, her fingertips lightly tracing the outline of the tattoo.

“My heart belongs to you, Cleo. It always has.”



# FOUR

CLEO

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?” I ASK AS I STARE AT KANE IN the reflection of my bathroom mirror, the fog from my shower finally evaporating. My hair is still twisted up in a towel and piled on top of my head, and I’m wrapped in only the lush pink robe my parents bought me for Christmas.

It’s been almost two weeks since I’ve laid eyes on him. On the heart he tattooed on his chest. The initials inside it a shock to my soul.

Not that he hasn’t texted me every chance he’s gotten since the moment we both stepped foot back in town.

So much for having a relaxing holiday break.

I should have known, though. Anytime we’re home at the same time, he blows up my phone with messages. Asking if I want to get together. Go to the movies. Grab dinner.

Look at the stars.

No, no, no, and definitely not.

I’d take them down if I could. I’ve tried. On multiple occasions. They’ve been on my ceiling so long now they’re a

part of it apparently. I was able to get four stars down the night I ended our relationship.

Four.

That's it.

I stood on my bed with my arms stretched over my head for hours, clawing at them, and only four came down.

"I came to see you."

"You've seen me. You can leave now."

Am I being a bitch? Sure am. Because I know if I give even an inch, he's going to take a mile. And then we'll end up naked and breathing heavily, and I still can't shake the memories of Thanksgiving from my brain.

"You could show me more, ya know," he sings, leaning against the doorjamb of the bathroom and crossing his arms over his chest, his eyes never leaving mine through the reflection.

"Or I could drag your smug ass to the front door and push you in the snow to cool you off."

"Bug, you're acting cold enough for the both of us. Want me to warm you up?"

*Grr.*

I can't do this with him anymore.

"Why are you really here, Kane?"

"I'm heading back to campus for New Year's Eve. I came to say goodbye."

"Like last time?" Rolling my eyes, I break eye contact with him, but his low chuckle has my eyes flicking back to his

reflection. The smirk on his face irritates the hell out of me. It's the same look he would get right before we would fight.

Like he knew I was getting heated, and he found it amusing.

*Asshole.*

“No, not like last time. Unless that's what you want.” Kane wiggles his eyebrows as he pushes himself upright. In two long strides, he's crowding me against the bathroom counter, pressing his body against mine. “Do you need to fly, bug?”

“Stop calling me that,” I whine, closing my eyes. I can't with him. With that nickname. I used to love it, but now... I just can't. It hurts too much. I can still hear the love he carries for me in that single word.

“Never. You'll always be my love bug. Always,” he repeats, his voice barely above a whisper as his lips find the shell of my ear.

“Kane, I...”

I, what? I have no idea what I want or need. No idea what I'm asking him for. All I know is that I feel weak in his presence, and the longer he's here, the closer he is, the weaker I get.

And anytime I feel weak around Kane, we end up fooling around.

I feel his hand snake around my stomach, dipping into the slit in my robe, and I let out a soft moan, urging him on. To take what he wants. To give me what my body craves.

He plays my body like a fine-tuned instrument, strumming the right chords. Delicately at first before increasing the tempo when my body begins to hum. I feel him grow hard against my

ass as he slips one, then two fingers through my slick folds, curling them to reach the spot he knows I like, as his palm rubs against my clit.

I'm putty in his hands.

Aching for release.

And all it takes is for him to whisper dirty promises in my ear to help me see stars.

"I love how you clench around my fingers. How you thrust against my palm, taking what you want. Come for me, bug. Give me your pleasure."

I fall apart seconds later, and I feel him smile against my neck as I soak his hand.

"Are you sure you don't want to keep doing this, bug?" Kane thrusts himself against me, the bulge in his pants pressed between the cheeks of my ass. Another thrust and I swallow the moan that's threatening to escape. To echo the moan he lets loose as he thrusts a third time. "Because I could do this for the rest of my life and never get bored."

I don't get a chance to reply before there's a knock on my bedroom door interrupting us. Kane steps back, removing his fingers from inside me, leaving me with an empty feeling I don't want to welcome.

Moving past him, I hear the water turn on just as I open my door to find Beck standing on the other side, a knowing grin on his face.

"I hope I didn't interrupt anything."

"You know you didn't," I state, rolling my eyes at my little brother. Considering he knows Kane is in here, he must have been the one to let him in the house.

“Whatever you say, sis. Mom wants to make sure you’re going to be ready to go in an hour.”

Lunch with my grandmother followed by binge shopping at the outlet mall is exactly what I need to get my mind off Kane and the effect he’s been having on me lately.

“I’ll be ready.”

Nodding, Beck’s gaze drifts over my shoulder to where I assume Kane is standing. He nods once at him, then again at me before turning and leaving as quickly as he showed up.

“I should get going anyway. I just came to say goodbye, remember.”

“If that’s your story,” I mumble as he moves past me, his hand grazing mine. A touch so soft I would have missed it if I wasn’t expecting it.

“When are you coming back?”

“Not until classes start. Why?”

“There’s a party tomorrow night. Fade Into Nothing is playing. Max owed Colt a favor, and he called it in.”

“This is the first I’ve heard about it. I have plans already, but thanks.”

Masking my pain in front of Kane is a skill I have yet to master. He knows all my ticks and tells. For instance, I lift my chin in defiance before I can stop myself, meeting his eyes.

With anyone else, they would think I was showing confidence. But Kane knows better. He knows that’s how I cover for feeling exposed and hurt. So other people don’t see that they can get to me.

“I know they didn’t invite you, Cleo. I’m inviting you. As my guest. My date.”

“No.”

“Are you sure? There’s no one else I’d rather kiss at midnight than—”

“Me. I know Kane. You said the same thing last year.”

Which is why I purposely made it a point to avoid him this year. The significance of the night doesn’t escape me. A new year. Fresh start. A new beginning.

Which is what Kane thinks he wants. With me. And if I ever thought it was an actual possibility, that we could start over without reliving all the shit we’ve been through, I might consider it. But the pain, though almost four years old, still feels fresh. The sting never seems to fade. And I know, giving in to him, trying again, will create a fissure in my heart that time will never heal.

“The offer is there if you change your mind.”

His parting words have me on edge the rest of the afternoon. It’s not just about the party or New Year’s Eve. He’s offering more than one night. He’s offering me a chance to start over.

His voice is still in my head, his words on replay as I countdown to midnight with my parents, my second glass of red in my hand. And I’m still focused on them when my phone chimes as the clock strikes midnight.

**K1: Happy New Year, Bug.**

**ME: Same to you.**

**K1: {emoji blowing a kiss}**

That one I don't respond to. I can't. It would give him false hope, and I've done that enough over the last few years, allowing him into my bed.

Sleep eludes me most of the night. I toss and turn, my thoughts constantly drifting to Kane. To what we used to have. The love we used to share. The years we spent dreaming together of the life we were going to create.

Which is why I'm wide awake when Scarlet sends a code pink text message the next morning. She's calling an emergency meeting, but she's not inviting the entire house.

After throwing all my shit in my bag as quickly as I can, I wash my face, write my parents a note since they're still not awake, and jump in my car. I'm backing out of the driveway when Scarlet picks up my call.

"Perfect timing. My parents are on the other line, and I can't deal with their shit this early in the morning."

"What'd they do this time?" Her parents are an interesting breed. Their standards are high, and there's no way in hell Scarlet will ever be able to meet them. I'd never tell her that, though, because it's not her fault. It's theirs.

From what I know of them, they allow money and status to rule their world. And if you're not from the same social circles as them, you might as well be a vagrant living on the streets. I've never understood how she came from people like that. She's kind and caring and doesn't give a shit about how much money is in your bank account. The exact opposite of them.

"That's a long story. Let's just say they were themselves over break. I refused to accept the future they built for me, and now we're not speaking. Or, at least, I thought we weren't

until they called. I wouldn't have answered, but I assumed it was you."

"And you don't want their future because why? Aren't you're parents like insanely rich?"

"Yes, and unhappy with life. I'd rather be poor and happy than rich and miserable."

"I'd rather be rich and happy." It's true. Why not shoot for both? Happiness can't be bought with money, but money can buy a lot of other things that will put a smile on my face, even if that smile is only temporary. "Did you want to call me back?"

"Um, no. I'd rather deal with this issue than anything they want to talk to me about this morning."

"Are they still on the other line?"

"Yup."

"You're not going to click back over, are you?"

"Not a chance in hell." I can hear the fire building inside her. Her anger is palpable, even through the phone.

"Fine. Start talking then. I want to know what I'm walking into before I get there. I have my entire drive to figure out a plan." If this is really a code pink, a plan will be necessary. Because the meeting won't end until we have a solution to whatever problem lies ahead.

"Here's the thing; I don't think a plan is going to help us here."

"And why is that?" I want to laugh, because a solid plan can solve any problem, but I hold it in.



“You can’t plan for how emotions are going to play out. And that’s what’s at stake here. If we’re not careful, hearts are going to break, and it’ll be our fault instead of Max’s.”

*Fuck!* Of course it would be something to do with Max. When it comes to him, I have no idea what to do. I never have. Which is why my anger toward him radiates off me in waves every time he’s around. I can’t control it.

“I’m not going to say anything else until everyone is together.”

But she didn’t include everyone on the message. In fact...

“I couldn’t help but notice there were a few girls you left off the group message.”

“That was on purpose.”

“So is it safe to assume that they are the hearts we’re concerned about?”

I really hope not. She didn’t include Kora in the message, and not only do I hate keeping secrets from my best friend, but if she’s involved with Max, I’m not sure I’ll be able to keep my emotions in check.

“It is, but don’t get ahead of yourself. I know your—” Scarlet’s voice drifts off for a moment before she continues. “Sorry, my mother was calling. What was I saying?”

“You were about to tell me that you know how my mind works. That I’ll start playing out scenarios based on no factual evidence and show up ready to throw down.”

“Not exactly what I was thinking, but yeah. Try not to let your imagination run too wild.”

“I’m just going to throw this out there, so take it for whatever it’s worth. Max is in love with one of them, using the

other one, and both are about to get their hearts broken. If that's the case, there's nothing we can do to help them. Nothing we can do to stop what's already in motion. And honestly, at the end of the day, Max will end up alone, so I'm not entirely sure I'm all that interested in changing the outcome. That man deserves everything he gets. It's about time he pays for his sins."

I shouldn't have said that. Should have kept my mouth shut. Which is why I'm biting my lip, waiting for her reply. She's going to ask the same question everyone has at least once over the last few years.

"Why?"

There it is. But I've been down this road before. I know how to play it off. To keep my cool. To control the narrative.

"Why what?"

"Why do you hate him so much? What happened that has you seething with anger every time you lay eyes on him, every time you hear his name?"

"That's a long story. Let's just say he likes to play games but doesn't like to lose. And one day, it sounds like soon, he's going to lose it all."

I'm pulling onto the highway as I bid her farewell, my mind running wild with scenarios. I'll find out what's really going on soon enough, but in my heart, I have a feeling I already know. And for once my head is in agreement.

Because Max, of all people, is great at keeping secrets. His own and other peoples. Which, in this case, scares the crap out of me. If they've unearthed a secret he's been keeping, there's no stopping him from revealing what he has on me to save his own ass.

# FIVE

CLEO

SITTING AT THE KITCHEN ISLAND, WAITING ON MYA TO COME back, I sip my wine as my mind runs wild.

Which sister is Max really involved with if it's not Gia?

Mya rounds the corner, nodding her head at Scarlet, a clear sign that both Gia and Kora, the only other two who are back from break, are upstairs and we can talk freely.

“Okay, ladies. I’ll keep this short and sweet,” Scarlet says, keeping her voice low. “Max is fake dating Gia.” She pauses, looking each of us in the eye. “Okay, I guess that was obvious.”

“The fact he doesn’t even touch her was a dead giveaway.” Kendall seems annoyed more than normal when Max’s name is mentioned. We’ve always been on the same page when it comes to him. Neither of us want to talk about him, to him, or hear his name mentioned.

I guarantee her reasons are drastically different than mine.

“Gia did a nice job of trying to sell it, though,” Mya notes, topping her glass with the sweet red we opened.

“Moving on. I’m pretty sure he’s using her to get to Kora. He’s trying to make her jealous.”

Scarlet’s words send a shiver up my spine.

*Kora?*

My best friend. The person I share everything with. Well, almost everything. She knows how I feel about Max. She knows I put a ban on the girls in this house dating him.

Not that they listened apparently.

Even if his relationship with Gia is all for show, she still broke the cardinal rule.

Kendall starts cracking up, almost tumbling out of her chair. I reach over and grab her by the arm to keep her from falling over as she gasps for her next breath.

“My sister and Max loath each other.” True. “They can’t even stand to be in the same room. He’s always shooting dirty looks in her direction. She refuses to go anywhere he’s going to be unless it’s a sanctioned event by the sorority.” Agreed. “And—” Kendall pauses, as if she’s contemplating the merit of the idea. Her face contorts, eyes widening, as she screams, “Son of a bitch!”

No. This can’t be.

Not Kora. Not my best friend. Not the one person who’s always supposed to be on my side. How could she do this to me? Why?

Of all the people she could get involved with, why did it have to be him?

How long has something been going on between them?  
How long has she been keeping secrets from me?

And what has Max told her?

“It took me a minute to see it too,” Scarlet states as we all stare at Kendall who has apparently been stunned silent by her realization. “Last night, Max punched a guy out. We knew it was over a girl. What we didn’t know is that it was over Kora. Or, at least, that’s what we’re assuming. Gia was with Max, so I know the guy wasn’t hitting on her. But Kora, she was flying solo last night. I didn’t see it happen, I was in Colt’s room, but he said—”

“You were in Colt’s room?” Scarlet and Colt are a thing now? I didn’t see that coming either. Am I that out of touch with my friends? Or is everyone keeping secrets and lying to me? “Why were you at the Kappa house? Why was everyone at the Kappa house?”

“There was a last-minute party. More of a concert. Fade Into Nothing played.”

That’s a bold-faced lie.

Last minute my ass. Kane invited me. Not that I can share that information with them. But even if I didn’t already know about the party, Scarlet has a tell; they all do. Hers is biting her lip which is what she’s doing right now. And her eyes are pleading with me to believe her lie.

I’ll call her out on that later. Right now, I want to know what happened and why she thinks Max is involved with Kora. Because I’m honestly having a hard time believing any of this is real, even if his relationship with Gia is all fake.

“Okay. So Max punched who?”

“A friend of his from back home. My guess is that he was hitting on Kora.” Scarlet’s answer confirms her lie. Last

minute party my ass. This was planned, and I wasn't invited on purpose.

How could Kane not tell me?

Scratch that...

“Do we have any actual evidence?” Mya asks. “Brady said he punched Beau, but he wouldn't say why. That man is so infuriating. I know he saw something.”

Kendall leans forward, eyes wide but her focus straight ahead on the refrigerator, as if she's watching it all play out in front of her.

“Finn and Willow had just left. Declan was using the bathroom, and then we were going to head out. Kora was in the kitchen getting a cup of punch, so I went to say goodbye when a guy slid up next to her. She was smiling so big I didn't want to interrupt. Declan and I left a few minutes later. She was still talking to him when I waved goodbye to her.”

Good for Kora. She never puts herself out there. She's always focused on school, homework, the sorority. She hasn't even been on a date in forever. Not since the end of last year, and then she ran off to play flight attendant after it ended poorly. It was like one second she was excited to go out with a guy she met in class, and the next she was running away as fast as she could, refusing to talk about what happened.

Could that have been Max?

“My guess would be he was talking to her, or maybe doing more than talking, when we came upstairs,” Mya says, resting her elbows on the counter and mimicking Kendall's position. “Gia and Max walked in the room ahead of me and Brady. I'd barely hit the tile when Brady moved me behind him. When I

glanced around him, I saw Max's fist slam into some guy's face."

I don't like what I'm hearing. I don't like the how the simple facts are coming together in my head. Because it would mean that Scarlet is right. That Max might, in fact, be dating Gia to make Kora jealous. That he has feelings for her that would make him punch a friend over flirting with her.

Before I realize what I'm doing, my thoughts flow past my lips.

"So here's what I've got... Max punched some guy he knows from high school for talking to Kora. More than likely because he cares about Kora and is too much of an idiot to admit it to her. Kora has the hots for Max but refuses to admit it because, well, he's Max. He's an asshole. And Gia is just a pawn in this entire game. Max is using her however he wants. To make Kora jealous, so he doesn't feel alone."

"So what do we do about it?" Kendall asks.

"You mind your own business, that's what."

The sound of Gia's voice has the four of us turning to stare at her. Her gaze is locked on Scarlet, and it's not a friendly stare. Which means she didn't discuss anything about this with her beforehand. The betrayal she feels is crystal clear in the gleam in her eye.

Not that I blame her.

Scarlet is supposed to be her best friend, and she's been talking about her behind her back. Discussing her relationship. Her *fake* relationship, but those are just semantics.

"Gia—"

“Don’t, Cleo. Don’t say anything, any of you. This is none of your damn business. My relationship is none of your business. Who I date is my prerogative, and nothing you say or do will change that.” Finally turning away from Scarlet, Gia’s eyes find mine. “Your opinion of him doesn’t mean shit to me. I don’t care if you like him or not. I don’t care if you have a problem with him. So save the lecture for someone who will listen.”

Gia storms off before any of us can say anything. I hear the slam of her bedroom door, the walls reverberating from the force. I wouldn’t be surprised if the framed alumni class photos that hang on the wall shook loose.

No one speaks for a few minutes, all of us in shock by her reaction. It was over the top and out of character for Gia. Even if she is a drama major, that was above and beyond what was necessary. Not to mention, it was clear that her reaction wasn’t a performance. She was really upset which makes me wonder if Kora’s not the only one who has feelings for Max.

Mya takes the opportunity to top off our glasses, polishing off the bottle. She’s rinsing it in the sink when Kora walks into the kitchen, brows raised when she spots the four of us.

“What the hell is going on? Why is Gia slamming doors?”

The other girls glance around, their eyes finally falling to me to provide an answer. I’m their leader. Kora’s best friend. If someone is going to be honest with her, it’s going to be me.

Of course, that’s not what I do.

“Not sure. She stormed through the kitchen without a word, and then we heard her door slam.”

Kora accepts my lame explanation, shrugging her shoulders as she reaches into the fridge and pulls out a bottle



of water. She's attempting to act unaffected, but I see the change in the set of her shoulders. In the way she's assessing each of us as we all remain silent, sipping our wine, acting as natural as possible.

She cares more than she wants us to know. More than she probably wants to admit to herself.

Kendall's the first to break the thick silence hanging in the air, announcing her departure to meet up with Declan as she bounces out of her chair. Coincidentally, Scarlet and Mya's phones chime at the same time moments after Kendall's out the door. Both dump their wine and leave through the back door with the same fire under their feet as Kendall.

That leaves me alone with Kora, which is what I feel they planned all along. I should be the one to talk to her about this. If there's anyone she'll be honest with, it's me, right? Her best friend.

There's only one small flaw in their plan.

She thinks I loathe Max. Which I both do and don't, so I can understand why that's what she would believe. It's what I want her to believe. What I've led everyone to believe.

"So how was your break?" I ask as she leans on the counter across from where I'm seated.

"Uneventful. Yours?"

"Same." I can't decide who's lying more. Me or her. I can't tell her that I had a run-in with Kane over break. She doesn't even know that we have a past. Or that we're from the same small town.

I've been lying to her and everyone else for years. By omission. Which, after all this time, somehow seems worse than telling an actual lie.

“Why are you home early then?” she asks, taking a sip from her bottle but never breaking eye contact.

“Had to get out of there. My parents were driving me nuts. Plus, I was bored. What about you?”

“Party last night.” Kora rolls her eyes, her lips forming a smirk.

“Did you have fun at least?”

“It was okay, I guess. Fade Into Nothing put on a great show. It’s been so long since I’ve been to one of their shows, I forgot how good they are.”

The last show Kora and I went to together was last year. They tend to draw a big crowd, and it can get a little rowdy sometimes. Not exactly the kind of place I feel comfortable. Not to mention... Wherever Colt goes, Kane tends to be not far behind. And I like to avoid all the places he is as much as I can.

“Did you take a date?”

Not the greatest segue, but she isn’t giving me much to work with, and I don’t have all night to try to get the information out of her.

“No...” Kora stretches the word out as she stares at me with a knowing look. When I don’t press her further, she lets out a sigh and moves around the island to take the seat next to me. “But I did meet someone.”

“Really? And who might this someone be?”

“I have a feeling you’ve already heard. No one around here can keep a secret.”

“The girls might have mentioned they saw you talking to someone. One of Max’s friends from back home.” Kora nods,

so I continue. “They also might have mentioned that Max got in a fight with that same guy. Any idea why?”

“No clue. Beau and I were talking one minute, and the next Max’s fist was in his face. It was crazy. The poor guy was caught off guard. I felt horrible for him.”

“Sounds to me like Max was protecting you the way he tries to protect his sisters.” The people he cares about. The women in his life.

I expect her to bite, but she doesn’t. Not even a nibble.

“Randomly punching his friends... Sounds more like Max has finally lost his mind.”

And with that, she waves at me over her shoulder as she heads up the stairs to her room, leaving me more confused than I was when Scarlet started talking. I almost doubt the theory that there’s something going on between her and Max.

Almost.

# SIX

KANE

“I NEED YOU TO DO ME A FAVOR.” COLT BURSTS THROUGH MY door just as I click out of the tracking window I had open. Cleo’s been avoiding me, ignoring my texts since she returned to campus, and my plan was to find out where she was and ‘accidentally’ bump into her.

But she’s not at the library like I was hoping she would be.

She’s at the Zeta house.

And there’s no way to sneak in there without being noticed, which causes my mood to turn even more sour than it’s been the last few weeks. I miss her. Talking to her. Seeing her. The smell of her hair. At this point, I’d settle for one of the three. A mirage would satisfy my needs.

That’s a lie. I’ve been dreaming about her every night. A replay of the last time I saw her. The goosebumps that prickled her skin as I slipped my hand beneath her robe. The way her eyes dilated with the first touch. Her stare burning into mine in the reflection of the mirror. The look on her face as she came around my fingers.

Fuck! I’m getting hard just thinking about it right now.

“I’m a little busy,” I say, brushing off his request as I continue to stare at my screens, not that there’s anything interesting on them. I was working on a paper, so two windows have research pulled up and the third has the actual paper on it.

“I need you to talk to Cleo.” He has my attention now. I’d love nothing more than to sit down and talk to her. Not for whatever reason he wants, but for a few of my own. “Something happened at the Kappa house with Gia, and Scarlet’s not talking. It’s fucking with my relationship.”

“Didn’t realize you two were together.”

That’s a lie. I saw them on New Year’s Eve. Saw her sneaking around the house. And I know they’ve been meeting a lot lately to plan the gala, though I doubt any work has been getting done.

“Fuck you. Yes, we’re together. You’ve seen us on campus. You’ve seen her at my shows.”

“Doesn’t mean you’re dating. Just means you guys are friends. I haven’t heard your headboard beating against the wall at night.”

Why am I being such a dick to him? Oh yeah, because he’s asking me to do something I want to do, but I have to pretend it’s the last thing on Earth that interests me.

“Just because we haven’t slept together, doesn’t mean we’re not together. Sex doesn’t make a relationship real.” He says the words through clenched teeth. “Will you help me or not?”

“No.” My statement is firm. Clicking on the search bar, I type in the next set of parameters I need for my paper and click on the hourglass.

“Why not?”

*If only he knew the real reason, he'd shit his pants. The last thing on his mind would be whatever is going on with Gia and Scarlet.*

“I don't want to get involved. This has nothing to do with me.”

“I'll owe you big time.”

“I'm going to have to pass. Man up and talk to her yourself.”

He slams my door behind him as he leaves, and I immediately reach for my cell, shooting her a message. I don't expect a response, but I'm pleasantly surprised when I see three dots appear letting me know she's already typing a reply.

**ME: What's going on at your house that has Colt asking me to talk to you about it? Gia and Scarlet fighting?**

**BUG: Stupid shit with Max and Gia. Scarlet needs to let it go. It doesn't concern her.**

**ME: Does it concern you? Because I bet you're clenching your jaw right now. Max has that effect on you.**

**BUG: Max has no effect on me whatsoever. Think what you want.**

**ME: You mean, the way you led me to think that you two were a couple when you broke up with me.**

**BUG: I'm not having this fight with you again.**

It's only a fight because she owes me an explanation, and she refuses to give me one. She refuses to explain why she lied. Why she wanted me to think something that was so far

from the truth it immediately grabbed my attention. To believe she had moved on from me so quickly.

**ME: One day I'll learn the truth.**

My screen goes dark waiting for her to respond. I knew she wouldn't. I shouldn't have gone there. I don't know why I'm torturing myself. Fighting with her is not something I enjoy doing unless we're in the same room and makeup sex is going to follow.

Considering I haven't seen her, touched her, felt her presence in weeks, sex is not in our near future.

---

“SO, KANE. CLEO NEEDS A DATE FOR THE GALA.”

Scarlet's a nice girl, but she's obviously lost her mind.

When I promised Colt I'd come to his show tonight, I didn't realize Max and Gia were going to be here. Their relationship is... I don't even know. You can tell it's not real. He holds her hand like he would hold his sister's.

If she were eight.

And needed help crossing the street.

With caution.

He refuses to admit the truth, but we all see it anyway. Their relationship is fake as fuck. He gets more turned on fighting with Cleo than he does in Gia's presence, and I tell him as much, antagonizing him until he's ready to punch me.

Ahhh, good times.

It makes me wish the focus was still on Max and Gia right now and not on me. I can feel Max glaring at me out of the

corner of his eye, listening to my conversation with Scarlet. He seemed to take an interest as soon as she said Cleo's name which makes me want to punch him even more than he'd like to punch me.

"Uh, no..." I say, keeping my eyes trained straight ahead so she can't see the look of desperation in my eyes.

I already asked Cleo to the gala. Last week. She ignored my text. The same way she's ignored every other text I've sent her since calling her out about lying.

I'm so desperate to see her, to hear her voice, I felt jealous of Colt today when he told me he spent the afternoon shopping with her.

### *Shopping.*

I hate shopping, but I would have given anything to trade places with him. To spend a few hours with her doing something I hate while she enjoyed every minute of it. To see the smile on her face. To hear the way her voice gets higher when she sees something she loves.

"You won't even consider it?" Scarlet asks. "She's a good person, Kane, and so are you. Plus, neither of you are dating anyone. Why go alone when you could go with a date? We're all going to be riding in the limo together anyway."

Right. The limo.

What Scarlet doesn't know is that I planted that idea in Colt's head then invited myself along. In front of Max, which was a mistake, because he invited himself as well. Which means Gia is going to be riding with us too.

Not that I have anything against her. I just don't understand what she's doing with Max. One of them must have an ulterior motive, and it's a fifty-fifty bet as to who it is.



Either Max is using her or she's using him. And they're both probably in on whatever the reason is. If I can see it clearly, so can everyone else.

"I'll pass."

Thankfully, Scarlet drops the subject as Colt's voice fills the room, but Max's focus is still on me, making me nervous as fuck. When I glance in his direction, he doesn't even bother to look away.

I hold his stare for a few tense moments, not wanting to back down. If he has something to say, he can say it. I'd love to have this conversation with him. I don't care who the hell is around. But we don't get the chance because Gia tugs his arm and pops up on her tiptoes to whisper something in his ear. A few minutes later, they slip out the door without a word.

---

"YOU'VE BEEN HIDING FROM ME." I STARE, FALLING IN STEP beside her as the snow crunches beneath my boots. I'm not surprised that the sidewalk is still covered from last night's accumulation given the early hour.

I've tried and failed to talk to or see Cleo in weeks. I heard through the grapevine that she accepted an internship this semester. It appears to be keeping her busy enough to avoid me at every turn. But the one thing I've noticed that hasn't changed is the fact Cleo can't start her mornings without a cup of coffee from the shop across from campus.

Which is why I've been sitting here, waiting for her to show her beautiful face for over an hour.

I felt her presence even before the bell above the door announced her arrival. I watched as she approached the counter, ordered, and then waited with her back to me.

As if she didn't realize I was there.

I knew differently. Her posture was stiff. Her hands shook at her sides.

My hope was that she would come to me. Feel the pull between us and be unable to stay away any longer. The current swirling in the air was electrified, my skin tingling with excitement at just the sight of her. Unfortunately, that hope died when she grabbed her cup off the counter and darted for the door, her footsteps heavy as if she was stomping off in a huff.

Not that she was going to get far. Her heeled boots were a poor choice considering the weather conditions this morning. We'd gotten at least two inches overnight, and the forecast called for another four. Nothing major but enough to slow her down a step or two. Which is why I was able to catch up to her without breaking a sweat.

"I'm not avoiding you; I'm busy. What are you doing? Stalking me?"

"Stalking is such a nasty word, bug. I just wanted to see you, to make sure you were okay since you've been *avoiding* my texts and calls."

"Like I said, I've been busy."

"The new job?"

"And classes, the gala, house drama..." Her voice trails off as she takes a sharp left at the corner, looking both ways before crossing the road to campus.

“Is this still about Gia and Max? You realize it’s all a bunch of bullshit, right?” Cleo lets out a huff but doesn’t reply. Wrapping my hand around her arm, I pull her to a stop then move in front of her to block her path. “Talk to me, bug.”

“There’s nothing to talk about, Kane. And stop calling me that. You know I hate it.”

“You didn’t use to.” Cleo frowns before steeling her expression. “I don’t care what we talk about, just talk to me. I miss talking to you. We used to talk about everything. Once upon a time, we were friends.”

“And once upon a time, we were also more. And now we’re not. What else do you want me to say?”

My heart aches in my chest. I should be over this. Over her. I should move on. I know this, but I can’t. My love for her is still alive. It’s real, and it won’t go away. No matter how hard she pushes. I tried to let her go, and it only made me crave her more. And every time she pushes me away, I’m starting to think I fall a little more in love with her.

Which is fucked up; I know.

“I want you to tell me that you still want the happily ever after we talked about. The house with the big backyard, the porch swing, and the kids running around screaming at the top of their lungs.”

I mentally cross my fingers that she doesn’t see the trap I just set. Her eyes glare at me with an intensity that lights my insides on fire.

“Laughing, Kane. I said laughing, not screaming. Why would I want a screaming child?”

Perfect.

“So you do still think about it. About me. About our future. The one we could still have if—”

“No.”

“No to which part, bug?”

“All of it,” she states, crossing her arms over her chest and pursing her lips. I have her right where I want her, feeling weak and vulnerable. Ready to strangle me for bringing up the topic again. For pushing her.

“One day, bug, you’ll change your tune. I’ll be here waiting. Always. But please, don’t make me wait too long to have you back in my arms.” Leaning in close, I take her by the shoulders, holding her hostage, and kiss her on the cheek.

“What are you doing, Kane?” she practically yells, attempting to step out of my embrace. “Someone could see us.”

“Let them see, bug. I’m not ashamed of the way I feel about you. I don’t care who knows I’m in love with you. That I’ve always loved you.”

Releasing her, I let my fingers graze her hip as I walk past. A simple touch, but I hear her audible exhale, a sign that it had the desired effect I was hoping it would.

# SEVEN

CLEO

HE'S LAYING IT ON THICKER AND THICKER THESE DAYS, AND I'm finding it harder and harder to say no to him. To lie and deny that I still love him.

Which pisses me off.

But what makes me even angrier is the fact that I know he can tell I'm lying.

Asshole.

And I tell him as much as soon as I take a seat in my first lecture of the day, my head still hazy from our early morning encounter.

**ME: I can't do this with you anymore. You have to stop. What we had was amazing. I'll never regret it. But it's over, and it's been over for years. We can't undo what's been done. We can't go back and change the past. Nothing will take the pain away. Nothing will erase our mistakes. So please, if you care about me at all, stop pushing me.**

I expect an immediate reply, but when one doesn't come, I feel the loss of him in my heart. It's what I wanted, right? So why does it suddenly feel like I'm even more vulnerable than

when he was standing in front of me, talking about imaginary future children.

Or when I walked in the coffee shop and spotted him sitting in the corner.

Shaking away the unwelcome feeling, I open my laptop and check my email while I wait for class to start. It's only the third week of my internship, but it's keeping me busy. Any extra minutes I can carve out to take care of little details helps me stay ahead of the game.

And I'm quickly learning that when working for Dixon Advertising, being ahead of the game is important.

It's a dream job.

Well, not technically, but it could be. Right now I'm only an executive assistant, but my boss, Emerson, is amazing. She's willing to teach me anything I'm willing to learn. Which means I've been taking on extra tasks in the hope that after my internship ends, they may let me stay on a little longer before replacing me. At least long enough for me to find another job and figure out what the hell I want to do with my degree, where I want to do it, and find the courage to make the decision.

Emerson's also very pregnant. I haven't asked her how far along she is, but I can tell she's getting tired easier, eating more, and seems uncomfortable more often than not. Her feet were so swollen the other day she was walking around the office barefoot until her husband, Ryder— one of the three brothers who own and run Dixon Advertising—ran home to get her a pair of slippers.

It was really sweet.

And it made me think of Kane. Ryder reminds me of him in so many ways. Especially the way he treats Emerson. You can tell he's madly in love with her and would do anything to make her happy. And she looks at him like he's the sun, moon, and stars.

That's how Kane and I used to be.

Maybe that's why I've been avoiding him. Or why seeing him this morning has me more shaken than seeing him normally does. I want what they have and not so long ago, I thought I would have it one day.

A thriving career, the man of my dreams, and a child on the way. And when I had those aspirations, Kane was always the one I envisioned my future with.

My phone vibrates on the table as the professor walks in. The buzz of activity in the room quiets as we all wait for him to start his lecture. Tucking my laptop in my bag, I take a peek at my phone, but I don't have to look to know that Kane replied to my message.

**K1: I don't want to change the past; it's part of who we are now. All I want is a second chance to prove to you that we belong together, and no amount of pain or suffering can change the way I feel about you. Ever. I love you, bug.**

Shit. He's not going down without a fight. I should have known better.

---

“YOU'RE LEAVING ALREADY? I THOUGHT WE WERE GOING TO ride together. In the limo.”

Kora raises her left brow in challenge to my statement. “Why would I do that? You know I can’t stand to be in the same room as Max let alone in a confined space. Plus, my date would rather avoid him if possible, and we’re going to grab a bite to eat before the event.”

“But we’re feeding everyone. A nice three-course meal.”

“It’s a date, Cleo. When I asked him to come with me, I thought it would be a good idea to get to know him a little better before thrusting him into an uncomfortable situation.”

I can see Kora’s logic. This is only the second time they’ve even hung out, and tonight is going to be controlled chaos. People everywhere. People he doesn’t know.

“Plus, there’s no room.”

I’d make room for her, though. I’d let her sit on my lap if necessary. Anything to keep from being left to fend for myself in the situation. Kane is going to be in the limo. He’s asked me seven times to be his date tonight, and I’ve turned him down every time. Still, we’re the only two single people riding together, and it could appear we’re going as a couple.

Nodding at Kora as she spins in the mirror, I give my best friend a hug and wish her good luck. She seems more nervous than I am as she begins to descend the staircase. Looking over the railing at the man standing at the bottom, waiting for her, I’m a little taken aback.

He’s not exactly what I expected. He appears to be Kora’s type to a T. Tall, lean, striking good looks. I’m not surprised by that. She’s always been a sucker for the tall, dark, and handsome types.

It’s the way he’s looking at her that has me wondering why she really invited him. His smile is sincere, but his eyes lack



the fire they should hold. Kora looks hot tonight, and his gaze lacks the appreciation she deserves.

I don't have time to give it more thought before Scarlet is shouting my name from the bathroom. Time for me to finish getting ready for the hell that awaits me.

It's bad enough that Kane will be in the car. Max will also be there. With Gia who hasn't spoken to me since she started her relationship with Max behind her back. She hasn't spoken to anyone, aside from Scarlet, as far as I know.

If she's not in class, she locks herself in her room, or she's off somewhere with Max. Or so she claims. I overheard her telling Scarlet they were going out for dinner a few weeks ago, and then I found her in a cubicle in the library later that night.

Not exactly the evening she described.

"I'd rather drive myself," I protest again for what feels like the thousandth time in the last ten minutes. I've tried to reason with Scarlet. Made every excuse in the book. She's not buying anything I'm trying to sell her.

*I'd rather not ride with Max.*

*I was hoping to leave early.*

*Kora and I were going to ride together.*

That one fails because Kora was picked up ten minutes ago by the guy she met on New Year's Eve. To say it was a shock is an understatement. None of us knew she was bringing a date. We all assumed she's flying solo the way she has the last few years.

And bringing Beau to the gala brings up an entirely new set of challenges tonight.

Like Max potentially ruining the gala by throwing punches. Again. No matter how much she's tried to convince me otherwise.

The fact that she has my hair wrapped around the curling rod right now means I can't escape the conversation.

"Everything is going to be fine. It'll be fun. Plus, there's no reason for you to ride separate when the guys are picking us up in a few minutes. It's silly."

Silly? Maybe.

But I'm desperate to escape Kane's gaze. No one else may be able to see he's staring at me because of those stupid fucking sunglasses, but I can feel his gaze. My skin heats under his perusal. My body flushing with desire.

And that's something I don't need tonight.

I've already felt my resolve starting to crack. The walls I built around my heart crumbling every time he confesses his love or calls me by the nickname he gave me years ago.

"Fine, but I just want to be clear that if I take an Uber home later, you know why."

"You won't be taking an Uber, and we both know it. There's no way in hell you're leaving the gala a moment before it's over. You deserve to be acknowledged for all the hard work you put into the event."

"No, that was all you and Colt. How are things with you two, by the way?" I ask, attempting to steer the conversation in a different direction.

"Things are ... good," she says with a sigh.

"Good? That's it?"

Scarlet releases the strand of hair she was curling and lays it across my shoulder. Before she picks up the next piece, she pauses as if to think about her answer.

“Things are actually great. He’s amazing.”

“But?”

“That’s what I’m waiting for, I guess. The but. For something to change. For things to fall apart.”

“What makes you think they will?”

“Nothing, I guess. I just have this nagging feeling in my gut that something is about to change.”

“Not in a good way?”

Scarlet lays another piece of perfectly curled hair over my shoulder and sets the curling rod aside. After combing her fingers through my locks, she finds my stare in the mirror and gives me a warm smile as she rests her hand on my shoulder.

“I’m not sure, but I’m trying to have a little bit of faith. The universe brought us back together—”

“That was me.”

“And I’m hoping it wasn’t a cruel joke. I’m holding onto the magic of it all as tightly as I can, afraid it, he, will slip through my fingers.”

Scarlet has always been a sweet, somewhat quiet, but passionate person. Since rekindling her flame with Colt—a flame none of us even knew existed—it’s like a new, more sparkly version of Scarlet has emerged. She’s still the same sweet girl I first met freshman year. She’s still more reserved than most of the other girls in the house. But she’s also a bright light in every room. She shines, and her positive energy is contagious.

And she deserves every ounce of happiness she's found.

Covering her hand with mine, I reassure her that everything is going to be okay. That tonight is going to be amazing, and that she deserves the happiness she's found with Colt.

Scarlet leaves me to apply my makeup. By the time we're both ready, Gia, Max, and Colt are waiting for us by the front door.

My heart aches in my chest. Kane is nowhere in sight. I have to steel my features to hide my disappointment. With my lips pressed together, I follow behind Scarlet as she leads the way out the front door.

Colt opens the limo door and ushers us in. I duck my head and follow behind Scarlet, taking the seat furthest from the door.

I feel his gaze as soon as my ass hits the bench seat. When I lift my head, I find him staring in my direction. I'm sucked in a trance as the rest of our group finds their seats, unable to look away as the limo pulls away from the curb.

The ride to the gala is silent. Uncomfortable. The tension swirling in the air is thick.

At first, I think it's just me. That maybe it's all in my head because of the way my heart is beating. How close Kane and I are sitting.

Nope.

Everyone else looks as uncomfortable as I feel. Including Max who tends to show no emotions whatsoever.

We pull up to the gala, I hope the tightness in my chest will ease. I'll get away from Kane, distance myself for the rest of

the night. But as we climb out of the limo, the cool February air smacking me in the face, that tension in my bones amplifies.

And when Kane's hand lands at the small of my back as we all make our way to the rec center, I suck in a deep breath and hold it until I'm able to escape his feather light touch.

That's all it takes for me to lose the grip I have on my sanity.

# EIGHT

KANE

I'M SO FUCKED. I KNEW IT THE MINUTE SHE DUCKED INTO THE limo. The minute I saw the way her dress hugged her curves. How silky her hair looked as it flowed down her back.

The mantra I'd been rehearsing all day—*Act natural. Act cool. It's just another day*—flies out the window as quickly as the breath is sucked from my lungs.

Instead of calm, cool, and collected, I'm ready to reach across the car and pull her in my arms. To press my lips against hers in a searing kiss she will never forget. To strip her out of the very dress I'm admiring and make love to her.

I don't do any of those things. For one, we're not alone. Far from it. And secondly, Max has already caught on to the growing sexual tension in the car. He spent the entire drive flicking his gaze between Cleo and me.

All of which I ignored while I kept my gaze on Cleo, during the ride over, as she walked ahead of me into the gala, and even now, as she leans against the bar, scrolling through her phone, appearing relaxed and in her element.

That's all about to change.

**ME: You look beautiful tonight. Stunning.**

**BUG: Thank you. You look nice as well.**

**ME: Nice? You look better than nice, bug. You look delectable. I'm getting hard staring at you.**

I watch as she reads my text from across the room, her eyes widening in surprise at my bold admission. It's the truth, though. The second she slid into the limo across from me, my dick stood at attention. I was half tempted to whip him out and show her what she does to me.

But we weren't alone then, and we're not alone now.

There are at least a hundred people milling around the room, and I'm sure more will show up throughout the night. Colt and Scarlet did an amazing job of organizing the event. The gala is going to be a huge success, and the children's hospital is going to get a big fat check next week thanks to the time and effort they put into tonight's event.

**ME: You look tense. I can help you with that if you're interested.**

**BUG: Pass. My boss just walked in.**

Ah yes, the new job. It took a little digging, but I finally figured out how Cleo's been avoiding me the since the semester started. She got an internship in downtown Sunnyside, working for an advertising firm. It's the perfect place for her to get her feet wet in the industry.

It also means that she's keeping busy.

And when Cleo's busy, she's hard to trap.

It's like trying to nail jello to the wall.

She's always on the move. Never stays in one place too long. I've tried to catch her before and after her classes, but I've been unsuccessful. Last week was the first time I was able to catch a glimpse of her. She was clearing the freshly fallen snow off her car, but before I could reach her, she'd jumped in and was backing away.

Tonight marks almost six weeks since I've had any type of real interaction with her, and my body is craving a taste.

That's not true. I want more than a taste. I want to feast on her. For hours. Until the sun rises tomorrow and announces the start of a new day. A day where I get to satisfy my hunger over and over again.

Making my way to the bar where Cleo is standing, talking with a very pregnant woman and a man I'm assuming is her husband, I keep my eyes focused on her, and it makes her nervous. She shifts her weight slightly, as if her shoes are digging into the heels of her feet. She tucks her hair behind her ear and lowers her chin every so often, embarrassed at whatever compliment her boss has given her.

After ordering myself a sparkling water, I shoot her another text, hoping she'll at least glance at her phone. It's still in her right hand, her purse tucked under her arm.

**ME: Limo. Ten minutes.**

I'm not close enough to hear her phone chime, but I don't have to be. I see the moment her shoulders tense. Notice the change in her body language.

Yet, she never breaks her conversation with her boss.

Never glances at her phone.

**ME: Five minutes. I'm heading out there now.**



Making my way toward the exit, I allow my fingers to graze her left hand as it rests at her side. Out of habit, her fingers curl against mine for a brief moment before realizing her mistake. I don't look back at her until I'm at the main entrance. Allowing an older couple to enter, I step aside and take the opportunity to chance a glance in her direction.

The man and woman she was talking to have moved on, and Cleo's currently staring at her phone. When her fingers start flying across the screen, a devilish smirk spreads across my face. I can see the fight in her stance.

She wants to tell me to go fuck myself.

And she's going to do just that. Only, when I don't answer her, she's going to come searching for me so she can say it to my face.

Which is when she'll break.

It's not until I close the door to the limo behind me, after relieving the driver for the next hour, that my phone chimes. I expect to find a novel with as long as it took her to reply. Instead, I get three letters that have me scrambling to release my cock from it's confines.

**BUG: omw**

Before I can even undo the clasp on my belt, the door is opening and Cleo is ducking inside. Her hands cover mine, taking over the task of stripping me as she starts yelling in my face.

"I hate you," she seethes. "And for the record, that was a risky move to text me that while I was talking to my boss, Kane. *My boss!* I can't believe you. Actually, yes I can. You always get what you want. You push and push and push until you win. Do you have any idea—"

I silence her with my lips against hers, our teeth clashing together. Her hands falter for a brief moment before she regains her senses, slowly dragging my zipper down as she straddles my lap. Bunching her dress around her waist, I reach under the silky material and pull my cock out of my slacks, never once letting our lips part.

Cleo is mine.

She was made just for me.

And even if it takes another twenty years, I'm going to prove it to her. Over and over again. With my words. With my heart. My actions.

And right now, with my body.

Cleo lifts herself up as I position my cock at her entrance. Breaking our kiss, Cleo leans back and removes my sunglasses, tossing them on the seat next to us so she can look deep into my eyes as she slowly lowers herself until she's completely seated, my balls resting against the swell of her ass. Her eyes are swirling with lust and desire, a direct reflection of the way I feel. As much as I don't want to break eye contact, the sensation overwhelms me.

"Oh no you don't, Kane Alexander." My eyes pop open at the use of my middle name to find Cleo glaring at me. "You want this, you're going to look at me."

God, I love when she takes control. When her bossy side comes out.

She knows I want this, and I know she does too. She wouldn't be here if she didn't.

I may have lit the match that sparked the flame, but she's the one who doused the fire in gasoline. She holds all the cards, and she knows it.

My hands glide up her thighs beneath the skirt of her dress until I'm gripping her hips, my touch punishing as I force her to move.

The little sounds that leave her are music to my ears. Encouraging me to keep going. To keep thrusting. To continue moving her hips back and forth, pushing and pulling her hips, bringing us both the pleasure we crave.

She maintains eye contact as long as she can, her lids finally closing, and when they do, I rest my head against the back of the seat and focus on everything I feel. The way her insides grip me as she attempts to hold back her orgasm. The sting of her nails as they dig into my shoulders. The sticky yet slick moisture that coats the tops of my thighs as she continues to grind and glide.

Mostly, I focus on the way my heart is beating in my chest. In sync with every thrust of my hips. For her. For us.

Because she's in my arms. Again.

And this time, she came to me.

I didn't have to chase her down. Or trap her in her room.

I wasn't forced to trick her into letting me hold her.

All it took was a couple of enticing text messages, and she came running. She followed me. Trusted me. Took refuge in me.

She knew I would take care of her. Bring her the pleasure she craved.

"Kane, I'm so close," she purrs, resting her forehead against mine. It's a simple act, one that I shouldn't read too much into, but I can't help myself.

The move is comforting. Sensual. Personal.

“What do you need, bug? Tell me what you want,” I beg, sliding lower in the seat, allowing me to thrust even deeper inside her.

“Oh, God!”

“God isn’t here,” I tease, my hips punctuating each word with a hard, quick thrust.

“Fuck, Kane! Fuck!”

That’s what I’m doing suddenly. I’m fucking her. I know it. She knows it. I wanted this to be more. To make love to her. So I could show her how I felt. So she didn’t have to question if she was more than an easy lay. That this isn’t just about sex or getting off.

This is so much more.

We’re more.

Our hearts beat in sync. Our souls seek each others in the darkness.

And they always will.

“I’m... I’m, uh, uh.” A shiver racks through Cleo’s body as her movements momentarily stutter. She goes slick around me as she rides the waves of ecstasy.

Three deep thrusts, and I’m following her over the cliff.

Cleo’s head throws back. She’s still bouncing on my lap.

And then I hear the door open, feel the cool night air on my cheek, and when I turn to find out why, my eyes meet Scarlet’s.

*Shit!*

My hands still Cleo’s hips, drawing her attention. She freezes in my arms, her gaze focused on Scarlet.

No one speaks. No one even flinches.

I expect Scarlet to say something, anything. Instead, she slams the door to the limo shut. The only sound is our heavy breathing as we attempt to catch our breaths.

“Oh my God. Please tell me that didn’t just happen,” Cleo states as she crawls off my lap.

“It happened. It’s no big deal.”

If it were possible for Cleo’s eyes to actually bug out of her head like those 80s cartoon, they would have. And the second I realize that, I want to apologize for what I’ve said.

The problem is, I’m not sorry. Not even a little bit.

Because I’m tired of hiding how I feel about her. Tired of pretending that I don’t love her. That I don’t want to be with her. That she’s not the future I dream about. And I’m tired of letting her hide from her feelings as well.

I don’t care that Scarlet caught us. In fact, deep down I’m grateful. Even if it means I have a lot of explaining to do to my friends. Even if I have to answer a million questions and people realize I’ve been lying to them all these years.

To have Cleo back in my arms, openly, will make it all worth it in the end.

# NINE

CLEO

I SLIPPED.

Made one tiny mistake.

Miscalculated the time.

And because of that, the lies I've been keeping for almost four years are about to come to light. The tight grip I've held has loosened, and everything is slipping through my fingers.

Control over the narrative.

My self-image.

I've become vulnerable. The one thing I was trying to avoid from the beginning.

Three more fucking months and it wouldn't have mattered anymore.

No more pretending at frat parties. No more lying to everyone around me. Lying to myself.

Because the truth is, I still love Kane.

I never stopped.

I've loved him since I was thirteen. He holds all my firsts.

My first kiss. First sexual experience. First heartbreak.

Though, I credit that to myself more than to him.

I broke up with him. It was the only way to know if it was real. If we could be more. If we were meant to be together.

I mean, who ends up with their high school sweetheart? You only see that in romance novels and sappy made-for-TV chick flicks. The kind they play on repeat around the holidays. You know ... different actors, different small town, same storyline with a bit of a twist.

He's a lawyer, and she's a single parent. Next time he's the single father, and she's the successful business owner.

They meet, rekindle an old romance, or fall in love at first sight. Hit a minor bump in the road that's quickly resolved. Both are understanding and forgiving. Both have the time and effort to make the relationship work. And they get their happily ever after by the time the end credits roll.

That's not real life.

Relationships are hard. Messy. Stressful. The bumps in the road are more like potholes that have the ability to blowout your tire. There's never enough time to fully resolve an issue, and someone is always holding onto a grudge or unspoken feelings.

I've seen it.

My parents, my friends ... they've all struggled. They've fought for what they have.

Relationships are hard because they're supposed to be. They make you stronger, or they break you.

Even in high school, my relationship with Kane felt easy. Which is what scared me.

We didn't fight. We always made time for each other. We were happy.

In love.

It was like the sun was always shining down on us, and I was waiting for the storm to roll in. For the ground beneath me to begin to shake. For everything around me to crumble to the ground.

And I had no control of when it would happen.

So I took matters into my own hands at the first sign of a pothole. Which led to our first, and only, fight.

---

*"ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME RIGHT NOW, CLEO!" KANE screams as he paces beside his truck.*

*"No. This is what I want." I lift my chin and straighten my shoulders. Maybe I can appear more confident than I feel. The last thing I ever wanted for us was this, yet here I am, destroying everything.*

*Kane's steps falter. He pivots and turns to face me, and then he marches toward me with an angry glare on his face.*

*"I'm not letting you do this," he states firmly, stopping only inches from where I'm leaning against the trunk of my car as my knees threaten to buckle.*

*I knew this was going to be ugly. I knew he wasn't going down without a fight. It's the reason I asked him to meet me in the parking lot of the high school. The very place we spent the last four years falling more and more in love.*



*With only a week until we both head to Lake State University to begin our college experiences, I have to do this today. Before I lose my nerve. So I have a chance to grieve. So he has time to stop hating me before I run into him on campus.*

*Well, that last part is more a pipe dream than anything. Kane is going to hate me for a long time. Unless I'm right and our love is strong enough to survive this.*

*"You don't have a choice, Kane. I'm not asking. I want to break up. I want to start college single. I want to have fun without being tied down."*

*"You're lying," he retorts quickly.*

*Damn. He knows me too well. Still, I find myself shaking my head, trying to deny it.*

*"You love me, Cleo. I know you do. So be honest with me. You owe me that at the very least. What is this all about? Why are you doing this?" When I don't say anything, he continues. "We spent the last two years looking at colleges. Picking the ones we thought we'd both love. Planning our future together. And now you want to break up a week before we leave to start that future because you don't want to be tied down? You can lie to yourself, lie to our friends, but you can't lie to me."*

*Fuck!*

*Closing my eyes, my chin drops to my chest, and I inhale deeply. He's leaving me no choice. I'm going to have to tell him the truth. If nothing else, I do owe him that.*

*I open my eyes to see Kane's arms are crossed and he's staring down at me, waiting, a knowing look in his amber eyes. Eyes I know darken when he's feeling frisky, and that lighten when he's happy.*

*Eyes that I locked onto the first time we made love.*

*“I’m afraid we’re going to fall apart. Is that what you want to hear? That I’m scared?”*

*I’m not particularly fond of feeling vulnerable.*

*That’s a lie.*

*I hate it. And Kane knows it. It’s the one thing I try to avoid. I plan, prepare, and execute. I’m always in control. I don’t allow myself to be caught off guard. Being unprepared for anything makes you vulnerable, and being vulnerable makes you weak.*

*“You don’t have to be scared, bug. You know I’ll—”*

*“That’s just it!” I holler. “You’ll take care of me. You. I need to take care of myself. And as much as I love you, as much as I want a future with you, I need to be prepared in case that doesn’t happen.”*

*“So you’re ending this now? To what? Avoid potentially getting hurt? That makes no sense. You’re creating the pain!”*

*Shaking my head again, I stare at the ground beneath my feet. Kane pinches my chin and lifts my eyes up to his. “I’m sorry I yelled. I just don’t understand what you want, bug.”*

*“Stop calling me that.”*

*“I’ll never stop calling you that. You’re saved in my phone as bug. You’ll always be my bug.”*

*“And I’ll always love you, Kane, but I can’t do this anymore. College changes people. It destroys relationships.”*

*“That’s why we’re going together,” he says, his hands sliding down my arms before gripping my hips and giving my body a shake. “We talked about this. No long-distance relationship. A year ago we were both all-in. Why are you suddenly changing your mind? Is this about—”*

*“No.” I cut him off before he can ask. It’s another lie. This has everything to do with that.*

*The truth is going to be harder for him to hear than any lie I tell. He’s not going to accept anything I say anyway, so I might as well sell him another lie. Say words I don’t mean. Slice through his heart even deeper than I already have and end this.*

*“I met someone else. At orientation.” His hands fall from my hips, and he takes a step back. “I love you, Kane, and I always will, but the same thing is going to happen to you. You’re going to meet someone else. You’ll want to see what else is out there. That’s what college is about. Experiencing life. Exploring your options and—”*

*“You’re lying.”*

*It’s as close to the truth as I can get. I did meet someone, but I’m not interested in him. I told him about Kane as we walked around campus, ignoring our tour guide.*

*“I’m not.”*

*“What’s his name?”*

*“It doesn’t matter.”*

*“It does to me. What’s. His. Name.” Kane’s fingers curl into fists as he speaks.*

*Letting out a sigh, I slide past his vibrating body and open my car door. I have to end this conversation before I start telling more lies than I can keep straight.*

*Glancing over my shoulder, I take one last look at the man I still hope to marry one day. If we make it through the next four years and come out stronger on the other side... I truly believe that if it’s meant to be, it will be.*

*“His name is Max. Max Palmer,” I state, sliding into my seat and closing the door behind me.*

*I refuse to look in my rearview mirror as I drive away from Kane, leaving the biggest part of my past behind me.*

---

DO I REGRET THE LIES I TOLD HIM THAT DAY?

Hell yes, I do. And every lie I’ve told him since. Every lie I’ve told anyone.

It took pushing him away, losing him, to realize that what we had was special. That it would have been worth risking. What we had was better than any scripted relationship in those movies I find myself watching when I feel bad for myself.

It was real.

It was true.

It was everything.

Kane was my everything.

He still is.

My heart belongs to him. He’s embedded in my soul.

And my body... It’s only ever been his.

Which is how we ended up in the back of the limo tonight, tearing at each other’s clothes. Him throwing his sunglasses off so I could look into his eyes as I lowered myself onto him. His hands gripping my hips so tight I know there will be bruises tomorrow.

It took about half a second to remember how great we were together. How great we could still be, if only I’d tell him

the truth.

We do this dance every few months.

Collide with hurricane force. Fuck each other's brains out. Get our fix and then go back to pretending we don't have a past together. That we're nothing more than acquaintances passing in the night.

We've always been careful to not get caught.

But tonight, I couldn't resist.

I knew he was staring at me on the ride to the gala. I could feel his eyes on me from across the room as I spoke to my new boss, Emerson Dixon, and her husband, Ryder. And then he made it a point to move closer. To slowly encroach on my position.

My heart was pounding in my chest. My skin tingled from his close proximity. My breathing shallow and labored as I tried to ignore the effect he had on me.

But Kane knows me too well. All it took was one text, and I was his.

**ME: Limo. Ten minutes.**

It wasn't a question. It was a proposal. He walked away, and I followed a few minutes later at a safe distance.

What I never expected was for Scarlet to show up seconds after I orgasmed. Or for Kane to act as if it wasn't a big deal.

---

*“WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU DON'T CARE THAT SHE SAW US?” I whisper-yell, afraid she might still be standing outside the door, listening.*

*“Exactly what I said. I don’t care. You shouldn’t either.” My eyes fall to Kane’s lap as he tucks himself into his black slacks, his hands stilling when he realizes he’s drawn my attention.*

*“Kane, people are going to talk,” I continue as he slowly raises his zipper, the sound cutting through the silence.*

*“Let them. I’m sick of this shit, bug.” He’s holding back his anger, but I can feel it in my chest.*

*Which, in turn, pisses me off. He’s holding back when I know he wants to scream, to release his frustrations. So do I, which is exactly what I do.*

*“Don’t call me that!”*

*“Cleo, I’m done playing this game. Aren’t you?”*

*“It’s not a game.”*

*“Really? What we’ve been doing for the last four years isn’t a game? Neither of us dating anyone else. Secretly screwing each other. Pretending like we don’t know each other when the truth is there’s no one else in the world who knows you the way I do. Who loves you the way I do. You don’t call that a game?” His growl has me sitting back in the seat, contemplating how to calm my racing heart.*

*Even though he’s right, I find myself shaking my head as I tuck my breasts back in the top of my dress and avoid eye contact. We need to get back inside before anyone else notices we’re missing. Before Scarlet says something to someone and our secret’s exposed.*

*“Let’s call it what it is, then,” he suggests, grabbing me by the hips and lifting, setting me on his lap. I try to wiggle out of his grasp, but he’s gotten stronger over the years. He may look like the geeky tech kid he’s always been, but beneath the*

*surface, Kane has the body of a Greek god. “It’s all a facade, bug. A lie. One you created. Because you love me, I love you, and in a few months, we’re going to start living out the life we planned with each other.”*

*“Kane, I—”*

*“No more lies, bug. I can’t do it. I don’t care what anyone says or thinks. I’m not hiding this anymore. I don’t want to.”*

*I prepare to fight him, but his lips crash against mine, silencing any protest I could come up with. Forcing me into submission. Making me vulnerable to the only man I feel comfortable being vulnerable around.*

*Because Kane will always protect me.*

---

AND THAT’S HOW I ENDED UP HERE. TELLING LIES TO Scarlet. Claiming what happened between Kane and me was nothing more than a mistake. Acting like it was the first time anything has ever happened between us. Because to admit the truth will unravel all the other lies I’ve told.

# TEN

KANE

FUCK IT.

I'm telling Colt the truth. I don't care what the repercussions are. I don't care if Max finds out the real reason I rushed Kappa Omega. I don't even care if he kicks my ass out.

I'm done with lying.

I'm done pretending I'm not madly in love Cleo. The only woman I've ever loved. The only woman I've ever let in my bed, even though I've let everyone—including her—believe otherwise.

This isn't what I wanted for us. It isn't how I imagined we'd travel through college. Apart. Barely acquaintances.

I wanted to be with her. Even after she broke up with me.

And I've been fighting for her every day since. Playing the part of the single frat boy at parties. Acting like I don't know her, or want to get to know her. Watching her every move behind the cover of my sunglasses without anyone getting wise to it.



After Colt caught me staring at her the first time I spotted her on campus, I had to come up with a plan. The sunglasses were the best addition to my wardrobe I could think of. And they've worked. They're annoying at times but necessary so I can keep her in my sights.

Which I've been doing ever since that day. Watching over her. Keeping her safe. Admiring her beauty.

And she knows. She's always known.

The second I walk into a room, she can feel my gaze. She has a tell. One only I know about, only I would catch.

She pulls her ring finger on her right hand.

The same finger I slipped a promise ring on the night we graduated from high school after all the pomp and circumstance was over. After all our friends had passed out. When it was just the two of us, sitting on the tailgate of my truck, wrapped in a blanket, staring up at the sky.

Cleo was talking about our future. I was staring at her profile, wondering how I'd gotten so lucky. What had I done to deserve her? To earn her love?

I wasn't special. I wasn't the most attractive guy. I was shit when it came to sports. My body was still filling out, and I felt like a gangly teen most days. Awkward and nerdy. Unsure in my own body.

But she was in my arms, and I wasn't going to let the moment pass me by. I'd bought the ring months ago. I'd planned to give it to her for her birthday and chickened out. I'd carried it around in my pocket every day since, waiting for the perfect moment.

And there it was, presenting itself to me.

---

*“WHAT DO YOU THINK? THREE OR FOUR?” SHE ASKS, snuggling closer.*

*It was the perfect Michigan summer night. The sun had long sunk beneath the horizon, and with it, a little bit of warmth had disappeared. Just enough that my bug wanted to sit closer, to wrap her arms around me and steal the heat radiating off my body.*

*“Ten,” I state, pressing my lips together to keep from laughing.*

*We’ve had this conversation before. It started out as a joke when we were in middle school, and my answer has remained the same since.*

*Ten kids. That’s how many I tell her I want, but it’s a lie. I want as many little versions of us as she’s willing to give me. She has to do the hardest part, after all. I’m responsible for the fun part.*

*Putting a baby in her.*

*Which I’m willing to do ten times if she wants. Or more.*

*Cleo smacks me in the chest, her laughter breaking free. “You keep saying that, but I have a feeling you’ll be changing your mind as soon as you change your first poopy diaper.”*

*“Maybe. All I know is I’m willing to have sex with you as many times as it takes to give you the babies you want.”*

*“Such a gentleman,” she smarts. “Be serious for a second.” Sitting up, the blanket falls from Cleo’s shoulders, revealing the tiny straps of the dress she wore beneath her graduation gown. “How many, Kane?”*

*She stares at me with love in her eyes. She still doesn't get it. I'm willing to give her whatever she wants. Kids. A house. The happily ever after she always talks about. I want everything she dreams of, as long as she's part of that dream.*

*"Bug, we can have ten or none; as long as I have you and you're happy, I'm happy."*

*"You're still avoiding the answer." Crossing her arms over her chest, my eyes are drawn to her breasts. They're plump and testing the strength of the thin material. They look fuller tonight. Maybe it's the way the moon casts a spotlight on them, or maybe I'm just a horny bastard, but I can't stop staring at them. Which is probably why Cleo snaps her fingers in my line of sight.*

*"I don't know how many kids I want, bug. All I know is that I want them with you." Sliding off the tailgate, I drop to the ground and prop myself up on one knee. This is my moment. I can feel it. "I want everything with you," I continue as I reach into the pocket of my khakis, my fingers wrapping around the silver band. "And to show you how much I love you, I want to make you a promise."*

*Cleo gasps, her hands flying to cover her mouth as I hold the band up for her to see. It's nothing fancy. A plain silver band with a small amethyst gem, her birthstone, in the middle.*

*Tugging her right hand toward me, I slide the ring on her finger as I promise to love, cherish, and protect her for the rest of our lives.*

*Tears slide down Cleo's pink cheeks as she replies, her words causing my leg to give out and for me to fall on my ass.*

SHE'S PULLING ON HER FINGER AS WE APPROACH SCARLET AND Colt. The same finger that once held the ring I bought her, only she doesn't wear it anymore. She hasn't since the day she broke up with me.

"What am I missing?" Colt asks me as Scarlet follows after Cleo when she storms past.

I watch them go; my eyes focused on the way Cleo's hips shake. She's stomping her heels with every step. She's angry because I refuse to keep lying to everyone. I refuse to hide what's been going on between us for years.

Hell, she's probably even pissed that I still love her, even after she's tried everything to push me away.

"What's going on between you and Cleo?" Colt asks, drawing my attention away from her. When I don't answer him right away, suddenly unsure how to start this conversation, he continues. "You have lipstick on your collar."

Shit.

"Your sunglasses are sitting crooked, and it looks like you bent one of the arms."

I tried to adjust the damaged sunglasses the best I could before we walked back inside, but I can feel them leaning heavily to the left.

"And you can't keep your eyes off her. Unless you're looking at Scarlet, in which case we have bigger problems. So talk."

Colt's been my best friend since day one. We were matched to room together freshman year. We've always gotten along great. He's very laid back, and so am I. Except where Cleo's concerned.

When I begged him to rush the Kappa house with me, he didn't question me.

When he caught me staring at Cleo, he took one dig and then dropped the subject.

And when I started wearing sunglasses the next day, he accepted it as my new style.

He's all about avoiding the drama, living a low-key life.

He's my partner in crime—well, crimes of illusion. Neither of us are the person we portray ourselves as. We're not the frat boy players we pretend to be. He's always had a thing for someone— come to find out it was Scarlet—and I've always been faithful to Cleo, even though no one knew about us.

“Kane,” Colt growls.

“I slept with Cleo. Scarlet caught us.” The truth easily slips past my lips.

There's so much more I want to confess, more I want to tell him, but I made a promise to Cleo that our past would always be kept between the two of us. That I'd never tell anyone. And I haven't, but shit's about to get real.

“Seriously? How long has that been going on?”

I can't lie to him. I don't want to, not anymore. So I do the only thing I can to avoid it.

I walk away.

I avoid him the rest of the night.

I avoid everyone, including Cleo.

I spend twenty minutes in the bathroom attempting to scrub the lipstick from my collar only to smear it, making the spot bigger. I walk in circles around the room, observing my

friends, keeping my distance from them as long as possible. I eat in silence, my focus straight in front of me, which happens to be directly on Cleo.

But the truth is hard to avoid when it's staring you in the face. And that fact becomes obvious as we pull up to the Zeta house to drop the girls off.

Max watches me closely. His eyes have been bouncing between me and Cleo the entire ride. The tension is thick, and I'm thankful it's almost over until Gia finds Cleo's damn lipstick on the seat.

The same seat she was riding me on hours earlier.

I see the moment it all clicks for Max.

And when he exits the limo, leaving me alone with Colt, who is expecting to get answers from me, I feel my resolve crack.

"He knows," Colt says, staring after Max.

It appears he does. He's not an idiot, and even though I'm not talking, I'm not trying to conceal anything either.

"Yeah."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing," I state, doing my best not to sound like I want to crawl out of my skin.

"Nothing?" he questions, his voice laced with shock. "You're just going to let him have his say?"

"He can say anything he wants. He can threaten to kick me out. He can do whatever he has to do to make himself feel better, but this has nothing to do with him. It never has, yet we've let his opinion make decisions for us. I'm done

following Max's laws, Colt. In a few short months, we're all graduating. No more Kappa house. No more Max calling the shots. So I say it ends now. At least where I'm concerned it does."

The truth is, I don't care anymore. Not about Max's opinion. Still, I'm not looking forward to what happens when he returns to the car. Mainly because it's going to piss him off that I refuse to give him what he wants.

Information.

Colt let's my words rattle around in his brain for a few beats before speaking. "Is she worth it?"

"Yes," I confess, my heart swelling in my chest. "But I'm going to have to prove it to her. After hiding our feelings for years, I'm sure she has her doubts."

"Years?" he questions.

"Yes, Colt. Years. I lied to you when you asked." Shit, here goes nothing. This is the most I plan to reveal to anyone. But if there's one person I know I can trust with the truth, it's Colt. "I've known Cleo since middle school. She's the reason I'm at Lake State. I followed her, the way she wanted. It was part of the plan, but I'm tired of the games we play. I'm ready to prove to her that we are meant to be together. And I'm not about to let Max or anyone else stand in my way."

Colt's mouth drops open as the door swings open, and Max slides into the seat he vacated, his glare focused on me.

"Talk. Now." It's not a request, but there's something Max is about to realize.

I'm done bowing at his feet.

"No."

“Excuse me?”

“No. Think whatever you want, Max, but I’m not telling you anything. It’s none of your business.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Howell...”

Here we go. Max only calls us by our last names when he needs to distance himself from the friendship. Right now he’s not Max, my frat brother. He’s Max, the president of Kappa Omega. And I’m about to get a lecture that I’m not going to enjoy.

Well, I have news for Max. He’s about to get the silent treatment in response, and he’s going to hate that even more.

“You took a pledge. Part of that pledge was to abide by the rules and regulations of the Kappa house. One of those rules revolved around Cleo Griffin. No one was allowed to get involved with her. You took the same pledge as the rest of the brothers, and yet, here I sit, staring at her lipstick smeared across your collar. You both looked guilty as sin, and the sexual tension between you was obvious. So I’m going to ask you once, and only once. Did something happen between you and Cleo tonight?”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I stare straight into Max’s eyes and remain silent. He’s not getting a confession from these lips. Not until I talk to Cleo. As much as I’m sick of lying to everyone, the lies we’ve told are part of the foundation we’ve built.

A foundation that’s about to come crumbling down.



# ELEVEN

CLEO

IT'S BEEN TWO WEEKS SINCE THE GALA, AND I'VE MANAGED TO avoid discussing what happened that night with anyone. Gia bombarded me with questions as soon as we walked in the door. She knew something was up. Knew Scarlet was lying about tossing my lipstick on the seat of the limo.

She also knew I was hiding something.

I've spent most of my time hiding in my room or in a private cubicle in the library. There's no avoiding my sisters today, though. There's a lot on the agenda. With the semester almost halfway over, and graduation looming, it's time to discuss the future of the chapter.

Last year, I was anxiously awaiting this meeting. It always comes at the end of every February. Nominations for the next president are made. Voting will happen after spring break. And the official announcement will come during the week of finals.

In the meantime, it's my job as the current leader to watch each candidate. To mentor them. To ensure that I'm passing the torch to the most capable person.

I already know who that person is.

I'm just not sure they want to accept the position.

The amount of responsibility that comes along with the title is astounding. I thought I knew what I was getting myself into, was sure I could handle it like I handled everything else in my life—with confidence, grace, and a tight grip on reality.

I'd love to say that the reason I nominated myself—I'm aware how vain that sounds—was because I wanted to be the leader, but that would be a lie on top of the already growing mountain.

Some would say that it was because I liked to be in control. They'd be partially correct.

*I need* to be in control.

The truth is, I knew if I didn't grab the reins, shit would start to fall apart. Max would make my life a living hell, payback for what I'd put him through, and everything I'd worked so hard to keep a secret would come to light.

The only way I could make sure that didn't happen was to force myself into his world, even more so than I already was. Unfortunately, that also meant forcing myself back into Kane's world as well.

I still blame him for that.

He's the one who chose to rush the Kappa house.

He's the one who put himself in the position he's in.

But I'm the one who put Max in the middle of our shitstorm.

Damn it!

I'm getting all worked up. I can feel my anger start to boil just beneath the surface, and with the anger comes the

memories. Those memories rile me up in a completely different way, and that's usually when I text him.

Which is why I find myself reaching for my phone.

Why I pull up his contact.

Type out a quick message and hit send before I can stop myself.

Two weeks of avoiding him down the drain in a matter of seconds.

**ME: I'm so pissed at you. For everything.**

I don't have to elaborate. He knows exactly what I'm talking about. It's the same message I've sent him countless times the past few years, and I'm guessing I'll get the same response.

**K1: It takes two to tango, bug. If you're mad at me, you're mad at yourself.**

Fucker.

**ME: Who did you confess to?**

*Please say nobody. Please, please, please...*

I know he's sick of hiding; I am too honestly, but we only have a few more months. We've made it this long.

**K1: Colt. Max tried to get me to confess, but it didn't work.**

*But Max knows! I want to yell.*

Max knows everything. I swore him to secrecy, but he's been holding it over my head for years. In the beginning, I begged him to stop being friends with Kane. To find a way to get him kicked out of the Kappa house so they didn't have to associate with each other.

That's about the same time he stopped talking to me.

So I'd yell, he'd smirk, which would piss me off, and I'd yell some more.

That's been our relationship for the past three and a half years. Since the second week of school. The one time we were alone, I tried to plead my case, but he remained silent.

Max knows all our secrets. He's the one person who could bring it all crashing down.

**ME: Scarlet knows.**

**K1: I figured. Are you planning on telling the rest of the house?**

**ME: Why would I do that?**

**K1: So we don't have to sneak around anymore. So when I show up in the morning with your favorite coffee, people don't start drawing their own conclusions.**

He better not!

I'm typing my response when another text from him pops up, causing my jaw to drop open. Not that I should be surprised. After years apart, he still knows me better than anyone else.

**K1: So you can control the narrative.**

**ME: That's what I've been doing, and it's been fine so far.**

**K1: People will find out, bug. They always do. There are no secrets among friends.**

*Secrets among friends.*

I want to laugh. If he only knew how many *friends* I've kept our secret from. Max is the only person I've ever confessed every detail to. I thought he was on my side. I

thought he was my friend, that I could trust him, only to find out that he chose Kane over me.

**ME: I have to head down for our meeting.**

**K1: Same.**

**K1: I'm free after ten if you want to meet up and talk more.**

**ME: We never talk when we meet up, and you know it.**

**K1: The sky's supposed to be clear tonight. We could pretend to count the stars like we used to.**

Closing my eyes, I hold my tears at bay as I blindly type out my reply.

**ME: We're not the same people who used to wish on those stars.**

It's both the biggest lie and closest thing to the truth I've said in days.

We aren't those people anymore, but in many ways, we'll always be them. We may not be young and naive, but our hearts are still aligned. My dreams for my future still include him. When I imagine my wedding day, it's Kane I'm walking down the aisle toward. And when I imagine children running around our yard, they all have their daddy's eyes. The same amber brown eyes I fell in love with before I even knew what love really was.

"Knock, knock," Kora says as she pushes my door open and sticks her head in. "You ready?"

"Always," I state with confidence, grabbing my binder off my desk as I slip my phone in the pocket of my dress. I feel it vibrate against my leg as we walk down the stairs in silence.

In fact, the entire house is eerily silent.

We usually have to wrangle a few stragglers into the meeting room to get started, but the kitchen is empty as we pass through. As is the living room. The halls are quiet, bedroom doors closed.

And when I walk into the meeting room ahead of Kora, I find out why.

All my sisters are seated, waiting for me to arrive. Everyone except Scarlet, Gia, Kendall, and Mya who are standing at the front of the room with their hands behind their backs.

“What’s going on?” I ask, keeping my eyes trained on the four of them as I take my place behind the podium while Kora joins them, her smile growing.

“We know that the meeting tonight signifies the beginning of a new era and the ending of not only yours, but many of ours.” Kora’s words strike deep in my chest. “We, all of us,” she says, motioning around the room with her arms spread wide, “wanted to make sure we showed you how appreciative we are of everything you do for us, for everything you’ve done for the Zeta house. So, as a token of our appreciation, we’d like to present you with a little gift.”

Mya walks over and hands me a plain white envelope. Flipping it over, I don’t find a postmark or any markings at all.

“What’s this?”

“Open it and find out,” Scarlet encourages.

Cautiously slipping my finger beneath the flap, I break the seal and slide out the contents of the envelope, setting them on the podium as the magnitude of what the girls have given me smacks me across the face.

“You’re kidding me, right?” I ask as my fingers glide over the ticket.

“Cleo Griffin,” Kendall announces as if she’s the host of a game show. “You have won an all-inclusive paid vacation to Cabo San Lucas, Mexico!”

The room fills with laughter and cheers as tears fill my eyes. These girls are my family. They are the ones who have pulled me through the tough times these last four years. I don’t know where I would be without them. I wouldn’t have survived if I hadn’t met them.

Especially Kora.

She’s been my rock since day one. I was lucky she ended up as my roommate. I’m lucky to call her my best friend. And I know, at the end of the day, this was her idea.

After I hug each of my closest friends, I call the meeting to order, attempting to ignore the plane ticket I placed back in the envelope. Instead, I go through the motions, read the minutes, go over the budget, and make my way down tonight’s agenda as if on autopilot.

The last thing we do is make nominations for president. Each one of my sisters drops their ballot in the box before leaving the meeting room.

I’ll look through them later. I’ll ask Kora for help. Maybe Scarlet. Someone who can keep a tally while I read each name. But that won’t be tonight.

“So,” Scarlet starts, taking a seat in the front row beside Gia as Kora closes the door behind the last sister to make her nomination. Kendall and Mya are sitting behind Gia, and Kora takes the seat on her other side. “You’re not going to Cabo alone; I hope you realize that.”

I figured as much.

“Who’s all going with us?” I ask, my question directed at Kora. Her eyes shift from mine, a clear sign she doesn’t want to be the one to tell me. “Kora?”

“Everyone’s going,” Kendall announces.

“Who’s everyone?”

“Well, when Finn overheard what we were doing for you, he pulled me aside and asked me for a favor,” she starts.

“Finn. Willow’s boyfriend?” Max’s best friend?

“Yeah. You see, he was planning on taking Lo on vacation for spring break and popping the question. He just couldn’t figure out the logistic of how to get everyone there without making it obvious. So we’re letting them tag along on the vacay we got you.”

“We’re letting them tag along? I need you to be more specific as to who is tagging along.”

Gripping the podium on either side to keep my hands from shaking, I listen as Kendall begins listing off all the couples that are going to be joining me on my vacation that’ll be a cover for Finn to propose to Willow and get his happily ever after.

Finn and Willow.

Mya and Brady.

Kendall and Declan.

Julian and Piper.

Micah and Alexis.

Scarlet and Colt.



Evie and Leo.

And then there's the singles who are invited because apparently Finn wants to make sure he doesn't exclude anyone, no matter their relationship status.

Kora because she's Kendall's sister, and Kendall insisted that she go. The look on Kora's face tells me she's less than enthusiastic about it. We're just going to have to stick together, which is fine since I was going to ask her to go with me anyway.

Max because he's Finn's best friend for life, and they haven't done anything without each other since they were in diapers. Unless you count the time Finn spent sneaking around with Willow. I'm sure Max was glad he wasn't a fly on the wall during all that.

Kane, though no reason is given. I'm guessing it's because he would be the only one left behind, and that's not exactly fair.

Me.

The reason there is obvious. The trip is supposed to be *for me!*

They're hijacking it.

So Willow and Finn can get engaged.

Just perfect. It's not like I don't have my friends flaunting their relationships in my face all the time already. Now I get to watch their boyfriends look at them with love *and* lust in their eyes while they prance around in tiny bikinis, drinking frozen beverages with tiny umbrellas in them.

*I'm going to need a ton of tiny umbrella drinks to make it through this vacation.*

“Sounds like fun,” I say through gritted teeth. No one seems to notice my discomfort except Kora. They all leave the room with a smile and a wave, discussing when they’re going to go shopping for new swimsuits and sandals.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this? The trip wasn’t supposed to turn into a group thing. It was going to be just you and me. That was the original plan. One last girl’s vacay before graduation.”

Kora stares up at me with a pleading look on her face. She needs me to tell her this is okay. That I’m not upset. That I’m good with a group trip because no matter if I like it or not, it’s happening, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it.

“It’s going to be great, Kora. You and I can do our own thing, right?” I try to keep my voice upbeat and positive while I die a little more on the inside.

Her smile widens at the same moment my phone vibrates against my thigh.

“Right. There’s one last thing you should know.”

*Fuck!*

“What’s up?”

She wrings her hands in her lap, her gaze trained on the floor before she answers.

“They gifted Max the same trip tonight so it didn’t seem obvious what was going on.”

My phone vibrates again. I have a feeling the Kappa meeting just ended.

# TWELVE

KANE

**BUG:** We're not the same people who used to wish on stars.

**ME:** Want to know what I wished for every time? You, bug. It was always you.

SHE DOESN'T SEE IT.

We *are* still those people. At least, we still can be. If she'd just—

“Okay, let's get this started,” Max hollers over the commotion in the room. Everyone quiets immediately, with the exception of Julian.

“Something you want to share with the rest of us?” Max sears Julian with a glare, his tone turning even more sour than it has been the last few weeks.

I blame myself. He's tried talking to me on more than one occasion, and I've remained mute on the subject he'd like to discuss. He wants to give me his opinion.

And I refuse to give him the time of day.

Mainly because this has *nothing to do with him*, but he doesn't see that.

Sure, I joined the house to get close to him. So I could block any chance he might have had with Cleo. Though, I never saw that happening from the beginning.

They're too much alike.

And since day one, they have acted like they hate each other.

Well, that's not entirely true.

She acts like she hates him. He acts indifferent to her.

So them together... It never happened. People think they were together once, and that's why he refuses to engage with her, but I see things differently.

Something happened, but it wasn't sexual. Hell, it probably wasn't even friendly. If anything, he turned her down, and that's why she's pissed.

"Actually, Maxy," Julian coos as he approaches the front of the room where Max is standing. I can see Max's aggravation with him the closer he gets. "Before you start swinging, I want you to remember where we are right now and how many witnesses you'll have to kill." My brothers chuckle at his jab, myself included. "This room is sacred. To even enter you have to have been deemed worthy. And every man in this room has proven their worth, their commitment to this house, and their dedication to you."

Julian stops short of Max's reach, extending his hand. In it is a white envelope. Legal size. I can't see any marking from my seat in the front row, giving nothing away.

"This is from everyone in here."

Is it? What did we get him?

I guarantee a swift kick in the ass isn't hiding in that envelope. My foot wouldn't fit.

“As a thank you for your dedication to us,” he continues when Max finally reaches out and takes the envelope from him. “We’re going to have one final hurrah before we leave campus life behind in a few months.”

Looking inside the envelope, Max’s eyes flick to Julian’s, a slow smile spreading across his face. Usually, I feel the need to run when Max smiles like that. His lips are pursed in a smug, self-satisfied smirk.

Trouble.

“Cabo?” he asks. “What makes you think I want to go to Cabo?”

“Tequilla. Half-naked chicks. Sun. Sand. Do I need to go on?”

“No, but you can.”

“I’ll pass. I’m sure we’ll regret going with you before the plane even lands,” Julian retorts, taking a seat in the row behind me.

“Who invited you?” Max raises his left brow in challenge.

“You have that backward, brother. We invited you.” Julian laughs.

Before Max can reply, Julian calls the meeting to order, overstepping Max’s authority. It’s past time. We need to get this show on the road. This is always our longest meeting of the year. They didn’t need to present Max with a fancy trip here, but my brothers like to make a show of things.

Colt nudges me as Max begins going over the voting process, leaning in close so no one else can hear our conversation.

“You’re going with us, right?”

“Why would I go to Cabo with Max?”

“Because your girl is going to be there.”

*What? Cleo’s going on a trip with Max?*

“Calm down,” he continues. He must have noticed me tense up at the thought of them on vacation together. “We’re all going. I’ll tell you why later. Let’s just say, you’re not going to want to miss it. Max is going to shit himself before the trip is over, someone is going to get punched, and there won’t be enough tequila in all of Mexico for Max to drown his sorrows.”

I’m intrigued.

Watching Max fall apart would be fun. Especially if it’s not at my expense.

I agree as Colt whispers a few more details to me while Max drones on and on about voting, the expectations he has for nominations, and what to expect for the remainder of the semester.

You know, until Max’s reign is over and we all go our separate ways.

Me, back home to find a job so I can be close to my family. My friends, on the other hand, will be leaving here with the loves of their lives, moving wherever they want, and starting their happily ever afters.

I found mine.

When I was twelve.

I'm not giving up on her now. I just have to find a way to make her see what's right in front of her.

Me.

The future we planned together.

As soon as the meeting's over, Colt follows me up to my room. I shoot Cleo a quick text. My last text has still gone unanswered, as I expected.

**ME: Bring your yellow bikini.**

**ME: And those chunky shoes you like so much. They make your legs look spectacular.**

“Who are you texting?”

“Just checking on an assignment for class,” I say dismissively as I toss my phone on my desk. “So what's this trip all about?”

Colt closes my door before answering. “Finn is proposing to Willow. It was the only way to get Max there without telling him.”

“So, let me get this straight...” I swallow the laugh that's trapped in my throat. “Max is an overbearing, overprotective brother. He can't keep his shit together when it comes to his sisters, so he gets a trip to Cabo? So, what? We can get him drunk before Finn pops the question and hope Max doesn't try to drown Finn in the ocean?”

“No.” Colt rolls his eyes at me as he drops into my desk chair and spins around twice. “He gets a trip to Cabo so he can be there to congratulate his best friend and his sister on their engagement. We get a trip to Cabo so we can run interference

if he decides to go off the rails. It's a win-win situation. I love the beach."

Colt has no idea what he's signed up for. His head has been in the clouds the last week since agreeing to travel with Seven Underground and write this summer. Hell, his head has been in the clouds since before Christmas when he finally went after Scarlet.

My phone chimes, alerting me of an incoming text. Colt snags it off my desk before I can reach it, staring down at the screen.

"Who the hell is bug?" he asks, turning the screen so I can see Cleo's message.

**BUG: No.**

I've never been more thankful for her nickname and her one-word answers before in my life.

"None of your damn business."

"I like her already." Colt's smirk has me clenching my fists. If he only knew...

Well, he sort of does. But he doesn't know everything, and I don't plan to give him my life story right now.

Swiping my phone out of his hand, I slide it in my back pocket as it chimes again.

"You should get that. I doubt Cleo likes to be left waiting."

Fuck my life!

"It's not Cleo," I lie. And not well, I might add. I avert my eyes and let out a heavy breath.

"Tell your story the way you want. I'll let Finn know to get you a ticket. He's buying them for everyone since this was his



idea. Sort of.”

“What do you mean sort of?”

“The Kappas were taking Cleo on a trip, and Finn basically hijacked the idea. Kendall was telling Declan about Cabo the night she was helping Finn come up with ideas for how to propose to Willow, and they just put their ideas together.”

“So we all get a free trip out of this because Finn wants to go big?”

“Yup. His dad is footing the bill, I guess. Kora got some kind of discount with the airline she worked for last summer. And the rooms are cheap as shit because our spring break is a week later than most colleges. Plus, if you bunk with someone, you can save even more. The resort is all-inclusive. I figure Scar and I will spend maybe five hundred each.”

Free vacation.

In Mexico.

With Cleo.

Finn is going to steal the show, but that doesn't mean he's the only one who can go big, right?

I need a plan. I damn good one. And I'm going to need my best friend to help. Which also means I need to tell him everything. Every last detail. Even the one thing I swore to Cleo I would always keep just between us.

“I have a confession to make,” I start, getting Colt's attention. He spins in my chair again but comes to a complete stop as soon as my words register. His brows raise as he stares at me, waiting for me to continue.

Only, I'm suddenly not sure how much I want to tell him. How much I can trust him with.

Let's hope he's as good of a friend as he claims to be.

“You already know Cleo and I have known each other since we were teenagers. Well, we dated in high school, made plans to come to LSU together, and then she broke up with me right before we moved here.” He nods and leans forward, resting his arms on his thighs, fully invested in each word.

“The gala wasn't a one-off. It's not the first time we've...”

What do I even call it? It wasn't a hate fuck. We weren't just screwing. We also weren't making love. It was somewhere in between those three things.

“It's not the first time your dick has slipped between those thighs since you broke up,” he says for me.

“Yeah, that.” I shake my head as I agree with his statement, a vision of my head between Cleo's thighs flashing through my mind. “Over the years we've come back to each other on occasion. Recently, more often than before. The first year, we were both still angry. Any time we were alone, we fought. I fought for us, for her, and she pushed me away. We'd fuck each other's brains out because our tempers got so hot.

“Then we went home for the summer, and we found a way to get along. To be friends. It was a slow process that took months. I thought I was making progress at winning her back, but coming back here seemed to bring out the worst in both of us. She'd fight me any chance she had. She wanted to keep everything a secret, and I appeased her to try to make her happy. The sex was off the charts.

“But I was getting to a point where I couldn't look at her without wanting to wrap my arms around her. To bury my nose in her hair. Without thinking about—”

“Sticking your dick inside her?”

“Yeah, that. And around and around we went. During the summers it felt like we were living in our own little bubble. Then we’d return to campus, and it felt like a storm was always brewing between us. Which is why I didn’t go home for long periods of time last summer. I didn’t want to fall back into that bubble only for it to shattered again. I was ready to give her up, to let her go. At least, my brain was. My heart may never be.”

Last summer was hard. I split my time between home and here. My family is close, and it killed me every time I drove out of town. I wanted to stay, but I also needed space from Cleo. From the life we had together. From falling back into a routine that would ultimately change the second the new semester began.

“Okay,” Colt says, pausing as he takes in everything I’ve said. “So, you love her, that much is clear. You still want to be with her. You’re having a hard time letting go.”

“I don’t want to let her go.”

“Are you sure? Because if Scarlet put me through even a fraction of what you’ve told me she’s put you through, I might have to reconsider everything.”

“I don’t want to let her go,” I reiterate, growling at him.

“Fine. You’re all in. Why do you think she flips like a switch the second you return to campus?”

I let the truth slip before I change my mind. And for the first time ever, Colt is left speechless. No witty comeback. No comment at all as he stares at me in shock.

# THIRTEEN

CLEO

THOSE BITCHES. THEY DANGLE THIS AMAZING VACATION IN front of my face, get me all excited, and then drop the bomb on me that it's going to suck ass!

Because Max fucking Palmer is going to be there.

And the vacation is not even about me.

Finn is fucking proposing!

Talk about being blindsided by my friends.

It's fine, though. I can work with this. I'll just avoid everywhere Max is going to be. Everywhere Kane is going to be. Kora and I are sharing a room. We'll stick together, do our own thing, and have a good time, just the two of us.

That'll keep her away from Max too. I still haven't brought up what happened on New Year's Eve. I've been avoiding it. I don't want to know the truth. Because if she has a thing for Max, I might lose my shit.

Almost everyone else is coupled up. They'll be occupied and won't even notice we're not there.

I'll be invisible like always when it comes to this close-knit group of friends.

They chose not to invite me to New Years. To keep it a secret from me. They purposely leave me out of things all the time. Why should this be any different?

I'm still stewing when I read Kane's messages.

**K1: Want to know what I wished for every time? You, bug. It was always you.**

That one I ignore. I can't even bring myself to type out a response. There's too much I want to say, and nothing is going to come out sounding right at the moment. Not with the anger coursing through my veins.

**K1: Bring your yellow bikini.**

**K1: And those chunky shoes you like so much. They make your legs look spectacular.**

That bastard!

He actually sounds excited about Cabo. Why wouldn't he? Vacation with the boys, right? Sun and sand and booze. He's going to have a great time. He always does. Even when he's the odd man out.

Unlike me.

**ME: No.**

That's all I manage to type out before I hit send. Just ... no. No to everything.

No yellow bikini. I haven't been able to fit into it since before college, anyway. He should know that.

No to the wedge sandals. I love them, but I don't want him to think I'm wearing them for him. I probably would have

packed them had he not made that comment.

I don't even really want to go on this trip anymore.

My phone vibrates as I'm about to set it on my charger. Releasing a heavy sigh, I flip it over to see that Kora is texting me, and I send up a silent thank you to whoever might be listening.

I don't think I can handle a conversation with Kane right now. Or anyone else.

**KORA: Are you okay?**

She's right next door. She walked upstairs with me after the meeting. The fact she's texting me instead of walking her skinny ass over here tells me she already knows the answer to that question.

No matter how much I try to hide the fact that I am far from okay.

**ME: Fine. Just a little irritated. I was excited and felt honored until I heard the rest of the plan.**

**KORA: If it makes you feel any better, the original plan was all about you. The trip was for you.**

**ME: It does. A little. I just wish it was only the two of us. Girls' trip, ya know?**

**KORA: You're gonna change your tune after a few days when you're sick of me being around every second of every day.**

**ME: Never!**

**KORA: Sure.**

**ME: Promise me we'll stick together. You won't leave me to vacay by myself.**

**KORA: As long as you don't follow me into the bathroom, you have yourself a deal.**

**ME: Uh, girls always go to the bathroom in pairs. How else are we going to gossip about the people we're with?**

**KORA: I mean the one in our room. A girl needs a little privacy when she has to do her business.**

**ME: LOL. Deal.**

**KORA: I'm going to look up the day trips the resort offers. Anything specific you want to check out?**

Kora knocks on my open door before I can even reply. Her laptop is tucked under her arm, and she's smiling at me. "Let's check them out together," she suggests, plopping down beside me on my bed.

Kora and I spend the next hour choosing what kind of adventures we want to go on in Cabo. We're definitely hitting up the spa at the resort one day and kite surfing another. The resort has a lot to offer, and the restaurants look amazing.

Once she heads back to her room for the night, I find myself fighting the urge to text Kane. I finally give in shortly before midnight after tossing and turning for an hour.

**ME: Cabo**

I know he's still awake; he's always been a night owl. He can function on four hours of sleep unlike me. Still, he doesn't answer me immediately.

**K1: Are you backing out?**

**ME: No. Are you?**

**K1: No. I want to be there when Max loses his shit.**

That's going to be epic. I can already picture the look of shock on Max's face when Finn drops to one knee. The anger that will follow.

**ME: Kora and I are going to make it a girls' trip.**

**K1: Does that mean I won't see you?**

**ME: I'll be around. I'm sure you'll see me. We just don't plan to hang out with the rest of the group as much. If you think about it, we're both outcasts.**

**K1: You're not an outcast, Cleo. You just make it hard for people to get to know the real you. You hide behind a mask. Ever think about taking it off? Letting yourself be vulnerable?**

Nope. Sure haven't, and I don't plan to now.

**ME: I'll get right on that.**

I say the words out loud as I type them.

**K1: I can hear the sass in your voice.**

Asshole. I hate when he calls me out. I hate that he knows so much about me.

**ME: I just wanted to know if you were still planning on going. Goodnight.**

**K1: Sleep tight, bug.**

**ME: You have to stop calling me that.**

**K1: Never.**

This is a fight I'm never going to win, so I don't bother to text him back. Of course that doesn't stop him from keeping the conversation going.

**K1: You will always be my love bug.**



**K1: No matter how hard you try to fight me.**

**K1: We are meant to be together, and you know it. One day you're going to wake up and realize it and because I love you, because I've always loved you and always will, I'll be right here waiting. Please don't make me wait too long. You know I'm not a patient man.**

Damn him.

He makes it hard to not want to crawl back to him. But I have my reasons. Reasons he'll never understand.

He deserves better than me. He deserves a chance at a happily ever after with someone who won't hold him back. And in a few short months, hopefully he'll move on with his life and open his heart to the possibility.

---

“GOOD AFTERNOON, CLEO,” EMERSON GREETES ME AS I STEP off the elevator.

Dixon Advertising has become my saving grace. The one place I can escape to where no one knows me. I'm just the lowly intern who goes on coffee runs, takes notes in meetings, and makes sure my boss, Emerson Dixon, is where she needs to be, when she needs to be there.

Her schedule was a hot mess when they brought me on two months ago. Her assistant had quit and Justine, her partner, had just left for an extended vacation. I've worked out all the kinks now.

Not to mention, she's just starting her last trimester and blames her lack of organization on the baby. She says she's

never felt more forgetful in her life. Pregnancy has messed with her memory.

I don't doubt it for a second.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Dixon.”

“Emerson,” she corrects. “I feel old when you call me Mrs. Dixon.”

“Sorry. Where would you like me to start today, Emerson?”

I don't like calling her by her first name. It feels too personal. She's only a few years older than me, and if we'd met somewhere else, we could be friends. Emerson is one of the nicest people I've ever met. She reminds me a lot of myself—driven, fierce, but also with a soft spot for people.

Though, to be fair, I don't let my soft side show very often. The only person who's ever seen it is Kane.

“We have a meeting in an hour, so I was hoping we could talk beforehand. Ten minutes?” she asks as she breezes past me, heading in the direction of Ryder's office, her husband, motioning for me to follow.

They met here. She used to be his assistant. Rumor has it, they fell in love in the elevator. I'm not sure how much truth there is to what I've heard, considering all the gossip that spreads through the office. I thought the whispers were bad at the sorority house. That's nothing compared to Dixon Advertising.

We bypass Ryder's office and head toward Hunter's office. Her brother-in-law. The head honcho here. He scared the crap out of me the first few weeks I was here. I avoided even looking in his direction. Then his wife and their daughter came

in for a visit, and I watched as his tough exterior melted before my eyes.

“Hunter,” Emerson greets him as she walks through his open door, pausing only to allow me to pass her so she can close it behind us.

Shit. I’m either fired or I’m fired. I don’t see another scenario about to play out. I guess that means I won’t have to ask for time off to go to Cabo, which I was planning on doing before I left today.

“Emerson. Cleo.” Hunter nods at each of us as we slide into the chairs in front of his desk. “How are you today?”

His question is directed at me, but when I open my mouth to speak, no words come out.

“You’re not being fired,” Emerson says quickly, placing her hand on my arm.

“Oh, thank god,” I say as I let out a breath.

Hunter laughs as he stands and moves to sit on the edge of his desk in front of us. “The opposite actually. We were hoping to talk to you about staying on after your internship ends.”

“Really?”

“Emerson is going to be taking maternity leave about the same time you graduate,” he continues. “We’re not sure if you have any job offers yet, but we’d like to put ourselves in the mix. It would start out as temporary with the chance for a permanent place in the company.”

As much of a planner as I am, the one thing I haven’t done yet is send my resume out. I need to start hunting for a job after graduation, but I’m not even sure I know where I want to live, let alone work. This would be a great solution, though

temporary. It would give me more experience and time to find a permanent solution.

“You don’t have to answer us today. Just think about it.” Reaching behind him, he picks up a sealed manila envelope and hands it to me. “This is our offer. There’s room for negotiation. We understand that you live in your sorority house currently, and the timeline may not work for you. Please don’t hesitate to talk to either myself or Emerson if you have questions, okay?”

Hunter extends his hand to me, and I place the envelope in my lap so I can shake his hand. It’s heavy, or maybe that’s just my imagination. It feels like a weight in my lap, holding me hostage to the chair.

Still, I follow Emerson out of Hunter’s office. As soon as we reach my desk, she excuses herself to her office, closing the door behind her, and I plop down in my chair. The envelope taunts me as I start up my computer and briefly look over Emerson’s schedule for the day, making a mental checklist of all the things I need to do to ensure she’s ready.

The first meeting goes by in a blur, as does the second. I leave the office to get lunch, the envelope weighing my purse down like a pile of rocks as I trudge down the street in a daze.

I know what I want to do. I don’t even need to look at their offer. But I don’t know if I can do it.

Staying in Sunnyside after graduation means living alone. All my friends are going to leave here, find jobs, and start their lives. I’ll be the one left behind.

It scares me.

The idea of going back home scares me even more. The idea of not finding a job and being forced to live with my

parents, in my old room, is the equivalent of failure in my mind.

I list off the pros and cons as I make my way back to the office, the heavenly smell of pasta sauce filling the small space of the elevator, causing my mouth to water. I eat my lunch alone in the break room, my heart and my mind warring over what the right decision should be.

By the time I get back to my desk, I'm eager to tear into the envelope. What I find has my jaw dropping open in shock.

A salary no other company would offer an entry-level employee. Full benefits. Paid vacation twice a year. Even my moving expenses are covered.

I've done nothing to deserve this offer. Not after only a few months of working with this team, yet they're putting their faith in me. Completely.

Something no one else has ever done.

Except Kane.

# FOURTEEN

KANE

IT'S BEEN A SHIT DAY. A SHIT WEEK.

Max has been on my ass, practically stalking me, spending all his free time at the house. Staying the night. He says it's because he can't sleep when Willow stays at his place. Which I don't doubt, but it also happens to be extremely convenient timing.

He tried to get me to talk over coffee this morning. First about house business and the upcoming trip to Cabo. He wants us to room together so we can save money.

I agreed before thinking my decision through. I was about to withdraw my answer when he switched topics, giving me whiplash. Of course, he wanted to talk about Cleo. About what happened.

I left him in the kitchen. Alone. To talk to himself.

The idea of rooming with Max has some merit.

For one, I don't plan to sleep in that room. I'm going to find a way to share a bed with a hot blonde who has a thing for me, no matter how much she wants to deny it.

Secondly, I do like to save money. Not that I have a lot, but I have enough to afford the trip. If that means listening to Max snore—because I would bet the little money I do have that he does—for half the price, then so be it.

Finally, Max has a thing for Kora Potter. There's always been someone, but we could never figure out who. I'm guessing it's been her all this time. It makes sense. The way they act around each other. It's all a show. Kind of like the show Cleo and I have been putting on, pretending we barely know each other.

Well, it made sense until he started fake dating Gia. Who he hasn't mentioned or been seen with since the night of the gala. And who, for some reason, won't be joining us on our little vacation.

Convenient.

Which means, if I'm lucky, I can pull a roommate swap.

Max and Kora can work their shit out in one room, while Cleo and I work ours out in another.

Preferably naked. With her on top. Her breasts bouncing as I—

As if I've conjured her up, Cleo walks out of the student union a few feet away.

God, it feels like years since I've seen her instead of weeks.

I've perfected avoiding Max, and Cleo has perfected avoiding me. I haven't even caught a glimpse of her since the gala.

But I've texted her every day. Sometimes it's nothing more than a good morning or hello with a picture of myself. But

mostly, I just send her a heart emoji to let her know I'm thinking of her. That I still care. That I love her.

She doesn't normally respond. Aside from discussing the Cabo trip, my texts have gone unanswered.

Is it possible she's even more beautiful with the sun shining down on her in jeans and a blouse than she was all dressed up that night?

She spots me and stumbles to a stop.

Lowering my sunglasses, our eyes connect, and for a brief second, I can feel her love. Right before she puts her shield back in place.

Slowly approaching, I slide my sunglasses up my nose, but my eyes remain locked on hers.

"Kane."

"Bug."

Cleo growls at me, her lips pursing together in irritation.

"You look beautiful today."

"Did you need something?" she asks, finally averting her eyes.

"Just you. Only you."

Am I laying it on a little thick? Probably.

But I've never lied to her. I've always been honest about my feelings for her. And I know she hears me, even if she doesn't want to listen. Even if she doesn't respond to my text messages.

When we first came to Lake State, I gave her space. I let her acclimate to college. Did I watch her like a hawk? Yes,



because I'll always feel the need to protect her, but I never interfered.

I kept my feelings to myself.

I didn't pressure her.

I honestly thought she'd come back to me before the first semester was over. Because I could see how miserable and lonely she was without me. I was living the same nightmare.

But I was wrong. It makes me wonder if I should have pushed her. Should have tried harder. Been around more.

Come clean with my friends about who she was and what she meant to me.

I can't change what happened back then, but I can choose to do better now. And that's my plan. To stop hiding how I feel about her from everyone else. I'd be saying the same thing to her even if we weren't standing here alone.

"You can't say things like that to me, Kane. We've talked about this."

"No, we haven't, but we should. I told you I was done hiding, that I didn't want to do it anymore. I want to be with you, Cleo. I don't give a fuck what anyone thinks. They're entitled to their opinion, and if they don't like us being together, it's a hill they can die on alone. All that matters is how we feel. I lo—"

"Don't. Please," she begs, placing her hand on my chest, directly over my heart. "Please, don't say it."

"It's how I feel, bug."

Cleo shakes her head, her hand falling and dangling at her side as she brushes past me.

She's not ready to hear it. She knows I love her, but hearing me say it might break her.

Why is she fighting so hard to push me away? I know she feels the same. It's the look in her eyes when it's just the two of us. Before we strip each other of our clothes, we strip each other's emotions with just a glance.

Before I can stop myself, I reach out and place my hand on her hip. Cleo stops walking, her head dropping to her chest in defeat.

"I'm sorry, bug. I really am. I don't understand why this is so hard for you."

"Does it matter?"

"It does to me. Talk to me. Explain it to me."

She brushes my hand away, lifts her head, and storms off.

At least I got a reaction out of her.

And her reaction tells me more than she knows.

Everything she's fighting stems from why she broke up with me. From that summer. From the very first lie.

I've blocked out a lot about that night. Not all of it, as much as I wish I could sometimes, but a lot of it. The pain comes rushing back any time I think about it, so I avoid it at all costs.

---

*SHE DOESN'T WANT TO BE TIED DOWN.*

*But she's not tied down. She's tied to me. There's a difference. The same way she always will be. The way she has been for the last six years.*

*She's afraid of us falling apart.*

*That will never happen. If we can make it through the heartbreak of this summer, we can make it through anything. Even this. Even her trying to destroy us.*

*But the knife that punctured my heart was when she said she'd met someone else.*

*Max fucking Palmer.*

*That's a name I'll never forget for as long as I live. I'm going to find him and destroy him. If he touched my girl, if he took advantage of her, I'll kill him.*

*Slowly.*

*I'm left watching as my life, my love, my future drives away. I'm still staring at where her taillights disappeared around the corner long after they're gone. My phone has been ringing in my pocket, but I ignore it. I don't want to talk to anyone right now.*

*I'm angry, and I want to stew in that anger.*

*After everything we've been through, I can't believe she'd leave me for another guy. I'm her rock. Her shield. I've protected her from everything I could control since we were teenagers, even herself.*

*I don't plan to stop now.*

*My phone starts ringing again, and I rip it out of my back pocket, answering without looking at the screen. "What?"*

*"I'm sorry. Did I interrupt sexy time," Beck jokes.*

*Why am I friends with him again? Oh, yeah. He's Cleo's younger brother. I have no choice.*

*Had.*

*I guess I have a choice now. Not that I would ever stop being his friend just because his sister broke my heart. I love the kid almost as much as I love his sister.*

*“You know damn well you didn’t. Why the hell are you blowing up my phone?”*

*Running my fingers through my hair, I give the strands a little tug, trying to tamp down the rage coursing through my veins. I need a haircut before I leave for Lake State. Cleo and I have been talking about it for a week.*

*Retract that— she’s been teasing me about how long it is.*

*I like a clean cut. Short and trim. No fuss. No product.*

*“Cleo wasn’t answering her phone, so I figured you two were together. Where is she? Mom was expecting her home an hour ago.”*

*“She’s headed that way,” I inform him, hoping that’s where she was going.*

*“Cool. You not coming over for dinner tonight? Mom made your favorite. Lasagna.”*

*“Not tonight.”*

*“You sound like you want to punch someone in the face. Everything okay?”*

*Far from it, but I can’t burden him with the truth. The last thing I want is for him to be forced to choose sides. Plus, he’s too young to understand.*

*Hell, I barely understand what happened tonight.*

*At fourteen, Beck is smart as a whip, and insightful, but he’s still a child at heart. Everything is fun and games. He doesn’t take life seriously.*

*The shit that went down is serious. This entire summer has been one adult decision after another. And now this...*

*"Things are ... fine." I realize I pause too long when he clears his throat.*

*"No, they're not," he growls. "Even if I believed you, Cleo just ran into her room with tears streaming down her face. What did you do to her?"*

*Of course he thinks it's my fault.*

*"I didn't do anything. We had a fight."*

*"You need to come over and apologize then."*

*If only it were that simple, kid. If only. Because if it was, I'd be there in a heartbeat.*

*"If you want to know what happened, ask Cleo. You won't be seeing me for a while, but you know you can always call me. Anytime, Beck."*

*"You broke up with her, didn't you," he accuses.*

*"No, Beckham. She broke up with me, and I have no idea why."*

*I hang up before I say more. Climbing back in my truck, I buckle my seat belt but don't turn the ignition. I sit there for a while, replaying the conversation over and over in my mind.*

*Everything she said was a lie. An excuse. The easy way out.*

*There's no other guy. No Max Palmer. He probably doesn't even exist.*

*She doesn't want to find someone else, and she doesn't want me to either.*

*She still loves me. I could see it in the way she was looking at me, pleading with me to believe her lies as they spilled from her mouth.*

*She's never been able to lie to me. Not convincingly anyway. Because her eyes will always hold the truth.*

---

OF COURSE, MAX FUCKING EXISTED. AND HE LIVED IN THE same dorm as I did, just down the hall. And did he have to be so fucking charming?

I liked him before I knew what his name was. Then I hated him even more for making me like him. Which was hard because I saw him all the time. And guess who was never around?

Cleo.

The one time we ran into her on campus, she acted like she barely knew him. She also acted like she didn't know me at all. Which is when all the lying really began. For me at least.

But she started lying long before I did. Her lies started the moment she opened her mouth and Max's name came out. I just need to figure out why. And what role does Max play in all this.

"You gonna stand there all day and stare after her, or are you going to go get your girl?" Colt asks, sliding up next to me.

"I'm going to stand here and try to put the pieces of the puzzle together before I make my next move. I feel like every time I open my mouth I push her further and further away."

"Are you sure you don't want to ask Max what he knows?"

I've thought about that a lot lately, and it's clear he has to know something. There's a reason Cleo mentioned his name that night. And since I can't fathom something happening between them, both because I don't want that mental image in my head and also because they seem to hate each other, there has to be another reason.

"I'm going to have to."

"Do you think something happened between them? And if so, what are you going to do about it?"

"I'm not going to do anything," I start, tugging my backpack higher on my shoulder as I start toward the student union, Colt falling in step with me. "And I don't think anything happened. I think Max is just another one of Cleo's lies to push me away. She just didn't plan on Max and me becoming friends."

Colt nods in agreement as he holds the door open so I can step inside.

"I was thinking about the night she broke up with me back there."

"And?"

"And if I can figure out the real reason she broke up with me, I think I can win her back."

"How are you going to do that exactly? She's the only one who knows the real reason."

"Is she?" Stopping, I spin to face Colt. His face is wrinkled with confusion. "Want to take a day trip with me this weekend?"

"Where are we headed?"

“Home. I need to visit a friend. It’s time he chooses which side he wants to be on.”



# FIFTEEN

CLEO

I FEEL HIM WATCHING ME BEFORE I CATCH SIGHT OF HIM. There is no running. Nowhere I can hide that he won't try to follow. Which is why I don't move an inch as he approaches.

Not that my feet would move even if I willed them.

After the look he gives me, my feet feel like they are weighed down by cinder blocks.

All because he doesn't hide his eyes from me.

One look from him conveys more than a thousand words ever could. His love. Devotion. Desire. It's all there in the way he gazes at me, stirring up the feelings I've attempted to keep hidden from him.

Only it's getting harder and harder these days.

To not love him.

To not want him.

To not dream about him at night.

That's the worst part. I have some semblance of control over when and where we see each other. Of how long we

interact. If I let him touch me. How close I stand or if I even stop and talk to him at all.

*When I'm awake!*

But at night, there's nothing stopping my subconscious from allowing me to be vulnerable. From conjuring him up and reminding me what life use to be like before I pushed him away.

Which is why he's always holding me. Caressing my cheeks. Pressing his lips to mine. Taking my hand. Telling me I'm beautiful, in the same tone he did this afternoon. With love laced in every word.

And nothing holds me back from confessing all my secrets to him.

Which usually happens right before I wake up, dripping in sweat, moisture pooling between my legs, and a sense of panic coursing through my veins.

Even in my sleep, I'm confused.

I want Kane, but I'm scared to have him. Scared of what might happen should I let myself find happiness with him only for it to be taken away.

This time, I won't survive.

*I have nothing left to lose.*

We were younger then, naive. We understood what was happening, but after it was over, instead of being heartbroken, devastated, and emotionally scarred, we were sad but relieved.

At least I was.

After a while.

I wasn't ready to be a mother. To be responsible for the life of another human. To grow up. I was barely an adult. High school had just ended, and we were supposed to be having the time of our lives.

Instead, we were faced with a life we hadn't planned for. Not at that point. I'd been mapping out our future for years, but it didn't start with having a child.

College.

Get engaged.

Travel the country.

Start our careers.

Get married.

Buy a house and settle down somewhere near the water.

*Then* have our first child, followed by our second, and maybe a third if I could talk Kane into it. I wanted a boy and two girls. In that order if I could choose. And I wanted them all to be two years apart, so they were close enough in age to be friends when they grew up, but not close enough that they'd fight their entire childhood.

That's the life I was prepared for.

But things don't always work out the way we want them to.

And when you're broken inside, you stop caring about what you once wanted and focus on the little bit of a life you can manage to hold onto. My grief felt like rage, and that rage was all-consuming for a long time.

When it comes to Kane, I'd love nothing more than to grab hold of the dreams we once shared, but it's still in pieces, and

no amount of glue is going to be able to put them back together.

---

“I’M SO READY FOR THIS!” SCARLET SAYS AS SHE BOUNCES down the stairs in front of me. “A little sun. A little sand. Lots of drinks. It’s the perfect way to unwind and an early graduation celebration for most of us.”

She’s been on cloud nine most of the week. All the girls have been.

Me? I’ve been faking my excitement. Mainly because I don’t want to look ungrateful for their gift. But, if I’m being honest, I don’t have a good feeling about this trip.

I’m not the only one.

Kora’s been on edge the last two week as well. She hasn’t said as much, but as her best friend, I can tell. She’s jumpy, constantly zoning out, lost in thought.

The other day she stood at the kitchen counter stirring her coffee for five minutes before I interrupted her, causing her to spill said cup.

When I asked if she was okay, she played it off as being tired.

*“I’ve seen you exhausted, and this isn’t it. Be honest with me.”*

*“Really, that’s all it is. I didn’t get much sleep last night.”*

*“But you closed your door before ten. What were you doing all night if you weren’t sleeping?”*

*“Trying to sleep. Tossing and turning,” she answers quickly, as if she was prepared for the question. A clear sign she is lying.*

But I let the conversation drop. I let her believe I accepted her lies as the truth and kept my eyes open for clues as to what might be going on with her.

It’s been a great distraction from my own predicament.

Not that I’ve seen Kane since the day outside the student union. My efforts to continue avoiding him have been successful. He hasn’t even texted me once. They were coming daily and then suddenly stopped.

“The guys have all the bags loaded, and we’re ready to go. Everyone have their ticket?” Mya asks as we reach the bottom of the stairs.

“Shit!” Scarlet exclaims, dropping her purse to the floor and bounding back up the stairs in a rush. Mya rolls her eyes as she turns and heads out the open front door of the Zeta house.

The drive to the airport is filled with excitement. Kora and I were lucky enough to ride with Declan and Kendall while Mya and Scarlet piled into Julian’s car with Brady and Piper.

The rest of our group is waiting at the gate for us when we arrive. Though, there are a few people clearly missing.

Max, Colt, and Kane.

Maybe they decided not to come after all?

I’m pulling my phone from my purse to text Kane when I overhear Willow and Kendall mention Max’s name.

“Max says their plane just landed. They’re going to get everyone checked into the rooms and wait for us at the bar.”

“Why did he insist on going early again?” Kendall asks.

“I have no idea, but if I had to guess, my brother is up to something. He *offered* to get on a plane at five o’clock this morning. I didn’t even know he knew that hour existed.”

Kora tugs on my arm, pulling me out of earshot of their conversation.

“Did you notice Max and Kane aren’t here?” she whispers in my ear.

“Max is already in Cabo.”

“What? Why?”

“No idea. Lo seems to think he’s up to something.” I glance in her direction just in time to see her reaction. A look of genuine fear crosses her face before she’s able to rein it in. “What’s going on between you and Max, Kora? And please don’t tell me nothing because everyone already suspects. We had an entire meeting about it.”

“What?”

“Scarlet called an emergency meeting after he started dating Gia. Which was all bullshit. He was only using her. It was all fake.”

“It was?”

Is she the only one who didn’t see through their relationship?

“Yeah. I guess you’re the only one who didn’t realize it.”

She straightens her shoulders, brushes her hair back, and says, “I wasn’t really paying them any attention. If Gia wants to date him, that’s her choice. It doesn’t affect me.”

“But I think it does. And I think he did it to get a reaction out of you.”

“Then Max is an idiot,” Kora huffs.

Or I am. Until this very moment, I never realized how she feels about him. How much she fidgets when she lies. Or how her hands clenched when I mentioned him dating Gia, as if the idea made her irate.

The only way I’m going to get her to talk about her feelings for Max is if I explain my relationship with him. And that’s opening a box of secrets I’m not sure I’m ready to share with anyone. Even if I trust her to keep them to herself.

“Max isn’t that bad, you know,” I start, taking her hand and pulling her over to a row of chairs away from the rest of our group. “In fact, he’s kind of ... great.”

The look on Kora’s face says it all. She’s not buying a word of what I’m selling. But it’s the truth. He is great, as much as it pains me to admit. He’s kept my secret all these years, and now I’m going to have to ask that of Kora as well.

“You expect me to believe that you don’t hate Max, when you’ve spent the last four years either avoiding him or trying to destroy him?” Every word is laced with doubt and confusion. “We had an entire meeting about that as well. Halloween ring a bell?”

Yeah, not my proudest moment. I’d run into Max on campus a few days before the meeting. He’d been with Kane and motioned between us with his eyes. That’s all it took to set me off. He knew he held all the cards, had power over me, and I wanted to exert a little bit of power of my own. Knock him down a peg. And the only way I knew how to do that was to take away the one thing that meant the most to him.

His reputation.

“You’re right. But I don’t hate him. Not at all.” I’ll explain more to her later. One thing at a time.

“Then why all the fighting?”

“Because Max knows my secret, and I was afraid he’d expose me.”

There, I said it. Now she’s going to ask me a million questions, and I’m going to answer them as honestly as I can bring myself to.

My heart pounds in my chest as I wait for her to speak. But when she does, she stuns me.

“Max is crazy protective. You realize that, right? You’ve seen it with how he acts around his sisters. He goes crazy sometimes. So if you told him a secret, my bet is that he would protect that secret because it also means he’s protecting you from being hurt.”

Nodding in agreement, I let her words sink in. She makes it sound so simple when all this time I was afraid he was going to dangle my information as a bargaining chip. Use it to his advantage when in reality, he’s been protecting me by keeping it to himself.

But that’s not the only thing I learn from her response. The fact that she understands Max better than anyone else, and is defending him, is a clear indication of how much she cares about him.

“You’re in love with him, aren’t you?” My question is meant to be blunt, but it doesn’t have the impact I expect. Kora barely flinches. I’m about to say more when Kendall waves us over, motioning that it’s time to board.



“I want to finish this conversation when we get to Cabo,” I state as we join our friends.

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“All I want is the truth, and if there’s nothing there, it’ll be a short conversation. But I also have a confession to make, and that’s going to take a while. I’ve kept a lot of secrets over the years, told a lot of lies. I’ve weaved a web so thick I’m not sure I’ll be able to escape.”

“Does this have anything to do with Kane?” she asks as we take our seats in the back row. We’re far enough away from the rest of our group I could tell her now without worrying they might overhear, but I’m not ready.

I probably won’t be by the time we reach our final destination either, but at least I’ll have time to mentally prepare before then.

This is not how I thought we would start our vacation. I never intended to share my secret with anyone. And if I’m going to tell Kora the truth, I’m going to have to tell Kane as well.

I’ve never felt more vulnerable in my entire life as I do right now.

“It does.”

“How long have you been sleeping with him?”

I have to give Kora credit. She knows more than she’s let on. She’s probably been waiting for me to spill all the details when I was ready.

“Since I was sixteen,” I confess, drawing a gasp from her lips.

“Um, okay. So I have a feeling I’m missing a big chunk of the story.”

She has no idea how big.

“It’s pretty simple, actually. Girl meets boy. Girl falls in love with boy. They date all through high school. She plans their entire future together.” Sucking in a deep breath, I let it out slowly before continuing. “Girl gets pregnant, loses the baby, and falls apart.”

“Oh, Cleo.”

“It was a long time ago.” I brush off her comment, attempting to keep my emotions in check. To detach myself from the memory. But I can feel my eyes welling with tears.

“That doesn’t mean it doesn’t still hurt. That you don’t still feel that loss.”

She’s right.

I do feel it. Every damn day. Every time I look in Kane’s eyes, I’m right back in the emergency room, the look of devastation on the doctor’s face ingrained in my brain. His voice ringing in my ears.

*I’m so sorry, but you’ve had a miscarriage.*

He’s sorry.

For what? That my body rejected the child Kane and I created from our love.

Or is he sorry that he had to be the one to tell me?

“It does hurt,” I confess. “It hurts when I look into Kane’s eyes and know I failed him. It hurts when I think about how relieved I was, even if it was only for a brief second, that I

wasn't ruining his future. My future. But what really hurts is losing Kane."

"I can't believe he broke up with you after that."

"He didn't. I pushed him away."

Let the judgment begin...

# SIXTEEN

KANE

TALKING TO BECKHAM WAS EYE-OPENING.

He's grown into an admirable young man. He's the star of the rugby team and headed to Michigan State on an academic scholarship. He has a girlfriend, Hailey, who's half his size and cute as a button. When he pulled her in for a hug after introducing us, I wanted to laugh.

She barely came up to his chest.

Though, he has grown since Cleo and I broke up. At six-foot-five, he towers over me.

Once Hailey leaves, we move to the backyard and Colt, Beck, and I sit around the fire pit in an attempt to stay warm.

"Not going to lie, Kane. I was shocked you called."

"I wasn't even sure you'd answer," I confess.

"Is that why you waited until you were in the driveway?" I nod, and he continues. "So what do you want to talk about?"

His eyes glance to Colt, giving him a onceover, before swinging back to mine.

“Colt knows everything,” I say, answering his unspoken question. “He’s my best friend. You don’t have to hold back in front of him.”

“Just ask me what you want to know. I have homework.”

It’s Saturday. Yes, I realize he could be telling the truth, but if I were a betting man, I’d say he’s making up excuses. And since I’ve known him since he was eight years old, and I’ve never seen him do homework over the weekend, I’d more than likely be right.

“I want to talk about your sister.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“Does she know you’re here?” My silence gives him his answer. “I won’t talk about her behind her back. I love you like a brother, but I’m not taking sides, man. Not after all this time, so don’t ask me to.”

“I only have one question. When you asked her why she broke up with me, what did she say?”

Beck shifts uncomfortably in his seat. I didn’t expect this to be easy for him, but I also didn’t expect him to try to push back.

“Why?”

“Because I think she lied to me. I think she’s lied to everyone about why she ended our relationship. We were both hurting, and we should have been leaning on each other, not pushing the other person away. But you were always the one person she never lied to. So I think you know the real reason.”

Beck nods in understanding as he leans back in his chair. “Why should I tell you?”

“I still love her, Beckham. I’ll always love her. And I know she still loves me. I’m tired of playing this game of tug-of-war. One minute we collide, and then she pushes me away again. In two months we graduate, and if I don’t find a way to win her back before then, I may never. So I need to know the truth. The real reason. So I can figure out how to prove to her that she was wrong.”

“She’s not going to like hearing that, so I hope you don’t lead with it.”

“Oh, I’m well aware she likes to be right. I learned that early on. I also learned that she hates being vulnerable and losing our child made her the most vulnerable she’s ever been.” I almost choke on the words, the memory of the day the doctor told us feeling like a punch directly to the center of my chest. “It scared the shit out of her. I did everything I could to try to make her feel safe, loved. She still pushed me away with a bullshit excuse of wanting to be free. To not be tied down. That she’d met someone else.”

Beckham’s laugh is deep and loud, echoing off the trees that line the backyard.

“That’s rich.”

“Yeah. Not as funny as you think. I know the guy she said she wanted to date. I’m friends with him.”

“She hasn’t dated anyone since you, Kane.”

“I’m aware. She lied. Everything she said that night was a lie.”

“Not everything,” he retorts. “She may have lied about *why* she wanted to break up with you, but everything else she said was the truth. You already have your answer, Kane. You just can’t see it.”

Beckham leaves Colt and I sitting around the fire. Colt motions for me to get up after a few minutes, and we leave out the side gate. It's not until we're back in the car that either of us speaks.

"Well, that was a wasted trip," Colt declares as I pull away from the curb. "Unless you can remember what else she was telling you that night."

"I remember every word."

"Okay, so walk me through your conversation. Maybe an outside perspective can shine some light on things."

As we make our way back to Lake State, Colt and I go over my conversation with Cleo the night she broke up with me. There are two words that stand out to him.

*Tied down.*

I tried to explain to him that I wasn't trying to tie her down. That we were happy one minute and then she was breaking up with me the next. That's when he flips the script and all the pieces of the puzzle come together.

We lost the baby, and she didn't want *me* to feel tied down. She was letting me go so I didn't feel obligated to stay with her because of the child we created.

*Oh, Cleo.*

She should have known that I didn't feel obligated to be with her. I loved her. I love her still. That's why I wanted to be with her. It had nothing to do with the baby, or losing it. All I've ever wanted is to make Cleo happy. To spend the rest of my life with her.

I still want that.

And now that I know the truth about why she broke up with me, I can start making a plan to win her back. Because if she needs me to prove to her that I want to be tied to her for the rest of my life, I will.

But first, I need to talk to Max.

He still plays a role in this; I just don't know how big of one. And I'm not sure I'm going to be able to restrain myself when I get answers.

After dropping Colt at the Kappa house, I head downtown toward the loft Max shares with Finn. Colt did a little recon for me to ensure Max is home. Finn is going to keep him there until I arrive, and then agreed to give us some privacy.

I don't bother to knock, opening the door and calling out Max's name as I shut it behind me. He rounds the corner, clearly surprised to see me.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, regaining his composure, a slow smirk spreading across his face. "Ready to confess your sins?"

"I am if you are," I counter, toeing off my shoes and walking past him into the kitchen.

"I have nothing to confess." Max takes the seat furthest from me at the island in the kitchen but turns in his chair to face me.

"You met Cleo before classes started freshman year." His eyes momentarily widen with surprise and that's all the confirmation I need to continue. "I think you have plenty to confess."

"We met at orientation. So what?"



That makes perfect sense. Cleo and I were going to attend orientation the same day, but she was still recovering from the miscarriage, so she rescheduled hers to a later date.

“What happened that day?”

“Same thing that happened when you went to orientation, I assume. Tour of the campus. Shitty lunch in the cafeteria.”

“If nothing happened, why do you and Cleo detest each other.”

“I never said I didn’t like her.”

“You banned everyone in the house from dating her, Max. Why?”

“Oh, that?” he jokes, leaning back in his chair as he smiles at me. “I did that for you. So no one would touch your girl.”

He knew. All this time and he never said a word, but he knew Cleo and I had a past. And the only way he would know that is if Cleo told him.

I’m torn between thanking him and wanting to punch him in the face.

“Elaborate,” I state firmly, removing my sunglasses and tossing them on the granite countertop.

“You and Cleo were an item before college. She broke up with you. You both still love each other, so I tried to keep other guys away from her until you pulled your head out of your ass and went after her.”

“There’s more to the story than that. She—”

“I know the story, Kane.” Max levels me with a sympathetic glare. “You don’t have to relive all the details.

Cleo made me promise to keep her secret, and I have. Even though she used me.”

“She claims you’re the reason she broke up with me. Because she met you.”

“I know. She told me the first day of classes. After she realized that you and I had already met. The thing is, I knew who you were before you knew who I was. She’d shown me photo booth pictures of the two of you she kept in her purse. I recognized you in the hall.”

“You drew me in, wanting to get to know me. To what? Size me up?”

“No. I had no interest in Cleo aside from being her friend. She needed one that day at orientation. She was crying and alone, and I couldn’t bear to see her sad. That’s why we started talking. And that’s probably why she told me everything, because she needed to talk to someone. She was angry and sad and confused, and I just happened to be the one to find her.”

“Thank you.” My words are genuine. If Cleo needed someone, and I wasn’t there, I’m glad she found a friend in Max that day.

“For the record, I tried to talk her out of breaking up with you.”

*I’m sorry... What?*

“She told you she was going to do it?”

“She felt like she was holding you back. She didn’t want to keep you from the dreams you two had talked about, and in her mind, losing your child would always be something that tied you to her. An obligation. I didn’t know you, but I knew she was making a mistake. I made her promise to give it time,

to think it over, and to talk to you before she made a decision. I'm pretty sure she didn't listen to me."

No, she didn't. She broke up with me two days after coming back from orientation.

"What else did she tell you?" I ask, wanting to know everything he knows.

"Nothing. She didn't have to tell me that she loved you for me to see it, Kane. It's clear she still does. I've tried to talk to her about it a few times over the years, but she always ends up screaming at me to keep my opinion to myself. The girl is a control freak, and her feelings for you are the one thing she can't control."

I couldn't have summed her up better myself.

"She knows I love her. She knows I'm done hiding."

"You think you were hiding? Ha! I mean, I knew the entire time. Some people probably never suspected, but I always saw you two sneak away."

"Whatever. It ends now."

"Listen, Kane. You're not going to like what I have to say, but you need to hear me out." I never like what he says, so I nod in agreement, my hands clenching into fists in anticipation of punching him. "I'm going to have to take Cleo's side here. To protect her. So if you're not serious about this, if you only want her back because you think you can't have her, you need to walk away. She's still hurting, and fucking with her feelings is only going to make things worse."

Is he serious?

"You don't need to protect her from me, Max. I love Cleo, with all my heart. I always have and always will. This isn't a

game to me. I want her back in my arms, back in my life, and I'm not going to stop until she realizes that she made a mistake. We're not over. We never will be. No matter how many times she pushes me away, I'm going to come right back and try to win her over. Again and again. If you have a problem with that—"

"Don't get your panties in a bunch. I just needed to make sure you were serious about this. I don't want to see her hurt again. It may not always look like it, but I do care about her. She was my friend once, and we could be friends again if she stopped pushing me away."

"She does that. She doesn't like to feel vulnerable. And if you've known our secret all this time, she's the most vulnerable around you. In her mind, you have the ability to blow everything up."

Max nods in understanding as he slides off his stool. Reaching into the fridge, he pulls out two beers, sliding one across the counter to me as he cracks his open.

"I'm sorry you thought something happened between us. I didn't realize she was going to use me like that until after she had." Max seems genuinely apologetic, something that doesn't happen very often.

"She dropped your name, and I have to confess, I saw red. But once I saw you two interact the first time, I knew nothing had happened."

"Good. Because when she told me, I was irate. I'd already befriended you, and I didn't want you thinking I was trying to steal your girl or worse, that I was the reason she broke up with you. I begged her to be honest with you, but she refused."

“Generally, with Cleo, if you tell her what to do, she does the opposite just to spite you.”

“So how are we going to win your girl back then?”

I have no idea, but I’ll accept all the help I can get.

# SEVENTEEN

CLEO

KORA LETS MY CONFESSION SINK IN. BY THE TIME WE'VE changed planes and are on the final leg of our journey to Cabo, I'm on the edge of my seat in anticipation of her reply.

I need her to say something.

Anything.

Instead, she takes my hand in hers, gives it a little squeeze, and smiles at me.

“Kora, I—”

“You don't need to explain anything to me. What happened before we met is your secret to keep. I understand why you didn't tell me. I can't imagine it's easy to talk about, and I won't force you to do that.”

“But I lied to you,” I whisper-yell as the fasten seatbelt sign turns on. Kendall and Declan are in the row in front of us, and even though I've shared my biggest secret with Kora, I'm not ready to share it with anyone else yet. Which is why I lower my voice and lean in close before continuing. “I lied to everyone.”

“We all lie, Cleo. We all lead people to believe what we need them to believe. If everyone told the truth one hundred percent of the time, we’d be at each other’s throats. No one would trust anyone. None of us would be friends.”

She has a point. And my secret didn’t effect anyone except me and Kane.

“It’s fine,” she reassures me. “Sometimes secrets are meant to be kept. For instance, do you really think Finn and Lo would be together if he’d confessed the way he felt about her to Max years ago? Probably not. And think about the domino effect that would have had.”

Where is she headed with this? She’s normally quicker to get to the point she’s trying to make.

“If Max and Finn weren’t friends, Kendall wouldn’t have met Declan. That’s two relationships demolished by one secret. There would have been no camping trip where Micah and Alexis met. Three down. Piper and Julian may still have met through her internship, but who’s to say they would have ended up together? Evie and Leo seem like a foregone conclusion, and so do Mya and Brady.”

“What about Scarlet? Do you think she and Colt would have met if Finn had confessed?” I ask when she doesn’t continue.

“Maybe, but here’s the thing. If you had been honest about your relationship with Kane, would he have been friends with Max? Would he have joined the Kappa house? Because from what I know of Colt, he only joined because Kane asked him to. And we only heard about that concert Scarlet and Colt met at because Colt was a Kappa pledge.”

She makes the idea of keeping secrets sound less devious and more appealing. Not that I plan to continue lying to all my friends. But I also don't feel obligated to tell anyone anymore either.

“Every decision you make, every action you take, has a reward and a consequence. One always outweighs the other. What was the reward and consequence of keeping your secret?”

The consequence—living with the pain of pushing the love of my life away.

The reward...

I'm drawing a blank. Because I don't think there is one. I don't deserve one. Not after all I put us through. I deserve to feel the brokenness that lives inside me every day for what I did to us.

But Kane, he deserves all the happiness in the world. And if he'd just let me go, he could find it. There's someone out there for him. Someone better than me. Someone who will love him the way he deserves to be loved.

I thought that person would always be me, but I was wrong.

“Cleo,” Kora nudges me with her shoulder as the plane touches down.

“Sometimes the consequences of our actions are so great, there is no reward.” Turning to look out the window so she can't see the look on my face, my words are barely above a whisper.

---



“WHO’S READY FOR A DRINK?” MICAH ASKS AS ONE BY ONE we get out of the van.

“Colt says they’re at the bar by the pool. They have our room keys,” Scarlet informs everyone without looking up from her phone, her thumbs quickly tapping her screen.

“So we go get our keys, settle in, then meet back up for drinks in an hour. Sound good?” Finn asks, pulling Lo to his side.

Everyone nods in agreement with the exception of me and Kora. If Colt’s at the bar, so are Max and Kane. The thought of seeing him makes my stomach flip.

Still, Kora and I follow behind the rest of our friends. We’re both silent as we make our way through the main lobby of the resort. Keeping my eyes focused straight ahead, I barely glance at my surroundings.

There will be time to check this place out later. After we’ve managed to ditch the rest of the group.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Kora asks as we walk through the open double doors that lead outside.

“Get our keys and hide?” I state. My hope is to sound like I’m joking, but by the way my voice trembled, neither of us laugh.

“I like that plan.”

“Are you hiding with me, or from Max?” I ask, slowing my steps and putting distance between us and the group.

“Does it matter?”

“To me it does.”

“Both then. I promised you I wouldn’t leave you, but I also have no interest in being around Max.”

“Because you love him.” It’s a statement, not a question. Not that she replied.

Max, Colt, and Kane are sitting with their backs to us as we approach. Colt turns first, sensing Scarlet as she races to where he’s seated. As soon as she lands in his arms, Max and Kane turn in succession.

I watch as Max greets everyone, avoiding looking in Kora’s direction until he’s confident no one is paying him any attention.

Kane isn’t as clever. He greets all his friends with his eyes locked on me. I can feel his stare, and if it weren’t for his damn sunglasses, everyone would know where he is looking.

I hated them when he first started wearing them. I was annoyed that I couldn’t look into his amber hues and know exactly how he was feeling. Read his thoughts. See his love.

I finally realized I didn’t need to see his eyes to know those things. All I have to do is listen to what my heart is telling me. It’s perfectly in tune with his, communicating with mine without a single word passing between us.

Like right now.

His smile tells me he appreciates the dress I’m wearing. The slight shift in his stance alerts me to the lust coursing through his veins. And the way he tilts his head slightly is his way of asking me to go somewhere alone with him.

And I want to.

But I won’t.

“Can you grab our keys?” I ask Kora when neither of us make a move any closer. Colt is handing them out while the rest of our group order a round of drinks.

“Rock, paper, scissors,” she suggests.

“You know how I feel about Kane. I have no idea how you feel about Max. So right now, my feelings trump yours. Unless there’s something you want to confess?”

I know she’s not going to say a word. Not here. Not now.

“Fine, but you owe me,” she says through clenched teeth as she stomps toward the bar.

Before she can reach Colt, though, Kendall hands her two tall glasses with a frozen concoction in them. Both have tiny pink umbrellas piercing a pineapple that’s perched on the rim.

Looks like we’re drinking before we head to our room.

Taking a seat at the end of the bar furthest from Kane, Kora and I sip our drinks in silence. If it weren’t frozen, I would have sucked it down even faster. As it is, I’m barely avoiding the feeling of brain freeze with how fast I’m drinking.

There’s laughter floating all around us. Our friends are having the time of their lives.

Each of them cuddled up to the men in their lives. A smile on their faces.

“I’ve never felt more like an outcast than I do right now,” I say to Kora as I stare at them.

*I had that once.*

Envy is an ugly shade of green, but that’s how I feel right now. Envious. Of what they have. Of the way they feel. Of the

fact that they can openly show those same feelings when I've been forced to keep mine locked away.

*It's your own damn fault.*

“Don't be. Just because they've found their happily ever after, doesn't mean you won't.”

*I thought I already did.*

“And just because they're smiling on the outside for the world to see, doesn't mean they don't have their own problems.”

*Sure doesn't appear that way. Not with the sights and sounds of paradise surrounding them.*

“None of their relationships are perfect. It wasn't easy for them to get where they are today, and it won't be easy for them to stay happy. They're going to have to work for it. They're all still in the honeymoon phase of their relationship.”

She has a point.

I hate to admit it, but as perfect as their relationships look to an outsider, I know differently. None of them had it easy in the beginning.

Lo fought to stay away from Finn. She didn't want to ruin the friendship he had with her brother even though she loved him. He fought to win her back.

Kendall wasn't exactly keen on Declan, and she had to overcome the demons of her past. He refused to let her go and proved he was worthy.

Alexis refused to date Micah, only giving him one night. She made him show her that not only had he given up his playboy ways, but that he wouldn't be a burden on her schoolwork.

Piper never saw the way Julian looked at her. The rest of us did, but she was oblivious. He slowly but steadily got her to open her eyes.

Evie was bound and determined to be with Leo. I can't blame the guy for being a little hesitant—Max threatened to kill him probably. But once he realized she was it for him, he took the risk. He even let Max punch him a few times.

Then Evie punched Max.

There were things I didn't know about Mya until recently. She has severe PCOS, meaning she can't have kids. She didn't want to tie Brady down and strip him of that opportunity in life, so she pushed him away. Colt wasn't about to let her walk away that easily, so he pushed them back together.

Scarlet's situation was a bit of a surprise to everyone. After she broke up with the tool she was dating—he was a cheating asshole none of us really liked—she was suddenly in a relationship with Colt. I wanted to take credit since I'm the one who forced her to take over planning the gala for me, but I couldn't. I thought she was meeting with Max. Come to find out, she and Colt had been secretly crushing on each other for years. The gala meeting was just a coincidence that forced them to open their eyes.

Then there's Kora, who needs to tell me what the hell is going on with her and Max. I don't honestly believe she's in love with him. She's always said she can't stand him. She refuses to go places he's going to be, instead sticking by my side. Yet, I feel like there's a big chunk of the story I'm missing.

“Let's get our keys and head to the room. I feel like a little sun and sand,” I state, popping off my chair, suddenly feeling courageous.

Marching away from Kora, I weave my way through our group of friends until I stop short in front of Colt. Kane is seated to his left, his gaze fixed on me. Max is to his right, staring out at the ocean, oblivious to everything going on around him.

“Can I get my key card please? I want to go freshen up.”

“Sure.” Releasing his hold on Scarlet, he turns in his chair and shuffles the remaining stack of cards on the bar top. Once he locates one with my name on it, he hands it to me. “Room one-twelve. I think it’s at the very end of the hall.”

“Thanks. Can I snag Kora’s too?”

He searches again and hands me her card. “Room one-seventeen.”

“We’re sharing a room,” I say more to myself than him.

“Everyone has their own room.”

“Why?” This isn’t what we planned. We were going to share a room, save money, and stick by each other’s side.

But I guess Kora got her wish. She has privacy in the bathroom.

Colt shrugs before lifting Scarlet by her hips and placing her in his lap. She giggles, kissing him on the cheek.

“Maybe you’ll meet someone, Cleo. And now you’ll have a little privacy if you do,” Mya states, slipping up beside me, holding out her hand to Colt.

The cards burn against my palm as I walk back to where I left Kora seated. She’s standing now, her purse strapped across her chest and her hand clutching the handle of her rolling suitcase. One look at me, and her eyes go wide.

“You’re in one-seventeen,” I say, handing her the card with her name on the envelope. “And I’m down the hall.”

“What? I thought—”

“So did I.”

Kendall and Willow’s conversation at the airport comes rushing back to me and Willow’s words are suddenly all I can hear.

*My brother is up to something.*

Great.

# EIGHTEEN

KANE

EVERYTHING IS GOING AS PLANNED.

But it was too easy.

I expected her to push back more. To fight Colt about her room. And she might still, when she realizes that my luggage is already tucked in the closet.

Which is why I follow her and Kora a few minutes after they leave the bar. At a safe distance. The last thing I want is for her to see me coming.

The door to our room is closing behind her as I turn down the hall. Pulling my key card from my back pocket, I spin it between my fingers as I quickly make my way to the room, my stride long and sure.

Only, I don't feel that sure about what comes next.

Cleo is a wild card.

She always has been.

Anytime I've ever tried to tell her what to do, she's done the exact opposite. Her issues with control and independence



run deep. This might just be what pushes her over the edge. And if that's the case, she can always stay in Kora's room.

I tried to plan for every potential outcome. And in the instance she throws me out or leaves when she realizes we're sharing a room, a bed, for the next seven days and six nights, I wanted her to have a place to go.

I'm hoping that's not the case.

*Please. Please. Please.*

Scanning the card, I push the door open slowly as soon as the light turns green and step inside the room. To my left is a sitting area. Cleo's purse is sitting on top of her luggage by the chair. In front of me is a king-sized bed covered in white linens with light blue decorative pillows. And to my right is the bathroom with a massive walk-in shower and separate oversized jet tub.

There are two sets of French doors draped in sheer blue curtains that open to a private patio area. It's surrounded by tall bushes on either side and boasts a small wrought iron table and two chairs. Nothing fancy, but the view of the ocean is incredible.

I'm guessing that's where Cleo is since I don't see her.

Making my way deeper into the room, I push the curtains aside, and my lungs seize up at the sight of her. The same way they did when she walked into the bar earlier.

She's breathtaking. Her dress sits mid-thigh, giving me a view of her perfect legs. The top is stretched to accommodate her amazing breasts, and I can picture them in my mind even though they're fully covered. But it's the way her hair falls around her face, making her look angelic, that has me transfixed.

And right now, with her back to me, I'm appreciating the view of her ass when I should be taking in the sight of the ocean.

"You look stunning," I say, keeping my voice low as I raise my eyes.

Do I want to ravish her right now? Hell yes!

Do I want her to think this was all a ploy to get her in bed? No, because it's not.

I put a lot of time and effort into perfecting this plan.

"What are you doing in my room?" she asks without turning around.

"*Our* room," I clarify. Her shoulders go stiff when she realizes what I'm implying and seconds later, she storms across the small patio and gets in my face.

"You've got to be kidding me. You really think I'm going to sleep in the same bed as you!"

"You have before. Plenty of times. Though, most of the time, we didn't get much sleep."

Am I egging her on? Yup.

Is there a reason for that? Of course.

One, because I can't help myself, and she's so damn cute when she's angry. Two, because when she's angry, she tends to be more rational. She doesn't think with her head; she thinks with her heart.

"Fuck you, Kane!" she screams in my face, planting both her palms and pushing against my chest as hard as she can, but I don't budge.

"I love you, Cleo."

“I hate you!”

“I’ve always loved you. I will always love you.”

“Shut up! You don’t have a right to say that to me anymore.”

“I promised I’d never lie to you.”

“This,” she starts, taking a step away from me and motioning to the room, “is all a lie. You tricked me.”

*Uh, yeah. I kind of did. But if I tell her she can still stay with Kora, she’s going to march out of here without listening to what I have to say.*

Removing my sunglasses, I take her face in my hands and force her to look at me. The second our eyes connect, I take my chance, the only one I’m probably going to get. “I love you, Cleo. I would do anything to prove to you that we still belong together. That even though you’ve spent the last four years pushing me away, I still want to be with you. I still want the future we always dreamed about.”

My words seem to stun her. I’ve said them before. I know she’s heard me. But did she really listen? With her heart? I hope, this time, she not only hears what I’m saying, but she feels it too.

We stand in silence for a while. Cleo stares passed me into our room while my eyes stay locked on hers, my hands cupping her cheeks. My thumbs slowly stroke the curve of her jaw.

The second I mentioned our future, she averts her eyes. As if it is too painful for her to even think about. Or maybe it is our past that is causing her to look as if I’ve just ripped her heart out.

“I love you, Kane,” she whispers. Her words are laced with anguish and in them, I hear more than she’s saying.

*I love you but...*

I know there’s more she wants to say, but she remains silent, letting her confession hang in the air between us. There’s so much more I could confess, but the moment’s not right. I can already feel her emotionally shutting down. I have to say something, though. Do something.

“Cleo, I—”

Her eyes flick to mine so suddenly I cut myself off. They’re glistening with unshed tears and when she blinks, one escapes, carving a path down her right cheek. I swipe it away with my thumb, and another one replaces it.

“We can’t do this.” Her voice is strong, confident, a complete contradiction to the uncertainty I see in her stance.

“We can do anything. As long as we do it together.”

“Our history—”

“Is history.”

“It’s too much to forget. Too much to get over. We can’t pretend like it never happened.”

*No, we can’t.*

“I’m not asking you to forget. That’s not what I want. I want to heal. I want to move forward. And I want us to do it together. Like we planned.”

She shakes her head, but her eyes are still locked on mine and her tears are freely flowing now, covering her cheeks.

“I ruined us,” she wails as she clutches onto my shoulders.

Pulling her into my arms, I hold her while she cries. When her shaking subsides and she doesn't push me away, I lift her and carry her into the room, setting her on the edge of the bed.

Kneeling in front of her, I slowly remove her heeled sandals, one at a time, and set them aside. I feel her eyes on me the entire time and when I rise, her gaze follows me. Moving around the side of the bed, I situate myself so I'm sitting against the plush headboard and pat the spot next to me.

Without a word, Cleo moves to where I motioned and mimics my position. Wrapping my arm around her shoulder, I pull her close, and she rests her head on my shoulder.

“Why don't we start by talking about why you pushed me away. The real reason. Because I know nothing ever happened between you and Max. And I know it had nothing to do with you feeling trapped.”

Cleo clears her throat but remains silent.

“Okay, let me tell you what I've figured out based on talking to Max and talking to Beck.”

“You talked to my brother?” she asks, attempting to push out of my embrace, but I hold her tight against me.

“I did.”

“Why?”

“Because he was there the night you came home. I knew if you needed to talk to someone, you'd talk to him.” Her silence confirms my statement. “And you know what he told me when I asked him why you really broke up with me?”

“Am I going to have to kill my brother for betraying me?”

“Nope. He told me nothing. He told me I already had the answer, I just didn't see it. And he was right. And Max

confirmed my suspicions when he told me he tried to convince you not to break up with me.”

“So I get to kill Max?”

“There will be no bloodshed, bug.” Cleo growls at my use of her nickname but doesn’t argue with me. “You barely knew Max, and you told him you were going to break up with me. And using him as an excuse is why the two of you have been at each other’s throats all this time.”

“Not exactly.”

“It was the start of it. He was angry you lied to me. And you were scared he was going to rat you out.”

“Max has always held all the cards, and you know how I feel about being—”

“Vulnerable? Yeah, I know. But you put yourself in the situation this time. You made yourself vulnerable when you confessed everything to Max.”

“I never thought you two would meet. Lake State is huge. What were the chances that you would end up in the same dorm? As friends? In the same fraternity?”

“Not as small as you would think. As far as the friendship and fraternity, that was on me. Max knew who I was and struck up a friendship with me. When I figured out who he was, I wanted to stay close because I still didn’t believe you’d left me for him.”

“Not my most convincing lie?” she asks.

“Let me be perfectly clear—none of what you said that night was convincing, bug. None of it. Not even a little. Which is why I was angrier than I was hurt. Because I couldn’t figure out why you were destroying everything we had built. Why

you would walk away from me when we needed to lean on each other more than ever after that summer.

“But the pieces never fell into place. We danced around each other the first year, never once making eye contact. I watched over you the best I could, watched you suffer in silence while putting up a brave front. And then when we came home for the summer, I watched you fall apart.”

“I was trying to let it all go, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t stop thinking about that day. It haunted me. It still does.”

“Me too.”

“It didn’t look like it to me. You went on with your life as if it never happened. As if we never lost him.” Her voice cracks, and my heart breaks all over again for the loss of the son we never met.

“What you saw was me trying to be strong for you. So you could break. So you could grieve. So you knew you had someone to lean on. But on the inside, I was just as broken as you were, and I still am.”

Cleo sits up, pushing out of my arms, and turns so that her back is to me. I can feel her separating herself emotionally from the situation. Her back stiffens. Her head lifts. And when she speaks, it’s as if the words are rehearsed.

“Losing him... I felt like I lost a piece of myself. I wasn’t the same after. And I knew that if I didn’t push you away that I’d lose you too. Eventually. So I did what I had to do.”

“You pushed me away because you thought I would always feel tied down. Because we lost him.”

“You deserved a chance to see what else was out there. I knew you’d stay by my side if I didn’t force you to leave.”

She's right. I never would have left her. I don't want to now. What she doesn't realize is that it has nothing to do with losing our son and everything to do with how much I love her. Not because of him, but because of us. Because of the way I feel about her.

Yes, he was a part of her. A part of me. And I hate that she miscarried and that we didn't get the chance to meet him. But I will never be sorry that we created him because he was a product of our love.



# NINETEEN

CLEO

VACATION IS SUPPOSED TO BE RELAXING.

It's supposed to be fun.

There should be fruity cocktails and delicious food.

Sun and sand and water so clear it seems impossible.

Drunk hi-jinks.

Dancing.

Maybe even karaoke.

All that sounds amazing. Instead of feeling like I'm on vacation, though, I'm living my own personal hell.

Not only has Kane forced me to confront *why* I really broke up with him, but he's forcing me to relive all the trauma that led up to that awful night.

My emotions are on full display.

My heart is pounding in my chest, the ache so deep I can feel it in my toes.

All I want to do is run, yet my ass stays firmly planted on the bed even after I move away from Kane. My legs are

shaking so bad I'm afraid I won't be able to stand if I were to try.

Mostly, I miss the way it felt to be wrapped in his arms again.

No, this is not the vacation I imagined when the girls gifted me this trip. Not even in the slightest. But it's the situation I've been dealt, and it's time to finally deal with our shit.

Keeping my defenses up, I state, "You deserved a chance to see what else was out there. I knew you'd stay by my side if I didn't force you to leave."

"Let me ask you something," Kane starts. I can feel him moving behind me and then suddenly, he's kneeling in front of me, the same way he did when he took my sandals off.

My thoughts had taken a sharp turn in that moment. I figured he was going to seduce me, to strip me of the rest of my clothing, and we'd do what we always do when things get tense between us. We'd collide and screw each other's brains out until we both forgot why we weren't together anymore.

It hasn't worked the last few years, and it wouldn't have worked this time. Every time it happens, he steals another piece of my heart, and there's not much he doesn't have at this point.

"It's been three years, seven months, and nine days since you broke it off with me."

*Holy hell! He's been counting?*

"If I haven't given up on us yet, what makes you think I ever will?"

"You think I'm what you want but—"

“You are, bug. You’re everything I’ve ever wanted, and all I’ll ever need. I get that you didn’t want to trap me, but that’s not what you were doing. Did you ever think that it was the other way around? That I was trying to trap you? That I was holding you close because I didn’t want you to realize that you deserved someone better?”

Reaching into his pocket with one hand, Kane takes my chin in his other and forces me to maintain eye contact. His usually amber hues have darkened slightly, a sign that being this close to me is having an effect on him. The same effect his touch is having on me.

Then I see what he’s holding in his hand, and I let out an anguished sigh.

Where did he get that? How?

I need air. And space.

My head is spinning from his confession. He’s said the exact same thing before, a thousand different ways—in person, through text messages—and I’ve always blocked him out. Put up my shield. Guarded myself from the meaning of it all.

To protect myself from letting him in again.

Because losing Kane a second time is something I know I won’t survive.

I still love him.

I still want to be with him.

I still want the future we talked about.

It’s just not possible. The good doesn’t always outweigh the bad. Love doesn’t triumph all.

That shit only happens in romance novels and sappy movies.

This is real life.

Complicated doesn't even begin to describe our situation. It's going to take more than sweet words and empty promises to overcome all we've been through.

Because of me.

And now, with him holding the promise ring he gave me four years ago, the same night I told him I was pregnant, between his fingers... It's all too much.

I'm down the hall, banging on Kora's door in less than a minute. I push past her as soon as it cracks open, coming to a stop when I realize she's not alone. The bathroom door is closed, and I hear the toilet flush.

"Cleo? Are you okay?" she asks, moving to stand between where I've stopped near the end of the bed and the bathroom door.

Her voice is loud enough that whoever is hiding in there can hear her. My guess would be Max, but I can't be sure. We still need to have that conversation. I'd love nothing more than to talk about it right now, so I can avoid talking about why I'm in tears, but I can't bring myself to say anything. Instead, I turn and head out her patio doors and don't stop until I'm standing at the edge of the ocean, the water lapping over my bare feet.

---

*THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING.*

*He's with Max, of all people, and he's pledging the Kappa house.*

*How did this happen? Why?*

*Is this karma coming back to bite me in the ass?*

*That's what it feels like. Because Max is the one person who knows the truth about Kane. About why I broke up with him. And if Max tells Kane the truth, I know exactly how he's going to react.*

*He's going to be pissed.*

*It was clear he didn't believe my lies that night. He wasn't buying the story I was trying to sell him. It didn't help that the first time I saw him on campus with Max, I pretended not to know who Max was. Or Kane, for that matter.*

*Because I froze.*

*Literally. It felt like the blood in my veins turned to ice. My heart stopped beating for a few seconds. I couldn't draw in a breath. And then Max smiled at me.*

*Was that supposed to be reassuring?*

*It was anything but.*

*There was a hint of mischief in his eyes. He knew he held all the power. He knew exactly who Kane was and wanted me to know what he knew.*

*I've never felt more vulnerable in my life.*

*Until right this moment.*

*Kane's wearing sunglasses, but I can feel his eyes tracking me. They have been all night. I've tried to escape his gaze. Tried to sneak out of the house without him noticing.*

*But it's not my night.*

*And Kane's not just anyone.*

*Which is why I find him waiting for me next to my car.*

*"Going somewhere?"*

*"Not that it's any of your business, but I'm going back to my dorm."*

*"Were you even going to say goodbye?" he asks, taking a step toward me.*

*I counter his move, backing up as he advances. I cross the sidewalk and move back toward the Kappa house where the party continues to rage on. It's not until I feel the brush of the bushes against the back of my bare legs that I stop, not wanting to tear my new dress.*

*"I didn't say hello. Why would I say goodbye?"*

*"See, that's the thing. You don't need to say hello, bug. I saw you look at me when you walked in the room. I saw the way you danced for me. The way you brushed off that guy and immediately sought out my eyes to make sure I saw."*

*"I did not." My words are supposed to be firm, filled with conviction, but they come out barely above a whisper. A lie. Because he's right. I did look to him as soon as the guy walked away.*

*Only ... I didn't even realize it until now.*

*"Keep telling yourself that, bug. Tell yourself all the lies you want." His hand reaches out as he finally stops in front of me, gripping my hip. "We both know you're still mine. You always have been. You always will be."*

*The way he's kissing me is new. It's punishing and filled with anger. His lips, though, those are familiar. They feel like home, and I melt into his touch.*

*“Kane, we can’t.” Pushing him away is the hardest thing I have to do, but I find the strength, and he stumbles back.*

*“I lo—”*

*“No. Please don’t.”*

*“It’s been months, Cleo. Months!”*

*“You need to move on, Kane.”*

*“I don’t want to—”*

*The flashing red and blue lights coming up the drive catch Kane’s attention, and before I know what’s happening, he’s pulling me into the bushes with him and onto the ground.*

*“What are you doing?” I whisper over the slamming of car doors.*

*“Hiding so we don’t get in trouble.”*

*“Why are they here?”*

*“My guess is someone called them because of the noise.” Kane places his finger over my mouth before I can reply just as I hear the police open the door to the Kappa house and announce their presence.*

*This is going to end badly for everyone in there. Especially those of us who aren’t old enough to drink. I’m thankful I only had one cup of punch. It was too strong and made my stomach churn.*

*“We should go,” I mumble against his finger.*

*“No, we need to wait until they leave. You can’t just drive off. They’ll see you.”*

*“Let them. I’m not doing anything wrong,” I persist, wanting to get as far away from him as possible right now. It’s cold as fuck out here, and I’m not dressed for the weather.*

*Kane shifts next to me, and then his jacket is draped over my legs. He's closer than I expect when I turn to thank him, and my lips brush against his.*

*I should pull away.*

*It's the right thing to do.*

*I don't want to give him false hope.*

*Breaking up with him was the right decision.*

*To save him from a life he would eventually regret choosing.*

*So I made the decision for him.*

*But I don't. Instead, I lean into him and let my lips part. Kane takes the reins from there.*

---

I MADE THE DECISION FOR HIM. I DIDN'T GIVE HIM A CHOICE. I didn't ask what he wanted. I decided, and that was it.

I did this to us.

Everything that's happened since that night is my fault.

All the pain and sorrow. All the unshed tears. The anguish. I'm to blame for all of it.

I caused this mess we're in.

I was scared. I'm still scared.

Of being with him but also of being without him.

Of remembering the pain of losing our son.

Of remembering the joy of finding out we were pregnant.



Everything Kane and I have been through is a positive and a negative. Two strikes against us, and it feels like we've gone more than nine innings already.

*Did I just make a really bad baseball reference? Where the hell did that come from?*

"You still talk to yourself, I see," Kane says from behind me. I should have known he wouldn't let me avoid him for long. Though, he gave me more time than I thought he would. The sun has sunk lower in the sky but has yet to brush the horizon.

Kora came out to check on me shortly after I walked down here. She didn't say anything, just stood next to me until I begged her to go away. To let me have time to think before I started talking.

"You say that like it's a bad thing," I reply, not bothering to turn and face him.

"Just for the record, we're still in the first inning, no outs, and bases are fully loaded."

*Great. He heard my shitty baseball reference.*

"Okay, I'll bite. How do you figure we're still in the first inning? I don't know much about baseball, but I know innings don't normally last this long."

"I didn't say it was the first game of the season. Think of every year as a game. Nine innings, twenty-seven outs. That's twenty-seven times we can each screw up and still maintain a chance to win the game."

He makes it sound so easy.

Twenty-seven mistakes, missteps. All forgiven if you still win the game. Because in the end, the outcome is all that

matters.

No one is going to count the number of errors when the final score is in your favor.

“We can still win the game, bug.”

“This isn’t a game, Kane. You know that.”

“No, it’s not. It’s our past. Our present. Our future. I’d rather not leave it up to chance, and I don’t intend to lose.”

What do I even say to that?

We’ve already lost...

But have we? I mean, we lost our son. We lost each other. We lost the future we dreamed of sharing.

I can’t bring myself to say any of that, though, because only one of those statements are true.

Our son is gone, but the rest is still within my grasp. All I have to do is put my hand in Kane’s.

“What happens if I win the game?” When he doesn’t answer, I turn to face him in an attempt to read his expression only to find that he’s no longer standing behind me. It makes me wonder if he ever was or if his voice was a figment of my imagination.

Because Kora is standing there.

“What do you get if you win?” she asks, her smile filled with sympathy.

“I don’t know,” I tell her honestly. “Win or lose, it feels like my only prize is a broken heart.”

# TWENTY

KANE

I FELT HER SHIFT.

My words finally sunk in.

That I'm not walking away from her. That I don't plan to give up.

If I thought for one second that she didn't really love me, that she didn't want to be with me, I would let her go. The fact that I know that's not the case...

Cleo is mine.

She always will be.

I'll fight for her, for us, for our forever until she's ready to stop fighting against it. Until she's ready to admit to herself, and to me, that what she wants is the same thing I do. What we've always wanted.

A future that's bright. Where we get the chance to spend the rest of our lives together. Where we can put the pain of our past behind us and move on.

Which is why I walked away from her. Because I also know that once that revelation sunk in, Cleo was going to need

time to digest everything. To come to terms with the facts. And even longer to accept them.

When I passed Kora on my way back to the resort, I knew I was leaving Cleo in good hands. She had someone to lean on, to help her through.

She's going to need Kora right now more than ever. As a sounding board. As a friend. A confidant.

She's going to need to process everything going on in her head, and talking to me is going to be too emotional for her. But when she's ready, I'll be here. For now, it's time to go back to the way things have been for the last four years.

I'm going to have to watch her from a distance.

Pretend there's nothing going on between us, even though most of our friends either know the truth or have an inkling of what they believe is the truth.

And patiently wait for the love of my life to come back to me.

Taking Cleo's luggage to the front desk, I have them deliver it to Kora's room before going in search of Colt and the rest of the group. I find them exactly where I left them, at the bar with drinks in hand.

No more than fifteen minutes after I arrive, Kora and Cleo join us.

The mood is light, drinks are flowing, and carefree laughter is floating on the breeze.

We all head to dinner as a group. I try not to stare across the table at Cleo, but my eyes constantly drift to her. The smile on her face is genuine as she chats with Mya and Kora.

It's a beautiful thing. To see her like this for the first time in a long time.

She's spent years perfecting a false persona. Acting a certain way. Guarding who she really is from those who think they know her best. But right now, she's the Cleo I've always known and loved.

And that makes me smile.

It fills me with hope that her scars aren't as deep as she thinks they are.

That maybe they've healed a little.

That she'll come back to me sooner rather than later.

"Looks to me like someone is happy tonight," Max says as he slides up next to me.

After dinner we all changed into our swimsuits, and the girls are currently sitting on the edge of the pool sipping on drinks and laughing at Declan and Micah as they attempt to dunk each other under the water.

"I thought I told you not to look at her."

"It was just an observation."

"Mind your own business, Max." My words are clearly a warning, but my tone is still friendly.

"After all my help putting together your little plan, and you still see me as a threat? That says more about you than it does about her."

Cleo's senses must have started to tingle because she looks over her shoulder, and her gaze falls to where Max and I are standing next to the bar. She studies us for a brief second

before Scarlet's laughter draws her attention back to the pool where Colt has just thrown Leo in.

"Thank you again. For all your help."

"Does that mean she'll be sharing your bed tonight?" I can hear the hope in his voice. Because if Cleo's in my bed, that means he doesn't have to share a room with me.

"Nope."

"So we still have work to do."

"No." I have work to do. "I'm abandoning the rest of the plan."

"Seriously?" His shock is mixed with irritation, and I get why. Max, to my surprise, is all for pushing us together. He kept everyone away from Cleo all this time because he knew we belonged together. He was as invested in us reconnecting as I am.

But the rest of this is up to me.

"We talked. She listened and I mean, she really listened. She heard everything I said. That's a first. I don't think tricking her into being alone with me is going to win her over. She needs to make the decision on her own. So now I wait."

"What about snorkeling tomorrow?"

"Let Kora know she can go with her."

Max grunts as he pushes off the bar, walking away with the shake of his head.

The plan was to woo Cleo. To sweep her off her feet. To remind her of the way things used to be. But things aren't like that anymore.

We are the same people, but we're also different. We've grown and changed. That summer, losing our son, changed us.

But the love we have for each other is still the same, and that's what's going to bring us back together.

That's why I had Scarlet steal her ring from her room. I knew it would be in there, in the secret drawer in her jewelry box. The ring is a symbol of how I felt for her before she told me she was pregnant, and it's still a symbol of how I feel.

What I've realized this afternoon after talking to Cleo is that I can't trick her into falling in love with me again.

That would mean she doesn't love me already, and I know she does.

So, no, I won't be stealing her away for snorkeling tomorrow. Or meeting her for a private dinner. Taking her for a stroll around town to see the sights, just the two of us.

Not unless she wants to do those things with me.

As I make my way back to where the rest of my friends are gathered, I focus on the first day we met. The moment I laid eyes on her. The feeling I got when I saw her.

I hold on to that feeling the rest of the night as we all hang out by the pool, laughing and chatting until long after the sun has set.

---

*“DID YOU SEE THE NEW GIRL?” DAVE ASKS AS HE SLIDES ONTO the bench next to me, taking the last seat at the table.*

*The cafeteria is buzzing with conversation already. You can tell it's Friday. Things always seem louder on Friday. The*

*energy higher. Everyone is ready for the weekend to begin, and today is no exception.*

*“I didn’t realize we had a new girl,” I state, taking a bite of my half-burnt pizza. It looks and tastes like cardboard, but it is better than the alternative considering I couldn’t identify what it was.*

*“She’s in my fourth hour algebra class. Real pretty. Blonde. Not too skinny. And she’s already developing.” Dave drops his pizza to his plate and motions toward his chest.*

*He acts like your typical teenage boy all the time. It’s all crude jokes and innuendos. All he ever talks about is girls. The ones he thinks are hot, and the ones he doesn’t.*

*The list of the latter is longer, and Dave can be a little cruel when it comes to discussing what turns him off about them. It can be anything from the color of their eyes to how tall they are.*

*Though, that I understand since he’s on the short side. He’ll be lucky if he has a growth spurt soon. Most of the girls in our class are either as tall as him or taller. Whereas I had my growth spurt almost a year ago, and I tower over most of my friends.*

*“Did you catch her name, or were you more concerned with her bra size?”*

*“Definitely her bra size.”*

*“You’re such an ass sometimes.”*

*“You haven’t seen her yet. Your eyes will be locked on her chest too.”*

*I lift my head to challenge him with my stare when my eyes catch sight of long blonde hair. Staring at her jean-clad legs, I*



*make my way up her curvy body until I'm taking in every aspect of her face.*

*She's gorgeous.*

*My heart swells in my chest, and I'm standing before I realize what I'm doing.*

*"Told you she was pretty," Dave calls after me as I make my way across the lunchroom to where she's currently standing, holding her lunch tray as she looks around, unsure of where to sit.*

*I've almost reached her when her gaze lands on me, and I stumble to a stop a few feet in front of her.*

*"Hi," her soft voice says, eyes locked on mine.*

*"Hey."*

*"I'm Cleo."*

*"Kane."*

*This is it. She's it. I see my future play out in front of my eyes. Her walking toward me at our wedding, wearing a long white gown. Holding our first child. Family vacations. Grandchildren. The two of us with gray hair.*

*In a flash, it's there and gone. The rest of my life. And she was the star.*

---

THAT WAS THE BEGINNING OF EVERYTHING.

We started dating the following week. Went on our first official date to the movies the weekend after. Had our first kiss a month later.

We were twelve, almost thirteen.

And I was sure of what I'd found. Sure that she was the one.

The same way I'm still sure of it to this day.

Almost ten years later.

We spent the next six years loving each other. Spending every ounce of free time we had together. She knows everything about me, and I know everything about her.

We've experienced every high together and every low. I've been her shoulder to cry on and her biggest cheerleader. Both roles I will never take for granted.

We received our acceptance letters to LSU days apart. She refused to open hers until I had mine. We started making plans as soon as we knew we'd both be going away to college together.

We were going to live on campus the first year to get the full college experience. Plus, her parents were adamant that we didn't live together even though they loved me and had always treated me as a son.

Our second year, we were going to find an apartment close to campus. Nothing fancy. Something big enough that we weren't on top of each other, but small enough it wasn't too expensive. I was going to get a part time job if necessary so Cleo could focus on her classes.

Our third year was when we were going to get engaged. She didn't know that part of the plan. I'd asked her parents for their blessing shortly before high school graduation, and they gave it to me with one condition. I had to wait until we were juniors to propose, and we had to wait until after we graduated college to get married.

I knew Cleo was it for me, so I wasn't in a rush. That's why I had bought her a promise ring. A symbol of my love.

Of course, I had no idea what was going to happen only weeks after I sat down with them.

Cleo finding out she was pregnant. Her parents freaking out. The doctors visits. The excitement around finding out we'd created a child together. Then the rug being pulled out from under us the day she fainted at the ice cream parlor, and I rushed her to the hospital.

I'll never forget the look of sorrow on the doctor's face when he told us that Cleo had miscarried. That we'd lost our child.

A son.

She was sixteen weeks along.

Cleo hadn't done anything wrong. She was taking her vitamins. She was healthy. Still, her body rejected him.

I knew I'd lost her a little that day. I felt her slip away. At first, I thought it was the loss of our son that I was feeling. I had loved him already. We'd talked about names. Decided that if it was a girl, we'd name her Sarah after her mother. If it was a boy, she wanted to name him Kane.

Kane Alexander Howell Junior.

We'd call him KJ for short.

My legacy.

Gone in the blink of an eye, and with him were all the dreams of the future we'd shared.

What I didn't see then that I see clearly now is that when he died, a part of Cleo died as well. A part that tied us

together. A single thread came unraveled, and in order for her to heal, she had to let me go.

I was a reminder of what she lost.

And with me by her side, she would always hurt.

The ache in her chest is still there. The same as the ache in mine will always be. But the light in her eyes has returned, and I'm hoping that means the threads that were severed have healed slightly. It's the only way she'll come back to me.

# TWENTY- ONE

CLEO

MY BAGS WERE WAITING FOR ME WHEN WE GOT BACK TO Kora's room.

Somehow he knew I wouldn't stay with him. That I needed space and distance. This was his way of giving me that. But he also gave me a choice.

On top of my bag, sticking out of my purse, was the keycard to his room. To my room.

I could go back when I was ready.

An open invitation.

Without the pressure.

Though, to be honest, I felt pressured. Not just to go back, but to talk to him. All throughout dinner as I felt his stare on me. While we were hanging out by the pool. But it wasn't until I saw him talking to Max that I finally allowed my gaze to travel to him.

I could stare at him for hours and never feel fulfilled. From his strong jaw to those broad shoulders. The way his t-shirt tapered down to the blue swim trunks he was wearing. They're

hanging low on his hips, and if he were to lift his arms slightly, I'd be given a glimpse of the perfection that lays beneath. The sharp cuts around his hipbones that dive beneath the waistband and toward—

“Do you think Gia is pissed?” Scarlet asks, causing Kora to draw in an audible breath. “I mean, it's not like things were serious between them, at least from what I could tell, but she didn't seem enthusiastic about not being invited.”

This is the first time anyone's mentioned Gia since we arrived. I knew it would happen eventually. As far as Kora knows, Max and Gia are dating. The rest of us know the truth. Though, I have to wonder if Kora is as blind as everyone thinks she is. I mean, the girl is smart as a whip. There's no way she thinks—

“I heard them fighting about it the other night. Something about him keeping it in his pants while he was down here. I think she's angry he didn't invite her.” Kora's words catch Scarlet off guard, her mouth popping open and forming an O.

“Oh, yeah, that makes sense,” Scarlet says, attempting to recover.

“They're such an odd couple,” Mya adds. “I never would have put them together. Max doesn't really seem like her type.”

“Does Max have a type?” Scarlet wonders aloud. “I mean, he hasn't dated anyone seriously since we've known him. I don't think I've even seen him with a girl aside from at random parties, and it's not like he takes them home with him.”

And that's when it hits me. They're on an information hunt. They're trying to get a reaction out of Kora,

confirmation of what we've all decided is the truth. That they have a thing. That Max has been dating Gia just to make her jealous.

The more I think about it, the more it makes sense. She never talks about Max, even when he's brought up in conversation. She never hangs around him. Seems to avoid him, yet she made it known that she didn't like him a long time ago. And she's stuck true to her word.

There's only one reason I can think of for that.

The same reason I never talk about Kane. Avoid him at all costs.

She cares about him.

Considering he acts the same way toward her, I think the feelings are reciprocated. And the fact he punched a guy for talking to her, the same guy she brought to the gala last month.

Max looked like he was ready to rip his arms off when they were dancing.

"Want to know what I think?" I ask, all eyes falling to me. "I think Max is a complicated guy. I think he doesn't like to let his feelings show. Aside from rage, you never know what's going on inside his head. And there's probably a reason for that. He keeps everything that matters to him to himself. And there's nothing wrong with that."

Mya, Scarlet, and Kora stare at me with wide eyes and jaws hanging open.

Yeah, I just said something nice about Max. They should be shocked. Especially since I've never uttered a kind word about him since the beginning.

"Are you feeling okay?" Mya finally asks.

“Fine. Why?”

“You just... I don’t know. We all know how you feel about Max, and here you are defending him in a way. It’s just shocking, that’s all.”

“I’m not defending him,” I state, even though that’s what it feels like I was doing. “Maybe it’s time to put the past behind us and move on.”

*Put the past behind us.*

*Move on.*

Am I talking about my feelings toward Max? Or am I talking about what happened between me and Kane?

“Does that mean you’re finally going to tell us what happened between you two?” Scarlet asks with raised eyebrows before I have time to think any deeper on the matter.

“Nothing happened. It was a misunderstanding. I overreacted. End of story.”

“End of story?” Kora echoes, her voice rising. “That’s all you’re going to say. You’ve bitched for four years about him, and it was all a misunderstanding?”

Kora pushes off the side of the pool, standing over me as she glares. I’ve only ever seen her act like this one other time. And that conversation tracked back to Max as well.

---

*“STAY AWAY FROM HIM, KORA. HE’S BAD NEWS.”*

*“Who?” she asks, plopping down on my bed next to me.*

*“Max Palmer. The guy I saw you talking to outside the business center this morning. He’s an asshole. Grade-A jerk.*



*You don't want to get involved with him."*

*"We weren't—"*

*"Looked to me like you two were flirting."*

*"He was flirting, Cleo. I was talking. We have a class together. He spilled my coffee all over me last week and was offering to buy me a new one."*

*"Are you going to let him?"*

*"I was, but now you have me second guessing. How do you know him?" Kora's hands start to shake, so she tucks them beneath her thighs.*

*"We had orientation together."*

*"And?"*

*"And nothing. Just stay away from him. He's not a good person."*

*It's a straight-up lie. Max is kind and caring and a great listener. He gives good advice, and he held me when I cried even though he didn't have to. I was grateful for him that day.*

*Then I screwed up and used him in my plot to destroy my relationship with Kane, and now he hates me. He won't say it, but I can see it in his eyes. The last thing I need is Kora to find out what Max knows and for her to look at me the same way.*

*She's my roommate, my best friend. Right now, my only friend. I need her. Which also means I need to keep her away from Max at all costs. To save myself, but also to save our friendship.*

*"You can't just deem someone a bad person, Cleo," Kora hollers, standing and crossing her arms over her chest. Her*

*hair is tied up in a messy knot on the top of her head, and it bounces with the movement, a few curls coming loose.*

*“I’m just trying to save you from heartache, that’s all.”*

*Another lie. How many will I have to tell her to keep her away from him?*

*“Bullshit. You like him, don’t you? That’s why you don’t want me talking to him.”*

*I can’t stop the laugh that explodes from my chest.*

*Yes, Max is attractive. Anybody—man or woman—can clearly see that. He’s the kind of guy you see on the cover of magazines and wonder how much filtering went into making them look that good.*

*But no, I don’t want Max. Not even for a split second has the thought crossed my mind. There’s only one man for me.*

*That’s what I should tell her.*

*Instead, I continue laughing and shaking my head. Kora lets out a huff and storms out of our shared room, slamming the door behind her.*

*I’ll apologize later. Not for warning her to stay away from him, but for laughing at her. I love my roommate. She’s exactly the type of person I need to get through this transition. And I know if I were to be completely honest with her, she wouldn’t look at me any different. I just can’t bring myself to do it.*

*Not yet anyway.*

*Even thinking of saying the words brings tears to my eyes and a searing pain in my chest.*

---

THAT'S WHEN IT STARTED FOR HER. WAY BACK AT THE beginning of freshman year. She's been hooked ever since. I can see it in her eyes.

The moment I open my mouth to apologize, she storms off, much the same way she did that day, only there's no door to slam, and I'm not laughing this time.

"I'll check on her," Mya offers.

"I've got this," I state, placing a hand on Mya's shoulder as I rise from the edge of the pool.

"Are you sure? We can come with you." Scarlet's already standing as she speaks.

"No. I'm the one that pissed her off. I want to apologize to her."

"What about us? You owe us more of an explanation as well," she adds when I turn my back to them.

"I don't have one," I mutter.

"Figure it out because no one throws that much hate around for no reason, Cleo. Not even you." Mya's words cut deep. I feel their eyes on me as I wrap my towel around my body, securing it in place, but I keep my eyes focused straight ahead to avoid making eye contact.

It's time to give Kora all the details of my story. Starting from the beginning. Before I came to LSU. Before I even met Max. And what kind of a role he played in all of this.

I find her sitting on the edge of her bed, waiting for me, when I return to the room.

"I'm sorry I yelled," she says as soon as she hears the door close behind me.

“You’re sorry? Shouldn’t I be the one apologizing?”

“Probably, but I’m the one who went all psycho bitch on you.”

“Uh, if that’s your version of psycho bitch, feel free to lay it on me anytime, sister.” I keep my voice light as I take the seat next to her. My joke earns me a soft chuckle, so I continue. “You got angry, that’s all, and I deserved your wrath.”

“All I’ve ever asked you for is a reason, Cleo, and you can’t seem to give me one. Yes, he’s an asshole. Yes, he’s made your life miserable. Yes, he’s said shit about you. That was all *after* you told me to stay away from him. *After* you went crazy at the outdoor concert when we had to drag you away. So, please, explain to me what he did that was so horrible you started hating him before he gave you a reason to.”

She’s right.

Max was always calm. He played it cool. Pretended we didn’t know each other in front of other people. No one would ever suspect he ripped me a new asshole the day before classes began. And I deserved his anger that day.

I knew what dorm he was in. I hunted him down. Let myself in his room and waited for him to show up. Once he did, I started crying. He held me while I explained how I’d broken up with Kane. He was a great friend.

Right up until the point I confessed I used him as an excuse. That I let Kane believe something was going on between us. That’s when a little switch inside him flicked on. He dropped his arms from around me and started yelling at the top of his lungs.

His anger was palpable. I felt it in my bones.

I apologized, but what was the point? The damage had already been done.

He kicked me out.

And I've been living in fear that he'd tell Kane my secret for the last three and a half years.

"Max knows my darkest secret." The words are barely above a whisper as I say them.

"I know all your secrets," she counters.

"Not this one."

"The baby?"

"Yes and no. I broke up with Kane after we lost the baby."

"You told me that already."

"And what I said to him was mean. I lied and told him I wanted to be free. That I didn't want to be tied down. That I wanted to see what else was out there. To meet other people." She nods, following along with the story. "I met Max at orientation that summer, right after we'd lost the baby. I was still a mess. I was emotional and felt like I was losing it. He was honestly my saving grace that day. He listened to me, let me vent and cry and just let go. I told him everything. I also told him I thought it was best to break up with Kane, but he tried to talk me out of it. So when I did anyway, I used Max as an excuse. I led Kane to believe that I'd met someone.

"I felt horrible about it, so I was honest with Max, and he was irate. He had every right to be. I'd used him after he'd been so nice to me. I was scared he was going to tell Kane the truth, so I lashed out at him. Threatened him. And then after a while, I just couldn't stop myself. It was like there was this

beast inside of me that emerged anytime his name was brought up. Anytime I saw him. But never once did he share my secret. Never once did he tell Kane the truth. Not until recently.”

“So you were a bitch to Max because you were scared he was going to out you? Don’t you think killing him with kindness would have served you better?”

Probably. But when you’re losing your mind, you don’t always have the best reactions.

“Yeah. I’m actually surprised he never served my secrets up on a silver platter. He could have, at any time. Instead, he took the high road while I continued to bad mouth him and act like a scorned lover.”

Kora’s laugh brings a smile to my face, my heart feeling lighter for the first time since she stormed away from the pool.

“Scorned lover? God, Cleo. You sure did make a mess of this. Have you tried apologizing to him again?”

I shake my head, making a mental note to do just that the first chance I get. At the end of the day, it’s the least I can do. It may not make much of a difference, and it can’t erase the last few years, but maybe it will at least bring both of us a little peace for the last month of college.

We can part as friends, the same way we started.

# TWENTY- TWO

KANE

I'VE BEEN STARING AT THE CEILING FOR HOURS, ATTEMPTING TO stop my mind from running a million miles an hour. Between the memories of Cleo that have found a way to assault me from all angles the last three days, her genuine smile bringing me back to a time when life was better, and the new memories we've made with our friends while here in Cabo, I can't seem to get any rest. I've been running on about ten hours of sleep since arriving here, and still I can't get my brain to shut down.

It doesn't help that Cleo's been acting different around me.

Around everyone.

She even had a twenty-minute conversation with Max this morning after breakfast. I wasn't the only person it took by surprise when they walked away from the table together. Finn dropped his fork on his plate, the loud clatter drawing everyone's attention to him and eventually to where he was staring.

Everyone started whispering to each other as Cleo and Max walked away together, already in a hushed conversation.

Colt and I shared a look from across the table. We both knew there was nothing to be worried about. Max had been talking about how he wanted to clear the air with Cleo while we were here. His main concern was her giving him the opportunity to do so.

He has a lot of explaining to do with her.

She'll never see all that he did for her unless he sits her down and explains it to her.

Why he acted the way he did. Why he put a ban on anyone dating her, though, I'm not sure she even knew about it.

And he wanted to apologize for holding her secret over her head all these years. Because yes, Max knew exactly what he was doing. He knew how to push her buttons. How to get a rise out of her. In his mind, the dance they were doing was a game, and he couldn't resist playing along.

Plus, he has secrets of his own to hide.

What I've figured out recently is that the best way to keep attention off yourself, to ensure that your secrets remain just that, a secret, is to ensure that when people talk about you, when they watch you, they're looking for clues to anything but what you're trying to keep hidden.

In Max's case ... they were watching for a relationship with Cleo. If they had been paying better attention, they would have seen who his mystery woman is all along.

He's been keeping her a secret for years.

Since the very beginning.

And no one is even remotely aware something has been going on between them.



They portrayed themselves as enemies, when in reality, they are lovers. In love. Drawn to each other the same way I'm drawn to Cleo.

With my heart. My soul. My entire existence.

Which is why our friends were intrigued when Max and Cleo walked away together. When we saw them laughing as they exited the restaurant. And why they started whispering as soon as they are out of sight.

*"Are they finally going to admit they want each other?"*

*"Took them long enough."*

*"It all makes sense now. There's a thin line between love and hate."*

*"I can't believe the girl I heard him having phone sex with was Cleo. I never would have guessed."*

There were a few collective gasps at Declan's admission, but there was one voice I heard above all the others.

Kora's.

She knew exactly what Declan was talking about. And the flush in her cheeks would've give her away if anyone was looking in her direction.

Rolling onto my side, I throw a pillow off the edge of the bed, and Max's soft snoring stops momentarily before starting up again.

Every night we flip a coin to see who sleeps in the bed and who gets the floor. He has yet to win a coin toss.

Though, we have a silent agreement that *when* Cleo decides to stop fighting me, *when* she comes knocking on the

door, that he'll find somewhere else to sleep. I'm guessing he'll crawl in bed with Kora.

If she lets him.

She's been prickly toward him so far. In a way, she's just keeping up appearances. I have a feeling there's more to it than that, but I prefer to keep my nose out of their relationship. I have enough to worry about.

"Go the fuck to sleep, or I'm going to smother you with a pillow," Max growls. "You're huffing and puffing is starting to annoy the fuck out of me."

"How am I supposed to sleep with you breathing so loud?"

"Try putting a pillow over your head instead of mine," he states, tossing the pillow I threw at him over the edge of the bed, landing it square in my face.

*Asshole.*

Tossing back the covers, I slide out of bed and slip on a t-shirt and sneakers. Pushing through the open French doors, I head down to the beach for a middle-of-the-night run, hoping to tire myself out.

I don't get far before a familiar figure comes into view, my steps slowing as I approach. She's facing me, arms wrapped around herself to ward off the slight chill in the air.

The short cotton dress she's wearing stops just above her knees, the bodice hugging every one of her curves. Curves I have the sudden urge to trace with my fingers. Or my lips.

"You still run when you can't sleep," she notes as I stop a few feet away.

"I haven't changed much, Cleo."

She lets out a sigh, her arms falling to her sides. “I know.”

“I’m still the boy who used to carry your backpack for you in middle school. The guy who walked you to every class in high school—”

“And had to serve detention at least once a week our junior year because you were late to your own classes.”

“I’m still the person you trusted with all your firsts. And I’m still the man you fell in love with long before either of us even knew what love really was.”

She nods in agreement as I speak. The only light is from the moon, the reflection off the water casting a shadow over her face. Still, I see the way she presses her lips together.

“What I want to be is the man you see your future with,” I state, reaching out and brushing my fingertips down her arm until I reach her hand. Lacing our fingers together, I give her the slightest tug, and she steps into my embrace willingly. “I want to be your husband. The father of your children. The one you grow old with. I want everything we talked about having together and so much more.”

“And if I said I still want that future too?” she asks, her voice barely above a whisper as she tilts her head up, her lips grazing my chin.

“I’d give it all to you in a heartbeat.” I answer without missing a beat.

There’s a shift in the air. The tension growing. My heart pounding in my chest at the thought of being with her again.

“And if I said I didn’t want it anymore?”

My heart stops beating in my chest completely.

What do I even say to that? Is this a test? Or is she serious? I thought I felt the shift, or was I imagining it because it's what I've wanted for so long?

Taking a step back, Cleo's eyes find mine as she waits for me to answer her. I'm stalling, and I know it. I don't want to think about a future where we're not together.

"If that's not what you want anymore, if I'm not the man you envision your future with, I'd walk away. You deserve all the happiness in the world, Cleo. I want to be the one to give it to you, but if that's not what you want, then I'd have to walk away."

Breaking eye contact, I clench and unclench my fists before walking backward a few steps, maintaining eye contact with her until finally her entire face is in shadow. That's when I turn and start running.

Only, I don't get far.

Cleo's voice reaches my ears, and I stumble to a stop.

Turning slowly, I watch as she sashays toward me. Every step taken with purpose. The sway of her hips. The way one leg crosses over the other as if she's walking down a runway instead of barefoot through the sand. Her head held high, her shoulders back.

I expect her to stop in front of me.

I have questions.

For starters, I'd like her to repeat what she just said. I need to know I heard her correctly.

Instead, my girl has other ideas.

She grabs onto my face and pulls my lips to meet hers. I'm stunned for a brief second before my senses kick in, and I'm

devouring her, my arms wrapping around her and pulling her close. There's not an inch of space separating our bodies as I deepen the kiss, tracing the seam of her lips with my tongue, begging her for entrance.

When she finally grants it to me, I let out a groan, and my tongue tangles with hers.

Every inch of Cleo is familiar.

Kissing her feels like coming home.

It feels like heaven.

With her in my arms, her lips pressed to mine, I feel whole again. My heart is beating wildly in my chest, the pounding against my sternum as if it's attempting to jump into her hands.

Which are currently sliding beneath my t-shirt. Her fingertips trace the lines of my abs, stoking the flame that's burning inside me.

"Cleo," I whisper against her lips.

"Don't ruin it, Kane. We can talk later. Right now this is what I need from you," she pleads. "Your hands on me. Your lips on mine. Your heart—"

The last thing I want to do is ruin this moment. This is our new beginning. Our second chance. The start of something new and exciting but also the relationship neither of us ever really let go of.

Our future is within reach again.

The future we dreamed of together. Where we spend the rest of our lives building a family, fighting and making up, loving one another for better or for worse.

When my hands slide down Cleo's back and grip her ass, she jumps into my arms, deepening our kiss.

Blindly, I carry her up the beach and toward the resort, stopping only to get my bearing. As soon as I see the patio of my room, I pull her lips to mine again and march toward our final destination.

Straight through the open doors.

Over to the bed, I deposit Cleo on the mattress and pull my shirt over my head in a rush. She pulls her dress over her head when we hear Max groan.

"At least let me leave before you two get back together." Pushing himself off the floor, Max keeps his eyes trained on the door as he hastily makes his exit.

The door closing behind him echoes through the room as Cleo and I both remain still, staring at each other. Her dress is bunched at her waist, my shorts are hanging loosely on my hips.

I resist the urge to tug them down when I see the look on Cleo's face. The turmoil turning inside her.

Climbing beside her in bed, I wrap her in my arms and hold her close. To show her I love her. To prove to her that this has never been about her body but her heart.

"Where do you think he went?" she asks after a few minutes of intense silence. She finally relaxes in my embrace, but it takes her a minute to calm her erratic breathing.

"If I had to guess, he went to your room."

"Do you think he and Kora will ever work out what's going on between them?"

If she ever forgives him for the ups and downs he's put her through, maybe.

Of course, that's not what I tell Cleo.

"If we can find our way back to each other after everything we've been through, after all the obstacles in our way, anything is possible. Even Max and Kora getting over whatever the hell their issues are."

Cleo lets out a huff of irritation, causing me to chuckle.

"You hate the idea of them together, don't you?"

"No. Yes. I don't know. I hate that my best friend is in love with the one person I tried to keep away from everyone. I get it, though. I get that you can't help who you love. That no matter how hard you try, you have no control over your heart. It's going to beat for the one it's meant to beat for. It may have taken me a long time to realize that, too long, but now that I do, all I want is for her to be happy. And if that means she ends up with Max, I guess she ends up with Max."

I hear the words, but I also hear the meaning behind them.

Her heart still beats for mine. No matter how much she's tried to push me away.

"I love you, bug," I whisper against her neck as I kiss her softly.

"I love you too, Kane." Turning to face me, she cups my face in her hands. "Now show me how much you love me."

# TWENTY- THREE

CLEO

IT WAS MEANT TO BE A SIMPLE APOLOGY, NOTHING MORE.

Not a heartfelt conversation. No tears were supposed to be involved. And I wasn't planning to spill more of my secrets.

Not to Max.

He's already held all the cards for more than three years. Why would I give him more ammunition against me?

Yet that's what ended up happening.

I started with the apology.

*"I know it doesn't mean much after all this time, but I just want to apologize for putting you in the middle of a situation you shouldn't have been in. And I want to thank you for keeping everything I told you that day to yourself."*

Simple. Clean. All he had to do was accept my apology, and we could move on.

I should have known better. That isn't Max's style.

*"Did you get what you wanted? Was it worth it in the end? All the lying. All the secrets."*



*“Uh, what do you mean?”*

*“Are you happy, Cleo? Did me keeping your secret make a difference? Did things turn out the way they were supposed to?”*

He already knew the answer to his question. No, I wasn't happy. I was trying to get there, but if I was being honest with myself, I wasn't sure I'd ever truly go back to feeling the way I did before I miscarried.

*“He loves you. I know you know this. I know he's told you. As quiet as Kane is, as laid back and carefree as he seems, it's as fake as the smile you wear most days. Because that man is dying a little more inside each day that passes and you're not in his arms.”*

*“Are you trying to make me feel like shit? Because if so, it's working,”* I state, blinking back the tears that started to well in the corner of my eyes.

*“Do you know why I kept your secret? Why I never told Kane that I knew everything? Why I played your little game all these years?”*

*“To torture me?”* I joke, smiling at Max.

*“No. I did it because when you told me about Kane, I felt how much you loved him. I tried to talk you out of breaking up with him because I knew you'd regret your decision. I knew you two belonged together, and I hadn't even met him.*

*“A love like that isn't something you give up on. No matter how hard you have to fight to save it. You weren't ready to fight that summer. The question is, are you ready to fight now?”*

Tears were freely flowing down my face by the time he was done. When he wrapped me in his arms and held me, I let

out a guttural sob. But by the time my tears dried up and Max and I headed back into the restaurant to join our friends, my conscience felt ten pounds lighter.

My heart, however, was still aching, his final question nagging at me.

Was I ready to fight for Kane?

For the love we shared. A love we still share.

It was all I thought about all day as we hung out on the beach with our friends. As Kora and I got cleaned up for dinner. And it was the only thing on my mind as Finn dropped to one knee in front of everyone and proposed to Willow.

As if I was seeing clearly for the first time in years, the answer came to me without a second thought.

This is what I want.

Kane on one knee, professing his love for me. Promising to stand by my side for the rest of our lives. Asking me to be his wife.

And when I looked in Kane's direction and found him watching me, it was clear he was having the same thoughts I was.

I would have stared at him the rest of the night if Max hadn't interrupted us, pushing his chair back so quickly it toppled to the ground. Stomping over to where Finn was still bent down in front of Willow, holding her hand, the ring poised to slide into place.

It felt like it all happened in slow motion. We were all waiting for him to cock his arm back and slam his fist into Finn's face. Maybe grab him by the shirt and drag him outside, into the ocean, and drown him.

Needless to say, we were all surprised when he stopped next to his sister, waiting for her to answer. When Willow looked over her shoulder to where he stood, his face filled with anxiety, his hands clenched at his side, she smiled at him, and her head nodded slightly.

He stood by and waited for all of us to congratulate the happy couple after Willow finally said yes before he moved any closer. When he finally did, glancing between his sister and his best friend, we all let out a collective sigh as he pulled Finn in for a hug first, and then Willow. His smile was radiant as he congratulated them.

His sister and his soon-to-be brother.

“What are you thinking about over there?” Kane asks as he steps out of the bathroom, his eyes locked on me.

“The future. Us. Max.”

Kane raises his eyebrows as he pulls a shirt and shorts from his suitcase. “Your smile made sense until you said you were thinking about Max. Should I be concerned?”

Laughing, I toss back the sheet and stalk over to where Kane is gathering his clothes. We skipped breakfast with our friends this morning, ordering room service instead. Staying in bed until Kora started blowing up my phone. It’s mid-afternoon, and Kane finally convinced me we need to go meet up with everyone for a late lunch.

Of course, he promised to bring me back here and ravish me as soon as the sun goes down. A promise I have no doubt he’ll make good on.

That doesn’t keep my hands from shaking at the thought of standing by Kane’s side and announcing our relationship.

“Max is the reason I was standing on the beach last night. He’s the reason I came back here with you last night. He’s the reason I never once gave up on us all these years. If it weren’t for him, for the fear I carried around that he might let my secret slip, we might not be standing here right now. Mostly, if I hadn’t pulled him aside to apologize for creating this situation in the first place, and involving him, I wouldn’t have come to my senses.”

“So I should be thanking Max, then?” He quirks a brow as he drops his towel, my eyes following the movement and taking in the sight of him naked. A sight I’ve seen time and time again but will never get tired of.

“Yes, because Max is an asshole, but he also cares more than people give him credit for. Everything he’s ever done or said was for a specific reason, even if he doesn’t share that reason. And he’s not afraid to ask the hard questions no one wants to answer.”

“Such as...” His voice trails off as he steps into his shorts, sans his usual boxer briefs.

“He asked me if I was a fighter. If I was ready to fight for us.”

“And are you, Cleo? Are you ready to fight for us until the end of time? Because I am.”

“I know, Kane. You’ve never once stopped fighting for me, and I hope you never do.”

Slipping his shirt over his head, Kane picks up the towel he let fall to the floor and tosses it in the bathroom before extending his hand to me. “Never,” is all he whispers in my ear as soon as I’m in his arms.

“Good, because you’re stuck with me. Today. Tomorrow. Forever. As long as that’s what you still want.”

“I’ve never wanted anything else. Only you, bug. Only you.”

Good, because I’m tired of fighting against him, and I’m ready to fight for him. For us. For the future we dreamed of. For the rest of my life.

“Does this mean you’ll marry me?”

All the air is sucked out of my lungs when he pulls my promise ring from his pocket and holds it between us.

“Someday, and when that day comes, I expect a better proposal than that,” I tease.

---

“YOU SEEM NERVOUS,” I STATE AS WE HEAD DOWN THE HALL, Kane’s hand wrapped around mine.

“Not nervous. Excited, I guess. I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Well, I’m nervous, if it makes you feel better. I guarantee no one saw this coming.”

I can still remember the look of shock on Scarlet’s face when she opened the door to the limo and found me in the throes of an orgasm. Shock doesn’t even begin to cover it.

I hope that no one even notices. Finn and Willow’s engagement is still new. Maybe, with a little luck, that’s what they’ll be focused on. Willow’s ring. Talk of a wedding. Their eyes on Max, waiting for him to strike, a delayed reaction not out of the question.

“No one saw this coming because we hid it from them. Since meeting us, we’ve been playing a part. And they’ve only seen what we’ve wanted them to see. Only know what we’ve told them. And they’ve accepted every lie as the truth.”

*Shit!*

“They’re gonna be so angry when they find out our backstory.”

“Maybe. Who says we need to tell them. Let them draw their own conclusions. We don’t owe anyone an explanation. They didn’t ask for permission before seeking their own love story. We shouldn’t have to either. Plus, I don’t really give a shit what they think.”

My smile spreads as we exit the resort, and the warmth of the afternoon sun causes my skin to heat. We only have a few more days left in paradise, and I can’t wait to spend them with Kane.

Laughter floats on the breeze as we round the corner, the pool coming into sight. Our friends are gathered at one end. Max and Finn are by the bar, deep in conversation. It appears to be light, considering the smile on Max’s face. The rest of the guys are in the water, and the girls are lounging in the sun.

Mya’s the first to notice us as we approach.

“It’s about time,” she says, her words capturing the attention of the rest of our group.

“Where have you two been?” Kendall asks, taking in our clasped hands.

Kane and I share a look, unsure how to answer that question.

*Making up for lost time by having amazing make-up sex.*

When I open my mouth to give her a more PG version of the truth, Max interjects from behind me. That man is like a ninja sometimes. I didn't even realize he'd noticed us walk in let alone snuck up on us.

"Nice to see you two found time to spend with the rest of us. There's a cookout on the beach happening in about an hour. Do you think you can keep your hands to yourself long enough to join us?"

If there was any question as to where we were and why we showed up together, there isn't anymore.

"I make no promises," Kane answers, wrapping his arm around my waist and pulling me into his side.

Keeping my eyes focused on Max, I wait for the inquisition to start. When it doesn't come, I let out a sigh of relief. Then Kane and Max walk away, joining Finn over at the bar. Scarlet pulls a lounge chair over for me. Kora offers me a sip of the frozen concoction she's sipping. Alexis tosses a towel in my direction, and Piper sets a stack of magazines next to my chair.

No one says a word.

Asks a single question.

In fact, the only person who even gives me a questioning look is Evie, and that is just the lift of her brow when Kane kisses me on the cheek after bringing me a drink to sip on.

The silence is nerve wracking. Knowing a million thoughts are running through their heads and they're not asking. Drawing their own conclusions.

We're just a hook-up.

It was a one-night stand.

Finally, after about ten minutes of nothing but Kendall and Willow whispering about potential wedding dates, colors, and locations, I can't hold my tongue any longer.

"If you have questions, you can always ask, you know."

I don't direct my statement at anyone in particular, but I make sure my voice is loud enough that all of my friends can hear me clearly. Even the guys who are now floating around our end of the pool glance in my direction.

"Do you want us to ask?" This from Kendall whose interest seems piqued.

"Go ahead. I'd rather you hear it from me than to draw your own conclusions."

"How long have you two been keeping this a secret?" Mya asks, sitting up and looking over at me.

"Since before we knew you. Kane and I dated in high school."

There's a collective gasp from the girls while I hear someone in the pool snicker. When I look over, Declan is huddled together with Colt.

"Something to share, Colt?" I ask.

He knows everything. Or, at least, I'm pretty sure Kane told him everything.

"Declan was asking why Kane had suddenly ditched his sunglasses, and I had to explain that he only wore them so he could watch you without anyone catching on."

A few of the girls giggle, and I can feel the heat creeping into my cheeks. I knew he was always watching me. I felt his stare. He might have been able to hide from everyone else behind those lenses, but not from me.



Never.

When I glance over to where he, Max, and Finn are, I find his gaze focused on me, his sunglasses perched on top of his head.

No more hiding.

Not that I would have been able to with the rapid firing of questions from our friends. They want all the details, so that's what I give them, saving only one piece of our past just for the two of us.

Our son.

# TWENTY- FOUR

KANE

I DIDN'T WANT TO LEAVE CABO. THE BUBBLE CLEO AND I HAD been in. The high I'd been on.

Honestly, I was afraid that as soon as we were back to our real lives, she'd change her mind and retreat. Hide from me. Go back to pretending that I didn't exist.

That our love didn't exist.

Thankfully, that wasn't what happened.

We were both busy, our final semester of college coming to an end. She was mentoring potential candidates to replace her as the president of the Zeta house. I was busy attempting to complete my final projects, send out my resume, and secure a job.

Somewhere close.

Cleo decided to accept a position with Dixon Advertising. It's temporary, but knowing Cleo, she's going to impress them enough to create a position for her. In the event that happens, I need to be prepared to stay here.

With her.

For her.

For us.

“You know, I’m breaking my own rules right now,” she whispers in my ear as her fingertips trace my bare chest.

“We’re pretty good at breaking the rules, ya know.”

“Yes, but you know I like to lead by example, and right now, I’m setting a pretty bad one.”

“Does it really matter at this point? We graduate in less than a week.” Not to mention, it’d been two days since I’d laid eyes on her. There was no way I was taking no for an answer when I showed up last night.

She tried to fight me at first. I knew guys weren’t allowed to stay the night at the sorority house. But I wore her down with a kiss. One that started in the mudroom and ended with her naked, moaning beneath me on her bed.

Not a single one of her sisters said a word as I carried her through the house, our lips sealed. And I didn’t stop kissing her until I was buried deep inside her.

“And then—”

“We can do this whenever we want, as much as we want,” I finish for her.

“That’s not what I was going to say.”

“Oh really?” I challenge, moving so I’m on top of her, nudging her thighs apart with my knee.

“Yeah. I was going to say then we didn’t have to play by the rules anymore.”

“Because you’ll be sharing my bed every night.”

“Our bed,” she corrects.

*God, I love the sound of that. Our...*

“Yes. And I plan to wake you up in the most delicious ways,” I threaten, my lips gliding down the side of her neck.

“You realize, we both have to work. You can’t keep me in bed all day.” Her breathing is labored, each word coming out with less conviction than the last.

We both know I’d love nothing more than to keep her in bed all day every day for the rest of our lives if I could. And she’d enjoy every second of it.

After I bring her the pleasure her body craves, the pleasure only I can bring her, we both get cleaned up, and I drive us to campus. As we part ways, Cleo heading to the library to study while I head to my first exam, my phone rings in my pocket.

“Hello,” I answer without looking at who’s calling.

“Mr. Howell?”

“This is. How can I help you today?”

“This is Hunter Dixon from Dixon Advertising.” My feet falter slightly, surprised that one of Cleo’s bosses is calling me. “I came across your resume, and I was wondering if you have a minute to chat.”

How the hell did he get my resume? I didn’t apply to Dixon. I didn’t even realize they were hiring.

“Sure. Can I ask how you have my resume?”

“You applied for a position with a friend of mine, Zane Wright.” I did. He runs a successful travel agency and was looking for someone to update his website, manage it, and capitalize on the search algorithms that are forever changing.

“Zane had already filled the position when he came across your resume,” he continue. “He was impressed with your skill level, so he passed it along to me. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.” Do I tell him I know Cleo? That she’s my girlfriend, hopefully soon to be more. Unsure if this conversation will go anywhere, I decide against it until I know more. “What kind of position are you looking to fill?”

“We’re expanding. My national marketing director, Vinnie, is in need of a skilled tech assistant. The position is remote, work from home or from the road. He travels about eighty percent of the time right now, and he has a family at home. We’re trying to lighten his load, and I think you might just be the person to help with that.”

I’m intrigued, more than I care to admit.

When I was the posting for Wright Travel Accommodations, I wasn’t exactly excited about the opportunity, but this—working from home, a little bit of travel—I could get on board with. Which means I need to tell him about my relationship with Cleo.

“I have a few questions.”

“Ask away. I’ll answer them the best I can, but if you’re interested, I’d prefer you speak directly to Vinnie. I can put you in touch with him.”

“Well, first I would like to point out that I have zero marketing experience.”

“You don’t need any. The marketing part will be done by Vinnie and our team here in the office. What we need from you is the behind the scenes, or the screen, however you want to look at it, help. Think of it as complicated data entry. Working on websites. Creating graphics and marketing

materials. You majored in Information Technology and minored in graphic design, correct?”

I nod my head even though he can't see me before I confirm his statement with words.

“Well, we need someone who is comfortable with both aspects of the job. Vinnie is well-versed in those areas, but he can't handle the full workload, meet with clients, and find time to spend with his family. Family is important to us. We value it over everything else. I'm not sure how much you know about Dixon Advertising, but my brothers and I run the company. My father started it, and when he retired, we took the reins. The rest of our team is like family. We're a very close-knit group.

“And we work well together because we not only respect each other, and what each person brings to the table, but we love each other. Not every day, of course, but most days. The dynamic in the office works because we all pull our fair share of the load. Right now, Vinnie is struggling, and we're trying to make it right. Emerson, my sister-in-law, is about to take maternity leave. There are a lot of changes happening around here. I'd like you to be a part of them.”

I think I'd like that too.

Cleo's told me a little about the time she's spent working for the Dixons. All of it good, praising them and the way they run the company. When she showed me the offer they made her to fill in for Emerson while she is on maternity leave, my mouth dropped open in shock.

She isn't going to find an offer even remotely as good as that one. Not now, probably not even in five years with more experience under her belt.

It proves what Hunter's just told me. They take care of their own. They actually give a shit about their employees. Why wouldn't I want to work for a company like that?

Which means now is the time to be 100% honest with him.

"The position sounds great. I'm definitely interested in talking about it more, with you or with Vinnie. But before we get to that point, I feel like there's something I need to let you know."

"Are you a serial killer?" he jokes, a booming laugh trickling through the phone.

"No, but I'm not sure how you feel about interoffice romances."

"As long as it's not with my wife, I don't feel any way about it. Ryder and Emerson met here. It's a foregone conclusion that you might get involved with someone you work closely with. I'm surprised you're already planning on it happening, though."

"I'm already involved with someone who works for you." Cautiously, I let the words slip past my lips as I reach the computer science building, checking the time to make sure I'm not going to be late if I finish this conversation.

"Interesting. You don't have to tell me who, but I am curious."

"Cleo Griffin."

Hunter is quiet for a long moment before he finally continues. "She's a lovely girl. I don't see a problem with you two working together as long as you both are comfortable with it. Why don't you plan on coming in later this week. Friday after lunch. Vinnie will be back Thursday late afternoon, and the three of us can talk more."

I agree and hang up just as I reach my classroom. As excited as I am, I need to talk to Cleo about all this. It's one thing to live together and another to work *and* live together.

Are we starting the next chapter of our life together? Yes.

Are we eventually going to get married and start a family? Yes.

Will we survive if we live and work together?

Probably, but I want to know that she feels the same. I promised her I'd stop making decisions without consulting her where she was concerned. The way I've been doing the past few years. Silently protecting her. Watching out for her. Striking when she was the most vulnerable in an attempt to wake her up to what was still right in front of her.

I don't regret a single thing I've done to keep her close.

I also don't want to screw up and push her away when I've just gotten her back where she belongs. In my arms.

So I shoot her a text as soon as I take my seat.

**ME: Got an interesting call, a job offer. I want to talk to you about it. I'll meet you in the library after my exam's over.**

**BUG: Congrats! Are you excited?**

I've had two interviews since we returned from Cabo, and both were not the jobs they were advertised for. To say I've been a little upset about my prospects is an understatement.

**ME: I'm trying not to be. That's why I want to talk to you about it. I'll see you in an hour.**

I pocket my phone as her reply comes through. I don't look at it. I need to focus on my exam, not my conversation



with Hunter or Cleo. I'll deal with it once I'm finished here.

Cleo's sitting on a bench outside the library waiting for me when I arrive. My eyes remain locked on her as I approach. The moment she feels my gaze, her eyes lift and find mine through the small crowd moving down the sidewalk.

Quickly gathering her things, she's off the bench and in my arms seconds later.

"Tell me everything," she says as she links her arm with mine, and we head toward the parking lot.

"Hunter Dixon called me." My words are meant to have an impact. What I don't expect is for her to trip over her own two feet and almost fall flat on her face.

Once she's upright again, she leads us to the edge of the sidewalk and turns to face me, her eyes lifting to meet mine. "My boss?"

"Yes."

"I didn't realize you applied for a job at Dixon. Or that there even was one."

"I didn't. I applied with one of his friends who passed my resume along."

"Oh." Her lips remain parted as she stares at me in disbelief.

I'm still in a state of shock myself.

"What are you thinking, Cleo? Because I can say no if they make me an official offer. I can find a different job. It might take a minute, but I have no doubt there's a job out there for me."

Composing herself, she takes my hand in hers and says, “I think you would love working for Dixon. Tell me about the position.”

So I tell her what I know as we make our way to my car, then to the Kappa house. She’s quiet, listening intently as I give her the details I have. When I ask her questions about the company, she answers to the best of her ability.

By the time we’re in my room with the door locked behind us, I’m starting to get an uneasy feeling in my gut. I worry she’s pulling away.

*Too much, too soon.*

“I think you should at least meet with them. It sounds like a position you’d kick ass at, and you’ll be working from home which is amazing.”

“What about us working together?”

“What about it? Unless you won’t be able to keep your hands to yourself when you do visit the office, there shouldn’t be a problem. I can’t even count the number of relationships that have started there. And the rumors I’ve heard... Let’s just say, the conference room table is very sturdy.”

Cleo wiggles her eyebrows at me as I pull her into my arms.

“Is that a proposition?”

“Maybe.”

I press my lips to Cleo’s before she can say more.

# TWENTY- FIVE

CLEO

MY EYES SCAN THE LOFT ONE MORE TIME, MY HANDS SHAKING in anticipation. The sounds of laughter can be heard over the music. The energy buzzing is palpable.

We graduated.

College is in our past, and our futures start now.

I watch as my friends, the people I love most in this world, people who have become more like family over the years, dance around the room, sing to the music, share memories of the past four years.

There's only one person missing.

Kane.

Checking my phone again, my frown deepens when I find he still hasn't responded to my last text message.

**ME: Where are you?**

That was over an hour ago.

The plan was for him to drop the last of his things at our new apartment and then head straight here. Finn and Max are

hosting an intimate gathering tonight before we all go our separate ways.

Colt is the first to leave. Tomorrow morning, he flies to meet up with Seven Underground to start touring with them. He'll be spending most of the summer on a tour bus, writing music, and living his dream. Poor Scarlet is beside herself.

Happy for him but devastated that they're going to be apart.

Especially since the rest of our friends seem to be moving closer together instead of further apart. Willow and Finn are engaged and moving in together.

Kendall and Declan are moving in with them since Max is moving out. Even Evie and Leo considered getting an apartment together but decided to wait one more year before taking the big leap.

Probably a good idea since Max looked ready to commit murder when he heard it was a possibility. Poor Leo. I'm not sure Max will ever cut him any slack. Evie will always be his baby sister no matter how old she is.

"He'll be here soon," Kora says, nudging me with her shoulder.

There's a lift to her voice that leads me to believe she knows something she's not telling me. When I glance over my shoulder to where she's leaning against the kitchen island, her smile confirms my suspicions.

"What are you hiding?"

Her face pales for a split second before she regains her composure. "Nothing."

"You can't lie to me."

“I can try.” She smiles proudly, pushing off the counter and sauntering away, joining Kendall and Willow in the living room where they’re hunched over the coffee table. Without having to look, I know they’re going over wedding details for Willow’s upcoming nuptials. It’s all they’ve been talking about.

It makes me dream about the day Kane proposes to me. About the wedding I get to plan. The one where I walk down the aisle toward the only man who’s ever held my heart. The man who refused to let me go when I did everything I could to push him away.

He has the ability to not only heal my heart, but break it all over again. And I won’t survive the second time. I barely made it out the first. And what I was doing, how I was living, couldn’t be categorized as surviving. More like dangling by a threadbare rope.

But Kane caught me before I slipped away.

Now, if only he would get here to celebrate with me. With his best friend, who’s as anxious for his arrival as I am, judging by the fact he’s been monitoring the door most of the night.

Refilling my wine glass, I place the bottle back in the fridge when I spot Kora sneaking down the hall out of my peripheral. I don’t think much of it until I notice Max follow behind her a few minutes later.

She hasn’t said much about him since our last conversation in Cabo. They ended up sharing a room so Kane and I could stay together. I expected them to make an announcement of their own at some point, knowing there was something going on between them. Knowing that they had been either hiding it or fighting against it for a while.

What surprised me is that they barely glanced in each others direction the entire trip. Acted as if they weren't even friends. They surely didn't act like they had all these years, though, as if they hated the other person.

I'm about to follow after Max when the music cuts out and my friends begin to hoot and holler, drawing my attention to the living room. When I turn to see what all the commotion is, I'm stunned speechless.

My mouth hangs open as I take him in, head to toe. From his shiny black shoes, to the black slacks that cover his toned thighs, the stark white and perfectly pressed shirt he has buttoned all the way up to accommodate the baby blue tie he's wearing. Then there's the black suit jacket that's accentuating his broad shoulders.

But it's the look in his amber eyes that steals my breath from my lungs. He barely wears his sunglasses anymore. Only when he drives. Only during the day. Never inside. And never when he's inside me. He knows how much I love to look in his eyes as I come undone.

Without a word, Kane takes a step in my direction, and the room falls silent.

My heart begins beating wildly in my chest as his lips slowly form a smirk. He's up to something, and it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what. I knew this was coming. I've known it since the moment I was back in his arms that he wouldn't want to wait to claim me in an entirely different way than he did that night.

Moving around the island, we meet in the middle of the room, neither of us saying anything as Kane kneels in front of me.

“Cleo,” he starts, his eyes never leaving mine as he reaches in his pocket. “I think we both know this is long overdue. This moment should have happened years ago. Your parents gave me permission to marry you long before we were ready to take that next step. Before our love was tested beyond measure. Which makes this moment even more special because we survived. We passed every test, battled up every hill, and even though we did most of that apart, we’re individually strong, but together we’re a force to be reckoned with.”

I giggle. Why? I have no idea. Maybe from nerves. Maybe it’s because he’s so damn cute down on one knee. Maybe because I can see the sincerity in his eyes, but his body is practically shaking with nerves.

Shaking his head at me, Kane rolls his eyes and continues. “Bug, it’s going to be you and me against the world from now on. Hand-in-hand we’re going to face every challenge, every obstacle. My heart has belonged to you since the first time I laid eyes on you, and it always will.” Pulling his hand from his pocket, Kane holds a gorgeous diamond ring pinched between his fingers.

I feel the first tear escape as I wait for him to ask me to be his wife. To spend the rest of my life with him. To give him what’s left of my heart.

And for the first time since the night we lost our son, I’m confident I know exactly what I want out of life. And there’s only one person I want it all with.

“Cleo, will you—”

*“Yes! Yes! Ohmygod.”*

My heart stops in my chest as Kane is cut off. And those words, although appropriate for my situation, didn’t come

from my mouth.

As if in slow motion, every head in the room turns toward the muffled screams, eyes focused on the hall leading to the bedrooms.

*“Fuck!”*

And now everyone is looking around the room trying to figure out who’s missing, but I already know.

Kora and Max.

If they are trying to keep whatever is going on between them a secret... Well, the secret’s out. Everyone just heard their explosive ending.

“As I was saying,” Kane continues, clearing his throat. Once he’s sure he has everyone’s attention, he says, “Cleo, would you do me the honor of being my wife? Spend the rest of your life letting me love you? Put up with my shit on a daily basis, keep me in check, and love me even when you hate me?”

“Even when I hate you?” I challenge.

Let’s be honest, I can’t make it that easy for him, and he left the door wide open for that. Plus, he already knows I’m going to say yes, so messing with him a little just makes this moment more memorable for everyone watching.

Kane raises his left brow but doesn’t say anything.

“I think I’ve perfected loving you when I hate you. I’ve spent the last four years pretending my heart doesn’t beat for yours. Hiding the way my skin heats under your stare. Trying to control my breathing when you’re close to me.”

Placing my hand on his cheek, I bend down, my lips barely a breath away from his.



“I’m done hating you, Kane. All I have left is love. My heart belongs to you. It always has. It always will.”

“Is that a yes?” he asks, brushing his lips against mine.

“Ye—”

Kane crushes his lips to mine. I can hear our friends cheering in the background as he pushes off the floor, pulls my body close to his, and deepens the kiss. Everything around us fades, and I’m lost in the moment, until I hear Kendall’s shriek.

“Are you fucking kidding me!”

Slowly pulling away, Kane kisses me one last time, sliding the ring on my finger and spinning me in his embrace so we’re facing our friends.

Max and Kora are standing at the end of the hallway, eyes wide. It’s clear they’ve been busted, and they know it.

“What the hell is this, Kora?” Kendall asks, anger radiating off her in waves.

She knew this was a possibility. We talked about it. Scarlet was the one who pointed out Max’s relationship with Gia was just a cover for who he was really dating. Kendall was surprised, but she seemed to have accepted it that night.

I guess seeing it first-hand is different. Especially when it’s your sister and a man who has always been a jerk to you.

Lifting her chin higher, Kora hardens her features, laces her fingers with Max’s, and steps into the kitchen, her eyes locked on her twin sister’s.

Kane tightens his arms around me, and I relax in his embrace. No matter what happens in the next few minutes, nothing is going to bring me down. Not today.

Kane and I are engaged. We're going to be husband and wife, the way I always imagined. Our path to get where we are right now was not the one we thought we'd travel, and we traveled it alone instead of together, but we made it.

And every road we travel from here on will be together. Side by side. Hand-in-hand.

Leaning down, Kane kisses my cheek before whispering in my ear, "You look good wearing my ring."

Lifting my hand to admire the ring he chose, my chest tightens a little. What I didn't notice before is the tiny ring of amethyst stones around the princess cut diamond in the center.

Kane Junior would have been born in February.

"It's beautiful, Kane."

"You're beautiful, bug."

Chaos ensues around us, and I smile up at my fiancé.

Everyone talks at once. Kora is crying. Max looks like he's trying to refrain from punching someone. Declan is holding Kendall back. Willow is trying to comfort her while Finn stares at his best friend, shaking his head.

And Brady is laughing hysterically. He's bent over at the waist, holding his stomach. Mya's staring at him in disbelief, a look of shock on her face.

Am I surprised? Yes and no. Kora was adamant that nothing was going on between them. Then again, I was lying to everyone and to myself for years. She didn't owe me an explanation or even the truth if she didn't want to tell me.

Her relationship is none of my business. It has nothing to do with me.

Still, I'm sure this isn't the way she wanted everyone to find out. Especially her sister, who Declan is currently trying to push out the door as Evie and Leo walk in.

“What the hell is going on?” Evie asks, dropping her purse on the counter next to me, scanning the scene around her.

Before I can answer, her gaze lands on Kora and Max's clasped hands, and she starts laughing. The entire room quiets, all heads turning in her direction as her words punctuate the tension swirling around the room.

“Maxy, did you finally man up and confess that you're in love with Kora, or did you get caught in the act?”

Well, I guess their relationship wasn't as much of a secret as I thought it was. How did I miss the signs? Was I that caught up in my own lies that I didn't notice my best friend sneaking around with my mortal enemy?

Or were they that good at hiding it?

One thing is clear... I'm not the only one who's been lying to everyone around me.

---

WRITING CLEO & KANE'S STORY WAS A LITTLE heartbreaking for me. I knew their past had to be devastating to bring them back together. They're the only ones who can help each other heal. Even if you teared up a little, I hope you enjoyed their story.

You can find a bonus scene for them [here](#).

There's only one couple left... Max & Kora! I can't wait for you to see the world of Lake State through their eyes. They've been hiding for years, pretending to hate each other.

But you know what they say, there's a thin line between love and hate and their love is so much stronger. Preorder your copy now!

## GET CAUGHT UP

Dirty Little Secret – Willow & Finn

Tempting Little Tease – Declan & Kendall

Risky Little Affair – Micah & Alexis

Wicked Little Promise – Julian & Piper

Scandalous Little Obsession – Leo & Evie

Torrid Little Passion – Brady & Mya

Tangled Little Truths – Colt & Scarlet

Twisted Little Lies – Kane & Cleo

**Coming Soon...**

Defiant Little Love

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachael Brownell is an International best selling and award-winning author of sexy but sweet new-adult romance. She lives in Michigan with her husband, son, snuggly dog, and hateful cat. She moonlights as a server a few days a week (her excuse to get out of the house and socialize) and writes almost full time. Her first book was published way back in 2013 and since she's released more than 30 additional titles.

When she's not writing her next novel, you can find her hanging out with her family, watching her son play baseball, or running on the treadmill at the gym (though she skips more days than she goes). She also enjoys golfing but is still learning, so if you see her on the course... stand back.

To learn more about Rachael and her books, follow her on social media or join her reader group on Facebook, [Brownell's Book Lovers](#).

*For more information...*

[www.AuthorRachaelBrownell.com](http://www.AuthorRachaelBrownell.com)

[rachael@authorrachaelbrownell.com](mailto:rachael@authorrachaelbrownell.com)



ALSO BY RACHAEL BROWNELL

**Current Freebies...**

[Chasing Fate](#)

[Dating Dilemma](#)

**College Romance...**

A Moment Too Late

Worth The Fight

Reasons Series

Lake State University Series

**New Adult (sweet & sexy) Romance...**

Always in My Heart

A Million Little Reasons

Sticks & Stones

Love or Lust Series

Rumors Series

**Young-adult Romance...**

Holding On Series

Take A Gamble

Snapshot

AVAILABLE IN AUDIO

A Moment Too Late

Worth The Fight

For All The Wrong Reasons

Half Truths

Sticks & Stones

Love or Lust Series