

She's slipping away,
but I refuse to
let her go.

north haven university

WASTE MY TIME

KELSEY CLAYTON

WASTE MY TIME

KELSEY CLAYTON

Copyright © 2021 by Kelsey Clayton

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.

Editing by Kiezha Ferrell at Librum Artis

Proofreading by Tiffany Hernandez

*To everyone except my sister Stephanie.
You tried to give me away on the boardwalk.
I'm just saying.*

Never ever mistake her silence for weakness.
Remember that sometimes the air stills, before the
onset of a hurricane.

— NIKITA GILL

CONTENTS

[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](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Need More?](#)

[Coming Soon](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Kelsey Clayton](#)

Chapter 1



kennedy

LIGHTNING FLASHES IN THE DISTANCE, CRACKING THROUGH THE atmosphere with no mercy—the same way today’s revelations shattered every fiber of my being. Betrayal is just an eight-letter word, but it runs so damn deep. It’s a life-changing pain, one that you’d do anything to rid yourself of, and I’m fucking drowning in it.

“Kennedy,” Easton says, my name a broken plea falling from his lips.

“Don’t.”

He exhales heavily. “Please. You have to believe me.”

Believe him? I can hardly even look at him. “Stop talking.”

“We didn’t do anything,” he repeats for what feels like the millionth time. “I swear to God.”

“Fuck you,” I sneer. “Fuck you for thinking that makes it better. That keeping your dick in your pants excuses the fact that you lied to me *for weeks*. And that’s if I even believe you, because right now, I have no reason to.”

Staring out the window, I watch as the rain pounds against the glass. A part of me wants to stand in the middle of it—let it pour down on me and wash away every inkling of his touch on my skin. Rid myself of this.

Of him.

Of us.

And yet I stand here, refusing to leave the room, because if I walk out that door, I might never come back, and that's scarier than any storm.

“How did we end up here?” I whisper, the pain in my voice cutting through the silence like a razor blade.

I watch in the reflection of the glass as he runs his hands over his face. He doesn't try to answer, because there's nothing he can say that can make this better. No words can bring us back to before this. Back to when everything was perfect. Before he broke every promise he ever made me, and for a girl who will never look at him the way he wishes she would.



Two Years Earlier

Ever since middle school, I fantasized about what it would be like to go to college. The idea of getting to live with friends and be on my own, it seemed like heaven. I always have been a bit of a free spirit, but I don't think anything I pictured matched up to the real thing. For the first time in our young lives, we're treated as adults. Adults who will inevitably make really questionable decisions, but adults nonetheless.

“Are you sure about this?” Amelia questions.

I look over at my blonde bombshell of a roommate and smile. “Positive. He's not even going to know what to do with

himself. I promise.”

She still looks unsure but nods anyway and loops her arm with mine. The two of us step into our first ever college party, and it’s everything I thought it would be.

Red solo cups in everyone’s hands.

People making out in all corners of the room.

Guys who look unfairly hot—one in particular.

For the most part, these parties are exactly like the ones we threw in high school, but the vibe is totally different. It’s like we have a right to be here. Like we earned it or something.

Amelia spins around to face me, looking like she’s going to spontaneously combust. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

Sighing, I take my focus off the party and put it on her. “I know you can. Look at you!” I blatantly admire her perfect body. “You look fucking hot. He’d be crazy not to realize that.”

I grab her wrist and turn to find Zayn, the guy who has her nerves in a frenzy. As soon as my gaze lands on the familiar bad boy, I move to pull her toward him, but I’m stopped by a six-foot wall of sex on legs.

Fuck.

Easton Donovan is Amelia’s brother, and everything wet dreams are made of. His dark brown hair hangs down into his chocolate eyes, making him flip it out of the way. And if the fact that he’s drop-dead gorgeous wasn’t enough, the smile he’s giving his sister makes him even hotter.

“You made it,” he says to Amelia, and then his attention turns to me. “Kenna, right?”

I giggle to hide my disappointment. “Close. Kennedy.”

“Sorry, Kennedy,” he corrects himself.

Thankfully, Amelia interrupts the awkwardness like the godsend she is. “I need a drink. I’m parched. What alcohol do you have?”

“For you?” Easton narrows his eyes on her. “I have a juice box.”

“Really, E? Don’t be such an alcoholic cock block.”

He nearly gags but covers his mouth with his fist. “If I ever hear the word cock come out of your mouth again, I’m going to lose my mind.”

Amelia finds a little badass inside that innocent brain of hers and smirks. “Cock. Big, hard, veiny cock.”

His face almost turns green as he puts his fingers in his ears and yells to drown out the sound of his sister’s vulgar words. I can’t help but laugh at their antics.

“Keg’s in the kitchen,” he says with a sigh of defeat. “Just don’t get carried away.”

“I make no promises,” she answers.

Grabbing my hand and leading me through the party, one thing is clear—if I want to be on Easton’s radar, I’m going to need to get creative.

Okay, so maybe I’m not the most honest person in the world. For example, as Amelia and I lean against the wall with two jocks talking almost directly to our tits, I failed to mention my ulterior motive. It wasn’t a lie, per se, but more an omission of truth. One that’s working to our benefit, mind you, because what she has failed to notice is that Zayn and Easton have been staring at us for the last ten minutes. And as jock number two reaches up and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, Easton snaps and storms our way.

“Oh, fuck no,” he growls as soon as he’s close enough, pushing himself between his sister and the football player. “Not happening, Amelia.”

She allows her brother to pull her away and over to where Zayn stands. I ignore the guy leaning over me like I’m some kind of prey and focus solely on Amelia. It’s clear Easton is yelling at her, but what we need is for him to leave her alone with Zayn. They’ve both had eyes for each other all night, but neither one of them will act on it with him there.

A brilliant idea comes to mind and I slip out from under this douchebag's arm and make my way toward them, mentally thanking my mom for the acting classes she forced me through when I was a kid. I cover my mouth and give Easton a panicked look.

"Bathroom," I murmur, as if I'm going to be sick.

"Fucking freshmen," he groans. "This way, come on."

Following him through the house, I quickly glance back and wink at Amelia in a silent "you're welcome." Like I said, I'm not the most honest person in the world, but my heart's always in the right place.

As we reach the bathroom, Easton steps aside and gestures for me to go in. "Your porcelain throne, princess."

I play it up with ease as I sit down on the cold floor and rest my head back against the tub. "The room is spinning."

He chuckles, and God, it's such a good sound. "That's what happens when you drink too much."

Keeping my eyes closed, I hear him shut the door and turn on the water. A few moments pass before a damp washcloth is being rested against my forehead and Easton sits down on the edge of the tub next to me.

"Oh, you are my favorite person right now," I moan.

"Don't let Amelia hear you say that. She almost failed kindergarten because she wouldn't share."

Something tells me the only one between the two of them who would be pissed about sharing right now is him. If my plan worked, and as long as Amelia didn't pussy out, she and Zayn should be playing tonsil hockey right about now.

"Shh. Don't tell her," I slur.

Easton snorts. "Your secret is safe with me."

My eyes blink open, and I look up to find him already staring back at me. "And what about me? Am I safe with you?"

The corner of his mouth raises. "Definitely not."

I try to think of a snappy comeback. Something flirty and fun that could drive this home. And if I hadn't drunk so much, I'd probably be able to do it. But before I can say anything at all, the room starts actually spinning, and the next thing I know, I'm lunging to empty the contents of my stomach into the toilet.

Sexy, Ken. Real fucking sexy.



GRABBING AS MUCH of my stuff as I can find, I shove it into a duffel bag. I guess one of the benefits of dating someone with severe commitment issues for two years is that you don't leave too much behind. Still, there's the occasional pair of pajamas and a few sweatshirts lying around.

Tears blur my vision and pour down my face no matter how much I told myself I wouldn't cry. I need to get the fuck out of here. That's what I need. I just need to go.

"Kennedy, stop," Easton pleads, coming behind me and resting his hand on my elbow. "Don't do this."

I whip around and push him away. "I'm not the fucking one to blame here, Easton! You are! You did this!"

"I know," he agrees. "And I'm so sorry. Tell me what I can do to fix it?"

"Fix it?" My stomach churns. "You think this is just something you can fix? You swore to me that she wasn't a threat. That you'd always be honest with me."

The rage building in me starts to bubble over the surface. Anger masks the sadness, and I bask in the fury because it's better than drowning in the pain. I step closer to him and pound my fists against his chest.

“You’re an asshole! A fucking asshole! A lying, cheating, piece of shit!”

He stands there and allows me to beat on him, screaming insults and obscenities in his face, until he doesn’t. His hands grab the sides of my face and he spins us around faster than I can react to it. His mouth molds over my own, and he kisses me with such an intense need it almost knocks the wind out of me.

Our tongues tangle together, and for a moment, I’m lost in the feeling he’s always spurred inside me. It covers the pain and erases the devastation, leaving behind a need to stay wrapped in his arms no matter what. It’s toxic and manipulative, and yet I’m greeting the devil with open arms because it just feels so damn good.

He breaks the kiss and rests his forehead against mine, our heavy breathing mixing together in the air. “Please, baby. I...”

Time freezes, and I wait for the three words I’ve been longing to hear. The words he hasn’t said because he claims the institution of it all is just a massive mind fuck. The words that I’ve told him numerous times, only to be let down when I don’t get them in return.

“...don’t want to lose you.”

My stomach drops, and I’m right back to where I was before he made everything hazy with his talented lips. I always tried to tell myself that he feels it. That he proves it in the way he looks at me. In the way he holds me at night. But I’ve been fooling myself.

“Did you ever say it to her?” I ask, eyes clenched shut, terrified of the answer.

“Say what?”

Inhaling, I force myself to look at him. “The three words you won’t say to me.”

I will him to say no, that this twisted view on love has been something instilled in him from a young age. But as he steps back and looks down at the ground, I have my answer, and it hurts so much more than I thought it would.

“So it’s just me then?”

He runs his fingers through his hair and shakes his head. “No. It’s not you. You’re perfect. I just...”

“You gave your heart away when you were seventeen, and you never got over her,” I hiccup over a sob. “It’s fine. I get it.”

As I walk around him to continue packing my stuff, he stops me. “It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?” I question exasperatedly. “Tell me, please. Because nothing you say can be worse than what’s going through my mind.”

He reaches forward and runs his knuckles down the side of my face. “I care about you.”

And just like that, his touch is no longer comforting. It’s burning and cruel, like a branding iron meant solely for torture. I take a step back and wrap my arms around my stomach.

“That’s the problem! You care about me. You want me to be happy. You like spending time with me. But you love her.” Tears flow like a broken faucet as I almost choke on my words. “I get the holding hands in public and kisses goodnight, but she gets the only part of you I want. She gets your heart. I just can’t handle being your second choice anymore, Easton. It hurts too much.”

“You’re not—” He starts to fight me on it, but as I turn away from him, he stops and exhales before marching out of the room, slamming the door shut behind him.

As soon as I’m alone, my legs give out and I crash to the floor. I cover my mouth with my sleeve to try and keep the sobs in, but it’s no use. My head falls back against the bed, and for the first time in years, I wish I could go back to the best night of my life and choose differently.



Two Years Earlier

Parties for no reason are one thing. They're fun and a good way to let loose after a long week of classes. But celebration parties? Those are on another level. The energy is intense and intoxicating even without booze. It may only be the first game of the year, but we're drinking like it's the championship.

"Do you think Mason is hot?" Amelia asks.

I tilt my head to the side. "I mean, yeah, he's good looking." He's no Easton though, I think to myself. "Why? Are you thinking of going for him?"

Her nose scrunches. "Not really, but he keeps coming onto me, and I do like the attention."

Surprise fills my expression as her cheeks pink. "What about Zayn?"

"Zayn has made it very clear that we're just friends."

I snort. "Right. Sure. Because friends go to second base all the time."

She rolls her eyes. "He took that back, remember?"

"That's not a thing," I inform her stoically.

"It is to him."

I feel bad for Amelia. She's had a crush on Zayn since she was a kid, and when they hooked up in his room the night of the first party, she thought she was finally getting what she wanted. However, that dream was crushed the second he told her that they couldn't be together. That hooking up was a drunken mistake.

Fucking asshole. I'll show him a drunken mistake.

“Then screw it,” I announce. “Let Mason make his move. You’re so much better than waiting around for a guy who doesn’t deserve you anyway.”

“And Mason does?” she quips.

Mason Lockhart is NHU’s prized quarterback and grade-A douchebag. He’s got a bit of a reputation for being a tool and doing some shady shit, but as long as you’re careful around him, he’s pretty harmless.

“Definitely not,” I answer. “But I’m not telling you to marry the guy. Just use him as a distraction. An ego boost, if you want to call it that. No feelings. No strings attached.”

She seems unsure, but before she can answer, the devil himself comes over and drapes an arm over her shoulder. Amelia blushes and turns away, while I give him a look that tells him if he hurts my best friend, I’ll make his life a living hell.

“You good here?” I ask my best friend. “’Cause I need another drink.”

Glancing up at Mason and then back at me, she nods. “Yeah, I’m good.”

I push through the crowded party and make my way over to the keg. Sometimes, there’s nothing better than a cold beer to make your worries melt away. However, as I head back toward Amelia and Mason, I spot Easton coming through the front door.

Fuck. He will cock block Amelia any chance he gets, and if he sees it’s Mason, that’ll only make it worse. I quickly pass my drink to a girl walking by and hurry toward Easton, stepping in front of him to make sure he sees me and no one else.

“Never expected to find you here,” I say.

He looks me up and down and chuckles. “Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

Shrugging, I give him my best smile. “I just figured you were too cool for jock parties.”

“You’re here. Are you saying you’re not cool?”

His response is smooth, and paired with his flirty smirk, I’m fucked. I wrack my brain for something sassy to snap back with, but I come up empty. The only thing I can focus on is the way he’s checking me out with such patience—like he has all the time in the world and isn’t trying to hide his intentions at all.

With all the confidence I can muster, I straighten my shoulders and put two fingers under his chin, lifting his gaze back to my face. “My eyes are up here.”

He licks his lips. “I’ll get there, babe. I like to save the best for last.”

My cheeks pink as I chuckle. “Come on, Casanova. Let’s get me a drink.”



EASTON COMES BACK INTO the room to find me still curled in a ball on the floor. I lift my head just enough to look at him through my bloodshot eyes. He sighs and runs his fingers through his hair as he comes to sit next to me.

“I thought you would have left by now,” he confesses.

I hum sadly. “Me too, but every time I try to convince myself to go, I can’t.”

“Then don’t.” It comes out like a whisper but sounds more like a plea. “Stay and let me fix this.”

Fix this. Like it’s just a broken toy or something he can put back together with glue or tape. As if he didn’t betray me like it was the easiest thing in the world to do. The idea of giving him the ability to ruin me further makes my stomach churn, but the thought of being without him isn’t any better.

My shoulders sag, and I rest my head on his shoulder,
every broken piece of me clinging to him like a lifeline,
because I love him, even if he's in love with *her*.

Chapter 2



I WALK DOWNSTAIRS FEELING LIKE A NEW MAN. PUSHING MY WAY through the crowded party in my living room, I slip into the kitchen to grab a beer. It's amazing how one person can change everything. No amount of drugs I've taken in the last few months ever came anywhere near making me feel like this.

So alive.

So content.

Like I rose from the ashes of rock bottom and am ready to fly.

"E," Zayn calls as he comes toward me. "How's Tess? She okay?"

My grin stretches from ear to ear. "Couldn't be better. We couldn't be better."

He cocks a brow at me. "You mean you two..."

"Yep." I tilt my head back as I take a long swig of beer. "I think we're going to make it this time. I have a good feeling about it."

“Damn,” he says. “I thought she was still all hung up on her teacher.”

Even the mention of that guy has the ability to make my smile falter. If I had known Tessa would move on as fast as she did, I never would have left in the first place. But none of that matters now, because she’s mine again, and I won’t let anything get in the way of us.

“Being as she’s naked in my bed right now, I’d say she’s over his ancient ass.”

He snorts. “Twenty-eight isn’t ancient.”

“Whatever.” I wave it off and start heading for the stairs again. “I’d love to stay and chat, but I’d rather get back to my girl.”

“Easton,” he says, grabbing my attention as I’m three steps up.

I stop and turn back around to face him. “What?”

“Just be careful.” His words are more a warning than an order. “She seems pretty fragile lately.”

“Have you met Tessa? Fragile is the last thing I’d use to describe her.”

Leaving him behind me, I take the stairs two at a time and head down the hall. As soon as I get back in my room, I notice the door to my bathroom is shut. A feeling of dread sits in the pit of my stomach that I can’t seem to shake.

“Tess?” I call, knocking on the door, but there’s no response. “Tessa?”

Nothing.

The realization that I told her where to find my stash hits me like a truck and panic sets in. My fist pounds on the door as I scream her name.

“Tessa!”

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

With all the strength I have, I rear back and start kicking the door.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

The wood breaks into pieces as I finally get it to open, but there's no relief from finally getting inside. My heart sinks as I find Tessa on the floor, a near-empty bottle of vodka clutched in her hand and her head slumped to the side. For a second I hope she's just drunk, until my eyes land on the empty prescription bottle in the sink—the same one that was full of oxycodone just a couple hours ago.

"No, no!" I shout, dropping to my knees and taking her face in my hands.

"Tessa? Tessa!" I tap her cheeks to try to get a response, but all I get is an empty look in her eyes. "Answer me!"

Her hand releases the bottle of vodka as she starts slipping away right in front of me. I watch as her eyes start to roll back and her head falls heavily against my hand.

No.

This can't be happening.

No!

"Shit! Zayn!" I scream my best friend's name as I panic to maneuver Tessa so she's lying flat on the floor. "Zayn!"

With my hands on her chest, I start doing CPR as I call for my roommate in unadulterated fear. Her body feels hollow beneath my touch. I can feel her ribs creaking under the pressure, but I can't stop. If this is the only thing keeping her alive, I'll do it for as long as I need to.

"Don't die on me. Please don't die on me," I plead through sobs. Tears that I didn't know were streaming down my face fall onto Tess's lifeless body. "Fuck, Zayn!"

Finally, he comes running into my room. When he realizes the scene in front of him, he looks just as terrified as I feel. His

eyes double in size and his skin goes almost as pale as Tessa's.

"Call 911!" I tell him urgently. "Now!"

My lungs fill with air as I jolt awake. The dark room provides a sense of relief as I realize it was just a nightmare—the same recurring nightmare I've had since it happened. The one that makes me feel all the same things I did when I lived through it.

Kennedy lies beside me, sound asleep and turned away. A part of me wants to reach out and touch her, but after everything we went through last night, I don't think waking her would do any good. It's better not to risk it.

The floor creaks beneath my feet as I slip out of bed and head downstairs. I make my way into the kitchen and open the fridge, grabbing an ice-cold beer and cracking it open. The liquid slides down my throat and cools me from the inside out, bringing me back into reality and away from the memories that haunt me at night.

"Again?" Zayn asks, appearing out of nowhere. "I thought they stopped."

I push myself up to sit on the counter. "I thought so, too."

"You really should see a therapist. You have PTSD, and it really helped Jace."

Shaking my head, I stare down at my beer as he grabs one for himself. "We don't do this. I act like I'm fine, and you pretend you believe I'm fine. That's how we operate. Remember?"

He cracks the can open and leans against the island across from me. "Are the nightmares making you want drugs?"

"No, Z," I say calmly, knowing he's only asking because he cares. "Reliving the memory of my ex-girlfriend nearly dying in my arms is not triggering the urge to relapse."

"Good enough, then I'll drop it. But at least consider therapy."

I nod but say nothing else. The two of us sit in total silence, but there's a mutual respect. He knows that just being here is exactly what I need, even if we don't talk.

"I'm asking Amelia to marry me," he announces out of the blue.

Sputtering beer, I struggle to catch my breath. "Fuck, man. Seriously?"

The corners of his mouth raise. "I love her, E. There's no one else I could imagine spending the rest of my life with."

"Jesus Christ, she turned you into a damn Hallmark card," I tease.

Zayn has been my best friend since we were riding on training wheels. He's one of the most loyal and protective people I know, which is probably the only reason I'm so calm right now, given that he's standing here telling me he's going to propose to my little sister.

Them dating was something I never saw coming. When I found out they were hooking up behind my back, it was a shock to my system, but I don't think I could find a better guy for her. Just seeing the two of them together, I know he'd throw himself on a blade if it was in her best interest.

"You haven't killed me yet," he quips. "That's a good sign."

A deep chuckle echoes through me. "Are you kidding? If I put so much as a scratch on you, Amelia would rip me to shreds."

"Touché. Though from what it sounded like earlier, Kennedy might do that for her."

I wince. "You heard all that?"

He shrugs and a small laugh bubbles out of him. "Parts of it. She isn't exactly the quietest person we know."

The look on Kennedy's face when she realized I'd been lying to her is one that's going to stay burned into my mind forever. Just like everything else I've done wrong. And the way she screamed at me earlier? Yeah, I more than deserved it.

“You want to talk about it?” Z asks.

Taking a deep breath, I exhale slowly. “I’ve been hanging out with Tess behind her back. She found out.”

His brows raise. “E!”

“I know, I know. I don’t need the lecture,” I tell him honestly. “I fucked up.”

“Fucked up is a massive understatement.” He pauses and runs his fingers through his hair. “Shit, Amelia might kill you anyway.”

I hop down from the counter and throw my empty can into the recycling bin. “Say something nice at my funeral?”

He chuckles. “Leave me your record collection, and I’ll do my best.”

“Deal.”

I start making my way back to my room, but just before I leave the kitchen, Zayn stops me.

“E,” he calls. I turn around to look back at him. “Kennedy doesn’t deserve that shit.”

Nodding slowly, I rub the back of my neck. “I know. I’m going to fix it.”

“I hope you can.”

As I climb back into bed a few moments later and see my girlfriend sleeping soundly beside me, I let my head sink into the pillow and drape an arm over top of her.

“Me too.”



TENSE. THAT'S THE ONLY way to describe things between Kennedy and me. While Amelia is around, she acts like everything is fine, but I can tell. It's the way she leaves a couple inches of space between us on the couch. The way her whole body stiffens when my phone gets a text message. The way she looks at me when we have to be away from each other. It's almost as if she's terrified of what I'll do next.

I hold the bouquet of pink roses tightly in my hand as I walk up the steps. As I sat through my eighty-minute lecture this morning, all I could think about was how I could make this up to her. Flowers may not solve everything, but they're at least a start.

Opening the door, Kennedy is standing in the kitchen with Zayn and Amelia. My sister glances back at me, and when she sees the present for Kennedy, her face lights up.

"Oh my God," she coos. "You *can* be a sweetheart after all."

I chuckle and roll my eyes as I ignore her and head for my girl. "You told me once that pink roses are your favorite."

She smiles as she takes them from me, but I can tell it's a forced one. "They are. Thank you."

Arching on her tiptoes, she kisses my cheek and then lets me wrap her in my arms while her head rests on my chest. It's a show. All of it. And it's all for Amelia's sake. She doesn't want her to know, and that's mostly for my sake. She said that she doesn't want my sister to hate me, and fuck, that broke me. How can she still be thinking of me and my reputation, when I hurt her so badly?

She's a goddess, that's how.

"Zayn never buys me flowers," Amelia says with a pout.

Z snorts. "Because the one time I did, you kept them three weeks after they were dead because you didn't want to hurt my feelings by throwing them away."

"It wasn't that long."

"They attracted bugs, babe."

Kennedy and I laugh at their banter, but I'm mostly relishing in the way I'm allowed to hold her close while they're around. I know the second they walk out the door, she's going to pull away from me again—roses or no roses.

“Oh, whatever,” Amelia groans. “Come on. I want to get lunch before class.”

She blows a kiss to Kennedy and heads for the door, and Zayn pats me on the shoulder as he follows dutifully. My hold on my girlfriend tightens as I watch them leave, knowing what's coming.

Sure enough, the second the door closes behind them she takes a deep breath, almost as if she's committing the feeling to memory, then removes herself from my embrace. Her head drops as she makes her way up the stairs.

“Kennedy,” I plead as I follow behind her.

No answer. She carries the flowers upstairs and into my bedroom before tossing the bouquet down on my bed. Her hands rub over her face, and I can tell she's trying to keep herself from crying.

“Babe,” I try again. “Please. I'm trying to fix this.”

She scoffs. “And you think flowers are the way to do that? I found out that months of our relationship have been a lie, and you think *flowers* are just going to make it all better?”

“Of course not! But I'm trying here.” I sit down on my bed and take a breath to try to calm myself. “You're acting like I cheated on you. I told you, nothing happened.”

“So you keep claiming, but what I want to know is why were you sneaking around with her then?” She crosses her arms over her chest and holds her head high. “If you weren't sleeping with her—which I only believe because she's still happily in a relationship last time I checked—then what the hell were you doing?”

My mouth opens and closes, trying to think of an excuse, but if I have any shot at fixing this, I need to give her at least somewhat of the truth.

“She’s been helping me through some things,” I confess.

Kennedy flinches like my words hit the weakest spot she has. “The nightmares you have?”

Fuck. “That’s part of it.”

Her eyes fill with tears as she runs her fingers through her hair. “So, instead of confiding in your girlfriend, who has done nothing but try to help you, you decide it’s better to fuck off with your ex. That’s great, E. Just great.”

She turns around and grabs her books. Everything feels so broken as I watch her go to leave. I can’t let her walk out that door right now, because the fear that she might never come back is getting increasingly real by the second.

“Ken,” I say, reaching out for her.

She shrugs off my touch and turns around, her piercing glare on me through bloodshot eyes. “Don’t.” She takes a step into the hallway before stopping once more. “You know, I honestly would have preferred you sleeping with her. That would have hurt less than this.”

I stay at the top of the steps and watch as she walks out the front door, not once looking back. The moment she’s gone, I go back into my room and find the bouquet of flowers still lying on my bed. I pick them up and admire their beauty before chucking them with all the force I can manage.

I’m going to lose her.

I can feel it.

Chapter 3



MUSIC FILLS THE ROOM AND VIBRATES THE WALLS. A *HAPPY Birthday Carter* banner hangs on the wall with streamers all over the place. Hypnotic, the local club, is completely decked out—the work of Tye—Carter’s girlfriend for all intents and purposes. Kennedy and Amelia came in to help, and since all three of them work here, they’re now behind the bar serving drinks while still getting to enjoy the party.

Kennedy comes over with a big smile on her face, for once looking like she’s in a good mood. After the week that we’ve had, I honestly will take any twitch of her lips that she’s willing to give me, even if it is mainly because we’re in front of all our friends.

“Hey, you,” I greet her, kissing her forehead.

She smiles up at me and hands me a beer. “I grabbed you the last one. After this, you’ll have to drink something else.”

I cock a brow and turn to my closest friends. “Which one of you fuckers drank all my beer?”

Zayn raises his own beer up, showing he had nothing to do with it. Carter is next and shakes his head. Good, because even if he had, I can't necessarily yell at him on his birthday. I look over at Jace. He's Carter's best friend and roommate, but he only snickers at me.

"Sober life problems," he tells me.

That leaves only one other person—*Knox*. Knox Vaughn has been best friends with Zayn and me for as long as I can remember. When we were younger, the three of us could always be found together. There was even a point where I thought we would end up brothers-in-law, being as he's dating Tessa's sister, Delaney, but that obviously isn't going to happen.

"What?" he asks incredulously. "You can't expect me to drink the other shit they have here."

"I know," I answer. "That's why Kennedy has Paul order my craft beer *just for me*."

He raises his glass that obviously contains my beer. "Well, cheers."

I'm about to make some smart-ass remark, to tell him the secret ingredient is giraffe piss or something, but a familiar brunette walks into the room and every thought dissipates in an instant. Seeing the smile on Tessa's face sends a calmness through me that I could get high on.

I focus on every one of her features.

Her healthy complexion.

Her eyes filled with life.

The happiness that radiates from her like sunlight.

The need to know she's okay is primal. After all, she left my house with no pulse. The fact that they were able to get her back is a miracle in itself. To know I didn't fuck her up permanently feels like coming up for air after almost drowning. And still, knowing what I did is a regret I will live with for the rest of my life.

Delaney runs across the room and jumps into her arms. Tess stumbles but laughs as she holds onto her sister just as tight. The two of them spent their entire adolescent lives together until Laney moved across the country for college. Needless to say, they miss each other constantly.

A sudden smack to the back of the head snaps me out of it, and I turn to the only possible culprit.

“Ouch. What was that for?” I ask Knox.

“Being an idiot,” he answers, like it’s nothing new. “Go fix that.”

It’s then that I notice Kennedy walking away, and my heart drops. *Shit*. Tessa being here was the absolute last thing we needed, and by letting myself get so wrapped up in how well she’s doing, I fucked up again. I sigh heavily and run after my girlfriend.

“Kennedy, wait,” I call out, but she keeps walking.

Neither one of us stop until we’re alone and hidden away in the kitchen. Kennedy immediately grips onto the steel countertop and takes a deep breath.

“Baby, it’s not what you think.”

She scoffs. “It’s not? So, you weren’t just blatantly checking out your ex right in front of me?”

“No,” I answer, but change course when she rolls her eyes. “Okay, kind of, but not for the reasons you’re thinking. I was ___”

“Why are you even with me?” she interrupts.

The question catches me off guard and trips me up. “What?”

“Why are you with me? I mean, clearly you’d rather be with her.”

“That’s not true.”

She scoffs as she takes a few steps away from me. “Bullshit. I just watched you stare at her like she hung the goddamn moon!”

“Because I...” The truth almost slips out, but I bite my tongue and reign it in. “I was surprised to see her here. That’s all.”

“What were you going to say?” she presses. “You started saying something else. What was it?”

I shake my head. “It’s nothing.”

“Coward. Just say it.” She leans back against the counter on the other side of the room. “You love her, right? You’re in love with her? Just fucking say it, Easton! It’s completely obvious, so stop wasting my time and say it!”

With every second that she gets louder, my anger builds. And by the end of it, she’s screaming at me and my restraint snaps.

“Enough!” I demand, making her flinch at my tone. “You want to fucking scream at me, fine, but do it at home! Don’t ruin Carter’s birthday because you can’t seem to accept that I made a mistake!”

“A mistake?” she sneers. “You didn’t drunk-dial your ex-girlfriend and share all your darkest thoughts and feelings. You lied to me for God knows how long and hid that you were hanging out with her behind my fucking back!”

“Yeah, I did! And then you agreed to stay with me and let me fix it. But if you’re just going to hold it over my head like a damn guillotine, maybe leaving was the right choice.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I feel the regret and watch as her face drops. Pain and despair take over her perfect features as she drops her head and nods. Without saying another word, she goes to leave. I should let her, give her the space she obviously needs, but I can’t.

“Wait,” I beg, wrapping my fingers around her wrist. “I didn’t mean it.”

“No, I think you did.”

She tries to pull herself from my grasp, but I won’t let go. “Baby, I’m sorry. Just stay here and talk to me.”

“Let go,” she pleads. “Easton, let go!”

Using all her strength, she yanks herself away from me at the same time I loosen my grip. She stumbles backward and, before I can catch her, falls and crashes into the counter. The sound of metal hitting metal echoes through the room, but all my attention is on Kennedy.

We stare back at each other, eyes wide in panic and unable to move. It's as if neither one of us knows what to say or do, but that if we make a wrong move, it could be the end of us right here and now. Just as I'm about to ask if she's all right or if I can help her up, the door swings open. Zayn and Amelia rush into the room and take in the scene in front of them.

Kitchen tools scattered across the metal surface.

Kennedy on the floor.

Blood dripping down her arm.

“What the fuck happened?” Amelia asks, going over to kneel next to Kennedy. “Are you okay?”

My girlfriend, if I can still even call her that, keeps her eyes locked with mine. “I'm fine. I just tripped and fell.”

“Ken, you're bleeding.” Amelia sounds concerned as she reaches for the napkin Zayn is handing her and presses it to Kennedy's arm.

Kennedy winces at the sting but then trains her expression to neutral. “I've felt worse.” She looks away from me and gets up with the help of my sister. “Come on. I need a drink.”

“Okay, but first, a Band-Aid.”

As they walk out of the room together, Amelia glances back at me—clearly wondering what is going on between us. The second they're gone, Zayn raises his brows at me, but I'm too busy being consumed by anger.

“Fuck!” I scream, kicking a metal table as hard as I possibly can.

This just went from bad to worse.



KENNEDY SPENDS TWO HOURS avoiding being around me at all costs, not that I can blame her. Hell, I'd avoid me too if I could. I've been trying to fake a smile for Carter's sake, but I don't think anyone is believing it. Especially not anyone who knows me well enough.

By the third time Kennedy walks away to keep no less than ten feet of distance between us, Zayn grabs us each a beer and drags me outside to smoke a cigarette. I lean against the cold brick wall and breathe in, letting the nicotine calm me from the inside out.

"Are you sure you two are doing the right thing?" Z asks.

I exhale and watch as a puff of smoke pours out of me. "What do you mean?"

"Well, don't take this the wrong way. Kennedy is great. But is what's going on between you two really fixable or do you think you're just beating a dead horse?"

It's not something I haven't asked myself once or twice, especially when she hasn't so much as let me hold her hand in private for a week now. But if the choice is to let myself get burned alive by her fiery rage or deal with the hell of losing her, I'll lie down in the middle of the blaze.

"I don't know," I tell him honestly. "But I'm not willing to give up until I know I've tried everything."

"Fair enough."

It goes quiet until I'm halfway through my cigarette and the door opens. Tessa walks outside and when she spots Zayn and me, she smiles.

“I thought I’d find you two out here,” she says. “I’m surprised Knox isn’t with you.”

“Your sister holds him hostage,” Z answers.

Tess chuckles and takes the cigarette from his hand. “Aw, you jealous?”

As she takes a puff and holds it in, Zayn snorts. “Still wreaking havoc, I see.”

The smoke flows gently out of her mouth as she exhales. “What do you mean?”

“Stirring up shit between—”

“Z!” I cut him off.

Since everything with Kennedy blew up, I haven’t told Tess anything about it. Whether that’s because I’m afraid of her reaction to it, or Kennedy’s for telling her, I’m not sure. Regardless, the time to not mention it has run out.

Zayn looks at me confused for a second and then chuckles. “I’ll see you two inside.”

As he disappears back into the club, Tessa hums. “What was that about?”

I run my fingers through my hair, trying to figure out an excuse. It’s useless though, because she knows me too well. *Fuck*. She’s really going to kill me for this.

“Kennedy found out that I’ve been hanging out with you, and kind of flipped the fuck out.”

The smile drops right off her face. “What do you mean *found out*? She didn’t already know?”

“No,” I answer with a wince.

“E!” she yells and kicks me in the shin. “The fuck is wrong with you?”

“Ow! Heels!”

“Do I look like I give a shit? What the hell were you thinking?”

I lean my head back and look up at the sky. “I don’t know. My head is all kinds of screwed up. You know that.”

That seems to calm her down at least a little. She moves to stand beside me and rests back against the wall, not even flinching as the bitter cold hits her skin. She takes another puff of the cigarette she stole from Zayn and lets the information just settle in for a minute.

“Did she lose her shit?”

A short, humorless laugh bubbles out of me at what an understatement that is. “I think she’s convinced I cheated on her.”

She winces. “I was afraid of that. I don’t blame her. If Asher was sneaking around with his ex, I’d assume the same.”

“You’d cut his balls off,” I point out.

“That, too.” She finishes the cigarette and then puts it out with the bottom of her shoe. “You should be glad you still have yours.”

Pulling her keys out of her purse, she walks over to the Mercedes her boyfriend bought her for her last birthday. Just before she climbs inside, her eyes meet mine and she shakes her head.

“Fix it, Eas,” she says. “Do whatever the hell it takes, but don’t give up on her. She’s good for you.”

I watch as she drives away and think about how right she is. After everything with Tess, I never thought I’d find another person who seemed to be perfect for me. I might be afraid to say the three words Kennedy is looking for, but that doesn’t mean I don’t feel them with every fiber of my being. If I lose her because of this, I don’t know that I’ll ever be able to forgive myself.

After giving myself a few more minutes, I put out my second cigarette and head back inside to rejoin the party. Kennedy spots me from across the room and her brows furrow as she comes toward me. Even with the scowl on her face, she’s heart-stoppingly beautiful. And if I wasn’t so afraid of

ruining her the same way I almost did Tess, I'd scream everything she's been wanting to hear from the rooftops.

“What were you doing?” she hisses. “Kissing Tessa goodbye?”

My shoulders sag in defeat, knowing I caused her to be this way. “How many times do I have to tell you that you're the one I want?”

She holds her head high. “As many times as it takes to make it true.”

And that might just crack my chest wide open.

Chapter 4



kennedy

IT'S NEARLY THREE IN THE MORNING BY THE TIME WE WALK IN the door. One of us doesn't even walk, she stumbles. Being Amelia's best friend, I've seen her drunk a few times, but I don't think she's ever been *this* wasted. She paced herself pretty well for most of the night, until Knox had the brilliant idea to shit-talk her into a drinking contest. Zayn tried stopping her, but the look she gave him had him holding his hands up and backing away.

"I don't care what you guys say," she slurs. "I beat Knox Vaughn at shots. I'm a goddamn champion."

Zayn snorts because he all but threatened Knox into letting her win, but she doesn't need to know that. "You did, baby. I'm proud of you. But let's get you to bed, okay?"

She shakes her head. "I want Kennedy. She gets me."

"I'm right here, babes," I assure her.

Squealing, she quickly spins around in Zayn's hold, throwing herself at me with excitement in her eyes. I stumble

back but manage to keep us upright. Her face is only inches from mine as she smiles.

“Hi.”

I chuckle. “Hey.”

Her head rests on my shoulder but she stays looking at me. “I love you. You’re so pretty.”

“I love you, too.”

“You know, if I was a lesbian, I’d steal you from my dumb brother.”

Easton is clearly annoyed, having listened to her babble the whole way home, but Zayn watches with amusement. As I glance over at him, he smirks and bounces his brows like it’s something to consider. If I wasn’t holding his girlfriend upright, I’d probably elbow him.

“Okay, honey, but you’re not a lesbian,” I tell her.

She juts her bottom lip out. “I’m not?”

“No.”

“Oh,” she says sadly. “Okay.”

I carefully pass her back to Zayn, and he picks her up, bridal style. As he starts to carry her up the stairs, she rests her head against his chest.

“I love her more than you,” she murmurs.

He snickers. “I know.”

Easton goes to help Zayn put her to bed, getting things for her like Advil, a bottle of water, and a trash can to throw up in—because God knows she’ll need it. Meanwhile, I head into Easton’s bedroom and let the boys handle it. If I go in there, she will want me to cuddle with her, and I’ve never been able to tell her no.

I take out my dangling earrings one at a time and stand in front of the mirror, just staring at my reflection. I’ve felt a million different things over the last few hours, let alone the

last week, but I think right now I feel the lowest as I take in everything about myself.

“Remind me to punch Knox in the nuts the next time I see him,” Easton says as he comes into the room. When he notices me standing still, he comes up behind me and runs his hands down my sides. “Are you okay?”

“You know, before I started dating you, I loved my blonde hair,” I tell him. “I didn’t care about the hours spent in the salon every six weeks, or that when it grew out it didn’t look as good. I did it for years without a single complaint.”

“Where is this coming from?”

I shrug. “It wasn’t until you started making comments about dark hair looking good on me that I changed it.”

He looks genuinely confused. “Did you not want to change it?”

“I don’t know.” I turn around in his hold and look up at him. “Did you really feel that way, or was that just another way to make me look like her?”

Stepping back as if I delivered a blow to the chest, he lets go of me. “What? Of course not.”

“Don’t do that,” I argue. “Don’t make me feel like I’m crazy. I saw her tonight, Easton. You don’t think I realized how much we look alike?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t see it.”

“You don’t see it?”

“No.”

I reach back and grab the hair tie, yanking it out of my hair. My long brown locks fall around my face as I run my fingers through it to mess it up a bit.

“What about now?”

Easton stares back at me for a moment before closing his eyes and letting out a breathy laugh. He walks away and shakes his head, going over to take off his shirt.

“You’re just going to ignore me now?” I sass.

He doesn’t even turn to face me. “You’re looking for an argument. So, for tonight, yeah. I am.”

Not even denying it. I drop my head and wrap my arms around myself as I let it sink in that I’m fighting a losing battle. He’s never going to say the things I need for him to calm my fears. He’s never going to be able to fix this.

We’re completely and irrevocably broken.

Taking a deep breath, he comes toward me and uses his knuckle to lift my chin, making me look him in the eye. The same feeling that pulls me toward him at all times is still there. Still so strong. I swallow hard to maintain my composure.

“All we’ve done today is fight. So if it’s okay, I’d rather we climb into bed and you let me hold you the way I’ve wanted to all damn night.”

It’s a tempting idea, and I almost agree to it, until a realization makes my stomach churn. “You mean with my back to you? So all you see is my dark brown hair?”

He throws his head back and groans, turning to walk away again.

“What?” I say, exasperated. “It’s not an outrageous thought. I just want to know if you picture Tessa when you’re with me.”

“No!” he snaps, spinning around and getting in my face. “How could I when she never made my blood boil the way you do?” I try to look away but he grips my chin and holds me in place. “Being with her was easy. Carefree and effortless. Being with you is something else entirely.”

“Then leave me if I’m such a damn inconvenience for you,” I hiss. “Why be with me?”

“For fuck’s sake.”

In one swift move, he pushes me against the dresser and covers my mouth with his own. His arm wraps around my back as he pulls me closer. Our tongues tangle together in a heated mix of anger and desperation.

A little voice in the back of my head tells me to push him away. To stop this before it starts. But I can't. I want it and need it, just as much as he does—if not more.

It's like we're clinging to every ounce of the past as we can.

The relationship we had.

The physical connection that still burns between us.

Anything.

“You are so fucking infuriating,” he growls against my lips.

I dig my nails into his shoulders. “Fuck you.”

He chuckles darkly, lifting me up and onto the dresser. “Oh, baby. I'm going to do a hell of a lot more than that.”

Maybe it's because it's been over a week since I last had his hands on my skin. Or the way his touch feels like fire and ice all at once. Regardless of the reason, it's making me feel alive for the first time since I found out about his betrayal, and I'm not willing to walk away.

His mouth moves to my neck. He licks and sucks with just the right amount of pressure while he unzips the back of my dress. Once it's fully undone, he backs away and gently pulls the fabric from my arms, watching as it pools around my waist. His tongue darts out to moisten his lips as he pulls my bra off and throws it onto the floor.

“You're fucking mouthwatering,” he growls.

Instantly, he's all over my tits. His hand caresses the right one, while his mouth does its magic on the left. I throw my head back and let out a moan that sounds way too desperate but I can't find it in me to care.

Grabbing my waist, Easton picks me up and moves us over to the bed. He tosses me down without a care in the world, and while the darkness in his eyes should scare me, it only seems to turn me on. My dress gets ripped the rest of the way off, along with my panties—leaving me fully on display and wanting on the bed in front of him.

“What about you?” I tease. “I’m naked and you’re still half dressed.”

The smirk that appears on his face threatens to make me combust on the spot. “That’s because I’m not nearly ready to be inside you yet. Not until you’re a quivering mess, begging me for it.”

“If you think I’m going to beg after this past week, let me tell you some—”

He cuts me off by practically diving in between my legs and licking one long stripe up my sex. My head presses harshly back against the pillow as my hands grip the bed sheets as tight as I can.

“My God,” I moan. “Fuck, you’re good at that.”

Two fingers slip inside me and immediately press on the sensitive bundle of nerves. Meanwhile, Easton lifts his head and gives me a teasing look.

“You were saying?”

I try to keep an irritated look plastered across my face, but he only sees it as a challenge. He presses harder on my g-spot, and I lose it in an instant. He knows exactly what I want, and he’s holding it over my head.

As he starts to move his fingers in and out, he sucks my clit into his mouth. I bite onto my fist to avoid making this room sound like a live-action porno, but it barely makes a difference. This man has one goal right now, and that’s to make me scream his name. No part of him will stop until that happens.

I can feel my orgasm building, but I need something more. Something harder. I reach down and lace my fingers into his hair, arching against his face. He must be able to tell I’m close because his fingers start working faster and he hums as he flicks his tongue exactly the way I like it. And when it finally hits, it rips through me with no mercy. Easton moans against me as he laps up everything I’m willing to give him, and *fuck*. It’s hot as hell.

“More,” I tell him as he stops. “I need more.”

He stands beside the bed, eyes locked with mine as he undoes his belt. “Now, now. What did I tell you?”

“Easton,” I breathe.

Shaking his head, he undresses the rest of the way in one move. His cock springs free, rock hard and an angry shade of red as he stands tall—completely unashamed and confident as hell. He takes it into his hand and lightly pumps as he grins at me. He knows exactly what he’s doing, and he’s loving every fucking second of it.

After grabbing a condom from the nightstand and slipping it on, he kneels on the bed in front of me. For a second, I think he’s going to give me what I want, but of course it’s never that easy. Not with him.

With his dick still firmly in his hand, he runs it up and down my pussy. It’s a tease, and torture, and all I want is for him to slip inside me. I breathe heavily as I try to stay strong, but that’s turning out to be more difficult than I thought.

“Say the words, Kennedy,” he orders.

I shake my head and he starts teasing at my hole—pressing in the tiniest bit only to pull it back out again.

“Say it.”

“Fuck you.”

The corner of his mouth raises. “I’d love to, baby. All you have to do is ask.”

No. I can’t. It’s giving him everything he wants, and after what he did, I don’t know that he deserves it. But then...what if he gets it from someone else instead? If I don’t give it to him, is he going to get it from another girl? From Tessa?

“Please,” I beg, and even as I say it I’m ashamed of my lack of self-control. “I need you. Please.”

He grins triumphantly and pushes inside in an instant, throwing his head back and letting out a growl as he bottoms out. The feeling of being so full of him, it’s everything I didn’t realize I need.

This connection.

This moment.

Him and me.

Us.

He bends down and presses his lips to mine as he thrusts into me. His tongue dances with mine, and I can taste myself on him. It's sweet yet a little salty, and it always feels like a claim—knowing the taste of me coats his entire mouth.

“God, baby,” he pants. “You feel so fucking good.”

I drag my nails down his back as he drills into me. Easton is not small by any means, and no matter how many times we're together, I can feel the way I have to stretch around him. And I wouldn't want it any other way.

He moves his mouth to my ear. “Give me what I want, Kennedy. Let me feel that pretty pussy clench around me.”

“It's my orgasm,” I counter, and yet still, the pressure in my core starts to build.

It's like he has a direct line to climax central. No matter what I do, I can never deny him of anything when we're like this. My body just naturally reacts to him. Does whatever is necessary to please him.

I let out a moan that he quickly swallows down as another high hits and threatens to leave me in ruins. Easton hums contently against my lips with that arrogant smirk already appearing. But I'm loving it too much to care. At least until he moves.

He pulls out and rolls me onto my side, only to get behind me. It's a position we've done a million times, and yet this time feels different, like he's making it so he doesn't have to see my face.

Like he's making it so he can picture it's her.

“Always so good,” he coos as he pushes inside of me from behind. “So fucking good for me.”

I try to push the thoughts from my mind, to convince myself I'm just paranoid and to stay in the moment, but I can't. It's eating me alive from the inside out. But like he said before, all we've done tonight is argue. If I stop him now, if I ruin this, it might be the final straw.

So, instead of pushing him away, both physically and figuratively, I stay still and let him pound into me—tears slipping out and pooling on the pillow as he chases his own high.



I LIE AWAKE EACH night for days, staring at the ceiling. Easton has one arm draped across my stomach as he sleeps soundly beside me. Minutes feel like hours, and my mind will not shut off. It's reeling, playing the events of the last two weeks on a loop, and I can't seem to shake the feeling in my gut.

He's lying.

He's a cheater.

He's in love with her.

The monsters are there, in the dark parts of my mind, convincing me to run. To leave him and never look back. And lately, it's becoming harder to find reasons to stay than it is to go.

A couple weeks ago, the thought of walking away from him was enough to send me into a panic attack. Despite everything he did, I couldn't find it in me to leave. It's like I needed him in order to breathe. But now, as the dust starts to settle, I don't know where we go from here.

I don't know how to get over this.

I don't know if I can.

Accepting the fact that I'm not going to get any sleep, I once again slip out of Easton's hold and climb off the bed. The room is dark, only illuminated by the moonlight, but I manage to spot my bag sitting on the floor next to the dresser. I pull a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt out of it. When I go to pick up my bra, however, I notice Easton's phone lying on the floor. It's exactly where it landed after he threw it during yet another argument that preceded desperate hate sex.

Like most nights lately.

I pick it up and place it on the dresser before making quick work of getting dressed. As I pull my shirt over my head, my eyes land on it again.

I bet he's still sneaking around.

Go through his phone. You'll see.

No. No, I can't.

Looking over at Easton, I notice he's fast asleep. If I were to have a look, he would never know. And even if he did, if he has nothing to hide, he shouldn't care.

Just take a little peek.

I grab the phone off the dresser and press a button, making it come to life. It only takes a second for me to put in his password. I bite my lip nervously and open his text messages.

Kennedy Lehigh

Zayn Bronsyn

Amelia Donovan

Knox Vaughn

If there were any messages that I wasn't meant to see, especially those with Tessa, they're long gone. I switch over to his recent calls, but there's nothing there either. I should be relieved, but instead, I'm even more worried.

How could there be nothing to find after he just spent months lying to me about where he was at least a couple times a month? Is that even possible?

I swipe through his phone frantically, looking for any type of secret messaging app or hidden pictures. It isn't until I'm about to check his browser history that I stop. My shoulders sag, and I run my fingers through my hair as I go to sit down.

It's like I'm determined to find something even though it isn't there.

"What am I doing?" I murmur to myself.

"I was wondering the same thing."

Easton's voice breaks through the quiet room and makes me jump. I was so wrapped up in searching through his phone that I didn't realize he had woken up. Reaching over, he flicks on the lamp beside the bed.

"How long have you been awake?"

He sits up, letting the blanket fall and pool on his lap. "Long enough. Did you find what you were looking for?"

I huff. "No, but you knew that already. What did you do, delete it all?"

His head drops, and he lets out a long exhale. "Is this just how it's going to be now? Constant arguing and searching through my phone while I sleep?"

A part of me wants to tell him yes. That I will do whatever makes *me* feel better. Whatever will help me trust him again. But before it can come out of my mouth, I realize that I'd be lying. Even finding nothing, it didn't make me feel any better, and it sure as hell didn't make me trust him.

The only option I have weighs heavily on my chest, making it hard to breathe. I've never been the kind of girl to question her boyfriend. To sneak around and go through his phone. And I always swore I would never be that girl, and here I am. As much as I love him, I can't change who I am, and this isn't me. Deep down, I've known it was going to come to this for weeks. I simply chose to live in denial, but I can't anymore.

"No," I answer defeatedly.

He gives me a sad smile and climbs out of bed. “Okay. Good. Let’s go get something to drink and then get back in bed. It’s late.”

As he pulls on a pair of basketball shorts, I tilt my head back and blink to keep in the tears, refusing to cry.

“No,” I repeat, once I’ve gained control of my emotions. “It’s not going to be like that because I’m leaving you.”

His whole body tenses before he turns around with utter fear in his eyes. “You can’t.”

“I have to,” I say quietly. “This isn’t who I am, E. I’m not that girl that stays with a guy she doesn’t trust. The girl that goes through her boyfriend’s phone, looking for evidence of something that might not even exist.”

“You did that all on your own!”

“No,” I snap, standing up. “You don’t get to do that, to act like I’m the reason we failed. I was ready to spend the rest of my life with you. That’s how sure about us I was. So all the bullshit was worth it to me because you were mine. But I didn’t sign up to be lied to. And I have way too much respect for myself to be a doormat. I am not the reason we failed, Easton, because if it were up to me, we would have made it.”

He shakes his head. “Stop talking about us in past tense. We’re not in past tense.”

“We are past tense.”

“You told me I could fix it! I thought we were getting better! *You stayed!*”

The pain in my chest doesn’t let up as I feel this breaking us both. I pick up my bag and walk toward him. He watches me like I’m some rabid animal, ready to attack at any given moment and rip him to shreds.

“I stayed because I love you,” I say as I stand in front of him. “And I think a part of me is always going to love you. But right now, I need to love myself more.”

Arching up on my tiptoes, I press a kiss to his cheek and let it linger for a moment. As I pull away, it takes everything in

me to ignore the pained look on his face.

I open the door and go to leave when he breaks the silence once more.

“Please don’t do this,” he begs. Taking a deep breath, he says the words I’ve been craving. “I love you.”

I’ve waited so long to hear that from him. Since right after the first Thanksgiving that we spent together. And yet hearing it now, it’s tainted.

“You don’t love me,” I say honestly. “Not like you love her. You love me because you’re scared. Because I’m leaving and there’s nothing you can do about it. You don’t love me for who I am or how I make you feel. You only love me because you don’t want to be alone.”

With that, I hold myself together and head out the door, thankful when he doesn’t try to follow. I manage to keep it all in until I make it down the stairs and out into the darkness, but as soon as I reach the sidewalk, I crumble.

Tears pour from my eyes, and my chest feels like it’s shattering into a million pieces as sobs wrack through me. Everything from the last week hits me all at once, and it’s ripping me apart.

I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand as I scramble to find the one number I need right now. The only person I can go to with this. The only one who is guaranteed to be on my side and won’t try to convince me to choose differently.

“Hello?” she answers tiredly.

The second I hear her voice, I break all over again. “Tye ___”

“Kennedy? What’s wrong?”

“I need you.”

Chapter 5



STARING AT MY BEDROOM DOOR, A PART OF ME IS CONVINCED she'll walk back in. Tell me she's sorry and that she didn't mean it. But with every hour that passes, as sunlight starts shining through the blinds, I realize that's not going to happen.

She's gone.

I lost her.

Drove her away at lightning speed.

I don't even know how long it's been since she left. I've been sitting on my bed, unable to move. Unable to think of anything other than her. Memories of the last year play through my mind like my own personal torture chamber. I can't escape it. All I can do is sit here and drown in my failure.

My heart lurches at the sound of a knock on my door, but when it opens and Zayn peeks his head in, it's as if it breaks all over again.

"You still coming with me today?" he asks.

Fuck, I almost forgot I promised Z I'd help him pick out an engagement ring. With Amelia in class all day, it's the perfect time to ditch. She'll never realize we were gone.

I stare down at my lap and nod. "Yeah. I'll be down in a bit."

After giving myself another minute, I get up and go into the bathroom. The water runs cold as I cup it in my hands and splash it onto my face. It's a sobering feeling, knowing this isn't a bad dream or sick joke. I'm used to the nightmares, and they still send a wave of emotions through me, but at least I can wake up from those. This is worse.

As I get downstairs, I can hear Amelia talking Zayn's ear off in the kitchen. Something about Carter being a moron for messing things up with Tye, and how she loves them both. I make my way into the room and immediately go over to the coffee pot—though it's not like I'm tired.

"I swear, we better not have to choose between them," she says. "I won't do it. I refuse."

He chuckles and presses a kiss to her forehead. "No one is making you choose anything."

"You say that now." She turns around and pushes herself up to sit on the island. "Is Kennedy almost ready? She's supposed to help me go over my presentation before class."

My stomach twists into a knot. If I wasn't so out of it, I'd probably be able to come up with something, but what good would that do? She's going to find out eventually.

"She's not here," I tell her.

My sister's brows furrow. "Well, where did she go? She was here last night. Don't think you're quiet in there. Your headboard is going to end up going through the wall one of these days."

Everything she says is only making it worse. She doesn't have to worry about that anymore, because there's no more Kennedy and me. She finally figured out that I don't deserve her to even look my direction, let alone be with me. I will forever kick myself in the ass for fucking this up.

“We broke up.”

The second the words leave my mouth, everything goes dead silent. Even Zayn, who was mid-sip into his coffee, freezes. Amelia’s jaw hangs slack for at least a solid thirty seconds before she starts to laugh.

“Okay, don’t play with me like that. It’s not funny.”

I sigh and run my fingers through my hair. “I’m not kidding. She left in the middle of the night, right after we ended things.”

Without a second thought, Amelia jumps off the counter and smacks me in the arm. “Have you lost your mind? That girl is the best thing to ever happen to you! Hell, she’s the best thing to ever happen to *me!*” She spares a quick glance at Zayn. “No offense.”

I try to ignore her. To act like the conversation isn’t happening. But I should’ve known she would never let me get away with that. I can practically hear the gears turning in her head.

“Oh no,” she groans. “Please tell me I’m not going to have to choose between the two of you, too!”

“No one is making you choose between anyone, Meelz,” Zayn tries.

She scoffs. “You say that now, but then next thing you know, Tye and Kennedy won’t be in the same room as Carter and Easton and I’m going to have to choose between them! It’s going to be a disaster!”

“Okay, stop,” I demand. “There’s no way in hell Carter will let this be the end of him and Tye. He’s way too fucking gone for that girl. They’ll be back together by next week, I’m sure.”

“And you and Kennedy?”

Dropping my head, I look away. “That’s different.”

“How?” she presses. “What the hell happened?”

I fucked up. “It just wasn’t working anymore.”

She comes closer and dips down, forcing me to look at her. “If that’s true, then why do you look so damn sad?” I roll my eyes and turn away from her, but she obviously has no intentions of letting up. “E, if you don’t want this, then fight for her. Win her back. She loves you!”

“Drop it, Amelia.”

“No way,” she argues. “You two are perfect for each other. I can help you! It’s probably all a misunderstanding anyway.”

I grip the edge of the counter as I try to reign in my frustration, but it’s not working. The more she talks, the worse I get, until finally, it breaks.

“It’s not going to happen!” I snap. “We’re done. Broken up. Over. If I have to accept that, then so do you. So for the love of fuck, just leave it alone.”

The tone of my voice, paired with my words, are enough to shock her into a momentary silence. After a second, I realize what I said was harsh, but before I can apologize, she exhales.

“Okay,” she says with a nod. “I have to get to class. I’ll see you two later.”

She kisses Zayn goodbye and puts a sympathetic hand on my back before heading out the door. Once she’s gone, I spin back around to find my best friend looking at me cautiously. Zayn sighs and crosses his arms over his chest.

“You okay?”

I shrug, trying to seem indifferent but failing miserably. “I just never thought she’d actually leave me.”



I STARE UP AT the small cafe, making sure I'm at the right place before going inside. After spending all yesterday looking for the perfect ring for Amelia, we finally found one. And while I'm more than happy for my sister and my best friend, maybe ring shopping while fresh off a breakup wasn't the best idea either.

Then again, neither is this.

As I get inside, Tessa is easy to spot. She's sitting at a table near the window with a cup of coffee, already waiting for me. There's a little voice in my head telling me how fucked up this is. After all, hanging out with Tess was almost every nail in the coffin of my relationship. But at the same time, this girl isn't just my ex. She's one of my best friends.

"You're a godsend," I tell her, sitting down and grabbing the mug. "Thank you."

She chuckles. "Don't thank me yet. I'm pretty sure it's stale."

I'm in the middle of taking a sip when the taste of it makes me immediately feel like I might hurl. It takes less than a second before I'm discreetly spitting it back into the cup.

"Okay, that's nasty. What did you do to it?"

"Antifreeze," she teases. "It's supposed to be a lot more discreet than that, though. Shame."

I can't help but smile as I shake my head. "And you wonder why Knox calls you a psychopath."

"There's something about a guy who literally has a handful of dead bodies to his name calling *me* a psycho that makes me proud. Not going to lie."

My eyes widen as I look around the crowded room. "Okay, maybe we shouldn't talk about shit like that in public."

She chuckles. "Once a pussy, always a pussy."

"How does Asher deal with you?" I ask her, only half joking.

Tilting her head from side to side, she smirks. “I pulled him in with my charm and made him fall in love with me. After that, he was done for. Plus, I’m good in bed. It’s a bonus.”

“You’re impossible. You know that?”

“I know,” she answers. “Now stop deflecting. How are things with you and Kennedy?”

Ugh. I was hoping we could avoid that topic for a little longer, but I should’ve known she was going to call me out on it. Tessa is nothing if not straightforward.

I rub the back of my neck, an old nervous habit. “Things are, uh...nonexistent.”

The smile she was sporting drops right off her face. “What?”

“She broke up with me two nights ago,” I admit. “It blows, but it’s not like I don’t deserve it.”

“Back the fuck up. She left you?”

“Yes. Keep up.” I snap my fingers. “You’re not as quick as you used to be.”

“And you just...let her?”

My shoulders sag in defeat and I can feel my *I’m okay* facade start to slip. “What else was I supposed to do? Hold her hostage in my basement?”

“You fight for her, asshat!” She pretends to choke me from across the table. “Christ, what happened to the guy who transferred colleges for the girl he wanted?”

I cock a single brow at her. “You really want to go over how that went?”

“No,” she replies without hesitation. “Definitely not. But what we *are* going to do is ditch this Popsicle stand and figure out how to get your girl back.”

“We can’t do that here?”

“Well, we could. But I want coffee that doesn’t taste like the dirt Delaney dared me to eat as a kid.”

A small laugh echoes from the back of my throat. “Fair enough.”

The two of us stand up and make our way toward the door. As she stops, waiting for someone to step out of the way, she glances up at me.

“Do you even have a basement?” she asks curiously.

I snort. “No. No, I don’t.”



MY HEART POUNDS INSIDE my chest as I walk down the familiar hallway toward Kennedy’s dorm. I stood outside for the last thirty minutes, trying to convince myself to go inside. Everything I’m about to do is my worst fear, but I’m more afraid of losing her than I am of this. I need her.

I raise my fist and knock lightly on the door, trying to tame my nerves while I wait for her to answer. I try to steady myself by imagining the worst that could happen: I lay my broken heart on the line, and she takes a blowtorch to the pieces? Ugh, this is a horrible idea.

Just as I’m about to walk away, the door opens, and Kennedy’s bloodshot eyes meet mine. She looks as bad as I feel, like she hasn’t gotten a wink of sleep. My heart breaks just looking at her, knowing I caused her suffering. Just like that, I know I can’t leave without her hearing what I have to say, no matter what happens.

“Baby.” The pet-name slips from my lips unintentionally.

The second it’s said, she grunts and goes to close the door, but I shove my shoe in the way before she can shut me out.

She looks down at my foot and back up at me with an annoyed glare.

“Just hear me out,” I beg. “Please.”

Saying nothing, she crosses her arms and waits for me to continue. I take a deep breath and try to remember everything I want to say to her. I get the feeling this is the only chance I’ll get. If this doesn’t work, I don’t think anything will.

“I’ve been scared,” I admit. “Of a lot of things, really. To fully let you in. To get too close. To love you. But all of that seems absurd now, because what I should’ve been afraid of was losing you.” I pause to let out a nervous breath. “I fucked up. Massively. I didn’t treat you the way you deserve to be treated, and even worse, I broke your trust. But if you give me another chance, I’ll never make that same mistake again. I swear.” I stare deep into her eyes, so she knows I’m being sincere. “Give me another chance, Ken. I’m not the begging type, but I’m begging you for this. Please.”

When she realizes I’m done, she clears her throat. “Answer me something.”

Her voice is wrecked, as if she’s spent the past few hours screaming at the top of her lungs. She even touches her neck like it’s in pain. I swallow hard, thinking she might actually give me the thing I want most right now.

“Anything.”

She trains her expression to a knowing, stone-cold gaze that fills my whole body with dread. “When’s the last time you saw Tessa?”

Fuck. There it is. My heart sinks as the pieces fall into place and it all makes perfect sense.

The reason she’s in such bad shape.

The hoarseness of her voice.

The fresh set of tears staining her cheeks.

She saw us.

Just like that, there's nothing I can say. Nothing I could do that would make her hate me any less. So, instead of saying anything at all, I drop my head and stare down at the ground as she lets the door swing closed.

There's no hope for us anymore.

Chapter 6



kennedy

TRUTH BE TOLD, I'M NOT OKAY. I KNEW THE SECOND I MADE up my mind to leave Easton that it wasn't going to be easy, but I don't think I ever expected it to be this hard. I can't even count the number of times I've picked up my phone, ready to call him and tell him that I was wrong. That we can work through it. That I don't want to be without him.

I sit on my floor and find a small amount of comfort in the loneliness, with my arms wrapped around myself. I'm not sure if Easton is still standing on the other side of the door, or if he gave up and left the second I shut him out. Being as he hasn't tried talking to me again, I assume he left.

Probably on his way back to Tessa.

Squeezing my eyes closed tightly, I will the monster in my mind to go away.

Anywhere but here.

Any time but now.

It's been two days since I've had a single bite to eat. And I know what my mother would tell me. She'd look me in the eye

and tell me that I shouldn't let anybody have such power over me, much less a boy, and then she'd make me my favorite meal. But my mom isn't here to do that, and I don't have much of an appetite.

I was going to eat something. I had even gone to a restaurant downtown that I've been to before. Ordered something that made my mouth water and waited for it to be ready. As I was walking out, however, I spotted Easton across the street.

He didn't see me, of course. Why would he when he was so focused on where he was going? Or who he was going to, for that matter. For a second, I almost called his name. Seeing him for the first time since I left him in his bedroom, my heart hurt. The only thing I wanted was to be wrapped in his arms again. But the second he went inside and I saw him take a seat at a table across from Tessa, everything I had put back together over the last forty-eight hours had shattered again.

I couldn't help but stand there like a creep for a moment, watching as he laughed with her, seemingly without a care in the world. Like my leaving didn't affect him at all. He was with the girl he wanted to be with, and there was no getting in the way of that. And when I finally managed to pull my eyes away, I handed the bag of takeout to a stranger passing by.

My appetite was gone.

Everything he said, every word that came out of his mouth, it was everything I've always wanted to hear. The verbal equivalent of ripping his heart out and handing it to me. But every syllable is tainted with the image of him and Tessa laughing over drinks while I break down on the sidelines.

Once again, another piece of me was chipped away at the hands of Easton Donovan, but as I sit here on the floor of my empty room, I make a promise to myself.

That will be the last piece he ever gets to take.



THE CLUB IS PACKED, even more than usual for a Saturday night. There's a bachelor party wreaking havoc in the back corner, and a few of the regulars all chose tonight to bring a bunch of their buddies to the bar with them. And to top it all off, Tye decided to stay in Miami for a couple extra days, leaving Amelia and I to fend for ourselves.

"I'm not telling you to give him another chance," Amelia continues to press. "I'm just asking if you really want to throw the last year with him away."

I focus on pouring the glass of beer just right so there isn't too much foam. "Leave it alone, Amelia. Please."

She sticks her bottom lip out, pouting. "I can't. I just don't understand. You two just woke up in the middle of the night after headboard-banging sex and decided you weren't happy together anymore? How does that happen?"

A part of me knows I should tell her the truth—admit all her brother's wrongdoings and let him deal with the aftermath. But I can't. It's not that I think she would take his side, but the opposite. I've seen her ready to punch him in the face because he didn't get me what she considered to be an adequate birthday gift. If she knew what he did, there's no telling what she would do.

"It just does, babe," I tell her. "I love you, but you need to move on. He and I are. You should, too."

Taking a deep breath, she lets it out in a huff. "You were supposed to become my sister."

"I already am, Meelz. Whether I'm with your brother or not, I already am."



IT'S HALFWAY THROUGH MY shift when Amelia shrieks and switches one of the TVs over to *E!*. Within a second, I realize how much the universe actually hates me. There, front and center on the screen, is none other than Tessa Callahan. She's sitting next to her quarterback boyfriend, Asher Hawthorne, in an interview about his comeback to football. After winning the Super Bowl not just once, but twice in a row after coming back from what should have been a career ending injury, you end up under the spotlight.

Still, perfect fucking timing.

I'm not going to lie; the girl is gorgeous. It's no wonder she managed to score one of football's favorite bachelors. Her long brown hair and brown eyes both match Easton's, and I'm sure when they were together, they made a beautiful couple. And honestly, that makes me hate her even more.

Asher drapes an arm around her, and she preens under the attention. Watching her, I can tell E was telling the truth. Whatever they were doing when they were together was innocent, apart from lying to me about it. It's obvious she has no interest in anyone but Asher. And yet, I think that's worse.

He knew he had no chance with her. He knew there was no way she would ever do anything to risk her relationship. And yet, he snuck around anyway. Lying to me was worth just being in her presence and confiding in her about things he outright refused to tell me.

I was always second choice.

Fed up with this shit and the pain it spurs deep in my chest, I grab the closest bottle of alcohol to me. *Malibu Rum*. I pour it into a glass with ice and add a splash of pineapple and cranberry. I'd hardly call it a Bay Breeze, but at least it doesn't look like I'm drinking straight rum.

“What are you doing?” Amelia questions. “You know what happened the last time we got caught drinking on the job.”

I roll my eyes, not giving a damn anymore. “Fuck it. My new motto.”

Lifting the drink back, I down it in one go. The alcohol courses through my bloodstream and warms me from the inside out. I instantly pour myself another and do it all over again.

I’m going to forget Easton tonight, even if it means forgetting my own name.



EVERYTHING IS HAZY, BUT in the best way possible. My body moves to the beat of the music as men stand around watching. Amelia has been watching me like a hawk, but she needs to lighten up. For the first time in days, I’m actually having fun. She should be happy for me!

“Maybe you should take those moves up on the bar, pretty thing,” a guy suggests.

I purse my lips and look over the bar. I’m wearing a tight pair of jeans. It’s not like they’d be able to see up my skirt or anything. And besides, imagine the tips I’d get for it. Tye has always joked around about doing it, but she’s never actually had the balls.

Walking out from behind the bar, I grab the pole and use one of the regulars to help me up. The DJ, a thirty-year-old named Tim, turns the music up even louder. As I start to sway my hips with more effort, the bachelor party starts to watch and cheer.

“Kennedy!” Amelia shouts. “Get down from there. You’re going to get fired.”

I throw my hands in the air. “Then I get fired. Live a little, Mom!”

She tries to grab my hand, but I yank it away. My lack of balance makes me stumble a little and I kick over a few cups of beer. I look down and giggle at the mess I made.

“Oopsie.”

The guys sitting there don’t seem to care, though—too busy staring up at me like they’re getting their own personal show. And honestly, I don’t even mind it. I’m finally letting loose, and I feel fucking great about it.

“For fuck’s sake,” Amelia groans and heads toward the back room.

She’s probably going to tell Paul. Make excuses for me and plead temporary insanity. But me? I’m going to enjoy this for as long as I can.



IT’S A HALF-HOUR later when it all goes to shit. I’m dancing with one of the guys from the bachelor party. His hands are on my hips and his mouth is by my ear, whispering about how sexy I am and the things he’d like to do to me. It’s not something I’d ever let happen. I’m just not that kind of girl. But it’s still nice to hear.

“We should get out of here,” he tells me.

I chuckle and let my head fall back against his shoulder. “I’m supposed to be working. And if I try to leave with you, my friend behind the bar might cut us both.”

Amelia hasn’t taken her eyes off me, even while tending the whole bar by herself. She watches me, forehead creased with worry, and makes sure I don’t do anything worse than get wasted while at work.

He moves one hand from my hips to my bare stomach, exposed by my crop top. “Then at least let me do a body shot off you. It’s like you were made for them, I swear.”

I think it over for a second and then shrug. “Sure, why not?”

The guy, whose name I don’t care enough to ask for, grins triumphantly and does a quiet cheer. He leads me over to the table and swipes the drinks right off it. Glasses crash to the floor and leave a mess all over the place. Then he helps me up and then lays me down across the wood.

“I need booze!” he announces. “And salt and a lime!”

He looks around for his friends, but when he realizes no one is really paying attention, he throws the whole idea away.

“Fuck it. Who needs the alcohol anyway?”

Bending down, he licks a strip across my neck, then nibbles on my belly button, but right before his mouth can reach my own, he’s yanked back by his shirt. It’s all a giant blur as Easton rears back and punches the guy right in the mouth.

“Easton!” Amelia and I scream at once.

Bachelor dude is pissed as he recovers from the sudden assault. His friends help him back up and he immediately rushes toward my ex.

Shit!

It’s clear Easton isn’t about to back down as he stands firmly in place. I watch as his fist clenches and I throw myself between the two of them. The last thing I need is for Paul to come out here because of a bar fight. As much as I didn’t care about getting fired while I was drunk and enjoying myself, it would really suck when it came time to pay bills.

“Both of you, stop!”

Easton tries to move me out of the way. “Fuck that. He was all over you!”

The guy snorts. “Not my fault she never mentioned having a boyfriend.”

“Because I don’t!” I shout and turn back to Easton. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Amelia was worried about you.”

I turn to my best friend, whose shoulders sag as she realizes she was outed.

Traitor.

Rolling my eyes, I walk away and head to the back room to get my bag. When I reenter the club, Easton is there, already trying to talk to me. I try to push by him but he grabs my wrist and won’t let me go.

“Why are you wasted while at work?”

“Let me go.”

He narrows his gaze on me. “No. Not until you tell me what the hell you’re doing.”

I throw my head back and groan. “What does it even matter?”

“It matters because I care about you!”

“Then stop caring about me!” I yell.

His brows furrow. “I can’t! I can’t stop thinking about you. I can’t stop missing you. And I sure as shit can’t stop caring about you.”

“Well, that sucks for you, because the time for you to do any of that expired when you snuck around with your ex-girlfriend!”

“You what?”

Amelia’s voice is small compared to the anger that is radiating off him and me. We both turn in her direction, and I realize the secret is out. She heard everything. She knows it all. Easton releases me as he focuses on his sister, but I don’t bother to stick around. This mess is his and his alone.



A KNOCK AT THE door pulls me from my peaceful slumber. At first, I throw my pillow over my head and try to ignore it, but when it comes again, it's clear the person is not going away. I push the covers off me and sit up. My eyes blink open slowly as I walk toward the door.

"Tye, I told you I'd call you when I wake up," I groan as I open the door but it's certainly not Tye on the other side.

Amelia stands there with a sorrowful smile on her face. She holds up a paper bag in one hand and her laptop in the other.

"I have ice cream and HBO Max," she tells me.

If I had any ability to stay mad at her at all, I'd close the door and go back to bed. But all things considered, there's nothing to hold against her. All she knew was that we split up because we grew apart.

I step aside and open the door further to let her in, wincing from the light in the hallway. "Come in quick. This hangover is a bitch."

She chuckles. "That happens when you outdrink an entire bachelor party."

"Yeah," I wince. "I don't think I'll be doing that again any time soon."

"Well good, because it took two hours for me to convince Paul not to fire you."

Plopping back down on my bed, I scoot over to make room for her. "Thank you. I owe you one."

She cuddles into my side. "No, you don't. I should've known better than to call Easton last night. I'm sorry."

“Don’t be.” I rest my head on hers. “It’s my fault for not telling you the truth.”

“Why didn’t you?”

Her tone isn’t an accusation, but more something like hurt. It’s as simple as the fact that she’s my best friend. Not telling her probably felt like I was cutting her out or pushing her away, and I would never.

“I just didn’t want you to look at him differently,” I answer honestly. “He’s your brother.”

Lifting her head, she turns to look at me. “And you’re my sister.”

I cringe. “That sounds incestuous.”

“Don’t be gross.” She lightly smacks my arm. “No more secrets.”

“No more secrets,” I promise.



I WALK THROUGH CAMPUS with a forced smile plastered across my face. Hanging out with Amelia on Sunday helped a little, but it didn’t do nearly enough for my psyche. Therefore, I’m taking a new route. *A fake it ‘til you make it* plan of sorts. I’m going to pretend I’m happy and fine without him, until I really am.

I’m turning the corner to head to class when I stop dead in my tracks. I was hoping luck would be on my side today. That I could go to my lectures, pretend to laugh, and make it back to my dorm without incident. But as I stand here, frozen in place and watching as Easton leans up against the brick wall while talking to Zayn, I realize it’s not going to be like that at all.

A sharp pain slices through my chest when I realize I still get the familiar urge to go to him. But then I remember how even after I left him, he still went to Tessa, and just like that, I'm stone cold once again.

“Kennedy?” a voice calls. “Is that you?”

I turn around to see who it is and my jaw drops. “Alec?”

“Holy shit! How are you?”

Alec is an old friend and former neighbor. We spent years living next door to each other, and our mothers used to joke about us ending up together. It wasn't exactly a bad idea. He's always been attractive, with his dark blond hair and emerald eyes. It's just that nothing ever became of it. I honestly thought I would never see him again after my parents moved away, but here he is.

“Been better, been worse,” I answer. “What are you doing here?”

He smiles the same way he always has, in a way that stretches across his whole face. “I transferred in January for the second semester. Arizona was just not my kind of place.”

“Well, I didn't think it would be. Then again, I didn't think my parents would like it in Texas, either.”

Throwing his head back, a deep chuckle emits from the back of his throat. “Only you would choose a college close to home, only to have your family to move over a thousand miles away.”

“I know. It's like they ditched me and ran.”

The sound of laughter behind me grabs my attention, and before I can stop myself, I glance back to find Easton joking around with Zayn. His gaze locks with mine until he tears it away. He looks Alec up and down as if sizing him up and then goes back to his conversation—grinning like he's the happiest he's ever been.

“Friend of yours?” Alec asks.

I turn back to him and run my fingers through my hair. “He's my ex.”

“Ah.” He nods. “That would explain why he keeps looking over here like he wants to set me on fire and roast marshmallows over my corpse.”

“Ugh!” Rolling my eyes, I put a hand on my hip. “He doesn’t get to act all possessive over me. I’m not his anymore, and you and I are childhood friends!”

“Easy, killer,” he quips. “You’ve got a lot of built-up frustration.”

“You have no idea.”

His brows raise at my answer. “If you’re up for it, I could help you with that.”

“I’m not sleeping with you, if that’s what you mean.” Maybe it’s a little blunt, but rip the Band-Aid off and all that.

Alec chokes on air and starts coughing. “No. That’s definitely not what I mean. This is something a little more dangerous, and a lot more clothed.”

Sparing one last glance at Easton, he doesn’t even try to hide the fact that he’s watching me. It’s then that I make a split second decision.

“Yeah, fuck it. I’ll give it a shot.”



AMELIA AND I WALK through the mall in search for the bathrooms. We originally came here for a bit of retail therapy, but I’m starting to think she only brought me here to talk about Easton. Every time her mouth opens, it always ends up back at him.

“I’m just saying, he lost his shit when you left with that guy,” she tells me. “Even Zayn had a hard time calming him down and keeping him from going after you two.”

I sigh heavily. “I told you already, *that guy’s* name is Alec, and I’ve known him since I was like fourteen. He took me to an ax-throwing place to let off some steam, but that was it.”

“Well, I hope so.” She pushes the door to the bathroom open and we both step inside. “I mean, I know E fucked up massively, but I’m still holding out hope for you two. You two are so perfect for each other and I...”

She goes off into a tangent, but I tune it out. I’ve spent the last few days telling myself that I need to get over him, but how can I do that when my best friend is constantly down my throat about it? The answer is simple—I can’t. The only way I’m going to be able to move on is by killing any hopes she has about me ending up with her brother, even if it hurts her.

“Oh, I know!” she says excitedly.

“Amelia.”

“What if you two tried couples counseling? I’ve heard that works for some people.”

“Amelia.”

“I know, I know. It sounds insane because we’re so young, but what could it hurt?”

“Amelia!”

Finally realizing I’m trying to get through to her, she stops. “Oh. Yeah, sure.”

She digs in her purse before pulling out a tampon and handing it to me. My brows furrow as I look at it, but she only extends her hand further, getting me to take it.

“We are still synced up, right?” she asks.

Realization sets in and my heart pounds inside my chest. If she has her period now, that means... *fuck*. I mask my internal panic, not wanting her to see that I’m on the edge of a massive breakdown, and take the tampon from her.

“Yeah, of course.”

Completely oblivious to what might be the biggest crisis of my life, she smiles and starts fixing her makeup in the mirror

while I slip into the stall. I slip my phone from my pocket and immediately open my health app. It takes me a minute to find the menstrual section but when I do, the entire world seems to crumble around me.

Your period is 57 days late.

Chapter 7



DO YOU EVER SIT THERE AND THINK ABOUT THAT TIME YOU fucked up? Like really sulk in it and let your anxiety eat you alive? I should be used to it, really. I've been doing it for so long now. First over everything that happened with Tessa, and now Kennedy.

After pouring my heart out and having the door shut in my face, I convinced myself that it was over. That I had fucked up beyond repair. That she was never going to forgive me. And a part of me still believes that's true. But there's still a part that holds out hope.

Amelia keeps saying I should be patient. She says she'll come around eventually. Although, after she found out the truth of why we broke up, she damn near threatened to cut me. It wouldn't be the biggest surprise if she was giving me hope just to torture me a little bit more. And yet, I go along with it.

"Dude," Zayn interrupts my thoughts. "Are you even listening?"

"Yep," I answer, even though I couldn't tell you what he just said if my life depended on it.

“Fucking liar. You were zoned out and staring at the wall for the last fifteen minutes.”

Rolling my eyes, I focus all my attention on him. “You were telling me all about how you and my sister are going to get hitched like Knox and Delaney, and I’ll be the single one for the rest of my life.”

Z has been trying to figure out how he wants to ask Amelia to marry him since we picked out the ring, but keeps coming up empty. Nothing is good enough for her, according to him. He wants something memorable and perfect. Something she will be proud to tell her friends about. I mean, Knox is literally tattooing the question on his chest to ask Delaney. That’s a pretty high bar.

When did we reach this point? Was there a moment in time where we transitioned from a bunch of fuck boys who wouldn’t commit to anyone to these guys who are totally ready to devote our whole lives to one person? I always thought out of the three of us, I’d be the first to get married. And if you had asked me, Knox never would have at all. He was too independent. Too closed off. And then Delaney came storming into his life and flipped the whole thing upside down.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy for them. They deserve all the happiness in the world, and I’m glad they found their person. I’m just a little jaded, because I thought I found mine—twice.

“Overdramatic much?” he teases.

“Says the guy who is freaking out over how to pop the question.”

He throws his head back and groans. “Fuck off. I’m sure she’s been dreaming of this since she was little. Sue me for wanting it to be special.”

I chuckle and throw one of the couch pillows at him. “The only part she’s been dreaming of is you being the groom.”

“So, in the middle of sex is fine then?”

The smile is wiped straight from my face. “You two don’t have sex.”

He smirks. “Is that really what you think?”

“It’s what I force myself to believe so I don’t kill you in your sleep.”

Raising his hands in surrender, he grins. “Fair enough. We’re practically Mormons.”

If he wasn’t my best friend, I’d knock him upside the head. But Zayn has done enough for me to deserve a lifetime supply of free passes. He could get away with murder in my book.

As I let myself drift back into thoughts of everything Kennedy, I start to wonder what her ideal proposal would look like. If I had a ring burning a hole in my pocket and was just waiting for the right moment to ask her. Would it be on a beach somewhere? Or in a field full of wildflowers? Knowing her, she would probably want something that looks amazing in pictures. A place she could go back to on our anniversary every year.

“I’ve got it!” Zayn snaps. “I’ll take her up in a helicopter and have it written on the ground beneath us.”

“Eh, I was kind of expecting something a little more badass from you. I think she’s turning you soft.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “In fire.”

A broad smile stretches across my face. “Now that’s more like it.”



I’M SITTING IN THE kitchen, drinking a beer, when Amelia comes in. She drops her books onto the table and exhales in relief. I can’t help but chuckle at her when she slumps down in a chair.

“I’m so tired I could sleep for a week,” she whines.

“You’re the dumbass who chose to major in pre-law,” I tell her.

She turns toward me and glares, but before she can answer, Zayn comes into the room. He wraps his arms around Amelia from behind and she melts against him.

“Pretty sure that makes her a genius.”

My sister chuckles. “Someone has to become a lawyer and keep you guys out of prison.”

“Oh, come on,” I press. “We’re not that bad.”

“No, of course not,” she deadpans. “Knox was just *almost* charged with murder. And Zayn nearly got killed trying to keep you away from a psychotic drug dealer.”

I tilt my head to the side. “Okay, fair enough. Study on.”

“Thank you.”

Finishing my beer, I grab another from the fridge and pass one to Zayn. After he finally figured out how he plans on proposing, he spent the rest of the afternoon making phone calls. Apparently, finding pyrotechnics who are willing and able to spell out a question in burning flames is not the easiest thing to do. When he found one who will, he damn near threw a party.

“I cannot wait for this semester to be over,” Amelia vents. “Between my course load and work, I’m exhausted.”

“Did you ask Kennedy about taking over a few of your shifts?” Zayn asks her.

My attention is fully grasped at the mention of my ex. Even if I wanted to, I don’t have the ability to ignore it.

“Yeah. She and Tye are figuring it out,” she answers.

I lean forward on the island. “Speaking of Kennedy, how is she?”

“Easton.”

She hates giving me updates. She says it feels like betraying her best friend. For a while I was playing the brother card, but that only lasted until she found out about my fuck-up. Then it was null and void. I have to rely on other methods to get it out of her.

“Come on. Please?” My eyes widen in a way I know she has trouble ignoring.

As she looks back at Zayn, I watch something pass between them. It’s silent but scary, and it immediately forms a pit in my stomach.

“Okay, now you have to tell me,” I demand. “What the hell is going on? Is she okay?”

Amelia sighs. “She’s fine.”

“Then what was that look for?”

The worst thoughts start to pass through my mind as I try to figure it out, because whatever is actually going on doesn’t seem *fine* at all. If it was fine, she wouldn’t be so afraid to tell me. She glances back at Zayn again but this time I won’t stand for it.

“Stop looking at him,” I growl. “Tell me what the fuck is up.”

Running her fingers through her hair, she gives me a sad smile. “She’s just been hanging out with Alec a lot lately. She says they’re just friends, but I don’t know.”

Alec. According to Amelia, Alec is someone Kennedy knows from back home. They were neighbors or some shit, and he’s been helping keep her “distracted.” Yeah, right. More like he’s been trying to get in her pants. I’d bet money that it hasn’t happened yet. Kennedy isn’t like that. But it’s only a matter of time before he has her brainwashed into thinking he’s what she wants. There’s always an ulterior motive with fuckheads like him.

“That’s it,” I say, determined. “I’m going to talk to her.”

As I head for the door, Amelia jumps up and runs over to block it. “You don’t want to do that.”

“Like fuck I don’t. You said all I had to do was give her space! You said she’d come back to me!”

“I said she *might* come back to you,” she clarifies. “There’s a lot of hurt there, E. You’ve got to give her time to get over that.”

“What if she never does?” I shout, feeling the panic of losing her for good. “What if she falls for someone else and never spares me a second thought?”

Amelia puts a hand on my arm. “Then you’ll have to move on.”

“I don’t want to!”

“I know.”

“I miss her.”

“I know that, too.”

Taking a deep breath, I exhale and try to imagine my stress going with it. My shoulders sag as I stare back at my sister. She means well, and this has to be hard for her too, but I just wish I could get my girl back.

“I don’t like that guy.”

She smiles when she sees I’m calmer now. “Me either.”

I drop my head and nod. “I’m going to listen to music. Maybe go to sleep early.”

“You’ll be okay?” Zayn questions.

“Yeah,” I answer honestly. “Just sucks.”

“All right, man. Let us know if you need anything.”

I thank them both and make my way upstairs and into my room. As soon as I shut the door behind me, I realize how not okay I actually am. Who does this prick think he is? All I know is that he better be just a friend, because if I find out he’s more, I just might lose my shit.



The party is in full swing as I walk down the stairs, feeling on top of the world. I head for the fridge to grab a beer. Sexual exhaustion can make you thirsty as a motherfucker. As I wrap my hand around a bottle and pull it out, Zayn calls my name.

“How’s Tess? She okay?” he asks.

I can’t help but smile. “Couldn’t be better. We couldn’t be better.”

He raises a single brow. “You mean, you two...”

“Yep.” I bring the bottle to my lips and go to take a sip, when it hits me. “Wait. This isn’t real.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Shaking my head, dread sets in. “This is a dream. It’s not real. And when I go upstairs...”

Shit, Tessa!

The beer falls from my hand and shatters on the floor as I run for the stairs. I take them two at a time and rush for the bathroom door, but I already know when I get in there it’s going to be too late. Still, I kick like my life is depending on it. Wood flies as I finally get it open, and sure enough, I find her slumped on the floor.

“Tessa!” I drop to my knees and grab her face, but it’s not Tess after all.

It’s Kennedy.

Her breathing is shallow and the color drains from her face right in front of me. Fuck, fuck, fuck. I pat her cheeks to try to wake her up, but she won’t budge.

“Kennedy!” I scream. “Zayn!”

Each breath she takes seems further apart as my panic rises.

“Don’t do this. Don’t leave me,” I beg.

My vision is blurred as tears fill my eyes, but I can’t stop.

I can’t let her go.

I won’t.

“Kennedy!”

Zayn appears in the doorway, but he just stands there—staring at me. No fear. No panic. No emotion at all. He doesn’t even seem to care that Kennedy is dying right in front of me.

“What are you just standing there for?” I shout. “Call 911! Help me!”

He still just stands there. “There is no helping you. You did this to her.”

I shake my head and look back at the love of my life. “No. She’ll be fine. Just like Tess. She’ll be okay! Just fucking call 911!”

“She’s gone, E.”

“No!” Laying her down, I start to do CPR the same way I did to Tessa. “She’s going to be fine!”

“E,” Zayn deadpans.

“No!”

“Easton!”

My eyes fly open and I immediately sit up, clutching at my chest and trying to catch my breath. Zayn sits on the bed beside me and just watches to make sure I’m all right. It’s been two years of these nightmares, so he’s used to it by now, but this one was something different.

Something darker.

“You were screaming,” Amelia says.

It's then that I realize she's standing in the doorway. "It was just a bad dream."

She obviously doesn't buy it, but she nods anyway and goes back to bed. Zayn, however, stays as my breathing evens out and I flop back on the bed.

"It wasn't the same nightmare, was it?" he asks.

I shake my head and rest my arm on my forehead. "It was, until it wasn't."

"Worse?"

"Much worse."

He sighs, staring at the floor. "I'm calling Jace's therapist tomorrow and making you an appointment."

"No," I argue. "I'll be fine."

"You won't!" He finally turns to look at me. "It's been two goddamn years of this, E. And it's not getting any better. You're going to see a therapist."

"And if I don't?"

"You will." Z stands up and walks back to his room, leaving nothing up for discussion.

What he doesn't know is that I was seeing a therapist of sorts.

Tessa.

She's been taking classes to get her degree in psychology and was using the things she learned to try and help me. Though I wasn't exactly being honest. She seems to think I just have a little bit of residual fear. I didn't tell her about the nightmares or that I can't even take a Tylenol without it making me crave an oxycodone.

No.

This is my life, and I'm not fucking going.

I'll be fine.

I roll over onto my side, trying to fall back asleep. But every time I close my eyes, I picture Kennedy's lifeless body. I

think of how she stopped breathing and her skin turned ghostly white. It stays in the front of my mind and keeps me wide awake.

After trying everything I can to wipe the vision from my mind, I throw the covers off me and sit up. I just need to make sure she's okay. Once I see that she's fine, alive and well and thriving, it'll go away.

As quietly as I can manage, I slip on my shoes and grab my keys off the dresser. The stairs creak under my footsteps but thankfully, as I get to the bottom, there's no movement from upstairs. They're probably sound asleep again by now.

Bastards.

It only takes ten minutes to get to Kennedy's dorm. Fortunately, the security guard knows who I am and lets me through. He must think we're still together otherwise, he would have told me to go home and come back during the day when she can sign me in herself.

The hallway is empty as I reach her floor, but what else would you expect at four in the morning? She's probably going to kill me for waking her up at this hour, but I can't help it. I need to see she's okay.

That she's safe.

That she's breathing.

That I didn't ruin her.

I knock lightly on the door at first, but there's no movement on the other side of the door. Raising my fist, I knock a little harder.

"Kennedy?"

Still nothing.

Fear and anxiety start to take over as I pound on the door. All I can picture is that she's in there, lifeless and cold. I shout her name as my fist beats on the door. Finally, someone across the hall yanks their door open and their eyes narrow on me.

“Can you shut the fuck up?” a girl sneers. “She’s not in there.”

My brows furrow. “Where is she?”

“Fuck if I know.”

I open my mouth to respond, but I don’t get a chance to as she slams the door shut again and turns the lock.

Fantastic.

Maybe she slept over at Tye’s. They’ve always been close, but Amelia said Kennedy feels like it’s easier to vent to Tye since she’s not inclined to feel bad for me. Not going to lie, it sucks to know she’s talking shit about me, but at least I’m still on her mind.

Resting my back against the door, I slide down until I’m sitting on the ground. I’ll just wait here until she gets back. Then I can see that she’s all right and stop letting my thoughts eat me alive. Who knows, maybe she’ll even give me the time of day.



I WAKE TO THE feeling of someone’s hand on my arm. It’s warm, yet sends shivers down my spine. My eyes blink open slowly, and the blurry image of Kennedy in front of me becomes clear. It all comes back to me in an instant.

The nightmare.

The pure, unadulterated fear.

The need to come check on her.

“Shit, sorry,” I tell her, forcing myself awake and jumping to my feet. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“What are you doing here, Easton?”

“I, uh...”

Throughout the decision to come here, and the whole way over, I never figured out what I was going to say when I got here. It’s not that she doesn’t know I have nightmares. She’s woken me up from enough of them as I was thrashing around in bed. It’s just, we’ve never spoken about what they entail. Burdening her with my demons was never in the plans.

Still isn’t.

Hell, even if it was, seeing her standing in front of me, it all fades away. My lungs feel like they double in size as I’m finally able to breathe again. She looks exhausted, like she hasn’t gotten much sleep lately, and still, she’s gorgeous.

“Is everything okay?” she asks.

The concern that laces her voice spurs hope inside my chest. If she still cares, there’s still a chance for us, isn’t there? I could still fix this.

I shake my head. “No. Things haven’t been okay since the day you walked—”

“Hey, you forgot this in my car.”

My head whips over toward the culprit of the interruption, only to find Alec walking toward us with a textbook in his hand. As he notices it’s me standing there, he slows down and looks between me and Kennedy. I turn to my ex and my stomach churns when I notice the guilty look on her face.

“Wow,” I mutter. “Just fucking wow.”

She exhales. “It’s not what you think.”

The realization that the halls are still empty hits me, and I glance down at my watch.

4:53 a.m.

“Not what I think? So, you didn’t just spend the night with him?”

“I did, but we were just—”

I put a hand up, cutting her off. “Save it. You don’t owe me any explanations.”

“Easton,” she breathes, but I’m already walking away.

Using my shoulder, I shove past Alec and don’t have a single regret as he stumbles into the wall. He’s a weak little shit who snuck his way in with my girl when she was vulnerable. I know snakes like him. He’s going to break her in ways I never would. But she’s not my concern anymore.

She moved on, now I will, too.

Chapter 8



kennedy

THERE ARE MONUMENTAL MOMENTS IN EVERYONE'S LIVES. THE ones you can't avoid. The ones that have the ability to change literally everything, and there is nothing you can do about it. They're not meant to break you. They're meant to shape you. To transition you into the next chapter of your life. But that doesn't mean they're easy.

I walk down the street, clutching my purse to my body like it's holding all the money I have to my name. The store is only a short distance away from campus. A quick jog if I really felt like running. And yet, my dorm couldn't feel further away.

Every step feels like a lifetime.

Like swimming against a current or walking through quicksand.

It's heavy and uncomfortable, and deep down, I know why.

"Kennedy," a voice calls just as I reach my dorm.

I stop in my tracks and close my eyes, because I know that voice. Sure enough, Alec jumps out of his car and jogs over to

me. He runs his fingers through his blond hair and looks at me with nothing but concern.

“Are you all right?” he asks. “I haven’t heard from you lately.”

“Uh, yeah,” I grumble. “Sorry. I’ve been busy.”

He cocks a brow at me. “Busy?”

“Yep.”

It’s obvious he doesn’t believe me as he crosses his arms over his chest. “Come on. Why are you avoiding me?”

My shoulders sag as he hits the nail on the head. I thought I was being discreet, acting like I was studying or writing essays. Anything a lot more productive than what I’ve really been doing. But there’s no way I can tell him the truth.

The morning I came home and found Easton at my door, my heart broke. He looked so peaceful, sound asleep against my door, and yet still, something was burdening him. Something that made it so he couldn’t sleep without me.

I was needed.

If Alec hadn’t interrupted, I would’ve invited him in. Stopped playing the denial game and confided in him about everything.

My missed periods.

The nausea.

A feeling in my gut that tells me this isn’t just going to go away.

But that’s what happened.

Instead, it got worse.

I should’ve known that Easton would immediately think I was sleeping with Alec. After all, I thought that about Tessa because he was sneaking around to meet her. I wish he knew that isn’t at all the case with Alec and me.

Alec knew I was having a hard time. Accepting that a relationship you were fully invested in is over isn’t an easy

feat. When trying everything else he could think of didn't cheer me up, he stuck me in the car and drove an hour to the town we grew up in.

Seeing some of my old friends was exactly what I needed. Granted, only a few of them still lived at home. The rest were away at college. But it was still nostalgic. We went to my favorite ice cream shop, drove by my childhood home that's now owned by a family with two little girls, and sat on the bleachers of my former high school.

It was a trip down memory lane, back to when everything was so easy. I didn't want to leave, but we had class the next day. So, Alec suggested we sleep at his parents' house and head back bright and early in the morning.

And that's what we did.

We slept.

In separate beds.

In separate rooms.

And I dreamed of Easton.

I always dream of Easton.

My phone rings in my pocket and snaps me out of my thoughts. Alec still stands there, expecting an answer he's never going to get. Without even looking at who's calling, I press ignore and shove it back in my pocket.

"Well, at least it's not just me you're avoiding," he says.

I sigh and look anywhere but back at him. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be, but you know I'm here for whatever you need, right?"

"I do."

He smiles sadly at me and nods before going back to his car. I don't wait around for him to drive away. Instead, I rush inside and up the stairs. Once the door shuts behind me, I press my back against it and let out a breath I didn't know I was holding.

Pulling the box out of my purse, I stare down at it with both fear and apprehension.

Ready or not, here it comes.



AFTER I ENDED THINGS with Easton, he still made little moves that showed he still cared. Text messages in an attempt to talk to me. Staring at me from across the courtyard. Even calling Amelia when he knew she was with me. It was the way I knew he was still there, but since the incident with Alec a week ago, he hasn't even looked my direction.

He's acting like he's fine, but I'm not buying it. I see Zayn watching him, like he's a ticking time bomb, ready to explode at any given moment and take out everyone around him at the same time. There have been times I've considered trying to help, but I always stop myself.

He wants nothing to do with me anymore.

And that sucks, because things are getting really complicated.

I pull up to Casa Bronsyn-Donovan, and Amelia climbs in.

"Why haven't you been answering your damn phone?" she chastises.

I wince. "Sorry. I haven't been feeling well lately."

"Well, I have news! Big news!"

Looking at her expectantly, I wait for her to tell me but she stays quiet. "Well, spit it out then."

She shakes her head. "Nope. We're already on our way into work. May as well wait until we're with Tye, too."

My eyes roll practically into the back of my head. “Fine, but I have news, too.”

Telling Amelia is something that scares me more than telling Easton. At least Easton is levelheaded enough not to have a coronary about it. Amelia, however, might actually slit my throat if I tell anyone before her—her brother included.

“Oh! Tell me!” she says excitedly.

The words are on the tip of my tongue, ready to blurt out and throw my secret into the open air. But it’s better if I don’t have to repeat the words any more than I already have to. And it’s probably better to have Tye there when I tell Amelia anyway.

“I’ll tell you and Tye together.”

The whole ride to work, my best friend acts like a five-year-old on pixie sticks. She cannot sit still, no matter how hard she tries, and the little smirk she’s sporting does nothing for my tolerance of her.

“Can you stop bouncing?” I snap, my patience thin. “Sorry, you’re just shaking the whole car.”

She stops and chuckles. “I’m surprised this hunk of junk is still moving.”

“Shh! She’ll hear you!”

My 2005 Honda Civic is well beyond its lifetime, with almost 200,000 miles on it, and recently it’s been giving me some trouble. I’m sure it’s only a matter of time before the thing completely craps out on me and leaves me wheel-less.

I pull into the parking lot and hop out, cringing as the door squeaks when I close it. Amelia snickers under her breath and all but skips toward the door. It’s like she’s floating on a whole damn cloud right now.

My nerves build as we head inside, where we find Tye already there and wiping down the bar top. Amelia is already perched on a barstool by the time the door shuts behind me.

“I have news!” she sings excitedly. “Kennedy does too, but hers doesn’t look nearly as exciting.”

I sigh. “I told you; I will tell you and Tye at the same time.”

“Okay, well here we are! Spit it out.” She uses the same words I tried earlier to learn her big secret.

Honestly, she really should’ve told me in the car, because she looks like she might combust if she keeps it in any longer.

“Are you always this high strung?” I ask her.

Amelia smiles guiltily. “Patience is not my strong suit.”

A light chuckle comes from Tye as she watches us. “Well, I have something to tell you, too. So, on the count of three, why don’t we all say our news at once?”

Amelia and I both nod, though hers is excited while mine is more reluctant. As Tye counts down from three, my stomach is practically in my throat. When I open my mouth, it’s quite likely that vomit will come out rather than words, but I close my eyes and when she reaches one, we all confess.

“Carter and I closed on a house.”

“I’m engaged!” Amelia excitedly holds up her hand with a beautiful ring on a particular finger.

“I’m pregnant.”

They both turn to me, jaws slacked and eyes wide. I wrap my arms around my stomach, feeling exposed and vulnerable and scared. Hearing the words come from my mouth when I called my OB/GYN earlier was intense, but telling my friends makes it real.

I can’t hide from it anymore.

This is happening, whether I want it to or not.

Amelia is the first to recover and starts firing off question after question. “How do you know? Wait, didn’t you just have your period? Oh my God, is it Alec’s? Please don’t tell me it’s Alec’s. Does Easton know? Are you sure it’s Easton’s? How far along are you?”

“Can we go back to when you said you’re engaged?” I ask.

She shakes her head, like the ring and her engagement are minor details. “Absolutely not.”

As she starts to demand answers that overwhelm me more than knowing there’s a tiny human growing in my stomach, I glance over at Tye for help. Thankfully, she takes mercy on me and jumps in.

“Okay, Meelz,” she stops her. “How about we calm down a bit? One thing at a time, yeah?”

Amelia’s shoulders sag as she catches her breath. “You’re right. Sorry.”

Tye focuses on me. “Are you sure?”

I nod slowly. “Pretty sure. I took a few home pregnancy tests.”

“Okay,” she says quietly, then a little louder. “Okay. We can handle this.”

“We can?” Amelia and I ask in unison.

Tye squares her shoulders confidently. “We can. After work tonight, we’re going to go back to Kennedy’s, and we’re going to figure out a plan.”

Amelia shakes her head immediately. “No. We have to go now. Call out or something.”

“All three of us cannot call out on a Friday night,” I tell her.

“Well, Zayn is coming here to hang out, and I suck at keeping secrets from him. It’s like he’s got a direct line to my brain or something.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, knowing what a disaster this could be. To my relief, Tye takes over. She puts her hands on Amelia’s shoulders and looks her dead in the eyes.

“You have to, okay? Just focus on your engagement.” She grabs Amelia’s hand and lifts it so the ring is center focus. “You’re getting married! Isn’t that exciting?”

“I’m going to be an aunt. That’s exciting.” She stops. “Wait. I *am* going to be an aunt, right? It’s not Alec’s?”

Slipping onto a barstool, I put my head down on my arms. “It’s Easton’s. I haven’t slept with anyone else.”

“No more pregnancy talk!” Tye declares. “We just have to get through tonight. One night.”

Amelia takes a deep breath and exhales slowly. “One night.”



BY THE GRACE OF God himself, she actually manages to make it through the night. Tye and I watched her like a hawk, making sure she wasn’t alone with Zayn at all. It’s not that we don’t trust him to know, it’s just that he would tell Easton before any one of us could even ask him not to.

If I know my ex as well as I think I do, he’s not going to take the news well. He won’t be as erratic as his sister, but he sure as hell won’t be calm. I’d just rather have a handle on my own emotions before I have to tackle his.

The three of us walk into my dorm room, and I pull a shoe box out from under my bed. As I open it and place it on the desk, Amelia’s brows raise in surprise as Tye laughs.

“I thought you said you took a few,” she drawls.

“I wanted to be sure.”

“And the first ten didn’t do that for you?” Tye grabs a handful of tests and holds them up. “Kennedy, there are at least twenty-five tests here!”

Amelia picks one up and looks at it with awe before cringing and dropping it. “Ew, you peed on these.”

Tye shifts all her attention to Amelia. “How are you majoring in pre-law?”

She flips her off and comes to sit on the bed beside me. She wraps her arms around my body and pulls me close. I go willingly, resting my head on her.

“It’s going to be okay, babe,” she assures me. “You just have to tell Easton. He’ll be there for you.”

That’s one of the main parts I’m afraid of—telling Easton. He hasn’t so much as looked at me in the last week. I’m pretty sure he thinks there is something going on between Alec and me. If he tries telling me he’s not the father, every part of me that I’ve managed to make whole again might shatter.

“I have a doctor’s appointment on Monday,” I say. “I’ll tell him after that.”

“You sure you want to wait?”

I nod. “I want to be 100% sure.”

Tye grunts humorously. “Piss on another couple dozen tests. Maybe then you’ll be one hundred percent sure.”

Amelia grabs a pen off the nightstand and throws it at her. Tye manages to dodge it, but not by much.

“What?” she balks innocently. “I bet she cleaned out the drug store.”

Meelz just stares back at her, shaking her head. Me, on the other hand, I’d like nothing more than for my bed to swallow me whole.



SITTING IN THE DOCTOR’S office waiting room, I don’t think I’ve ever been so nervous in my life. Not during my gymnastics competitions as a child. Not when I had to try a new stunt for cheerleading. Not even when I grew the balls to tell Easton I love him, only for it to be met with silence.

The room is filled with pregnant women in all trimesters. Some are dressed like they've just come from a corporate job while others are wearing sweats, choosing comfort over fashion. One thing they all have in common, though, is they're all much older than my twenty-one.

"You do have options, you know," Tye says as she comes over with pamphlets. "If this isn't what you want, you don't have to do this."

Amelia snatches them out of her hand. "You can't honestly be suggesting killing my niece or nephew."

"Actually, no. That wasn't the only thing I was referring to." She rolls her eyes. "There is adoption, too."

"Oh!" Amelia coos. "Let me take him or her! I love babies!"

I drown them both out, staring into space and getting lost in thoughts of how Easton is going to react and what my future looks like from here.

Am I going to be able to finish school?

A college dropout wasn't my career goal.

Am I ever going to sleep again?

Who am I kidding? Probably not.

"Lehigh," the medical assistant calls.

I stand up and follow her, with Amelia and Tye right behind me. People in the waiting room share strange looks. Sure, my support system is a little unorthodox, but they're my best friends. My sisters, even. As intolerable as they may be sometimes, I wouldn't choose anyone else to be here with me.

When the doctor comes in, it all happens in a blur.

Going over the date of my last period.

Tye chuckling as she fills her in on how many pregnancy tests I took.

An embarrassingly exposing pap smear.

Finally, she walks us down to another room for an ultrasound. It's dark, with the only light coming from the hallway, the screen in front of the bed, and the ultrasound machine itself. I lie down on the table at the instruction of the technician and feel my heart jump as she rolls my shirt up and has me tug my pants down.

The gel is surprisingly warm as she squeezes some on my stomach. I reach over and grab the closest hand to me, which happens to be Amelia's. As the wand touches my stomach, we all try to make out what's on the screen until it comes into focus.

My breath hitches as I see it—the little alien-looking shape of a baby. Tears spring to my eyes as she takes her measurements, and when she points to the blinking little white spot and tells me that's the heart, I lose it completely.

“Give me one second here,” she says calmly, clicking a few things on the machine.

What sounds almost like a horse gallop comes through the speakers, and Amelia covers her mouth in complete awe while Tye stays focused on me. I watch in amazement as I listen to my baby's heartbeat, and it's in this moment that everything calms.

All the questions and the unsure feeling in my stomach are answered.

This little alien just became my whole life.

My only concern.

My perfect baby.

Chapter 9



ANOTHER NIGHTMARE PULLS ME FROM A DEAD SLEEP AND yanks me back into my miserable reality. Fucked up as it might be, I preferred when Tessa was the subject of the night terrors. At least *that* I was used to. I lived through it. Could tell myself how it ended. Instead, they've permanently switched to Kennedy, and they happen more often than not.

I get up from my bed and head downstairs, knowing I can't go to her. She's with Alec now. All moved on, loved up, and happy. If I had half a sense of selflessness, I'd be happy for her. She deserves to have everything she's ever wanted in life.

The doting husband.

The perfect family.

The white picket fence.

All the things I can't give her.

As I get to the kitchen, I head straight for the liquor cabinet. Beer isn't going to cut it this time. I need something stronger. Something that will rid myself of the pain I feel at

knowing she's no longer mine. Knowing I fucked it all up. Knowing I lost her.

I grab the bottle of whiskey and bring it to my lips, telling myself she's better off.

She's so much better off.



THE CURTAINS GET THROWN open, and the sun shines directly in my face. My head feels like someone threw a bunch of knives straight through it as I use my pillow to hide from the light. Zayn, however, isn't having it.

"Time to get up," he tells me as he pulls the pillow away. "You've already missed two classes. Get your hungover ass out of bed and stop throwing your life away."

"Fuck you," I sneer.

He chuckles. "My bedroom tastes lean to a different Donovan."

At the mention of my sister and their sexual activities, I jump out of bed and go to chase him, but he jumps just out of my reach. I grip my head as the room spins around me. The hard stuff may do the job better than beer, but man does it cause one hell of a hangover. I manage to stumble my way into the bathroom and grab a couple Advil from the medicine cabinet, swallowing them down by putting my mouth directly under the sink.

Turning on the shower, I step in and let the hot water encase me. It burns and runs cold all at the same time, and I just let it scorch my skin.

I deserve it.



WALKING THROUGH CAMPUS, I keep my head down. The Advil has done as much for my headache as the saltine crackers the school nurse gives you for a broken arm. If there's one thing I don't want right now, it's to make small talk with some shithead who thinks we're friends simply because Z and I throw the best parties.

My only mission is to get to my class, where I can fall back asleep listening to the monotone voice of my professor as he drones on about the fundamentals of programming and problem solving. And yet, when I get most of the way there, I quite literally crash right into someone else.

Books fly out of the girl's hand and land among mine on the ground.

"I'm so sorry," I say, but as I look up, I notice Kennedy staring back at me.

Shit.

I've been trying to stay out of her way. I mean, Tessa found happiness after me, and then I practically destroyed her by trying to get her back. I'd rather die than do the same thing to Kennedy, so if she's happy with Alec, I'll force myself to be happy for her.

She stares back at me, clearly in shock as I quickly pick up her books and hand them to her. As she takes them from me, our hands touch, and my body reacts to the feel of her skin on my own.

The same way it always has.

The same way it always will.

Seeing her now, my body hurts—literally yearns to pull her back into my arms and just hold her there, never letting her go. But I can't let myself do that. Not anymore.

I go to walk away, to leave her alone like I swore to myself I would, but she stops me with a call of my name.

“I actually need to talk to you about something,” she says with a sigh.

The air around me feels too thick, standing here with her, but I swallow it down. “Everything okay?”

“Uh, yeah. I guess,” she mutters, looking anywhere except back at me. “I, uh...fuck.”

A part of me wonders if she's just trying to keep me around. Keep my attention on her. Like ignoring her the past week was drawing her back to me. But if I've learned anything the last week, it's that she's better off without me.

Where I can't ruin her life.

Letting out a huff, I know I'm going to hate myself for this. “Can you just say what it is you want to say? I have places to be.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “It's not that simple.”

“Sure it is. Your mouth forms words, and you say them,” I spit. “Just tell me.”

“Easton,” she breathes, and I'm even more sure she just wants to keep me here as long as possible.

I roll my eyes. “Fuck it, then. I've got to go.”

“I'm pregnant,” she announces, freezing up as she realizes the way she just blurted out that crucial information. “According to the doctor, about twelve weeks.”

Her words hit me right in the chest.

Pregnant.

She's pregnant.

And twelve weeks means it's mine. There's no way it can't be, unless she cheated. No. Kennedy is a lot of things, but a

cheater is not one of them. That only leaves one person to be the father.

Me.

“Y-you’re...”

Everything starts to spin as the reality sets in that I’m going to be a father. The nausea from my hangover builds in my throat and threatens to bubble over. I try to hold it back. Try to keep it in. But there’s nothing I can do.

It all happens in a millisecond. I attempt to turn away but she puts her hand on my arm, keeping me in place as she looks at me in bewilderment.

I’m stuck.

There’s nowhere to go.

Nothing I can do.

And that’s when it goes wrong.

I bend over, emptying the contents of my stomach all over the ground and Kennedy’s favorite pair of boots. She gasps, holding her books close to her chest and not looking down for a moment. She doesn’t need to. It’s no mystery as to what just happened.

“Fuck,” I groan. “Kennedy, I am so sorry.”

“It’s fine,” she snips, showing it’s most definitely *not* fine.

As she takes a step away, I stop her. “At least let me help you clean up.”

“No,” she barks. “Trust me. You’ve done enough.”

With that, she practically runs back toward her dorm, not sparing so much as a glance back at me.

I fucked up again.



I TRY TO SIT through my class. I really do. But nothing the professor is saying even registers, let alone stays there. He might as well be speaking in a foreign language. The only thing I can think about is Kennedy. Granted, that's not different from most other days. That girl is always in the forefront of my mind. But the part I'm focused on today most definitely *is* different.

She's pregnant.

Knocked up.

Growing a miniature human inside her that's both half me and half her.

Christ, that's the last thing the world needs. A tiny human for me to destroy just like I've done to others. The mere idea alone is enough to scare the shit out of me.

I get up from my desk and grab my things. All eyes are on me as I walk out of the room without saying a word, but what would I say? *Sorry, my ex-girlfriend dropped a pregnancy bomb on me before I puked on her, and now I have to get her to talk to me?* Yeah, everyone's better off not knowing that.

It only takes a few minutes to get to Kennedy's dorm building. The place is somewhat empty, with most students sitting in class right now. I push through the door and wave to the security guard as I head through the gates and up the stairs.

As I reach Kennedy's door, I stop and take a breath. There's no telling how this is going to go. Hell, for all I know, she could have just been fucking with me. Something to get me to talk to her since stopping cold turkey. Something to keep her on my radar, not wanting me but not wanting anyone else to have me either.

Barely a moment passes before she yanks the door open. She gives me a once-over and wraps her arms around herself. I can't tell if she's trying to shield herself, or the baby. Either way, I don't like it.

"Can I come in?" I ask.

"I'd really rather you didn't," she deadpans. "The smell of a distillery mixed with a frat house bathroom is still burned into my nostrils."

"Please? I promise I won't vomit on you again. Pretty sure I don't have anything left in my stomach."

It takes a moment, but she sighs and gives in, opening the door further for me to step inside. I look around the room that I've spent so little time in, despite being with her for most of the time she's had it. We always stayed at my place. It had her boyfriend and her best friend under the same roof. For Kennedy, it was a residential goldmine.

"If you're here to be a dick some more, you can see yourself out," she snips.

Dropping my head, I nod. "I deserve that."

"Ya think?" She sits down on her bed and curls into a ball. "I'm dealing with enough shit. I don't need you being an asshole on top of it."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Are you?"

"Yes."

It goes quiet for a moment, the two of us just looking around the room and trying to figure out what to say. When did everything between us become so tense? There was a time not too long ago when being in her presence was my happy place. Fuck, I hate that it's come to this. And now adding a baby to the mix? It's a disaster waiting to happen.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, breaking the silence.

She shrugs. "Okay, I guess. Just can't believe this is happening."

Walking toward the bed, I sit beside her and wrap her in my arms. Thankfully, she doesn't object. She lets me hold her as she cries, releasing all the emotions she's been trying so hard to hold back. I press a kiss to the top of her head and run my hand up and down her back.

"Just relax," I tell her. "This is what you wanted, isn't it?"

She pushes herself away and looks at me like she wants to run me over. "Getting pregnant in the middle of my college education with my ex-boyfriend's baby? Why the fuck would you think this is something I wanted?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe because you waited to tell me until there was nothing we could do about it," I growl. "We could have had options! We could have gotten rid of it! This didn't *have* to be happening."

Her mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water before she jumps off the bed and marches over to the door. "Get out."

"Seriously?" Leave it to Kennedy to be this stubborn. "You never once considered that we're in no position to be parents? Not even for a second?"

She grabs me by the collar of my shirt and physically drags me to the door. "I said get out!"

"Just let me look into it," I plead. "I might be able to find a place that will still do it. We can leave this nightmare behind us."

In a split second, her hand flies up and she slaps me across the face, hard. A stinging sensation is left behind, so strong that I wouldn't be surprised if there's a handprint on my cheek. I'm momentarily dazed as she opens the door and quite literally pushes me out of it before slamming it in my face.

My whole body tenses and I try to breathe, but it does nothing for me. Instead, I clench my fist and drive it right into the wall.

The *brick* wall.

"Fuck!" I shout.

Pain shoots through my hand, but the only person to pay any attention to me is some chick with a staring problem. As I raise my brows at her, she scurries by. And Kennedy's door stays firmly shut.



MY PARENTS TRIED TO raise me to be a functional adult. They taught me how to stay out of trouble. What not to do in a stressful situation. Manners and being polite. It's funny that one of the only things that stuck is that a bag of frozen peas makes the best ice packs. It's not like anyone in this house will ever eat the things, but we still have at least four bags in the freezer for when one of us gets injured—which happens far more often than it should.

As the bag goes warm, I put it back into the freezer and start stretching my hand—opening it and closing it to make sure I didn't break anything. Thankfully, it doesn't look like I did any serious damage. If I had, Zayn never would have let me live it down.

Who the fuck decides to punch a brick wall?

Me. That's who.

The front door opens, and Amelia walks in with Tye. They both seem like they're in good moods as they chuckle about something as they saunter into the kitchen. Amelia goes straight to the fridge to grab a chocolate pudding, while Tye goes to the knife block.

“What the hell do you need a knife for?” I ask her.

She finds the biggest one we have and smiles at it before walking toward me. “You.”

I throw my hands up and walk backward until I hit the wall. “Okay, why don’t you put that thing down before you hurt yourself?”

It’s no use. Within a second, she pins me to the wall and holds the knife to my throat. I can feel the blade there, against my skin but not piercing it—yet. The slightest bit of pressure and it’ll cut me.

“Tell me why I shouldn’t slit your throat from ear to ear right now,” she hisses.

“What the hell did I do?”

“What did you *not* do? You barfed on a woman carrying your baby, you blamed her for still being pregnant, and you told Kennedy she should get an abortion!”

Shit. I glance over at my sister, who is sitting on the island, swinging her feet and calmly eating her pudding.

“Mila,” I whine, using her childhood nickname reserved just for me. “A little help here?”

“Oh, no,” she answers without looking at me. “The only reason I’m not over there helping her is because you’re my brother.”

“Fantastic.”

Tye stays in place, watching me like some kind of psycho. There isn’t a doubt in my mind that she’ll actually cut me. She might not fully slit my throat, but she’s not above doing some damage.

“I was pissed,” I confess. “She waited to tell me until it was too late to do anything about it!”

“She didn’t fucking know, you dense piece of shit!”

Wait, what? “What do you mean she didn’t know? She’s three months pregnant!”

Tye pulls the knife away and knees me directly in the balls. My stomach tightens as I hunch over in pain, falling to the floor the second she releases me. The feeling like I’m going to

vomit again starts to crawl up my throat, but I manage to swallow it back down.

“She just found out,” Amelia informs me. “Maybe a couple weeks ago. But she just went to the doctor yesterday. She had no idea she was so far along.”

Catching my breath, I sit up and lean against the same wall Tye just had me against. And still, the knife hasn't left her hand.

“I didn't know,” I tell them honestly.

“Because you didn't ask,” Tye claps back. “If you had, she would have told you. But no. You were too worried about keeping your life responsibility free. Do you even know the emotional damage that caused her? The girl is already terrified!”

The one thing I've never wanted is for Kennedy to be in pain—emotionally or otherwise. And the fact that I caused even more, at the worst possible time, is so much worse. God, why can't I just go a few days without fucking anything up?

“You're going to fix this,” Tye orders as she stares down at me.

I close my eyes for a second and nod. “I'll do whatever it takes.”



TESSA SITS BESIDE ME, her drink still halfway to her mouth as she stays completely frozen in shock. Safe & Sound, the non-profit she founded a couple years ago, is pretty much empty, but there are still a few people walking around. None of them matter right now to Tess, though. I'm not even sure anything is registering.

“Before you spill this all over yourself,” I say as I grab the cup from her hand and place it back on the table.

She shakes herself out of it. “There are a million things I thought you were going to say when you told me you need to talk, but that wasn’t even on the damn list.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“A baby, Easton?” she balks. “You’re going to have a baby?”

Tyeler steps into the room. After meeting Tessa at Carter’s birthday party, they got to talking, and Tye felt strongly about what Tess is trying to accomplish here—helping people who have gone through traumatic experiences and need help from somewhere that doesn’t consist of a couch and a shrink that just asks you how something makes you feel. It was only a week later that Tye started helping out around here, and the two of them have become pretty good friends, much to Knox’s dismay.

“Did you know about this?” Tessa asks her.

Tye tilts her head to the side. “Which part? The pregnancy, or the dumbass move he made?”

Tessa whips her head over to me. “What dumbass move?”

“It’s nothing,” I rush to add.

Tye scoffs. “Sure, if you consider blaming the mother of your child that she should have killed your baby sooner *a nothing*.”

Tess’s jaw drops as I roll my eyes. “I did not! I merely insinuated that an abortion might be a good idea.”

Before I can react, Tessa winds back and smacks me upside the back of the head. I wince in pain, but at least it wasn’t as bad as when Tye got me in the balls. I put my hand on the point of assault to protect myself.

“Ow! What the hell is with all you women hitting me today?”

Tess looks over at Tye. “You?”

“No,” I answer for her. “She just held a knife to my throat and then crushed my balls to the point where I might not have to worry about knocking up anyone else.”

My ex purses her lips and looks over at her psychotic counterpart. The corners of her mouth raise as she goes for a fist bump. Of course she’s proud. These two were a match made in hell. No wonder Knox is so against them being friends.

“Okay, I’m leaving,” I declare.

Before I can stand up, Tessa reaches out and puts her hand on my arm. It’s enough to keep me in place. She gestures for Tye to go, and when we’re alone, her expression softens.

“It’s going to be okay, E,” she says softly. “You’ve made some mistakes, but not ones that have the ability to ruin everything beyond repair. Just talk to Kennedy. You two will come up with a plan. There’s nothing you can’t handle.”

Every word that comes out of her mouth is exactly what I should be hearing. The thing I should convince myself is true. The advice I should be taking without hesitation. But it’s too late for that. I’m a monster who does nothing but break everything I touch. There is no helping me.

I lean on the table with one arm crossed over the other as I swallow my pride and speak the words that have been on my mind since I found out the news.

“I practically raped you and drove you to attempt suicide, Tess. I don’t deserve her, and I definitely have no business being a father.”

Chapter 10



kennedy

ALEC SITS ON THE COUCH NEXT TO ME, STARING DOWN AT THE ultrasound picture like it's some kind of joke. He holds it up to the light and looks for any indication that I'm pranking him. If I'm being honest, I wish I was. There is nothing easy about being a single mother, even before you give birth.

"You're serious?" he finally asks.

I nod. "As a heart attack. I went to the doctor a few days ago, and she confirmed it."

His eyes widen and he takes a deep breath in. "Wow. Okay, so you're pregnant. Are you keeping it?"

My jaw tenses and I instantly get irritated. "Why the fuck do all men's brains immediately go to abortion when hearing about a pregnancy?"

"Whoa," he says, dropping the ultrasound picture and putting his hands up. "I meant adoption, too. But you're keeping it. Okay. You're going to be a mom."

Those words manage to hit me right in the feels. Ever since I was little, I imagined being a mother one day. Granted,

I never thought it would happen like this. I had this image in my head that I would be happily married, with a career that I love and helped provide for my family. But that's the risk you take when you have premarital sex.

Maybe I should have listened to my mother when she said I should stay a virgin until my wedding night, but what's the fun in that?

"Yeah," I breathe. "I'm going to be a mom."

Alec hands me back the picture and leans back. "How did Easton take it?"

Easton. The other half of this baby that's been sucking all the energy out of me. Out of all the ways I thought telling him about the pregnancy would go, I don't think I ever imagined what actually happened. Hearing him reject the baby and insinuate that I intentionally withheld the pregnancy from him—it broke my heart.

He doesn't want this.

He doesn't want me.

He doesn't want our family.

I spent the whole rest of the day in tears, even after Amelia called to tell me that Tye literally held a knife to his throat over it. It's nice to know my friends are willing to fight for me, no matter what the cost, but that doesn't make the situation any better.

I don't think anything will.

Sighing, I look anywhere but back at Alec. "I don't want to talk about it."

And that's the God's honest truth because talking about it means I have to deal with it, and I have enough to deal with right now. After spending all last night tossing and turning, I came to the conclusion that this baby is coming whether we like it or not. I don't know about Easton, but I refuse to make my child feel anything less than loved wholeheartedly. If that means doing it on my own, so be it.

I'll pick my head up, straighten my crown, and kick ass by myself.



IT'S TWO DAYS LATER when I have no choice but to face Easton. All his attempts to talk to me—the texts and phone calls and showing up at my door—have gone unanswered. I honestly just haven't been interested in hearing any more of his excuses. But he's not just my ex or the father of my child. He's my best friend's brother, and that makes him unavoidable. Especially when we're both in the bridal party of Amelia and Zayn's wedding.

I stand outside the house I've spent more time in than my own dorm room. There was a point in time where I never imagined this place would make me feel uncomfortable, and yet, here we are. Amelia offered to do this literally anywhere else, but I can't let this dysfunction control my life.

So we made a baby, and only one of us will be raising it. Big deal. It happens with sperm donors all the time. Although, the women don't see their sperm donors on a constant basis, but whatever.

I can do this.

I'm stronger than I give myself credit for.

Swallowing down the lump in my throat, I walk up the steps and push the door open before I change my mind. For a second, I'm hopeful that I can get upstairs and safely in Amelia's room without him even noticing that I'm here, but as I shut the door behind me and look up, I realize luck isn't on my side.

Easton is walking out from the kitchen, looking down at his phone. He glances up for a second and his breath hitches as

he stops in place. I try to avoid him by turning toward the stairs, but he was never going to let that slide.

“Kennedy,” he calls and rushes over to me. “Wait, please.”

I stop and take a deep breath. “What do you want?”

“The same thing I’ve wanted all week,” he says, as if it’s obvious. “To apologize. I made assumptions that you didn’t deserve and said things that I’ll never forgive myself for.”

“You tried to convince me to get an abortion, Easton.”

“I know, and I’m so sorry for that. I was scared, and I didn’t mean it.”

I run my fingers through my hair as I silently remind myself to stay strong. “You did mean it. You aren’t the kind of person to say things you don’t mean. Maybe you wish you hadn’t meant it, but you did. And that’s okay. You’re off the hook. I’ll raise this baby on my own. You don’t need to be involved.”

Lines of pain and anguish form on his forehead as he keeps his gaze locked with mine. “You’re taking my own kid away from me?”

““No, Eas.” My shoulders sag—all the fight I had in me has gone. “I’m giving you the out you were looking for.”

With the sad smile I give him, he stays quiet as I head up the stairs. Amelia is standing in the hallway, having heard everything that was just said. She wraps her arms around me and pulls me in for a much-needed hug.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asks.

Shaking my head, I go into her room and sit down in front of the massive binder and multiple wedding magazines. “No. I just want to enjoy planning this wedding with you and not think about any of it for a while.”

“Okay, babe.” She shuts and locks the door behind her then comes and joins me. “Whatever you need.”

Chapter 11



PATHETIC DOESN'T EVEN BEGIN TO DESCRIBE ME AS I SIT outside of Zayn and Amelia's bedroom. After trying to talk to Kennedy for two days straight with no success, I am clinging to any ounce of her I can have. And sitting here, knowing she's only a few feet away, hearing her laugh with Amelia, it helps me breathe.

I'll take what I can get, and I won't apologize for it.

Over the last seventy-two hours, the initial shock of the pregnancy has worn off. It may have taken Tessa lecturing me for at least four of those for me to believe that I'm not exactly the devil reincarnated, but I came to terms with it. That's why I've been trying to talk to Kennedy. I wanted to come up with a plan and promise her that I'm here for whatever she needs. The last thing I expected was for her to tell me she doesn't need me involved. To give me an out, as she called it.

Well, I don't fucking want it.

It's half past nine by the time the door opens and they step out. I look up at Kennedy to find she's only mildly surprised at me sitting by the door, but before I can talk to her, she steps

around me and runs down the stairs. I call her name but by the time I get up and get to the landing, she's already rushing out the door.

My fingers lace into my hair, and I tug in frustration. "Son of a bitch!"

I grab the closest thing to me—the third remote we've bought for the TV due to the rest going missing—and launch it across the room. It crashes into the wall and shatters while putting a dent in the sheetrock, but it does nothing for my frustration.

Amelia throws her head back and groans. "I just bought that! Now I have to order another one."

I ignore her whining and bring the conversation back to something that matters. "She wants to raise the baby on her own. Did she tell you that? She told me she doesn't need me."

She gives me a sympathetic look. "I know. I heard."

"What the fuck am I supposed to do with that? I can't just...she can't—"

There are no words for what's going through my mind.

The panic.

The fear.

The feeling of no control.

My sister comes over and wraps her arms around me as I break. "Relax. She's just going through a lot right now."

"She's going to keep shutting me out."

"She won't."

I rest my head on her shoulder. "Did she say anything to you? How she's feeling? What she's thinking? Anything at all?"

"No," she answers sadly. "The only thing she wanted to do is plan the wedding. All conversations regarding you or babies were off-limits. It was wedding only."

Everything in me freezes as an idea comes to mind. It's crazy, unpredictable, and maybe a little psychotic, but it could work. It *will* work. I put my hands on Amelia's cheeks and press a hard kiss to her forehead.

"You're a fucking genius," I tell her.

"Uh, thank you?"

Pulling my keys out of my pocket, I slip past Amelia and break for the door. She watches me like I've lost my mind as she follows me outside.

"Where are you going?"

I can't tell if the shiver that runs through me is because of the cold, or because of what I'm planning on doing. Regardless, nothing is going to change my mind.

"Home."

She throws her hands in the air. "You *are* home!"

But I don't stop to explain. Getting into my car, I throw it in reverse and whip out of the driveway.

This is going to work.



I STAND IN THE middle of campus, searching for the only girl who makes me want to be a better person. Students fill the courtyard as they move from one class to another, but when my eyes land on Kennedy, it's like none of them even exist. She's walking with Tye on one side of her and Amelia on the other. One of them must say something funny, because her face lights up as she laughs.

Doing everything I can to keep the nerves at bay, I grip the small velvet box in my hand and walk determinedly over to

her. It's now or never. The moment the three girls see me, they stop. Amelia's brows furrow as she notices the look on my face, but I'm too busy paying attention to Kennedy. Because that's what she does when she's around, and I was stupid to ever let anyone else have my attention before.

Kennedy sighs as I stand in front of her, but her eyes widen as I drop down on one knee.

"What the hell are you doing?" Amelia asks.

Tye presses her fist to her mouth in an attempt to conceal her laughter, but she fails miserably. Kennedy glances between them and then back at me.

"Easton, get up," she tells me.

I shake my head. "No. Not until I do this."

"Don't," my sister whispers harshly. Tye reaches out for me, shaking her head, but I shrug her off.

People around us stop to watch as I open the box and show Kennedy the ring—a princess-cut diamond encased in white gold that belonged to my grandmother.

"Marry me, Kennedy," I say firmly. "I want to marry you."

"Easton," she breathes, sounding regretful.

I reach forward and grab her hand. "I'm serious. I want to get married."

She pulls her gaze from mine and looks around for a second. "I'm having a baby. A baby that just days ago you suggested aborting."

"I know, but I want to marry you anyway."

"Anyway?" she scoffs. "As if our baby is just some extra feature you'll deal with to get your way?"

Fuck. "No. I didn't mean it like that."

"How else does it mean?"

As my knee starts to sink into the wet ground, I stand up. I try to take her into my arms, but she backs away before I can get anywhere close.

“Please. Marry me so we can be a family.”

She stays completely still for a second, thinking it over, and my heart drops as she shakes her head and takes another step away from me. “I’m sorry. No.”

Everything inside me feels like it’s on fire. Burning and melting and scorching all I had left. Her rejection is a level of pain I’ve never felt before. And as she leaves me standing there, the ring still safely in the box, I don’t know if I’ll ever recover from this.



I PACE BACK AND FORTH across Tessa’s oversized living room. With everything running through my head, I honestly didn’t know where else to go. I couldn’t go home where Amelia would find me and demand to know what on earth I was thinking. I couldn’t go to Kennedy’s, because I’m clearly the last person she wants to see. So, I texted Tess to find out if she was home or at Safe & Sound, thus ending up here—in the penthouse she shares with Asher.

Tess sits on the couch, watching me, as I practically create track marks into her rug. She’s yet to say anything since I got here, but then again, I haven’t really given her the chance. I don’t know where to start.

Asher comes out of the bedroom wearing a suit and tie. “What’s wrong with him?”

Tessa purses her lips and tilts her head, her eyes never leaving me. “I’m not sure. I think he’s broken.”

Her boyfriend chuckles and bends down to kiss the top of her head. He never has been my biggest fan. Then again, I can’t say I blame him. I tried to steal the woman he loves. Granted, she was mine first, but she was always meant to be

with him. And then to top it off, I nearly killed her. I'd hate me, too, if I were him.

"I'll see you when I get home later," he tells her. "You going to be able to handle him?"

She nods. "He's harmless."

"My memory says otherwise."

He sends me a warning glare that barely even registers as he steps into the elevator, and then he's gone, leaving me alone with Tessa. She sighs heavily and gets up. Without missing a beat, she puts her hands on my shoulders and stops me from my continuous pacing.

"Snap out of it!" she demands.

Everything in me feels like it crumbles to the floor. "She said no. I asked her to marry me and she said no."

"And you thought that would go any other way?"

My head drops. "I want her to marry me."

"Easton." Walking me over to the couch, she makes me sit down and she takes the place beside me. "This girl has had her whole life turned upside down in the matter of a month. Just because she's pregnant doesn't change that you destroyed her trust in you by lying to her. And then you made her feel like the baby you two made together was a massive mistake by suggesting she get an abortion. Did you even ask her to marry you, or did you just tell her to?"

As she lists my wrongdoings, the realization of how much I've put her through really settles in. What the fuck is wrong with me? She deserves none of that. Kennedy is heaven-sent. She deserves someone to cater to her every whim, not make her feel like she's anything less than perfect.

I run my hands over my face. "I really fucked up, didn't I?"

"Yeah," Tess says sadly. "You did. But you can fix this. It'll take a lot of work, but you can do it. Show her she can trust you. That you're responsible and can be the father she

needs for this baby. That's the priority. Everything else comes after."

"Do you think one day she'll marry me?" I ask, my voice laced with hope.

She shrugs with a sympathetic smile. "I don't know, but I do know how hard you fight for something you want. Just make better choices this time."

She's right. I can fight for her.

I'm *going* to fight for her.

And I'm going to win.



THE PHONE RINGS IN my ear as I stand next to my car in the middle of downtown North Haven. Traffic drives by me, making cold wind blow through my hair. For a moment, I think she isn't going to answer, but when I'm about to end the call and try again, she picks up.

"Yeah?"

"Amelia," I huff, relieved.

She hums. "What's up? Everything okay?"

"I need you to get Kennedy to our house."

Her groaning in the distance tells me she pulled the phone away from her ear just to whine. "I told you I really don't want to get involved."

Shit. This plan completely relies on her being at my house. "Please. I promise this will be the last time. I just need her there."

She goes quiet, not saying no but not agreeing either. I hold my breath as I wait for her response and mentally beg for this to go my way. If she can just get her there, I can handle the rest. All I need is for her to pull her best friend strings and make it happen.

“Fine,” she caves. “But this is the last time. After this, I’m Switzerland.”

“Deal. Thank you!”



PULLING UP TO MY house, my heart pounds inside of my chest as I spot Kennedy’s car parked out front. It’s been three days since she shot me down in the middle of a crowded courtyard, but this is going to be different. This will work in my favor.

I walk around the car and grab the medium-sized box from the passenger seat. Heading inside with a pep in my step, I open the door and find most of my friends sitting in my living room. When my eyes meet Tye’s, I immediately turn to Zayn.

“Did you hide all the knives?”

He chuckles. “Yes.”

Focusing on Carter, who has his girlfriend planted comfortably on his lap, I give him a look. “Your girlfriend is a psycho. Did you know that?”

Carter smiles and wraps his arms around her, looking up at her in awe. “I know.”

“Match made in hell,” I grumble to myself.

My gaze lands on Kennedy, and everything goes still. She’s looking anywhere but at me and clearly uncomfortable,

but she's here. She came. That's all that matters.

I carry the box over to her and put it down at her feet. She hesitantly glances over at Amelia and then back at me. I give her a hopeful grin as I lift the lid and pull out the adorable eight-week-old golden retriever puppy.

"This is Baylor," I say to her.

Amelia and Tye both coo at the sight of the little fluff ball, but Kennedy's response once again isn't what I was hoping for.

"Whose dog is that?" she questions.

My brows furrow. "He's ours. I bought him today, at the pet store downtown."

She pinches the bridge of her nose in frustration. "You've got to be kidding me right now."

Amelia comes over and takes Baylor out of my hands. "Excuse me while I just..."

As she carries the puppy over to Tye and they sit on the floor to play with him, Kennedy gets up and storms into the kitchen. I know they said pregnancy hormones are intense, but fuck. I'm starting to think there is literally no pleasing her anymore. Still, I follow her anyway, because I promised myself I would fight for her.

"A puppy?" she sneers as soon as I get in there. "We're having a baby, and you decide that *now* is the best time to get a fucking puppy?"

"I thought it would make you happy," I try.

She scoffs. "And why on earth would I be happy about that?"

I grip the island to keep my anger in check. "Because it shows you that I can be responsible!"

"Seriously? You think that being able to take care of a puppy is the same thing as raising a baby?" Her voice gets louder with every word. "They are nothing alike, and the fact that you think that they are speaks volumes to me."

My restraint starts to slip as I realize everything I do only seems to get thrown back in my face. “I’m just trying to win back your trust! I’m fucking trying here, Kennedy!”

She huffs and closes her eyes for a moment, and when she opens them again, she’s more determined than ever. “You want me to take you seriously? To trust you again?”

“Yes!”

“Then tell me what your nightmares are about.” Her words hit their target as she looks at me expectantly. “Explain them to me. Paint me a picture.”

My chest tightens at the request. The memory runs through my mind vividly, crystal clear images I could explain in detail. But as I open my mouth, nothing comes out. I can’t. It’s not my story to tell.

I shut my eyes and pinch my lips together as I drop my head in defeat.

“That’s what I thought,” she says softly. “Enjoy your new puppy.”

She leaves me standing in the kitchen as she walks through the living room and straight out the door. By the time I reach the doorway to the kitchen, she’s already gone. I stare out the window and watch as she gets in her car. As she drives away, I look over at my sister and my friends playing with Baylor.

I’m starting to think there is no winning here.

Chapter 12



kennedy

ALEC SNORTS AS HE LAUGHS, THROWING HIS HEAD BACK AND guffawing. It doesn't surprise me. I expected this kind of reaction from him. Still, I roll my eyes and smack him lightly in the chest.

“Shut up,” I chastise playfully. “It was a cute attempt, if a little insane.”

He chuckles some more. “Come on. Don't tell me you're falling for that crap.”

I shrug my shoulders, because part of me is. At least he's making an attempt. It would be worse if he wasn't trying at all. If he was completely indifferent and just took the out I gave him. But he's not. He may not be making the smartest choices, but he's trying.

“I don't know,” I mumble.

Alec sighs heavily as he gets ready to deliver what I know will be a lecture. “Ken, he doesn't deserve you. He lied to you for months and snuck around with his ex, doing God knows what.”

As he reaches out and goes to grab my hand, I quickly pull it away in surprise. “What are you doing?”

He smiles and looks down at his lap, then back up at me. “Do you remember in fifth grade when I used to follow you around like a lost puppy?”

“Yeah. Everyone swore you had a massive crush on me.”

“That’s because I did,” he confesses. “How could I not? You were gorgeous and funny and made me want to spend all my time paying attention to you and only you. I was hooked.”

It’s sweet. It is. But it’s coming from the wrong person. Everything that he’s saying he felt about me is exactly how I feel about Easton. And even though I know Alec would be the right choice—the better choice with the shit Easton has been pulling lately—I can’t find it in me to make it.

“I thought I got over you when you moved away, but after running into you here and getting close again, I realize that my feelings for you have only grown since then.”

I can’t help but look at him like he’s crazy. “Do you know what else is only going to grow? My belly. With a baby. That isn’t yours.”

He snickers like it’s not something he hasn’t already figured out. “It’s not a deal breaker for me.”

Ugh. The last thing I wanted to do today was deal with one of the people who I’ve considered a good friend lately trying to take things to another level. Why is it that when a woman is single, it’s automatically assumed that she isn’t choosing to be? I didn’t leave Easton to be with someone else. I left him because I needed to put myself first.

“Alec, I—”

“You don’t need to give me an answer right now,” he cuts me off. “Just consider it.”

I’m about to tell him that I don’t need to consider it. That it’s not going to happen. But then he gets up and grabs the Xbox controllers and hands me one, completely changing the

subject, and I feel like I'm actually being let off the hook for once.

So I let it happen.



I'M SITTING IN MY dorm, studying for finals that are only a little over a month away, when there's a knock at the door. My shoulders sag as I wonder what Easton has up his sleeve this time.

A vacation he planned.

A house on the wrong side of town he bought.

But as I open the door, I'm faced with my little brother. He leans his six-foot-four frame against the wall opposite of my room, radiating the same confidence he always has. Our parents claim he took all of it for himself in the womb, because his twin sister has absolutely none of it. She's the girl you'll find hiding in the library at a party, reading a book.

"Ryker," I say in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

He puts his arms out for a hug, and I go willingly. "I wanted to see my big sis and tour the campus. See what the big deal about these digs are that you gave up Ivy League."

"You couldn't have called first?"

"And miss the chance to surprise my favorite sister?"

The corner of my mouth raises. "I'm telling Quinn you said that."

His jaw drops but I can still see a hint of a smile hiding there. "Traitor."

Girls in the hallway of my dorm start to whisper to each other as they check out my brother. It's not surprising.

According to all my friends back home, he's got *eyes to die for* and a *body that puts Zeus to shame*.

Vomit.

It's honestly the thing about home I've missed least since being at college.

"Let's get out of here before the wolves descend and sink their claws in," I tell him as I loop my arm with his and pull him down the hallway. "How did you even get past security?"

"With this smile?" He shows me to prove his point. "I can do anything."

"You told him you're my brother and trying to surprise me?"

He chuckles like he's been busted. "Yep."



I'M ON HIGH ALERT the entire time I show him around campus. It's like I'm just waiting for Easton to jump up with yet another grand gesture that makes me want to crawl into a cave and never come out. All I can hope is that he sees Ryker before he makes matters so much worse.

Him being here is a reminder that I should really tell my parents—something I've been avoiding since I found out about the pregnancy. Thankfully, the cold temperatures justify wearing a sweatshirt, so it's not hard to hide the small bump that has been forming.

We're on our way to the football field when excited screams of my name sound from behind me. I turn around to see Tye and Amelia jogging toward us, and my heart sinks.

Oh fuck.

I mentally pray to God that the pictures on my wall have been enough for these two to recognize my brother next to me, but I doubt it by the way they're squealing as soon as they get over to us.

"We've been looking everywhere for you!" Amelia tells me. "So, I was bored, and Tye had the brilliant idea to go downtown and go shopping. We tried to call you, but you must have been busy."

She looks Ryker up and down like he's someone I'm hooking up with, and she's not happy about it. I mean, if the situation were reversed and it were my brother, I'd probably be the same way.

"Amelia, this is—"

Shaking her head, she cuts me off. "I don't need to know his name. He won't last. Let me finish my story."

A groan echoes from the back of my throat, and I look over at Tye for help, but she's too busy finding this situation amusing to care.

"So, we found this little boutique near the movie theater," she continues. "It's so cute and has the most adorable baby clothes."

I cough to try to cover the slip of information but it's totally obvious to everyone but Amelia. Even Tye tries to nudge her, but her mouth keeps going—letting out everything I've been trying to keep in. And Ryker? He's focused on every single word that leaves her loose lips.

"You need to find out if this baby is a boy or a girl as soon as you can, because now I'm super excited to shop for my little niece or nephew."

Ry turns to me with a fire in his eyes that threatens to strike me dead. "You're pregnant?"

I glare at Amelia and turn to my brother. "I was going to tell you."

"He got you pregnant and then fucking ditched you?" He's all but yelling at this point. "I'm going to kill that son of a

bitch.”

In hindsight, I probably shouldn't have told him that Easton and I broke up. Especially when everything is so unknown and up in the air. But he called me one night when I was upset and there was no lying to him about it. When you grow up with someone, they learn how to pick up on things—like when you're full of shit.

“Excuse me,” Amelia sasses. “That's my brother you're talking about.”

“Yeah?” he asks, completely unamused. “Well, let him know that Ryker Lehigh is out for fucking blood.”

“Lehigh?” Her mouth opens and closes. “You're...”

“My brother,” I answer for her, pressing a finger to my temple.

“Shit. I thought he was just another Alec, trying to get in your pants.”

“You slept with Alec?” Ry shouts.

I throw a hand over Amelia's mouth so she can't say anything else. “No, I haven't slept with Alec! Are you crazy? Now stop screaming before the whole campus thinks I am.”

Releasing Amelia, she starts to apologize, but I shake my head to stop her. I focus all of my attention on Tye while grabbing my brother's wrist so he can't storm off.

“I'm going to take him back to my room to fix this mess,” I tell her. “Can you please make sure she doesn't start a whole-ass riot to make sure guys know I'm off limits?”

“Yeah, of course.”

As I'm pulling Ryker away, I call back, “And warn Easton.”

Ry says nothing as we walk all the way back to my dorm room. It's obvious he's mad at me, and I don't blame him. He just found out something huge about his sister from someone he's never even met before. I'd be pissed, too, if I were him.

As we get to my floor, I turn the corner toward my room, and everything in me goes cold. There's no opportunity to reverse course as Ryker sees what I saw—Easton knocking at my door. He yanks himself from my grasp and books it down the hallway.

“Easton, run!” I scream, but there's nowhere for him to go.

Ryker grabs him by his shirt and throws him against the wall. “You knocked up my fucking sister, you piece of shit?”

“Ry!” I shout, but it's not like he's listening to me.

People come out of their dorms and fill the hallways to watch as my brother lands a punch directly to Easton's jaw. He winces from the pain, but makes no attempt to fight back, even as Ryker punches him again, this time right in the mouth.

“Ryker, fucking stop!” I shriek again, and this time, it works.

With one last blow to the stomach, Ryker lets go, and Easton hunches over in pain. He stares down at him, not even acknowledging the crowd that has formed.

“You're going to marry her,” he orders. “Do you hear me?”

Easton tries to catch his breath again. “I tried. She told me no.”

Ryker turns his attention to me, but I'm not having it. There are more pressing matters to attend to, like the fact that Easton is dripping blood all over the hallway floor.

I grab one of the girls who was checking out my brother earlier and push her into Ryker. “Alicia, meet Ryker. Ry, Alicia here is going to show you the football field.”

“I am?” Alicia asks, confused yet interested.

“You are,” I confirm. “Run along now.”

Ryker is obviously not amused but still lets Alicia lead him down the hallway as he stares at her chest. I know this shit is far from over, but at least with him occupied, I can tend to Easton.

I shove the key into the lock on my door and open it, ushering Easton into my room. With a grip on his shirt, I pull him into the bathroom and sit him down on the closed toilet. He follows my orders to the letter as I wet a paper towel and start cleaning off the cut.

“Ouch,” he hisses when I apply some peroxide, but it’s halfhearted.

I roll my eyes. “Don’t be such a baby.”

That seems to hit just the right spot because he stares up at me, watching me like I’m the most mesmerizing thing he’s ever seen. He carefully lifts his hand and lightly places it on my lower stomach.

“We’re having a baby,” he breathes.

The action makes my heart stutter, and I bite my lip to try to contain myself. It’s the one thing he’s done that seems like he gets it. Like it’s not the worst thing to happen to him since his drug addiction. Like he actually feels something for the little alien I’m already head over heels in love with.

But it’s too much. I can’t bring myself to deal with his hot and cold right now. I just can’t. Too much has happened in the last twenty minutes.

“You didn’t fight back,” I say, changing the conversation.

“What?”

I shrug and apply some ointment to another cut on the bottom of his jaw. “With Ryker. You didn’t fight back.”

He cocks a brow at me like even questioning him about it is insane. “Ken, he’s your brother. What else did you expect?”

I don’t answer that, because lately, I don’t know what to expect from him. He’s so all over the place, it’s hard to keep track. One minute he’s fine, and the next he’s proposing to me in a way that could be found in the “don’t” section of *The Do’s and Don’ts of Marriage Proposals* and buying a puppy, like we don’t have enough responsibilities right now.

But still, it goes back to him and the fact that he’s trying. He’s putting in an effort, and he’s not giving up, no matter

how hard I push back. There's something to be said about his determination to not leave me alone with this baby.

Our baby.

I sigh as I toss the ointment back into the drawer and kick it closed. Leaning against the wall across from Easton, I cross my arms over my chest and hope to hell I don't regret this.

"I have an appointment next week at the OB/GYN," I tell him. "Come with me if you want to."

He breaks into a face-splitting grin, one that he can't contain no matter how hard he tries. "Really?"

"Really."

Resting his head in his hands, he exhales slowly like he's just been given the best present in his life. "I'll be there. I promise."

I'll believe it when I see it.

Maybe that's harsh of me, but I won't let my guard down around him anymore, until he proves that it's safe to do so. I can't. I won't allow myself to be hurt again at the hands of him. He does too much damage.

I walk back to the door with Easton in tow, a silent message that I want him to leave. Just as I open it and he goes to step out, he stops.

"Thank you," he says with the most conviction I've ever seen come from him. "For giving me another chance, even though I know I don't deserve one."

He doesn't.

That much is true.

But that doesn't mean my heart hasn't stayed firmly in his possession, even when I wished it wasn't.

Chapter 13



I'VE BEEN TO MY FAIR SHARE OF FORMAL EVENTS. MY parent's vow renewal when I was a kid. My grandmother's funeral. My senior prom, which was a joke in itself. And still, no matter how many times I stand here and let the tailor fit me for a tux, it's super uncomfortable.

Zayn chuckles as he looks over at me from his platform. "Will you just relax?"

"Easy for you to say," I bark back. "You have a female measuring you."

The male on his knees in front of me rolls his eyes as he starts to measure up my inseam. My whole body tenses as he makes his way up the inner part of my leg. For a moment, I think he's stopped, but then he gets a little closer and I can't hold it in anymore.

"Ay! Watch where you put your hand there, bud," I tell him. "I know I'm pretty, but I don't bat for your team."

He drops the tape measure in a huff and stands up, pulling his wallet out of his back pocket and unfolding a whole

plethora of pictures. Family photos of him, a gorgeous woman with legs for days, and two little boys.

“I’m literally married to a supermodel,” he informs exasperatedly. “Trust me when I say that I’m enjoying this even less than you are. Now, if it’s all right with you, I’d like to get this over with.”

I run my fingers through my hair and look anywhere but back at him. “Uh, yeah. Sorry.”

Z smirks at me. “You know, I think watching people put you in your place is my favorite hobby.”

“Fuck you, too, dick,” I grumble. “I bet Knox would be even worse if he were here.”

“Knox would refuse to let a male measure him, or a female for that matter. He would make Delaney do it while they tell her how.”

Since he’s all the way across the country, Knox is getting fitted for his tux at a place in Rhode Island. They will then send his measurements here, and we will pick up all the formalwear the day before the wedding. It’s the one job Amelia and Kennedy gave Zayn to do, and he refuses to disappoint them.

“So, how did he take it when you told him you’re having two best men?” I ask. “I’m sure that didn’t sit well with his narcissistic tendencies.”

“He threatened to kill you so he’s the only one,” he answers casually.

My jaw drops. “Seriously?”

“No, you shit. He knows I couldn’t choose between you two. As long as he stands directly behind me so he can be close to the center of attention, he doesn’t care.”

“Typical Knox,” I laugh.

He nods. “Typical Knox.”

The tailor working on Zayn pulls him to the side to have him try on a couple jackets they already have in stock, and I

watch as he stares at himself in the mirror, a glint in his eye I only see when he's looking at Amelia. It makes me wonder if I'll ever be doing this, and more specifically, if I'll ever be doing this for Kennedy.

Things have been better with her lately, or at least as better as can be expected. She doesn't look like she wants to run in the opposite direction every time she sees me, and she texted me a screenshot of an app yesterday that showed what size fruit the baby compares to right now. It's crazy to know that my kid is growing inside her, but as scared as I might be, I couldn't imagine doing this with anyone else.

"All right," the man who just had his hand too close to my balls says. "You're done. Go with your friend, and Tina will get you a jacket to try on."

Thank fuck that's over.



I WAKE UP WITH an extra pep in my step as I head downstairs. Kennedy called last night and asked me to pick her up this morning for the doctor's appointment. Apparently her car finally crapped out, which isn't a surprise. That thing is practically a dinosaur, and it's not like she ever took good care of it, but no part of me plans on telling her that.

"You look happy," Amelia says as I come into the kitchen to pour myself a cup of coffee.

Grabbing the pot, I can't help but smile to myself. "What's not to be happy about? I get to hear my baby's heartbeat today *and* see my girl. It's a good day."

She hums over her own mug. "Not your girl, but okay."

I turn toward her and level her with a look. “Do you take pride in ruining things for me?”

“I’m your sister. It’s in my job description.”

“Whatever.” I shake it off. “Today is going to be great, and I won’t let anyone ruin it for me. Including you.”

She giggles softly. “I’m not ruining anything. I’m happy for you. Promise.”

“Thanks, Mila.”

As I finish stirring my coffee in the travel mug, I look at the time and realize it’s already a minute past the time I wanted to leave. “Shit. I’ve got to go.”

“Good luck!” my sister calls as I run out the door.



THANKFULLY, CAMPUS ISN'T THAT far away. It allows me time to stop at Kennedy’s favorite little cafe and pick her up something to eat. If I know her like I think I do, she probably hasn’t eaten anything this morning, and she’s eating for two now.

I pull up outside the place and run inside, groaning at the long line. I consider leaving, but as I look at the time, I realize I still have a few minutes. I left early to allow time for this, and I really want to surprise her.

“Can I get a blueberry muffin and a decaf coffee please? Light and sweet.”

The barista nods and tells me my total while she starts preparing the order. I swipe my card and wait for her to hand everything over to me. Once she does, I spin on my heels and

head for the door. What I see when I get outside, however, stops me in my tracks.

“No,” I breathe.

All four of my tires are completely flat, with the rims touching the ground.

“No, no, no. This can’t be happening.”

This is the absolute last thing I need today. It’s the one day Kennedy is relying on me. The one thing she is trusting me to do. If I fuck this up like I fucked up everything else, she’s never going to talk to me again. I can’t.

As I look behind my car, I see a bunch of shattered glass that I didn’t notice when I pulled in. If I had, I would’ve gone around it. Fuck.

I take a deep breath and think for a second, then make a decision. Regardless of what I do, my car is fucked. And now I’m even further from Kennedy’s dorm than I was before. I go to grab my phone out of the cupholder inside my car, but it’s gone.

What the fuck?

“Can I use your phone?” I ask the woman walking by but she just gives me a strange look and keeps walking.

Rushing back inside the café, I beg the barista to let me use their phone. Thankfully, she relents and the first number I dial is Kennedy’s.

Voicemail.

I run my fingers through my hair and dial Amelia, only to get the ignore button there, too. Fuck! Why are we brought up in a generation where we don’t answer calls from numbers we don’t know?

With my head reeling to try and find a solution, I leave the café for the second time. It hits me when I get outside that there’s nothing left to do. The only choice I have is to make a run for it.

Tossing her coffee in the garbage, I take off in the direction of campus—sprinting as fast as I can.



IT TOOK FIFTEEN MINUTES to run to Kennedy’s dorm, only to find she wasn’t there. She left. Went without me. So, I did the only other thing I could do, and continued my way to the OBGYN’s office. At least maybe if I made it there, she could forgive me for not picking her up. But of course, she couldn’t have picked a place close by. Nope. She picked one almost ten miles away. Still, I run anyway.

I’m just getting to the doctor’s office when I see Kennedy walk out the door, an hour and a half after her appointment time. I call her name while keeping the bag from the cafe tightly in hand. As she turns my way, I can already tell by the way she’s looking at me—I’m done for.

“I should’ve known you’d do this,” she mutters.

I bend over, resting my hands on my knees and panting. “Let me explain. Please.”

“Explain what? That you didn’t come because you changed your mind? Because you don’t really want this baby?”

“No!” I all but yell. “I want this baby. I...”

Just then, Alec walks out of the doctor’s office and puts his hand on Kennedy’s lower back. “Sorry. Didn’t expect to see my aunt in there. You ready to go?”

Kennedy looks back at Alec and gives him a kind smile. “Wait in the car for me?”

“Sure,” he says, giving me a once-over.

My brows furrow as I watch how he is with her. “What the fuck is he doing here?”

“*He* was there for me when I needed him,” she sneers. “*He* never told me I should kill our baby. *He* never lied to me.”

I scoff. “Oh, so what? You’re just going to fuck off and be with him then?”

“No! But at least he shows up when I need him to! You *ditched* me this morning!”

“I didn’t!” I hold up the bag from the cafe. “I stopped to get you breakfast and when I came out, all four of my fucking tires were flat.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “And you didn’t think to call? Let me know you weren’t coming? Thank God Alec happened to be driving by and remembered I should’ve been at my appointment.”

“My phone was stolen by whoever—wait.” It all comes together. “He did this!”

“What?”

“That prick fucking did this!” My blood starts to boil as everything falls into place. “He fucking slashed my tires, stole my phone, and drove by your place because he knew I wouldn’t be there to pick you up.”

She’s already shaking her head before I’m even done talking. “You’re unbelievable. You will blame literally everyone you can instead of taking the blame for your own wrongdoings.”

“That’s not—”

“I’m not listening to this,” she cuts me off. “If you’re not serious about this baby, then leave me alone and let me do what I need to do. My baby’s life is not a revolving door for you to be in when it’s convenient for you.”

Her words hit me in the chest, and I recoil from them. “I am serious.”

Exhaling, she shrugs sadly as she walks backward toward Alec's truck. "Could've fooled me."

I watch as she climbs into the passenger seat and they drive away, leaving me standing here alone—with the bag containing Kennedy's muffin still in hand.



THE PARTY SWIRLS AROUND me, but I can't find it in me to pay much attention. It's been three days since Kennedy has even looked my direction, let alone talked to me. All of my texts and phone calls have gone unanswered. The flowers I sent her were given to Amelia. And the two times I've tried showing up at her dorm, the security guard no longer let me in.

Her message is clear—she's done.

But I'm not.

I look around at the massive house that's entirely too big for the two people who live in it, though I wouldn't expect anything less from Carter. Everything about him screams wealth and power. His father is the district attorney, for fuck's sake. Rumor has it, he's even running for mayor next year.

Just what Carter needs: an ego that grows with his father's occupation.

There's a DJ in one corner of the living room, and there's an actual catering company in the kitchen. The house is filled with people Carter couldn't name if his life depended on it, Alec included.

I don't know if Kennedy brought him as a dig at me or if there is something going on between them, but it's pissing me off. He hangs on every word she says, and while she's not

giving off any of her tells that show she's interested, she's not ignoring him the way she's doing me.

"He looks like a tool," Carter says as he appears by my side.

I snort. "He is, and so are you. What kind of housewarming party is this?"

He gives me a boyish grin, like he's a child who was given keys to a kingdom. "It's Trayland Style."

"And Tye allowed this?"

His head gestures over to the other side of the room. "Who do you think suggested the waiters?"

Sure enough, there are people walking around with trays of hors d'oeuvres. I roll my eyes at the whole ordeal, but he's right. This is totally his style. I'm actually surprised he's spent all the time he has been slumming it at my and Zayn's parties. Though, that's probably because they're the biggest ones on campus. We even manage to beat out the fraternity houses.

"Well, I think it's sick," Z tells him.

Carter pats him on the shoulder. "Thanks, man. Where you been?"

"Jace was showing me his place," he says, Jace stepping up beside him. "Leave it to you two assholes to buy houses next door to each other."

Jace smirks. "Says the fucker who lives in a house with his best friend."

"Okay," I interrupt their banter. "While you two catfight like a bunch of chicks over who is more codependent, I'm going to go have a smoke."

Carter snickers. "The back door is through the kitchen."

"Thanks."

As I step outside into the breezy April air, I'm actually surprised by how warm it's gotten. The fresh air that blows past me is exactly what I needed. I light the cigarette and

inhale deeply, feeling it soothe me from the inside out. I lean my head back against the wall and close my eyes.

There's got to be a way I can get Kennedy to forgive me, but I can't seem to figure out how. I tried sending her pictures of my car in front of the cafe when Zayn and I went to pick it up, and Amelia even told her that the tires were slashed and showed her the receipt for my new phone. It's like she doesn't want to listen to it.

The door opens again, and I startle from the sudden noise.

"Oh, sorry," a familiar and annoying voice says. "I didn't realize you were out here."

I don't even spare a glance at Alec. "You have a tendency of doing that. Not realizing I'm somewhere."

He sighs. "Look, I know you don't like me. I get it. A guy hanging out with your pregnant ex wouldn't sit well with anyone. But I care about her. I'm only trying to help."

I'm sure you are. I'm about to come back with something sarcastic. Something to make him go back inside and leave me the fuck alone. But as I go to open my mouth, I realize this is exactly what I need. If I play nice with Alec, maybe Kennedy won't hate me as much.

I swallow my pride and look him in the eyes. "You're right. I'm sorry. It's just been one hell of a couple weeks."

"That bad?" he asks.

I shrug. "You care about that girl, but I'm in love with her. I've been busting my ass to show her that, and to be there for her and the baby, but I just keep fucking up. I don't know."

He takes a hit of his own cigarette. "Kennedy told me about your car. Someone slashed your tires?"

Yeah, you. Fucking douche. "Yep. All four in the time it took for me to go inside to get a cup of coffee and a muffin for Kennedy."

"Fuck, man. That sucks. I'm sorry."

I bet he is. This nice guy act may be fooling Kennedy, but it sure as shit isn't fooling me. I just hope he's buying mine.

"Thanks. It's just been a lot."

He turns around and looks inside before taking a step closer toward me. "You just need a little pick me up, that's all. Something to take the edge off for a bit."

I shake my head. "Oh, nah. That's all right, man. I don't ___"

My words are cut off by the sight of a little baggie filled with white powder. Since getting clean, Zayn has made sure I'm never even in the vicinity of any drugs, and he's gone to great lengths to make it happen. He even almost got himself killed by the dealer I used to work for, just to keep me away from the shit. But I'd be lying if I said the urge to dip back in wasn't getting harder and harder lately.

He puts out his half-smoked cigarette and tosses the baggie to me with a wink. "Chill out a little, bro."



I SIT ON MY bed, staring down at Alec's party favor as a million things run through my head. Half of me is screaming to flush it. That nothing good can come from this. But the other half tells a different story.

The last time I got high was after Tessa's overdose. After she woke up in the hospital and told me that she was choosing Asher. No matter what I did, how hard I tried, she was still going back to him. And I had lost her. I was stupid and heartbroken and decided to get high as hell to try to dull the pain. It's not like it worked at all, but I sure as hell tried.

Recovery was the worst thing I've ever been through. Having to detox off something my body had become so dependent on, I wanted nothing more than to swallow the same amount of pills Tessa had, even knowing it would kill me. If I had been strong enough, I would have physically fought Zayn, but I could barely keep myself hydrated, let alone throw a punch. My words, however, were like knives.

Out of everything, though, what I remember most was how weightless it made me feel.

How it took the stress away.

How it made everything a little more bearable.

"My problem was never cocaine," I whisper to myself. "Hell, once wouldn't be the worst thing in the world."

Just as I'm about to open the baggie and find something to pour it out on, Baylor comes over and lays in my lap—preventing me from getting up. He lays his head down on my leg and looks up at me with his big, dark brown eyes. The ones that Kennedy said match mine.

Kennedy.

The baby.

My whole body freezes as I realize what I was about to do. There is no world where either of them deserves that, for me to throw away everything for drugs, like I've done before.

No.

I won't do it again.

Opening my dresser, I toss it inside and slam it shut. In that instant, the decision is made. I'm not going to let anything get in my way. Not Alec. Not cocaine. Nothing.

I'm going to be the man she needs and the father that this baby deserves.

I'm going to do better.

Chapter 14



kennedy

I'M NOT THE KIND OF PERSON WHO GETS NERVOUS EASILY. Public speaking, cheering in front of huge crowds, starting a new job or having to meet new people—none of it bothers me. I possess almost the same amount of confidence as my brother does. But sitting here in front of the computer screen, staring back at my parents on the other side, I might vomit.

How do I even tell them this? That their perfect daughter wound up pregnant in the middle of her college education. They are the kind of people who have always expected me to make the right choices. My mom has talked about my bright future for as long as I can remember. Let me tell you, this was never a part of it. They've always said that they're not paying my tuition for me to mess around with my friends. And now I need to tell them that I fucked up. That I failed them. That I ruined their plans for me.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?” my mom asks. “Is everything okay?”

I swallow down the lump in my throat. “Y-yeah. I mean, nothing is wrong, per se.”

“Then why do you look so sick?”

Every part of me wants to run. To shut the computer and act like my internet stopped working. Put off telling them for another couple weeks. But knowing Ryker as well as I do, it’s only a matter of time before he lets the news slip. Honestly, it’s a shock that he hasn’t already.

“I actually need to tell you something.”

It’s okay. They can’t do anything. They’re a thousand miles away, and if they react badly you can just get off the call.

“Well?” My father asks expectantly. “What is it then?”

I take a deep breath and close my eyes as I let the words flow from my mouth. “I’m pregnant.”

The call goes quiet—so silent that the only indication they’re still there is the sound of my sister’s pet parakeets chirping in the background. When I force myself to look at the screen again, they’re both just staring with their jaws slacked.

“Say something,” I beg. “Please.”

My mom’s eyes widen, and she shakes herself out of it. “Are you sure?”

I nod. “The doctor said I’m due August 27th. I had an ultrasound and everything.”

“Wow,” my dad murmurs.

Everything feels awkward as we sit on opposite sides of a computer screen. We’re so far apart, and yet I can still choke on the tension. It isn’t until they start whispering something I can’t make out between themselves that the hormones start to get the better of me.

Tears build until one slips out and slides down my cheek. “Do you guys hate me?”

Both their attention turns back to me and they answer in unison. “No.”

“We could never hate you,” my mom assures me. “This is just a shock. We thought you and Easton broke up.”

“We did,” I confirm. “I got pregnant before we broke up. I just didn’t know until after.”

“And what about Easton? Is he doing his part?” my dad inquires, sounding like he’ll have his gun ready depending on the answer.

I drop my head. “He’s trying. It’s just not an easy situation.”

My mom grabs her phone. “I think I need to fly out there. You need your mom right now.”

No. That’s actually the last thing I need. ”No, Mom. You don’t need to do that.”

“I think I do, Kennedy.”

Fuck. “No, really. Finals are coming up and everything. I won’t even have the time to spend with you.”

She sighs, but thankfully gives in. “Well, are you at least taking care of yourself? Prenatal vitamins are very important.”

“Yes, Mom,” I say with a small smile. “I take them every day, even when they make me feel sick. And I’ve been napping in between classes and studying. I promise.”

My mom breaks into an already well known story about how she had preeclampsia with the twins, and how I should be very careful and always go to the doctor for any concerns. I nod patiently and have to hold back a laugh as my dad rolls his eyes when he thinks she isn’t looking.

“I saw that,” my mom chastises.

My dad smirks. “I didn’t do anything.”

As they bicker back and forth, a knock at my door pulls my attention away. I get up and walk over to it, but when I open it, there’s no one there. Instead, there is just a paper bag. My brows furrow as I glance down the hallway just in time to see Easton enter the stairwell. Grabbing the paper bag, I bring it inside.

“Who was that?” my mom questions.

“Easton,” I murmur as I start taking things out of the bag.

Each item has a little note attached to it, and every single word pulls at my emotions.

Gatorade—*to keep you hydrated.*

Tums—*for when the baby gives you heartburn, or when I do.*

Tissues—*for when everything just becomes too much.*

And lastly, a key—*for if you ever need anything, no matter what time of day.*

I hold the key to his house in the palm of my hand as my heart swells. Out of all of it, I think the thing that means the most was the selflessness. He didn't stay and try to talk to me. He didn't try to force what he has to say down my throat. He simply wanted me to have these things.

He's changing.

"Well?" My mom asks impatiently. "What is it?"

Tears stream down my face and I quickly swat them away. "Just a few things I needed. Can we talk about this later though? I've got to go."

"What? You can't just drop a bomb like this on us and then say you have to go."

My dad shakes his head. "She's a grown adult, Melissa. She can do whatever she wants."

Mom sighs, and I give Dad a thankful smile. "I love you guys."

"We love you, too," they answer in unison.

As soon as I shut the computer, I sit down on my bed and stare at the key still firmly in my hand. I don't think I can find it in me to trust him again yet. The choices he made and the things he did are some that are the hardest to forgive. But if he keeps doing things like this, I can't say it won't happen eventually.



EVERY DAY CONTINUES THE same way, with a knock three times the way Easton does, and a bag of something left at my door. Day two was a couple books by my favorite authors. On day three it was cold, and he dropped off a hoodie of his that I always stole whenever I was at his house. Day four, a fetal Doppler so I can listen to the baby's heartbeat on my own.

One thing I've noticed is that he always comes around the same time—6:15 p.m., when he knows I'll be home. On day five, I decide to stand near the door and wait for the knock. The second it sounds, I yank the door open just as he's putting the bag on the floor.

Easton's eyes meet mine and he picks the bag back up, handing it to me. "I figured with studying, you'd be hungry. Amelia said this is one of the only things you can hold down right now."

I open the bag to find lasagna from an Italian place over by Tye and Carter's new house. I've been obsessed with it ever since the restaurant catered their housewarming party, and now it seems to be the only thing the baby wants.

"Thank you," I tell him sincerely. "I'm actually starving, so this helps."

He nods slowly. "Well, you should go eat while it's hot. Do you need anything else?"

"No, but I appreciate it."

Taking a step away, he stops and then turns around. I stay completely still as he comes closer and presses a soft kiss to my forehead. My eyes close as I feel his breath on my skin, and when he pulls away, he puts his hands in his pockets and walks down the hallway.

I'm so fucked.



TYE AND AMELIA WATCH in amusement as I throw my head back and groan. It's pretty much the only thing I've been doing since I got to work. It's like my brain is such a puddle of mush lately that I can't even formulate a complete thought, let alone make any sense.

"Why can't he let me be mad at him?" I whine. "Being mad at him was easier than this."

Amelia chuckles. "First you're mad because he's doing everything wrong, and now you're mad because he's doing everything right. He deserves a medal for dealing with you."

I narrow my eyes at her, but when I open my mouth to retort, nothing comes out. She's right. I'm sitting here getting frustrated because he's doing all the right things, when I should just be thankful he's still trying. He's still holding on. He won't give up no matter how hard I push back. And there's a lot to be said about that.

Becoming fully vulnerable and exposed, I drop my guard and look at them with fear in my eyes. "What if he hurts me again?"

"I mean, he probably will. He's a boy. They do stupid things. But I don't think he'll do it on purpose," Tye counters.

"You don't know that. He could change his mind. Take one look at the baby and decide being a father isn't what he wants after all. Or he could fall in love with someone else after spending the night at the bar looking for something to take his mind off the hundreds of responsibilities he has at home. Or what if he lies to me again? I can't handle all that. I'll—"

Tye throws a hand over my mouth to stop my rant. "That isn't going to happen. He loves you."

My shoulders sag in defeat. “How are you so sure?”

“Because he came into Safe & Sound earlier,” she admits.

I throw my hands in the air. “Great, so he was hanging out with Tessa. This is exactly my point!”

She rolls her eyes and then grabs my cheeks. “Listen to me. He came into Safe & Sound to tell Tessa that he can’t talk to her anymore.”

“He what?” Amelia and I ask in unison.

Tye nods. “I didn’t hear the conversation first hand, but when he left she told me that he said he couldn’t talk to her anymore. That he values her friendship and thanked her for everything she’s done for him, but that he has to put you first.”

Shocked doesn’t even begin to explain how I feel. My whole body is tingling, and my heart is beating against my ribcage like it’s trying to break free. I always wished he would pick me over Tessa, but I never thought there would be a time he actually would. It’s why I left. I couldn’t handle being second choice to the person I always put first. But he...

“Oh my God,” I breathe. “I have to go.”

Tye tosses me the keys to her brand-new car with a smirk, and I run out the door.

I need to get to Easton.



ALL THE LIGHTS IN the house are on as I run up the steps. I pull out the key Easton gave me and shove it into the lock, throwing the door open as soon as I can. Zayn is sitting on the couch and looks at me, confused, but it only takes a second before he figures out what, or rather who, I’m looking for.

“Upstairs in his room,” he tells me.

I thank him and book it up the steps. Before I can second guess myself, I go straight to his bedroom and barge in. Easton is sitting at his desk, earbuds in, hunched over a notebook, but when he turns around and sees me, he yanks them from his ears.

“Kennedy?” He stands up and comes toward me. “Is everything okay?”

“You gave her up,” I say breathlessly.

“What?”

I wipe away a stray tear and hold my head high as I stare back at him. “Tessa. You chose me over her.”

He arches his brows at me. “Of course I did. You’re the most important person in my life—you and the baby. I should have figured that out a lot sooner, but better late than never, I guess.”

Everything I was holding against him fades away as I stand here, remembering all the reasons I fell in love with him in the first place.

My best friend’s hot older brother.

My favorite late-night conversation partner.

The father of my child.

I take a step toward him. “Say it. Tell me.”

He comes closer and tucks a piece of hair behind my ear. “It’s you. The answer to any choice is *always* you.”

Emotions wrack through me as I throw myself against his chest. Everything is so overwhelming and I don’t know which way is up, but as he wraps his arms around me while I sob, I know I need this. I need him here, holding me tightly when things get to be too much.

He waits patiently for me to stop crying, running his hand over my hair and whispering sweet things to me.

That it’s going to be okay.

That he's here.

That he understands.

And I just breathe in the scent of him, something I've missed so much.

When I finally pull away, I can already tell I look like a mess. I can feel the mascara dripping down my face. I let out a huff and excuse myself into the bathroom. Sure enough, black smears start at my eyes and make their way down.

I'm trying to clean myself up with a tissue and some water when Easton leans against the doorway. As my gaze locks with his, I stop. He takes a step toward me and gently pulls the tissue from my grasp, removing the rest of the makeup with a gentleness I don't know that I've ever felt from him.

Once he's done, he puts it down and uses a light grip on my chin to tilt my head up. I stare at him with my every emotion on full display. There's nothing I could hide from him if I wanted to right now. I'm completely exposed.

"You're beautiful," he whispers.

Everything in me wants to kiss him. To take him back. To let him claim me the way he always used to. But instead I force myself to look away. I stare down at the floor until his lips against my ear makes my breath hitch.

"At the risk of pushing my luck, I just want you to know..." He forces me to look at him again. "I've seen the way Alec touches you, and I've been patient. But if I catch his hand on you again, I'm going to snap, and there will be no apologies for what I do to him."

I stand tall and square my shoulders. "You're a puppy dog. Your bark is bigger than your bite."

He smirks and wraps an arm around my back, pulling me into him. "Fucking try me, baby."

"What are you doing?" My voice shakes as I ask the question, but my body makes no attempt to remove myself from his hold.

“Every goddamn thing it takes to get you back, and I won’t let anything stand in my way—including childhood lover boys. You are mine, Kennedy.” He dips down and, without kissing me, manages to take my bottom lip between his teeth. “Fucking mine.”

I stay still as his hand splays across most of my back, until I reach up and run my fingers up from the back of his neck, into his hair. He stares into my eyes, not making a move but waiting for an okay. And when he dips his thumb under my shirt and I feel his burning touch on my skin, every restraint I have snaps.

Arching up, I press my lips to his, and it’s as if he was waiting for it. He reacts immediately, taking over the kiss in the dominant way he does. He grips my hips and lifts me up. The way he holds me as my legs wrap around his waist tells me he’s been working out. A way to relieve his frustrations, no doubt. But I wish he would take them out on me.

As our tongues tangle together, he carries me out of the bathroom and lays me down on his bed. I drag my nails down his back, moaning while he kisses his way down to my neck. With the force he’s using, I know his intention is to leave a hickey. To mark me. To claim me for everyone to see. And fuck, why is that so hot?

“Easton,” I plead.

Between the pregnancy hormones and having gone without sex for months now, my libido is on fucking overdrive. The students of North Haven University are lucky they haven’t caught me outside, dry humping the nearest bench to get a little relief. Tye kept telling me to buy a vibrator, but I haven’t done it yet. And now it’s led to this.

Thank fuck it led to this.

“I’ve got you, baby,” he answers. “Don’t worry. I’ve got you.”

My head presses firmly into the pillow as he undoes the button on my jeans. It’s almost like he’s trying to take his time,

wants to enjoy it, but also can't get inside of me fast enough. And God, I know the feeling.

When he isn't moving fast enough, I grab the waistband of his sweatpants and his boxers, pushing them down in one go. His cock springs free, hard as a steel with veins protruding to the surface. My mouth salivates at the sight of it, but if I don't have something to clench around soon, I may actually self-combust.

He undresses me from the waist down and presses his cock against my pussy. I'm already soaking wet as he catches some of it on the tip of his dick and rubs it on my clit—teasing even when he has no patience.

“Fuck, I've missed this,” he growls.

I go to answer, but as he sinks inside of me, the only thing that leaves my mouth is a breathy moan. He dives down and pushes my shirt and bra up, exposing my breasts, and immediately takes one into his mouth. I can feel every single part of him *everywhere*.

His mouth.

His hands.

His cock.

He thrusts into me again and again while making sure I feel as much pleasure as possible. It doesn't take long until the familiar pressure builds in my core. I arch my hips up to grind against him, and he pleases me by pushing down with the same amount of force. It's like he's prepared for me to just use him as my own personal dildo, taking what I want and not apologizing for it.

“You feel incredible,” he says as he bends down to kiss me. “I love feeling you like this. Raw and with nothing in between us.”

My impending orgasm is doused in an instant as I realized why we're able to be like this. The reason we're here. The reason we *shouldn't* be doing this. The reason we can't.

There's no need for a condom when you're already pregnant.

“Stop,” I croak.

His movements halt as he looks at me, bewildered. “What?”

“Please, stop,” I repeat. “I need you to stop.”

He pulls out and gets off me without hesitation, but he watches me like I'm a caged animal and ready to run at the slightest movement. “Did I do something wrong?”

I shake my head as I start to cry again, because even now, he's being so perfect. He's been wanting nothing but this—me—and the second he gets it I take it away again, but he's still a gentleman. He still stopped the second I asked him to, asking questions after not before.

“No,” I say sadly. “You're perfect.”

“Then what's wrong?” He lays on his side next to me.

“It's the baby.”

His eyes widen and panic covers his face. “Oh my God. I didn't hurt you, did I? Do I need to take you to the hospital?”

I put a hand on his face to calm him down. “Relax. The baby is fine.”

“You're sure?”

“Yes, I'm sure.”

He exhales. “Okay. Then what's the problem? Why'd you want to stop?”

I pull my eyes off of him and stare at the ceiling. “The problem is us. God, Easton. It's so easy to get lost in you again. To just fall back into this like nothing bad ever happened.”

“So, why don't you?”

“Because I can't,” I admit. “It's not just us anymore. There's a baby we need to put first here. We can't just dive head first back into everything with no repercussions. For all

we know, I could have the baby, and you could decide you don't want to be a father."

Reaching out, he places his hand on my stomach that's starting to have an unmistakable bump. "I won't."

"You don't know that," I counter.

"I do."

"You still have your out. I'm not taking it back."

He shakes his head and smiles. "I don't want it. I want this. I want you and our baby. Ken, I asked you to marry me."

I roll my eyes. "Because you didn't want to lose me."

"No. Because I didn't want to lose either of you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

He's saying all the right things, and so much of me wants to just believe him. I want to take his word for it and just throw myself back into this without looking back. But I can't. I need to protect myself, because this baby needs the best, and you can't pour from a broken glass.

"I'm sorry," I tell him honestly.

For a moment, I expect an argument. A glimpse of the Easton that gets angry when he doesn't get his way. But I don't see any of that. Instead, he just bends down and gives me one more gentle kiss.

"Just promise me something?" he asks.

"What?"

Now it's his turn to be vulnerable as I can see him almost let his guard down. "Don't cut me out again. It's not something I can handle."

His words hit a soft spot, and I have no reason not to agree to that. He's been doing everything right lately, and even tonight, he proved that I come first.

"Okay, I won't," I promise.

He looks visibly relieved. "Thank you."

The two of us slip out of bed, not wanting to risk taking things too far again—especially since we both have a severe case of sexual frustration. And I know if I stay here any longer, there's no telling what might end up happening. The two of us together has always been explosive, and clearly that hasn't changed.

“I should get going,” I tell him. “I have to pack up my dorm.”

His brows furrow as he turns to me. “Where are you going?”

Fuck, I'm so not used to him not knowing things. “I'm moving to Tye's for the summer. My parents wanted me to come home, but there are so many reasons to stay. So I'm packing and moving before finals so I don't have to stress about it during them.”

“Am I one of those reasons?”

“What?”

He watches me intently. “You said there are so many reasons to stay. Am I one of them?”

I smile down at the ground and run my hand over my bump. “You should come with me in a couple weeks. I have an ultrasound.”

The corners of his mouth raise as he comes closer. He puts a hand on my belly and stares into my eyes, making me feel like I have every last bit of his attention. Always.

“I wouldn't miss it for the world.”

For a second, I cover his hand with my own as the two of us stay locked in this moment. Honestly, I could never move from here and be completely content. But instead, it gets interrupted by a sudden jab to the inside of my stomach. Both of us gasp and turn our attention to my belly.

“Was that just...” He trails off as it happens again.

I can't help but giggle as I feel our baby kicking inside me. “This is incredible.”

He covers my whole stomach with both his hands, but he focuses on my face. “*You* are incredible.”

Chapter 15



I'M SITTING ON THE COUCH REPLAYING THE MEMORY OF tonight over and over on a loop. The way Kennedy and I connected felt like a breath of fresh air. It doesn't even bother me that she stopped us when we were only getting started. Getting to feel her skin on mine again, getting to kiss her again, it was everything. And then for the baby to kick for the first time right before she left? I can't even explain it.

Going to Tessa earlier today and telling her I couldn't be friends with her anymore was hard. I dreaded doing it, and the whole time, there was a pit in my stomach. But that pit turns into a rock when I think about the possibility of Kennedy never being mine again. When I weighed the two, the obvious choice was Kennedy, and I was stupid not to see that before.

Thankfully, Tess took it like a champ and told me she was proud of me for starting to make the right choice. It made the blow easier for me because I wasn't hurting her. She just got it, as usual.

The door opens, and Amelia comes in. She looks exhausted, which is understandable if she and Tye handled a

whole Friday night shift by themselves. With Kennedy being pregnant, they've been trying to keep her away from the night shift. There is too much chance of injury when around a bunch of drunken men with wandering hands. I offered to be a bodyguard, but both she and Amelia said no.

"You look like you need a nap," I tell her.

She groans and plops onto the couch beside me. "More like a coma."

"Ouch. That bad?"

"Yeah." She covers her mouth as she yawns. "But I'm proud of you. I heard what you did today, giving up your friendship with Tess. I know that had to be hard for you."

I shrug. "I was being selfish by trying to have them both. Even just being friends with her makes Kennedy uncomfortable, and for obvious reasons."

"Well, I'm glad you finally acknowledged that."

"Yeah. If I had figured it out sooner, maybe then I wouldn't have lost her in the first place."

She waves it off lazily. "You'll get her back."

I look at her like she knows something I don't. "You think so?"

"You're a Donovan," she says with a smile. "We don't give up. Just look at Zayn and my awesome scar."

With a lift of her shirt, I see the fading mark of where Blade, my former drug dealer, stabbed her. She was trying to protect Zayn and instead almost got herself killed. I don't think I've ever been as scared as I was that day in my life.

I reach forward and tug her shirt down for her, not able to stand looking at it. She curls up in a ball and leans against me as she's unable to keep herself awake any longer. I chuckle softly and shake my head.

She does have one thing right—Donovans don't give up.



TWO WEEKS GO BY in an instant, and with finals coming up, everyone has been on edge and studying constantly. Still, I've managed to keep up the pattern of bringing Kennedy something she needs every day. Only now, I don't walk away.

Seeing her living at Tye and Carter's place now, I'm not going to lie—it irks me. She's pregnant with my kid and I'm in love with her. Of course, I wish she moved in with me instead. But I also know why that wasn't going to happen. That wasn't a plan she was even considering, and I'm not in the place to push. Besides, it could be worse. She could be moving home.

I pull up to the house a whole half-hour early and text her to let her know I'm here. Even though I think she's gorgeous, I know she's been really self-conscious about her clothes not fitting her as well anymore. When I showed up one day unannounced, she looked really uncomfortable about it. So for her, I let her know when I pull up.

"You're super early," she says as she opens the front door.

I rub the back of my neck nervously. "Yeah. I wanted to make sure I didn't let you down this time."

That makes her smile. "Well, thank you. I appreciate it."

What she doesn't realize is that it's a whole extra half-hour I get with her.

It's definitely not a hardship.



THE WAITING ROOM OF the doctor's office is probably one of the most anxiety-inducing places I've ever been. I sit next to Kennedy, who reads a magazine, completely calm, while my knee can't stop bouncing. After a couple minutes, she glances over at me and gives me a look.

"Are you okay?"

I nod, but it's clear she doesn't buy it. "I'm just nervous."

She closes the magazine and puts it on the seat next to her. "About what?"

"After you asked me to come with you, I looked up all the things they look for at this appointment. If anything is wrong with him or her, we'll most likely find that out today."

Her eyes sparkle with something I haven't seen from her in a while. "You're worried about the baby."

"Damn right I am," I say, shocked she isn't. "That's my baby."

She looks me up and down and a smug grin appears on her face. "You're kinda hot when you're all caveman and protective."

I lean forward and speak directly into her ear. "Let another man try to get close to you or my baby, and you'll see just how caveman I can be."

Her cheeks pink, and she smacks me in the chest halfheartedly as she laughs. Instead of letting her pull her hand back, however, I grab it and take it in mine. She doesn't fight me on it as I interlace our fingers. I don't think too far into it, though. She knows I'm nervous.

No more than ten minutes later, we're called back, and we follow the nurse into a dark room. Kennedy climbs up on the table and lifts her shirt like she's a seasoned professional at this point. Me, on the other hand, I sit nervously on the chair beside her.

"So, is this the father?" the technician asks.

Kennedy looks over at me and smiles, like she's proud. "Yeah. He's the dad."

The woman looks at me. "Nice to meet you, Dad." She turns her attention back to Kennedy. "You two are going to make a beautiful baby."

"I know, right?" she agrees.

After squirting some gel on her stomach, the tech presses a wand over it and the image of our baby appears on the screen. Right away, I can see every little body part, from the head to the toes. I'm instantly mesmerized. My jaw drops, and I watch as the baby kicks his or her legs and flails its tiny arms.

The technician starts to do her measurements, taking pictures and marking them with certain things I'm sure only the doctor can understand. We count the fingers and toes to make sure there are ten of each, and she points out things like the baby's spine and that the arms and legs are exactly the size they should be at this far along in the pregnancy.

"I'm just going to check the ventricles of the heart and listen to the heartbeat," she says, pressing buttons on the machine.

I wait patiently, but when she zooms in on the heart and I watch the little thing fluttering away, I can't hold back anymore. This is my child. This precious tiny human, with a beating heart and moving limbs, is mine.

Kennedy looks over at me and sees how in awe I am of everything. She reaches over and puts her hand out for me to take. I grab it instantly, and as the heartbeat starts to play through the speakers, I know I would do anything in the world for these two.

I'd walk through fire.

I'd swim to the bottom of the ocean.

I'd take on an entire armed cavalry with a hand tied behind my back.

I'll do absolutely anything to keep them safe.

“Well, I'm not the doctor, but from what I can see, everything looks good,” the tech says, making Kennedy and I both sigh in relief. “Last thing is, do you want to know the sex?”

The two of us turn to each other, and it doesn't even take a single word to know we're thinking the same thing.

“Yes!”



MY WHOLE BODY IS buzzing in excitement as I drive away from the doctor's office. There were a lot of ways I saw that appointment going, but I don't think I imagined anything like that. The feeling I got when I saw our baby up on that screen—it was everything.

“That was...wow!” I tell Kennedy as we drive home.

She giggles from the passenger seat. “Out of this world, right?”

“I can't even explain it. Did you get this way the first time?”

“Just about,” she answers. “But this time there was a lot more to look at. The first ultrasound just looked like a little alien.”

I take a deep breath and smile over at her. “Thank you for letting me come with you to that. It means a lot to me.”

The corners of her mouth raise in a grin she couldn't fight off if she tried. "I'm glad you were there. I really loved sharing that with you."

Her response, paired with how good we've been for the last couple weeks, makes me feel invincible. Now, there's only one thing left to do.

"If it's okay with you, I'm going to go tell my parents about the baby tonight," I tell her. "I want them to know they're becoming grandparents."

"Good luck with that," she quips. "I told mine, and it sucked worse than when I got my period in class in the sixth grade."

I snicker at the dramatics. "I mean, I never said I won't throw up on myself in the process, but I'm still going to do it."

She looks over at me and smirks. "Do they know we broke up?"

Fuck. Between fighting to get Kennedy back, finding out about the baby, and also being deathly afraid of my mother's *women deserve more respect than that* lectures, I put off telling them. A little voice in me wonders if I should mention that we could just get back together and solve that part of the problem, but we're on such a high, and I don't want to ruin it.

I lean my head back against the headrest and sigh heavily. "I guess I have two things to tell them."

Chapter 16



kennedy

ONE OF THE BEST PARTS OF MY JOB IS THAT WHEN IT'S DEAD, I can study for finals. With pregnancy comes a whole range of different things. One minute I'll feel perfectly fine, and the next, I'm puking my guts out because I let a piece of avocado touch my tongue. So, I need to take any time to study that I can.

“Kennedy Madison!”

Well, there goes studying.

Amelia storms over to the bar and throws herself onto a barstool. I try to keep my attention on the screen, but I can feel her eyes burning into the side of my face. Honestly, I should've expected this the second Easton texted me about it.

“What the fuck is this shit I hear that you're not telling us the gender yet?”

I look over at her and smile sweetly. “We have so many friends. We just want to tell you all at once. Like a gender reveal party.”

She crosses her arms and rests them on the bar. “You are not the type to want a blue or pink colored cake or explosions. You’re doing this to torture me.”

“I am not,” I say with a chuckle.

“You are. You want to see me suffer.”

Closing my computer, I sigh. “We just want to make it special and tell you all at the same time. That way no one feels left out.”

That seems to soften her a little. “Fair, but this is my niece or nephew. I think I deserve to know first.”

“Sorry, babe.”

She scoffs. “But Easton gets to know!”

“Easton’s the dad,” I snicker. “He helped make this baby. It gives him certain perks.”

“And one of those perks isn’t getting you back?” Her brows raise, and a small smirk is displayed on her face.

All the playfulness is sucked out of the room as the smile falls off my face. “Amelia.”

“What? A girl can hope, can’t I?”

“It’s just not the time to even consider it,” I tell her honestly. “We’re in a good place, him and me, but that’s all the more reason not to risk it. It’s not something I’m taking off the table forever, but it’s not just the two of us anymore. There’s a baby to think about.”

She tilts her head to the side. “And this baby, will they be wearing a dress or a tux at my wedding?”

“You’re a terror,” I deadpan.

“I know.”

The angelic smile she gives me is such a crock of shit. The girl acts like a saint, but she’s forgetting that I’ve seen the devious side of her. The side that gets what she wants no matter what it takes. The part of her that wanted to walk on the

wild side so bad, she dated a psychotic drug dealer who literally set our dorm room on fire.

Amelia walks around the bar and gets herself a soda. “I can’t believe neither one of you will tell me. He wouldn’t even tell our parents last night.”

Shit, I forgot he planned on breaking the news of the pregnancy to them. “You were there?”

“Yeah. I hadn’t seen them in a little over a week, so I went with him.” I give her a *don’t-bullshit-me* look. “And because I wanted to eavesdrop.”

“That sounds more accurate,” I say, amused. “So, how’d it go? Is he still alive? Is he on his way to join the monastery and become a monk?”

She purses her lips. “Actually, that’s not a bad idea. Mom would like that.”

“Amelia!”

Chuckling, she finally takes mercy on me. “Okay, okay. No, it went fine. I mean, Mom nearly lost her shit when she found out he lied to you and went behind your back, but then she got all lost in baby thoughts and nursery plans.”

My brows raise. “He told them *why* we broke up?”

“Well, yeah. He didn’t want them to think any less of you for leaving him.”

I throw my head back and groan. “God, he makes this so hard!”

“Who’s hard?” Tye’s voice echoes through the nearly empty bar as she comes in.

Amelia glances back at her. “Easton is being all chivalrous and gentlemanly and it’s testing Kennedy’s restraints.”

Instead of walking around the bar, Tye hops up onto it and dangles her feet on the inside. “So, go fuck it out of your system.”

“Oh, gross,” Amelia whines and cringes.

“What?” Tye questions. “She deserves a medal for resisting him. Your brother’s hot, Meelz.”

Amelia feigns gagging and throws a hand over her mouth. “I think I might vomit.”

“His eyes and those muscles,” Tye continues.

“Keep going,” Amelia encourages. “I’m sure Carter will love to hear all of this.”

Tyler gasps. “You wouldn’t dare.”

A devilish grin stretches across Amelia’s face. “Bet me.”

“Okay, while you two are being children, I have to pee,” I tell them. “Sharing a bladder and all that.”

They both wave me off, and Amelia immediately turns back to Tye. “Did you hear they won’t tell us the gender until Saturday?”

“I know! It’s such bullshit!”

“I heard that!” I call out.

“You were meant to,” they answer in unison.

Bitches.



IS THERE SUCH THING as filling my brain too much? I honestly think that if I study any more, my whole brain is just going to explode. Useless facts and equations will just go flying everywhere, making a mess of my room and leaving this baby without a mother. I can almost read my tombstone now.

Kennedy Lehigh

Death by Boredom

And Easton will need to raise our child on his own. They'll end up thinking cereal is a suitable dinner and beer is the equivalent to water. Oh God, no one can ever let Easton be a single father. Our baby would never stand a chance.

My phone rings and pulls me from my irrational thoughts.

"Hello?"

"Hey," Alec's voice comes through. "What are you up to?"

I lay down on my bed and stare up at the ceiling. "Contemplating if college degrees are really worth all the stress we put ourselves through for them."

He chuckles. "Of course they're not. It'll just be a piece of paper you can hang on your wall to make you look smart."

"Are you calling me stupid, Alec?" I tease.

"That depends. Are your hormones making you extra stabby today?"

"Yes."

"Then no. I'm absolutely not calling you stupid."

I roll my eyes and switch the phone from one hand to the other. "So, what's up? You need something?"

The sound of his truck starting fills the background noise. "I just wanted to know if you need a ride to Amelia's later. I have some shit to do right now, but I can swing by on my way there and get you."

Oh, crap. "I, uh...I don't actually. Easton is going to come get me. We're going to lunch before the party."

It was Easton's idea, and a cute one if I'm honest. He called me a few days ago and asked if he could take me to lunch. Let everyone show up at his house while we're not there yet so no one tries to get us to spill the beans early. And I can't seem to forget the excitement in his voice when I agreed to it.

Alec exhales. "So, you and Easton, huh?"

"Don't do this."

“I’m just asking a question,” he reasons.

He’s not, and I’m not stupid enough to believe that, but I answer anyway. “It’s just lunch, Alec. And even if it wasn’t, he’s the father of my child.”

Cursing under his breath, he groans. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I’ll see you tonight.”

The tone of his voice tells me he’s anything but happy about my plans, but before I can say anything about it, he hangs up. I drop the phone onto my bed and throw my arm over my eyes.

It’s not that I haven’t given Alec an answer to his proposition because I’m actually considering it. No part of me wants anything more than a friendship with him. But I’m afraid that if I tell him that, he’ll vanish from my life. It’s selfish and inconsiderate, I know, but I’ve really enjoyed having him back and I don’t want to lose him.

Why does everything always have to be so damn complicated?



THE RESTAURANT EASTON BRINGS me to is a cute little place just outside of North Haven. It sits against a lake, with a gorgeous view of the forest behind it. It doesn’t exactly look new, but being as Easton needed his GPS to find it, I’m guessing it’s new for both of us.

As the hostess shows us to our table, one that is right next to the oversized windows, Easton pulls my chair out for me and helps me sit down. The move catches me off guard, since he’s never done anything like this before. Our relationship always felt casual until recently, though that could be because my feelings for him always felt unrequited until now.

“This place is nice,” I tell him as I pick up my menu.

He smiles proudly. “Yeah, I asked around and did some research. This was the top choice by a long shot.”

“You put that much effort into this?”

Looking up at me, I’ve never seen so much sincerity in him. “I put that much effort into *you*.”

My cheeks heat as I blush and I’m saved from having to respond by the waitress coming over to take our orders. After she leaves to put everything in, we fall into a comfortable conversation that is far away from the dangerous zone we were just in.

“So, are you excited to put everyone out of their misery?” he questions.

My nose scrunches. “Honestly? I’ve kind of been enjoying seeing them suffer.”

His brows raise. “We could cancel the party and make them wait until the birth.”

“Your sister would stick us both in a torture chamber until we tell her.”

He throws his head back laughing because he knows I’m right. “And my parents think *I’m* the unstable one.”

“Yeah, well, let’s hope that’s not true,” I tell him, bracing for impact as I stare back at him. “Alec will be at the party today.”

Dropping his head, he groans. “We were having a good day.”

“I know,” I say sorrowfully. “But I wanted to give you the heads up before we get there.”

“Why does he even have to be there?”

“Because he’s my friend.”

He eyes me intently. “Oh, okay. So, I can invite Tessa then.”

I know there is no venom to his words, he’s only trying to prove a point, but they still sting regardless. “That’s not the

same thing.”

“She was my friend. How is it not?” he argues.

“Because I’ve never seen Alec naked.”

The two of us stare at each other from across the table, neither one backing down. I hold my head high and refuse to break eye-contact, so he knows that I’m not fucking around. Finally, a hint of a smile graces Easton’s face.

“He better thank fuck for that.”



WE PULL UP TO Easton’s house an hour after the party started. Amelia’s been firebombing both our phones, demanding to know where we are and when we’re getting here. Parked cars line the street on both sides, but thankfully, they were smart enough to leave the driveway open for us.

Easton hops out of the car and runs around to my side, opening the door for me. He puts out his hand and I take it willingly. We feel like a team lately, one that’s so much stronger than we were before, and that’s exactly what I need.

“Let’s go let all our friends in on the secret,” he tells me.

I look up at him, a wide smile on my face. “I hope he has your eyes.”

Chapter 17



FRIENDS AND FAMILY FILL MY HOUSE, AND AS KENNEDY AND I step inside, everyone goes eerily silent. It's like they're all waiting for the same thing, because they are. *The baby's gender.* It was hard enough not to let it slip when one person at a time tried to sucker it out of me. And now that we've finally gotten to today, the last thing I want is to ruin it at the last minute.

Bringing Kennedy with me, we push our way through the house and into the kitchen. I let go of her hand to get up on the island. Everyone watches me expectantly as I throw my hands in the air.

"It's a boy!" I shout.

Gasps and squeals fill the room as I hop down and wrap my arms around Kennedy. She looks up at me with her chin rested against my chest.

"That was very anticlimactic," she tells me.

I shrug and drop a kiss to her forehead. "I couldn't hold it in anymore. Another minute and I was going to explode."

People start making their way over to us, saying hello and congratulating us on our baby boy. Even just thinking about it makes me feel like nothing in the world could ever bring me down.

I'm having a son.

There's going to be a little boy that looks up to me.

If I'm being completely honest, that fact still scares the ever-living shit out of me. But running isn't an option. This baby is coming into this world, *my* baby, and I refuse to be a deadbeat dad.

"A grandson!" my mom squeals. "Oh, honey. I'm so excited!"

"Thanks, Mom."

She turns to Kennedy, giving her a hug. "And you, dear. How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay. Just tired basically all the time," she answers.

"Then just make Easton do everything. You're allowed." My mom tilts her head at me. "Better yet, Eas, put it in your wedding vows."

My mouth goes dry as I stare back at her. "Subtle, Mom. Really."

"Well, you can't blame me for trying. I couldn't think of a better daughter-in-law than Kennedy."

I watch as Kennedy shifts back and forth on her feet. She doesn't look uncomfortable, per se, but she'd definitely rather be talking about something else. Hell, so would I. It's hard enough not knowing where our relationship is going to go from here, let alone having my mother jamming fantasies of a future wedding down our throats. I'm trying to make her trust me again, not run for the damn hills.

"How about this, I'll promise to make you the first to know when she agrees to marry me, and you promise not to bring it up again until that day happens."

My mother perks up. "So, that's a when, not an if."

“Mom,” I say warningly.

She throws her hands up and backs away. “Okay, okay. I’m going.”

My dad pats me on the back and apologizes on behalf of my mom before following her over to where Amelia and Zayn are standing. Kennedy relaxes and chuckles, giving me a knowing look.

“What?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “Amelia is going to kill you for that promise.”

“Shit. I didn’t think about that.”

“Good job, slick,” she teases. Then after a moment, she looks up at me, and she looks...hopeful. “So, is it a when, not an if?”

I stare back at her, ready to throw my heart on the line for a third time—heartbreak be damned. But before I can answer, one hundred and sixty pounds of pure douchebag comes to stand in front of us, ruining the moment. Immediately, I have every urge to scoop Kennedy up and carry her out caveman style. He smiles at both of us like he’s not mentally plotting how to steal her away from me.

“A boy?” he asks. “That’s great, Ken. Congrats!”

“Thanks, Alec,” she replies, going willingly as he hugs her.

The action is an innocent one but it makes my blood boil. Even being in the same room as her is too close for my liking. The way he lets the hug go on for just a little too long is enough to make me practically homicidal.

As I raise my brows at Kennedy, she backs away and out of his hold. Alec runs his fingers through his hair and grins at my girl.

“You’re going to be such a good mother,” he tells her. “That little boy is going to love the hell out of you.”

“Yeah, well,” I cut in, “anyone would be crazy not to love the hell out of her.”

He keeps his head held high as we make eye contact. “You would think.”

The message is there, written in code and embedded in the silence. He’s not giving up, and I’m not either. Everything I thought I could have been imagining with him was just confirmed, and judging by the way Kennedy doesn’t seem surprised, she knew about it.

“Fucking Christ,” Kennedy mumbles, and we both look away from each other and over to her. “Are you each going to try pissing on me, too?”

Don’t tempt me, I want to say. I’d do whatever it takes to get her the hell away from Alec. There’s something about him that just doesn’t sit right with me, and it’s not just that he’s clearly got a thing for the girl I want to spend the rest of my life with. It’s something darker than that. Something unhinged.

He gives in and sighs. “I’m going to get a drink. Congratulations, again.”

“Thank you.”

As he leaves, Kennedy looks up at me and crosses her arms over her chest. It doesn’t look nearly as intimidating as it once did, since it basically looks like she’s just resting them on her belly, but no part of me underestimates her. She was dangerous before she was pregnant. With these hormones, she’s basically lethal.

“Did you have to do that?” she accuses.

I take the beer that Zayn is handing me and shrug. “He threw down the gauntlet. I just picked it up.”

Z and Carter both smirk at the way Kennedy is glaring at me. If I could read her thoughts, she’s probably thinking about ways she could off me and get away with it, while also realizing how much she would miss me at the same time. But thankfully, she’s quickly distracted when Amelia pushes through Carter and Zayn to get to us.

“I cannot believe you’re giving birth to a miniature Easton,” she says in mock outrage. “Are you *trying* to destroy the world?”

We all laugh, and I won't deny she has a point. "Let's just hope that he turns out like his mom."

Kennedy softens and rests a hand on her stomach. "I don't know. I think turning out like his dad wouldn't be the worst thing ever."

"You didn't grow up with him," Amelia deadpans. "It absolutely would."

I, however, can't be bothered with my sister. I'm too busy admiring Kennedy. Her strength and confidence is always something I've found appealing, but the more it shows, the more I fall in love with her for it.

"Can you believe we're going to have a nephew?" Amelia says to Zayn.

Z snickers at her change of heart. "I heard, babe. It's awesome."

Both Amelia and Kennedy share a glance and then look back at Zayn. He's trying to play it cool, but under the intense stare of those two, he never stood a chance. Finally, Kennedy narrows her eyes at me.

"You told him."

I put my hands up in defense. "I did no such thing."

"He really didn't," Z vouches for me. "Not intentionally, anyway."

Not intentionally? "Wait, what?"

Taking a sip of his beer, he rolls his eyes. "You referred to the baby as *he* like four different times."

"Shit," I grumble.

I should've known I wasn't going to be able to keep it a secret. I mean, from Amelia, sure. But she was constantly bringing it up so I was always aware of the things I was saying. With my best friend though, I'm so comfortable that I didn't even think about it. I'm just glad he didn't point it out. I would've felt like such a dick.

Amelia backhands Zayn in the chest. “You knew and you didn’t tell me?”

“Please remember that you love me,” he says, giving her his best smile.

She doesn’t look happy, but she goes into his arms anyway. “You’re so lucky that’s true.”



AN HOUR LATER, I’M standing outside, smoking a cigarette. Zayn is with me, talking about all the big things we have going on in our lives. Carter and Jace just bought houses and moved in with Tye and Paige, Zayn is currently planning a wedding with Amelia, and I’m having a baby with Kennedy. They’re all such monumentally life-changing things, and yet none of us are freaking the fuck out.

Don’t get me wrong, being responsible for another life is terrifying. There are times when I think about it and my stress level skyrockets. But then there are other times, like now. Times when I think about how incredible it will be to have a family with Kennedy, and everything else fails to matter as much.

“You and Kennedy seem good today,” he says, stating the obvious.

I can’t help but smile as I exhale, a cloud of smoke filling the air around me. “Yeah, we do.”

“Think you two will end up getting back together before the baby is born?”

It’s a question I’ve asked myself hundreds of times, but I don’t think I’ve figured out the answer yet. I’m hopeful, of course, but things are complicated. The only thing I’m focused

on right now is regaining her trust. The rest is just an added bonus.

“I’m not sure,” I answer honestly. “But I know I won’t give up until it happens.”

A wide grin stretches across his face. “Domesticated looks good on you.”

“Says the one who’s engaged,” I clap back.

The two of us laugh, finding irony in it all, until the smile drops off my face when I see Alec coming our way. I thought this fucker left a half hour ago, when it became clear Kennedy wouldn’t spend the entire time only paying attention to him.

“Hey, man,” he greets me, like we’re old friends. “The party is still going, I see.”

It’s obvious he’s trying to get to me, but I won’t let him. “Yep.”

“That’s good, that’s good.” He nods and Zayn gives me a look, wondering what the fuck is up with him. “By the way, it’s good to see you in a better mood. That coke really works magic, doesn’t it?”

My whole body runs cold as Zayn’s eyes meet mine. He turns his attention to Alec, his demeanor cold as stone.

“What coke?”

“Z, it’s nothing,” I protest.

Zayn holds up a hand to stop me from talking. “What fucking coke?”

Alec chuckles. “He’s right, Z. It’s nothing. Easton just seemed like he needed a little pick me up at Carter’s place, so I gave him some. I can get you some, too, if you want.”

“Oh yeah?” he asks, but Alec is too stupid to notice the venom in his tone.

He takes out his phone. “Yeah. My buddy has the best shit you’ll find around here. Let me get you his number.”

Zayn smacks the phone right from his grasp and it falls to the floor. Before Alec can react, he grabs him by the collar of his shirt and gets inches from his face. Alec watches him with wide eyes, and I glance back at the house to make sure Kennedy isn't watching this.

“Take your life-ruining connections and get the fuck out of here,” he sneers. “If I ever catch you giving him even so much as a goddamn Advil, I’ll turn you and your buddy into roadkill. Do you understand me?”

Alec nods rapidly and as soon as Zayn releases him, he takes off running away from the house. I lean my head back against the house and watch as he starts to pace back and forth.

“Zayn, it’s not—”

The way he looks at me sucks the words right from my mouth. “Don’t you dare say another fucking word. This day is important to Kennedy, and we are *not* about to ruin that.”

“But—” I try again.

“The fuck did I just say?” he growls.

I clamp my mouth shut because he’s right. Regardless of the fact that I didn’t even use the drugs, just the idea of a possible relapse would wreck Kennedy. Hell, that’s the only reason I’m not currently slamming Alec’s face into the curb right about now. No part of me believes his act. He’s pissed off that Kennedy is making her way back to me, and now he’s trying to sabotage it. And depending on how this goes, he may just succeed.

Zayn presses a couple buttons on his phone and brings it to his ear. I don’t even need to ask to know who he’s calling. There’s only one possible person it could be in a time where he thinks I’m spiraling back into a world that almost killed me the first time.

“Vaughn,” he says, dread filling his tone. “Yeah. It’s a code black.”

Chapter 18



kennedy

TYE PULLS UP TO CASA-BRONSYN DONOVAN, AND MY BROWS furrow as I see Easton's car still in the driveway. At the party yesterday, we planned on going to breakfast before I came back to his house for wedding planning with Amelia. He was supposed to pick me up at nine, but that came and went.

Then ten.

Then eleven.

He's not answering my texts and calls, and when Amelia hit the ignore button on me, dread coursed through me. I finally decided enough was enough and asked Tye to bring me over here.

As soon as I open the door, you can hear shouting coming from inside. Tye's brows furrow as she looks at me and then back at the house.

"Do you want me to come in with you?" she asks.

I shake my head. "Carter's waiting for you. Go. I'll text you with an update."

“All right, love you.”

“Love you too.”

She pulls away, and I take a deep breath before walking up the steps. The second I open the door, the scene in front of me is what can only be described as a shitshow. Easton, Zayn, and Knox are standing in the living room looking helpless and maybe a little annoyed as Amelia yells at them.

“Meelz,” Zayn tries. “Just calm down.”

As he goes to touch her arm, she yanks it away. “No, fuck you! You promised no more secrets.”

“What’s going on?” I question, and all attention turns to me.

Easton’s eyes widen, but before he can say anything, Amelia answers for him. “They’re hiding something. All fucking three of them.”

“We’re not,” Easton tries, but he’s always been a shit liar.

She spins back around and puts one hand on her hip. “Bullshit. Knox doesn’t fly across the country in the middle of the night for no fucking reason!”

I put my bag down on the ground and walk closer to my best friend, putting a careful hand on her back. “Babes, why don’t we relax for a minute, okay?”

“They’re hiding something,” she repeats. “They were whispering to each other, and when I came downstairs, they clammed up. And Easton grabbed something off the table and won’t tell me what the hell it is.”

Looking over at my ex, I notice his hands are behind his back. His gaze locks with mine and he looks scared. Terrified even. I take a couple steps toward him until he has to look down at me.

“What’s behind your back, Eas?”

He shakes his head. “Don’t. Please.”

I grab his arm and carefully pull it in front of him, seeing a small box in his hand.

Home Drug Test.

My stomach drops as I read the label. I thought my biggest fear was labor, but I was wrong. So fucking wrong. My biggest fear is this, and right now, I feel like I might throw up. Knox throws his head back and exhales while Zayn plops down onto the chair. Easton, however, stays completely still.

“Y-you’re on drugs again?” I croak.

“No,” he answers immediately. “I swear to you, I’m not.”

“Then why is Knox here, and why are they making you take a drug test?”

He drops his head. “Because someone gave me coke, but I didn’t use it!”

The whole story wreaks of an excuse. “Someone just gave you coke, unwarranted and unprovoked?”

“Yes.”

“And you took it?”

“From them, yes, but I didn’t use it.”

I turn to Zayn, trusting him more than I trust most people. “Do you believe him?”

His shoulders sag. “I’m not sure, but I’m not playing around with it either. He didn’t tell me himself. I had to hear it through Alec.”

Wait, what? ”Alec? What does Alec have to do with this?”

Zayn looks at Easton, a silent conversation taking place between the two. I spin around to face the father of my child.

“Tell me,” I demand. “Not him. You. What does Alec have to do with this?”

His words come out in an inaudible mumble at first, like he’s trying to avoid answering me at all.

“What?”

He looks anywhere but back at me and takes a deep breath. “He’s the one that gave it to me.”

If seeing the drug test wasn't a blow to the chest, hearing that definitely is. "N-no. He didn't."

The Alec I've known for years. The one who spent the last couple months being by my side as I tried to make sense of all this. The Alec that I trusted. He wouldn't. He couldn't have.

"Ken," Zayn gets my attention. "He admitted it straight to my face, and offered me some too. Said his friend gets the best shit around here."

My heart breaks as I realize they're not lying. He did this. He actually did it. I stare at the floor as my mind runs through every conversation I've ever had with Alec. All the things we've talked about. The way he's acted. Things he's done.

"Well, it doesn't matter how he got it," Knox says to Zayn. "We have to find out if he used it or not."

"I told you, I didn't!" Easton snaps exasperatedly.

"And how are we supposed to believe you?" Knox growls. "Don't act like it's absurd for us to think you relapsed. Especially with all you've got going on."

At the mention of the baby, I cradle my stomach, and a particular conversation with Alec comes to mind. My breath hitches, and I shake my head.

"Alec doesn't do drugs," I murmur.

"Fuck Alec," Knox says to me. "He can overdose for all I care, and if he's who you're worried about, you can leave."

"Don't fucking talk to her that way," Easton snaps.

I spin around to Amelia, finding her with her arms wrapped around herself as she tries to contain her fear for her brother. She looks back at me, and a tear slips out and rolls down my cheek.

"Alec doesn't do drugs."

Thankfully, she gets what I mean. We both turn to Zayn, and I watch as everything starts to fall into place for him. When it hits him, he closes his eyes and his fist clenches.

"I'm going to kill that piece of shit," he growls.

Knox watches Zayn intently. “I’ll help if you tell me what the fuck is going on.”

Z runs his hands over his face and then looks at Knox and Easton. “He doesn’t do coke. Which means the only reason he had it on him that day—”

“Was to give it to Easton,” Knox finishes for him.

I turn to Easton, feeling myself start to crumble. “I’m so sorry. We were talking one night, and I mentioned one thing I was afraid of was that the responsibility of a baby would make you relapse. It never occurred to me that he would do something like this, I swear.”

He shakes his head and takes a step toward me, putting his hands on my cheeks. “This is not your fault. Do you hear me? None of this is your fault.”

All the right words are coming from his mouth, but it doesn’t stop me from blaming myself. I was the one who told Alec about Easton’s former drug addiction. I basically gave him a Trojan horse. If Easton is lying, if he relapsed, that’s just as much my fault as it is anyone else’s.

“I’m going to take this, and then this will all be put to rest,” he tells me. “Okay?”

I nod and he presses a kiss to the top of my head before going to the bathroom with Knox in tow. Amelia goes over to Zayn and sits on his lap. He wraps his arms around her and breathes in the scent of her hair. She looks up at me.

“He’s right, you know,” she says. “You didn’t cause this.”

I wish I could believe that.

Walking over to the couch, I sit down and let myself get lost in my thoughts. This whole time, I was being so selfish. I should’ve told Alec that there was no future between us the second he mentioned the possibility of one. He saw Easton as competition he needed to sabotage because of me. Because I didn’t have the balls to tell him no. That I’m not interested. That I don’t want him.

A few minutes later, Easton and Knox come back out with a cup full of piss. Easton puts it down on the coffee table while Knox pulls on a pair of gloves. He carefully opens the cup and dips a card with multiple strips inside of it. After twenty seconds, he takes it out and places it on a piece of cardboard ripped off a pizza box.

Seconds pass like hours as we wait the five minutes for the results to show. No one says a word. Easton scrolls through his phone like it's just another day, his other hand resting on my leg. He runs his thumb back and forth in a soothing motion. Finally, the timer goes off, and Knox bends forward to read the results.

"Oh, thank fuck," he says in relief, falling back onto the couch. "It's negative."

The feeling that floods through me is so much more. It's reassuring. It's a weight lifted off my chest. It's everything. Not only did he not relapse, but he had the ability to and he resisted. He had the drugs in his hand, and he overpowered the part of him that craved them.

He fought his demons and he won.

"I told you it would be," Easton says, unfazed.

Zayn looks like he's finally able to breathe again. "Can you really blame us for questioning it?"

E opens his mouth to say something, but then clamps it shut again and shakes his head.

"Hey." Z gets his attention again. "I'm proud of you."

Knox reaches over and pats his shoulder. "You're stronger than we give you credit for."

"I thought about it," he confesses. "Taking them."

"What stopped you?" Amelia asks.

He looks over at me and puts his hand on my belly. "My family."

I'm shocked into silence as he gives me the same smile that made me fall for him in the first place. It's a patient one,

like he could spend all the time in the world just looking at me. The one that shows his vulnerable side just enough to draw me in, but not enough to make him seem less manly. And if I wasn't so busy blaming myself for all of this, I might have kissed him.

Tilting his head to the side, his brows furrow. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I lie with a small grin to make it believable. "The baby is just making me uncomfortable, and super tired. Stress and pregnancy don't mix well."

He runs his knuckle down my cheek. "Why don't you go take a nap in my room? We'll order lunch, and I'll wake you up when it gets here."

I think it over for a second, but then a yawn pushes its way out. "Okay, yeah. A nap sounds good."

Getting up from the couch, I slip by Zayn and Amelia and head up the stairs. As I do, I can hear them still talking about exactly the topic I'd like to avoid now.

"If you didn't do the coke, what did you do with it?" Z asks.

"I flushed it, baggie and all."

I get to the top of the stairs and slip into Easton's room. Every inch of it smells like him, like his cologne, and it relaxes me in a way nothing else can. I climb into his bed and inhale the scent of his pillow.

It's fine.

Everything is fine.



I WAKE TO THE feeling of someone shaking me lightly. The bed sinks beside me, and I open my eyes to find Easton

smiling softly down at me. He pushes my hair out of my face and tucks it behind my ear.

“Hey,” he practically whispers. “There’s pizza downstairs. You hungry?”

I hum. “Not really. I’d kind of rather just sleep.”

“Okay.” He puts a hand on my head to check my temp. “You feel okay, right?”

“Yeah,” I assure him.

“All right. I’ll be downstairs if you need anything.” Bending down to my belly, he speaks lowly. “Love you, little man.”

It’s a simple gesture, one he probably didn’t even do for my benefit, but it makes me melt all the same. He walks out of the room and closes the door behind him, leaving me alone to go back to sleep.

I toss and turn in the bed. Heartburn plagues my chest and makes it difficult to get comfortable again. When it finally becomes too much, at a point where I feel like I may very well throw up, I remember that Easton usually keeps Tums in his nightstand.

The whole thing is a mess as I open it and look inside. It’s as if everything he doesn’t know what to do with gets tossed in here. There are pens, condoms, an old wallet. I push things to the side and finally spot them. As I lift the bottle up, however, my heart sinks.

A tiny baggie filled with white powder sits at the bottom of the drawer, hidden beneath a pile of junk. It doesn’t take an expert in drugs to know what it is, nor what it’s doing here.

I flushed it, baggie and all.

My chest tightens as I realize he lied, and in an instant, I’m rushing to the bathroom and heaving the contents of my stomach into it. When I’m done, time feels like it’s stopped, and everything stands still.

Why does he still have it?

Why did he lie?

And most importantly, what else is he lying about?

I pace back and forth across the room, trying to hold myself together. Part of me wants to go downstairs and demand the truth, but what good would that do? We all believed him when he said he got rid of it.

No.

We need someone who can get through to him.

Someone who doesn't love him enough to let him get away with murder.

I grab my phone from the nightstand and call Tye. My hand shakes as I hold the device to my ear, and when she finally answers, I say the words I never thought would come out of my mouth.

"I need you to send me Tessa's phone number."

Chapter 19



WE'RE SITTING AROUND, EATING PIZZA AND DRINKING BEER. Everything feels calmer now, the stress of whether or not I'm back on drugs is gone, but something seems to still be bothering Zayn. He's distant. Spaced out. He's not laughing when Knox cracks a joke about how he proposed to Amelia in a rush to be the first one to get engaged. He doesn't even freak out when we're finally let in on the insane way he plans on proposing to Delaney, with ink permanently embedded into his skin.

"What the fuck are you going to do if she says no?" I question in almost panic.

His jaw locks and he drops his pizza back on his plate. "E, you're my boy, but insinuate that I won't be spending the rest of my life with that girl again, and us thinking you're back on drugs will be the least of your worries."

I look over at Zayn who has barely touched his food, but his third beer is long gone. "Are you hearing this?"

He simply nods. There's no emotion. No humor. No little comment that Knox always does what Knox wants, and the

only person who can get him to change his mind about anything is Delaney. Not even a joke about him being whipped.

“All right, what’s wrong now?” I ask him, refusing to sit in this tension any longer. “I took the test. Knox watched me piss in the cup.”

“A sight I wish I could wash from my brain with acid,” he quips.

I roll my eyes at his dramatics and focus back on Z. “What’s up, man?”

He shrugs. “You didn’t tell me.”

“What?”

“I’ve always been there to help you with this shit, and when Alec gave you drugs, you didn’t tell me.”

My head drops, and I exhale slowly before looking back up. “I didn’t tell you *because* you’ve always been there for me. I watched you practically ruin your life trying to make sure I didn’t end up back on that shit. Everything is back on track for you, and I didn’t want to watch you lose your mind worrying about me again. I had it under control.”

He watches me, as if he’s trying to figure out if I’m telling the truth or not, but then he sighs and leans back in his chair. “Fine, but if there is a next time, you fucking tell me. I don’t care if you’re tempted or not. We’re brothers, E. You tell me.”

“Okay,” I promise. “I’ll tell you.”

That seems to relax him because he turns to Knox with a smirk. “And you’re a fucking ballsy dumbass. I’ve told you that already.”

He chuckles. “You’re just mad you didn’t think of it.”

Amelia rolls her eyes. “He proposed with pyrotechnics. I don’t think there is a more Zayn way of doing it. But E is right, Knox. What if she says no?”

Knox puts a hand on his chest. “Do all the fucking Donovans have no faith in my relationship? Damn, princess. I

thought at least you were on my side.”

The corners of my mouth raise as it finally feels like the laidback hangouts we like to enjoy, but that smile gets wiped right off my face the moment the door opens and Tessa steps in with Delaney.

Fuck.

“No,” I say instantly. “You can’t fucking be here.”

“E,” Tess breathes.

She looks upset. Like there is something plaguing her mind. But I can’t find it in me to care right now. Not with what she’s risking by being here.

I shake my head. “Don’t fucking *E* me. You can’t be here!” Turning to Delaney, my eyes narrow. “What the fuck, Laney? I’m sorry you have fucking codependency issues, but why would you bring her here?”

“Watch your fucking mouth, Donovan,” Knox growls.

Fucking Christ. I get up and take a couple steps toward them, trying to get them right back out the door. “Tess, you have to go. Kennedy is upstairs and if she comes down and sees you here... You just have to go.”

“Who do you think called her?” Kennedy’s voice breaks through the tension.

I turn around to see her walking down the stairs. Dried tears stain her cheeks as she comes toward me, and I can’t even open my mouth to speak. She looks broken. Destroyed, even.

Tessa steps back to let her pass by, and she comes to stand in front of me. She stares up at me with pain in her eyes, swallowing harshly before she speaks.

“What did you do with the coke, Easton?” she asks.

All eyes in the room are focused on the two of us as I feel my heart start to pound. “I...I...”

Before a lie slips from my lips, she lifts her closed hand and flips it over, opening it to reveal the little baggie of coke

Alec gave me. My mouth goes dry as I stare at it, and if there's ever been a time I wanted to get high, it's now.

Zayn gets up from his seat and sees what Kennedy is holding. A low growl emits from the back of his throat as his fist clenches.

"Fuck!" he screams, and punches the wall with all the force he has, leaving a hole behind in its place.

"Sit down, Easton," Tessa tells me.

I look at her and then back at Kennedy, who now won't meet my eyes.

I screwed up.

Again.



SMOKE FILLS MY LUNGS as I inhale deeply. After being lectured for an hour, I need the nicotine more than air at this point. There was nothing I could say that would make it better after Kennedy found the coke in my nightstand. I just sat there and listened to everyone as I stared at where Amelia was comforting Kennedy. She couldn't even look at me.

We're back to that.

Back to her mentally debating whether or not I'm good enough for the baby.

Good enough for her.

I should've known I'd fuck it up. If she was really smart, she'd leave me in her rearview mirror and never look back. That's what would be best for her *and* the baby. But I'm too fucking selfish to leave them. I want them too much.

I want our family.

And that makes me an asshole.

Tess slips out the door and comes to sit next to me. She carefully takes the cigarette from me and takes a puff before hanging it back. No words come from her mouth as she waits for me to speak first.

“Go ahead,” I tell her. “I’ve heard almost everyone else yell at me.”

She exhales a cloud of smoke. “No one was yelling at you in there. We just don’t want to see you fall back into that shit.”

“But I didn’t! I didn’t even so much as open the baggie!”

“But you didn’t throw it away, either,” she points out. “Why didn’t you get rid of it?”

I keep my eyes focused on the tree in the backyard. “I forgot—”

“Easton fucking Donovan, don’t you dare even think about lying to me right now,” she snaps. “This is *me* you’re talking to.”

Taking a deep breath, I rub the back of my neck and then relax. She’s right. This is Tess. The same girl that has listened to what goes on in my fucked up mind and never once gave up on me.

“I guess I just liked knowing it was there,” I confess. “That if things went wrong, if shit hit the fan, it was there.”

“Fair enough.”

“But I also liked knowing I was resisting it,” I continue. “It was like I was proving to myself that I’m strong enough to be faced with it and not give in. Drugs used to have such a strong hold on me. So, to know that for once, I was stronger than that urge, it’s liberating.”

She puts a hand on my arm. “E, you’ve been stronger than that urge since the day you quit. Give yourself some more credit.” Then she quickly pulls her hand away. “Shit. I probably shouldn’t do that. I don’t want to give Kennedy the wrong idea.”

“I still can’t believe she called you,” I say honestly.

“She’s worried about you, and she knew if anyone could get through to you, it’s me.”

“She could get through to me.”

“Does she know that?”

I don’t respond because I’m afraid of the answer. Of course she doesn’t. I’ve done nothing to make her believe she has any part of me that no one else has. I’ve been trying to gain her trust back, but still haven’t given her anything to make her feel important.

As if Tessa can read my thoughts, she nudges me. “You need to tell her.”

“It’s not my story to tell, Tess.”

She scoffs. “Bullshit it’s not. That night fucked you up just as much as it did me, if not more.”

Fear simmers beneath the surface at having to mentally go back there. To relive the night that changed my life. The night that made me wish I were dead. The events of that night have never been said out loud, at least not in detail. I explained a sugarcoated version to Amelia when she found out about my former addiction, but that’s the extent of it.

“What if she hates me?” I speak my biggest fear.

“She loves you,” Tessa assures me. “If you can’t have faith in anything, have faith in that.”

As she gets up to go back inside, no doubt to tell Kennedy to come out here, I stop her.

“Tess?” She glances back at me. “Thanks for coming.”

Her eyes roll playfully as she smiles. “Shut up, dick. You know I’ll always be here for you.”

Chapter 20



kennedy

STEPPING OUTSIDE, I CLOSE THE DOOR BEHIND ME AND SHRINK further into Easton's hoodie. Not because it's cold out, but because I need the comfort it provides. After finding out he lied about what he did with the drugs, it's as if I don't know which way is up. My brain is a scrambled mess of thoughts, and all I want to do is curl into a ball and close my eyes until it goes away.

Easton sits on the steps and smokes his cigarette. I almost just want to sit here and watch him. From the way tattoos cover his skin and the smoke he exhales lingers in the air, he's mesmerizing. But letting myself do that means letting myself get lost in him again, and that is one thing I won't do right now.

"Tessa said you wanted to see me," I say as I sit down.

He won't look at me. Won't even so much as glance in my direction. "Please don't hate me after this."

"You're scaring me."

“There was a point where I scared myself.” He takes another puff of his cigarette, and when he exhales, he begins. “Before I came here, I was at UCLA. Tess and I had broken up before I left for school, and it sucked. I won’t lie. The whole time we were together, I convinced myself we were just casual. But when I left, it didn’t feel very casual anymore.”

I pull the sleeves over my hands as I listen, afraid of what comes next but not saying anything that will interrupt him.

“My roommate and a couple of our friends were taking pills, and anytime they did, they offered some to me. They promised it would help with the pain of missing Tess, so one day, I gave in and took them. For the first time, something helped. And that one time led to a dependency.

“When I realized I had a problem, I panicked. I transferred to NHU and moved home. In my mind, if I got my old life back, the one without the drug problem, that everything would be fine. But when I tried to get Tess back, she had already moved on with Asher.”

“Wait,” I stop him and take a breath. “I appreciate you telling me all this, but if it ends with you getting back with Tessa, I’d rather be left in the dark.”

He shakes his head. “That’s not how it ends. She’s happy in her relationship, and she’s not the girl I want anymore.”

“Okay,” I say with a nod. “You can keep going then.”

“That doesn’t mean it won’t still hurt though.”

“That’s okay. I’m a big girl. I can take it.”

Looking away from me, he doesn’t fight it and continues. “When she shot me down, I felt the same way I did at UCLA. So, I fell back into the pills, and this time, I fell deeper. I got wrapped up with Blade and started working for him in exchange for drugs. I was sucked into a black hole. And when Tessa trusted me to help her after she and Asher broke up, I sucked her in with me.

“She started taking the pills for the same reason I did—to get over the pain of a breakup. If I wasn’t so wrapped up in having her attention again, I might’ve noticed how bad she

was slipping. But I didn't. Not until it was almost too late, anyway."

He takes another puff of his cigarette, and I can tell this is hard for him to talk about. Goosebumps raise across his skin, and he twitches like he's seeing something different from his backyard.

"Your nightmares?" I ask carefully.

He nods. "One night, Zayn and I were having a party. Tess was high and drunk and in a good mood for once, until she saw a guy who had tried slipping something into her drink a couple months before that. I beat the shit out of him, of course. I'd do that for any girl. But he got a few hits in, too. Tess brought me upstairs to clean me up, and things got...out of hand.

"Maybe it was the adrenaline that clouded my judgment or the mix of drugs and alcohol, but I manipulated her into sleeping with me. If you ask her, she swears it wasn't rape and she yells at me when I call it that, but once I was in my right frame of mind, I realized how little she was into it."

Pausing, he runs a hand over his face and tries to contain his emotions. I reach over and take his hand in mine so he knows I'm not going anywhere.

"I left my bedroom feeling like I was on top of the world, but she felt lower than she ever has in her life. I had told her where to find my stash so she could take another one, and I went down to grab a beer. When I got back, she had taken them all.

"The fact that she's alive is a miracle, because when she left my house on a stretcher that night, she was anything but. The paramedics were doing CPR to keep her heart beating but as they closed the doors, I heard one of them radio in that she had no pulse."

I tighten my grip on his hand. "But she's okay. She's right inside. She's fine now. You don't have to blame yourself."

He won't hear any of it as he shakes his head. "She's okay now because of Delaney and Asher and herself. The condition

she's in now is in no way thanks to me." Turning to face me, he stares into my eyes. "I ruined her, Kennedy, and I am so fucking afraid that I'm going to do the same to you. To our child."

"You won't," I say assuredly. "I know you won't, because you love us. Both of us. And you're smarter now. You didn't take the drugs Alec gave you, because you're smarter now."

"What if I do?" His voice shakes as his vulnerability shows.

I reach up and place a hand on his cheek. "You won't. Tessa wasn't the only one who got better after that night. And maybe it took you a little longer than it did her, but you did it. You and Tessa both did."

He leans forward and rests his forehead on mine, finally letting the tension leave his body. "You called her."

It was a move that shocked even me, if I'm honest, but I felt helpless. I remembered that he was confiding in her. His thoughts. His fears. His nightmares. The only thing I wanted in that moment was for him to be okay. And she came running the second I asked her to. Not because she's in love with him, or because they share a romantic history, but because he's her friend and she cares. I think a part of me will always be uncomfortable when it comes to her, but this is a good step.

"Yeah," I sigh. "She's not the worst."

His lips ghost across my own, and I can already feel the electricity between us. It's so tempting to just lean in and close the distance between us, but...

"Easton," I breathe. "Please. Don't."

He stops trying to kiss me and backs away. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," I tell him. "You took a step in the right direction today. I appreciate you being open and honest with me. But that doesn't change the big step back we took earlier. I'm not going anywhere, but I also need to know that you're not going to hide drugs in your nightstand for you to take if things get tough."

His brows furrow. “How did you...”

“Because I know you better than you think I do,” I answer simply. “We’re having a baby, Easton. Things are *going* to get hard. I just want to know that I don’t need to worry about you when I have a million other things to worry about.”

A look of determination spreads across his face as he stands up and puts his hand out for me to take. He pulls me into the house and over to our friends.

“Give me the coke,” he demands.

They all look at him like he’s lost his mind, until Zayn and Knox nod at Tessa. She pulls the baggie out of her back pocket and hands it to him. He doesn’t let go of me until we get into the bathroom. Opening the baggie, he looks down at the coke inside of it and then pours it right into the toilet. Once it’s all ruined, he drops the bag in it too and flushes it down.

“I will do whatever it takes to show you that you don’t need to worry about me,” he says to me as it disappears.

And for the first time in a long time, I believe him.



WE ALL SIT IN the living room, joking around and just having a good time. Being near Tessa, I can see why she fits in with them. She doesn’t take any of their shit and is the last person to agree with something simply because everyone else is. Honestly, she’s kind of intimidating, but I think that’s just part of her strength. Though what I can’t figure out is how she and Delaney are twins. They look similar, but their personalities couldn’t be more different.

Easton keeps me right next to him and makes sure I know that if I want it, I have his complete attention. And while he’s cracked some jokes with Tessa that I don’t understand because I wasn’t there, it’s only because they’re friends.

My phone vibrates in my pocket for the fourth time in two minutes, and I hit the ignore button. He's the last person I want to talk to right now, and if he knows what's good for him, he'll stop calling. But of course it starts to vibrate again, just showing that he has a death wish.

"What the fuck do you want?" I answer, and the whole room goes quiet.

Alec sighs in relief. "You haven't answered me all day. I was worried."

"Don't be," I scoff. "I'm fine and so is Easton, no thanks to you."

"Ken, you've got it all wrong. Just come talk to me," he pleads. "I'm outside."

Of course, he is, because intruding in things he doesn't belong in is apparently a specialty of his. "Well, I'm not home."

"I know," he says. "I'm outside Easton's."

Zayn and Easton are sitting on either side of me and can hear Alec through the phone, and as he says that, their heads whip toward each other. Zayn jumps up and runs over to the window, then looks back at Easton and nods. Anger courses through me as I hang up the phone and storm out the door. Alec is standing in the street when I get out there.

"You have a lot of fucking nerve showing up here," I sneer, not paying attention to the crowd that pours out of the house to see what happens.

Alec raises his hands in defense. "You have to listen to me. He asked for them. Practically begged me!"

"He begged for them," I repeat back to him with my words practically dripping venom. "He didn't even fucking use it, Alec!"

"Wait, Alec?" Knox asks. "This is the fucker responsible for this shit?"

"Yeah," Easton answers. "But don't—"

He can't even finish his sentence before Knox is already walking toward Alec. "No, fuck that. You like messing with people's lives, you little shit? Is that it?"

"Man, get out of my face," Alec huffs, but Knox isn't having it.

"I don't think so. You want to fuck with my friends, you fuck with me," he growls.

It all happens in a split second. As Knox gets closer in Alec's face, Alec tries to push him away. Knox takes a step back and then swings his fist full force into Alec's cheek. The swings don't stop as he takes him to the ground. I've heard stories about Knox's history of fighting, knowing he even trained Zayn, but seeing it in person is something completely different.

"Knox!" I scream.

Alec doesn't stand a chance against him, and after trying to throw a few punches, he resorts to simply covering himself from the attack. Panic fills my chest as I scream Knox's name again, but he's not listening to me. I go to try pulling him off when Amelia's voice echoes through the air.

"Kennedy!" she yells. "The baby!"

Fuck. I stop in my tracks and run my fingers through my hair. Finally, I do the one thing I can think of to get him to stop. I turn to face the only person who has any control over him.

"Delaney," I beg. "Please."

She glances at Tessa before stepping closer to the fight. "Knox."

With a practiced skill, like she's used to this kind of thing, she puts a hand on his arm and his attention immediately goes from Alec to her.

"That's enough."

He shakes his head. "But he—"

"I know," she says softly. "Come on."

She pulls him back and he goes willingly, wiping Alec's blood off his fist and onto his jeans. Meanwhile, Alec stands up and looks at me. I'm pretty sure his nose is broken, and he spits blood out onto the street.

"Do you see what he did to me?" he shouts. "These are the kind of people you want to be around? The kind of people you want your baby around?"

"Oh, fuck no," Easton says and goes to step toward him, but at least with him, I have more of a say.

I put my hands on Easton's chest and hold him back. "No. Let me handle this."

Thankfully, he doesn't put up a fight, but it's clear if Alec tries anything, there will be no stopping him. I spin around to face Alec again and shake my head.

"You did this to yourself," I say simply. "I trusted you! I confided in you, and you used it against him!"

"I was just trying to show you what a lowlife he is!"

"Recovering from an addiction doesn't make him a lowlife, but trying to get him to relapse for your own personal gain sure as hell makes you one."

A humorless laugh bubbles out of him. "So that's it? You're picking him?"

"I was always going to pick him," I deadpan.

He looks at me in disgust. "You're making a mistake. I could take care of you. You *and* the baby."

I scoff and roll my eyes. "You're not hearing me. I will never want you! Things between you and I are *never* going to happen! If you thought otherwise, that's on you. After today, I never want to see you again. Now leave, before I let Knox have at you again."

Pulling his gaze away from me, he looks at Knox, who cracks his knuckles with an evil grin. Alec huffs and shakes his head before climbing in his truck and driving away. Everyone starts to head back inside, but Easton is too busy watching me. He comes over and wipes a tear from my cheek,

the only one I'll shed for the loss of someone I thought was a friend.

"You okay?"

I look up at him and nod.

"Come here," he tells me and pulls me into a hug, kissing the top of my head. "I've got you."

And I think he just might.



THE CAR DRIVES DOWN the street, but I have no idea where we're going. The blindfold does its job in making sure I can't see a thing. Tye and Amelia have music blasting in my ears so I can't even hear what they're talking about, until the car comes to a stop and they hit pause on the music.

"Are we there yet?" I ask. "Not that I know where *there* is."

Amelia chuckles. "Almost. I just need you to come with us."

The two of them help me out of the car and start leading me somewhere unbeknownst to me. One of them walks in front while the other holds my hips from behind.

"If you walk me into something, I swear to God, I'll throw hands," I tell them.

Amelia laughs but Tye isn't as amused. "You're pregnant, and even if you weren't, you couldn't take me."

"I know," I agree. "That's why I keep you on my good side. You're my little pit bull."

They lead me into what feels like an elevator, and Amelia reads off a code. I almost fall as it jerks and we're lifted up. I swear, my balance would be better if I could fucking see.

When the elevator dings and I hear the doors open, they lead me out of it.

“Are you ready?” Meelz asks.

I nod and she pulls the blindfold off to reveal a penthouse, decorated in blue baby decor.

“Happy surprise baby shower!” Amelia and Tye yell together.

Tessa and Delaney are standing there, along with Paige and a few of the girls from cheerleading. My eyes tear up as I take it all in. It’s perfection, all the way down to the giant blue blocks that spell out DONOVAN.

“Where are we?” I question as I look around, seeing some football memorabilia.

“Tessa and Asher’s penthouse,” Amelia answers.

Tye shrugs. “We would have done it at my house, but you live there, and it’s a little hard to set up a surprise when you’re in the house.”

Tess comes over and gives me a warm smile. “They worked hard for this. You’re a lucky girl.”

“Thanks,” I reply. “I really do have the best friends.”

She nods. “Well, I’ll get out of your hair. Tye, just text me when you’re done. Okay?”

“Sure thing.”

As Tessa and Delaney go to leave, something comes over me that I can’t explain. And before I can second guess it, I turn around and call her name.

“Stay,” I tell her, shocking both Tye and Amelia. “It’ll be fun.”

Chapter 21



HAVE YOU EVER MET SOMEONE THAT YOU COULD JUST STARE at all day? For me, that's Kennedy. I stare down at my phone with an involuntary smile on my face as I look over the picture Amelia sent me. The phrase pregnancy glow is tossed around but I never thought it was real. As I sit here looking at this picture of Kennedy, I see it.

She's radiant.

She's beautiful.

When Amelia said that her and Tye wanted to throw Kennedy a last minute surprise baby shower after everything that went down yesterday, I thought they were fucking nuts. I told her that there was no way they would be able to pull something like that off. I should've known better than to underestimate my little sister.

The door opens and Zayn walks in with Knox in tow. Behind them are two ugly mugs I haven't seen in months, Gage and Stone. The five of us were a crew in high school, ruling the place with an iron fist—normally one with some kind of bottle clenched in it. But then Knox moved across the

country with Delaney and these two fuckers went off to college. Hell, even I did before I ended up coming back.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I ask with a grin on my face.

“You know, just being the last to find out our best friend is having a kid,” Stone grumbles.

I chuckle and shake my head, getting up to give them each a bro-hug.

“Don’t listen to him,” Gage tells me. “His girlfriend has just been getting on his case about getting engaged or having a kid, and he’s blaming you three.”

Stone throws his hands in the air. “Well if she didn’t hear about all of this news when I did, which was all at once, by the way, I wouldn’t have a damn issue!”

Knox, who disappeared into the kitchen when they got here, comes out with beers for all of us. He shoves one into Stone’s stomach a little harder than necessary.

“Drink this and pull the thong out of your ass,” he tells him. “Commitment isn’t the worst thing in the world.”

Gage scoffs. “Says the guy who was practically allergic to it in high school.”

He has a point. Before Delaney came along, we were sure he would die single. Probably with his dick buried inside some chick, but single all the same. But from the second she barged into his life, he no longer had eyes for anyone else. Not even when we went to the strip club for Stone’s eighteenth birthday. And that was long before they so much as kissed. Tits were practically in his face, and he was staring down at his phone, texting Delaney.

“What’s that saying?” Knox asks. “All it takes is finding the right person?”

Stone laughs and damn near spits out his beer. “Fuck me, man. He’s turned into Nicholas Sparks.”

Knox glares at Zayn. “Remind me why we needed to invite them?”

“Easton’s bro-shower!” he exclaims, and I’m almost positive he’s high as a kite.

“What the fuck is a bro-shower?” I ask.

Zayn chuckles. “Well, this narcissistic son-of-a-bitch was annoyed that he wasn’t invited to Kennedy’s baby shower.”

“Still bullshit,” Knox grumbles.

Z waves him off. “So we decided to throw you a bro-shower, with beer!”

“Pretty sure that’s not a thing,” I murmur.

Gage watches Zayn with pure amusement. “It’s not, but can I please have some of whatever you smoked?”

Knox throws himself onto the couch. “He makes it sound like this was all my idea. He’s the one who wanted to throw you a party, but a *I’m sorry we thought you were on drugs* party is definitely not a thing.”

“Okay, fine,” I cave. “A bro-shower it is. But if you guys expect me to play pin the diaper on the baby, we’re going to have some issues. Especially cause I’m pretty sure Zayn couldn’t do that right now even without a blindfold.”

Smirking, Knox shakes his head. “We’ve got better ideas.”



THE NEXT COUPLE HOURS are spent chugging beer out of baby bottles and racing to see who can change a diaper on a baby doll the fastest. The loser becomes beer bitch for the next round, needing to go into the kitchen to get us more beer. It’s all shit that I never saw myself doing, and yet I’m having the time of my life doing it. It’s the Knox version of a baby shower.

In between games that make me question our sanity, we sit around and bullshit—reliving memories from high school and before. The four of them share a couple blunts, but I sit out. While marijuana wasn't the drug I had an issue with, it's still a drug, and I don't want Kennedy to get the wrong idea.

“So,” Knox says, with eyes glazed over. “Are you prepared for birth? Because I heard women poop on the table.”

Stone starts to giggle. “That can't be true. Girls don't poop.”

Gage stares at him like he's an alien. “How you've made it halfway through college is the eighth wonder of the world.”

“No seriously,” Knox presses. “They poop when pushing out the baby!”

Sometimes it sucks being the only sober one, though this beer is giving me a decent buzz. “A whole ass baby is going to be coming out of a hole no bigger than my cock. Whether or not she poops is really not my concern there.”

Knox snorts. “Suit yourself. But you'll never be able to unsee that.”

“What are you going to do when you have a kid?” Zayn asks. “Just not look?”

The smile is wiped straight from Knox's face. “In what world do you think I'm having a fucking kid?”

“The world where Delaney wants one,” I point out.

Zayn continues for me. “She'll look at you with those Bambi eyes and tell you she wants to have a baby, and like usual, you won't be able to deny her. Anything she wants, it's hers. Face it, Vaughn. You're whipped when it comes to her.”

He sits there and stares into his beer for a minute before throwing his head back against the couch. “Oh shit, I'm going to have a kid. What am I even going to name it? It better not be a girl. If I have a girl, chastity belts will be coming back in style. I don't give a fuck.”

Reaching over, Zayn pats him on the shoulder. “Don't worry. I'm sure that's still at least a couple years out.”

“Better be,” Knox groans. “I don’t want to share her. Not yet.”

Until now, that’s one thing that never occurred to me. *I’m going to have to share Kennedy.* But when I think about it, there’s something about picturing her rocking our baby to sleep that makes me okay with that. And besides, it keeps her in my life for the long term. Like Knox said earlier, commitment isn’t the worst thing in the world.

“So,” Gage changes the subject. “Did you go to any baby classes yet? Like Lamaze or whatever?”

“The fuck is Lamaze?” Knox spits. “Sounds like yoga with llamas.”

“Yoga with llamas?” Zayn deadpans. “Seriously?”

Knox shrugs. “They do it with goats, apparently.”

We all stare at him, dumbfounded, until I open my mouth. “What do you do, just sit around and Google useless facts all day long?”

“Ay! Knowing women shit when giving birth is not useless. Just you wait. You’re going to call me afterward and tell me you can never look at Kennedy the same way again.”

I roll my eyes and focus back on Gage. “No, we haven’t. I don’t think we need it, though.”

“Bullshit you don’t,” he says. “When my mom was pregnant with half-brother number three, she took step-daddy-dearest to Lamaze, and he had to learn how to tell her to breathe.”

Knox’s face contorts in horror. “They fucking forget how to breathe, too? Nope. Never having a kid. I don’t care what Bambi wants.”

Stone is laughing so hard *he* forgets how to breathe, while Zayn just watches Knox like he’s the most interesting thing he’s ever seen. Meanwhile, Gage pulls a Lamaze tutorial video up on his phone. It shows a man sitting behind a pregnant woman as he walks her through breathing techniques that help with the pain of contractions. Knox, being the little shit he is,

gets up and grabs one of the baby dolls before shoving it under his shirt.

“Come on, Daddy,” he says to me with the utmost seriousness. “You’re going to walk me through birthing this thing.”

I stare back at him, emotionless. “Call me Daddy again and I will literally vomit all over you.”

“Better get over here then.”

He sits on the floor, and I reluctantly get up and sit behind him. He leans back against me and bats his eyelashes.

“Darling, I’m scared,” he says with a southern accent he definitely doesn’t have.

I chuckle. “It’ll be fine, Sweet Cheeks. Just breathe.”

He throws a hand on his forehead dramatically. “But I forgot how! We never went to llama yoga!”

“I can’t do this,” I say, going to get up when Knox screams.

“Don’t leave me!” he shrieks. “I’m having our baby and it hurts! Help me breathe, Pudding!”

Zayn jumps up from the couch and positions himself in front of Knox, like he’s going to catch the baby when it shoots out like a football. Meanwhile, Gage and Stone breathe the way I’m supposed to be telling Knox to do.

Hee hee hoo. Hee hee hoo.

Knox mimics the breathing pattern with the dramatics of a teenager just reaching puberty. As he pretends to push, he pulls the baby out from under his shirt slowly.

“I see the head!” Zayn shouts, putting his hands out like a fucking quarterback. “Dr. Bronsyn, ready for delivery.”

We’re all doing the Lamaze breathing technique with the baby halfway out from under his shirt, and he’s so invested in his character that he’s sweating, when the door opens. Kennedy, Amelia, and Delaney stand there, staring at us like a circus act. We all go still for a moment, before Knox jumps

right back into character and makes some sort of animalistic noise as he pulls the baby out from under his shirt. Zayn catches the baby doll as it goes flying, and Knox sags against me like he actually just birthed a child.

Amelia is laughing so hard I think she might actually piss herself. Kennedy looks like she's never been so confused in her life. And Delaney? Well, Delaney just pinches the bridge of her nose and shakes her head.

“Why do I find you attractive?” she murmurs.

He smiles his best Knox smile up at her. “It's you and me forever, Bambi.”



A FEW DAYS LATER, I'm walking through the baby store with Kennedy as we pick up the rest of the things we need. She got a lot from the shower, our friends being rather generous, but Tessa gave her a \$1,000 gift card for anything we still need and didn't get. I follow dotingly behind Kennedy, knowing that if I take the lead, we'll just walk in circles. I don't know the first thing about what's needed for a baby, other than clothes and diapers.

We go through the aisles as she picks out things like bedding, a mobile, and pacifiers. When we get near the bottles, I notice a weird looking machine. I pick it up and look it over. There's a mask looking cup thing with a bottle underneath it, and it connects to a machine.

“What is this?” I ask, putting it to my mouth. “Some kind of breathing machine or something?”

Kennedy looks over at me and smirks. “That's a breast pump.”

In an instant, I toss it back on the shelf like it's diseased and start wiping my mouth vigorously. Kennedy chuckles and shakes her head as she starts walking away.

"Relax, dummy," she calls back. "It's unused."

I sigh in relief and follow behind her again, refusing to touch anything else.

I've learned my lesson.



WE GET BACK TO my place a few long hours later. I pull into the driveway and can already tell Kennedy is tired. She might not quite be ready to pop yet, but being over halfway through her pregnancy, being on her feet is starting to become more difficult than it used to be.

"Why don't you go inside and sit on the couch," I suggest. "I'll carry all the bags in."

She shakes her head. "I can help. Honest. I'm fine."

I give her a knowing look. "You're not, and that's okay. You're tired from making our tiny human from scratch all day. Go relax. I've got this."

Her shoulders sag as she gives in, and she smiles thankfully as she climbs out of the car and heads inside. I manage to grab all the bags within three trips, and by the third, Kennedy is fast asleep on the couch.

I walk carefully over to her, making sure not to wake her. She looks so beautiful as she sleeps peacefully. Her shirt rides up slightly and reveals her bump, and I've never felt such a possessiveness over anyone in my life. I want to stand here and guard her as she sleeps, making sure no harm can come to her or our baby.

Grabbing the blanket from the back of the couch, I drape it over her and press a soft kiss to her forehead. Once she's tucked in, I sit on the floor in front of her and lean my head back, allowing myself to feel close to her.

It's warm.

It's comforting.

It's everything.

Chapter 22



kennedy

OUR SENIOR YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL IS SUPPOSED TO PREPARE us for college. We're taught responsibility and being accountable for our own actions. For our own grades. But one thing that nothing can prepare you for is finals. And more specifically, finals while super pregnant.

I stare at the words on the page, but it might as well be complete gibberish. Nothing I read is sticking anymore. I read my own handwriting, and by the time I'm done, I cannot remember what the hell I just read and need to read it again. It's a vicious cycle that never ends.

Sleep calls to me like a siren. My eyes droop closed, and before I can stop it, I'm done for. I fall asleep with my face smushed into the page, not even caring if I wake up with pen on my face.



TYE WALKS INTO THE room, sporting an annoyed glare that could put anyone in their place. It's nice to know that I'm not the only one in a grumpy mood leading up to finals week, but Tye is frightening on her best day. When she's in a bad mood, take fucking cover.

"You can't just walk away from me," Carter says as he follows her out of their bedroom.

"Really?" she asks sarcastically. "Because I just did."

He scoffs. "You're being ridiculous."

"No. Ridiculous is waking up alone for the third time this week because you fell asleep next door...again!"

"I told you," he says, throwing his head back. "We were drinking and playing video games and we lost track of time. I didn't even realize I fell asleep until this morning."

She puts a hand on her hip. "And how does Paige feel about your codependency issues?"

"She's known Jace and me since we were kids, and we don't have codependency issues."

"Whatever." She gives him a dirty look. "Why don't you just go live there? It would be easier than having to walk back here every morning to shower and get dressed."

He rolls his eyes. "I'm not living with Jace."

"No," she says decidedly. "You are. Get out."

"What?"

"You heard me. Take what's yours and get the fuck out!"

He tilts his head, presses his lips together, and then walks straight up to Tye, throws her over his shoulders, and starts

walking toward the door. Tye kicks her feet and punches at his back, but he doesn't even flinch.

“What the fuck do you think you're doing, Trayland?” she shouts.

“Exactly what you told me to,” he answers. “Taking what's mine and getting the fuck out.”

I can't help but chuckle as that only seems to piss her off more. She maneuvers herself around and then sinks her teeth into his back. Carter hisses in pain and lands a hard smack to her ass. The action makes her arch her back enough so he's holding her straight up. He lets her slide down his body and then pins her to the wall. A hand comes to cover her throat, and in the same second, his mouth is on hers.

Making every effort to keep studying, I try to ignore the intense make-out session happening right across the room. But the second a pornographic moan leaves Tye's mouth, that's the end of it. I gather up my things as quickly as possible and almost run to my bedroom—gagging at the way Carter's dirty talk echoes through the house and groaning at the way my body craves someone to do that to me.

It's been way too fucking long.



I WALK OUT OF my last final, feeling like the weight of the world was just taken off my shoulders. Easton leans against the wall as I turn the corner, and when he sees me, he smiles.

“How'd it go?” he asks.

“Ugh, let's just say I'm glad it's over.”

Chuckling, he drapes an arm around my shoulder. “You know what the end of finals means, right?”

My brows furrow. “I get to sleep at night?”

“Damn, Ken,” he says, releasing me. “Pregnancy’s changed you.”

“You can thank yourself for that, Mr. I-didn’t-feel-it-break.”

He exhales and turns around to face me while walking backward. “Okay, fine. I’ll take the blame for that, but only if you come to the End of Finals party tonight at my place.”

Already shaking my head, I eye him nervously. “I don’t think so. I’m showing now. I don’t want to be that trashy pregnant chick who is still going to parties.”

“Okay one, you could never be *that trashy pregnant chick*,” he points out. “And two, as long as you’re not drinking, who cares? You can even wear one of my hoodies to disguise your belly a little.”

The idea of a party does sound nice. It’s been an exhausting past few weeks, and the last party we went to was Tye and Carter’s housewarming. Plus, I can only imagine how many pictures Amelia is going to send me if I don’t come—sad-face selfies all over the house.

“Fine,” I agree. “But if people start whispering to each other about me and I feel uncomfortable, I’m retreating up to your room for the rest of the night.”

“Deal!” He smiles at me teasingly. “I’ll pick up some juice when I go to the liquor store later.”

My jaw locks. “I hate you.”

“You can’t.”

Ugh, if that isn’t the fucking truth. As we walk in sync with each other, an idea pops into my head. I turn to Easton, who is already texting on his phone.

“Hey,” I get his attention. “You should invite Tessa.”

His brows raise in surprise, but not total shock. “Are you sure?”

I nod. “Yeah. She was saying at the baby shower that Asher is away for the week with Colby Hendrix. Invite her.”

He stares back at me in awe. “Okay, I will.”

“Thanks.”

And somehow, I feel a little lighter. Like being okay with their friendship lets a little less weigh down on me. And in an unexpected twist, she’s becoming my friend too—something Tye is more than excited about.



COLLEGE STUDENTS LET LOOSE all around me, relieved to be done with this semester and excited to get the summer off before we need to go back. Some are drinking because they’re nervous about their grades, while others don’t really give a shit. Regardless, the alcohol is hitting everyone tonight.

Everyone but me.

Zayn and Easton are in some intense debate with Jace and Carter about God-knows-what, but there’s arm throwing and I can’t count the amount of times Carter has pulled at his own hair in frustration. Tye and Tessa are talking about Safe and Sound, and Amelia is lost in a conversation with Paige. I just sit on the island, with my legs dangling as I drink fruit punch out of a solo cup.

Yeah, Easton wasn’t kidding when he said he’d pick up juice at the liquor store.

“Wow,” a familiar voice sounds, and I look up to find Chrissy, our cheer captain. “I knew you were a shitty cheerleader, but I didn’t think you’d be a shitty mom, too.”

I scoff. “Excuse me?”

She shrugs like she has no regrets. “Drinking while pregnant? That’s pretty fucked up.”

Matching the look she’s giving me, I tilt the cup until some of the fruit punch spills onto the floor. “Don’t make assumptions, Chrissy. It never looks good when you’re wrong. Then again, it never looks good when you’re right, either.”

This girl has had an issue with me since last year, when she found out the girl Easton was talking to turned out to be me. She had been trying to get with him all freshman year, but he had zero interest. Even when she tried to get Amelia to hook her up with him, it was a no go. Amelia knew about my secret crush at that point and refused to help her. I’m sure she loved hearing that we broke up.

“Well, at least it doesn’t take me trapping someone with a pregnancy.”

My jaw drops, but then all I do is smirk because out of the corner of my eye, I see she caught the attention of exactly who she doesn’t want. Tye and Tessa come up on both sides of her, looking her up and down.

“What the fuck did you just say to her?” Tye sneers.

Chrissy goes to back away from Tye but ends up bumping into Tessa, and she’s no less scary. “We must have heard her wrong, Tye. I’d hate to believe someone would dare to come into *this house* and shit talk our girl.”

“Get away from me,” Chrissy snaps.

They both shake their heads, and Tye wraps her arm around Chrissy’s neck in what to the casual observer would be a hug but I know is a precursor to a headlock. “Apologize. Now.”

Chrissy rolls her eyes. “Sorry you’re going to fuck up your kid.”

Tye’s elbow tightens and her other hand comes down on a nerve in Chrissy’s neck in a manner that causes her to screech. “Try again, and use your nice words this time.”

“Fine,” she hisses, trying to keep herself as far away as possible from Tye. “I’m sorry. Can I go now?”

“I’d like nothing more,” Tessa says, and with Tye keeping a tight grip on Chrissy’s shoulder, they spin her around and the two of them escort her right out the door.

Amelia, who appeared next to me at some point between Chrissy showing up and Tessa and Tye taking over, snorts and shakes her head. But me? I can’t stop smiling.

“They’re like little tag team pit bulls,” I tell her.

She giggles. “I know. I love them.”



THE WARM BREEZE BLOWS across my face as I sit on the back deck. Some of the students come out here to smoke a cigarette, but for the most part, everyone is inside. It makes this the perfect place to escape to. The perfect place to get lost in my self-deprecating thoughts.

“There you are,” Easton says as he steps out the door. “I’ve been looking for you. What are you doing out here?”

I shrug and keep my eyes set on the backyard. “It just felt a little crowded in there. I needed some fresh air.”

He sits down next to me and sighs. “Now that’s a lie if I ever heard one.”

Yeah. Yeah, it is. “Easton.”

“No,” he argues, shaking his head. “We agreed to do this as a team. I can’t help you if I don’t know what you need help with.”

“I don’t think there *is* any helping this,” I admit. “I’m a twenty-year-old college student who has no business trying to raise a baby. He deserves better than me.”

Exhaling slowly, he puts a hand on my back and rubs up and down. “Kennedy, every decision you’ve made lately is with that baby in mind. You’ve made sacrifices and held your head high because you knew it was worth it. You are the *best* person for our baby.”

“You have to say that,” I murmur.

“Bullshit,” he claps back. “I don’t *have* to say anything. I’m saying it because that’s the God’s honest truth.”

Running my fingers through my hair, I look up at the stars. “It’s just so fucking scary, and I didn’t let myself think about it before Chrissy made her stupid little comments.”

He snorts. “You’re letting *Chrissy* get to you? Really, Ken?”

“I know,” I reply. “But she had a point. A few points, actually.”

“Somehow I doubt that.”

“No, really. She did.”

“Okay. Like what?”

I finally turn my attention to him. “Like I trapped you with a pregnancy.”

That shocks him. “You didn’t—”

“No,” I interrupt. “Think about it. You can’t go out and find someone else. You can’t date. I made the decision to keep this baby, even when you didn’t want to, and because of that, you’re stuck with me. I trapped you and I’m—”

My words are cut off as he presses his lips to mine. He kisses me with the same skill he always has, but this time there’s more desperation to it. I don’t stop him. Don’t push him away. Instead, I place my hand over the one he has on my cheek and kiss him back.

After a few minutes, he pulls away and kisses my forehead.

“There are a lot of things I don’t know,” he tells me. “But one thing I am absolutely fucking sure of is that you did not

trap me in any sense of the word. If you hadn't gotten pregnant, I'd still be pining over you and trying to get you back. I was never going anywhere, so don't for a second believe anything that bitch says. She's just jealous of you because you're perfect."

With that, he gets up and walks away—leaving me alone again with the lingering feeling of his kiss.

I want him so bad I can't think straight.



I SIT ON THE barstool, watching as Amelia and Tye put away the clean glasses. The bar isn't open yet, and it gives me the perfect opportunity to wallow in self-pity without judgment. After that kiss last night, I haven't been able to focus on anything else.

Half of me wanted to go back inside, pull him up to his room, and fall back into him the same way we used to. But before I could risk everything, I did exactly what he said I do and I put the baby first. Losing myself in him that way again is a risk I can't afford.

"Why so glum, chum?" Tye asks.

Amelia snorts. "The old men that come into this place are getting to you."

"Fuck off," she sasses. "I'm just worried about our sad little buddy here."

"Sad little..." Amelia shakes her head. "You're still drunk. Okay, great."

Tye snickers. "Hair of the dog, Amelier."

Amelia looks like she wants to argue it, tell her that the hair of the dog is simply having a beer to cure your hangover,

not keep drinking, but before she can open her mouth, she stops herself. “Fuck it.”

I chuckle at their banter. “How is this place still running with the two of you in charge?”

“I wonder that every day,” the boss, Paul, says.

He rarely comes out of his office, but when he does, he’s always fun to be around. He’s kind and forgiving, though he has to be. When Amelia started, she broke almost every glass to the bar’s name. And yet, he didn’t fire her.

He walks over and puts a hand on my shoulder. “When is my best bartender coming back?”

“Hey!” Tye and Amelia say in unison, but he just laughs.

“You’re the reason I have to order more glasses every month just to keep an adequate supply,” he says to Amelia and then turns to Tye. “And you’ve scared off more customers by threatening them than I can count.”

Tye shrugs. “Perverts should keep their comments to themselves.”

“Agreed, but that doesn’t mean we threaten them.”

“No, that doesn’t mean *you* threaten them,” she corrects.

He pinches the bridge of his nose and looks back at me. “So, best bartender. Coming back at some point, yes?”

When I told Paul I was taking a leave of absence, he looked devastated. I was prepared for him to try and fight to keep me, but he knows as well as I do that a pregnant bartender tends to look trashy and is bad for business. Thankfully, I’ve saved a lot of tips over the year I’ve worked here.

I smile warmly at him. “I can’t make any promises, but after I have the baby, I’ll try to work it out.”

Nodding, he grins. “Good enough for me.”

As he leaves, I drop my head on the bar and go back to dealing with my inner turmoil that is Easton Donovan. God, I want him, and not even just in a sexual way. I want his arms

wrapped around me. I want to fall asleep with my head on his chest. I want the way he used to hold me as we watched a movie.

Plain and simple, I fucking miss him.

A glass is put down next to me and as I look up, Amelia smiles. “Ginger ale. Now talk to me. What’s up?”

I almost tell her. I really do consider it. But I know what side she would be on, so I don’t. “I’m okay. Just exhausted.”

She purses her lips. “So, it has nothing to do with the fact that E kissed you last night?”

“What?” Tye balks.

But my eyes stay focused on Amelia. “You know?”

“Of course, I know,” she says, like it’s no big deal. “And not because he told me. He hasn’t said a word, actually. I know because I saw you two.”

“And you didn’t tell me?” Tye whines.

Amelia cocks a brow at her. “For this reason. Look at how you’re acting about it. Tame yourself.”

Crossing her arms over her chest, Tye pouts, but it only makes us chuckle because she’s not the pouting type. Then again, she *is* drunk.

“So, what are you going to do about it?” Amelia asks.

I shrug. “There’s nothing I can do about it. Being with him, at least before the baby is born, it’s risking everything. I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because what if it doesn’t work out? What if we crash and burn and can’t get along afterward? This baby needs his parents.”

She puts her hands up. “Okay, stop. There is no part of you or Easton that would *ever* let shit get so bad that you can’t co-parent, for one. And secondly, I don’t think E would let anything get between you two again.”

Everything in me knows she's right, but there's still this suffocating fear when I think about it. Like if I make this leap, if I take this risk, I could ruin everything. But then I think about Easton, and the way he kissed me last night, and I feel like if he were to do it again, I'd lose all fight against him at this point.

My phone vibrates against the bar and grabs my attention.

Easton Donovan - 1 New Message.

Amelia raises her brows at me as I swipe it open and read the text.

Easton: Meet me at the lake. I have a surprise for you.

My heart starts to race as I read the words, knowing I stand no chance at telling him no. I flip it around and show Amelia, who coos.

“My favorite couple is going to get back together,” she says excitedly.

Tye chuckles. “Your favorite couple isn't you and Zayn? Does he know that?”

She narrows her eyes on Tye. “You mean your favorite couple is you and Carter? How narcissistic of you.”

Flipping her off, Tye goes back to stocking the bar. I stand up and take a deep breath as I give Amelia a helplessly nervous look.

“You'll be fine,” she assures me. “It was only a matter of time before this happened.”

“Yeah, I know,” I say with more calmness than I possess. “I just hope I'm making the right choice.”



I SHUT OFF TYE'S CAR as I pull up next to the lake. Putting the keys in the cupholder, I climb out and look for Easton, but I don't see him. I don't see anyone, for that matter.

What the hell?

“Easton?” I call out, thinking maybe he's trying to scare me, but there's no answer.

That's weird. It's not like him to stand me up, especially when he just told me to meet him here. Maybe I should call him.

As I take out my phone, however, a sharp pain shoots through my head and everything goes completely black.



EVERYTHING IS HAZY AS I come to. I groan as I try to move, but I can't. My hands are bound behind my back, my ankles to what feels like the legs of a chair, and there's something covering my eyes. I start to shriek against the tape over my mouth as I try to free myself, but there's no use. I'm stuck here.

The sound of footsteps coming toward me has me freezing before the blindfold is ripped off my head, taking some of my hair with it. I shy away from the sudden brightness, but when my eyes focus, everything goes cold.

Alec.

And even worse, Alec holding a gun.

Next, he rips the duct tape from my mouth. I wince from the pain, but it doesn't stop me from immediately trying to get through to him.

“Alec, what are you doing?”

He grins menacingly. “Exactly what I should have been doing all this time. I’m taking what’s mine.”

What’s his? It all comes clear in a millisecond. Him confessing his feelings. Him begging me to leave Easton’s with him after I found out about the coke he gave him. He’s taking *me*.

His nose hasn’t even healed yet, still black and blue from when Knox broke it. But the scariest part of his face by far is the dark, manic look in his eye. I’m in trouble.

“Please don’t do this,” I beg. “I’m sorry I didn’t go with you. We can talk about it, but you have to untie me.”

But there is no getting through to him as he starts to pace back and forth. He’s running his fingers through his hair like he didn’t completely think this through. It’s almost as if there is a part of him that knows how wrong this is, but it’s not the bigger part. And certainly not big enough to get him to release me.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this,” he says, looking anxious and angry. “This wasn’t part of the plan.”

“What was the plan?” I ask with a certain carefulness in my tone.

“You were supposed to want me!” he shouts. “I came to NHU for you, and I thought it was so perfect because you were fresh off a breakup and you looked so excited to see me. We were supposed to be together. To be happy. I was finally going to get the girl I’ve been in love with for years!”

I swallow harshly, wondering if this is my fault. If I made him think that I wanted him too. But I don’t say anything as he continues.

“It was all falling in place, but he still had his claws in you so fucking deep.” He turns to glare at me. “He even made sure to knock you up so I couldn’t have you.”

“What?” I shake my head. “Alec, I got pregnant before Easton and I even broke up. I just didn’t know it yet.”

Not listening to a word I say, he comes over and cocks the gun, putting it to my stomach. I shriek, and he slaps a hand over my mouth. Tears pour from my eyes as my whole body shakes, watching him hold my baby's life in his hands.

"I should just get rid of the problem," he growls. "A bullet to the stomach would do the trick. We could still get our happy ending, you and me."

I start to sob. "Please, don't."

The sound of my voice is muffled against his hand, but it registers enough to grab his attention. He looks up at me and softens, pulling his hand away and wiping my tears.

"Don't cry, baby," he coos. "I never want to make you cry. I love you."

He moves the gun away from my stomach and focuses entirely on me. There's not a doubt in my mind that he's telling the truth. He's in love with me. I just hope the part of him that loves me is enough to keep me *and my baby* alive.

Chapter 23



THERE ARE A LOT OF THINGS YOU'RE PREPARED FOR WHEN growing up. Like how to be a decent person, given you have the right upbringing, or how you're supposed to get a job after you're done with schooling. All parents seem to have the same hopes and dreams for their kid—to grow up, find a good job and a good partner, and settle down to have a family. One thing my parents failed to do, though, is teach me how to put together this fucking crib.

The instructions are in another language, and the pictures must be backward because none of the holes are where they say they are. Not only do I have to make something out of these pieces of wood, but I have to make sure it's sturdy enough for my son to sleep in.

Baylor sleeps soundly next to me as I struggle with the directions, tossing them down for the thousandth time today. As I drop the tiny little tool they give you, which is bullshit in itself by the way, he lifts his head to look at me.

“What am I going to do, boy?” I ask him.

He stares back at me like I'm crazy, and I sigh.

Kennedy deserves the perfect fucking nursery, and I'm going to give it to her. Even if it means losing my mind while putting all this shit together.



I'M FINALLY SLIDING THE last drawer into the changing table when Amelia comes in. She looks around in complete awe as she takes in the state of our former guest room. There have been a few people who have slept in here over the last couple years, Amelia and Tessa being two of them. But this, with a crib and changing table and other baby decor, is the most right it's ever felt.

"You did all this?" she asks me.

I nod. "Baylor wasn't much help."

She chuckles and bends down to pet the puppy that's now getting too big to be called such. "It looks great, E. Does Kennedy completely love it?"

"She hasn't seen it yet," I answer. "I just finished it. I was going to surprise her with it tonight."

Her brows furrow as she tilts her head to the side. "Two surprises in one day? You're really stepping up your game. What was the first one?"

I tilt my head and frown. "What do you mean? What first one?"

"The text," she clarifies, as if I should know what she's talking about. "I was there when she got it. The one that said for her to meet you at the lake."

"What fucking text, Amelia?" Panic starts to course through me as I grab my phone and try to call Kennedy. "I

never sent her a text, and I sure as shit never told her to meet me at the lake.”

“Oh my God,” my sister gasps.

As she freaks out, I listen to the ringing in my ear and wait for Kennedy to answer, mentally willing her to pick up the damn phone. When it goes to voicemail, I try again.

Still nothing.

“What the fuck did it say?” I question urgently.

She’s shaking as she starts to cry. “It came from your number. It said to meet you at the lake and that you had a surprise for her.”

“Fuck!”

“E, this was at least six hours ago,” she says, and my whole body goes still.

Zayn comes into the room and sees the state of us. “What’s going on?”

I go to open my mouth but nothing will come out. No words. No sounds. Nothing. Kennedy is out there somewhere, and I can’t fucking move. I can’t even breathe without a pain shooting through my chest.

“K-Kennedy is in trouble,” Amelia says through her tears. “We don’t know where she is.”

Z holds Amelia in his arms but his eyes meet mine, and we’re both thinking the same thing. Finally, the hold on me releases and I jump into action, grabbing my sister’s arms.

“How did you find out where Zayn was when he left to go fight Blade?” I ask her.

She swallows. “I tracked his phone through iCloud, but I knew his password.”

Not even paying attention to the last part, I rush to my room and grab my computer. It comes to life as soon as I open it and I rush to the iCloud website. Kennedy’s email is easy enough, it’s the same thing for everything. But her password, however, is a challenge.

My fingers move a mile a minute as I try to put in anything I can think of, but it's all coming back invalid. Soon, it's going to lock me out. But as I go to type in my last attempt, Amelia comes running in.

"Try your name and the baby's due date," she says. "The due date is her phone password, but you haven't named the baby yet."

I take a deep breath and give it a shot.

Success!

As the dashboard opens, I sigh in relief. Amelia comes to sit next to me as I open up the Find My Phone app. At least with it ringing when I called, that means it's still on.

It takes a second for the location to load, but when it does, I don't recognize the address.

"Do you know where that is?" I ask her.

She shakes her head. "She can't be there. She wouldn't."

What? "Mila, where is this place?"

Dread flows through me as I see the look on her face. "It's Alec's house."

I throw the computer off my lap and go to rush out the door when Zayn stops me. "Do you know for sure she didn't go there on her own? Because if she did, you can't go in there all chivalrous and heroic. It's breaking and entering."

Amelia puts a hand on my arm. "I saw her today. She was thinking about *you*, not Alec. She wouldn't go there on her own free will."

That's enough for both Zayn and me as all three of us book it down the stairs and out the front door.

I just hope we're not too late.



PULLING UP TO THE house, the whole street is covered in blue and red lights. Cops and the SWAT team flood the area, and my brows furrow.

“The cops are here?” I ask, feeling my entire world start to crumble.

Zayn sighs. “I called them before we left.”

It’s a relief, but it still manages to piss me off, because they’re still standing outside and Kennedy is nowhere to be seen. “What the fuck did you do that for?”

“Because the Donovans have a horrible tendency to be idiotically heroic,” he says bluntly.

And okay, maybe he’s not wrong. Amelia got stabbed trying to save him, and he’s right. If the cops weren’t here, I’d be rushing right inside that house without a second thought. But the idea that I can’t go in and find my girl irks me to no extent.

We get out of the car and try to get up to the house, but an officer stops us at where it’s taped off.

“You guys can’t go in there,” he tells us. “This is an active crime scene.”

I’m ready to deck the guy and run past him, but thankfully, Zayn stops me. “I know. I’m the one that called it in.”

“Where’s Kennedy?” I ask urgently. “The girl who was in there. Where is she?”

His shoulders sag. “She’s still in there.”

“What?” I shout.

“A hostage situation is a touchy one,” he explains. “We can’t just run in there or someone could get hurt. His roommates confirmed he owns a gun, so we need to do this by the book. But we have our most skilled negotiators working on it.”

His words are meant to soothe me, but they do the opposite.

She’s in there.

With Alec.

And Alec has a gun.

Everything in me gives out and I drop to my knees, feeling more helpless than I ever have in my life, even more than when I watched as the life slipped from Tessa’s eyes.

I can’t fucking lose her. I can’t lose *them*.



ALL OUR FRIENDS START to show up as I sit on the sidewalk. Amelia, Tye, and Paige all comfort each other while the guys keep their eyes on me. No one tries to talk to me. They all know there is nothing that can be said. At least, until Tessa shows up. She gives Amelia a sad smile as she comes right over to me and sits down.

“E,” she sighs. “It’s going to be okay.”

I shake my head. “You don’t know that.”

“No, I don’t,” she answers honestly. “But I’m going to believe that. Kennedy is strong and fearless. You really think that girl is going to let someone like Alec hurt her or the baby?”

She's trying to help, that much is obvious. And I know she means well. There was a point in time when her words would have helped. They would've calmed me down and made me relax. But not now.

Not when it comes to Kennedy.

To our baby.

"You don't know her like I do," I tell her. "She's strong but fragile, all at the same time. And these fucking cops aren't doing shit. She's in there, alone with him, and they're doing nothing!"

Over the last hour that we've been here, the fucker has looked out the window three times, and they've got him on the phone once. He knows we're out here. He knows we're worried. And I wouldn't put it past him to take himself and her both out in some forced Romeo and Juliet ending.

I get up and start pacing back and forth, making Tess stand with me.

"Don't," she says. "I know what you're thinking, and I'm telling you. Don't do it."

Turning to look at her, I huff. "There was a time I would have listened to you. You're one of my best friends, and you know that. But when it comes to her, I won't listen to anyone."

Her eyes widen. "Zayn!"

But it's too late. I take off running, under the caution tape and dodging the cops at the door as I slip inside, hearing Z scream "Idiotically heroic!" behind me.

The house is quiet. If I didn't know better, I would think no one is home. Everything is perfectly in place, like they had a normal day before his roommates went to school and he went to kidnap the love of my life.

I don't need to scour the downstairs to know they're not down here. All the police attention has been on the upstairs window. They're up there.

She is up there.

As quietly as I can, I creep up the steps and keep my back against the wall. When I reach the top step, Kennedy's voice meets my ears, and I damn near faint with relief, because she's still alive.

"What are you going to do?" she asks him, fear lacing her tone.

He groans. "Stop asking me that! God, you were never this annoying before!"

"Alec, just let me go. I'll tell them it was all a misunderstanding."

"A misunderstanding?"

"Yes. It'll be okay, I promise."

A loud bang sounds, like he threw something and it shattered. "Your father was right. You always were a shit liar!"

She starts to sob. "No. I'm not lying."

"Stop fucking lying to me!" he screams.

The sound of a slap echoes into the hallway, and I instantly take a step before stopping myself, but it's too late. The floorboard creaks under my foot, alerting him of my presence.

"Who's there?" he growls.

I try to stay completely still, to make him think he heard something, but then he cocks the gun.

"Show yourself or I'll put a bullet in her brain!"

It's more a promise than a threat, so I do the only thing I can do: I raise my hands in the air and turn the corner into the room. The sight of Kennedy tied to a chair, with blood still leaking from a cut on her lip, threatens to break me on the spot. She tries to maintain her composure, not wanting to piss Alec off even more, but I can see the desperation in her eyes.

Alec grunts as he looks at me. "Of course it's you. How fucking fitting."

"Put the gun down, Alec," I demand quietly.

He shakes his head. “This is all because of you!” Lifting the gun, he points it at me. “You’re the fucking problem here.”

I nod. “Okay. Then take me. You can do whatever you want to me. I’m no one. A deadbeat with a former drug problem. No one will miss me.”

A smirk makes its way on his face. “You’re damn right they wouldn’t. They’d be better off.”

“They would,” I agree. “But killing her, that’s double homicide. You’d end up spending the rest of your life in prison, and you still wouldn’t get the girl. Just take me and let her go.”

Keeping the gun still on me, which is exactly where I want it, he runs his fingers through his hair in frustration. “Don’t you get it? I can never let her go. That’s the issue here. My heart won’t ever let her go.”

He’s a deranged psychopath, but this is the one thing he’s said that I can understand. Kennedy has this thing about her. It draws you in and keeps your attention on her. And if I hadn’t taken her for granted when I had her, I would’ve realized how lucky I was. But I sure as hell do now, and there isn’t a single part of me that plans on letting this piece of shit take her from me.

“I get that,” I tell him. “She’s perfect.”

Kennedy starts to cry as she keeps her head bowed, but she’s smart enough to not say anything. Any words that could come out of her mouth right now would only enrage Alec more.

“She is, and you stole her from me!” he shouts.

I keep my hands held in front of me. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize. I didn’t mean to stand in the way, I promise.”

A dark laugh starts to echo out of him as he looks at Kennedy. “You chose this bitch over me? Look at him, cowering to me like a goddamn pussy.”

When she won’t look at me, keeping her eyes closed instead, it pisses him off.

“I said look at him!” he roars.

She shakes in fear at his tone and finally looks at me. The helplessness in her gaze matches the one in mine. I won't lie, we're both scared. But while she's afraid for me, my only thought is her and the baby.

I nod slowly, trying to silently tell her that it will be okay, but after not listening to him the first time, he now has his gun pointed at her.

In a move that defines idiotically heroic, I grab a trophy from the dresser. It does exactly what I intend it to and pulls Alec's attention off of Kennedy and onto me, only when he points the gun, he fires it. Kennedy screams but the bullet misses, going into the wooden dresser instead, and Alec is momentarily caught off guard. He looks down at the gun as I take the base of the trophy and slam it into his head. He slumps to the ground with the gun falling from his hand, out cold.

Grabbing the blade from the desk, I make quick work of cutting the ropes that hold Kennedy to the chair. She sobs hysterically as I lift her up and wrap my arms around her.

“Are you okay?” I ask. “Can you walk?”

She nods. “I'm okay, I think.”

“Okay, let's get the fuck out of here.”

I push her ahead of me as we both start to run out, but as I watch her bolt down the steps and out the door, I stop. The sound of Alec groaning grabs my attention, letting me know he's waking up, and still alive.

Instead of following Kennedy out like I should, I turn around and go back into the room without a morsel of the fear I had before.

She's safe.

Chapter 24



kennedy

I RUN OUT OF THE HOUSE AS FAST AS I CAN, COLLAPSING ONTO the front yard when my well of adrenaline runs dry. My hands grip at the grass to tell me that I'm free. After being tied to a chair and stuck in that room all day, I'm actually free and still alive.

Officers rush over as I try to catch my breath through my sobs, but the main voice that gets my attention is Amelia's. She screams my name as she ducks under the caution tape and runs over to me, not letting a single person stop her.

"Oh my God," she cries. "Are you okay? Where's Easton?"

The last question makes the hair on my arms stand straight up. "What do you mean? He was right behind me."

I turn around, hoping to see him, but there's no one there but an officer looking at me strangely. There's no sight of him.

"Where is he?" I ask, starting to panic once again.

Amelia wraps her arms around me. "He never came out of the house."

All the fear that left my body as I got through the front door comes back tenfold. The reason Alec never killed me when he had the chance was because he loves me. But Easton? He hates him with a burning passion. There is nothing that would stop him from pulling that trigger.

“Easton!” I push myself from Amelia’s hold and try to get back inside, but an officer grabs me before I can even make it up the porch steps.

“You can’t go in there,” he tells me.

I elbow him, swinging my arms to try to break free, but he holds strong. “Let me go! I need to get Easton!”

Another officer comes to help him hold me in place while one more stands in front of me. “Ma’am, I’m Lieutenant Frazier. I promise you my men are working to get your boyfriend out of there safely, but to do that, we need you to stay out here.”

Everything in me starts to break. “He needs to be okay. I can’t lose him.”

The Lieutenant nods. “I understand that. Let’s take you over to the ambulance and get you cleaned up. I even have an OB here to check out the baby. Can we do that?”

Knowing there’s no other option, I nod and let them lead me over to the back of an ambulance. Amelia follows behind me, and they finally let everyone else on the other side of the caution tape to be with me. They’re all trying to stay strong for my benefit, but I can tell by the way Zayn keeps looking back at the house that he’s worried. And he has a right to be. I saw firsthand how unhinged Alec is.

The EMT cleans the cut on my lip, and the OB that came to the scene uses a fetal Doppler on my stomach. Hearing the baby’s steady heartbeat should be a relief, and in a way it is, but my attention is on the house. On the window of the room I know Easton is in with Alec.

“Am I done here?” I ask frantically as they put away the first aid kit.

The second they nod, I hop off the back of the ambulance and start making my way back to the door. Every part of me knows if I don't get back in there, something terrible is going to happen. My friends follow behind me, trying to get me to stop, but I won't even hear it.

"Whoa, whoa," Lieutenant Frazier says as he stops me. "Ma'am, you need to stay out here."

I try to push past him but he puts his hand out and gently holds me back. "No. I need to get Easton."

"I understand, and believe me, getting him out safely is our number one priority," he calmly explains. "But like I told your boyfriend before he went all super hero on us, there are ways we need to do this to ensure no one gets hurt."

"You aren't listening to me!" I shout. "Alec doesn't give a shit about Easton. He's going to—"

The sound of a loud bang echoes out of the house and my body goes ice cold. My heart sinks inside my chest, shattering into a million pieces as dread fills even the officer's face. I let out a scream as I try rushing to the door, but Tessa grabs both my arms to hold me back. It barely even registers that Zayn is holding Amelia back as well as we both break down. Keeping me outside is a fight as I watch the SWAT team storm into the house. Tessa swings me around to try to gain some leverage, and I crumble to the ground.

"This can't be happening," I sob. "This can't be the way I bring our son into this world. He needs to know his dad."

"I know," Tessa says, crying along with me. "I know."

Zayn holds Amelia tightly as she sobs hysterically. The pain in my chest is so intense, I can barely breathe. It's too much.

I need him.

I fucking need him.

I can't do this alone.

Dropping my head against the grass, I give into the pain and let it wash over me—unrelenting and without forgiveness.

“K-Kennedy,” Amelia gasps.

I whip around to find Easton being led out of the house by police, hands behind his back, very much alive.

Nothing in the world can keep me in place as I scramble to my feet and run into him. My body hits his with a thud, and as I hear his heart still beating inside his chest, it’s a relief I’ve never known. He rests his head on mine and exhales, but when I realize his arms aren’t wrapped around me, I pull away.

It’s then that I notice the state of him. My brows furrow as I take it all in, but nothing is making sense.

“Why are you handcuffed?” I ask, then notice the deep red liquid that soaks his shirt. “Oh my God, you’re bleeding.”

Panic rushes through me as I think he’s hurt, lifting his shirt to find the source but all I’m faced with is his perfectly toned abs—completely unharmed. People scream to let them through and I turn around to see Alec being carried out on a stretcher, an EMT performing CPR the whole way. My eyes widen as they meet Easton’s, but he shows no emotion as he stares back at me.

“It’s not my blood,” he says stoically. An officer starts to pull him away, and Easton looks at Zayn. “Get them home and I’ll meet you guys there.”

Z nods and gently wraps an arm around me as I watch them take Easton and put him into the back of a patrol car. My whole body is shaking, still trying to recover from everything that just happened. As Zayn starts leading us away, the same officer from earlier stops us.

“Miss Lehigh,” he says to me. “We’re going to need you to give a statement on what happened here.”

“Is that necessary right now?” Zayn questions for me. “She’s been through a lot. You can’t give her the night and come get one tomorrow?”

He smiles sadly. “I’m afraid not, son. We need to get it while everything is still fresh in her head.”

I nod and wrap my arms around myself. “Okay.”

“Right this way.”



I PACE BACK AND forth across the living room, unable to sit still. There is no calm. No relaxation. No *anything* when I don't know what's going on with Easton. By the tenth time I look out the window, Tye sighs.

“Kennedy, you need to try to relax,” she tells me. “Stress isn't good for the baby.”

“Not having a father isn't good for the baby!” I snap back.

She presses her lips into a line, realizing that nothing she can say will make this better. There will be no relaxing until Easton is home safely.

“Why was he in handcuffs? Is he going to be charged with murder? Will he be around to help raise our kid or is that all on me now? How the fuck did this all go wrong?”

Tessa gets up and stands in front of me, putting her hands on my arms to keep me still. “I get it, okay? Maybe not firsthand, but I get it. I watched Delaney go through the same thing with Knox, and I won't lie, it was hard. But freaking out about it isn't going to help anything, and the last thing you want is to hurt this baby. Am I right?”

I nod, my whole body still shaking.

“Okay,” she says. “Why don't you go grab one of his sweatshirts? That might help you feel a little better.”

“Yeah,” I breathe. “Yeah, it might.”

I make my way up the stairs and into Easton's room, grabbing the sweatshirt off the back of his chair instead of one from the closet because it's been recently worn. As I'm walking out, however, the light on in the guest room catches

my attention. The door is only open a crack, but as I get to it and push it open, my breath hitches.

The room in front of me is a perfectly put together nursery. The walls are painted the light turquoise Easton knows is my favorite color and accented by the wall décor we picked out together. The gray crib sits on one side of the room, perfectly made with teal bedding, while the matching changing table and dresser are on the other side. Everything is exactly how I pictured it, even down to the mobile that spins and plays music as I turn it on.

I could have the baby tomorrow and know that everything is in order.

Everything except whether Easton will be there.

“He really does love you, little man,” I say softly through my tears, my hand cradling my belly.

A rush of emotions flood through me as I lose my emotional balance again. With my eyes closed, I let myself feel every ounce of it. I embrace it, because it means I care. And for the first time since I left that house, I let myself feel fear.

The events of today have left their mark. And maybe that means Alec wins, in a way, because he made me feel something, but I refuse to let him take anything else from me. So, as much as it may scare me to be alone, I stay in this room, and I cry.

When my tears nearly run dry, I feel two arms wrap around me.

“It’s going to be okay,” Amelia whispers. “It has to be.”

And God, I hope she’s right.

Chapter 25



IT'S THREE IN THE MORNING BY THE TIME I GET HOME. AN officer drops me off at my house, and I thank him as I get out. Every light in the living room is on, and when I get inside, I see why. All my friends are here, and when they see me walk through the door, they all sigh in relief.

“Thank fuck,” Zayn mutters and stands up to give me a hug.

My gaze meets Kennedy's as she stares back at me with a mix of fear and disbelief. I refuse to look away from her, even as my sister throws herself into my arms. I hug her tightly and press a kiss to the top of her head before moving onto Carter.

“What the hell happened?” he asks me.

Still looking at Kennedy, I exhale. “I'll explain in a minute, but first I have something more important to tend to.”

I walk straight up to my girl and as soon as I'm close enough, she jumps. I catch her with ease and don't let go as she sobs against my neck. Her belly that contains our son

makes it difficult to hold her, but there's no way in hell I'm putting her down right now.

"It's okay," I tell her softly. "We're okay."

"I thought he shot you," she croaks out.

Shaking my head, I hold her tighter. "And miss out on everything we have coming up? Not a chance."

She pulls away from me and uses the sleeve of my hoodie she's sporting to wipe away her tears. I spin around and sit down with her. Zayn comes back into the room, handing me a beer and a new shirt, since they bagged mine as evidence.

"I knew I loved you," I tell him.

He sits back down next to Amelia and they all watch me intently. I drape my arm around Kennedy and hold her close, not willing to let her get away from me right now. I need her here. Right here.

"Okay, so explain." Z demands softly.

I take a deep breath and look down at Kennedy, silently questioning if she can handle this, but she just burrows herself closer to me.

"Alec was in a manic episode by the time I got up there," I begin. "He was screaming, and at one point, he slapped Kennedy. I must have put my foot in the wrong place, because he heard me and threatened to shoot her if I didn't show myself. And when I got in there, it only got worse. There wasn't a question in my mind that he was going to kill us both, and probably himself, too.

"I grabbed a trophy off the top of the dresser, and he shot at me. Thankfully, he missed, and the sound of the gun firing stunned him for a second. I slammed him in the head with the trophy and I thought it knocked him out. I mean, he was laying on the ground and not moving. So, I cut Kennedy free as quickly as I could and pushed her out the door."

"But you didn't come out with her," Amelia points out.

I nod. "Because once she was out the door, I heard the gun cock behind me. I knew if I moved another step, Alec would

have shot me, and I wasn't counting on him missing for a second time. He wanted me to let Kennedy go, so he played as if he was unconscious, knowing I'd make her the priority.

"I tried to get through to him, to talk him down, but it wasn't happening. He insisted that I ruined his life and that he and Kennedy are soulmates. And when he told me he wasn't going to let anything stand in the way of his fate with her, I knew I had to fight for my life."

Kennedy's whole body shivers against me, and I kiss the top of her head before continuing. "I managed to get a hold of the gun enough to turn it away from me, and the two of us started to wrestle for it when it went off. At first, I thought he shot me. I felt a warm liquid soaking my arms and my shirt. But when I went to check myself, Alec hit the floor. When the cops rushed in, they tried to save him, but they told me he didn't even make it to the hospital."

Lifting her head, Kennedy blinks up at me. "H-he's dead?"

I nod once. "He's dead. Are you okay?"

She swallows and cuddles back into my side. "Yeah. I think so."

Zayn runs his fingers through his hair. "Goddamn, man. So, what took so long at the police station?"

"They had to determine that Alec was shot by accident and in self-defense," I explain. "Otherwise, I was getting charged with murder."

"But they cleared you?" Tessa asks, speaking up for the first time since I got home.

"Yeah. It was ruled as an accident," I answer. "They'll obviously be conducting more of an investigation, but they said I shouldn't worry. That's why they let me come home instead of keeping me in county."

Carter whistles. "Well, I'm glad you guys are all right. We're going to get out of your hair so we can all get some sleep, but we'll be back tomorrow. Okay?"

"Yeah, sounds good."

I get up and thank each of them for coming and for being here for Kennedy. It's nice to know that if I can't be here, I have incredible friends who will act as a proxy for her. That's important to me, and I have the best in my corner.

Tessa leaves with Carter, Jace, Tye, and Paige. Tye gets to the door and turns around, looking at Kennedy.

"You coming or are you staying here?" she asks her.

Kennedy looks at me, and as much as I'd love for her to stay, I think for once, I need her to go.

"It's okay," I tell her. "Go sleep in your bed. I'm just going to shower, and I'll see you in the morning."

The way she frowns tells me that's not the answer she was looking for, but she does it anyway, after giving me a sweet kiss on my cheek. It lingers, long after she's gone, and I give the best smile I can manage to Zayn and Amelia as I go upstairs.

I walk straight into my bathroom, turning on the water to scolding hot. As I peel my clothes off and let them pile onto the floor, my phone rings, and Knox's name appears on the screen. I answer it and put it on speaker.

"Yo."

He sighs. "Fuck, E. I just got Zayn's text. Do you need me to come there? I can get on the next flight."

I tilt my head back and rock it from side to side to crack my neck. "No."

"Okay," he replies. "But I've been there. A lot is going to go through your head the next few days you need to be aware of so you can handle it better."

Putting the phone down on the sink, I don't have to say anything before he continues.

"Don't be surprised if you start obsessing over your victim. His family. His friends. His life before this shit. And you're going to go numb. It's going to feel good at first because you won't feel anything, but you can't keep yourself in that place. You need to keep..."

His voice fades into the background as I get in the shower. The water scorches my skin as it washes away the remainder of Alec's blood. I put my hands on the wall and just let it burn every inch of me, as the last part of me that was alive inside dies.

I've never been more sure.

I'm nothing but a monster.

Chapter 26



kennedy

I KNEW THINGS WOULD BE DIFFERENT. I MEAN, YOU DON'T GO through what we went through and come out the same person. But what I didn't expect was for Easton to be so shut down. He insists he's fine every time someone asks. He even forces himself to laugh around his friends and smile at all the right moments. But I know him. Something is eating him alive, and he won't tell me what it is.

Three weeks pass but the fear never seems to fade. It's like, I know he's dead and he can't hurt me anymore, but I'm still waiting for something to jump out at me. To hit me over the back of the head and hold me captive again, convincing me that I'm going to die. And if I'm feeling all of this, how could Easton be fine?

He's not. He's lying.

I walk into Safe and Sound, finding who I'm looking for sitting at a table next to Colby Hendrix and across from a little girl. Tessa spots me out of the corner of her eye and smiles. She waves me over, and Colby and the little girl get up.

“Hey,” she greets me. “Do you have an appointment today? I thought it wasn’t until next week.”

After everything, both Tye and Tessa suggested I see a therapist. It’s not a bad idea. Honestly, it’ll be good to talk to someone about the nightmares I’ve been having. Tess even set me up with her mentor, Danielle. But right now, I’m more worried about Easton than myself.

I shake my head. “No. I came to talk to you, actually.”

“Oh.” She sounds surprised. “Okay. Give me one minute then.”

Tess picks up the little girl and gives her a big hug before giving one to Colby, too.

“Thanks for bringing me lunch,” she tells him. “And be nice to your dad, Brenna!”

She scrunches her nose. “I’m always nice, Aunt Tess.”

Tessa chuckles. “Sure you are.”

“Thank you!” Colby shouts. “At least you see it. Asher acts like she’s a goddamn angel, I swear.”

Brenna smacks her dad in the leg. “Potty mouth, Daddy!”

“Yeah. Potty mouth, Daddy,” Tess repeats teasingly.

Colby rolls his eyes and picks up his daughter, tickling her as he carries her out.

Once they’re gone, Tessa nods for me to follow her, and we go into an empty office that honestly looks more like a sitting room than anything. There’s none of the typical therapist things you see. No clipboards where they write down everything that leaves your mouth. It’s all just calming pictures and comfortable couches.

She shuts the door behind us and sits down. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes,” I answer immediately, and then correct myself. “Well, no. It’s Easton. I’m worried about him.”

Her lips purse as she nods. “He’s shutting people out, right? Zayn already reached out to me about it.”

“Oh, good. So I’m not the only one who sees it.”

“Not at all,” she chuckles. “Easton thinks he does well at hiding his feelings, but he’s actually pretty bad at it. Zayn is just focused on making sure he doesn’t relapse.”

I exhale slowly. “I’m not as worried about a relapse as I am him losing himself. I was hoping you could talk to him? Maybe see how he’s really feeling?”

She smiles sadly at me. “I wish I could.”

My brows furrow as I realize she’s telling me no. “What? Why can’t you?”

“Because I’m not the closest person to him anymore,” she says, as if the whole concept is simple. “He was holding back from letting you in, but the second he did, when he told you about the night I overdosed, you took that spot.”

“B-but I can’t get through to him like you can.”

“You can,” she assures me. “He loves you, Kennedy. Like wholeheartedly, more than he ever loved me, loves you. Give him some time to cope in his own way, but then take control. He’ll follow you.”

The thought of being the only one who can keep him from going over the edge damn near sucks the air straight from my lungs. “What if I fail?”

She lets out a breathy laugh. “You won’t. I’m here and I’m watching from the sidelines. But he’s your future now, not mine. You two will get through this...together.”

I’m not sure if I believe her. Then again, I’m not sure of anything lately. But she sounds confident, and assures me again that she’s here if I need anything. The message is clear, though.

This is my responsibility.



BY THE TIME OF our 35 week ultrasound, things are still tense. He holds my hand as we walk into the office, and he's constantly attentive when I'm moving around or seeming uncomfortable, but he's still distant. Like if he's not doing something to protect me or keep an eye on me, he's mentally someplace else.

The last few weeks have been rough. For me, the therapy is helping. Meeting with Danielle every week has actually become one of the highlights I look forward to. She doesn't try to force anything out of me or make me feel like she's judging the decisions I've made. But Easton still refuses to see anyone.

As if seeing a therapist would make him less of a man.

Less of a protector.

I've tried to get him to at least confide in me, but he blows me off. He says there is nothing to talk about. That the whole incident was caused by Alec and he won't allow himself to feel sorry for the psycho. And in a way, I get that. But he watched someone die. I have a hard time believing that had zero effect on him, especially when he's so different.

He doesn't make any attempt at getting me to be with him again. Doesn't try to kiss me or take things to another level again. He's just there, existing with me but not anything near the guy he was during that last party. The one who kissed me just to shut me up.

My last hope is this.

Seeing our baby on ultrasound.

Hearing his little heartbeat.

I just hope it works.

The technician calls my name and the two of us get up, following her back into a room. Easton takes the chair while I get up onto the table. She helps me roll my pants down, being as my belly is so big now I can't see anything past it, and I lay back.

“Are you excited?” she asks. “You're getting so close.”

“Yeah.” I nod. “I can't wait to meet him. And you know, having his feet out of my ribs will be nice, too.”

She chuckles. “My second was like that. Actually cracked one of my ribs by kicking so hard.”

“That can happen?” Easton interjects.

“Oh, yeah,” she tells him. “But don't worry. It's not life-threatening. Just painful.”

That seems to calm him down as he relaxes back in the chair. I squeeze his hand as if silently assuring him that I'm okay, but I'm disappointed when he doesn't squeeze back—going just as distant and cold again as he has been lately.

“All right,” she announces. “Let's get a good look at this little guy.”

As he appears on the screen, it's amazing to see how big he's grown. He doesn't look like a tiny alien anymore. His body has filled out more and he looks healthy. My heart swells as I watch while she moves the wand around my stomach, taking measurements to obtain his size. But Easton is still checked out.

“Want to see something cool?” the tech asks me.

I nod, and when she hits a few buttons, our baby's face appears on the screen. Not in a way where we can see his brain, but where I can see how he looks. His button nose and his plump lips.

He looks like Easton.

A tear slips out and down my cheek, and that's when I feel it. Easton's hand squeezes mine. I turn to look at him, but find him staring at the screen. His mouth is open as he breathes

heavily, and I watch as he has his first ever emotional reaction in weeks, staring at our son.

“He’s perfect,” I whisper.

He snorts, but doesn’t take his eyes off the screen. “He’s half you, what did you expect?”

The technician smiles at us both. “I told you that you were going to make a beautiful baby.”

She shows us a few more angles, and we watch as he sucks his thumb and rubs his hand over his face. By the time the appointment is over, I wish I could relive it again and again. But unfortunately, she takes the wand off my stomach and turns the screen away from us.

“So, he’s measuring a little ahead of schedule,” she tells us. “Don’t be surprised if he ends up coming a little early. As of next week, you’re considered full term.”

I nod as I take in all the information she’s giving me. Knowing we’ll be meeting our son soon is a level of excitement that both thrills me as much as it worries me. But nothing makes me happier than when she hands me the pictures she printed out.

Especially the one of his little face.

And as Easton and I leave the office, it feels like there’s something lighter about him, but I refuse to get my hopes up.



THAT NIGHT, I’M SITTING on the couch across from Tye. She looks over the pictures from the appointment today and when she’s done cooing about how adorable he is, her brows furrow. She pulls the picture away from her eyes and then back again.

“Oh, God,” she says as it hits her. “You’re having Easton’s clone.”

Laughter bubbles out of me. “That’s what I said! He looks just like him.”

“That’s actually a horrifying thought.”

I reach over and swipe the pictures back from her, wanting to look at our baby again. “Well, I love him.”

“Oh, I do, too,” she assures me. “But that doesn’t mean he won’t be a tiny terror.”

“Well, that’s a given. He’s his father’s son.”

I stare down at the picture, rubbing my finger over it in an adoring way. It’s hard to believe this little guy is the one kicking up a storm in my belly all the time, flipping around like a damn gymnast.

“How’s everything going, by the way? With Easton, I mean.”

How’s it going? Isn’t that the big question? It’s the same question I’ve been asked at least three times a week. Even Amelia doesn’t know how to connect with her own brother anymore. But today, seeing him at the doctor’s appointment, it was the first time I’ve felt close to him in weeks.

“It’s...complicated,” I admit. “But I’m still hopeful.”

“And in love with him,” she adds.

I cough as I choke on air. “W-what?”

She rolls her eyes playfully. “Playing dumb is not your forte, Kennybabe.”

I throw my head back against the couch cushion, because she might be right. If it was really Easton at that lake instead of Alec, we might even be back together by now. But with everything that happened, nothing is the same. And if I’m being honest, it only made me even more hesitant, because as Danielle calls it, I’m traumatized.

As I go to answer her, admit to feelings that might even be unrequited at this point for all I know, the door flies open and

scares the shit out of me. Easton storms over like a man on a mission and stands in front of me.

“Pack your shit,” he demands. “You’re coming to stay with me.”

My eyes widen. “I am?”

“You are.” The confidence in his voice is sexy as hell. “I’m sick of not being able to sleep at night because I’m busy wondering if you’re okay, so let’s go. Get your shit. You’re coming with me.”

The range of different emotions I feel is confusing. On one hand, every word that just came out of his mouth pulled at my heartstrings and gave me the urge to do anything he tells me to. But on the other hand, he’s got a lot of nerve demanding this after the way he’s been acting lately.

I decide to let my brain win this one, even though I know he’s going to get his way. “You can’t just storm in here and declare that I’m coming to live with you!”

“The fuck I can’t,” he argues. “That’s *my* baby in there, which means part of that body is mine. My baby, my house. Let’s go.”

Fuck. Why is that so hot?

Looking over at Tye, she bounces her eyebrows as if she can practically read my mind. And yeah, I’m aware I’m totally fucked. I mean, I guess I always knew I would end up staying at Easton’s. After all, the nursery is over there, and there has to be a reason I’ve been refusing Tye’s offers to create one here all this time.

Without another word, I get up and go to my room to pack up some of my things, leaving a smug Easton in the living room, feeling like he won.



THE RIDE TO EASTON'S is quiet. He's not as distant as he has been—getting his way with this seeming to have helped a bit—but he still gets lost in thought. Sometimes, I let myself wonder what's going through that mind of his. But then again, I don't know that I would be able to handle seeing the things he's been through. For a twenty-two-year-old guy, his life has been rather traumatic.

Neither Amelia nor Zayn are home as we go inside. They're probably at the venue for the meal tasting. She asked me to go with her, but I figured they needed to do at least one thing together. Don't get me wrong, planning this wedding has been the perfect distraction from everything. But it's them getting married, not Amelia and me—no matter how much she jokes that it should be.

“Where am I staying?” I ask Easton, realizing the guest room is now a nursery.

“My room,” he answers without hesitation. “If you want, I can sleep on the couch.”

I don't respond to that, mainly because I don't have the mental capacity to unpack that statement right now. Instead, he follows me as I march upstairs and into his room. As he gets inside, carrying my bags, I point to the corner.

“You can just put them over there.”

He does as I say, but he genuinely looks a little uncomfortable. Maybe he's realizing that he was a little out of line to demand I stay here. Or he's not used to getting an attitude from me. But right now, he kind of deserves one. As he goes to walk out of the room, I open my mouth.

“Let's get one thing straight,” I say confidently. “I came because I agree with you. This is your baby, and I should be

here. But this body, this womb growing our child, is not yours. It's mine." I take a step closer and stare up at him. "Say differently again and I'll make it so this baby is the only one you ever have."

Meeting my gaze, he licks his lips and then smirks in the way that always does me in. "Yes, ma'am."



SLOWLY, MY LIVING HERE instead of at Tye's starts to get Easton to warm up again. It doesn't happen all at once. More like a small thing here and there. But I'll take any progress I can get at this point. I just miss *my* Easton.

The one who used to crack jokes at all the wrong times.

The one who was so in tune with my body that he moved when I moved.

The one I rarely had to worry about.

I'm sitting in the kitchen, eating a bowl of cereal, when my stomach twists. I hold my fist to my mouth as I mentally will myself not to throw up, but no part of my body intends on listening. Within the next second, I'm jumping up from the table and rushing into the bathroom.

Everything I just ate comes shooting out of me, like this baby is forcefully expelling it from my body. I barely even have a moment to catch my breath before more comes out.

Two hands come up from each side of my head and my hair gets pulled out of my face. Easton sits on the side of the tub, holding my hair back with one hand and rubbing my back with the other.

"Well, this looks familiar," he teases.

It doesn't take much thought to know what he's referring to. My first college party. *The first night we were alone*

together. Only, so much has changed since that night.

I groan and turn to the side, leaning back against the tub as my stomach finally calms down. He gets up and grabs a washcloth. Running it under cold water, he wrings it out and then kneels down in front of me. With the gentlest care I've ever seen in him, he carefully wipes my mouth, and then uses the clean side to wipe the tears from my eyes. Once I'm all cleaned up, he bends down and kisses my forehead before leaving the room.

And I'm just left to sit here, thinking about how fucked I am, and how much I wish we could go back to how we were.

Before Alec.

Before the lying.

Before everything became so complicated.

Because Tye has never been more right—I'm in love with him.

Chapter 27



easton

HAVE YOU EVER FELT LIKE YOU WERE DROWNING? LIKE everything is okay, nothing is actually wrong, but you feel like the air is too thick to breathe and you can't seem to get enough oxygen in your lungs?

I feel it constantly. I can't tell if it's anxiety or the universe getting back at me. Like it's karma's way of making me feel what Alec did as he gurgled on his own blood. Honestly, it wouldn't surprise me if I pissed off some higher power. I've known I was going to hell since the first grade, and what I did to Alec only wrote my fate in stone.

But Kennedy? Kennedy is a breath of fresh air. A dose of pure oxygen straight to my bloodstream. She makes all the bad things better and my demons tolerable. And every second she's around, her warmth finds a way to melt some more of the ice in me. But she deserves so much better than a soulless prick.



IT HAPPENS ON A Tuesday. Kennedy screams in the bathroom as I'm lying down, and I damn near break every limb I have jumping out of bed. I reach the doorway to find her standing there in a puddle of liquid with fear in her eyes.

"What's wrong? What happened?" I ask urgently.

She starts to breath heavily. "I-I think my water just broke."

"Okay." My tone is calm, because clearly she's not. "We're prepared for this. Let's clean you up and I'll call the doctor while I put the hospital bag in the car."

Shaking her head rapidly, she cradles her belly. "No. I'm only a little over 37 weeks. We're not ready. *I'm* not ready."

Careful not to step in the amniotic fluid that covers the floor, I get as close to her as I can and put my hands on her cheeks. "We *are* ready. And remember what they told you at our last ultrasound? As of last week, you're considered full term. It's going to be fine."

"But what if he's not okay?"

A few months ago, Amelia jokingly gave me a Dad's edition of *What to Expect When You're Expecting* book, but the joke was on her when I ended up reading every damn word of it. And it said this would happen. That worries happen when it comes time to give birth and exactly how to deal with them.

I give her a comforting smile. "Then the hospital is exactly where we want to be, isn't it?"

She thinks it over for a second and then nods. I call Amelia into the room and have her call the doctor while Zayn puts the bag in the car and I help Kennedy change her clothes. Once

we're ready to go, we make our way downstairs and out the front door. It isn't until I get into the back seat with Kennedy that it hits me.

I'm becoming a dad today.



WE GET TO THE hospital to find our OB/GYN, Dr. Gabriel, already waiting for us in the lobby. A nurse is holding a wheelchair for Kennedy and comes out to help her from the car. I leave the bag in the trunk, knowing Zayn will get it for me, and follow them inside while Z and Amelia park the car.

“Hey, Kennedy,” the doctor greets her. “How are you feeling?”

She lets out a shaky breath. “Is he supposed to be this early? I mean, I know he was measuring ahead of schedule, but is two and a half weeks too early?”

The doctor puts a hand on her shoulder as we get into an elevator. “Thirty-seven weeks is perfectly fine, especially for his size. And if I'm not worried, you shouldn't be either.”

To my relief, she seems to relax a little at that, and as the elevator starts to rise, I mouth a silent *thank you* to Dr. Gabriel.



EVERYONE TALKS ABOUT HOW hard labor is. How much it hurts. How it's the most intense thing a woman will

ever go through. But my God, you don't understand it until you see it.

The contractions that rip through her body as it tries to expel our son.

The way she grips the bed to try to battle against the pain.

The fucking eight centimeter needle she gets in her back for the epidural.

All I'm saying is I've got a whole new level of respect for women after this. We might have to deal with the pain of getting kicked in the balls every once in a while, but at least we don't go through this shit.

Our friends sit out in the waiting room, all waiting patiently for the birth of our son, while Amelia is in the room with Kennedy and me. According to the text Zayn sent me an hour or so ago, even my parents are out there. Kennedy's parents would probably be here as well if they weren't on a safari tour in Africa. It's comforting, knowing everyone cares so much, but I have only one thing, *one person*, on my mind.

Everything is going well, and for a minute, I think we're through the freaking out stage. That is, until the doctor comes in and tells her it's time to push. As soon as she says that, it's like a switch is flicked, and Kennedy goes into utter panic mode.

"No," she murmurs. "Not yet. Just keep him in there."

I grab her hand and rub my thumb over it. "Baby, this is what we've been waiting for. You want to meet him, right?"

She starts to quiver, and a tear escapes and slides down her cheek as she looks at me. "It's not safe out here. There are psychos with guns and danger out here. I want to keep him in, where he's safe. He should stay where he is."

My chest tightens as Amelia and I lock eyes. She's been so busy worrying about me that no one noticed how much she's struggling herself.

In a split-second decision, I lean Kennedy forward and climb onto the bed behind her. She leans back against me as I

wrap my arms around her.

“I’ve got you,” I tell her. “Do you hear me? I’ve got you. I won’t ever let anything happen to either of you, but you have to push him out. He can’t stay in.”

Sobs wrack through her as she breaks down. “Promise me. Promise he’ll be okay.”

“I promise I will do every possible thing in my power to always keep you and our boy safe.” I help hold back one of her legs while Amelia takes the other. “Now, you have to push.”

It’s weird, the way it all happens. It feels like it’s in slow motion and in the blink of an eye all at once. Kennedy pushes with everything she has as Dr. Gabriel does everything she can to get the baby out. Finally, Ken collapses against me, and that first cry fills the room as they lift up our son.

He’s covered in fluid and wailing his little head off, but as I look at him for the first time, I instantly fall in love.

This is my son.

“Dad, you want to cut the cord?” Dr. Gabriel asks me, holding out the scissors.

I nod and slip out from behind Kennedy while she holds our boy and cries tears of joy. Taking the scissors from the doctor, I follow her instructions and cut the umbilical cord. Once I hand her back the scissors, I move up to the head of the bed where Kennedy is staring down at our son.

Watching the two of them, seeing them both right in front of my eyes, I know without a doubt that I had no idea what love truly was until this moment.



AS SOON AS WE'RE settled in the recovery room our family and friends swarm in, all wanting to get their hands on the new baby. We let my parents see him first, with Kennedy's mom and dad on a video call. They all coo over him and talk about how adorable he is, and then leave so that everyone else can get a chance to see him.

Amelia and Tye fight over who gets to cuddle him first, but as intimidating as Tye can be, Amelia is not backing down on this one. She pulls every card she has, including but not limited to being my sister, and takes the baby from Kennedy before Tye even has a chance to argue it.

"He's so perfect," my sister says, completely in awe of him the same way we all are. "You guys made a really cute kid."

I shrug. "She did all the hard work. I just had sex."

Everyone chuckles while Tye lets the baby clutch her finger. "I think this little guy needs a name."

My gaze locks with Kennedy's and she smiles. "You tell them."

Amelia looks around, confused. "Tell us what? You finally thought of a name?"

Over the last few weeks, Kennedy and I have gone back and forth on names. We went from something simple like Nicholas all the way to something completely unheard of like Izo. Thankfully, no one can judge me for that one. It's a name Kennedy was hooked on for at least a few days. But no matter how many names we thought of, nothing really felt right. Nothing until this.

I nod, completely focused on my son. "His name is Kayn. It's a combination of Knox and Zayn."

The room goes quiet until Zayn lets out a wet, emotional laugh as his head drops. "You named your kid after me?"

"You say that like it's a crazy thing to do," I say simply. "The two of you saved my life, you especially. I can't think of anyone more worthy of my son being named after."

It takes a lot for Zayn to get choked up, but as I watch him press his fist to his mouth, I can see it. He stands up and waves me over to him.

“Come here, man.”

We wrap our arms around each other and pound each other’s backs, swallowing down our emotions so we don’t look like a pair of pussies. When we separate, I notice the girls all sporting tearful eyes—always the sentimental ones.

“Kayn Donovan,” Amelia says softly as she stares down at him. “I love it.”

Carter snorts. “It’s great and all, but let me tell you something—Knox really doesn’t need that ego boost.”

We all look at each other as the reality sinks in.

Shit, he may have a point.

Chapter 28



kennedy

THE SOUND OF KAYN'S CRY RIPS ME STRAIGHT FROM MY peaceful slumber. I wake in a panic and sit up, barely even opening my eyes before I go to get out of bed. As I stumble down the hallway, it sets in just how tired I am.

I knew having a baby was going to be rough, but I don't think anything could have prepared me for the severe sleep deprivation that comes with it. At least in the hospital, they took him to the nursery to let us get some sleep. The last few days we've been home, I feel like I've been in a perpetual state of awake with the occasional catnap.

Kayn cries inside his crib, and honestly, I feel like crying with him. I lift him up and cradle him in my arms as I take him over to the changing table. With my eyes only half open, I change his diaper before realizing that I forgot to grab a bottle.

"Shit," I groan quietly.

Easton snorts behind me. "That'll be a great first word."

As I turn around, I see he's got the bottle, and he's never looked sexier to me than right now. He comes closer and takes Kayn out of my arms.

"I've got him," he tells me. "You go get more rest."

My heart swells as I watch him sit in the rocking chair with our son. "Are you sure?"

He nods. "Lacking sleep is something I'm used to at this point, but you're not. I've got him. I promise. Go back to bed."

My shoulders sag, and I almost confess my love right then and there, but instead, I bite my tongue. Confessing that right now would probably lead to a conversation that I am way too tired to have right now. So, I do exactly what he told me to.

I go back to bed.



IT TAKES A FEW more days, but by the end of the first week, I'm finally starting to feel like we've got a system down. We move around the kitchen with an unmatched skill, completely aware of what the other is doing with a minimal amount of effort. Amelia and Zayn sit at the island, watching Easton and me.

I bounce Kayn in my arms as I put the coffee grinds into the machine and hit start. Meanwhile, Easton makes his bottle. When he's done, he passes me the bottle and I walk over to the table to pull out a chair.

"Shit," I groan. "I forgot a—"

"Burp cloth," he finishes for me, already tossing one to me. "And what did I tell you about cursing in front of him?"

I catch the mini-towel and roll my eyes. "He's not even a week old, Easton. And besides. I'm sure he will learn a lot worse from you."

Easton chuckles and waits for the coffee to be done while I feed the baby, burping him every couple minutes. When the coffee machine beeps, he takes two cups and makes some for each of us. He puts the cup—the coffee prepared exactly how I like it—down on the table and takes Kayn from my arms.

“Hey, little man,” he coos. “I’m just going to put you in your swing.”

I watch as he bounces him and kisses his head before strapping him into his baby swing, the most critical piece of equipment we own at this point. After turning it on and making sure he’s safe, he comes to sit next to me. As he brings his cup to his mouth, however, he freezes.

“What?” he asks Amelia.

She smirks and shakes her head. “Nothing. You two are just disgustingly domesticated.”

“That’s what happens when you make a baby together,” I tell her.

Chuckling, she puts her hands up in defense. “I never said it was a bad thing. It’s cute.”

I leave it alone because the phrase *cute* walks on the line of dangerous territory. Since having Kayn, Easton and I have kept things in a very safe zone of friends and coparents. As much as sometimes I want to scream in his face that he’s everything to me, I would never have the balls to actually do it.

There’s also the fact that I don’t know what I would do without Easton at this point. He’s been taking the nighttime feedings so I can sleep, which usually ends in him sleeping on the couch by about 10 AM. The rest of the time, though, he’s up and willing to do anything I need to help. Seeing how hands-on he is with Kayn is everything.

Looking over at Easton, I notice that even drinking his coffee, his attention is on the baby. He glances over at me when he feels my eyes on him and he smiles.

“What?”

I shake my head and go back to my coffee. “Nothing.”

Pussy.



WE PULL UP TO the house after getting home from Kayn’s first doctor appointment. It went as well as it could have, if you don’t count me crying because I’m still super hormonal and he’s already a whole week old. He’s healthy and gaining weight exactly as he should. It’s everything we could hope for.

As I get out of the car, Easton grabs Kayn’s car seat from the back. He’s sound asleep inside of it, but that’s to be expected with a newborn. As E says all the time, all he does is eat, poop, and sleep. Kind of like his dad.

“Do you want me to let him sleep in here, or should I attempt to put him in his crib?” he asks as we walk up the steps.

I purse my lips. “Probably just leave him there. If you try to take him out, he’s going to wake up and we’ve seen what he’s like when he’s overtired.”

“Good point,” he chuckles.

The door opens and we step inside, but the sight in front of me stops me in my tracks. Amelia smiles nervously at me as the two people next to her turn to face me.

“Mom?” I ask, confused and yet trying to mask my terror at them being here. “Dad? What are you guys doing here?”

It’s not that I don’t want them here. I love my parents. It’s just that my mom has a tendency to be overbearing at times, and my dad, while he means well, lacks a backbone. Ultimately, it’s just more than I wanted to deal with this soon. I’m still getting in the swing of things.

My mom gets up from the couch and comes toward us. “You had a baby, Kennedy. Did you think I wasn’t going to come meet my grandson as soon as I could?” She bends down to peek in the car seat. “Oh my word, he’s even cuter in person!”

Kayn starts to stir and Easton puts the car seat down and lifts him out before handing him to my mom. She coos and holds him with a practiced skill of a mother who has done this multiple times.

“I’m going to let you spend time with your parents,” Easton tells me softly. “I’ll be in the other room if you need me.”

My dad gives him a look as he leaves the room, but then he’s quickly distracted by my mom bringing the baby over to him. I lean against the wall and sigh as I watch them with my son.

This is going to be a long visit.



FORTY EIGHT HOURS. THAT’S all the time it takes for my mom to overstep. We’re sitting at lunch and enjoying a perfectly good meal, when she throws something out there that damn near causes me to choke on my food.

“W-what?” I ask once I’m able to breathe again.

“I want you to move home,” she repeats.

Not even considering it, I shake my head. “No. That’s not happening. Kayn’s life is here.”

She raises the baby up and lays him against her chest. “I understand that, but how are you going to handle this all alone?”

“I’m not alone, *Mom*. I have Easton.”

“Yes, but Easton is still a college student,” she explains. “And so are you. Are you planning on dropping out?”

“No.”

“Is Easton dropping out to be a stay at home dad?”

“Not that I know of.”

She gives me a knowing look. “Which one of you is going to get a job so you can afford diapers and formula? That generous gift card from your friend is only going to last so long, Kennedy.”

“I-I don’t know,” I murmur, hating that I can’t seem to put her in her place on this one.

“There’s a lot you don’t know, but you’re a mother now, sweetie. You don’t have the ability to just not know anymore.”

As her words sink in, I drop my fork on my plate. No matter how delicious the food is, I don’t have an appetite anymore. Everything she’s saying is valid, but I couldn’t actually leave Easton. To take Kayn away from him would be cruel. He’s already become such an amazing dad.

“Just think about transferring to a university near us,” she continues. “We could help take care of Kayn while you finish your degree and then you can get a good job to support the two of you.”

“And what about Easton?” My voice comes out practically like a whisper, as if I can’t believe I’m actually considering this.

She presses her lips together and smiles sympathetically at me. “If he loves you, he will understand. You two can work something out, I’m sure.”

As Kayn starts to cry, my mom’s attention is taken off me and put onto him. It’s something I’m grateful for, because this conversation is not one I can handle right now. I’d be lying if I said she’s completely out of her mind. She asked questions I don’t have answers to and makes points that I never thought of before.

All I know is I have a lot to think about.



EASTON ROCKS KAYN IN his arms, shushing me as I come into the room. He puts him down in his crib and we carefully walk out the door. He shuts it behind us and we both go down the hall.

“It took forever to get him down for some reason,” he tells me.

I sit on the bed and lean against the wall. “Do you think he’s sick?”

He shakes his head. “He skipped his last nap because Amelia was playing with him. Overtired Kayn is a tiny dictator that could take over the world, I swear.”

A small laugh leaves my mouth. Easton goes into the bathroom and starts the shower. He takes his shirt off and tosses it into the basket.

“Is everything you own covered in spit up or is it just my clothes?”

It’s meant to be a joke, but it goes right over my head as I’m lost in thought. And before I can second guess myself, I open my mouth and let the words come out.

“My mom thinks I should move home,” I announce.

His back is to me as I say it, and I watch as he freezes. “Oh?”

“Yeah. She thinks I should transfer to a school down there so they can watch the baby while I finish my degree.”

He nods, still not looking at me. “And how do you feel about that idea?”

I swallow down a lump in my throat. “Well, at first I thought she was nuts. But the more I think about it, the more I

think she might have a point. I mean, what's our plan if I stay here? Who keeps going to school? Who is going to get a job? What's our plan, E?"

There's a part of me, a huge part, that is begging for him to fight for me.

To tell me not to go.

To demand that I not even consider this ridiculous idea.

To at the very least put up an argument.

But my heart drops as he leans against the doorway and looks down at the ground. "Well, if that's what you want to do, I won't stop you. But we'll have to come up with a plan for Kayn because I'm not a deadbeat dad. I won't abandon him, no matter where you're at."

The urge to scream is overwhelming as I realize we really are just friends. Just coparents. Just two people who happened to have a baby together after the relationship went sour. And the worst part of all is that I blame myself. The little voice in my head tells me that I should have stayed from the get go. I should have pushed through the hard times and given him more time to fix it. Maybe then we wouldn't have ended up here.

"O-okay." I run my fingers through my hair and force myself to look away from him. "We can do that. Sure."

He pushes off the doorway and closes the bathroom door before getting in the shower, and I'm left to hold myself together as the reality makes it hard to breathe.



AMELIA COMES HOME FROM work early one night, when Easton and Zayn are out celebrating Zayn's bachelor party. Knox flew in this morning, and apparently the idea of

waiting to have a guys' night was too much for them. I guess I can't blame two out of the three. Easton spends most of his time helping me take care of Kayn while Z has to hear him cry in the middle of the night.

What started as their bachelor pad now has two women and a baby living in it.

Tossing down her purse, Amelia makes grabby hands at the baby. "Okay. I need nephew time."

I hand him over willingly. "Take him. I could use the break."

"That bad?" she asks.

"I mean, he's a good baby. But he's a total daddy's boy." I run my fingers through my hair as I deliver the news I know is going to wreck her. "It's going to be hard for him to adjust when I leave for Texas."

She keeps her attention on Kayn, playing with his tiny hands as she talks to me. "Oh, are you going to visit your parents?"

"No," I tell her, and then pause to get a handle on myself. "I'm *moving* back to Texas."

Her eyes double in size as her head whips up to face me. "You're what? No. No, you're not."

"Amelia," I breathe.

She stands up and puts Kayn in his swing. "No. No fucking way. You can't!"

"I have to. If I stay here, I'll have to drop out of college to take care of him, and I want him to have a mom he can look up to. My parents can help watch him as I finish school."

"But what about Easton? What about the family you've created?" she yells.

I get up from the couch so that I'm eye level with her. "We're going to work something out so that he's still involved in Kayn's life."

“Still involved,” she repeats, making it sound like the most disgusting thing she’s ever said. “That’s a fucking joke. How could you do this to him? I trusted you!”

A lump forms in my throat and I look away. “I’m sorry. I don’t blame you if you hate me.”

That manages to get through to her because she sighs and her voice drops a few levels. “I could never hate you, Ken, but seriously? You two work so well together, and you’re just going to take him and leave?”

“I have to do what’s best for Kayn.”

“And this is what’s best for him? Moving away from his dad?”

I don’t answer, because I’m not completely sure it’s the right thing to do. I stare up at the ceiling and blink back the tears, but Amelia isn’t as strong. She just lets hers fall.

“What about you and Easton?” she says sadly. “I was counting on you being my sister-in-law one day.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

Her brows furrow. “You don’t know that.”

“I do,” I murmur.

She scoffs. “Oh, right. The all-knowing Kennedy. How dare I doubt you.”

It’s clear she’s getting angry again, and honestly, I expected it. But one thing about Amelia is that she doesn’t know when to quit.

“Did you even talk to him about your future together? Did you even try?”

She continues to shout questions that also feel like accusations at me, and each one hits me right where it hurts.

“You do know he loves you, right? Like he’s actually in love with you,” she keeps going.

“He’s not.”

“Oh, stop with the denial shit.”

Finally, my restraint snaps. “He didn’t fight for me!”

She flinches at my tone. “What?”

“He. Didn’t. Fight. For. Me.” I enunciate every word to make sure she really understands. “I told him my mom was encouraging me to move to Texas, and he didn’t fight for me. He didn’t argue it. He didn’t fight. He didn’t even ask me to stay. He didn’t fight for me.”

Amelia stares back at me, completely silent, until it all becomes clear. “Oh my God.”

“Don’t, please,” I beg.

“You’re still in love with him.”

I shake my head and wrap my arms around myself. “Seriously, Meelz. Don’t do this right now. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

She looks at me like I’ve lost my mind. “Like fuck it doesn’t. You know damn well he feels the same way.”

“He doesn’t,” I answer honestly. “He used to, yes. But after everything with Alec happened, it changed. He stopped looking at me as the girl he’s in love with and started looking at me as just the mother of his child. And I can’t blame him for that. There’s just too much damage there. So, please, if you love me at all, just leave it alone.”

Chapter 29



THE CASINO IS FILLED WITH PEOPLE ALL MAKING BAD decisions. We sit at the blackjack table with our stacks of chips and topped-off glasses of beer, feeling like kings. It's been hell since I found out Kennedy plans on moving to Texas with our kid, so tonight is exactly what I need. Just one night to take my mind off everything.

"I have to admit, I'm surprised there are no strippers," Zayn says as he looks around.

Knox snorts. "Have you met my fiancée? She'll sick her sister on me, and I don't think I could survive the wrath of Tessa. It's just booze and blackjack for you, bud."

"Not to mention, my tolerance for watching you get a lap dance expired the second you started dating my sister," I add.

Zayn chuckles but then his brows furrow. "Speak of the devil."

Knox groans as Amelia storms over to our table. "Listen, Princess. It's adorable how much you miss him and all, but this is guys' night."

“Knox, shut it,” she demands.

His bottom lip juts out in a pout. “Oh, come on. It’s bad enough you’re stealing him from me for the rest of his life. Can’t I at least have tonight? Goddamn.”

She flips him off before her other hand winds back and smacks me so hard in the head that I see stars. “Are you out of your fucking mind?”

I wince at the pain. “No, but I might not have one if you hit me that hard again.”

“Kennedy is moving, Easton!”

And there goes my one night. ”I know.”

My sister narrows her eyes at me. “And you’re just okay with it? E, she’s moving practically across the damn country!”

Knox looks around and leans toward Amelia. “Maybe keep your voice down a little bit. The whole casino is staring, and you’re making a bit of a scene.”

“Do I look like I give a shit?”

“Okay,” I say, getting up and grabbing Amelia by the wrist.

I pull her down a long hallway and into an unoccupied room. Thankfully, she comes without putting up too much of a fight. But her mouth? That keeps on going the whole time.

“I can’t believe you’re just fine with this,” she rants. “That’s your son. The girl you’re fucking crazy about. You’re really going to let the shit that happened with Alec ruin that for you two?”

At the mention of his name, a chill goes down my spine and the memories from that day play in my head. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She scoffs. “Then why are you letting her go? She said you didn’t even ask her to stay. Why are you so fucking okay with her just taking your son and leaving?”

I lean against the wall and don’t meet her eyes. “She’s better off without me. Honestly, they both are, but I won’t

leave my son without a dad.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it,” she counters. “There isn’t a thing you can say that would convince me that’s true. Look at everything you’ve done for them. Everything you still continue to do. Stop with the poor pitiful me, I’m-the-villain act. Between you and Zayn, I want to pull all my hair out!”

“I *am* the villain, Amelia.”

“No, you’re not! Look at what you did at that house. You literally saved her life and Kayn’s when you took on Alec yourself.”

“I killed Alec!” I snap.

Her brows furrow and she shakes her head. “It was an accident.”

“No,” I say firmly. “I made them *believe* it was an accident, but it definitely wasn’t. There was no threatening me after Kennedy left that room. There was no wrestling for the gun. I shot him in the chest with aim and accuracy, expelling the life from his body the same way he threatened to do to Kennedy.”

She takes a second to compose herself. At first she looks scared, but then I watch as her expression settles. She comes over to me and puts a hand on my arm.

“You did what anyone who wants to protect their family would do,” she tells me. “If Zayn killed Blade that day, would you have blamed him?”

“No.”

“So, how is that any different than this?”

I throw my hands in the air. “Because, Mila. I listened as he choked on his own blood, and it was like music to my fucking ears.”

“He tried to take your family from you,” she reasons. “If someone put a gun in my hands and gave me the chance, I would’ve done exactly what you did.”

“She deserves someone better than me,” I whisper.

Running her fingers through her hair, she switches tactics. “Okay, let’s say that’s true. You two have a kid together. What was your plan if she didn’t decide to move to Texas?”

With a half-hearted shrug, I frown. “I’d be there to help her and protect her until she found someone else, and then I’d let her be happy.”

“And what if the person she would be happiest with is you?”

“It’s not.”

Pinching the bridge of her nose, she groans. “You two are the densest people I’ve ever met. I don’t know how I’m related to you.”

I grunt. “And now you’re back to insulting me. Great.”

“She’s still in love with you, moron!” she shouts. “She is *in love* with you, and you’re about to let her leave. If you want to stay with this *I’m not worthy* attitude, that’s on you. But just know that if you let her go, there’s a good chance you might lose her forever.”

The thought of never getting to hold her in my arms again hits me right in the chest. When it comes down to it, I’m crazy about her. It was one thing when I thought she didn’t want me too, when I could convince myself that being a co-parent and a friend to her was enough. But hearing that she still returns the same feelings for me, from the person that knows her the best, makes me realize what I could be throwing away. And it’s not okay.

Not even close.

“Okay,” I cave. “But her flight’s already booked. What the hell do I do?”

My sister smirks. “I have an idea, but you might think I’m crazy.”



THE WEDDING VENUE IS gorgeous. White flowers line the aisle and a matching canopy covers the arch above us. I stand at the altar, behind Zayn and Knox, and I know I should be paying attention, but I can't. The only thing I can focus on is how beautiful Kennedy looks. People probably think I'm suffering through withdrawals as I try to control my shaking.

Keeping this a secret has been hard. Amelia was right when she said her plan was crazy, but crazy might be exactly what I need. Kennedy plans on leaving in two days so she can get settled and enrolled in school down there, so it's now or never.

I can't just stand by and watch as she walks out of my life.



I WAIT UNTIL JUST after all the pictures are taken before I put a hand on the small of Kennedy's back. She tilts her head back to look at me and I move my lips to the shell of her ear with as much calmness as I can muster.

"Can I steal you for a minute?"

She gives me a strange look and starts looking around.
"What about Kayn?"

I start to lead her away from the wedding party. “My parents have him.”

Thankfully, she follows me without asking too many questions. We go down a decorated hallway until we stand in front of a closed door. I feel like my heart is in my throat and if I wasn’t so mesmerized by the way Kennedy looks in that dress, I might pass out from being so fucking nervous.

“What are we doing?” she asks. “Amelia will kill us both if we don’t get back.”

“Just wait a minute,” I tell her.

Taking another few seconds to compose myself, I inhale deeply and then slowly let it out. Kennedy watches me with the same patience she always has. The same patience I really don’t deserve but she gives it to me anyway.

“You were right,” I start. “I don’t love you in the way I love Tessa.”

She takes a step back like she’s been wounded, but I grab her hand and pull her toward me again.

“Just, hear me out,” I beg. “I love her in the way that needs to know she’s okay. That she’s safe and happy and not dying in a bathroom somewhere from a drug addiction that I caused. But I love you in a way that consumes me. It runs through my veins and claims every inch of me from the inside out.”

Dropping down on one knee, I pull out the same ring I used to propose to her once, when she shot me down in front of the whole school. She throws a hand over her mouth as tears fill her eyes, but she doesn’t make a move to leave.

“Now I asked you this once, but this time is different. I’m not asking because I think it’s the right thing to do, or because you’re the mother of my son. Know that this is purely selfish, because I don’t want to live without you. And this time, I’m not just asking you to be my fiancée.”

Her brows furrow in confusion. “Then what are you asking me?”

I glance at the door and then back at her. “The pastor is still here. Right inside that room. Amelia asked him to stick around for a bit. I’m asking you to stay. With me. Here. I’m asking you to marry me, right now, in that room. Spend the rest of your life with me, Kennedy. I can’t promise I won’t fuck up sometimes, but I promise to always make it up to you. Marry me.”

Kennedy turns into a sobbing mess, crying so hard it’s almost hard to make out the *yes* that leaves her mouth. As if she can read my mind, she nods and puts her hands on my cheeks. I stand up and finally cover her mouth with my own for the first time in way too long.

Breaking the kiss, I interlace our fingers and open the door. The pastor stands there, patiently waiting for us with a smile on his face. Kennedy follows me inside, and as we reach the altar, she turns to me.

“We’re seriously doing this?” she asks in complete disbelief.

The smile that appears on my face stretches from ear to ear. “We’re seriously doing this.”



I STAND IN THE doorway, watching as Kennedy lays our son down in his crib. Somehow, she has mastered the ability to move him from the car seat to his bed without waking him. I’ve asked her to teach me how, but the only way I can explain it is magic. She’s fucking magical.

“He’s still asleep?” I ask quietly.

She nods and gives me one of her teasing smiles. “He is.”

Slipping past me, I close the door behind us. She doesn't get far, however, before I grab her wrist and pull her back to me. She spins around and lands with her left hand on my chest. I look down at the wedding ring that I put on her finger just a few hours ago, and I don't think it's a sight I could ever get sick of.

"It's beautiful," she says as she realizes what I'm looking at.

I smirk. "*You're* beautiful, but the ring means you're mine, and that's the part I'm having a hard time believing."

She chuckles and arches up on her tip-toes to kiss me. "Well, believe it, baby. I'm Kennedy Donovan now."

She's not. Not technically anyway. But she will be as soon as we go down to the courthouse tomorrow and get a marriage license. I tried to get one before the wedding, but they needed her there to do it. The pastor assured me to just bring it by after we get it and he will fill it out for us.

It's just crossing the Ts and dotting the Is.

As far as I'm concerned, she's my wife.

And as far as I'm concerned, I'm the luckiest mother fucker alive.

Chapter 30



kennedy

I PRESS MY HEAD INTO THE PILLOW, LETTING THE ECSTASY flow through me. It's intense, unrelenting, and everything I've been craving. Easton's tongue works its magic as his fingers slip in and out of me. It's only a matter of time before I'm falling over the edge. My thighs close around his head, holding him in place as I scream out. He reaches up and covers my mouth, making sure we don't wake the baby.

With Amelia and Zayn on their honeymoon, we've had the house to ourselves to enjoy our own. And we have done exactly that. Every second that Kayn spends sleeping, we spend falling back into each other in the best way we know how.

Easton slides back up the bed and collapses next to me, sucking my juices clean off his fingers. He doesn't even try to hide it as he looks over at me and smirks.

"Why are you stopping?" I ask, because I wasn't nearly done.

He rolls toward me and kisses me, not caring that the taste of me is covering every inch of his mouth. "Because I'd bet

that orgasm of yours woke up Kayn.”

I pull my head away to listen for him, but there’s nothing. “I don’t hear him.”

His lips purse. “Hmm. Maybe not then.”

His mouth moves against my own as he starts to slip inside of me, taking full advantage of the IUD I had installed at my last appointment. I groan at how amazing it feels when there is nothing between us. Just as he bottoms out, however, Kayn’s cry comes through the baby monitor. Easton drops his head onto my shoulder and sighs.

“A little more than a month old and already a cock block,” he mumbles.

And yet still, he pulls out of me and rolls out of bed—throwing on a pair of sweatpants and going to take care of our baby. I stay in bed and hold up my left hand to admire the ring on my finger.

The way we got married is out of the normal order of things, but I’d expect nothing less of us. Our relationship has always been wild and full of passion, and that’s exactly what I love about him. We may have lost our way for a little bit, but we belong together.



ONE MONTH LATER

I carry Kayn’s car seat in one arm while my other hand is busy holding the phone to my ear. The sound of my mother’s voice, once again telling me what a mistake I’m making, goes right through me. I understood when she was upset that she didn’t get to attend her first daughter’s wedding, but when she clung to this thing about moving home, even after Easton and I got married, she lost my sympathy.

“You’re throwing your whole life away for that boy,” she tells me.

I roll my eyes. “That *boy* is my husband, Mom. And as much as I love you, I’m a grown adult and a mother now. I can make my own decisions.”

She scoffs and starts going on and on about how Kayn is going to grow up thinking it’s okay to drop out of school, but that won’t be the case. Easton is going to finish first, and then if he can’t get a job that affords daycare, he’ll work nights while I finish my degree. It might not be a foolproof plan, but it’s one that works for us.

As I get inside the house, I notice all our friends are sitting in the living room.

Strange. No one told me they were coming over today.

Amelia takes the baby from me as I cut off my mom in mid-rant. “Ma, I’ve got to go. I’ll call you later.”

I don’t wait for her to say goodbye as I hang up the phone. Looking around at everyone, I start to get concerned. They’re all completely silent, except Easton who comes over and kisses me hello.

“What’s going on?”

Amelia hands something to Tye, too busy holding Kayn to care about anything else. It’s a piece of paper, and Tye looks at it before passing it to me. I look it over and my brows furrow as I stare at the class schedule for second semester.

“What is this?” I question.

Tye smiles. “Your schedule for next semester.”

“Uh, what?” I look around at everyone, dumbfounded. “I can’t take classes. Who is going to take care of Kayn?”

“All of us,” Zayn answers.

Easton explains for him. “We all got together and worked out our schedules so that one of us is always free to watch him.”

As I start to tear up, Carter comes over and places a hand on my shoulder. “We’re a family, Ken. And Kayn is a part of that family. We take care of our own.”

Looking around, I can’t even begin to explain how loved I feel. I always knew that I had the best friends a girl could ask for, but it’s times like this when I realize just how amazing they are.

My family is not limited to Easton and Kayn.

It’s every single one of these people, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

Epilogue



Fayn

Nineteen Years Later

EVERYTHING AROUND ME MOVES IN SLOW MOTION, MY BRAIN unable to take in the scene in front of me. It looks like something out of a goddamn horror movie.

The car wrapped around the tree.

Brayden leaning against it, holding his shoulder as he winces in pain.

Kai pulling Van away from the dead body lying on the ground, face covered in blood.

As they get a distance away, Van shoves Kai off him and storms away. He disappears among the trees, no doubt to let out some anger.

Once the ringing in my ears subsides, I take a deep breath and try to make sense of what happened. My sister, Talan,

stares ahead with a terrified look on her face, no doubt in shock. I kneel in front of her and take her face in my hands.

“Are you okay?” I ask. “Are you hurt?”

The sound of Van shouting angrily echoes in the distance. I spare a quick glance that way, but I know he’s only letting off steam. He’ll be back when he’s done.

She shakes her head no rapidly before getting distracted by heavy sobbing. Hudson Vaughn has her arms wrapped around herself as she rocks back and forth. Blood drips down from the cut on her forehead and gets in her eyes, forcing her to wipe it away and quickly staining her hands red.

“Kayn,” Brayden groans.

I take my attention off Hudson and make my way over to him. “What do you need, Bray?”

“It’s dislocated,” he pants. “I need you to...help me pop it back in.”

My anxiety rises as I see how serious he is. “We should wait for an ambulance. You should let a doctor—”

He shakes his head and cuts me off. “There’s a fucking dead body on the ground. No one is calling an ambulance.”

“But your football career.”

“I know the risks,” he insists. “Help me pop it back in.”

Against my better judgment, I lay him down and grab his arm. He clenches his jaw in pain as I bring his arm out to a ninety-degree angle. I place my feet on his torso to hold him in place, and then with all my strength, I pull his arm toward me. Brayden screams in agony but I don’t let up until I feel it pop back into place. The second I step off him he turns to his side and vomits. Half lifting him to his feet, I help him over to the picnic table and lean him against it.

“Kai, I need your hoodie,” I tell him.

He takes it off and tosses it to me so I can use it to make a sling for Brayden.

Hudson continues to sob hysterically. “My parents are going to be so pissed at me.”

“Oh, right,” Tierney scoffs. “Because *Knox Vaughn* hasn’t done worse.”

“Tierney,” I scold my cousin.

She rolls her eyes. “What? You’ve heard all the stories of the two men you were named after.”

“Yeah, and your dad is one of them. Keep your mouth shut.”

Looking over at the body, Hudson cries harder. “Rory. Oh my God, Rory.”

I glance back at the dead girl for only a second, being as that’s all my stomach can seem to manage right now. Her hair is splayed out across the leaves, her shirt stained a deep red from the large stick emerging from her abdomen. I pull my attention away from the gruesome sight.

Van says nothing as he returns and goes to put his arm around Hudson, much to the dismay of her twin brother. If Kai were the quieter type, he may have just let it happen anyway. After all, his sister is an emotional basket case right now. But being a miniature version of his dad, he doesn’t have a quiet bone in his body.

“Touch her and die, Hayworth,” he growls.

Van scoffs. “She’s fucking crying, dick.”

“That doesn’t make her your responsibility, shithead,” Kai snaps back. “Worry about your own sister. Oh, wait.”

He glances back at the body and then smirks at him. In a split-second, Van lunges at Kai. Hudson and Tierney scream as the two of them become a tangled mess of punches. It’s not the first time these two have gone at it and it probably won’t be the last, but I’m not about to let anyone else die today.

I grab Van by the back of his shirt and yank him back, pulling him away while Brayden holds Kai back with his uninjured arm. The two just glare at each other from over our shoulders, a silent message that this isn’t over.

“Knock it the fuck off,” I roar. “This is not what we fucking need right now.”

“No, fuck you,” Van yells. “He—”

“Hello?”

Relief rushes through me as a girl I’m happier to see than I’ll admit comes into view. She looks like she’s been through hell. Her face is covered in dirt, and she seems disoriented as she tilts her head to the side, her fingers hung in her knotted hair.

“What’s going on?” Rory asks. “What happened?”

“Oh my God. Rory!” Hudson breathes.

At the sound of his sister’s voice, Van’s attention immediately leaves Kai. He slings my hand off him and marches straight over to her, wrapping her in his arms. She sighs against him and holds him tightly.

“Wait,” Tierney says. “If Rory is alive...”

All of us turn toward the dead girl and a cold chill runs down my spine.

“Who the hell is that?”

Est. Arrival 2023

NEED MORE?

Want to know what really happened between Easton and Alec?

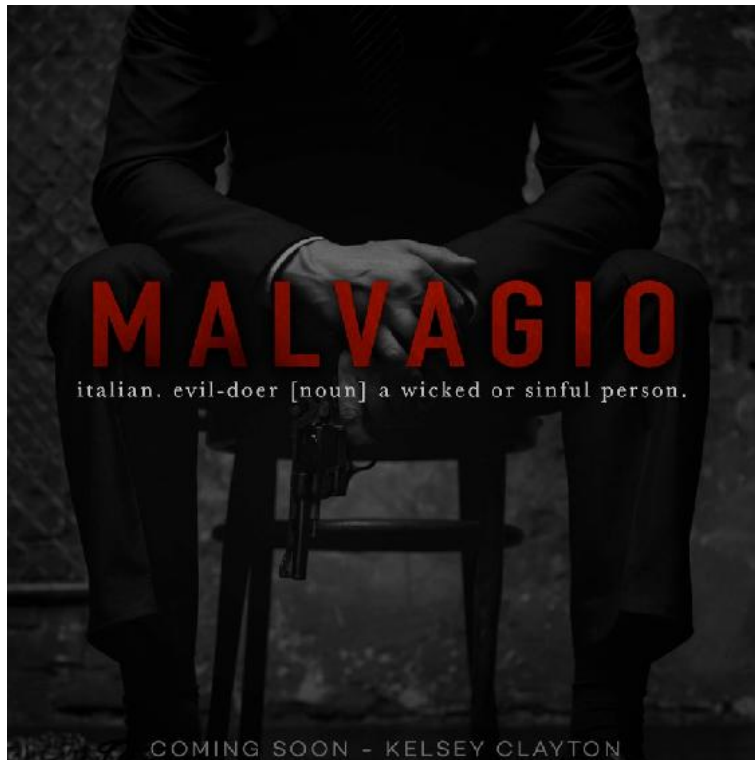
[Click here to read what went down.](#)

Not ready to say goodbye to the crew?

[Click here for a little extra.](#)

“The sound of her name makes all my demons go quiet.”

- Christopher Poindexter



“I’ve always said that the world is no place for the faint of heart. To survive, you need to be ruthless. You need power. You need vice. And most of all, you need to be able to turn off your emotions at the flick of a switch.”

Something darker is coming.

I’m about to dance with my demons.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

And that's a wrap on North Haven University.

Wow. I cannot believe this series is over already. While the original plan was not to give Easton and Kennedy a book, they were the perfect way to end this series. I've spent the last year and a half writing in this world and I loved every second of it.

To my PAs, Mercedes and Christina. I love you both so much. Thank you for dealing with the walking dumpster fire that is me.

To my publicist, Sarah Ferguson. I'm so glad you've come into my life. I love you so much and can never thank you enough for everything you do for me.

To my editor, Kiezha, and my proofreader, Tiffany. I don't even have the words to explain how amazing you two are. When things get rough, I can always count on you to help me get through it. I love you both.

To my beta readers. The first people who get their eyes on my book babies. All of your inputs and opinions make these books as good as they are. I love each and every one of you so much!

To my Street Team and Review Team. You guys are always so supportive and cheer me on when I need it most. Your love for my books keeps me in love with writing and I am so lucky to have you guys.

And lastly, to my readers. Your love of this series and your dedication to reading it has changed my life in ways I can't

even begin to explain. As much as I have enjoyed writing this series and the last, I am so excited to branch out and show you what else I can do. Thank you for always trusting me with your hearts. I love you.

Until next time.

xoxo,

Kels

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelsey Clayton is a USA Today Bestselling Author of Contemporary Romance novels. She lives in a small town in Delaware with her husband, two kids, and dog.

She is an avid reader of fall hard romance. She believes that books are the best escape you can find, and that if you feel a range of emotions while reading her stories - she succeeded. She loves writing and is only getting started on this life long journey.

Kelsey likes to keep things in her life simple. Her ideal night is one with sweatpants, a fluffy blanket, cheese fries, and wine. She holds her friends and family close to her heart and would do just about anything to make them happy.



Books By
**KELSEY
CLAYTON**

North Haven University

[Corrupt My Mind](#) (*Zayn and Amelia*)

[Change My Game](#) (*Jace and Paige*)

[Wreck My Plans](#) (*Carter and Tye*)

[Waste My Time](#) (*Easton and Kennedy*)

Haven Grace Prep

[The Sinner](#) (*Savannah & Grayson*)

[The Saint](#) (*Delaney & Knox*)

[The Rebel](#) (*Tessa & Asher*)

[The Enemy](#) (*Lennon & Cade*)

The Sleepless November Saga

[Sleepless November](#)

[Endless December](#)

[Seamless Forever](#)

[Awakened in September](#)

Standalones

[Returning to Rockport](#)

[Hendrix](#) (*Colby and Saige*)