

blossoming beginnings
book one

forget me not

JESS
TAYLOR

forget
me not

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TAYLOR

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DEDICATION

*To all those who struggle with survivor's guilt. You are here
for a reason.*

AUTHORS NOTE

While this is a work of fiction, the prologue is based on an event that I experienced in my real life. Many details are changed due to privacy, but the event itself was real. It is the only real event depicted in this story. I ask that you take that into account as you read. There are many sensitive subjects discussed within this story, and while I believe it is best read blind, if you wish to read them, please scan the qr code below for the link to my website where they are listed.



PLAYLIST



The music while writing this book was so incredibly important to me. There are 39 songs on this playlist. One for each chapter and the epilogue. The prologue has no song, and there is a reason for that. The playlist can also be found in order on Spotify and Apple Music. Enjoy!

Chapter 1: Life Goes On by Oliver Tree

Chapter 2: Can't Stop by Red Hot Chili Peppers

Chapter 3: Caught Up by Gryffin & Olivia O'Brien

Chapter 4: Heat Waves by Glass Animals

Chapter 5: Feeling a Moment by Feeder

Chapter 6: An Evening I Will Not Forget by Dermot Kennedy

Chapter 7: Breakable by Ingrid Michaelson

Chapter 8: Nonsense by Sabrina Carpenter

Chapter 9: Sex and Candy by Unions

Chapter 10: I Dare You by The Regrettes

Chapter 11: Sweeter by Gavin Degraw

Chapter 12: Good Vibrations by The Beach Boys

Chapter 13: Days Like This by Dermot Kennedy

Chapter 14: Smells Like Teen Spirit by Nirvana

Chapter 15: What Can I Say by Brandi Carlile

Chapter 16: Cool Girl by Tove Lo

Chapter 17: Oh My God by Adele

Chapter 18: Paris by Grace Potter & The Nocturnals

Chapter 19: Poison & Wine by Barton Hollow

Chapter 20: Way Down We Go by KALEO

Chapter 21: Cough Syrup by Young The Giant

Chapter 22: The Girl by City and Colour

Chapter 23: Paradise by Bazzi

Chapter 25: I Lived by One Republic

Chapter 26: WASTE by Kxllswxtch

Chapter 27: Animal I Have Become by Three Days Grace

Chapter 28: Toxic by Sofia Karlberg

Chapter 29: Heaven by Julia Michaels

Chapter 30: Son's Gonna Rise by Citizen Cope

Chapter 31: Drop The Game by Flume, Chet Faker

Chapter 32: Something in the Orange by Zach Bryan

Chapter 33: The Chain by Ingrid Michaelson

Chapter 34: Timshel by Mumford & Sons

Chapter 35: Turn To Stone by Ingrid Michaelson

Chapter 36: Old Days by Ingrid Michaelson

Chapter 37: Saturn by Sleeping At Last

Chapter 38: Light Me Up by Ingrid Michaelson

Chapter 39: Somewhere Only We Know by Keane

Epilogue: Can't Help Falling in Love by Haley Reinhart

PROLOGUE



Logan - Eighteen Years Old

Nothing ever really prepares you for the moment when your innocence is stripped away from you. I guess parents hope that their child's innocence will be something that will stay with them forever. It's why they never tell you that the world is full of evil. They hope that the said evil will never touch you and you can continue to live blissfully ignorant of the darkness that hides in the shadows. The problem with that is that nobody expects it when the darkness comes out to play. I sure wasn't.

All it took was the pull of a trigger. One single flick of evil's finger and suddenly I'm surrounded by the darkness that the world has tried so hard to hide from me.

Someone is pounding on the bathroom door. It echoes into the empty hallway, the loud vibrations of the sound jolting my body. It's the first answer my mind can come up with. Yet, with one look around the room, I know I'm wrong.

It seems as if time stands still for minutes, but what really can't be longer than a couple of seconds. My eyes lock with multiple others around the room, including my teachers. I'm sure my eyes mimic the frantic look of fear that is apparent in their own. I don't know how long actually passes, but suddenly, all at once, everyone is out of their seats and running to different sides of the room.

My body takes control and I'm in the corner behind my teacher's desk before my mind even has a second to catch up.

Somewhere in the back of my brain, I can probably recognize what is happening; but right now, the only thing I know for certain is that something is really, really wrong.

I can hear people shouting and I'm pretty sure what sounds like the fire alarm going off. Although all of it sounds like white noise to me. Nobody makes a move. It isn't until I hear the small glass window on our door shatter, and see bullets flying through the room, that my brain finally grasps the situation unfolding around me.

I feel frozen. I curl up behind the teacher's desk in an effort to make myself smaller, to hide from what is happening around me. I hold my hands over my ears as I squeeze my eyes shut. This can't be happening. I feel each bang vibrate through my body as bullets fly mindlessly around the classroom with no chosen target. It's so loud and it feels like it will never end. But then it does. The gunshots begin to fade.

I've always enjoyed horror movies, roller coasters, and haunted houses. I used to think the adrenaline that came with being scared was fun. But now I realize that before today, before right now, I've never felt real fear. It was all child's play. And after today, I don't think I'll ever be a child again.

Real fear is something else entirely. It's paralyzing. It's knowing you could die any second and you have absolutely no control over it. It's knowing that one second you could be breathing, your body functioning as normal, and the next second you're just gone.

I've never really thought about what happens after death before. It was never a question I was plagued with until now. It's funny how all these thoughts pop up in your mind when you realize you don't know if you're going to make it out of a situation alive. I'm not religious and I'm not really sure what I believe in. I'd like to think there's more, but the scientific part of my brain argues that there isn't, and I'm not sure which side of the equation scares me most.

The classroom becomes quieter as things settle, and so does the loudness in my head. I can feel the adrenaline in my

system kicking in, forcing me to come to terms with my surroundings.

My breathing slows, becoming less erratic, and I quickly sit up, observing my surroundings. Half of my classmates are next to me, all of us shoved together, trying to get as far behind the desk and away from the door as possible. I glance across the room only to see the other half of my classmates hiding behind a computer cart. A computer cart in direct view of the door with the shattered window.

My breath catches in my throat, and I quickly avert my gaze, too scared of what I might see if I look over there again. I can hear someone in my classroom screaming still, and all I can hope is that it doesn't draw the shooter back toward us. Next to me, I see my panicked teacher and another classmate whispering on the phone with 911.

As my head begins to clear and I'm finally able to fully assess the situation, I realize what a bad position we are in. The door is locked, but the window above the handle is shattered, meaning anyone can stick their hand in and open the door from the inside. I am nowhere near hidden enough for that to happen.

There are two file cabinets kitty-corner, leaving a small triangle of space between them and the wall next to me. As quietly as I can, I stand up and step into the small space between the cabinets. I drop back down, sitting on my butt with my knees to my chest. There's barely any room, but I make it work. It won't do much, but it is better than being out in the open.

I grab my phone out of the front of my leggings, thankful I had stuck it in there before all hell broke loose. Looking at the time, I realize that school is supposed to be almost over. It was around 2:20 p.m. when all of this began. I know because I had just checked the time wanting this long day to be over. It is 2:35 now. Only fifteen minutes have passed, although I feel like I've been stuck in this nightmare for hours.

I open up my texts, already seeing tons of missed messages and calls from my mom. I hadn't even felt my phone buzzing,

not that I'd be expected to notice at a time like this. I guess the news has spread quickly based on my mom's panic.

There are ten text messages, all in a group chat with me and my sister, asking what's going on and if we're okay. I quickly reply that I'm okay and I love them both. It isn't until I hit send that I realize my twin sister hasn't responded yet. The dread in the pit of my stomach intensifies as I remember that she is supposed to be in the class across the hallway from me right now.

Not wanting to worry my mom by texting anything else, I quickly start calling her phone. It rings for what feels like an eternity before going to her generic voice mail. I start calling again and then another three times, with still no answer.

It's completely possible that she may not realize her phone is ringing like me. Or maybe she had it put away in her backpack and didn't have time to grab it. I try to keep those thoughts in the forefront of my mind as I sit in the corner, waiting for whatever it is that is supposed to happen next.

I can hear my teacher next to me still whispering on the phone. I think one of my classmates is on the phone too. The screaming has stopped and besides some whispering of everyone checking on each other, it's pretty much silent. That is until I hear voices in the hallway.

My body freezes still again, and my first thought is that this is it, the shooter has come back. I don't know how I'm going to survive this. I slide as far down behind the file cabinets as possible. I will myself to keep my eyes open as the door to our classroom slowly opens.

"Police. Everyone put your hands up," I hear a man's voice shout.

I haven't sat up to look over the cabinet yet, but I am worried this could possibly be a trap. I hear my classmates start begging the men for help as I sit up to look over the cabinet and raise my hands above my head like everyone else. Once I see the men in swat gear and bulletproof vests, I feel confident they are here to help. The fact that they all have

huge guns pointed around the room makes me nervous, but I know they're just doing their jobs.

“If you are hurt, stand up and start making your way over to me, we are going to get you out of here first,” the officer says. Four people from the other side of the room stand up and begin making their way toward him. All of them are clearly injured, with blood in various places. I keep my eyes on them, not looking down or next to them. I'm not sure why I do it. Whether it's because I am eagerly waiting for the officer to get us all out of here or because deep down, I know that there's a reason I shouldn't look over there.

As the officers help the injured out of the classroom and, I assume, out of the building, we all stay still with our arms in the air, waiting for the next move.

“Everyone stand up. You're going to go in a straight line out of here as quickly as you can, keeping your arms above your head. Keep your eyes on the back of the person's head in front of you and do not look down. Do you all understand?” the officer says. Everyone either says “yes,” or starts urgently nodding their heads.

I don't even process how I end up in line between two of my classmates. I also have no clue who's in front of or behind me because all I can focus on is getting out of there. Staying directly behind the boy in front of me with my arms raised over my head, the officers usher us out of the room.

Our room is on the first floor of the three-story building, and only the second door in the hallway, so we are not far from the exit. When we enter the hallway, subconsciously, I do the one thing I knew I shouldn't do. I look down. The first thing I notice is that everything is white. Gunpowder covers the walls and floors while also giving the hallway a smoky hue. The next thing I notice is red. Blood. I quickly avert my eyes from it only to see something so much worse. A body.

I snap my eyes back to the person's head in front of me before I witness anything else. As we quickly file out of the hallway and exit through the doors outside that lead into the

rest of the school and the senior parking lot, there are officers scattered everywhere.

“Run.” I’m not sure who says it or how many people do, but I don’t need to hear it more than once.

My feet instantly start pounding the pavement, as do the rest of my classmates. I run faster than I think possible. I run all the way through the gate of the parking lot and across both sides of the street until I finally stop in the grass across from the school.

Sirens and screams surround me as chaos continues to unfold. There are people next to me, but I’m not sure if any of them are actually talking to me. I don’t think I could find it in me to care if they were. Despite all the running, I don’t even feel out of breath. It must be the adrenaline.

I’m still clutching my phone deadly tight in my hand. I haven’t put it down since I first took it out and my knuckles are white from the strength with which I am gripping it. Still nothing from my sister. Putting my phone to my ear, I start calling her again while I search around for her. She may have gotten out of there already.

It goes to voice mail again and the knots in my stomach intensify. Just as I’m about to start calling again, I hear my name being screamed.

“Logan.” The screaming becomes closer, and I turn my head toward where it’s coming from. I feel a whoosh of air release from my lungs as my sister’s small frame comes running toward me.

“Lennox, thank God.” I pull her into my arms, squeezing her into me. My sister’s here. She’s safe and she’s not hurt. So, why isn’t that pit in my stomach going away? Ignoring it, I pull back and begin to check her, making sure with my own eyes that she isn’t harmed. It isn’t until I look up and see her tearstained face that I know my instinct is accurate. Something still isn’t right. I go to open my mouth, worry written all over my face, but she cuts me off.

“Not now,” she chokes out. “Just not yet. I can’t. Please, Lo.” She starts frantically shaking her head and wiping her eyes.

“Len, hey, it’s okay.” I try to get her attention back on me. Lennox has always been the more emotional and caring of the two of us, so in the moment, I know I need to be the one to take control before she breaks down altogether.

“Come on. I’m going to call Mom and we’re going to keep walking as far away from here as we can so she’s able to get to us.” I grab her hand and pull her with me through the crowds of people without waiting for her response.

With one hand grasped in Lennox’s and my other holding my phone, I click my mom’s name and bring it to my ear. It barely rings once before she starts shouting through the phone.

“Logan, where are you? Are you okay? Where’s your sister?” Her questions are fired one after another and it doesn’t sound like she plans on stopping to let me get a word in.

“Mom,” I swiftly cut her off. “Relax. Len is here with me and we’re both okay.”

I hear her sigh of relief before she continues rambling again.

“Do not tell me to relax, Logan. It’s madness over here and I had no clue where my girls were or if you were okay. Can you imagine what I’ve been going through?” She huffs. That’s my mother for you, Julia Hart. She’s good at understanding her own struggles and emotions, just not so much anyone else’s. I’m not saying she doesn’t have a right to be worried, but sometimes she forgets that other people are going through the same situation as her. My mom loves us, and she cares about us deeply. Sometimes she just doesn’t know how not to care about herself a little bit more.

“We’re approaching River’s Edge, the neighborhood about a block away from the school. Can you meet us there, Mom?” I hurry out before she can continue to tell me any more about how hard this whole situation has been on her.

“Yes,” she says quickly. “I love you, Lo. Tell Lenny I love her too. I’ll see you both in two minutes.”

“We love you too, Mom.” I hang up the phone.

I look over at my sister, whose hand I can still feel trembling in mine. She looks like she’s minutes away from completely falling apart. I squeeze her hand a little tighter and smile softly at her just as my mom’s SUV speeds up next to us, screeching to a stop. I pull on Lennox’s hand, open the door to the back seat and climb in next to her, not wanting to leave her side.

“My beautiful girls,” my mom cries as soon as we are in the car. “Thank goodness you’re okay.” She smiles genuinely at us both. “I love you both more than anything, you know that right?” she says, eyeing us up and down with concern.

“We love you too, Mom. Let’s just get home,” I say.

She nods, smiling at us both before turning her eyes back to the road. Lennox makes no move to converse with me or my mom, staring blankly out the window.

“Hey.” I nudge her, and she turns toward me. Her pained eyes stare into mine. “Everything is going to be okay, Len. We’re all okay.” I try to smile at her reassuringly, but her expression just crumbles even more.

“Not all of us,” she whispers so quietly I barely even hear her. My eyebrows pull together, confusion marring my face. “Emersyn’s dead,” she barely manages to get out before loud sobs rack through her body. I freeze.

I stare at my sister in complete disbelief as she sobs. Emersyn has been mine and Len’s best friend since we moved here when we were five years old. She was practically our third sister. We used to joke and tell people we were actually triplets to see how many people we could get to believe us. Emersyn couldn’t really be dead, yet my gut tells me that it’s true.

Len’s head falls into my lap as she curls up into a ball and continues to sob. I blindly stroke my hand through her hair hoping to offer her some of the comfort that I’m definitely not

feeling right now. I'm not sure if my mom has heard any of what was said, but her eyes stay firmly on the road as she drives us away from our high school that has now turned into a crime scene.

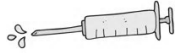
I stare out the window, numbness beginning to take over me. Most people in my situation would probably be crying, much like how my sister is, but I can't do that. I just sit here stone still as the rest of the world spirals around me.

We aren't next to the school anymore, but the crime scene spreads on for miles. My sister is sobbing, there are cop cars and ambulances everywhere, students are rushing around not knowing where to go, and parents are jumping out of their cars frantically looking for their children. It is complete and utter chaos.

I look away from the window and down to where my sister cries uncontrollably in my lap. A flash of red catches my eye and I look farther down to where my shoes sit against the floor of the car. I can't help the hollow laugh that escapes my lips. My whole world is falling apart around me, and all I can focus on is my stupid shoes. My stupid shoes that are splattered with red. Except they weren't splattered in red thirty minutes ago. Only thirty minutes ago, my shoes were pure, clean white.

CHAPTER

ONE



Logan - Eight Years Later

Blood. The substance flowing through our veins, vital to our survival in this fucked-up world. I've always had a complicated relationship with blood. In actuality, it keeps me alive so I guess you could say I'm grateful for it. Well, I am, on most days that is. But in my nightmares, it haunts me, which somehow led to me pursuing it.

The smell of hospital antiseptic drags me out of my thoughts as I grab my bag from the locker it's currently occupying. It's nearly eight thirty p.m. on a Monday and after a twelve-hour shift in the ER, it's safe to say I'm exhausted.

I think I always knew that I wanted to be a doctor. There was something about the human body, even as a child, that I found fascinating. I wanted to learn everything I could about it and then no matter how much I did learn, it never seemed like enough.

I didn't fully grasp the concept that there were multiple types of doctors and that I had a choice of what I wanted to treat until I was around eight. From that point on, I explored every avenue. I wanted to know the ins and outs of every specialty to try and figure out what was the coolest to my younger self.

It wasn't until after the shooting that I decided emergency medicine was the route I wanted to take. Two years into my residency, I know I made the right decision. Don't get me

wrong, it's hard and incredibly draining. But it's also extremely fulfilling in a way that I crave in my life.

“You want to go grab drinks at Carl's?” Theo, my coworker and friend, asks. I met Theo my first year working at Horizon Hospital Seattle.

Theo grew up in the Upper East Side of New York City with rich-as-shit parents. He spent his younger years living lavishly and essentially getting everything he ever wanted. When he told his parents that he was gay, they brought him straight to his therapist. Not because they weren't supportive, but because they'd known since he was two and the fact that he didn't realize they knew was concerning and he needed to discuss it with someone. It was with that therapist that he discovered his love for the medical field and with his tendency to get bored, on top of not ever being able to sit still, she advised him to look into emergency medicine.

Fast-forward to our first day of residency, Theo took one look at me, walked over and pulled me into a hug. I'm not a touchy person in general, so to have this random six-foot-something man hugging me was uncomfortable to say the least. He then let me go and claimed that because I looked like Tinker Bell and he looked like Peter Pan, we were destined to be best friends.

I didn't realize at the time how much I needed his crazy influence in my life, but now I don't know what I'd do without him.

“We just worked a twelve-hour shift, are you not tired?” I yawn. He looks at me like I have two heads.

“Are you new here? I don't get tired,” he says, dumbfounded.

I shake my head.

“Come on, Tink. It's not even nine p.m. and we have night shift tomorrow. Come drink with me, please?” he whines like a child throwing a temper tantrum.

“I just want to go home, Theo. I'm exhausted and the thought of being social right now is making my skin crawl.”

“Okay. We can go to your house first. We will grab you a hot outfit since I know you didn’t bring anything with you here, and then we will hit the bar.” He smiles as if his plan makes total sense. Before I can interject, Gabby walks into the locker room, looking just as exhausted as me.

“Yay, perfect timing. Gibbs, grab your shit, we’re going drinking.” Theo lifts her off the ground and spins her like a rag doll. If looks could kill, he’d be dead right about now.

A few days after Theo claimed he and I were best friends for life, we met Gabby. She was sitting alone in the locker room while other people talked around her. In normal Theo fashion, he barged up to her and told her she was too hot to be sitting alone. She blushed profusely, completely embarrassed by the interaction. But we managed to win her over, and we’ve all been friends ever since.

Gabby is the shyer and more reserved of the three of us, also definitely the smartest. The girl is a genius, I swear. It took her a long time to open up to us, but underneath the shy exterior, the girl is a firecracker. You definitely don’t want to be on her bad side.

“You convinced Lo to go?” Gabby asks Theo, who responds yes at the same time that I say no. She looks between the two of us, confused.

“Okay, enough,” Theo says. “I’ve had a long day and I want a drink, also possibly a man, and not only is drinking alone just sad, but I need my two best wingwomen with me. So, suck it up, and do this for me.”

Gabby and I share a look, exhausted and knowing Theo won’t rest until he gets his way. The thing about growing up without ever being told no is that you’re not likely to accept the word in your adult life either.

“Fine,” I say. “But we’re stopping at my place so I can change. I’m not wearing scrubs to the bar.”

Theo nods, satisfied with himself.

“Can we stop at mine, too?” Gabby asks, her voice small and polite as always.

“No, Gibs. You live too far. You can borrow from Doomsday, she’s about your size. We can drag her out with us too,” Theo says, referring to my roommate and other best friend Demi.

Demi and I met a few days after I moved to Seattle five years ago. I was walking into a coffee shop at the same time she was walking out. She tripped over her own foot and spilled coffee all over me. She immediately broke down in sobs as she tried to wipe the coffee off my boobs with hundreds of napkins. She went on to explain to me through her tears and groping that she had just walked in on her boyfriend fucking her best friend, and instead of stopping, he yelled at her that they were over and to get out.

She continued on to tell me how they lived together and how it was technically his place, so now, on top of losing her boyfriend and best friend in one, she was homeless. I’m pretty sure she said the entire thing in one breath, too. She was a mess, and she still is most of the time. In what was the most spontaneous decision in my life, I offered her my spare bedroom, helped her move her stuff out that night and we’ve been inseparable ever since.

When Theo heard the story of how we met and then actually met Demi, he declared her a walking disaster. When she flooded our apartment because she fell asleep on the couch after turning on the bath, this became even more true. Then when we had to live with Theo for two weeks while they fixed the damages, and she managed to clog both his toilets and break his TV, she officially earned her nickname, Doomsday, because she destroys everything she touches. She can’t even argue it at this point.

Agreeing to meet at my apartment, I leave first and head to my car while Theo waits for Gabby. The sound of a heart monitor flatlining and the orders of the code team as they work fills my ears as I pass by a room. I can’t help my eyes being drawn to the patient as the code team performs CPR. He looks young, maybe a year or two younger than me. On the outside, I can’t see any obvious injuries besides a black eye. But you

quickly learn that it's the injuries you can't see that are the most terrifying.

I quickly turn away, leaving the team to their jobs. I could stay to see the outcome, but part of me doesn't want to know. I'm not on shift anymore and there would be nothing I could do, so for the moment, ignorance is bliss.

I make my way to my car and begin the drive home. It's not too far of a distance to my apartment from the hospital. About twenty minutes, give or take, depending on traffic. The second I open the door, I hear Demi's completely off-key voice as she sings along to "Love Story" by Taylor Swift. Not sure what type of mood she's in to be blasting old Taylor, but then again, you never know what to expect with Demi.

"Hey," I shout over the music as I come around the corner and enter the kitchen.

Our apartment is nice for the price we pay for it. Two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a small living area, and a decent-sized kitchen that Demi has declared hers and hers only. She's a current waitress and an aspiring chef. Plus, all I know how to make is pasta, so I don't argue about it.

"Shit," Demi yells as she turns around and sees me. The tray she is holding slips from her hands. "No, my cookies!" She dives to the floor and somehow manages to catch the tray that I now see holding some sort of cookies, with only two of them falling onto the floor.

She carefully stands up and places the tray on the counter, pauses the music from her phone, and then turns to me with fire in her eyes.

"Why is it that you always seem to sneak up on me? Not only did you almost give me a heart attack, but you killed two of my cookies." She frowns, looking at the two cookies broken on the floor. I wish I could say I was shocked by the fact that Demi was referring to her cookies as living things, but I'm not in the slightest.

"I didn't sneak up on you, you had music blasting so loud you didn't hear me," I say, amused by the whole situation.

Demi just looks at me expectantly, knowing that I know exactly what she wants to hear.

“I’m very sorry I killed your cookies. It was an accident. May they rest in peace,” I say, struggling to keep a serious face. She eyes me up and down as if she’s judging if I’m being sincere or not. I’m sure she knows I’m not, but she nods her head anyway and smiles.

“Apology accepted. Now how was work?” she says cheerfully.

“It was fine. Nothing too out of the ordinary. I’m exhausted, but Theo insisted on going to Carl’s, so he and Gabby are on their way here now.”

The words barely leave my mouth before our front door bursts open and Theo shouts, “I’m home, bitches.”

“Alvin!” Demi shouts, letting out an excited squeal. He groans at the nickname as he makes his way into the kitchen where we are, Gabby following closely behind him. After Theo started calling Demi Doomsday, she decided he needed an equally horrible nickname. So naturally since he was already named after one chipmunk, she decided to call him another one’s name.

“We’ve talked about that nickname, Doomsday,” Theo says, reaching for one of the cookies off the tray on the counter.

“We’ve talked about THAT nickname, Alvin,” Demi replies, smacking his arm away before he can grab one. “Back off. My babies aren’t ready yet.”

“She’s still referring to food as if it’s alive?” Theo looks at me, only for Demi to slap him across the top of his head before I have a chance to respond.

“Keep talking about me like I’m not here and you’ll never get any of my food again,” she says, her tone sickly sweet. Theo relents, looking as though he’s just been scolded and sits on the barstool at the counter.

“Alright, ladies. You have forty-five minutes and then we are out of here, I want to be at Carl’s by ten.” Theo claps his

hands together, ordering us around is nothing new to him. “Doomsday, you’re in charge.” He smiles brightly.

Theo, always prepared, changed into jeans and a button-down at the hospital, so he’s completely ready. Not that where we are going requires more than a T-shirt, but with Theo, everything is an event. He moves to go sit on the couch, turning on the TV and making himself at home.

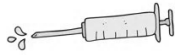
“You, go shower. When was the last time you even washed your hair?” Demi points at me but continues talking before I have a chance to respond. “Never mind, I decided I don’t want to know. Gabby, you’re with me, I have a perfect outfit for you.” She smiles sweetly and grabs Gabby’s hand leading her toward her bedroom. “Alvin, touch my cookies and die,” she shouts as she walks past him.

He doesn’t acknowledge her, keeping his eyes locked on his phone as a sitcom plays on the TV in the background. I shake my head as I make my way to my bedroom to get clothes, wondering how I managed to find the best people in the world and make them my best friends. For a moment, I feel happy. But it only lasts a single moment until I see the worn leather journal sitting on my nightstand, and my stomach sinks.

Sadness. Guilt. Anger. They all come back to the forefront, making me forget I was happy even for a second as I remember that that journal and the words in it are the only things that I have left of her. I grab the journal and shove it in my nightstand drawer and let the feeling of emptiness take over. Happiness is overrated anyway.

CHAPTER

TWO



Logan

The bar is packed. Carl's is technically always crowded, but apparently everyone had a case of the Mondays because tonight, there's barely any room to stand, let alone sit. Luckily, just as we walk in, the people in the booth closest to the door are getting up to leave. Demi takes it upon herself to not so gracefully dive into the booth before anyone else can, and we follow in after her.

Carl's is one of those places that nobody talks about, but once you find it, you never want to leave. About two weeks into our first year of residency, Theo was asked to meet here for a date with a guy he met on a dating app. The next day he showed up to work bragging about how he'd fallen in love. Not with the guy, he was an asshole, but with the bar.

He unofficially declared it our spot and we've been coming here ever since. The bar itself is owned by an eighty-five-year-old woman named June. She was never married and claims she doesn't know anyone named Carl, just liked the name for the bar.

We met June the first night that Theo brought me here. She walked over to where we were sitting, looked me up and down, and then proceeded to scold me for drinking ginger ale at her place. I told her that I wasn't much of a drinker, just there for moral support. She wasn't happy about it but said she would choose to ignore my "obvious distaste."

We've been coming here for a little over a year now and June has only shown up a handful of times. Tonight, she doesn't seem to be here. The bar itself is nothing special and probably hasn't been updated since June bought it thirty years ago. It's all dark-brown wood, with booths lining the left wall, a large bar on the right, and a couple scattered high tops in between.

I guess what makes this place special is the fact that even when it's packed, there never seems to be any trouble. No fights, no angry drunks, just no drama. It's like everyone has a general understanding that you come to Carl's to drink, relax, and not be bothered.

"The cute bartender is working tonight, so I've got drinks," Theo says, already making his way out of the booth. "Doomsday, you're with me."

As the two of them make their way over to the bar in the center, I turn my body to face Gabby. The thing about Gabby is that she's quiet until pushed, which means with big personalities like Theo and Demi, she sometimes can become invisible. I know what that feels like all too well, so I always try to make her feel included. Even though I'm pretty sure she doesn't mind the invisibility. In fact, sometimes I think she might prefer it. I know I do.

"How have you been, Gab? I feel like I've barely seen you these past few weeks." I smile at her and she returns the gesture.

"I've been good. I know, I'm sorry. I've been trying to catch up on sleep whenever I can since I haven't been sleeping the best at night," she says, letting her words trail off toward the end.

"Is your new roommate still bothering you?" I ask, concerned. Gabby lives in a three-bedroom apartment about ten minutes farther from the hospital than me.

About a month ago, one of her roommates got offered a job out of state and decided to leave the next day without giving Gabby or her other roommate any notice. The roommate who stayed, Kaia, is a nice girl but the complete

opposite of Gabby. She's twenty-one years old, to Gabby's twenty-five, and a huge partier. It was never an issue for Gabby since Kaia ended up out clubbing most nights. But when Kaia took it upon herself to find and offer their empty room to someone new, it became a problem.

The person she offered it to is a twenty-six-year-old guy who parties just as much as Kaia, except he does it out of their apartment. Theo has begged Gabby to let him go over there and tell the guy off so she can get some sleep, but she refuses. She's too polite for conflict, but I know she'll reach her breaking point sooner or later, and I hope I'm nowhere near her when that happens. Although, it would be enjoyable to watch her lose her temper on him.

"It's not a big deal. It's his home too, and it's not every night like it used to be. It's nothing I can't handle," she says right as Theo and Demi walk back up to the booth, drinks in hand.

"What can't you handle?" Demi asks as she scoots in across from Gabby, Theo taking the seat across from me.

"Nothing, I'm just a little behind on sleep," Gabby replies, quickly changing the subject, "What'd you get me?"

"A Corona with a lime for you, my love. Although I still don't know how you actually enjoy the taste of any beer," Theo replies before looking distastefully in my direction. "As for you, Tink, I refuse to order a ginger ale. You're on your own."

"Seriously? What is wrong with you?"

"Cute bartender is working tonight, therefore I can't be seen ordering something as boring as ginger ale in front of him. It's embarrassing," he says, looking exasperated at the idea of ordering for me.

"This is ridiculous, even for you." I sigh, scooting out of the booth and heading to the bar to get my own drink.

I work my way through the crowd and walk up to the part of the bar that doesn't house any barstools. Squeezing between two separate groups of people, I see the bartender working on

someone else's drinks. I lean against the bar while I wait for him to make his way over.

The bar is loud with chatter as rock music still plays in the background, just loud enough to be heard but not overpowering. A couple of months ago, Demi and I happened to be here on one of the nights that June was in, and she made it a point to complain about the terrible music that was playing.

We kindly told her that it was her bar and if she didn't like the music, why wouldn't she change it? She told us the playlist was being played from one of her bartender's phones and they hid it from her because apparently her music didn't fit the vibe.

I didn't realize at the time, but her bartender was right. On another night, we ended up here at the same time as June, and she somehow managed to get control over the music. Ear-piercing metal blasted through the bar speakers so loud that you could barely hear yourself think until one of the bartenders managed to steal back her phone. They've made sure to let her nowhere near anyone's phone since then.

"Well, hello, beautiful." The voice next to me draws my attention to him. A man at least a foot taller than my measly five foot two stands with his side against the bar, facing me. He has dark-brown hair, light-brown eyes, a straight white smile that reveals an adorable dimple, and a plethora of tattoos covering his body. I can admit the man is hot. That still doesn't stop the very unladylike laugh that comes out of me at the cheesy line.

"Please tell me you did not just lead with hello, beautiful," I say, still laughing. You'd think my response would make him give up, but nope. This guy only smiles bigger.

"Smooth," a deep, gravelly voice comes from next to him.

I look up to see a second man, his eyes looking me up and down. I suddenly feel exposed.

They're both around the same height, muscular, and covered in tattoos, but that's where their similarities end.

Where the man who's flirting with me radiates a light, playful energy, the other one gives closed-off vibes, something I recognize and can relate to.

His hair is darker than his friend's, such a rich, dark brown it nearly looks black, and his eyes are a deep navy blue that reminds me of the darkest parts of the ocean. His eyes seem so familiar, yet not at all. I internally reprimand myself for ogling him and turn my attention back to his friend who is still watching me with a smile on his face.

"I think I like the fact that you just called me out on it more than I would've liked it if you'd gone for it." He laughs. "I'm Asher, the asshole making fun of me is Kade."

Said asshole tipping his head slightly in a nod, but that's the only acknowledgment he shows other than staring. His eyes never seem to leave mine.

"Logan," I reply. "And how old are the women you're picking up? Can't say I know anyone over eighteen who would go for that."

"Hey, eighteen is legal." He winks. "Also, you'd be surprised." He shrugs, still smiling, clearly finding the humor in the situation. I laugh with him, then turn back to the bar just as the bartender makes his way over.

"What do you want? It's on me," Asher says, and I go to interrupt to tell him no, but he sees it coming and stops me before I get the chance. "Not because I think you're going to stay and hang with me, but because you made me laugh. Take the drink and go," he says to me before turning to the bartender. "Can we just get two more, please?" He nods to the beers in his and Kade's hands. The bartender nods and looks at me expectantly, as does Asher.

"Fine, thank you." I smile politely at Asher. "Can I just get a ginger ale, please?" I say to the bartender who is patiently waiting.

"Sure thing," he says and walks away to get the drinks.

"Did you seriously just order a ginger ale at a bar?" Asher looks at me dumbfounded.

Kade doesn't lift his gaze from his beer bottle resting on the edge of the bar, but I can see the hint of a smile pulling at the corner of his lips. Before I can determine if it was real or my imagination, his face turns back to stone.

"Yeah, I'm not a big drinker and I'm just here with my friends. Plus, I like ginger ale." I shrug.

"Most people who don't drink don't come to bars," Kade speaks, still never lifting his eyes to meet mine.

"I didn't say that I don't drink, I just said it's rare that I do. I don't like to be out of control." I let the words trail off, not meaning to say the last part. It's not exactly a secret that I like control, but it's not something I normally shout out to two hot strangers either.

"You people and your control issues." Asher laughs. "Kade's the exact same way, and when he does drink, it's never more than a few beers."

I don't respond as I look at Kade, only to realize that his eyes are now directly on mine. He doesn't say a word but continues to look at me as if he's searching for answers I know he won't find. He only averts his glare as the bartender slides two beer bottles, followed by my ginger ale, onto the bar in front of him. I look away from him, picking up my drink.

"Thanks again." I smile at Asher who nods at me with a smile and a wink, not asking for anything more, just like he promised. It's not that I wouldn't be interested in him, like I said, he's hot. I just don't have the time or the energy to worry about men right now.

I'm not the sleeping-around or one-night stand type. But I'm also not the relationship type. Being in a relationship means opening up to people, something I avoid at all costs. Demi knows more about me than anyone and it took her years to pull it out of me. Even so, she doesn't know everything. She doesn't know about the guilt, the anger, or the pain that I'm constantly feeling. I wouldn't know how to describe the pain even if I wanted to, and I definitely don't.

With one last smile at Asher and then Kade, who doesn't look up to acknowledge it, I turn to walk back over to the booth.

“What took you so long? I thought you died.” Theo says loudly, dramatic as ever. Gabby and Demi look over to acknowledge I'm back, then jump right back into whatever they were talking about.

“It was crowded,” I say simply, sliding back into the booth. He looks at me funny for a second before letting it go. He joins in on Demi and Gabby's conversation, but I'm too distracted to listen.

I bring the straw of my drink to my lips, my gaze involuntarily searching across the room for those ocean-blue eyes. When I finally catch them directly in my line of sight, they're staring right at me. With his blues on my greens, it feels like something unspoken passes between us.

We continue to stare at each other for what seems like hours but is probably only seconds. It's deep-sea waves crashing against rolling green hills. It's control fighting control. He quirks his brow as if challenging me and I can't help the confusion that I'm sure is evident in my own expression. His eyes widen a fraction, and he smirks as if he's somehow realized something. As if he's somehow won.

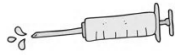
My guard instantly goes back up and with a final glare, I force myself to look away. I focus my attention on my friends, pretending to listen to whatever it is they're saying. But no matter how long passes, I can feel his stare burning into my side. It unnerves me.

My only comfort is knowing that after tonight I'll probably never see this man again. With that, I ignore the penetrating stare from across the room and fully focus my attention on my friends.

If only it were that easy.

CHAPTER

THREE



Logan

It's a strange feeling not being able to get the idea of someone out of your head. It's been nearly three days, and the man barely said two sentences to me. Yet, I can still feel the reminiscence of Kade's stare.

It's not because I want him. I mean, yes, the man is ungodly hot, but I wouldn't call what I'm feeling infatuation. Curiosity, maybe? Curious as to what he's hiding, curious as to what I accidentally allowed him to see in me.

I'd like to think I'm good at reading people. While Kade emulated the classic cold, asshole exterior, it's also obvious he's hiding things. Why I care to know what he's hiding is the question I can't seem to figure out.

Seattle is a large city and my chances of ever running into him again are slim. Even though I now know Carl's is most likely a place he frequents, us being there on the same day and at the exact same time a second time seems unrealistic. Even so, my mind can't help but stray to thoughts of how his deep voice resonated in my chest and his magnetic stare clashed with my own.

Despite being busy these past few days, nothing has helped. You'd think that when you have no time to think, your mind won't obsess over pointless things like men. But that's exactly what I've been doing. Thinking of him.

I love my job, but it can be exhausting, especially while I'm still in my residency. It's also the only place in my life

where I can't plan everything from start to finish. Which is something I have a tendency to do.

Especially working in the ER, you have no idea who will walk in or who you will have to treat. It could range from a simple stomachache to a life-threatening condition. But no matter what's thrown your way, you have to be able to respond calmly and efficiently.

Every person who walks through the automatic glass doors is a surprise, and the ER is the only place where I enjoy surprises. Actually, forget enjoying them, it's the only place I allow them.

Today is Thursday and I'm currently working an eight-hour shift from five p.m. to one a.m. The ER has been busy since I got here, and I've barely had a second to stop and breathe. Not even an hour into my shift I'm called to the trauma bay to help out with an incoming MVC.

The patient has been touch and go since he came in, but after repeated attempts at resuscitation, he doesn't make it. That alone seems like a precursor for how this shift is going to go.

It's nine p.m. right now and things have finally calmed down within the last hour. I'm savoring the last of my cup of coffee before I head to my next patient, that's until a large body steps into my view.

"Dr. Hart." My coworker, Ryan, smiles down at me. It's not what he says, it's the way he says it that makes me uncomfortable. Saying my name to get my attention is not an issue, but the flirty tone he uses as he says it makes me want out of this conversation before it's even started.

Ryan is essentially a gold-star player. He's a third-year resident and seems to be interested in anything and everything with a pair of tits. Unfortunately, he's also incredibly charming, so he doesn't normally have to try too hard to get what he wants.

Well, that was before he gave two of the nurses, who happened to be good friends, chlamydia. It was an entire

nightmare with HR, but since it was consensual, there wasn't much that could be done. Women around the hospital are not his biggest fans now. That doesn't stop him from trying though, especially with me.

Ryan has been trying to get me to go out with him since my very first week working here. My answer has never wavered from no, but the man is nothing if not persistent. He claims that "I'm different from the rest" when I call him on his shit. Says he wants to date me and that he genuinely likes me.

I don't believe it for a second. He likes me because I'm unattainable. He enjoys the chase. I can't fault him for it, most people do.

"Ryan," I respond. "What can I do for you?"

"Do I have to need something to come say hello to my favorite girl?" He smiles widely as I roll my eyes. "I feel like I've hardly seen you lately. Have you been hiding from me?"

"No, I haven't been hiding from you, Ryan." The lie rolls off my tongue, knowing full well that I have definitely been avoiding him. At some point, telling someone no repeatedly becomes tiring. "I've just been busy."

"Well, if you're so busy at work then we have to make time to hang out after work." He must see the answer on my face before he's even finished talking because he keeps going. "Come on, Lo. It's been over a year, when are you finally going to let me take you out?"

It doesn't seem to matter how many times I tell the guy that I'm not interested, he just can't seem to get the idea that someone may not be in love with him through his thick skull.

"I've told you before, Ryan. I'm just not interested." I try to keep the annoyance out of my tone. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I've really got to get to my patient."

"You'll change your mind eventually, Lo. And when you do, I'll be right here waiting for you." I scoff at the idea of Ryan waiting for anyone. The man who claims to have real feelings for me was dating one of the newer nurses just last

week. I walk away without another word, making my way over to the next patient.

“Hello, I’m Dr. Hart. I’ll be your physician tod—” I stop midword as my eyes lift to meet ones I recognize sitting on the patient bed in front of me. Those piercing blue eyes that I can’t seem to get out of my head now look at me with a new sense of fascination. Something I don’t recognize passes over his features, but it’s gone before I have a chance to decipher what it is.

The look of shock must be evident on my face, and he looks at me expectantly, waiting for me to continue. I school my features and force myself back into professional mode. “How are you doing today, Mr...” I let the words trail off for him to fill in the blank.

“Pierce. Kade Pierce.” He smirks. “Dr. Hart, huh?” he says. “How many times have you been made fun of for that one?” His tone of voice and the hint of a smile pulling at his lips makes it seem as though he’s amused, yet there’s something about the stiffness in his posture that makes me think otherwise. But then again, if he’s a control freak like me, he may just be naturally uptight.

I know he’s baiting me, and I should let it go. It’s what I would do in any other situation. But there’s something so infuriating about letting him have the upper hand. My mouth is moving before my brain has a second to catch up.

“And what do you do for a living, Mr. Pierce?” I blurt out. He looks at me silently, never letting his attention leave mine. For a second, I don’t think he’s going to answer, but then his expression changes and he almost looks... impressed?

“I’m a tattoo artist,” he casually says. I can’t help the bark of laughter that leaves me. The amusement returns tenfold to his face and this time he actually does smile. A full-blown smile showcasing luscious lips surrounding perfect white teeth. The man is droolworthy when he’s scowling, but when he smiles, it’s something else. It’s hard to look away.

“You do realize that your entire job is drawing with a machine that *pierces* ink into people’s skin for a living, right?”

I say as I get my laughter under control.

“And you’re a doctor whose last name sounds the same as one of the vital organs in our body,” he replies, shaking his head at the thought.

“What a pair we are,” I say, and then immediately want to take it back. “Not that we’re a pair or anything,” I hurry to correct myself. If the smile on his face and the burning I feel creeping up my neck is anything to go by, I’m sure I look like a tomato right about now.

He crosses his arms across his chest, choosing not to say anything, and it’s only when I see his bandaged hand that I realize what a massive idiot I am. This man is a patient and I’m supposed to be a doctor. Here he is, bleeding, waiting to be treated, while I’m making fun of his job and last name. *Fucking embarrassing is what it is.*

I’ve treated attractive men before. There have even been times when they’ll try to cross the line, flirting with me or asking for my number. I have never entertained any of the advances or once lost my sense of professionalism when treating a patient. How is it that only five minutes with him has me breaking all my rules?

I clear my throat and school my features. “I see that you’re here for a laceration to the hand. Could you go over what happened with me, please?”

“A glass vase broke at work. I was cleaning up the pieces off the floor and one of them sliced me pretty deep. Bleeding wasn’t stopping, so I figured I’d probably need to come here and get stitches.”

“Alright, I’m going to examine the wound if you’re ready.” I nod toward his bandaged hand. Walking toward him, I remove the bandage and examine the deep cut that runs across the palm of his hand. It’s only about two inches, but he was right, it’s deep enough to need stitches.

“Okay, so I’m going to go ahead and clean the wound, numb the area, and then we will get you stitched up. Sound

good?” I say, using my kind doctor voice, the one I use in all situations like this.

“Yup,” he says casually.

I grab a suture tray and move it next to the bed, gently placing his hand on top of it. I go to work, cleaning the cut.

“This is lidocaine, which I’m going to use to numb the area,” I say, holding up the needle. “It may feel uncomfortable for a few seconds.”

He nods his head, giving me the go-ahead. After numbing the area, I begin to suture the wound closed.

Kade doesn’t say anything as I focus, he simply watches me. I’m halfway done when he finally speaks.

“So, Dr. Logan Hart, are you the only doctor in the family, or is it a family of physicians?” he asks. There’s something about the way he asks the question that makes me curious about the reasoning behind it. It’s actually not an uncommon question to be asked, it’s just not one I expected from him. Keeping my focus on the task in front of me, I answer anyway.

“My mother is a nurse. She worked in the ER most of her life and just recently started working in a pediatric doctor’s office.”

“Only child?” The question comes out of his mouth almost too quickly. As if he was waiting for a chance to ask this question specifically.

“No. I had a twin sister.” I’m not sure why I reveal the last part. I could’ve just said no. Only my closest friends know about Lennox and even they don’t know the full story of what happened. My brain seems to malfunction when I’m around him. Like I can’t control the words that are coming out of my mouth.

He doesn’t speak after that, and I’m grateful for it. Grateful he doesn’t ask why I said had instead of have, grateful he doesn’t ask what happened or, even worse, say, “I’m sorry for your loss.”

I finish up and apply a dressing.

“Keep the area dry for the next two to three days. You can change the dressing after twenty-four hours and gently clean around it, then apply the antibiotic ointment and keep the dressing on for at least the first forty-eight hours,” I say, handing him an aftercare guide. “You can come back two weeks from today to have them removed. The nurse will go over all of this with you as well.”

I finally look up at him and see what looks like confliction marring his face. It’s only there for a second before his mask slides firmly back into place.

“Thank you,” he says. His voice polite but cold. As if none of our earlier interactions happened at all. I’m not sure what caused the sudden change, but it’s probably for the best.

“Of course.” I smile politely at him. “Have a good rest of your night, Mr. Pierce.” I take one final look at him before turning to walk away. The farther I move away from him, the stronger the hold that he has on me feels.

I can’t get over the feeling of familiarity I find when I look into his eyes. I can’t seem to shake the feeling that he seems to be hiding something. Not that I know much about him in the first place, but it goes deeper than that. I can’t help wanting to know him and hoping he wants to know me too; Yet, I hope he doesn’t want to get to know me just as much.

The thought that I gave him a piece of me without meaning to by sharing that I had a twin stays with me throughout the rest of my shift until I’m lying in bed trying to fall asleep. It’s clear after tonight that Kade Pierce makes me lose the ability to think clearly. He makes me feel a loss of control from just a simple stare.

I may not know much about him, but I do know that he’s dangerous to the carefully crafted life I’ve worked so hard to build for myself. Knowing that, there’s only one clear option. I have to stay away from him at all costs.

CHAPTER

FOUR



Kaden

Logan fucking Hart. The name has been on a loop in the back of my mind for the better part of the last five years. And now I possibly have a face to put to the name. There's a chance it might not be her.

I mean, after all, how many Logan Hart's are there in the world? I wouldn't know since I've avoided looking the name up since it was essentially forced on me. But there has to be more than one.

L told me she lived in Florida with her twin, the chances of said twin now being in Seattle are slim. But Logan said she had a twin sister. Had, not has. If she is Logan Hart, all my assumptions over the years are officially confirmed.

L is dead. L killed herself. The ominous last message I received from her five years ago before she disappeared had me assuming that she would try, but I never knew if my assumptions were right.

A big part of me was always holding on to the fact that she hadn't. That she got better, that she didn't need to talk to me anymore because it was just a reminder of a time she didn't want to remember.

I still don't even know her real name. L was the only thing she ever gave me. Besides her twin's name, that is. A twin I never wanted to know about. A twin who has always felt like a responsibility I refused to accept or even acknowledge.

Because that is what L left me with, the responsibility of looking after her twin sister. Even though I didn't know L's real name, that I never knew her outside of messages exchanged through a screen, or even knew what she looked like, she trusted me with her sister. And I failed her by not even trying.

Right before she disappeared, she told me the name of the person she cared about the most and told me she was mine to look after now. Why me, out of all the people in her life, I still can't figure that out. I didn't want that responsibility. Even if I did, I didn't deserve it.

I'd spent my entire life growing up taking care of another person, only for them to leave me too. If my track record shows anything, staying away from me is the best thing a person can do. L didn't understand that, but I did.

So, I never looked Logan Hart up. I never found her, never set out to take care of her, or be there for her, or whatever it is L intended for me to do. I shoved the name into the recesses of my mind and moved on with my life.

It's what I should do now too. Even if that was Logan Hart, she's a doctor, clearly doing well for herself. She seems happy enough. I know it's a lie even as I think it. The girl may have the rest of the world fooled, but I recognize the darkness that she's hiding. It's the same one I carry.

She has secrets that she doesn't want anyone to know about. It's probably why she clings to control like me. She's scared of what might happen to the carefully constructed facade she is putting on if it's taken away. Part of me is dying to do just that, take it away from her.

Her control wavers in my presence. I'm not sure why, but she says things without thinking them through. She's done it both times I've seen her now. First in revealing her control issues, then in telling me she had a twin. I could see the shocked look on her face on both occasions. Her guard came right back up, but her split-second reaction gave her away, exposing that she didn't normally share those sorts of things.

When I first saw her at Carl's, she stuck out to me. First, because she was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. Then because she straight up turned Asher down, making fun of his cheesy-ass line, and proceeded to order a fucking ginger ale. She surprised me, and I'm not surprised often.

When she introduced herself as Logan, it obviously triggered my memory. It was the first time I'd heard it as a girl's name, but I didn't question it. The thought that she was the Logan I was supposed to find but never did honestly didn't even cross my mind. It seemed like too big of a coincidence.

I was intrigued by the girl and figured I'd run into her again at Carl's eventually. All the people that go there are known to frequent the place at one point or another. What I hadn't expected was to cut my hand and have her as my doctor.

Asher knocked over a vase while trying to scare King, the owner of the tattoo and piercing shop we work at. King, who was neither scared nor amused, told Asher to clean up the mess and assigned me to help him because he couldn't be trusted to pick up sharp objects alone.

I wasn't paying attention while grabbing a larger piece of the glass vase and ended up slicing myself deep enough that the bleeding wouldn't stop. All of which led me to Horizon Hospital to get stitches, where none other than the girl who had been occupying my latest thoughts walked in to treat me.

When she said her last name, I felt frozen for a minute. Luckily, she hadn't looked up in time to see the shock on my face, only noticing who I was once I had gotten myself together.

I tried to ask her questions about her family as nonchalantly as possible and she didn't seem to have a problem answering me. Although I know she didn't mean to reveal she had a twin, it was the one piece of information I had been searching for the whole time.

Now I don't know how to feel. She still intrigues me, but if she is who I think she is, I've avoided looking for her all these years for a reason. It doesn't help that the girl is fucking

gorgeous, and my body doesn't fail to recognize it. Instead of conjuring up all the reasons I should stay away, I can't help thinking of all the things I could do to her if I got the chance.

Even so, I know the smart thing to do is not to intertwine my life with hers. She didn't recognize my name, which means there's a good chance that L never told her about me. It would be unfair to her to come barging into her life now, five years later. To bring up memories of the sister she lost would be cruel. Yet I can't help the pull I feel toward her.

It tugs at me as I leave the hospital and head home. It's her plaguing my thoughts so deeply that my body can't help but react to her under the warm spray of water in my shower. It's her plump pink lips I imagine as I move my hand back and forth over myself, trying to relieve the tension that her presence causes me.

It's her bright-green eyes looking up at me, a hint of shyness with promiscuity filling her orbs, that I see as I explode in the most intense release I've possibly ever felt. Only when it's all over and I open my own eyes do I realize the power her simple image has over me.

But it doesn't stop there. Because when I wake up the next morning, images of her long blonde hair splayed across my chest fill my head, thoughts of what could be. I know it's more than sexual when it comes to Logan Hart. I also know I am completely fucked.



Sleep doesn't come easy when a five-foot-nothing blonde girl, who you may or may not know through her dead twin, is invading your thoughts. So, as I walk into Blackheart Ink at eleven thirty a.m., I still feel as tired as ever.

“You look like the walking dead,” King says as I walk through the door, not even bothering to start with hello. I stay quiet, rolling my eyes at him as I walk past him to my room in the shop.

Damien King, or King as all his employees call him, is my boss and has been my mentor for the better part of the last ten years. When I was eighteen, having barely graduated high school, alone and struggling, King took pity on me. He claims it wasn't pity, that he selfishly wanted my talent for his own shop before someone else noticed it and stole me, but I don't believe him.

King is a thirty-four-year-old, six-four beast of a man covered head to toe in tattoos. To most people, he's intimidating as hell, but to those who know him, he's a big softy. The guy has got the biggest heart I know.

He has two daughters, Ellie, who's twelve and Willow, who's eight, and I've never seen a better dad than him. His ex up and left all three of them not long after Willow was born, but the girls don't need their mother in their lives with the way that King cares for them.

When I first walked into the shop ten years ago, I definitely didn't have money to spend on a tattoo. I was providing for my mom and myself completely at that point and any extra cash I had should've gone to paying off bills or stocking groceries.

But when a sketch came to me, all I could think about was permanently marking it onto my body. Especially when I knew exactly where to put it.

I've been drawing for as long as I can remember. It calms me. When I put pen to paper, it allows the rest of the world to fade around me. Letting me live in my own bubble of peace and quiet.

King was the first person I saw when I walked into the shop. He was up front saying goodbye to one of his customers while I made my way toward the receptionist. I told her I was looking to make an appointment to get tattooed but with my own design.

King was walking by as I said it, looked at me and saw the worn-to-bits notebook in my hand. He asked if I had the design inside, then asked to see it. The design itself was a geometric-like sketch of half a butterfly connected to half a skull with dark shading to give the entire piece a more eerie look.

He stared at the artwork, observing it and what felt like scrutinizing it for probably a solid five minutes. Even Darla, the receptionist, looked confused about what was happening as time passed. Finally, he looked up and told me he'd do the tattoo for free if I agreed to come be an apprentice for him.

At first, I was shocked, then honored, and then disappointment came in. Because an apprenticeship was everything I wanted at that point and something I could absolutely not afford. Except when I told him I couldn't afford it, he didn't hesitate to up the offer.

He told me the apprenticeship was free as long as I promised to work at the shop when it was over. I genuinely thought the guy was crazy. He was offering to waste his money and time training me for free, offering me a free tattoo on the spot, and offering me a job, all just after looking at a sketch.

To this day, I've asked him why he did it, and the only answer I ever get is, "You're fucking talented, kid."

A better person may have refused King's generosity, but I never said I was a good person. I didn't hesitate to accept everything he was offering. He took me to his room, tatted my artwork onto my chest, and never once questioned the jagged two-inch scar that he was covering up.

Blackheart Ink has been my home ever since. The staff has become my family. Honestly, I'm not sure where I'd be without them or this place. Nowhere good.

"What crawled up your ass?" King says, now standing in the doorway of my room.

"Nothing, just had a rough night's sleep," I respond.

He stays quiet for a minute, watching me, assessing my mood and the situation.

That's the thing about King, he's constantly bordering the line between letting me deal with things on my own and pushing me to talk about them. Never forcing though. He's intuitive and knows me better than anyone else.

"You want to tell me why you're not sleeping?" he pushes. He knows he may or may not get an answer from me, but he asks anyway.

"You remember L?" I say and his body tenses for a second. King is the only one in my life who knows the full story and what led to me talking with her. He also knows about her final messages and that I haven't heard from her since.

"What about her?" he asks, now more curious. His body language stiff, as if he's protective over me in the whole situation. Although only six years older than me, King has always treated me like a son. Makes sense since I was still basically a kid when I met him. He was only twenty-four, so technically he was too. But fatherhood aged him and made him wiser in a way most people his age weren't.

"Think her twin sister stitched up my hand last night," I say casually, trying to not make it as big of a deal as it is.

"Well, fuck," he says, running his hand through his hair, his eyes wide in shock. "You said you think? Does she not know who you are?"

"No, she definitely doesn't know who I am." I hesitate. "Her name is Logan Hart and she said she had a twin sister."

King looks at me thoughtfully, as if he's come to the same conclusion I have. L is really dead.

"What are you going to do about it, kid?" he says, and I wish I had an answer for him. The logical part of my brain is telling me to avoid seeing her ever again. To avoid the ridiculous connection that I feel toward her. To stay far away from her and don't screw up the girl's life any more than it already is.

Then there's the other part of me that can't get her out of my head. Her long blonde hair that would look so good wrapped around my fist, her bright-green eyes that hide so much behind them, and those lips. The image of her wrapping them around her straw as she looked for me in the crowd at Carl's replays in my mind and has me fighting a groan that's threatening to escape.

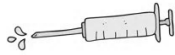
The clearing of a throat pulls me out of my daydreaming, and I remember King asked me a question. "Any chance Logan Hart is good-looking?" he asks, humor shining in his eyes.

I don't respond but rather drop my head into my hands with a sigh. I run my hands through my hair, pushing the fallen strands out of my face and meeting King's stare just as he begins to laugh.

"Yeah, good luck, kid," he says, still laughing as he makes his way out of the doorway and toward his own room. Fuck me, I'm going to need it.

CHAPTER

FIVE



Logan

Friday is my day off from the hospital and after an exhausting night, it's already eleven a.m. by the time I manage to drag myself out of bed. After treating Kade last night, everything seemed to spiral.

My mind was scattered and when Ryan approached me the second time within two hours about going out with him, I snapped. He came up to me and started telling me about a new restaurant he and I had to try together. I just couldn't do it. I yelled that it was never going to happen before he even finished getting the words out. Loudly.

Then because the man had the audacity to look like my statement was the shock of the century to him, I broke out into hysterical laughter. Not just a quiet laugh, nope. Loud cackles that attracted the attention of anyone my yelling hadn't already. Laughter that had tears forming in my eyes. Then when I realized what had just happened and that the tears poking at my eyes weren't just from laughter anymore, I bolted.

I hid in the supply room until I was able to calm down. Deep down, I know it's not out of the ordinary to have such a reaction after having to repeatedly tell a person no. But the part of me that craves control felt like it was being ripped at the seams.

Then I remembered my earlier interaction with Kade, and I felt even worse. As though with every encounter I have with a

man I barely know, more cracks seem to form in the wall that I've protected myself with for the past eight years. I'm desperately trying to fill the cracks, but it feels like they're forming quicker than I know how to handle. I feel like I'm being held together by tape and glue half the time.

I can tell myself that this is the end of it, that I'll never see him again and things will go back to how they were only a few days ago. I know I'd be lying to myself, though. Which isn't out of the ordinary, lying is something I'm familiar with, to others and to myself. Sometimes the truth hurts too bad to acknowledge.

Even if Kade never does come back into my life, things have changed. I no longer trust myself. If all it took was one good-looking enigma of a man to fracture my walls, then clearly, they weren't strong enough in the first place.

I'm a doctor and I believe in all forms of medicine. That includes taking care of your mental health. I've seen therapy work wonders for people. I've also seen it do practically nothing for others. I've seen therapists before, and they all tell me the same thing. I avoid my problems.

Avoid is probably too light of a word. I lock them in the deepest corners of my mind and throw away all the keys is more like it. Then I drown the locks in cement and layer my walls thick to avoid anyone or anything breaking through them. I'm aware it's unhealthy. I'm also aware that nobody I've ever seen has been able to help me fix the issue.

Possibly because subconsciously, I don't want to fix the issue myself. Of course, there's a part of me that wants to open up to people. To open the floodgates of my mind and let all my secrets flow out like molten lava. But the larger part of me fears who or what would get burned to ash when I do.

Therefore, my coping mechanism of choice is avoidance. It has been for as long as I can remember. I'm great at it, except when Kade is around, apparently. I groan at the fact that the man is plaguing my inner thoughts. I pull myself out of bed and to the bathroom. After brushing my teeth and

making myself look less like a zombie, I walk out to the kitchen where I'm assuming Demi is.

"Good morning, sunshine," Demi says, not bothering to lower her voice as I adjust to the world of the living. I love the girl, but I swear she doesn't have an off switch, or at least I haven't found it if she does.

"Morning," I mumble, heading straight toward my lord and savior. The Keurig. I swear the people that are any good to the world before drinking some form of caffeine have superpowers. I am unfortunately not one of those people.

"How was work last night?" she asks. Moving from the couch that is within view of the kitchen, she plops down on one of the kitchen barstools at the island. She leans both her elbows on the counter, dropping her chin into her hands to give me her undivided attention. It's one of the things I love about her, she always makes everyone feel like they're really being heard.

"It was a long night." I sigh as I stick a K-Cup into the machine and wait for it to brew. "I kind of lost my shit on Ryan."

"It's about damn time," she says, sitting up straighter in her seat with a smile on her face. Demi knows all about Ryan and his endless attempts to sleep with me. She has been encouraging me to take a firmer approach with him since the second time he asked, claiming I have to shout it in his face so he can hear it over his inflated ego. She may have been right.

I've never been a shouter though, and years of dealing with people who are have left me with more patience than most. That's not to say I let people walk all over me because I don't. I have no issue speaking my mind or putting people in their place, I just prefer to do it calmly.

"Well, I guess now that I've finally put your theory to the test, we will see how long he can go before convincing himself I do want him, again," I say, internally hoping it's forever. I grab the creamer from the fridge, pouring it into my mug until the liquid reaches the brim.

Putting the creamer back in the fridge and grabbing the cup of liquid gold, I make my way over to the counter where Demi is sitting. I set the cup down to let it cool and slide onto the barstool next to her, angling my body to face her.

“Are you okay, though?” she asks hesitantly. “You’re not a yeller, and I know you well enough to know that something had to have caused you to react that way.”

I can tell by the look on her face that she’s concerned. Demi knows more about me than anyone else. She knows about my past life in Florida. She knows about the shooting. She knows about Lennox and the years following it. The only thing she doesn’t know is how Lennox died. Although I’m pretty sure she assumes, and her assumptions would be correct. I’ve never come forward with the information, and she’s respectful enough to not push me to tell her when she can tell it’s something I’m not comfortable sharing.

“I’m okay.” I pause. It’s not that I’m uncomfortable telling her about Kade, but I never told her about meeting him at the bar, which I already know she would yell at me for. Plus, it seems stupid to explain how he affected me when I don’t know that I’ll ever see him again. If I do, I can address it when the situation arises. Running into each other twice seems like enough for this lifetime though. “Just a stressful workday.”

With the way that she’s looking at me, she knows I’m hiding things from her. She’s not dumb, but she doesn’t push me to give her anything else. Nodding her head, she accepts the answer as I give it. “You worked a late shift last night, right? How was it?” I ask.

“Dreadful.” She sighs, slouching back down into her chair. “I swear the new manager lives to torment me.”

I laugh at her dramatics, and she glares at me.

“I’m not kidding,” she yells. “She scolds me every chance she gets and always makes sure to double-check only on my tables as if just waiting for me to screw up so she can yell at me some more. It’s not my fault her boyfriend stares at me every time he comes to visit her.”

“Sounds like she’s got a shitty boyfriend,” I say.

“Exactly! Dump his ass for being a pig, don’t take it out on your sweet, innocent employee. Girl power and all that shit.” She pouts. “Anyway, today’s your day off? What are you doing? I wish I could hang, but I have to be at work by three.”

“Yeah, it is, and it’s all good. I’m still physically and mentally exhausted from the week, so I think I’m just going to spend the day resting,” I say. “Also, I have work at eight in the morning tomorrow, so I don’t need to be running myself down even more.”

“Well, that sounds boring. But whatever tickles your pickle, I guess.” I don’t even question the phrase. She gets up from the barstool and moves to walk away before abruptly turning around. “Oh, wait! My half brother is coming for dinner tomorrow, please tell me you’ll be here. It’s the first time I’m cooking for him, and you know we just recently started getting closer, and I need your moral support.” She starts to ramble.

“Demi, calm, breathe,” I shush her. “I’ll be here. I get off work at five and will head straight home, I promise.” She audibly sighs at my response.

“Thank goodness. I told him seven, so that should give you plenty of time to get home and change. I think he’s bringing his friend or coworker or something too.” She pauses for a moment as if thinking. “I can’t exactly remember, I got so excited he said he was coming I sort of blacked out for the rest of the conversation. But oh well, the more, the merrier.” She smiles big.

“Sounds good, Dem. I’m sure he’s going to love everything and anything you cook.” I smile softly at her.

“Thanks, Lo. I hope so,” she says. The hope and desire for her big brother’s approval evident in her face. “Alright, I’m going to go mentally prepare myself to deal with the she-devil,” she says, referring to her manager before turning and walking toward her bedroom.

I don't know much about Demi's brother other than they share a dad and have different moms. I know their dad left her brother's mom when he was young for Demi's mom and they're still together. I also know the siblings didn't grow up together and just connected recently.

Demi doesn't talk much about her family or what her life was like growing up. Something I can understand due to my own circumstances. Because of that, I know not to push better than anyone. If there was something Demi wanted me to know, she'd tell me.

I'm curious to see what her brother will be like. Whether he will be another version of Demi or the complete opposite. I love my best friend, but I don't know if I can handle two of her.

Finishing the rest of my coffee, I set the mug in the sink, opting to wash it later, and head back to my bedroom. Knowing I won't be leaving the confines of my apartment for the day, I don't bother changing out of my pajamas and crawl back into bed.

I open my night table drawer, grab a scrunchie from the top and throw my hair into a messy bun. I then move to grab my Kindle from the drawer but pause when the journal catches my eye.

I've read almost all of what lies between the worn pages countless times. Yet every time I see it, the pull to read it, to read my twin sister's innermost thoughts, is as strong as ever. Just as though it pains me to read the sadness Lennox went through, it equally excites me because her words within this journal are all I have left of her.

Reading Lennox's words is the opposite of the fictional world that I planned to spend my day inside. Everything she wrote in that journal is raw, real, *personal*. Probably never meant for anyone's eyes but her own. Although, that's never stopped me.

It's not a long journal. Five entries total, as if she knew exactly what she wanted to say before she ever wrote it. I've

read the first four. It's been five years since she's been gone and I'm still too scared of what I'll find in the fifth.

I never got to say goodbye to her. One day she was there, celebrating my getting into med school, and ready to pack up her life to move across the country to Seattle with me. The next, she was gone. Most people have that significant memory of their last moment with a loved one.

The last time we spoke, I was angry with her for not coming out with me. That wasn't our last real conversation though. That happened earlier in the day. I was rambling about how Seattle was known for the rain, and I was never a fan of it. She laughed and told me I should be grateful for the rain. She said it waters the world around us and allows new things to grow. New life to form.

She told me the rain was beautiful and that there was a hidden gazebo on the trail behind our neighborhood. Sometimes she liked to go sit there and watch the rain. She said it was her favorite place in the world and that one day we'd go together. She was gone before we ever had the chance.

After she died, I searched for that gazebo for a week and a half before I found it. Just off the trail, hidden between a cluster of trees, there was an opening that led to a small field with a run-down white wooden gazebo in the center of it.

I visited it almost every day after that until I moved to Seattle. It was where I felt closest to her. It was also where I learned to love the rain. She was right. Sitting on the splintering wood, I watched the droplets fall onto the gazebo, between the trees, onto the grass below me. I listened to the drops as they splashed against the surface, the only sound in the vicinity. There was a calmness. It was magical.

Needing to feel the closeness to her that only her words can give me, I grab the journal before shoving the drawer closed. Lying back farther and cuddling deeper between the covers, the voice in my head begs me to stop. It tells me that nothing good will ever come from me rereading this again. It

tells me to stop reliving my sister's inner torment. I don't listen. I flip open the first page.

SIX

DENIAL

February 18, 2014

Salutations are weird. Especially in my current situation. I was in a school shooting four days ago, and I'm already in therapy with homework. Guess that's what happens when you almost die, on top of watching your best friend die right in front of you.

Anyway, said therapist has suggested that I journal my feelings. She claims she won't be reading this, just skimming to make sure there're words on the paper. I'm not sure if I believe her.

But back to salutations. Now I'm supposed to be writing in this journal about all of my emotions, but how am I supposed to start? I feel like we need some sort of lead-up before I lay out all my fucked-up inner thoughts onto paper for fuck knows who to read. "Dear Diary" sounds too prepubescent teen. "Dear Journal" just sounds

weird. I can't address it to a single person because I don't know if anyone will ever even read this... I'm watching you, Doc. I think we will just keep it general.

To whom it may concern,

You know the movies where someone dies and the person closest to them absolutely refuses to believe it?

Well I always thought it was a tad exaggerated. How could someone literally deny the fact that a person was dead?

It's funny how something I thought wasn't even realistic then became my reality. You'd think it would especially be different for me, considering I felt my best friend's pulse leave her body, but nope.

Emersyn's funeral was yesterday. It was in a large ballroom at a fancy hotel that was most likely donating

the space because that's what happens when a seventeen-year-old girl is murdered at the neighborhood high school.

The place was filled with hundreds of people, most of whom probably never spoke a word to Emersyn in their lives. But, because they went to the same school as her, they showed up, and cried, and pretended they knew her enough to miss her.

I hate it. The thought of people who didn't even know her grieving for her. I always thought a funeral should be a small, intimate event. Where the ones who knew and loved the deceased gathered and honored the life that was taken too soon. But, when someone is killed in a school shooting, there is no option for that. People want to show their support for strangers, and things are too chaotic to

even question it.

They had an open casket when we arrived. They closed it before the others came, but it was open for her family, my sister and me. Logan dragged me up to the casket, but I refused to look. I was in denial at this point. I truly conjured up excuses in my brain that Emersyn wasn't gone.

When I refused to attend a stranger's funeral, my mother cried for me to accept what was happening. I didn't believe it was Emersyn's funeral though, and I felt uncomfortable going. That's what I told myself anyway.

My therapist now says that it was my subconscious trying to stop me from attending and realizing the truth.

In the end, Logan convinced me to go. She said she needed me, and when Lo needs me, then I know I need to

be there for her.

It's our one rule. But when she tried to make me look into that casket, I realized she didn't need me. She just needed me to accept that what she was telling me, that Emersyn was dead, was the truth. Well, I refused to do that.

The thing about being in denial is that you make up these crazy scenarios to avoid facing the truth and justify your delusions. Throughout the duration of the funeral, that's exactly what I did. When hundreds of people showed up, I thought, this is good, Emersyn didn't have this many friends or even know this many people for that matter.

That meant we were there for someone else. Which meant she wasn't in that casket, just like I thought. She was alive, she was okay. My chest expanded with

happiness and hope with every lie I told myself. Sucks that when hope is all you have, you're just setting yourself up for severe disappointment.

I tuned out whoever was talking in a microphone at the front of the room, not even letting their words register. I kept my head down, looking at my hands and not acknowledging what was happening directly in front of me. I told myself that, yes, there was a shooting, and maybe Emersyn got hurt, but she was probably in the hospital or at home recovering.

I continued to zone out throughout the entire funeral until I realized the ballroom was clearing out and Logan was gently guiding me outside. I remember her looking at me with concern in her eyes, the same ones that look so

similar to mine. We are fraternal twins, our similarities are few. In fact, besides us having the exact same bright-emerald eyes, we look pretty much nothing alike. Our personalities also couldn't be more different. I've always been outgoing, I like to push the limits of all things. Lo is quiet, smart, and shy, even though she likes to put on a facade that she's not.

She gently tried to tell me Emersyn was dead again and that after the funeral I had to believe her. I didn't. I explained to her that Emersyn was just recovering, that's why she wasn't with us, that she was alive and well. She argued with me, I argued back, she gave up and walked to the car. Having nowhere else to go, I followed.

I think part of me deep down knew at this point that she was right, and that Emersyn was gone. But, on the

surface, my brain refused to accept it. There was a huge part of me that was adamant that she was alive, none of this was happening, and I would wake up the next morning and everything would be normal. I felt like my mind was stuck between reality and a lie, and I wasn't sure which one to believe.

It wasn't until we arrived at the burial site that I began to question my truth. Walking through the wet, soggy grass and up to where people were gathered, the reality of what was happening started to hit me. There was some sort of machine holding up the casket over a large hole in the ground. People were speaking and crying. I kept my eyes focused on the casket.

That was the moment it hit me. My best friend was in there. Emersyn was in there. Emersyn was dead. It was

real. My heart sank and memories started flashing in my mind without my control.

Emersyn's blood covering my hands. The holes through her stomach and chest. Her translucent skin. Her once pink lips stained red from blood. It was all just too much. The casket began to lower and I looked across to see Emersyn's mother. Her knees sank into the wet sod beneath us as sobs racked her body. A horrid noise sounded out over the crowd. I screamed, only to realize the horrid noise was coming from me.

According to my mother, I begged and cried for it not to be real, for Emersyn to be alive. All I can really remember is the look on Emersyn's mom's face when her eyes met mine after the scream escaped my throat. She looked like her heart was being forcefully ripped out of

her body. I assume that's what it feels like to lose a child.

Like you've been killed right along with them.

I'm not sure how losing a best friend feels since my body doesn't seem to be processing emotions correctly. As I watched Emersyn being lowered into the soil beneath us, I continued to scream and cry, feeling pain and sadness like I'd never felt before. Yet, I don't think I felt even a fraction of the sadness that Emersyn's mother felt. A fraction of the sadness that she feels. Because pain like this never goes away.

On average, about two million people die from hemorrhaging every year. Hemorrhaging being a fancy medical word for bleeding to the point where you no longer have enough blood to survive. You'd think with all the blood in our body it would take a significant amount of

time for this to happen. But all it takes is an injury to the right spot and suddenly, about one-fifth of your blood volume is gone in minutes.

Two million people. I guess when you compare it to how many people there actually are in the world, then it seems like a relatively small number. It doesn't seem like a small number to me though. To me, it seems like two million people too many. Maybe that's because I sat there frozen as I watched my best friend become part of that statistic.

The thing with blood loss is that most of the time, it can be stopped or helped if someone arrives in time to do so. But when you're in high school, nobody teaches you how to tend to a gunshot wound or how to stop your friends from bleeding. It's never a scenario adults feel

they need to train you for. I'd say they were naive to think this way, but I'd be a hypocrite. I never thought I'd need to know those things either.

For one, I never thought someone would shoot up our school. Second, I would have thought the police and the paramedics would get there fast enough to help. If they were rushing to get to us, it was only about a four-minute drive from the fire station and half the building had to have called 911 within a few minutes of the first shots being fired. My teacher being one of them. So why did it take eleven minutes from the time bullets pierced my best friend's body before help arrived? The fact still puzzles me.

I have never been super interested in anatomy or anything medical, that's Logan's thing, but I know how to

find a pulse. I also know that Emersyn still had one for about eight minutes of those eleven we waited for help to arrive.

I felt her blood seep through my fingers as it drenched through all the jackets and hoodies we used to try to stop her bleeding. I heard her sputter as she choked on the blood that was somehow in her mouth. I watched as her skin became ashen and her eyes went from panicked to completely unfocused. Finally, I felt her pulse slow, and slow, and slow, until I felt nothing there at all. And then she was just gone. Never to exist in this world again.

Three minutes. If the paramedics had been able to get to her three minutes earlier, then she may have had a chance at surviving. Then I may not have lived through hell,

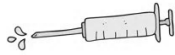
only to convince myself that it never happened, to then have to relive the vivid memories over and over again when I realized that it did. Then Emersyn's parents may not have had to go on living knowing their only child had been brutally murdered in a place of learning, a place for children, a place they believed to be safe.

It's funny how denial works. One second, everything is perfect because you've told yourself so, and the next, you realize your brain is a jumbled mess trying to protect you from your harsh, new reality. This all happened within a span of seconds. The memories flooding back, the pain ricocheting in my chest that felt reminiscent of the bullet that pierced through Emersyn's, the truth coming to the forefront of my mind. All before the casket was even fully loaded into the ground.

At that moment, I felt like I was burning up even though it couldn't have been more than seventy degrees out, cool for South Florida. I felt my mouth become increasingly dry as I clenched my jaw in an attempt to get my emotions under control. I felt my heart pounding in my chest as if it was trying to jump out of my skin and join Emersyn as the casket hit its final destination six feet under. I felt my emotions change as everything became crystal clear. At that moment, and in this one now, I feel something that feels a whole lot like anger.

CHAPTER

SEVEN



Logan

I slam the journal closed. I've read the words a hundred times over and they still have the same impact on me. They're a reminder that half of me is missing. Gone for no one to ever see again. Unfortunately, that half took any chance of happiness in my future with her.

I was there during the time she wrote about. I was there for the shooting, although my experience was different than hers. I was there when she refused to believe Emersyn was gone, that her mind began to play the cruelest of tricks on her and allow hope to take root. I was there for the funeral, there to hear her screams.

She may not have remembered, but I did. Her haunting cry pierced through the sound of soft cries. Her pleas for Emersyn. Her begging for them to not take her away. Her cries to make it stop. I remember her looking at me as if she had been crushed into a million pieces and I was the only one who could fix it. I couldn't fix it. I couldn't fix anything.

By the time we got her into the car, she was nearly catatonic. There, but not really there at all. None of us said a word as my mother drove us home. The silence was not one of comfort, it felt suffocating. I wanted to speak but couldn't fathom what words I could possibly say in such a moment.

When we got home, I helped Lennox inside and into the shower while my mother cooked us food. After I showered and dressed myself, I walked out to the dining room and saw

Lennox sitting at the table with a bowl of pasta in front of her. She stared at the food like she hated it.

She wasn't eating it, but moving it around in the bowl, picking up the pasta and dropping it back down with her fork. It wasn't ideal, her not eating, but the fact she was doing anything at all satisfied me enough for the moment.

She continued the pattern as I ate. Swirling the pasta, lifting it up, and dropping it back down. But then the sauce splashed onto her hand. A large splat of red covered her knuckles and dripped down her fingers. Her eyes went wide at the sight, the fork falling from her hand and every muscle in her body visibly tensing.

She abruptly stood from her chair and sped around the corner into the kitchen. I called out to her, but she didn't seem to hear me at all, lost in her own overwhelming thoughts. I heard the kitchen sink go on from where I sat at the table and continued to eat my own food as I waited for her to come back. Ten minutes passed, and she never did.

I followed where she went into the kitchen and found her still standing at the sink. Her eyes were stock-still on where she was scrubbing her hands raw with the sponge that we used for washing dishes under the steaming water. Her hands were bright red, the skin inflamed. I called her name, and she didn't acknowledge me.

When I approached her, gently grabbing her arm to pull her away from the sink, she violently pushed me away, causing me to fall to the floor. She started mumbling about how she had to get it off. It wasn't until later I learned that she was referring to blood. She had thought the sauce was Emersyn's blood.

It wasn't until twenty minutes later that my mom and I were finally able to drag her away from the sink. Her hands were cracked and bleeding in multiple places. She didn't go without a fight. I grabbed one of her arms while my mom grabbed the other and we dragged her kicking and screaming away from the sink.

Her dead weight fell between the two of us, her legs kicking and her hands reaching to slap in any direction she could. She screamed “no” over and over at the top of her lungs as we wrangled her into bed. I crawled in right behind her, pulling her into my chest, holding her tight.

I stayed there until her screams turned to tears and she eventually fell asleep. It stayed that way for a long time. Her getting angry and going on a path of destruction or starting a fight, and me holding her until the fight left her and sleep came. It never came for me though.

Even long after she’d drifted off and I’d made my way back to my own bed, sleep was never on the agenda for me. The sound of Lennox’s screams combined with those of my classmates were enough to keep me up at night. I went to therapy following the shooting, the same therapist that Lennox had been seeing. But it never helped me.

Talking about my issues made me more uncomfortable than not talking about them at all. So, when I told my mom I was fine and I didn’t need to go anymore, she believed me. Most of her attention was on Lennox at this point since she was the one who was so outwardly struggling.

As time went on, sleep came a little easier and I was eventually able to sleep normally through the night. I figured after that, time really must fix all wounds. It’s been eight years, I was wrong.

Pulling myself out from under the covers, I set the journal back in the night table drawer and make my way to the bathroom. Looking in the mirror, the girl who stares back at me seems like a washed-up version of my past self.

My eyes are red, although I know no tears escaped. It’s been a long time since I’ve really cried. Another thing I try to avoid. But it’s not the color that concerns me, it’s the emptiness. There was a time that my eyes constantly shined with laughter. That my whole demeanor radiated joy. There was a time when I lost that but began to get it back little by little until it was brutally ripped from me again. Now, I just don’t see the point.

It's like when people say they don't want to get their hopes up only to be let down. Why allow myself to be happy when I know how much the world likes to ruin it for me every time that I am. It's also the fact that there's still a part of me deep down that doesn't believe I deserve happiness.

It's not that I haven't experienced the emotion throughout the years. There are things that make me happy, people that make me smile and laugh. It just never lasts. As soon as I realize that it's happening, an alarm goes off in my brain reminding me of all the reasons why it shouldn't be.

Pulling my gaze away from the mirror, I splash some water on my face before heading back to my bedroom. I climb back into bed, ignoring the journal in my night table and this time grab my Kindle.

I know now that I've started reading the entries again, my mind won't let me rest until I get through them all. Besides the last one that is. I don't know if I'll ever be ready to read that one. As for the others, I know I need to pace myself. Reading too much of Lennox's words at a time is a recipe for disaster I learned the hard way the first time I binge-read the journal.

For now, I pick up my Kindle, turn off the light, and get lost inside the fictional world I originally intended to.



After the mental exhaustion from reading Lennox's journal entry, sleep wasn't hard to come by last night. Even with waking up early to get to my eight a.m. shift on time, I felt energized. It could also have to do with the two cups of coffee I drank, but I still think the sleep contributed.

Work was long and seemed never ending even though I was only on a nine-hour shift. It seemed like one major

accident after the next came in and I barely had a second to breathe. By the time I get home, any energy I have is down the drain and I'm ready to sleep for an eternity. Unfortunately, that's not in the cards for me.

Walking into my apartment, I hear pots and pans clanging along with Demi's muffled cursing. I take a deep breath to prepare myself for whatever disaster I'm about to walk into and then make my way into the kitchen.

"Thank fuck you're here," Demi says, frantically walking toward me with a spoonful of what looks like some sort of sauce. "Try this." She shoves the spoon in my mouth before I have a chance to respond. She looks at me expectantly as she begins to pace.

"It's really good, Dem," I say calmly, and I'm not lying. Demi may be a mess in every other aspect of her life, but her food is insanely delicious. I grab her shoulders to stop her and force her to look at me.

"Are you sure?" she asks. "It's not too salty? It doesn't need more butter?" I walk over to the pan where the sauce is, dip a new spoon in and bring it back over to her as she continues her rant. "Is it creamy enough, do you thi—"

I shove the spoon in her mouth, effectively cutting her off and her shoulders relax as she tastes her own brilliance. "Believe me now?"

"Okay, fine. It's good, you're right, I'm insane," she says, walking back over to the stove to continue what she was doing before I got home. "It's just you know my parents don't exactly approve of my career choices, and well, I really want my brother to support me."

"How could he not support you, Dem? You're incredible and are going to be the most amazing chef one day. To me, you already are." I smile at her. "Plus, doesn't he hate your parents? If anything, he'll support you out of spite." I laugh as she throws an oven mitt at me. "I'm kidding, he's going to love it. I promise."

“Thanks, Lo.” She smiles back at me, seemingly more relaxed since I walked in. “Now, get out of my kitchen, shower and get ready, you got home late.” She shoos me off and I listen, knowing my crazy shift led to me getting home almost half an hour later than I normally would.

It takes me longer than I anticipated showering, not wanting to step out from under the warm spray that seems to wash away all my problems. Almost forty minutes later, I am showered, my hair blow-dried straight, and dressed in leggings with a baby-yellow crop T-shirt. I don’t bother with makeup other than a few quick swipes of mascara. The dinner may be fancy food, but Demi made it clear that the company is casual.

I walk back out to the kitchen to find Demi with her head in the oven and the kitchen looking a million times cleaner than it did when I first got home. She also changed into leggings and a bright-pink T-shirt that says, “culinary legend.”

“Need any help?” I say, plopping down in the chair at the kitchen counter. She startles as if just realizing I’m here and I laugh.

“No, I think I’m okay. The vegetables and mashed potatoes are done and covered to stay warm, the chicken is in the oven and should be done in ten minutes or so, and the sauce should be done in a few,” she says as she continues to stir the pan the said sauce is in.

“Sounds good. It looks and smells amazing, you did good, Dem.”

She smiles at me, her posture relaxes as she stirs until there’s a knock.

“It’s six-forty.” She looks at me, eyes bulging out of their sockets. “Who the fuck shows up twenty minutes early? Whatever happened to being fashionably late?”

“Demi, relax. The food is almost done anyway, it’s good they’re here before it gets cold,” I say. “I’ll grab the door.”

“No, wait, let me get it. I don’t want to seem like a bad host.” She rushes past me, handing me the spoon she was stirring with in the process. “You stir.”

I follow her commands, walking over to the stovetop. I hear the door open and voices as people enter the apartment, continuing to stir the sauce as I was told. I pay attention to the sauce knowing Demi wouldn't hesitate to murder me for ruining her food. The voices get closer as they come around the corner and as they enter the kitchen, I hear Demi say, "... and this is my roommate, Lo."

I turn around to say hi with a polite smile on my face that immediately falls when I see who stands in front of me.

"Lo, this is my brother, Kaden, and his friend Asher." She smiles. I can feel the nerves radiating off her as we all stand there silently, not knowing what to say. Thankfully, Asher breaks that silence.

"Logan," Asher shouts, coming over to hug me. I pull myself together and return the gesture. "I had no clue you were Kade's little sister's roommate."

"Wait, you guys know each other?" Demi says, confused, looking pointedly at me.

"Oh yeah, we go way back." Asher smiles, and it's hard not to smile with him. He's got a contagious personality. "We met at Carl's earlier in the week. I hit on her and she broke my heart when she turned me down." He fake pouts and I can't help the laugh that comes out of me.

"The other night when I was there with you?" Demi looks at me to ask. "You were there too?" She directs the second question to Kade.

"Yeah, when I went to get my drink from the bar. I didn't know he was your brother." I say, trying to judge how the situation is affecting her. She looks at me, confusion still written all over her face.

"Oh, okay. Well, that's fun," she says, the smile returning to her face as she lets the subject go. "Also, I told you my brother's name is Kaden. I'm surprised you didn't put it together."

"You said your name was Kade," I say, looking at said brother. He still hasn't said a word since he entered the

kitchen. Those deep-blue eyes that I now realize I recognize because they're the same as Demi's are burning a hole through me as he glares.

“My family are the only people who call me Kaden,” he says. His voice is rough, as if he hasn't used it much lately. “I thought you said your name was Logan?” He fires the question back at me.

“My friends call me Lo.” I raise my eyebrow at him as if to say, anything else? He stays quiet, his attention never wavering from me until Asher clears his throat. Kade's attention snaps away from mine, landing on his friend who chuckles under his breath. Kade glares at him in return.

“You guys can go sit at the table in there.” Demi points around the corner to where the kitchen table sits, all the places set neatly. “Dinner will be ready in a few. Lo, help me?” She smiles at me, and I can tell she has questions about the staring contest that just ensued between me and her brother.

I smile and nod at her just as the boys leave the kitchen and head to sit down at the table. The second they're out of view, her questioning eyes meet mine. I know then, my long workday will be nothing compared to this dinner. It's going to be a long night.

CHAPTER

EIGHT



Kaden

Lo is Logan Hart. I didn't question my sister's roommate's name when we spoke on the phone, but now I'm thinking I should have. How my past and present got so completely intertwined like this is beyond me.

From what Demi has told me, she's been living with Logan for the past five years. It doesn't escape me that a little over five years ago was the last time I heard from L. Had her twin sister been living barely twenty minutes away from me with my little sister this whole damn time?

If I had connected with my sister sooner, would I have met Logan and connected the dots sooner? The what-ifs rack my mind as I try and ignore Asher looking at me with a smug grin on his face. It doesn't work for long. Asher is like a puppy looking for attention, he doesn't give up until he gets it.

"What?" I say, annoyed before the words even leave his mouth.

"You know what." He laughs, leaning back in the kitchen chair. If he thinks I'll admit to all the crazy thoughts going through my head about the tiny blonde, then he's wrong. Instead, I lean back in my own chair across from him and glare.

"Fuck off," I say, and he only laughs harder.

The idiot laughs so hard he leans farther back into the chair, causing it to fall backward. He hits the floor hard just as

Logan walks into the room.

“Fuck,” he says.

Logan takes one look at him and bursts out into laughter herself. She throws her head back, her long blonde hair cascading down her back. A wide smile takes over her face as the laughter flows out of her. It’s the most carefree I’ve seen her. Like just for a second, all her worries are gone and she’s just a normal girl. She’s fucking gorgeous. I can’t help the grin pulling at my own lips just from looking at her.

“I don’t even want to know,” she says as she calms down. She shakes her head at Asher who is still sprawled out on the floor. Her smile never wavers.

There’s a part of me that is pissed at Asher that he’s the one who’s making her laugh, making her smile. Even if it was at his own expense, I want all her reactions for myself. I want to make her feel the lightness that she’s undoubtedly feeling right now.

I sit up straighter at the realization. It’s the exact opposite of everything I should want. She doesn’t deserve me coming in and fucking up her life. Not to mention, she’d end up fucking my life up just as bad if not worse. Yet staring at her now, happiness shining in her eyes, it’s all I want.

Asher stands from the floor, picking the chair back up with him and her eyes turn toward me. I’m not sure what she sees on my face, but whatever it is causes her to clear her throat, a mask sliding over her features. Her guard sliding firmly back into place.

“I just came to see what you guys wanted to drink,” she says, pulling her attention away from me to look at Asher.

“What do you got?” he asks, still smiling at her, oblivious to the change in her demeanor.

“Water, Diet Coke, ginger ale, or cranberry juice. If you want something alcoholic, I think all we have is vodka and wine.”

“Diet Coke is good with me. Thanks, Lo.” He pauses. “I can call you Lo now, right? I feel like our friendship has hit

that level, don't you?"

She lightly laughs at him and nods her head. "Yeah, Lo is fine." She turns her direction toward me.

"Just water, please," I speak. She turns around to walk back into the kitchen without a response. I force myself to look away from her, not willing to give Asher any more ammunition. He's also smart enough to know he won't get anything from me, especially while we're here.

It's only a few minutes before Logan is walking back into the room with a glass in each hand, Demi following behind her with the same. They set them down before going back to grab the food from the kitchen. They set each plate down and then take their seats.

I had assumed my sister would sit next to me, but she surprises me when she quickly slides into the chair next to Asher, earning herself a glare from Logan, to which she responds with a smirk. Logan reluctantly sits in the chair next to me, seemingly doing everything she can to avoid looking at me.

I'm not sure what Demi's intentions are with making sure that Logan sits next to me, but I can't say I'm not happy with the outcome. Watching Logan sit next to Asher, knowing how he made her smile earlier, would've been torturous.

Not that her sitting next to me is much better. The table isn't big considering the room is small itself. Just big enough for the four of us, and the chairs are close enough together that if I spread my legs a little wider, they would rub against Lo's. The temptation to do so is strong.

"Holy shit, this looks good," Asher says, referring to the plate of food in front of him and he's not wrong. It looks like some sort of chicken with lemon sauce, mashed potatoes, and vegetables. It seems simple enough, but the way it's placed on the plate looks more like art than a home-cooked meal.

"He's right," I say, directing my attention to my little sister. "This looks amazing, Demi." I watch a beaming smile take

over her face. She looks like the fourteen-year-old little girl who was constantly begging me to hang out with her.

I should have been flattered she thought I was so cool instead of ignoring her or saying I was too busy with work. Eventually, she started reaching out less and less until she stopped asking altogether. Our relationship revolved around “How are you?” and “happy birthday” texts for years, and it was all my fault.

My father left my mother and me because he got Demi’s mother pregnant. My mother knew he was cheating on her but chose to ignore it. She chose to ignore a lot of things when it came to him. She probably would’ve stayed with him too, even with Demi’s mother pregnant, but he left to go play happy family with them instead.

I know Demi had no control over the fact that our father had chosen to stay and raise her instead of me, but it still caused me to push her away for years. It’s only over the last six months that we’ve been talking more and developing the brother-sister relationship she’s been begging me for all along.

“Thanks, guys. I hope it tastes good too.” She throws Logan what looks like a nervous glance. “Dig in,” she says, cutting into her own food.

It does taste as good as it looks, if not better. Every component on the plate is full of flavor, it’s probably some of the best food I’ve ever eaten.

“It’s really fucking good, Demi,” I say, and I can instantly see her relax as if waiting for my approval.

“Thanks, Kaden. That means a lot to me.” She smiles and I return the gesture. I catch Logan looking at me out of the corner of her eye as if she’s analyzing the interaction. The second she realizes she’s caught, she jerks her stare away.

“Delicious as always, Dem,” Logan says to my sister.

“This shit is some of the best fucking food I’ve ever eaten,” Asher says. “Where do you work again?”

“Oh, I’m just a waitress at Angelo’s right now.” Demi looks down at her food as if the fact embarrasses her.

“Fuck that, why?” Asher speaks while still shoveling food into his mouth. “I’ll hire you to be my personal chef right now.”

Demi laughs at him at the same time Logan cracks a smile.

“Please,” Demi says, eyeing him up and down. “You couldn’t afford me.” She smiles and he laughs at her in return, nodding his head as if he agrees. “For real though, I’d love to have my own restaurant where I can cook and create my own menu one day. But it’s just a pipe dream for now.”

“Well, I’d eat there every day for sure.” Asher smiles at my sister.

“I think you’d gain a hundred pounds if you ate this every day.” Demi chuckles at him. Asher being the asshole that he is, proceeds to stand up and lift his shirt showing off his abs.

“Please,” he says, flexing to each of the girls. “These things are made of steel, I could never.”

Demi looks at him like a fish out of water, looking back and forth between his stomach and his face. He laughs at her expression, making her snap out of it and roll her eyes at him. Logan laughs at the situation, acting as if she’s not affected, but I can see the tinge of pink on her cheeks. It fucking pisses me off.

“Put your shit away.” I kick Asher under the table. He drops his shirt and fakes being wounded before plopping back into his seat.

The rest of the dinner goes by relatively quietly. Everyone’s more focused on eating their meal than having a conversation. We’re all just about finished when Asher starts his meddling.

“So, Lo. What’s the real reason you turned me down at Carl’s?” Asher asks her, “I know it’s not because you’re not attracted to me. I saw you blushing before.” He winks at her, causing her neck and cheeks to heat once again as she reaches for her drink.

“Oh, yes.” Demi sits up straighter in her chair. “I’m curious to hear the answer to this as well.”

Logan looks at her with betrayal before directing her attention toward Asher.

“I’m just not big on dating.” She shrugs her shoulders to indicate it’s the best response she’s got.

“Who said anything about dating?” Asher smirks at her. Demi chokes on her drink, her eyes bugging out of her head. I kick Asher under the table for the second time now, but he doesn’t even flinch. He looks at me smugly. He knows exactly what he’s doing.

“Not big on sleeping around either,” Logan responds. Her cheeks are still slightly tinged pink, but she seems more amused than flustered now.

“Well, fine. Maybe I’ll just break all my rules for you. What will it take for you to say yes to going out with me?” Asher leans back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. I know he’s only doing this to mess with me, but the way Logan eyes where his biceps bulge from the sleeves of his T-shirt makes me think she may be contemplating saying yes.

I don’t think when I covertly slide my hand under the table to grip her thigh through her leggings. She tenses but, to her credit, doesn’t look down to see where my hand is wrapped around her. She doesn’t move to push my hand away but instead leaves it where it’s at. She’s quiet for a second, and I see the defiance in her eyes before she even speaks.

“Hmm.” She smirks. “Let’s say I do say yes, what do you have in mind?”

I gently squeeze her leg in warning and she involuntarily shivers. It’s subtle, but I notice it and apparently Asher did too because he raises an eyebrow at me, smiling as if he knows exactly what is going on.

“Sweetheart, we can do anything you want. There are plenty of ways that I can make you happy. On the date and when we get home.”

Demi gasps out loud at his words, her cheeks flaming red. She’s leaning forward with her elbows on the table and her hands fisted underneath her chin, looking back and forth

between all of us as if she's watching some sort of reality show. Logan looks at her like she's trying not to laugh.

"What?" Demi asks. "This is the most entertainment I've seen since a couple got into a screaming fight at the restaurant last week. Answer him," she all but yells at Logan.

Logan manages to keep herself in control and seems relatively unaffected by Asher's words, but the glint in her eye tells me she's still considering saying yes just to piss me off. I slowly slide my hand higher up her thigh, daring her to say yes and see what happens. She squeezes her thighs together, trapping my hand between them just before I reach where I'm secretly dying to be.

I know that I have no right to be doing this. We've met twice and have barely had a full conversation. But her reaction alone proves that she's feeling everything that I'm feeling. The attraction. The connection. I stare at her as she refuses to look at me.

"As fun as that sounds, I think I'm going to have to pass." She finally speaks. Asher shakes his head, acting let down, even though he's still got a smile on his face. With one more gentle squeeze, I slip my hand from between Logan's thighs and watch as her body relaxes back into her seat.

"Damn," Asher says. "What about you, De—" He doesn't get the sentence out before I cut him off.

"Absolutely fucking not," I say harshly.

He laughs as I give him the exact reaction he was looking for.

"I'm not a second choice, asshole," she says. "Plus, with the way I'm assuming you fuck around, I'd need to see a full list of test results before touching you with a ten-foot pole." Demi smiles at him, picking up her plate and bringing it to the kitchen.

"Hey!" Asher yells. "I always wrap it up, thank you very much." He grabs his own, following her into the kitchen. I turn to look at Logan, but she's already rushing out of the room with her own dish in her hand before I can get her alone.

I follow them into the kitchen where Demi is already rinsing plates. Asher continues to tell her, and the rest of us, that he's clean, severely offended by her comment. When Demi's phone rings, Asher is closest and immediately picks it up off the counter.

"Who's she-devil?" he asks, reading the contact's name off her screen and Demi makes a sound of disgust.

"Fuck me," she says, grabbing the phone out of Asher's hand.

"I mean, if you insist," he says, earning himself a glare from not only her but me as she walks into the other room to answer the call.

"It's her boss," Logan says from where she's taken over washing the dishes. "She's a bitch."

Demi walks back into the room only a minute later.

"I'm so sorry, I've got to go. That was my manager, and my friend Mel just called out because her kid is sick." She's already grabbing her things off the counter. "Normally, I'd say no, but the bitch said I was her last option, and if she doesn't find someone to cover Mel, then she's firing her."

"Can she even do that?" I ask, "It doesn't seem fair to fire someone for an actual emergency even if nobody can cover. Plus, it's already nine."

"Yeah, I know. Mel's shift started at eight, apparently, I really was her last call." She laughs. "We are open until midnight on Saturdays, so she's still short-handed for a few hours. Who knows if she can actually fire her, but I'm not going to risk it. I like Mel."

"You're a good person, Dem," Logan says from where she stands at the sink. "Don't worry, I've got clean up."

"Thanks, Lo. They can help you too." She looks at me and Asher. "I did cook for you both after all."

"Of course, we'll help. Be safe." I pull Demi into a hug, and she smiles up at me with adoration. The guilt sinks deeper that all she ever wanted from me was to be here and it's taken

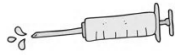
me so long to do it. Asher stands from the counter, looking between me and Logan with a glint in his eye.

“Oh, look at that.” He looks at his phone, pretending there’s something important on there. “I’ve got to run too. I’ll walk you out, Demi. Don’t worry, Lo, Kade can stay to help you, we drove separately,” he says, already following Demi out the door before either of us has a chance to argue.

I turn toward Logan, not sure what to expect. She shuts off the sink water and turns to face me, leaning her back against the counter and crossing her arms under her chest. Annoyance flares in her eyes as I wait for what I’m sure will be a scolding for touching her at the table. Even so, looking at her now with anger radiating off her body, knowing she’s about to lose control, I smirk. I don’t regret it for a single second.

CHAPTER

NINE



Logan

“What the fuck was that?” I’m fuming, and the piece of shit is smirking. I can’t tell if I’m more annoyed that he’s finding amusement out of my obvious anger or that he looks hot as hell. I can feel my face flush with a mixture of anger and arousal, unsure which one is more at the forefront. The fact that I haven’t had sex in over a year and his simple touch has me more worked up than I’ve ever been isn’t helping matters either.

“So, you’re the infamous Lo, huh? My sister’s roommate, best friend, savior.” He stares at me as if he’s looking at me in a new light. As if this new development changed something for him. His deep-blue eyes shed away my layers as they roam over every inch, leaving me feeling vulnerable and exposed.

“I’m not a savior.” I roll my eyes. “Not even close.” I stop myself before I reveal any more. That’s the thing about Kade or Kaden or whatever the hell I’m supposed to call him, he’s intuitive. Where I can get away with certain comments with most people, he sees through them. He’s not afraid to dig, and frankly, I’m terrified of what he’ll find.

“Interesting,” is all he says in response. His tone cool, almost bored as he stays leaning against the refrigerator across from me.

“You never answered my question,” I say, steeling my posture. I sure as hell hope I look a whole lot stronger and sterner than I’m feeling at the moment.

“I could ask you the same question, you know?” he says and my face crinkles with confusion. “You were baiting me before. Pretending to consider going out with Asher to get a rise out of me.”

I cut him off with a loud laugh that I hope doesn't sound as forced as it is.

“Who says I was pretending?” I say smugly. “Is your ego really that big that you think I was only entertaining Asher, who is hot as fuck, by the way, as some way of getting attention from you? Please, you think too highly of yourself.”

“I never said you weren't attracted to Asher,” he says, still unfazed. “Your face is a lot more expressive than you think, baby girl. I could spot you blushing from a mile away.” My smile drops as I wait for him to continue. “But you didn't start truly acknowledging Asher's advances until I had my hand on you. Until I gave you the attention you were so desperately looking for, and then you didn't know how to handle it.”

I stay quiet, not knowing how to respond. The truth is everything he's saying is one-hundred-percent true. I played into Asher's shameless flirting for two reasons. The first being that it got a rise out of Kade. Something I've been trying to unconsciously do since the first time I saw him.

Second, when I felt his hand, so large it covered nearly the entire width of my thigh, I panicked. I figured if I started flirting back with Asher, it would piss him off and he would let go. That backfired big time when all he did was move it higher until I felt like I was two seconds from combusting with the amount of heat coursing through my body.

He pushes off the refrigerator, slowly but confidently walking toward me. Closing the small distance between us with every step he takes.

“Also”—he stops directly in front of me. His height towers over mine, forcing me to tilt my head back to meet his stare—“my ego is merely a reflection of what I have to offer. What was it that Asher said earlier?” His eyes glitter and a low chuckle leaves his throat. “On a date and when I take a woman home.”

I swallow harshly and I watch as his eyes follow the movement of my throat, a confident smirk adorning his face.

“Maybe I’ll show you one day.” He steps around me, turns the faucet back on, picks up the dish on top of the pile, and begins to scrub it. I stand there. Stunned, speechless, *turned on*? I couldn’t tell you at this point. He nudges me with his elbow.

“You just gonna stand there like a fish out of water or dry for me?” He hands me the now clean plate. I clear my throat, turn around and grab a clean dish towel to dry with. I grab the plate from his hands, our fingers connecting ever so slightly before I yank it away. He lets out a low laugh at my urgency while I do everything I can to avoid eye contact.

We continue washing and drying in silence, one dish at a time. As the time passes, it’s not entirely uncomfortable. I’ve never enjoyed silence, but right now I can almost find comfort in it. Maybe because I’m not alone? Maybe because he’s here with me? There’s the uncomfortable feeling that was missing.

I finish drying the final dish as he dries his own hands. I move to put it away, standing on my tippy-toes to place it in the higher cabinet, but I feel his presence looming over me before I can reach it. He snatches the plate out of my hand, pinning me between himself and the counter to place it neatly in the cabinet above me.

My hands grip the edge of the countertop so hard my fingers nearly turn white as I feel the front of him press along my backside. I bite my lip to stop the hitch in my breath from escaping. It’s only for a second before he closes the cabinet and backs away, but the feeling of his body against my own lingers. I turn around to see him now standing by the opposite counter, watching me.

“Well, thanks,” I say. My voice sounds raspier than I’d like, revealing just how much he really affects me. “I’ll see you around, I guess.” The entire situation feels awkward now. I don’t know what to say anymore. It seems that he doesn’t either because he says nothing, observing me for a few seconds more before nodding his head and turning to walk

toward the door. He only takes a few steps toward the door before I blurt out what I've been dying to know all along.

"Why did you touch me to begin with?" He slowly turns back around, his face revealing nothing. "You said it yourself, I didn't start playing into Asher's game until you had your hand on me. But you never explained why you grabbed me in the first place."

"Do I need a reason?" he asks calmly as if maybe he doesn't actually have one. I don't buy it for a second. The man is calculated, he doesn't act without thinking. But then again, neither do I, except when I'm with him. "Maybe I just like to watch you squirm," he says, and I'm pissed again.

"Yes. You need a reason to fucking touch me, Kaden," I say, exasperated.

"Uh-oh, she's using my full name, this can't be good." He cuts in before I can continue, only fueling my anger.

"You don't get to touch me without my permission, which for the record, you won't be getting. And the only reason I'd ever squirm is because of how uncomfortable you make me."

"Hmm, are you sure about that?" he taunts. A smirk on his stupidly perfect mouth, like nothing I say matters enough to get through to him.

"Of course, I'm sure." I narrow my eyes and cross my arms over my chest.

"Do you want to know what I think?" He closes the space between us to stand over me again. It seems to be his favorite spot, putting me at the disadvantage of having to look up at him.

"No, not particularly," I say, although the words are a waste considering he blatantly ignores me anyway.

"I think my touch makes you anything but uncomfortable." He pushes a strand of hair that had fallen onto my face behind my ear. I curse my traitorous body as it shivers from his touch. My cheeks heat as his fingers leave a burning trail in their wake.

“What are you really angry about, baby girl? Is it that I had my hands on you? Or is it that you liked the feel of them a little too much?” He bends down to bring his lips to the shell of my ear. “Or maybe it’s because you wanted me to keep going higher until I reached that sweet spot between your legs?”

He pulls away, standing to his full height but still looking down at me. His eyes are full of untamed desire and I don’t doubt that mine look the same. My breathing is quicker than normal, although I try my best to mask it. My heart feels like it’s beating a million beats per minute, pounding harshly against my chest. I don’t even want to know what my face looks like, but if the burning flush I feel in my cheeks is anything to go by, it’s red.

Kade slowly raises his hand from his side, gently wrapping it around the back of my neck. My heart beats faster and my body feels frozen. I should push him away, prove to him just how uncomfortable I claim he makes me. But I can’t.

“Your heart seems to be beating pretty fast.” He smirks, gently rubbing small circles over the pulse point on my neck with his thumb. “Couple that with the shallow breathing and the intense blush you’re sporting, it doesn’t seem like you’re too uncomfortable to me.” He pauses like he’s meant to be thinking. “No, definitely not uncomfortable. Turned on seems more like it,” he speaks. “Although you’re the doctor here, so what do you say? What’s your diagnosis?”

I close my eyes, trying to distract myself from how undeniably right he is. I stay silent, not knowing what to say. Not even sure he’s done or looking for an answer.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” He continues, “I bet if I stuck my hand in those tight-ass leggings of yours, I’d find you dripping for me.” His voice is low and gravelly, his words meant for my ears only. I can’t stop the small whimper that falls from my now parted lips. A part of me hopes he’ll do it.

“Look at me, baby girl.”

My eyes immediately pop open, meeting his. It’s like he speaks, and my body can’t help but listen to his every

command.

“Is that what you want, Lo? For me to bend you over the counter and play with that pretty pussy of yours until you’re gushing all over my fingers?”

My sexual experience at twenty-six years old is rather limited. I’ve been with three men, and none of them ever spoke to me the way that Kade is right now. None of them made me feel the way he is either. Like all it would take is a single touch for me to explode.

He bends lower until his face is in line with mine, his lips so close that I can feel the warmth of his breath as it passes through them. I close my eyes again, waiting to feel the softness of his lips against my own. But it never comes. Coldness replaces the heat from seconds ago as I open my eyes to see him pulling away with an amused glint in his eyes.

“Maybe next time.” He looks at me with a satisfied smirk. I stand there in shock, anger, and, above all, with a boatload of sexual frustration. All of which I’m sure is apparent to him.

“I’ll see you around, I guess.” He throws my earlier words back at me, turning around to walk toward the door again.

“Fuck you,” I yell at his back. I hear the deep chuckle that leaves him, but he doesn’t turn around, continuing to open the door and walk through it.

“Soon, baby girl. Soon,” he says quietly, but just loud enough for me to hear right before he shuts the door behind him, leaving the apartment.

I stand in the kitchen exactly where he left me, at a complete loss for words. Never in my life have I experienced even half of the feelings that I do with Kaden Pierce. I don’t know whether to be terrified or intrigued. Maybe a little bit of both.

I don’t know how long passes before I move to lock the door behind him, brush my teeth, change, and climb into bed. I go through the motions of it all, but my mind is distracted by my best friend’s brother and the way my body involuntarily

melted for him. Even as I close my eyes, begging for sleep to come, all that I can think about is one thing.

What the fuck just happened?

CHAPTER

TEN



Kaden

It's been two and a half weeks, yet long, messy blonde hair and bright-green eyes filled with lust are still at the forefront of my mind. Logan Hart has taken up residence in my head and I cannot seem to get her out. Although, I can't say that I'm even trying too hard anymore.

Any chance I had of leaving her alone was completely destroyed the second I felt her pressed up against me. Coiled up so tight she would've let me do anything to her just to get some relief. I was close to giving it to her too. But teasing her was nearly just as satisfying. That is, until I had to drive home with a hard-on that refused to go away.

I haven't seen or spoken to her since I left her standing flustered in her kitchen almost three weeks ago. It wouldn't be that hard to get her number or even show up at the hospital to see her, for that matter. But my brain is still warring with my need to have her.

It's dangerous to get close to her knowing who she is, knowing how I play into an assumingly darker part of her past. But with every thought of her perfect pink lips parting for me, begging to be devoured, my determination to stay away from her withers further.

"Still thinking about the girl?" King asks, leaning against the wooden fence next to me. Every year within the last week or two of September, King throws a barbecue at his house. His daughters love having people here and it's his way of

celebrating them getting through the first few weeks of school. It's a laid-back sort of thing with lots of food and drinks, good music, and everyone's welcome.

He closes the shop early, invites everyone from there, and they invite whoever they want to bring, plus whoever else his daughters convince him to let come. I say convince lightly, considering they both have him wrapped around their fingers.

"Trying not to." I take a sip from the beer bottle in my hand. King laughs, following my movement to take a sip of his own drink.

"And how's that working out for you?" he asks. I look over at him with a look that shows him just how much it's not working out for me at all. He nods his head as if it's what he figured.

"You know you could just talk to her. She may not be who you're thinking she is anyway," he says. "Plus, you've never had an issue picking up women before, so what else is holding you back now?"

"She is." I continue, "She's exactly who I think she is. It's just a gut feeling." I look away from him and toward all the other people floating around the backyard, drinking, eating, happy. "There is no other reason I haven't gone after her. I can admit that I want to fuck her, King. But is a good fuck really worth fucking up her life if I'm right?"

"You don't only want to fuck her, Kade, and you're an idiot for thinking that. Who says it would fuck up her life? How do you know that a new connection to her sister isn't exactly what she wants? What she needs?"

"Because 'hey, I think I knew your sister, who I'm pretty sure is dead, and before she died, she told me that you're essentially my responsibility now, so do you want to grab a drink?' is every girl's fantasy."

King stares at me for a minute before throwing his head back, a loud laugh following shortly after. "Well, fuck. When you put it that way." He shakes his head as his laughter dies down.

We stand silently against the fence, drinking our beers and watching the others. King is similar to me in that he prefers to observe rather than participate. Where Asher is always at the center of the chaos, joking around and having a good time, King and I like to stay on the sidelines. It's more peaceful here.

"Uncle Kade!" I hear yelled just before I'm forced to catch a screaming eight-year-old as she jumps onto me. Even though King is huge, his daughter, Willow, is tiny, even for an eight-year-old.

I've been around since before Willow was born and when his now twelve-year-old, Ellie, was only two. I love both of the girls like they're my own and the fact that King has trusted me so wholeheartedly with them has been one of the honors of my life.

"Uncle Asher says you have girl problems." She throws her head back and laughs, just like her dad does, forcing me to hold on to her tighter. Willow may be King's mini-me in most ways, but she looks nearly identical to the mother who abandoned her. With her mother's long, sandy-brown curls that flow down her back and light-hazel eyes, she's going to be trouble one day for sure.

"Did he now?" I say to Willow, eyeing Asher as he walks up next to us.

"Yes, he did." Willow nods her head vigorously. "And he said he is going to fix them for you." She smiles obliviously.

My attention shoots to Asher. "And how do you plan on doing that?"

He smiles deviously and I know he did something even before he says it.

"Did I forget to mention I may have invited your sister and Logan?"

"Asher," I say his name as a warning. He grabs Willow from my arms before holding her out in front of himself.

"You can't do anything. I have a child." He laughs as he backs away a couple feet, still holding a giggling Willow in

front of him.

“Stop using my child to protect you,” King says, only making him laugh harder.

“Also, they’re already here.” Asher smiles wider just as I notice Demi walking up to us followed by the blonde who has been occupying my every waking and sleeping thought.

“Hey, big brother.” Demi smiles at me. “Asher,” she says, a small blush covering her cheeks that I know I’ll now have to ask Asher about later. “And who is this that you’re hiding behind?” Demi asks and Asher finally sets Willow down on the ground in front of him, knowing I won’t make a scene in front of everyone.

“I’m Willow Kate King,” Willow says sassily while putting her hands on her hips. “Who are you people?”

Demi smiles big at her. I look out of the corner of my eye to see Logan smiling too.

“I’m Demi, his little sister.” Demi points over to me. “And this is Logan.” She nudges her.

“Logan’s a boy’s name,” Willow says, eyeing Logan.

“Jesus, Willow,” King scolds her. “We don’t say those things to people.”

“Why, Dad? She has a boy’s name!”

“It’s okay.” Logan laughs softly, bending down so she is closer to Willow’s height. “All my friends call me Lo, so you can too.”

“Does that mean that we’re friends?” Willow asks.

“Sure does, if that’s okay with you.” Willow stays silent for a second as if she’s thinking about it.

“Okay, we can be friends. Now come meet my sister.” Willow grabs Logan’s hand and yanks her away from the rest of us.

“Sorry,” King yells after them, apologizing for his daughter. Logan smiles and shakes her head to show she doesn’t mind at all, following Willow across the yard.

“I’m gonna grab a drink,” Demi says.

“Great idea, I’ll show you where the good stuff is.” Asher rushes Demi away before I have a second to talk to him alone.

“I’m going to kill him.” I bring the bottle to my lips and down the rest of it.

“She seems nice. Hot as fuck, too, can see why you can’t stop thinking about her,” King says.

“I’ll kill you too,” I respond.

“Nah, I’m the one who signs your paychecks. Plus, you’d be leaving those two little angels parentless.” He nods his head toward his daughters, but the only thing that is registering is how fucking beautiful the woman sitting on the grass across from them is. She looks like she’s in her element. Like the two small girls bring out the very best in her.

“I might let you kill Asher if he’s the one who invited her though.” King’s voice pulls my attention away from Logan and toward the front of the yard, where I see none other than my ex-girlfriend and Asher’s on and off again fuck buddy walking in.

Kayla and I dated for about six months. I ended things with her about a year ago, but I swear the woman still ambushes me every chance she gets. Things were super casual between us and then they were just comfortable. That is, until she wanted more, and I didn’t. Then she went nuts.

She claimed I had been leading her on. That she’d been expecting an engagement ring for the last month of our relationship. She told me she loved me all the time but always said it in a casual way like, “love ya, bye,” and I never said it back, something she never questioned, so I figured she got the message. Apparently not.

Six months into our relationship, I found her birth control pills in the trash. When I asked about them, she said it was about time we started trying for a family. I was completely caught off guard and told her that I thought we both had different ideas of what our relationship was. She broke into full hysterics and stormed out of my apartment.

For the next two months, she practically stalked my every move, refusing to accept me breaking up with her, and kept pretending like we were still together. She constantly blew my phone up, showed up at my house, my job. It got to the point where I had to call her best friend, also known as Asher's occasional fuck buddy, Sabrina, and ask her to control her friend.

Things got better after that, but she still occasionally texts me that she misses me and will tag along to places that Sabrina is invited if she knows I'll be there. She flirts with me and tries to start things back up, but it's not to the level it once was. Regardless, her being here is fucking annoying.

"Fuck," I say. Her eyes skate across the group of people, as if hunting for her prey, until they land on me. I immediately look away, storming toward Asher, seriously ready to beat the shit out of him if he went as far as to invite Sabrina, knowing Kayla would tag along with her while also inviting Logan and my sister.

"Did you fucking invite them?" I cut off whatever conversation Asher is having with Demi. Demi looks surprised by the intrusion, or it could just be that she's never seen me as pissed off as I am right now.

"What are you talking about?" Asher asks, genuinely confused. "I just told you I invited Demi and Lo—"

"Not them," I cut him off, nudging my head toward Kayla and Sabrina.

"Fuck," he says. "No way, man. You know I wouldn't invite Sabs here. She's friends with Trix, it was probably her."

Trix, also known as Beatrice, is one of the piercers that work at the shop. I knew she was friends with Sabrina but didn't realize they were close enough for her to be invited to the barbecue.

"Incoming," Asher whispers, just as I feel a hand grasp my arm, long fingernails digging into my skin.

"Kade." Kayla's high voice grates on my very last nerve. I don't know how it didn't bother me while we were together,

but hearing it now is my own personal version of nails on a chalkboard. “It’s been forever. How are you, babe?”

Asher clears his throat.

“Oh. Hey, Asher.” She smiles at him. “I didn’t see you there.”

Asher snickers at the ridiculousness.

“And who are you?” She eyes Demi up and down, the smile dropping from her face. “I hope you’re not dating Asher, considering he still fucks my best friend.”

Demi’s cheeks heat and she looks uncomfortable.

“Demi is my younger sister,” I say, yanking my arm out of Kayla’s grasp. “Dem, this is Kayla, my ex.”

“I didn’t know you had a sister.” Kayla looks at me skeptically, and Demi looks hurt for a second before masking the emotion. I’ll have to explain to her later that Kayla never knew about her because I didn’t share anything with her, not because of Demi herself.

“Yeah, you have fun with that. I’m going to go find Lo.” Demi doesn’t even spare Kayla a second glance before walking away. Asher looks between the two of us before excusing himself from the conversation right after her.

I look over to where Demi is headed, only to find Logan’s gaze locked on mine. She looks curious, apprehensive, and even a little jealous. It shouldn’t matter, but every part of me is dying to go over there and assure her she has no reason to be. That the only one I can think about these days is her. Before I can try and portray any of that to her though, she yanks her eyes away from mine.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Kayla?” I return my attention to the current problem at hand.

“I miss you, Kade.” She attempts to move closer to me, but I only move farther away, not wanting to give even a sliver of hope for her to grasp on to. “We were so good together, baby. Don’t you miss me too?” I can smell the booze on her breath,

letting me know she clearly had a few drinks before coming here.

“No, Kayla. I’m sorry, I don’t. You’ve got to stop showing up to things like this.”

“I didn’t come only for you, Kade.” She changes direction, clearly unhappy that this isn’t going the way she planned. She does this every time, it’s a constant pattern that I’m used to by now. “Trix invited Sabs and me, and it would’ve been rude to decline. Not everything is about you, you know?”

“Alright, well then go hang out with Trix and Sabrina and leave me alone, Kayla.” I walk away from her, heading inside the house to take a breather from everyone outside. Unfortunately for me, Kayla has other ideas because she follows me inside.

“You don’t have to always be so cold to me, Kade,” she yells, acting as if she is seriously hurt. Manipulative is more like it. “We were together for a long time, and we had a lot of good moments. Does all of our history mean nothing to you?”

“No, Kayla. But we broke up over a year ago. I’ve moved on. It’s time for you to do so as well.” I realize my mistake too late.

“Who the fuck have you moved on with?” All hurt disappears and anger takes over her features. Telling Kayla that I’ve moved on is like poking a bear, considering she still feels like she holds some sort of claim over me, even though she doesn’t and frankly never did. It’s definitely not the quickest way to get out of a conversation with her like I was looking to do.

I hear the sound of the door we just walked through opening, and the footsteps coming toward us grab my attention. I turn around, thankful for whoever is interrupting this conversation. Except, what I’m not expecting is to see a flustered Logan standing there looking all sorts of uncomfortable.

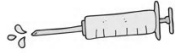
“Sorry, I was just looking for the bathroom.” She awkwardly points toward the hallway. The idea pops into my

head and I'm walking toward her before I can register what a terrible one it is.

“Kayla,” I say, wrapping my arm around a confused Logan. I pull her close to me, trying to ignore the heat of her body burning against my own and how perfectly she fits into my side. I pray she follows my lead and does what seems like the best-case scenario at this very moment. “This is my girlfriend, Logan.”

CHAPTER

ELEVEN



Logan

Girlfriend. Yup, I'm pretty sure he just said girlfriend, and I'm pretty sure it was followed by Logan. Me, my name, Logan. I try to keep a firm mask over my face, assuming he's doing this for a reason, but internally, I'm freaking the fuck out.

Not only am I still beyond wound up from when he left me standing a horny mess in my kitchen two and a half weeks ago, but now all I can focus on is that I'm pressed up against him once again.

His fingers are wrapped tightly around my shoulder, pulling me close to him. My body molds into each individual crevice of his body, fitting perfectly into his side. Heat sears from where his touch even through the fabric of my dress. I never thought I could be turned on by a man holding my shoulder, but here we are. *Fuck, Lo. Get it together.*

The heat between the two of us isn't the only thing burning me though. Kayla, his ex-girlfriend, from what Demi mentioned outside, is looking at me with such fire in her glare it feels like any second, I could turn to ash.

"You're dating her?" she asks. It's not what she says necessarily, but how she says it. Venom drips off her tongue when she refers to me. As if I'm beneath her, the scum on the bottom of her shoe, and she's disgusted by the idea that Kade may actually be associating with me.

I'd be offended if I cared what she thought of me. The fact that Kade is standing next to me, even if it is fake, already gives me a leg up on her. I lean farther into Kade, plastering a fake smile on my face.

"Nice to meet you." I keep my voice sugary sweet in complete contrast to how she's treating me. One of the things I've learned in life is that the best way to piss someone off is to make them believe that no matter what they say to you, they can't affect you. Kill them with kindness and all that. She can try to get under my skin all she wants, and maybe she'll even succeed, but she won't ever know it.

"This has to be a joke, Kade." She completely ignores my statement, choosing to focus her attention back on my apparent boyfriend. "You had me." She gestures to herself like the prize she believes herself to be. "And instead, you're telling me you'd rather have her? She looks like a little boy, Kade, at least pick someone good-looking next time. I just don't buy it." She laughs like the idea in itself is comical.

"It's not a fucking joke, Kayla. Logan, who, by the way, is the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on, is my girlfriend." His voice is cold, leaving no room for argument. "And if you are rude to her one more fucking time, I'll make sure you and Sabrina are not allowed anywhere near work events ever again. Are we fucking clear?"

My heart beats a little faster at the way he stands up for me, even if it is all for show. It makes me realize that I wish it wasn't. I wish that his words were the truth. I'm not necessarily insecure, and I don't think I'm ugly. But I also can't deny that his ex, Kayla or whatever her name is, is stunning.

Long sleek, straight black hair runs down her back. So smooth and shiny it looks like she belongs in a hair commercial. Crystal-blue eyes that make me feel like she's looking right through me. Not to mention her legs are a mile long and she has a good six inches or so on me.

She's wearing tight skinny jeans that mold to her every curve and a lacy black long-sleeve crop top that cuts low,

showing off her ample cleavage, which is much more than I have to offer. In comparison, I'm in a light-blue turtleneck sweater dress. It's a little tighter on the top but not nearly as form-fitting as her outfit. Kayla doesn't necessarily make me feel unattractive, just dull compared to her. But Kade's words give my self-esteem the boost it's looking for, even if they are just lies.

"Whatever, Kade." She scoffs, flipping her hair over her shoulder. "You're just a fucking loser who never appreciated what he had." She sends one more glare my way before rolling her eyes and walking back outside into the yard. The door closes behind her and not a second later, I'm being yanked down the hallway and into an empty bedroom.

"Are you okay?" Kade immediately turns to me, concern evident in his voice. "I'm sorry for throwing you into that situation, she just won't leave me the fuck alone." He runs his hands through his hair, effectively messing it up in a way that makes him look even more like a sex god than he already does. I've never seen him this way before, he seems almost nervous.

"It's fine, and I'm fine."

He looks at me skeptically, like the words are a lie.

"No, really, I am. I'm happy to help. You really didn't have to defend me like that. I mean, the whole most beautiful girl thing was a little overkill." I laugh uncomfortably, not knowing why I even brought it up.

This is why I can't be trusted alone with him. I apparently lose all sense of a filter in his presence, making me want to crawl into a hole and hide from the disastrous situations I put myself into. Especially considering he looks pissed off at my response.

"Is this Willow's room?" I walk around the neon-pink-painted room, trying to change the subject. I plop down on the twin-size bed that has purple bedding, a complete contrast to the rest of the room. It matches the little girl's chaotic personality, making me smile. "It's cute." I look back up

toward Kade, who still has a grumpy-looking frown on his face.

“It wasn’t overkill, it was the truth, Logan,” he says. He walks toward the bed and stands over me. He gently grabs my chin, nudging my head up to meet his stare. “You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen in my entire twenty-eight years of living.”

He rubs his thumb over my bottom lip, staring at it as if he’s mesmerized by the movement. I just feel mesmerized by him. “You’re fucking captivating, Lo. Don’t you ever think otherwise, understand?”

I nod my head, unable to form any words.

“Good girl.”

My tongue involuntarily sneaks out to wet my bottom lip, more out of habit than anything else, and a groan leaves his throat when it swipes across his digit.

“Fuck,” he says, his voice an octave deeper than it was just minutes ago.

I stare into his eyes, and I think he’s finally going to do it. He’s going to throw caution to the wind and just kiss me. I shouldn’t want it, I shouldn’t need it, but I do. I let my eyes fall closed, urging him to make the move. Then the door slams open.

“Shit, sorry. Am I interrupting something?” I’ve never been as frustrated to hear Asher’s voice. Kade pulls away, clearing his throat and putting distance between us.

“In a little girl’s bedroom? Kinky.” Asher smirks.

“What?” Kade asks, ignoring his best friend’s antics.

“Yeah, so we have a problem,” Asher says, more serious than he was a minute ago. Well, as serious as Asher can get. “Demi is shit-faced.”

“Shit, okay.” I jump up from the bed. “I’ll go take her home.” Asher looks between Kade and me, clearly trying to decipher what is going on. If he figures it out, I hope he’ll clue me in because I feel just as fucking confused.

“No, you stay. Enjoy the barbecue. I’ll drive her car home and just Uber home after. I came here with Kade anyway.” He smiles at Kade like he knows something I don’t. “I’m sure Kade can drive you home.”

I stay quiet, expecting Kade to tell him the idea is ridiculous so that I won’t have to, except that’s not what he does at all.

“You touch a hair on my sister’s head, I’ll murder you. Painfully. Are we fucking clear?” Kade says, shocking me and Asher, who looks surprised for all of a second before a wide grin spreads across his face.

“Aye, aye, Captain.” Asher salutes him like he’s a true captain.

“Let me at least go check on her first,” I say, to which Asher nods and gestures for me to follow him.

“After you, milady.”

I walk in front of Asher, seeing Kade move to follow behind the both of us.

“She’s not your anything.” I hear Kade grumble under his breath, followed by Asher’s laugh and then a grunt from when I’m assuming Kade hit him. I ignore the two of them, making my way back out into the backyard to find Demi lying on the grass, laughing so hard it looks like she’s crying.

I walk over to stand next to Willow, who’s standing over Demi, observing her like she’s some sort of foreign species. “What’s wrong with her?” Willow looks up to me.

“She was poisoned,” Asher says, walking up next to me.

“What?” Willow yells, looking panicked. “We should call the doctors.”

I glare at Asher for scaring her.

“Don’t worry, I’m a doctor and I think she’s going to be just fine. Why don’t you go play with your friends?” I point over to where a group of girls around her age are sitting.

“They’re boring.” She rolls her eyes but walks toward them anyway, leaving Asher, Kade, and myself standing over a still-laughing Demi.

“Lo,” she yells, much louder than necessary. “My best friend in the entire world. What are you doing up there?” She tilts her head to the side, squinting her eyes, most likely unaware she’s even lying on the ground. I squat down, careful to make sure my dress still covers me, to get closer to her level.

Demi rarely gets this drunk unless there’s something going on. I’m hesitant to let Asher drive her home, although I know Kade trusts him. I also know that knowing Demi, she’ll pass out during the car ride home and he’ll have better luck getting her inside than me. There’s nothing I can do until she’s sober and willing to talk.

“Hey, Dem. Do you think you can stand up? Asher is going to drive you home if that’s okay with you.” I gently grab her hand, pulling her into a sitting position.

“Lo.” She taps my shoulder like she didn’t already have my full attention. “He’s really hot,” she whispers loudly, pointing to Asher. Her cheeks are flushed red, probably a mixture of Asher and the alcohol, and she seems unaware of the fact that he’s able to hear her.

Asher smiles wide at the compliment while Kade glares at him. “Don’t even think about it.”

“Relax, she’s your baby sister, dude, you know I wouldn’t go there,” Asher says, and Kade seems to relax slightly.

“Alright, Dem. Let’s get you standing.” I manage to pull her up to standing, where she proceeds to drop all of her dead weight onto where she is leaning on me.

“I’ve got her.” Asher leans down to wrap his arms around her thighs and throws her over his shoulder. Kade watches him carefully, but Asher makes sure to keep his hands firmly on her legs.

“Whoa, how’d I get up here?” Demi moves her head around to observe her surroundings the best she can. Nobody

answers her, knowing she's living in her own sort of la-la-land right now.

"Her keys are in her purse," I tell Asher, the cross-body bag still wrapped around her.

"Got it." He walks toward the side gate that leads out of the backyard and toward the front of the house.

"You have a nice ass," Demi says as Asher walks away with her still thrown over his shoulder. She grabs his ass for good measure.

"Stop fondling me, woman. You're going to get me murdered." He removes one of his arms from where it was wrapped around her legs to attempt to swat her hand away. Being drunk, she just swats him right back. I laugh at the two of them until I feel Kade's arm wrap around my shoulders, drawing my attention up toward him.

He leans down farther, so his lips are nearly touching the shell of my ear. I feel his warm breath against my skin before he speaks. "Kayla's watching." I deflate. "Don't do that. Yes, I want her to think we are together, so she'll leave me alone. But don't think for a second this also isn't exactly where I want to be."

I don't know whether to believe his words under the scrutiny of his ex, but I let my body relax into his regardless.

I follow Kade around the party for a little as people try to talk to him. He's polite to everyone, but it's obvious he prefers to be alone rather than interact. We eventually eat food that King has laid out buffet style for people to grab. Then, when he starts talking to King, who I now know is his boss, I take that as my cue to excuse myself. I make my way back over to Willow who is sitting alone in the corner of the yard, picking flowers from the grass.

"What are you doing over here alone?" I ask her, dropping down onto the grass next to her. Thankfully, the weather has been nice today, no rain in sight, so the grass feels warm from the sun.

“The other kids are boring. All they want to do is talk about stupid TV shows, and my sister disappeared probably to her room forever ago.” She picks at the flowers, which I can now tell are daisies. I pick one out of the ground myself.

“Want me to show you how to make a flower crown?” I ask her. Her face immediately lights up and she turns her full attention toward me, giving me her answer without any words.

I sit with Willow for what I’m sure is a reasonable amount of time, but it feels like no time at all as we make the flower crown. I’m just placing it on her head when I look up to see Kade and King approaching us.

“Daddy, look.” Willow jumps up from the ground. “Lo made me a flower crown.” She smiles brightly at him and it’s obvious how much she loves him.

“You look beautiful, kid.” He lifts her up and places a kiss on her head on top of the crown.

“You about ready to go?” Kade asks, still looking down at me. I push up from the ground, brushing the grass off my dress.

“Yup, all ready.” I smile at him. “Thanks for having me,” I say to King, who nods his head politely in response. I squat down once more to give Willow a hug as King drops her to the ground.

“Am I going to see you again?” Willow asks, looking between me and her dad. I’m silent for a second, not sure how to respond. I like Willow and I hope that I’m able to see her again, but I also don’t want to be presumptuous.

“Yeah, you will, kiddo,” Kade answers for me before I have the chance. I look up, expecting to see his attention on Willow, but again it’s on me. It feels like it’s always on me and my heart inflates a little at the thought.

After saying goodbye, I let Kade guide me out of the backyard. His hand lying gently but firmly on my lower back, so low that if he moved it even an inch lower, it would be on my ass. Heat courses through my veins at the thought and goose bumps rise on my skin.

The car ride home is silent. Neither one of us wanting to acknowledge what happened, almost happened, is happening. He pulls up to my apartment building, finds a spot and puts the car in park. It's already dark out. The barbecue didn't start until five, but Demi and I didn't get there until almost seven. The hours went by quicker than I thought, making it already nine p.m. by the time we pull up to the building.

“So, what do my fake girlfriend duties consist of now?” I try to lighten the mood before I leave the car. He chuckles under his breath, and I breathe a sigh of relief at the sound.

“Well, as your fake boyfriend, I should probably at least walk you to your door.” He turns off the car and gets out. He comes around my side and opens the door.

“Such a gentleman,” I tease.

“Sometimes,” he mumbles, closing the door behind me and following me into the building.

His hand finds my lower back again as he ushers me up the stairs to the second floor. A part of me, inside, screams at the small gesture, knowing that there aren't any eyes on us at the moment. That it's specifically for me.

“You know, if your ex really is a crazy stalker, we should probably be seen together in public if she's ever going to leave you alone,” I say as we reach the door to my apartment. I'm not sure why I say it. I should be doing everything I can to get farther away from him, yet all I want to do is get closer. I turn around to face him, leaning my back against it instead of opening it.

“You're probably right,” he says. “Give me your phone.” I pull the small device out of my purse and unlock it before handing it to him. I watch as he saves his number before dialing himself to make sure he has mine.

“So now what? You just text me?” I ask as he hands me back my phone.

“Yeah, Lo. I'll text you.” He chuckles and the sound is like liquid gold running through my veins. He moves to walk

away, heading toward the stairs. But just before he reaches the door, he turns around to look at me one more time.

“Oh, and just for the record, when I do text you, it’ll have absolutely nothing to do with Kayla. Only you.” He smirks at the blush now running up my chest and cheeks. “Go inside, Lo.”

I turn around without another word, closing and locking the door behind me.

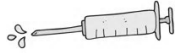
I move like I’m in a trance. Checking on Demi, showering, and getting ready for bed. “Only you” is what he left me with. I don’t know whether to be elated or terrified. I crawl into bed, grabbing my phone to plug it into the charger, when I see a text lit up on the screen.

Kade: Sweet dreams, baby girl.

I smile at the text, plugging my phone in without responding. For the first time in as long as I can remember, I feel a happiness that I may want to try and keep. Now I’m definitely terrified.

CHAPTER

TWELVE



Logan

“I’m confused,” Demi says from where she sits on the couch, a bowl of popcorn bigger than her head in her lap. “You’re going on a date.” She pauses for effect. “With my brother?”

“A fake date,” I explain. “He’s just trying to convince his ex-girlfriend that he’s moved on so that she leaves him alone.”

“And the role of fake girlfriend is being portrayed by you, his little sister’s roommate, and best friend, because?” she asks. “I don’t really care what you guys are doing. It just seems strange that you went from me having to beg you to go to the barbecue last week because his ‘presence irritated you,’ and now you’re going on a date with him.”

“Fake date,” I clarify again.

“Oh, fuck off. You get my point.” She looks at me, waiting for an explanation that I honestly don’t have for her.

I’m just as shocked as she is that I agreed to this. The day after the barbecue, it was radio silence from Kade following his good-night text. I had never texted him back, not knowing what I would even say if I wanted to respond. When a second day went by without communication on either of our ends, I figured that maybe he was over the idea and was dealing with it on his own. Then on day three, he finally texted me. Just a simple “what are you doing Wednesday night?”

Wednesday being my day off work, I barely thought about it before replying that I wasn't busy. He replied, saying he'd pick me up at six and to dress casually. I immediately started freaking out, completely forgetting why I even agreed to this in the first place. Now here I am, still freaking out, about to go on a date with my best friend's brother. *Fake date, Logan.*

I'm dressed casually like he told me to be. I have on a pair of light-wash, straight-leg boyfriend jeans that are cute but also comfortable, a white crop top with flounce sleeves and a sweetheart neck, and white high-top Converse. My hair is in its natural waves and my makeup is a light, natural look as well. I look decent enough without looking like I tried too hard.

"Wrong place, wrong time." I shrug, answering Demi's question the only way I know how to.

"When was the last time you've even been on a date, Lo?" I think back to the last date I went on, knowing it was an embarrassingly long time ago. Dating has always seemed like a waste of time to me. There's either awkward small talk while you try to get to know someone or an asshole man taking you out to drinks hoping you get wasted enough to consider sleeping with him.

I'm not good at long-term relationships. Between work taking up a good chunk of my time and the man I'm with expecting me to open myself up to him, something I never do, it just doesn't work out for me. Sleeping around isn't my thing either though. It's hard for me to want to have sex with someone who I barely know and am just not comfortable with. So lately I've just given up on the idea of men altogether.

"I don't know, six months ago, maybe?"

Demi gives me a look as if she doesn't believe me.

"Okay, so maybe eight months ago? I don't know, Dem. What do you want me to say? It clearly wasn't very memorable."

"Interesting," is all she says before there's a loud knock on our apartment door. I turn around, ignoring her and head

toward the door. "Have fun on your date," she yells behind me. "Be safe. I'm not at the fun aunt stage in my life just yet."

"Fake date, Demi. There will be no fucking," I yell back at her.

"Whatever!" she shouts as I open the door. An arrogant smirk sits on Kade's face as I push my way through, not giving him a chance to come inside before locking it behind me.

"No fucking, huh?" His eyes look up and down my figure. I fight the urge to shiver as I feel goose bumps rise over every inch of flesh they touch.

Having Kade's eyes on me makes me feel a way I've never experienced. I've felt comfort from a man's stare. I've felt anger. I've felt panic. I've felt heat. But with him, it's like I feel everything all at once. It's overwhelming and also not enough.

"That's a shame," he says. I feel my cheeks heat as I look away from him.

Fake date, fake date, FAKE date.

"So where are we going?" I ask, following him as he heads toward the stairwell.

"You hungry?" he asks, opening the stairwell door for me.

"Thank you," I say, stepping through, "Sure. I could eat." My stomach growls loudly just as the words leave my mouth and I hear him chuckle behind me. I've barely eaten all day due to the nerves over going out tonight, and I'm now starting to realize that was definitely a mistake.

"I can see that," he says, and I die of embarrassment a little bit more.

"Shut up," I scold him, which only makes him laugh more. I follow him down the stairs and out toward the parking lot. He stops in front of a large motorcycle and looks back at me.

"Absolutely not," I say. "You had a car last time you drove me home. Where's the car? Because there's no way I'm getting on that death machine."

“My car is at home in my garage, and this death machine is a Kawasaki Ninja H2.” He gestures to the bike. It’s black and gray with a hint of green. It’s massive and terrifying. “It’s nice out tonight, a perfect time to ride it. You’ll be fine.” He unlocks a helmet from where it hangs on the small attachment toward the back of the bike.

“Come here,” he says.

As usual, my body obeys him. I walk toward where he stands in front of the bike before my mind has a chance to catch up. He slides the helmet onto my head, a heavy weight settling in where it rests. He reaches under my chin to tighten the straps, his fingers brushing my skin in the process. He clips it in and lets his fingers slowly trail down my neck before removing them. I don’t know whether the movement is deliberate, but it feels like every touch from him intoxicates me a little further.

He moves around the other side of the motorcycle, unlocking a second helmet and fastening it on himself. He swings a leg over the beast, scooting all the way forward before looking back and reaching out his hand toward me. I hesitantly move toward him, gently placing my hand in his.

“Step here.” He grasps my hand tighter while gesturing where to step to haul myself up behind him. I do as I’m told, swinging my leg over the bike except with about a quarter of the grace that he had when doing so.

Once seated, my body immediately slides forward. My inner thighs mold to the back of his and my chest presses tightly against his back. My body tingles from the contact. I go to scoot back slightly, trying to put a sliver of distance between us, but his hand grasps my thigh, prohibiting me from moving even an inch.

“Stop that,” he says. “I like you close to me.” I don’t respond as he grabs my hands, wrapping them tightly around his waist. He is wearing jeans with a black T-shirt that is thin enough that if I were to move my hands, I’m sure I could feel each individual ripple of muscle lining his stomach. That

thought alone does nothing to help the steady heat I feel coursing through my body at our closeness.

“Hold on tight,” he says, and I nod my head before realizing he can’t see me. “I’m serious, Lo. You hold on tight and do not let go for any reason, understand?”

“Yes, I got it.”

He turns the key, and a loud rumble fills the air leaving no more room for conversation. I can feel the vibrations from the engine running through my body. I don’t know whether I’m shaking from the engine or fear.

As someone who has been in a life-and-death situation before, I know the feeling of adrenaline well. It’s not something I seek in my life anymore. In fact, I’d go as far as saying that it’s something I actively avoid. I tend to associate it with the same fear I felt eight years ago. Add that in with the fact that I’ve treated more motorcycle crash victims than I can count, and it’s safe to say that I’m on the verge of a panic attack.

Strangely, the only thing grounding me is the warmth of Kade’s body pressed against mine. I’ve never felt that sort of comfort from a man before. That just his body against mine has the ability to make me feel safe. Like if anything were to happen, it would all be okay as long as he’s right here with me. I think it may be equally terrifying.

Kade pushes off the ground, accelerating forward and I instinctively hold him tighter. I’m most likely squeezing him to death, but if he’s in pain, he doesn’t complain. I squeeze my eyes shut as we propel out of the parking lot and onto the open road.

I stay that way for the first few minutes, then finally I open my eyes and look around. The views are nothing new, I’ve been driving through Seattle for years now. Yet it all seems different. I feel my heart pounding, the adrenaline that I try so hard to avoid in my day-to-day life. But it doesn’t scare me when I have Kade here with me. The fear from eight years ago fades and all I feel is freedom.

The wind crashes against our bodies as we drive fast but steadily through it. I shiver, but the coldness I feel seems so inconsequential to the rest of what is happening around me. As I slightly loosen my death grip on Kade, the fear that we could crash is still there, but it's small compared to everything else I feel. Pleasure, relaxation, exhilaration. Keeping my hold on Kade, I throw my head back, laughter falling from my lips. I feel liberated.

It's only about twenty-five minutes until we pull up to a small restaurant. As he parks, I find myself reluctant to get off the motorcycle that, before this, I had been so terrified to get on. It's strange, but with a single ride, it feels like a small part of me that had been broken so long ago begins to heal. I can feel the emotion clawing at my throat at the realization, but I swallow it down before it can break free.

Kade turns off the engine and guides me on how to get off the bike before getting off himself. He takes his own helmet off, locking it back onto the bike before unfastening my own and doing the same.

"So, how do you feel?" he asks, turning back to face me. With the adrenaline still coursing through my veins and little thought, I reply the only thing that comes to mind,

"Alive." He smiles at me, a real smile, and I can't help the giddiness that covers my own face in response.

"Where are we?" I ask, looking at the small restaurant in front of us. We aren't too far from my apartment, but I haven't been to this particular restaurant before. The parking lot is small but full. The restaurant itself looks small from the front, almost like a wooden shack, with string lights hanging all around it. It looks cozy. The sign reads "Chowder House," and although it looks older, it doesn't look worn in a bad way.

"Puget Sound." He gestures to the ocean sitting behind the restaurant. "Come with me." He grabs my hand in his own and I freeze for a second. Electricity zaps through my body from where our hands connect, and the feeling holds me hostage. Kade either doesn't notice or doesn't acknowledge my

reaction. He gently tugs me along with him up the wooden ramp and into the restaurant.

Inside looks exactly how I would've imagined it to. All wooden booths and tables, with a nautical theme. Wooden fish hang from the ceilings and a wooden bar sits in the center of the room. Most of the tables are filled, but it doesn't feel packed in an uncomfortable way. It's still relatively quiet, comfortable, like my original thought, cozy.

Kade speaks to the hostess, but I pay them no attention, too lost in observing my surroundings. There's a large jukebox in the corner that it sounds like the music is coming from. "Good Vibrations" by The Beach Boys plays softly but loud enough to hear throughout the restaurant. It fits the theme of the restaurant and adds to its overall ambience.

"Follow me," I hear the hostess say. Kade and I follow her toward the back of the restaurant and out another door onto what seems like a large patio. She sets our menus down on a small table for two before walking away. Kade pulls out my chair and I thank him before plopping down and looking over to my right. It's definitely a little cold out, but the patio is surrounded by heaters, so it isn't too bad.

"Wow." The word falls out of my lips. We are seated on a dock, the water of Puget Sound directly below us. I look over the railing right next to our table at the clear ocean blue. My first thought is that it reminds me of Kade's eyes. My second is that I shouldn't be thinking about Kade's eyes.

"It's pretty beautiful, huh?" I look over to find him staring directly at me.

"Yeah, it is," I reply, staring back at him. Our eyes say the words that neither of us care to speak. This doesn't feel fake. It feels real, and not only that, but it also feels completely and utterly right.

CHAPTER

THIRTEEN



Kaden

Fuck, she's beautiful. She called this a fake date, and in theory that's what it's supposed to be. But there's nothing fake about the way she makes me feel. I had originally planned on taking her to a sports bar near where I work, knowing Kayla frequents it. But then I saw her, and Kayla was the last thing on my mind.

She was scared to get on my bike, and when I first took off, she clutched on to me as though her life depended on it. Holding me as tight as she was, my only thought was that I didn't want her to let go. So, I kept driving until I saw the exit to where I knew Chowder House was, where the view is almost as beautiful as she is. Seeing her eyes light up as she looks out to the water makes me realize it was exactly the right decision.

"Is it strange that I hardly know anything about you, but at the same time, I feel like I've known you my whole life?" she asks, setting her elbow on the table and propping her chin up on her hand.

"No," I say. "I feel the same way." Although that could be because I do know things about Logan Hart. More than she'd possibly ever want to share with me. It reminds me of all the reasons I shouldn't be here, shouldn't be on this date with Logan. Even if it is supposed to be for show, both of us know that it's more. Just neither of us is willing to admit it.

But even with everything I do know about Logan, I know it all from someone else's point of view. Plus, it was the Logan from nearly five and a half years ago. I want to know who she is now, from her own mouth.

“Why emergency medicine?” I ask her. Her body tenses for a moment as if the question caught her off guard, but she covers it quickly. It seems like a common question she would be asked so her reaction confuses me, but I don't comment on it. I stay silent and leave room for her to answer.

“I want to be able to help people.” She hesitates. “It only takes seconds for a person to go from being perfectly fine to on the verge of death. I want to be the one that gives them a fighting chance at escaping it. To save a person's life when they're not strong enough to save it themselves.” She leans back in her chair, brushing her hair behind her ear with her fingers in a nervous gesture. “I just want to help people live, I guess. I don't know, it's stupid.”

“It's not stupid, it's admirable.”

She blushes, redness crawling up her chest, and I'm desperate to see just how far down it goes.

“You're a good person and a good doctor, Lo. See.” I place my hand on the table to show where she originally stitched me up. “Not even a scar.”

She grabs my hand from the top of the table, gently pulling it closer to her to further examine my palm. Her touch is delicate, gentle. It makes me want to see what it would feel like to have her touching me all over.

“It looks good.” She softly caresses her thumb back and forth over where the gash originally was. She pulls her hand back suddenly, realizing she is lingering. “Tell me more about you.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Anything.” She pauses, thinking about what exactly she wants to ask. “You and Demi, why are you just now getting close?”

“You go straight for the hard-hitting questions, don't you?”

She shrugs.

“My father, if you can call him that, wasn’t a good guy to me or my mom, but specifically to my mom.” I pause, thinking about how much I’m willing to share. It seems unfair for me to hide anything at all, considering I, unknown to her, know all of the skeletons in her closet. Yet I still can’t force myself to share some of the darker secrets of the way I grew up. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

“My mom was already going through a difficult time of her own when he started cheating on her. Demi’s mom ended up getting pregnant and he took that as his second chance at the perfect family. He left us for them and rarely kept in contact. I knew about Demi growing up, but a part of me resented her for having the life I thought should’ve been mine at the time.” I look up to see Logan paying close attention to my every word. “I know now that I was wrong, and I regret not reaching out to her sooner, but I can’t change the past.”

She nods, understanding.

“Your dad sounds like a dick,” she says, and I laugh at the sound of the words coming out of her mouth.

“Yeah, he is,” I reply.

“But I think you have the wrong idea of how Demi grew up.” I sit up straighter, concern evident. My father is not a good man, but there was a catalyst behind his behavior with me and my mother. I didn’t think there was anything that would make him act in a similar manner toward Demi, and now with a simple sentence, Logan has me questioning everything I’ve ever thought.

“I don’t know all the details. Demi doesn’t talk about her family much. But I’ve just gotten the impression that it wasn’t all rainbows, butterflies, and happy families. I’m pretty sure she’s not your dad’s biggest fan either.” Her response calms me slightly. Demi not liking Alexander Rhodes isn’t the same thing as living the childhood I did.

“Alexander Rhodes is an easy person to hate,” I say.

“What about your mom?” she asks. “I’m assuming it’s her last name you took.”

“Yeah, I changed it once I was old enough.” I nod, confirming her theory. “My mom tried her best.” I end the discussion there, not willing to dive deeper into my mother and her struggles. She doesn’t push me further, looking down at her menu while I do the same.

The waitress comes and goes, taking our orders and bringing out food. There’s silence between us, but it’s not uncomfortable. I’ve never necessarily found silence uncomfortable, always preferring it over mindless words. Yet I find myself wanting to hear more of what Logan has to say. Even if just to hear how the words sound coming out of her mouth.

Everything I find out about Logan Hart draws me to her more. It’s like my head knew to stay away from her right from the start because, with every moment I spend in her presence, I want to spend another. She’s endlessly intriguing to me.

“I like it here.” She looks back out to the ocean as we wait for the check. “I don’t know why you brought me here though.”

“What do you mean?” I ask although I’m pretty sure I already know where she’s going with the question.

“The whole purpose of this date was supposed to be that Kayla would see us together, or someone who knows her would. I don’t think that’s happening here.” She gestures to the crowd around us, mostly filled with families and older couples.

I know that she’s right. The purpose of our going out was for Kayla to see us, confirming that I’ve moved on. But that’s not my purpose anymore. Any care I have about Kayla and her constant annoyances seems insignificant in the presence of Logan. It’s hard to focus on the past when it feels like my entire future is sitting directly across from me.

“We can go somewhere after this where I’ve seen her friends hanging out,” I say, knowing if I push too hard that I’ll

scare Logan away. “I just wanted you all for myself first.”

Her cheeks pink up and I realize that making her blush is quickly becoming one of my favorite things. The waitress comes with the check and Logan reaches for the small purse at her side.

“Don’t even think about it.” I leave no room for argument in my tone.

“It’s not even a real date, Kade. I can pay for myself,” she ignores me.

“Real date or not, I was the one who asked you here, I’m the one paying. And everything about tonight has been real, and you know it, Logan. Put your fucking money away.” She stays quiet after that, setting down her purse and waiting as I pay the bill.

I place my hand on her lower back as I guide her out of the restaurant and back toward my bike. The sports bar is the last place I want to go right now, not wanting to share my time with her for a minute. But with every second that passes, the struggle to not bend her over my bike and see if she wants me as desperately as I want her grows. Being alone with her is probably the best and worst possible case scenario right now.

“You ever been to The Alley?” I ask her as I fasten the helmet back onto her head. I bought the second helmet specifically for her yesterday since I normally don’t have anyone on my bike with me. For some reason, riding with her just seemed right. The idea of forcing her to be closer to me may have also passed through my head a time or two. The helmet is smaller than mine but still comically big on her, highlighting just how petite she is. It makes her look cute.

“No, but I’ve heard of it. Isn’t that the sports bar with all the pool tables in the back?” she asks, her voice slightly muffled beneath the helmet.

“Yeah, it’s right next to the tattoo shop I work at. Are you good with going there?” I fasten my own helmet onto my head before settling myself onto the bike.

“Sure, sounds fun.” She grabs my hand to help herself up behind me. Her body forms against my own. She wraps her hands around my center and my dick twitches from the simple touch. *Not fucking now*, I curse myself internally.

I start the engine and kick off before accelerating onto the open road. Logan doesn't have the same death grip on me as she did on the way here, but she still holds on tight. Having her this close to me feels intoxicating. It's a slow torture that I never want to end.

The ride to The Alley goes by quicker than I hoped it would. I help her off the bike and I'm left with an immediate coldness, an emptiness where her body once was. I undo both of our helmets before fastening them onto the bike.

“So is Kayla going to be here?” She looks up at me, what looks like nervousness in her eyes.

“I doubt it. Her friend Sabrina, the one who was at the barbecue with her normally hangs out at the bar here. Kayla rarely comes here, but Sab has a big mouth.”

“Okay, got it. I'm ready.” She pushes her shoulders back and stands taller. She looks like she's preparing to go to war. It's fucking adorable.

Adorable... who the fuck are you, Kade?

I grab her hand in mine, interlocking our fingers that feel as though they fit perfectly together. We walk into the sports bar and loud '90s rock music immediately fills my ears. “Smells Like Teen Spirit” by Nirvana blares in the back from where the pool tables are, while sports commentators can be heard on the televisions to the right opposite the large bar.

“Do you want anything to drink?” I ask Logan as we walk toward the bar. My eye catches Sabrina sitting with Trix in the corner, neither of them looking our way. I ignore them both, focusing all my attention on the girl by my side.

“No, I'm okay for now.” I nod my head and continue to guide her to the back of the building where a few high-top tables are scattered around the sides, and four large pool tables

sit in the center. There are people at most of the tables and two of the pool tables are being used, the other two empty.

“You ever played?” I ask as we walk up to one of the empty pool tables. A wide smile crosses Logan’s face and my heart beats a little quicker.

“You ready to be beaten by a girl half your size?” She laughs, pushing past me to grab a cue off the wall.

“No, and I don’t plan to.” I grab a cue of my own and start racking up the balls. Logan moves to the opposite side of the table just as I remove the triangular rack.

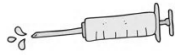
She leans over the table, lining up her cue with the cue ball to break the others. Her eyes meet mine, twinkling with mischievousness, just as she makes the shot. The balls scatter into a perfectly clean break, two striped ones falling into opposite corner pockets. Logan jumps back up to a standing position, a smile illuminating her entire face.

“We’ll see,” she says. She walks toward where the cue ball now is on the table to take her next shot. She lets her shoulder brush against my arm as she passes me, and I want to yank her back to feel more of her.

I watch her take her second shot, easily sinking the ball into the pocket and I find that I don’t care if she makes every shot, beating me all night long. Just standing here and watching her, there’s happiness radiating off of every inch of her and it feels like it’s directly seeping into me. In this moment and possibly every moment to come, there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.

CHAPTER

FOURTEEN



Logan

I like the way his eyes feel on me. They follow my every move, not leaving me for even a second. He looks at me like the world could be falling apart around him and I'd still be the only thing he sees. It's definitely not how you look at someone who's supposed to be your *fake* girlfriend.

His comment from earlier still rings loudly in my head. "Everything about tonight has been real, and you know it." He was right. It is real. I just don't know if I'm ready to admit that to myself. I honestly don't know if I ever will be. Avoidance is my friend tonight. Who am I fooling? Avoidance is always my friend.

We're currently playing our second round of pool after I annihilated him in the first round. He didn't seem to care though. The last time I played pool with a man, he was so butt hurt that I beat him that he barely spoke to me on our drive home, and I never heard from him again. I wasn't mad about it. If anything, I found it laughable that being beaten by a woman had that harsh of an effect on his ego that he could barely look me in the eye.

Not Kade though. The second I sank the eight ball, his eyes lit up with pride, a soft smile adorning his face as he told me, "good job." It was like he was proud that I beat him, even if that meant he lost. My heart feels a little fuller at the thought.

Our conversation flows effortlessly as we play. It feels natural speaking to him, asking him questions and answering his in return. I've found out that he's been drawing since he was a kid, so the transition to tattoo artist just felt right. He doesn't have a favorite color, saying each color holds equal importance in his life when it comes to art. He played football throughout high school, but more so for the love of the sport than the popularity aspect since he preferred the shadows. He was a mediocre student, he did enough to pass, but college was never an option for him, so he never saw the purpose of doing more.

He also told me that his biggest fear in life is becoming his father. He changed the subject quickly after that though, so I don't think he meant to let that bit of information slip. He's asked me similar questions, and I answer them easily, except for my biggest fear. I told him it was clowns. He looked at me like he didn't believe me for a second but didn't push me further. My true biggest fear is something I don't know that I'll ever be able to put into words, and now is certainly not the time to try.

"So, what about your family?" Kade asks, just as I hit the ball and take my shot. The ball goes wide, missing the second ball by an inch.

"What about them?" I ask. My family is a subject I normally avoid at all costs. With the skeletons of my past being directly tied to them, it's not an easy topic to discuss.

"Well, you got all my family secrets earlier, so now I want yours," he says. "What was your family like?"

"Normal, I guess." I hesitate, trying to think about what I'm willing to share. "My mom had us young and was a single mom. She was also a full-time nurse, so she worked a lot to make sure we had a good lifestyle. She can be a little self-involved at times, but she gave up a lot of her life to raise us alone when she didn't have to. She's a good mom."

"She sounds like it," he says.

"I don't talk to her as much as I should and we really only see each other a couple times a year when she can make it out

here to visit me. We're both just busy," I lie. I'm sure I could make more time to talk to her, or I could find time to visit her, but I don't. She reminds me of the past, of Lennox, and I know it's the same for her. That doesn't mean I don't love her, though.

"I've never met my father. He bailed before I was born and never cared to try to show up after. Not much of a story there." I add on.

"His loss," Kade says, and I shrug. I know he's right, but I'm also the one who was denied a father, so it kind of feels like my loss too. "Didn't you also mention having a sister?" I internally curse myself for letting that information slip at the hospital. On the one hand, it's nice to know he was listening to me enough to remember it. On the other hand, I hate that he remembers it.

"Yeah, I had a twin sister." I pause, swallowing around my suddenly dry throat. "She passed away."

"That must have been hard."

My eyes snap toward his at the response. It's refreshing. When you admit that someone close to you has died, the immediate response of most people is that they're sorry. I've always hated that response. It's to no fault of the people who say it, I understand that they're just trying to be polite. But what do they have to be apologizing for? It's not their fault that she died. Frankly, I don't know who exactly to place the blame on when it comes to Lennox. Her? Myself? The cruel world we live in? Maybe a mixture of all three.

"Yeah, it was," I answer Kade, the honest truth flowing from my lips.

"What was she like?" The question catches me off guard. Death makes people uncomfortable. It's a universal truth. So, when the topic of someone dying comes up, most try to run away from it as quickly as possible. I don't remember the last time I talked about Lennox or even a time that I wanted to. But with Kade's eyes on me, urging me to share the piece of myself that has been missing for so long, the words easily find their way to the surface.

“She was the best person I knew.” I can’t help but smile as I think about her. Not about her death or what she went through at the end. But who she was before it all. “She was the opposite of me. Wild, carefree, a little bit insane.” I laugh. “She was the more outgoing of the two of us, constantly dragging me to new places and to meet new people. Pushing me out of my comfort zone. She was the crazy to my calm. We balanced each other out. She wasn’t just my twin, but my best friend too.”

“It sounds like she was a really good person.” He looks at me like he understands the inner turmoil I feel when it comes to Lennox. The feeling of losing someone in a way that’s so completely out of your control, but it feels like something you could’ve fixed at the same time. “You must really miss her.”

“Yeah, I do.” The answer feels bittersweet. I miss Lennox with all my being, and I would do just about anything to have her standing next to me right now. But it wouldn’t be the same. Because as much as I love her, there’s a part of me that hates her too. For being so thoughtless, so selfish. For the part of me that died when she did. “Anyway.” I clear my throat. “Your turn.” I nod my head toward where the cue ball sits.

Kade moves over to take his shot, not questioning my abrupt change of subject. He hits the solid ball into the side pocket and moves to take his second shot.

“Kayla told me you had a new girlfriend, but I didn’t believe her. Figured she was talking crazy again.”

“Sabrina,” Kadensays, moving to stand by me. I put the name to the face, realizing this is his ex’s best friend from the barbecue. She’s gorgeous, just like her friend. She’s taller than me, although she still looks short compared to Kade. Her dark-brown hair is shorter, barely hitting her shoulders and has purple streaks peeking their way through her messy waves. She has light-brown eyes that are currently scrutinizing me. Kade feathers his hand lightly across my lower back before placing it on my opposite hip. He gives it a gentle squeeze, the gesture calming some of my nerves that are threatening to eat me alive. “This is Logan.”

“Nice to meet you.” She nods her head toward me, her expression skeptical.

“Hey, I’m Trix,” the woman standing next to her says. She’s closer to my height, covered in tattoos with long, light-pink hair. She also has piercings in pretty much every part of both ears and has a ring on the side of her nose. “I work with Kade at Blackheart.”

“Nice to meet you both.” I smile at the two of them. All of the natural comfortableness I’ve felt being with Kade vanishes and I suddenly feel like a fraud. Putting on the performance of my life in order to make these two women believe that Kade and I are actually together.

It felt like we were a real couple all night long until the reminder of why I was on this date in the first place was directly in front of me. Now, I don’t know how to feel. Does their presence truly erase everything I felt tonight, along with everything he said? With them standing in front of us, it becomes difficult to decipher whether Kade’s touching me because he wants to or because he has to.

Sensing my discomfort, Kade moves farther behind me. He moves his arms around to cross over my stomach, pressing my back to his front. His thumb rubs featherlight circles around my lower stomach and my breath catches in my throat. I keep my face neutral, trying to mask the effect he has on me.

Having him this close brings me right back to where we stood in my kitchen only weeks ago. The ache for him to slide his hand lower now stronger than ever. My body feels on fire, the only cooler being the two women standing in front of us. Is this for them or solely me?

Kade lowers his head so that his lips are directly next to my ear. “Only you,” he whispers so softly I can barely make out the words. The same words he said to me the night this all began, but this time I think I’m starting to believe them. Suddenly the coolness is gone, the flames burn stronger, and I’m in desperate need of him to soothe them.

“You know Kayla won’t let him go that easily,” Sabrina says suddenly, snapping me out of my Kade-induced haze.

“You’re the first person he’s been with seriously since her that she knows of. In her eyes, he’s still hers.” She doesn’t say the statement in a rude manner, just as if she’s stating facts. With Kade’s body pressed against mine and his words still fresh in my mind, a new sense of confidence washes over me.

“She can’t let go of what she’s already lost,” I say, conviction in my tone. “Kade is his own person and can make his own decisions. But from where I’m standing, he sure seems a lot more like mine.” Kade hugs me a little tighter toward him and I tilt my head up to see pride shining in his eyes. I’ve never felt the need for validation from a man, but I won’t lie and say getting it from him isn’t one of the best feelings I’ve ever felt.

“Yeah,” he says, his voice low and gravelly. “I’m definitely all hers.” Our eyes stay locked on each other’s. A million unspoken sentiments passed between them. His eyes are easy to get lost in, making me forget we aren’t alone and that the words aren’t only for my ears.

The clearing of Sabrina’s throat forces me to pull my stare away from his. A wide smile spreads across Sabrina’s face and it confuses me for a moment. She must see the confusion on my face because she laughs.

“I’m happy for you, Kade.” She smiles at him. “You’re good for him,” she says to me, and even though her opinion means little to me, I still feel a sense of satisfaction that she feels so. “See you both around.” She loops her arm through Trix’s, who waves at us both before walking back the way they came from.

“You good?” Kade asks, spinning me around in his arms so I’m facing him. I tilt my head up at him and nod.

“Yeah, I am.”

“Good.” He brushes my hair behind my ear, his hand curving around my face to hold it. He looks at me like he wants to kiss me. I’m sure I’m looking at him like I’m begging to be kissed. But instead, he pulls away. He walks around the table back to where he was going to take his second shot. He

leans over, sinking it into the pocket before looking up at me with a smirk on his face. “Can’t let you beat me twice.”

I smile at him. I couldn’t care less about the game right now. My mind wanders to how it felt to be in his arms, searching for ways to make it happen again. Kade makes me feel things I’ve never felt. I watch him walk around the table, leaning over to take his next shot. His muscles stretch against the fabric of his shirt, his eyebrow pinches in concentration, and I think I’m beginning to understand Kayla’s obsession. In fact, I think I may be starting to have my own.



Kade won the second game of pool. It was close, with me only one ball behind him, but he beat me fair and square. I found out he actually lives in the loft space above Blackheart Ink, which was right next to The Alley. So, I offered to get an Uber home considering it was way out of his way for him to drop me. He looked at me like I was ridiculous for even suggesting the option and proceeded to strap the helmet onto my head.

The ride home isn’t long, riding behind him feels more natural each time I do it. It feels as though the closer we get to my apartment, the more tension I feel about what will come next. Would we speak after this? Do we go on more fake dates? Does he want to go on a real date? Was this a real date? Not knowing what to expect has anxiety creeping over every inch of my body until I feel like I’m about to explode.

Which is exactly how I feel now as I walk up the stairs of my building, Kade following right behind me. I turn around

and he stops in front of me, close enough to touch. I tilt my head to look up at him.

“Thank you for tonight, it was fun,” I say, and he stays quiet. The words feel minuscule to how important the night truly was. He stares at me, and it feels like his eyes are searching mine. For what, I’m not sure.

“I don’t know what to do,” I admit, wringing my hands together in front of my stomach awkwardly. The man who makes me feel an immense sense of comfort just by being here with me also makes me feel like I’m crawling out of my skin with nerves.

“What do you want me to do, Logan?” He moves closer to me, and my breaths come out a little quicker. It’s the question of the century, what do I want him to do?

Everything, and all of it to me.

I bite my lip between my teeth, chewing on it in the same nervous habit I’ve had for as long as I can remember. He lifts his thumb, dragging my bottom lip out of their hold, and rubs over where my teeth were just assaulting.

“*Fuck*, these lips.” He watches the movement while I watch him. “All of the things I want to do to them.” Everything in me is begging for him to follow through. Desperation for him clouds my every thought.

“These lips are part of my every fantasy.” His eyes, filled with desire, lock on mine. “How good they would look wrapped around my cock as I pumped into them like my life depended on it. Saliva dripping down as you choked on it.” He moves his hand to cradle my face, moving the other one to my lower back to yank me closer to him, forcing my body flush against his.

“I’ve jerked off to the fantasy too many fucking times. Those big green eyes of yours staring up at me, begging me to tell you how much of a good fucking girl you are as you swallow my cock whole. Fuck, baby girl, you’d be perfect.”

His words practically have me panting. My heart feels like it’s beating out of my chest, butterflies exploding in my lower

stomach as a throbbing pulse pounds just a little lower. A reaction that only he's ever been able to pull from me. A "yes" falls from my lips, my voice sultry, barely even sounding like my own.

"Fuck." The words are barely spoken before his lips crash against my own. A small gasp falls from my lips, and he wastes no time intertwining his tongue with mine. He devours my mouth, exploring every inch of it. I've never been kissed like this before.

People say a good first kiss feels like an explosion of fireworks, but this feels like more. Like the fireworks exploded and now I'm standing in the aftermath, the embers falling around me, burning all over in the most delectable way.

It feels like no matter how close I get to him, I'm not close enough. Everything in me is desperate for more. His lips are soft, yet the kiss is anything but. Kade is a dominating force that my body can't help but submit to.

His hands lower until they find their way to my ass, where he easily lifts me, my legs wrapping around his waist of their own volition. He grinds his hips against me, allowing me to feel exactly how much I'm affecting him, and a whimper falls from my lips. I grind myself against him farther as he presses my back against the apartment door. Our movements are clumsy, both of us desperate for relief.

His lips are swollen and red by the time he pulls away, I'm sure mimicking what mine must look like. He leans his forehead against mine, heavy breaths filling the space between us.

"Fuck, baby girl. You're testing my control," he says, still so close to me I can feel the words leave his lips. "I need to leave before I say fuck it all and follow you inside."

"You could." I look up at him. "Follow me inside." The words come out as a whisper, vulnerability shining through my tone.

"I want to, baby girl. So badly. But not like this. Not with my sister in the room next to yours, and not while you're still

questioning if this is real or not. Because it is real, Logan.”

“Okay.” I nod my head against his. He says the words and I find myself believing them.

“Okay,” he says, slowly sliding me down his body to set me on the ground. He presses his mouth to mine again, this time softer. His lips mold against my own for what feels like only seconds before he pulls away.

“Go inside, Logan.” He sounds tormented. Like if I don’t listen to him now, he’s not sure what he might do. With a final look, I leave him. I close the door to my apartment behind me and lock it before making my way to my room.

All the lights in the apartment are off and I peek my head into Demi’s room to find her asleep. I get ready for bed myself before crawling under the covers. I feel like I’m floating. I don’t know how, but I’ve somehow entered an alternate reality where a hot-as-sin man with a delectably dirty mouth wants me. I lived it, yet still, none of it feels real.

I don’t know if it’s because I’m looking to ground myself back down to reality or because tonight was the first time that I’ve talked about her in so long that it has me opening my night table drawer and reaching for Lennox’s journal. I suppose it could be a little bit of both as I turn the pages and open to entry number two.

FIFTEEN

ANGER

June 3, 2014

To whom it may concern,

I know, I know, I haven't written in a while. My therapist, along with everyone else in the world, has not been happy with my lack of progress, as they put it. But what does anyone expect me to write that I haven't already said? The only reason I'm doing this now is because Lo asked me, and after everything I've put her through these last few months, I figured I could at least give her this.

You see, I'm just so fucking angry. At everyone and everything. I'm angry at the disgusting human being who took the lives of so many. I'm angry at the system for having so many obvious signs and ignoring every single one. I'm angry at the police for not doing their job correctly. I'm angry at the school for not protecting us better. I'm

angry at the school board and their bullshit apologies. I'm angry at my mother for not knowing how to fix all the things that are out of her control. I'm angry at my therapist and her stupid exercises that do nothing more than piss me off. I'm angry at Emersyn for dying. I'm angry at Logan because she's okay and I'm not. And I'm angry at the fact that if Emersyn wasn't shot, if the shooter would've chosen to shoot left first instead of right, it would be Logan that I'd be grieving right now. I don't know if I even believe in God, but if there is a higher power out there, seriously FUCK you for allowing this to happen.

Lo went back to school about a month after the shooting. I didn't. I yelled at her for going back. How could she just go back and complete an assignment like

everything was normal when our best friend fucking bled out on the floor there? Yes, the building had been closed off and they put high gates around it, but you could still see it. The place where so much terror happened. Where I watched it happen. Lo has been bringing me my work home from school and I've apparently done enough to pass because I graduated.

Yup, that's what today was. My high school graduation. This was supposed to be the moment that Lo, Emersyn, and I were officially free from the hellhole that was high school. We were supposed to all walk out side by side with our diplomas and then go conquer the world together. But now, all of that is a distant memory.

I didn't want to go to graduation. Why would I? But today was the day my mother decided to put her foot

down and demand that I attend. I screamed at her, calling her names that I never in a million years would've said to her before this. Then Logan got involved. She told me she needed me there with her. I wanted to be understanding, but it only made me madder. What we fucking needed was Emersyn there. I didn't know how to say that though.

I felt myself begin to sweat, and my jaw clenched so tight I thought my teeth might crack. I clenched my fists, trying to control the storm that was raging inside of me.

But I couldn't. So, I picked up the vase of pretty blue flowers next to me and threw it at her head. She moved in time, and it shattered against the wall. My mother stared at me in shock, like she didn't recognize me or who I'd become. I don't blame her. Sometimes I don't either if I'm being honest. But of course, Logan, selfless as they

come, ignored the mess, walked over to me, and asked me if I was okay. I just threw a fucking vase at her and she was consoling me. I sucked it up and put on the cap and gown after that.

The graduation was around five hours long. Our class was a little under eight hundred kids, but that wasn't what added on the extra time. It was the families of those who died. Each of them accepting the diploma that their child should've earned. Sobs racking their bodies as they walked across the stage that their child was meant to.

They each spoke to us, but I couldn't handle that, so I tried not to listen. Especially when it came to Emersyn's parents. I didn't want to see them up on that stage, I wanted to see her.

I walked across the stage myself, but I didn't shake

anybody's hand. I grabbed my diploma, ignored them all and walked off the stage. I didn't even stop for the picture. Why would I shake hands with the school board members who seemed to barely care? In fact, I had to fight back the urge to not scream at them the same way I have been screaming at everyone else in my life for the last few months.

They only made one statement and it was in reference to compensation. Oh yeah, we all got compensated. They claimed they knew nothing could take away our pain, but they hoped the money would help.

Those who were present that day got a thousand dollars, those who were in the building but unharmed like me, got two thousand dollars, those that were seriously injured received anywhere from \$345,000 to \$770,000, and

there were the victims' families. Those who lost a child received about one million each. One million dollars. It seems like a lot, but was it really? Is that how much a child's life is worth? Is that how much my best friend's life was worth? I don't think so.

The second that the graduation ended, I ran to the car. The drive home was silent. None of us had any words to fill the air. What could we even say? This wasn't a joyous day. I don't know if any day would ever be joyous again. After I heard everyone's bedroom doors close, leaving me alone by the front door, I turned around and walked back out. I walked to the gazebo that had always been one of my favorite places. It was hidden off the beaten path, and I'd never seen anyone there before. It was just mine. Now, I wish I had brought Emersyn there.

It could've been ours.

I had lain in the center of the old wood, still in the white dress my mother had forced me to wear to the graduation. The wood was dirty, and it stained the dress. It felt right that the dress was now ruined. It matched the rest of my life. I lay there for about an hour before the rain started. I've always loved the rain, and that was something that hadn't changed through all of this.

The storm raged on for what felt like hours, but I didn't mind. When it showed no signs of stopping, I got up and walked straight into it. The rain drenched me from head to toe, but I wasn't cold. I could barely feel anything. I walked for miles in the rain with no destination in mind. Then the cemetery was right in front of me, and I realized that it was where I had been heading the entire

time.

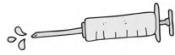
I had only been there once, for the burial, and I wasn't exactly in the right state of mind. But my body seemed to know exactly where it was going. The pull toward my best friend's grave only felt stronger the closer I got. Then there I was, staring at her name carved into stone.

I sat at Emersyn's grave and for the first time in a long time, the anger I'd felt for so long started to dissipate. A new feeling taking its place. Suddenly, I felt like pleading. To whom? I had no clue. But every ounce of me wanted to beg whoever would listen to give her back to me. I would do anything just to have her back. Even if only for a moment. For a chance to tell her I love her. For a chance to say goodbye.

That's how I feel now. Like begging. Pleading. Bargaining.

CHAPTER

SIXTEEN



Logan

“What the hell is going on with you and Doomsday’s brother?” Theo steps up to the counter next to me, where I’m on the computer filling out my final notes for the night. I’m at the end of a twelve-hour shift and do not have the energy to have this conversation right now. Although, I doubt that will stop Theo. I swear he’s like the energizer bunny, never getting tired.

“I don’t know,” I tell him, logging off the computer as I finish. It’s the best answer I have, considering I have absolutely no clue what the hell is going on with me and Kade. If he could figure it out, I’d love to be informed. One second, we are on a fake date to make his stalker ex jealous, and the next, he’s kissing the shit out of me and making my world explode right in front of my eyes.

“Doomsday bet me fifty bucks that you two would end up either fucking or falling in love. I of course told her no way since you tend to avoid all men like the plague. But then I hear not from you but from Doomsday yet again that you were out on a date with him.” He fake gasps as if it’s the scandal of the century. “Now, don’t get me wrong, I’m happy for you, Tink. You deserve a hot man to sweep you off your feet. But I need to know if I’m about to be out fifty bucks.”

“Again, I honestly don’t know, Theo.” I sigh, exhausted from a long shift and the constant worrying over this exact topic.

It's been a little under two weeks since our date, and Kade has texted me every day. Not anything life altering, just random conversation. He tells me good morning, asks me how I slept, and asks me about work while I do the same.

He's asked when he can see me again, and I haven't given him a definite answer. A part of me has just been overwhelmed by work and hasn't had the time. The other part is terrified to pick up where we left off. Do we even pick up where we left off? Do we pretend it never happened? Was it the heat of the moment or was it the real thing?

This is the exact reason I avoid men. I go on one fake/real date and here I am, with one invading my every thought and making me question my entire existence. I desperately want to see him again and explore what comes next, just as much as I want to hide from it all.

"How do you not know? Are you planning on letting him rail you until you forget that you haven't been fucked in over a year?"

"Theo!" I scold him, which he ignores and keeps going.

"Or are you planning on marrying the dude? It's not that hard, Tink. Make up your mind."

"It is that hard. I don't know what I want, and I don't know what he wants. I'm fucking confused, and terrified, and reeling from sexual frustration. So, all I have to give you right now is I don't fucking know." I'm out of breath by the time I finish. The outburst is out of character for me but also completely necessary for my sanity. The frustration that has been building up and seeping out into every aspect of my life, releasing with only a few sentences.

"Shit." Theo leans onto the counter and drops his head into his hands. Peeking through his fingers, he looks up at me. "I'm definitely going to lose my fifty dollars and you're totally going to marry him and have his babies." He groans.

"Who the hell are you marrying?" Ryan cuts into our conversation before I have a chance to respond to Theo. He

looks genuinely shocked and also a little bit annoyed. I see Theo's eyes light up and already know what's coming.

"Her new boyfriend," Theo says dreamily. "I didn't know Tink had it in her, but she went and bagged herself a six-foot-something, dripping-with-sex, gorgeous-ass man." Normally I'd correct Theo and refrain from letting him brag about Kade, especially when I don't even know where we stand. But this might be exactly what I need to finally get Ryan off my back. Plus, Kade is using me to get Kayla away from him anyway, so he can't get mad at me for it.

"I thought you were too busy and focused on work? That you weren't interested in dating?" Ryan asks me, his voice accusatory. As if no matter how many times I've turned him down, I'm now the one in the wrong for being with someone other than him.

"I am busy and focused on work," I say, doing little to hide my aggravation. "Kade and I just kind of happened."

"I'm sure you'll meet him at the gala on Saturday," Theo says, and I jerk my head toward him in panic. He just smiles.

Every year the hospital throws a fundraising event that, if you're not on call, your attendance is pretty much mandatory. They technically can't force you to go, but it's heavily looked down upon if you don't. The idea is for the investors and the rich people to talk to all of the doctors and residents in attendance in the hopes that we can convince them to open their hearts and their wallets. All of the money goes toward helping the hospital be the best it can be, which in turn helps the patients, so overall it's for a good cause. It's still a pain though.

Not only do I have a nine-hour shift during the day Saturday, but then only an hour to get ready before I have to be there, which means I have to get ready at the hospital. The event is at the hotel just across the street from the hospital itself so at least I don't have to go far.

I had always planned on going and suffering through the gala, but I was most definitely not planning on asking Kade to go with me. To be his fake girlfriend is one thing, but to have

him be my fake boyfriend is entirely another. Plus, the fake part is still to be determined at this point.

“I guess I will.” Ryan grinds his teeth like he’s trying to stop the vile comments that I’m sure he’s dying to say from leaving his mouth. He doesn’t say anything else as he walks away. I wait until he’s out of earshot before grabbing Theo’s arm and dragging him into a supply room. I look around to make sure it’s empty. Horizon hospital is a fairly large hospital with a good number of staff members, yet gossip spreads around here like we’re a small town. If you let the wrong person hear you, suddenly everyone knows your business.

“I can’t invite him to the gala.” I immediately turn to Theo after seeing nobody else is in the room. My voice sounds shrill, panicked, unlike me.

“Why not?” he asks. “You just text him and say I have to go to a hospital fundraising gala, want to be my date?” He says it like it’s the simplest thing in the world. “If he says no, offer him head. I can give you some tips if you want.”

I shove at him as he bursts into laughter.

“It’s not that simple. I don’t know where we stand, and I don’t know that I’m ready to find out. Also, we were supposed to all go together, no dates.”

“I’ll bring a date then. Oh, and maybe we can convince Gabby to bring that delicious roommate of hers as her date.” He smiles.

“You’ve met him?” I ask, surprised by the fact. Gabby is a private person. I’ve only been to her apartment twice since I’ve met her, and she doesn’t seem to like to combine her hospital life with her personal one. She also hates to burden people, and that’s exactly what her roommate seems to be. A burden.

“Yeah, I showed up at her apartment the other day to take her to breakfast. I asked you too, but you didn’t answer me.” He side-eyes me. “He seems like a total douche, but damn, he’s hot. He was in her kitchen, shirtless, gray sweatpants and all. I was practically drooling when Gabby dragged me out of

there.” He pauses as if he’s thinking. “If Gabby won’t take him, maybe I can.”

“I don’t understand why any of us have to take anyone. Why can’t we just go as a group as planned?”

“Because number one, that’s boring and I don’t do boring. Number two, you finally have a hot man, even if you aren’t sure if he’s fully yours yet, that you can use to get Dr. Ho Bag to leave you alone.”

He’s right in that Kade may finally force Ryan to leave me alone. The temptation to ask him for that reason alone is strong. But it also forces me to face reality, my absolute least favorite thing.

“Whatever, I’ll ask him. But if he says no or if he’s busy, then you have to drop it.”

Theo smiles, temporarily satisfied by my response.

“He won’t say no.” He drops a kiss on my head before walking toward the door. “By the way, we’re going dress shopping on Wednesday. I don’t trust you or Gabby with your own outfits.” He winks at me before leaving the room. I pull my phone out of my scrubs, open my texts with Kade and wonder what the hell I just got myself into.



“Come out of the dressing room,” Theo yells from outside the door. We are currently in a local dress store that Theo dragged Gabby and me to, claiming we needed new dresses for the gala. He also claimed that neither of us was capable of

picking out said dresses and he must do it himself. He's hard to say no to, so here we are.

"Theo, I am absolutely not wearing this." I look into the small dressing room mirror at the first dress he threw at me before shoving me in there. It's a long black dress missing about half of the fabric that it should have. It's a halter with an open back that crosses over my boobs, barely covering the little I do have. It opens back up to cross over my stomach into the long skirt that turns sheer at barely midhigh. I feel naked.

"If you hate it, I won't make you buy it. Just let me see it, Tink." He begs, and I cave, opening the door. He immediately starts fanning himself dramatically. "You look fucking hot, Tink. Tell her she looks hot," he says to Gabby, sitting next to him on the couch outside the dressing rooms. She looks at me helplessly.

He already picked out her outfit, a pale-pink dress with spaghetti straps that is tighter on top with a slight dip over her cleavage and flowy from her waist down, a single slit on one side that opens to her upper thigh. It took them over an hour to agree on it, but the final decision looked gorgeous on her.

"We're going to a hospital fundraiser, Theo," I remind him, gesturing to my barely covered body, which is clearly inappropriate for the event.

"Fine." He huffs. "Try on the next one."

I try on six more perfectly good dresses, all of which Theo says are too boring and just will not do. He called one of them horrendous, saying that it looked like something his great grandma would wear, right as one of the salespeople was walking by. From the dirty looks I've been getting from her since then, I can confidently say that she isn't our biggest fan. It's half an hour later and I'm trying on dress number seven. I know shopping is a treat and I should be grateful that I'm even able to afford a new dress, but I swear shopping with Theo is what nightmares are made of.

I carefully take the next dress that Theo picked out for me off of the hanger and slip it on. I look in the mirror and am surprised by how much I love it. It's the first one that feels like

me. It's a pale-blue halter dress with thicker straps that leads into fabric that crosses, parting into a *V* around my chest. It's tight enough to push up my cleavage but in a classy way. It accentuates my waist, the fabric clinging to my every curve until the bottom, where it lies loose and flowy. The left side has a slit that hits about midthigh where the fabric is all ruched together. It's simple yet elegant. I walk out of the dressing room and Theo immediately gasps while Gabby smiles softly at me.

"That's the one." He jumps up from his seat and proceeds to twirl me around. "You look stunning. Kade isn't going to know what hit him."

I roll my eyes at him.

"You look really beautiful, Lo," Gabby speaks up.

"Thanks, Gabs." I smile at her. "Does this mean we can be done?" I look at Theo with pleading eyes.

"Yes, we can be done. Go change and we'll pay and get out of here before I get murdered." He nods his head toward the saleswoman who's still side-eyeing him. I laugh at him as I walk away.

After changing back into my normal clothes and grabbing the now hung-up dress, I walk back out to the area where Theo and Gabby, also holding her dress, are waiting for me. My phone buzzes as I follow them to the register. I let Gabby in front of me to pay first and look down at my phone, reading the text lit up on my screen.

Kade: I'll meet you outside the hospital tomorrow at 5:45. See you then, baby girl.

I feel the blush rise to my cheeks as it does every time he calls me that. I've never been affected by terms of endearment before, in fact, most of the time I find them cringeworthy. But with him, I can't help the way my heart beats a little faster every time the words leave his mouth.

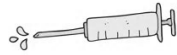
I look behind me to see Theo looking down at the text over my shoulder, then up at my heated face with a knowing grin.

“Oh, tomorrow is going to be so much fun. Better answer him, baby girl.” He chuckles.

Fuck me.

CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN



Logan

I'm fucking late. It's five forty, I'm supposed to be outside in five minutes, and I'm not even dressed yet. I hate being late. Hate, as in it makes my insides tighten, my heart beat faster, and my anxiety shoots through the roof. Although the reason why I'm late definitely isn't my fault.

Just as I was finishing up my shift, there was a little girl who had wandered out of her bed, so I of course walked over to help. I walked over and bent down to ask her where she came from. She opened her mouth to answer, but projectile vomit came out instead, all over me. I can't say it's the first time it's happened and I'm sure it won't be the last. It wasn't the poor little girl's fault, but it still put a wrench in my schedule, nonetheless.

I had to help clean her up and get her back to her room, where luckily there was already a nurse there ready to take the situation out of my hands. It was already 5:25 by the time I rushed into the shower and quickly fixed my hair and makeup.

I throw everything back into my bag, shoving it into my locker, before slipping the dress on. I pair it with simple nude strappy heels and move to look in the mirror one more time. My hair falls in loose curls down my back, and my makeup is more than I normally wear but still light with all neutral colors. I forgot a jacket that matches, but I'll be inside for most of the night, so I should be fine.

My eye catches on the dainty silver chain around my neck, the small *L* hanging from it. My heart feels a little emptier as I stare at it. Nobody questions the charm, assuming it stands for Logan. It doesn't. I never wore jewelry when I was younger, not liking the way it felt to have it on all the time. But Lennox loved it. Specifically, this necklace. She got it when she was just a kid and never took it off. Until she did.

The day after she died, I found her journal. I opened it up to the first page, and the necklace fell right out. As if it was waiting for me. I don't like jewelry. But I haven't taken it off ever since.

I look down at my phone to check the time, almost forgetting how late I am for a second. "Shit," I say, grabbing my purse and running out the door. It's 5:54 by the time I get outside and see Kade standing there, waiting for me. I practically run up to him.

"I'm so sorry I'm late. A little girl threw up on me, but she also threw up on herself, so I had to clean her up, and then she was lost. Then I had to shower because I was covered in vomit, and I lost track of time and now we're late and you've been waiting here for me and I'm never la—"

His lips press against mine, effectively shutting me up.

My mouth instinctually moves against his, my body pressing against him as he pulls me closer. It's not a long kiss, not dominant or fiery like the last one. It's gentle but also urgent. It's sweet but sinful as his tongue dances against mine. It's perfect. He pulls away and I immediately feel the loss.

"Why'd you do that?" I ask, looking up at him. He has a small smile on his face, an emotion I don't recognize from him in his eyes.

"Because I wanted to."

I don't respond, unsure what there even is to say.

"You look beautiful." It's not the way he says it but the way he looks at me that makes me feel exactly that.

"Thank you." I smile up at him. "You look really great also," I say, and I mean every word of it. He's wearing an all-

black suit that looks as if it's perfectly tailored to him. All of his tattoos are covered except for the ones that peek out at his wrists from under his sleeves. Most people may want tattoos covered for a formal event, but I find that I miss seeing them on him. As though they're an extension of him and without them, a part of him is missing.

His face looks like he shaved a day or so ago, light stubble covering it in a way that only makes him look hotter. His hair is still a beautiful mess on top of his head, as if he's run his hands through it just the right number of times. Even dressed like a gentleman, he still exudes a roughness that only adds to his appeal.

"You ready to go?" He holds out his hand for me and I intertwine my fingers with his like it's the most natural thing.

"I'm ready."



I was not ready. Not for all of these people, not for the fake smiles, and definitely not for the death glare from Ryan across the room. As if he has any right. And people wonder why I've avoided men for so long.

"Is there a reason the frat boy over there looks like he wants to kill me?" Kade whispers against my ear. His voice sounds somehow deeper in the hushed tone. A small laugh falls from my lips at him referring to Ryan as a frat boy. Although, I have no doubt he was.

"Not a valid one," I say, and he looks at me to continue. "He sleeps around the hospital. A lot. He's been begging to

take me out for over a year now, claiming I'm different. He doesn't take rejection very well."

"Well, I guess I can't entirely blame him. Who would take rejection well when it comes from you?" He sounds so earnest as he says it, making me feel like more than just another woman in his orbit. I smile softly up at him.

"Fancy seeing you here, big brother." Demi's voice cuts through the moment and I turn to see her walking in front of us, her arm looped through Theo's.

"You were supposed to bring a date, that was the deal." I look at him accusingly. I'm not surprised. I should have figured any words out of his mouth were half-truths to convince me to bring Kade here.

"I did bring a date. I brought Doomsday." He smiles brightly at me. "You never said it had to be a date I was attracted to."

"Hey!" Demi slaps him on the arm.

"Oh shush, you know you're hot. You just don't have the physical attributes I'm looking for." Theo waves her off, his eyes wandering toward Kade. "But you definitely do," he says, looking Kade up and down.

Most men would be uncomfortable by the perusal, but Kade surprises me when a deep chuckle leaves him.

"I'm assuming you're Theo. Dem's told me about you. Nice to meet you."

Theo contemplates him for a minute before a wide smile encompasses his entire face.

"I like him," he says, looking at me. "If you don't marry him, then I will."

I roll my eyes at him.

"Oh my gosh, Lo. We could be sisters!" Demi squeals. "You better not fuck this up," she says to Kade who looks more amused than anything else.

“Okay, this has been fun. Goodbye.” I grab Kade’s hand, pulling him toward an empty table. My cheeks feel like they’re on fire from embarrassment. Theo and Demi individually can be a lot to deal with, but together they’re the chaos of the century.

I go to apologize to Kade for their craziness, but the second we sit down, one of my attendings and his wife take the seats across from us. I introduce Kade and make polite conversation. At some point during the conversation, Kade slips his hand under the slit of my dress, placing it gently on my bare thigh. I have to fight the shivers that attempt to rack my body.

After about twenty minutes, they stand up and leave the table. I look over to Kade to find his attention already on me.

“Sorry about Theo and Demi and all the small talk. These events can be really tedious.” He looks at me, contemplating before he speaks.

“Do you do that a lot?” he asks and my brows furrow in confusion. “Apologize for things that are out of your control,” he clarifies. The question surprises me. I don’t think it’s one I’ve ever gotten.

“I don’t know.” I pause, thinking about it. “I guess,” I say, realizing that I do. But if I don’t apologize when things go wrong, who will? It seems like the natural thing to do.

“You don’t have to do that. Constantly apologize. Things will fall out of your control, life happens, but that doesn’t make it your responsibility to fix everything.” His words make me feel seen. His recognition of my need to right all the wrongs around me, my need for control. They make me feel vulnerable.

“Well, this looks cozy.” I look up to see Ryan leaning over the opposite side of the table. His words come out slurred, making it clear that he’s drunk. I mentally prepare myself for the shit show that’s about to ensue. “So, this is the fuckface you chose over me, huh?”

“Ryan, this is Kade.” The two men stare at each other, neither saying a word. Except where Kade looks relaxed, unaffected, Ryan looks outright pissed.

“Really, Lo? You decided to start fucking *this* over me?” He laughs darkly, referring to the tattoos peeking out from Kade’s sleeves. “I hope you know that she may be using you as a good fuck for now, but you’re not the type of guy she’ll end up with. When she’s ready to get married and have kids, it wo—”

“It won’t be with you, Ryan,” I cut him off. “So, you really need to stop thinking that it will be.” He looks at me with spitefulness I’ve never seen from him before.

“Whatever, Lo. You may be all high and mighty now, but just wait until he leaves you. Sluts like you are only good for one thing anyway. You’ll come to me begging just like the good-for-nothing whore that you are.” His words themselves don’t sting because I know just how untrue they are. The attention he’s drawing to me as his voice gets louder with every word does.

“That’s fucking enough,” Kade speaks, his voice low, filled with venom. “You can say whatever the fuck you want about me, but if another disrespectful word comes out of your mouth in reference to Lo, I swear to you it will be the last.”

“Is he fucking threatening me? Seriously, Lo?” Ryan looks at me as if I would dare defend him ever again after what he just said to me.

“Alright, that’s enough.” Theo swoops in, grabbing Ryan by the shoulder and pulling him away from the table. He looks back at me apologetically. I turn to Kade, ready to apologize, but he speaks before I can even open my mouth.

“Don’t you dare apologize for that shit.”

I can’t help the high-pitched laugh that bursts out of me. It doesn’t stop there though. The laughter keeps flowing until it feels like it may just turn into tears. I hold them back, clearing my throat to get a hold of myself. I don’t realize my leg is

anxiously shaking under the table until I feel the gentle squeeze on my thigh stopping it.

“Come with me.” Kade stands from his chair and pulls out my own. He guides me out of the large hotel ballroom, through the hallway and through a door on the opposite end.

It’s an empty ballroom about half the size of the one we were just in. There are only two emergency lights lit up on either side of the room, making the entire space barely bright enough to see each other. I hear the door close gently behind me and my nerves heighten at the realization that I’m alone with him.

“You’re anxious,” he says, pulling my attention toward him. He’s right, I am, and his closeness doesn’t help with that.

“That tends to happen when half of the people you work with hear your coworker call you a good-for-nothing whore.”

He steps closer, his hand coming up to cup the side of my face.

“That the only reason?” he asks as his other hand trails up my bare leg through the slit in my dress. His touch is featherlight, yet it feels like it’s searing through my skin. “Do I make you nervous, Lo?”

“No, you don’t.” I shake my head.

“You’re a bad liar, baby girl.” He smirks down at me.

“Apparently only when it comes to you.” His hand trails higher until I feel it lifting the dress itself. “What are you doing?”

“Do you trust me?” he asks, his hand pausing on my mid thigh. I look into his eyes, and I don’t know when it happened or why, but the single word falls breathily from my lips.

“Yes.”

Before I can even comprehend what’s happening, his lips are pressed against mine in a brutal kiss. There’s no gentleness to be found, only firmness, power, passion, possession. His tongue presses against the seam of my lips and I don’t hesitate

to allow him deeper. He kisses me like he'll never have the chance to do so again.

His mouth leaves mine only to lick and suck a pathway down my neck. He somehow finds the perfect mixture of rough and gentle as he devours every inch of me. Each spot his lips kiss burns from his touch, then cools from the cold ballroom air with the loss of it. The sensation is overwhelming. I can't hold back the breathy moan that falls from my lips.

"Kade, please." I feel the words leave my lips, but I'm so caught up in the heat of the moment that I don't even know what exactly I'm begging for.

"Hold on to me, baby girl." He whispers against my ear before his lips find mine again. I do as he says, wrapping my arms tightly around his neck. His hand continues its journey up my thigh until he reaches the place that has been desperate for his touch since the first time I laid eyes on him.

His hand wraps around the side of my lace panties and I think he's going to remove them until I hear a snap and feel them fall to the floor. I pull away from his kiss, looking up at him, shocked at the fact this man just ripped my underwear clear off my body.

"I'll buy you new ones," he says, and his mouth slams back to mine. His fingers move back down to my now bare center. I feel a rush of air leaving me as he gently slides them through my folds, brushing them ever so lightly over the bundle of nerves throbbing for his attention.

"Fuck, baby girl." He strokes his fingers through my wetness before pushing a single digit inside of me. "Do you hear how fucking wet you are for me?" He slides his finger in and out slowly, the sounds of my arousal loud in the silence of the empty ballroom.

He pushes a second finger inside me, stretching me further. He continues to move them in and out of me at a torturously slow pace. I moan against his lips and the sound seems to be his undoing as he begins to move faster, rougher, deeper.

“So fucking tight. So fucking perfect,” he whispers against my lips as more unintelligible words leave my mouth. “That’s it, baby girl. Keep clenching that perfect pussy around my fingers, squeezing me so fucking tight. I told you I’d have you gushing all over my fingers, pretty girl.”

I feel myself clench harder around him as his words deepen the fire burning in my core. Nothing has ever felt this good. Sex has always been okay for me, but I never craved it how I felt I should. I never thought I needed it. Clearly, I’ve never been with a man like Kade. A man who knows how to make a woman feel like she’s fucking flying. I don’t think I could ever get enough of it.

His fingers continue to move in tandem inside of me as his thumb settles onto my clit. He expertly circles it until I feel like my legs are going to give out, making me realize why he told me to hold on in the first place.

“Kade.” His name slips from my lips with a rush of air as his fingers curl inside me, finding that single spot that makes the world go blurry in front of me. He picks up his pace even more, hitting the sensitive spot inside me with each and every thrust of his fingers.

“That’s my good girl. Show me how fucking beautiful you are when you come for me.” His words throw me over the edge as my head falls back in a breathless scream and I explode around his fingers. He doesn’t stop until he’s positive he’s wrenched every ounce of pleasure from me, then he eases his fingers out of me. Every part of me is left feeling numb and tingly. I’ve had an orgasm before, but never one quite like this. It feels fucking extraordinary.

I look up to him, not knowing what to say or how to feel. Embarrassed? Thankful? Satisfied? Or instantly turned on again as I watch him bring the two fingers that were just inside me up to his lips. His tongue darts out before he closes those perfect lips of his around them sucking them clean. A deep moan rumbles through him and I stand there speechless, watching the scene play out in front of me.

“Do you feel better?” he asks, wrapping his arms around my waist, pulling me close to him.

“Yeah, I do.” The words come out as a whisper, filled with vulnerability.

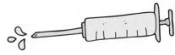
“Good.” He presses a soft kiss against the top of my head before pulling away. “Now, we could go back to the fundraiser, talk to some more people and pretend the flush on your face is from too much to drink”—the flush deepens—“or we could go back to my loft now and finish what we started?” He looks down at me with so much heat I feel it against my skin. “What do you say, baby girl?”

I stare into his eyes, searching for a reason to not go home with him. Deep down, I know that there are plenty. But as I stare into those deep-ocean eyes that have mesmerized me from the very beginning, my mind comes up completely blank.

In a moment of weakness or strength, which one is still to be determined, the only words that come out of my mouth are, “I’m ready to go.”

CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN



Logan

The drive to Kade's apartment over Blackheart Ink is only fifteen minutes, but it feels like hours. The anticipation of what comes next has my nerves in a choke hold. Neither of us speaks during the drive, soft rock music and the loud rumble of the engine filling the space. The sexual tension that has been building between the two of us for weeks now is loud in the silence that surrounds us.

My hands fidget anxiously in my lap, not knowing what to do with them or, frankly, myself. Kade notices the small movement though and grabs my hand in his without even taking an eye off the road. He grips my small hand into his large one, gently rubbing his thumb over my skin, causing goose bumps to emerge.

He holds my hand like it's the most natural thing in the world, like we've done it a thousand times before. It feels brand new and exciting, yet comfortable and familiar at the same time. After he helps me out of the car, he guides me toward the back entrance behind the shop. I follow him inside and up the stairs to the single door at the top of them.

He unlocks the door, and I step inside. The loft is dark besides the moonlight coming through the windows, giving just enough light to see but not necessarily enough to observe. I barely hear the door shut and lock behind me before I'm spun around and my back is pushed against it.

Kade's lips slam into mine with a hunger that I feel throughout my entire body. Sparks shoot through my veins, heating my blood and leaving me desperate for more. His hands slide under my ass and my legs easily wrap themselves around him as he lifts me like I weigh nothing at all. He breaks the kiss only to walk us farther into the loft, through a door and into what I am assuming is his bedroom.

"No going back after this, Logan." His eyes lock onto mine, filled with desire and promises of what's to come. "Once I have your tight little pussy wrapped around me, taking my cock for all it's worth, you're officially mine. Understand?"

His words cause heat to flood my core and I know my answer before it's even left my now parted lips. "Yes."

He gently sets me down on my feet before shrugging the suit jacket off his shoulders. He continues undressing, unbuttoning each individual button of his dress shirt slowly, watching me as he does. My eyes follow his movements as more skin is exposed with each undoing of a button. Tattoos cover nearly every inch of skin that's exposed. They're not all crammed together in one design though, rather it's a scattering of many. His body is like a canvas of different paintings that are each telling their own individual story.

I try to make out the individual designs, but the lack of light makes them hard to see the way I want to. He frees the final button and slips the shirt off his shoulders, allowing it to fall to the ground with his jacket.

His tattoos are beautiful, but it's the body underneath them that's the real masterpiece. He's lean but incredibly muscular at the same time. His shoulders are broad and built, leading to muscular arms that explain why he's been able to lift me so easily.

I watch as he lifts his hands, veins expanding over the top of them and reaches behind me, carefully unzipping my dress. Once the zipper is fully down, he slips his fingers under the halter, gently pulling it over my head before slightly tugging it so the dress falls in a puddle to the floor.

“Fuck. You’re beautiful.” He runs his eyes down my body from head to toe, slowly taking me in. The dress didn’t allow for a bra, and he ripped my underwear off earlier. So, I stand there completely naked in front of him, save for nude heels that I’ve yet to take off. He looks at me with desperation and I can’t help but look at him the same.

I reach my hand out, grazing my fingers over each individual ripple of muscle that stretches across his stomach. I loop my fingers through his belt, unbuckling it and popping the button beneath. I lower his zipper and look up, locking eyes with him as his hands connect with mine to help me lower his pants to the ground.

I lean down to slip off my heels as he takes off his shoes and socks before kicking his pants fully off of him. We stare at each other with fervency, neither of us making a move to do more as the seconds tick by. Heavy breaths full of anticipation fill the stillness between us. Until finally, he snaps.

His mouth devours mine as he lifts me onto the bed, my back crashing against the mattress as he crawls on top of me. His hands roam over every inch of my exposed skin, his mouth never leaving mine.

He kisses me with urgency, and I kiss him back with the same enthusiasm. I wrap my legs around him, and he doesn’t hesitate to grind himself against me right where I need him most. The thin fabric of his boxers is the only thing separating us.

His fingers slide up my thigh before reaching exactly where I need him. He rubs them over my center, gently grazing over my clit before sliding a single digit inside of me, only to take it out and repeat it all over again. I squirm against his hand, desperate for the relief I know he can give me.

“Fuck, you’re always so wet for me.” He adds a second finger, evidence of his statement loud in the silent room. “Look at you, soaking my hand.” He lifts the two fingers that were just inside of me up, my arousal shining from them in the reflection of the moonlight.

“Suck,” he says, lifting the same two fingers to my mouth. I don’t hesitate to open, licking myself off of him. “That’s a good girl. Taste yourself and everything I do to you.”

I moan around his fingers as his words have me clenching around air.

“Fuck.” He moves quickly toward the end of the bed, grabbing my thighs and spreading them over each of his shoulders before he practically shoves his mouth into me. He licks me languidly from front to back, his tongue venturing into places no one has ever been before, wrapping his lips around my pulsing clit. My back arches off the bed, pushing myself farther into him as unintelligible noises leave my lips.

Kade eats me like a starving man. Like I am the last thing he’ll ever taste, and he is trying to savor every drop. His tongue spears inside of me and I struggle to stay still. I’m equally trying to push myself closer to him and pull myself away, the pleasure nearly too much to bear.

He brings his tongue back to my clit, gently circling and sucking it as he pushes two fingers inside of me. He picks up the pace of his fingers, curling them inside of me and hitting the spot only he’s ever been able to find over and over. I can feel myself on the precipice of coming undone with every stroke of his fingers and tongue as they work together in tandem.

“That’s it, baby girl. Come all over my tongue and let me taste you.” He roughly sucks my clit into his mouth and I fall apart. I clench around his fingers and I feel a gush of liquid flow from me. My eyes roll to the back of my head and my mouth falls open in a silent scream as I do exactly as he said.

“Fuck me, baby girl. You just squirted all over me and I don’t know whether I want to fuck you or keep eating you until I can make you do it again.”

I look down at where he still sits between my thighs, his lips glistening from my arousal.

“That’s never happened before,” I say, looking at him with vulnerability. I feel my cheeks heat as embarrassment takes

hold.

“Fuck.” He moves up the bed so his body covers mine and his hand wraps around the back of my head. His fingers gently grip my hair and force me to look up at him. “That was the hottest thing I’ve ever seen in my life and I plan on making it happen again and again. Never be embarrassed with me, baby girl. You’re fucking perfect, okay?”

I feel emotion clog my throat as I nod up at him.

“Good,” he says before his lips slam against mine. I can taste myself on his tongue and for some reason it only makes me want him more.

He pulls away to pull his boxers down his thighs and my eyes immediately go between his legs. He’s big, although looking at the rest of him, I expected him to be. His cock bounces heavily between his thick thighs. I reach out to gently spread the small amount of precum that’s formed over the tip, wrapping my hand around him and stroking him from base to tip.

He throws his head back with a groan as I increase the pressure. Pulling my hand off him, he reaches over to the night table drawer next to the bed, for I’m assuming a condom.

“I’m on the pill,” I say, stopping him before he opens the drawer. I’m not sure why I say it. I’ve never even thought about not using a condom, but there’s a part of me that is desperate to have that with him. To feel the connection that comes with him being bare inside of me.

“Are you sure?” he asks, looking at me for any sign of hesitancy.

“I trust you,” I say. An emotion crosses over his face so quickly that I don’t have time to recognize it. But then he nods his head, moving back on top of me.

He lines himself up with me before slowly pushing inside. I feel a twinge of pain as he works himself in, allowing me to adjust to his size. But pleasure is the overwhelming feeling coursing through me.

“Fuck, Lo.” He pushes himself fully inside and I feel myself clench around him. “So fucking tight, squeezing my cock like you never want to let it go.”

A moan escapes my lips as he begins to move at a steady pace, hitting the spot that makes me see stars with every thrust. I wrap my legs around his waist, trying to pull him into me farther with every movement he makes.

“So fucking perfect, baby girl.” He picks up his pace, slamming into me harder than before.

My back arches off the mattress as I push back into him with the same enthusiasm.

He grabs my legs and brings them over his shoulders without breaking his pace. The new position allows him to go even deeper than before. I feel the tension build in my core almost immediately, and in this moment, I swear nothing has ever felt this good.

“Fuck, Kade.” My head falls back against the mattress and stars explode behind my eyes as his name falls from my lips. I clench around him as I ride out the release.

“Good girl.” He lets my legs fall around him again, leaning forward and covering my lips with his. He kisses me until I feel the pressure build in my core again and I’m moaning into his mouth for more.

He pulls out and flips me over so that I’m on my knees, my head and shoulder flat against the mattress, and my ass in the air. He pushes back into me and I feel the air leave my lungs at how deep he is from this position.

“There you go, pretty girl.” He moves slowly, letting me adjust to him again, and the pace soon becomes torturous. I feel my arousal grow each time he enters me. “Let me feel that sweet pussy of yours drip all over my cock while I fuck you from behind.” I moan, pushing my ass farther into him. “Touch yourself, baby girl.”

I do as he says, my fingers reaching under me to rub circles around my clit as he grips my hips tightly, picking up

his pace. The sound of him slamming into me, among the grunts and moans coming from both of us, fills the room.

The pressure builds inside me for the third time since we stepped foot inside this loft and I slam back against Kade, chasing that feeling.

“Fuck, Lo. I need you to come again for me, baby girl. Come all over my cock and suck me dry like the good girl you are.”

“Kade.” His name falls from my lips as I fall over the edge.

He continues to thrust into me, his own release only seconds behind as he pulses inside of me, filling me with his cum.

Both of us collapse against the bed in a mess of tangled limbs as we catch our breath and regain our grips on reality. Kade grabs me, pulling me into him. My head falls against his chest, and he runs his fingers through my hair, splayed messily all over his chest and shoulder.

We lie there in silence, the sounds of our breathing filling the room. It feels like everything that needed to be said was already spoken through what we just did. I don't know if it's minutes or hours that pass before Kade breaks the silence.

“I meant what I said before, Logan.” His fingers still stroke through my hair, and his heart beats steadily from under me. “You're mine now. I don't care about anyone or anything else except this. You. Us.” He gently pulls my head back, forcing me to look into his eyes and I see the truth in them. “Tell me you're mine, baby girl.”

I stare up at him, the man who makes me feel more than I ever knew I wanted to. The man who makes me feel whole again. The man who I think I might be falling in love with. I say the two words that I'm finally starting to understand the depth behind.

“Only yours.”

CHAPTER

NINETEEN



Kaden

Happiness. I don't know that I've ever felt it like this. With her bright-green eyes searching every inch of my skin, her golden-blond hair splayed across my chest, her fingers intertwined with mine, it's like the feeling is consuming me.

"What about this one?" Her fingers brush over the scorpion tattoo covering my forearm. She runs them over the mishmash of designs surrounding it, flipping my arm over to follow the design all the way around.

She's been doing this for the past half an hour, finding a piece of ink on my body and asking the meaning behind it. Most of them I give her an honest response, others I don't. A lot of the ink on my body I got simply because it's art and I like it, making it an easy explanation. There are a select few that mean more than what is shown on the surface though. Luckily, she hasn't gone near any of the ones I refuse to talk about just yet. Her eyes meet mine, awaiting a response.

"I got that one when I was nineteen." I smile at the memory of that specific piece. "I had been working with King for over a year at this point. Jillian, his ex-wife, had gone into labor with Willow at two o'clock in the morning, two weeks early, so nobody, especially him, was prepared. He called me completely flustered and asked if I could come watch Ellie, who was asleep in bed. I'd only been around Ellie a few times and she wasn't totally comfortable with me, but that was the most uncomposed I'd ever seen him, and it seemed like I was his only option."

“I can’t picture King being uncomposed,” she says, looking like the thought of it is comical.

“Before that, neither could I. He is the most together person I know, but in that moment, he was a mess. Anyway, Ellie ended up waking up not long after they left and was hysterically crying, asking for her parents. I was a barely twenty-year-old kid with no clue about what to do, so I tried to explain it all to her. When that didn’t work, I told her I’d get her anything she wanted if she just stopped crying.” I pause, laughing at the memory. “The little shit’s response was that she wanted a scorpion. Obviously, I had no clue what to do with that, so I compromised by telling her we could draw one and I’d have her dad tattoo it on me. Surprisingly, she agreed to that.”

“Wait, so four-year-old Ellie drew that?” She looks back and forth from me to the tattoo, her eyes comically wide. She looks cute when she’s shocked.

“No, the one Ellie drew is somewhere in the box on top of my closet. I redrew this one before I had King ink it onto me. Ellie didn’t know the difference and thought she was the artist behind it.” I chuckle. “She’s probably figured it out by now, but we don’t discuss it.”

“So, you tattooed a scorpion on yourself to make a four-year-old stop crying?” She smiles up at me, disbelief in her eyes.

“Yeah. Pretty genius, if you ask me.” I smile at her, and she throws her head back laughing.

“You’re insane, you know that, right?” She smiles up at me.

“I’ve been told a time or two.” I watch as she moves her attention back to the ink covering my chest. I see her attention go to the tattoo over where my heart is, and I know that I’m not in a place to discuss that with her now or possibly ever. I grab her hand, intertwining her fingers with mine before they reach the piece they were heading to.

“So, what about you?” I ask, redirecting the conversation. “You’ve never wanted any tattoos?”

She lays her head back onto my chest as she quietly contemplates before answering. It’s something I’ve noticed she does. Thinking before she speaks. She treats every word that exits her mouth as though it’s meaningful.

“It may sound like a stupid answer, but I haven’t found something meaningful enough to tattoo onto my skin for eternity.” She pauses like she’s debating whether to let the next words leave her mouth. “When I was seventeen, I was in a school shooting. A lot of people died and a lot of those who lived got tattoos to commemorate them, or the classroom, or just the event itself. But it always felt weird to me.” She turns onto her back. Her head still rests on my chest, but now her gaze stares at the ceiling above us. I watch as she chews her lip, uncomfortable with the conversation but pushing through to get the words out. I stay silent, giving her all the time that she needs.

“Most of the people who survived in my classroom got tattoos of the classroom number that we were in. But I didn’t feel the need to have that inked onto my skin, it wasn’t like it was something I was ever going to forget regardless. Then there were those who got the date that the shooting happened. Valentine’s Day.” A humorless laugh leaves her lips. I hate the way it sounds. I hate that she went through something so horrific, something that caused her so much pain. I also hate that I already know about it from her sister’s point of view, and Logan has no clue.

“Again, I’m pretty sure it’s a date I’ll never forget, so to have it permanently inked into my skin feels redundant. Plus, there’d be questions from people about what it stands for, questions I don’t feel the need to answer. It just leads to people’s sympathy that I don’t need or want for that matter. And then there were those who got the names of those who were killed. My best friend was among those murdered that day. But simply getting her name tattooed felt too insignificant. She deserves something more than that and I’ve never been creative enough to decide what. When I finally

decide to put something on my skin permanently, I want it to feel like not just a word or a piece of art, but something real, if that makes sense. Like it represents not only loss but also life, beauty but also pain, the end of one thing, but also the beginning of another.” She bites down on her bottom lip again and I instinctively pull it free with my thumb. Her eyes meet mine for only a second before flickering away. “I don’t know, it sounds stupid, I know I could just get anything—”

“It’s not stupid,” I cut her off. After everything she’s just said, it’s the one thing I think I can fully understand. That’s why instead of giving her the sympathy she doesn’t want or acknowledging a subject that clearly makes her uncomfortable, I offer her the one thing I know that I can give her. “Let me draw it for you.”

“What?” She looks up at me, confused.

“The perfect tattoo. The one that signifies more than a name, number, or date ever could. The one that is exactly everything you’ve wanted it to be. If you hate it, we throw it away. But if you love it, I’ll ink it onto you.”

“Yes.” The word falls from her lips so quickly it surprises me, and evidently herself too. “I think I’d like that.” She smiles up at me.

“Okay, good,” I say. “Thank you. For telling me all of that. For trusting me with it.” I feel like a piece of shit as I speak the words because that’s what she’s doing, trusting me. Trusting me when I’ve given her no reason to. Trusting me when I’m still hiding so much from her. I should’ve told her from the first time I saw her, but I wasn’t sure then. And then I got distracted. And now, too much time has passed, too much has happened. She wouldn’t accept it. I wouldn’t blame her for it either.

“Thanks for just listening,” she says softly. She leans up and brushes her lips softly against mine. I deepen the kiss, drowning myself in the feel of her still naked body pressed against mine, her sweet scent filling the air, the taste of her as our tongues dance. I focus on this moment and how perfect it

feels, knowing that it's only a matter of time before I fuck it all up.



Today is shit. It has been since the second I woke up late four hours ago. I never wake up late, but it's like my body knew today would be a day that I didn't want to participate in and was warning me not to stay asleep.

Today marks seven years since my mother took her last breath on this earth. It's been three weeks since the gala and I've been so lost in Logan that I didn't even realize the day was coming up. It's never a day I try to remember in the first place, but it's also a hard one to forget. Especially considering I was the one who found her. I wonder if that's another thing Logan and I have in common.

Just another thing I haven't spoken to her about yet as she continues to lay her trauma on a silver platter for me. She opens up to me more every day, something I know she doesn't do for just anyone. For some reason, I still struggle to give her even a bread crumb of the hellhole that is my past. She doesn't dig how most would, she understands not pushing someone to share things more than anybody.

But I still feel guilty for giving her nothing. Especially when the truth about my mother is something I can actually discuss with her. Minus how my mother's death connected me to Lo's sister. Fuck, I'm an asshole. With each day that passes that I hold Logan in my arms, that I bury myself deep inside her, that I watch her sleep by my side with her head tucked gently into my neck as though being pressed up against me

provides her the comfort she's been missing, I hate myself a little more.

I tell myself that she doesn't need to know the truth, that it would only hurt her, and I never want to be the person to add more pain to her life. But I know she deserves it, nonetheless. The problem is that if I tell her said truth, she won't trust me, trust us, trust what we have. But if I don't tell her, and she finds out, she still won't trust me. I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't.

The guilt weighs on me with every minute that passes, yet I still can't bring myself to tell her. Especially not when things have been so amazing between us. It feels natural and easy with her. It feels like more than anything I've ever felt before or ever thought that I would feel. I never wanted a relationship or love, it never seemed like something important enough to search for. But then Logan was dropped right in front of me and the immediate connection between us was so strong that it felt inevitable.

"Are you good?" King's voice brings me back to the land of the living. I swirl around on the stool that I'm sitting on to look his way.

After waking up late, I had to rush to get ready and get downstairs for my first appointment of the day. Luckily the guy was a regular, so he didn't mind me being a few minutes late. It wasn't until we took a break an hour and a half into the appointment and I checked my phone I noticed the date. It fucking certainly didn't make my day any better. I finished up with that client about fifteen minutes ago and have been sitting here, lost in my thoughts ever since.

"Fucking great," I say, knowing he won't buy it. King is good like that, remembering important dates. I only told him what this day meant to me four years ago and he's remembered it every year since.

"I can cover for you with your appointments today. You don't need to work today if you're not up to it."

"Nah, if I'm not working, I'm just sitting around thinking about shit. Thanks though."

He nods at me, understanding.

“How are things with Lo?” he asks. He’s run into her a few more times since the barbecue when she’s been with me, and I can tell he likes her. She’s kind, but she’s also not a pushover. She’s the type of girl that just exists and makes those around her comfortable.

“They’ve been good.” I know it’s not the answer he’s been looking for. He’s been urging me to tell her the truth since I met her. He insists she’s reasonable enough to understand. It has nothing to do with being reasonable though. It’s a part of her life that she’s barely shared with me and the fact that I know most details without her knowledge will be enough for her to bolt. That’s not even including the fact that I’ve been lying to her.

“You should talk to her. If not about what you’ve been keeping from her, then about your mom, about what today means.”

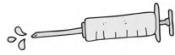
“We’ll see,” is the only response I give him. I won’t make promises I can’t guarantee that I can keep, and he knows that. He nods his head, knocking his fist against the doorframe before turning and leaving the room.

With his presence gone, the weight of the day settles heavier over me. I pick up a pad and pencil, drawing to distract myself the way I always have until my next appointment gets here. The thing about distractions is that they’re just that. They only work for so long until you’re forced to face everything right in front of you. I should know, I’ve been using them for as long as I can remember, and they never seem to work in the long run.

Yet here I am again, distracting myself from every aspect of my life. Even knowing it’s only a matter of time before it all comes crumbling down around me, I can’t find it in me to stop.

CHAPTER

TWENTY



Logan

“You look funny.” Theo’s voice immediately wipes the smile that I hadn’t realized formed off of my face as I shove my phone into my pocket. “I’m not used to seeing you so giddy. Is Kade sending you dirty texts? Oh my gosh, is it a nude? Let me see.”

“Shut up.” I throw my banana peel at his head, but he ducks, making it hit the wall behind him. It’s only us in the locker room right now, or else I never would’ve thrown it. “It wasn’t anything dirty, he just said he’s excited to see me later.”

“Aw, cute,” he says, picking up the banana peel and throwing it in the trash for me. “You’re disgustingly in love.”

“I’m not in love,” I defend. The words being said out loud bring me a sense of discomfort.

“Yes, you are. I’ve known you for how long? And I’ve never seen you smile like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re in love.”

“I’m not in love.”

“Are too. You’re so in love.” He emphasizes the “so,” smiling from ear to ear, amused by my discomfort.

“Whatever, you’re a child. I need to get back to work.” I stand up, gathering my things to head back into the ER where I’m working for the day.

“At least I can admit when I’m in love,” he yells as I close the door behind me, leaving him in there.

I walk through the hallway back to the ER, the *L* word still sour on my tongue. I’ve never told a man I’m in love with them, mainly because I never have been. I never let my feelings wander that far. Love has been a foreign concept to me since the last time I said the words five years ago to Lennox’s lifeless body. I vowed to never let myself feel love again after that, the concept of loving and losing too much for me to emotionally bear. But I never took Kade into account.

His eyes swirl in deep, rich blues that I continue to get lost in. His hand when he holds mine, grounding me. His arms, when he holds me, make me feel safe, cocooned from the pain that constantly follows me. The thought of loving him is just as terrifying as not loving him. But that doesn’t mean I’m ready to admit it out loud.

I go about my day, seeing patients as they come in, never taking a moment to rest. It’s one of the reasons I love this job so much. It doesn’t give you the time to dwell on outside factors. All that matters is the patient in front of you and making sure that they’re okay. The sound of the busy emergency room, the sounds of the patients’ monitors beeping to the rhythm of their hearts, chatter from every corner. It’s an organized chaos that calms me in a way nothing else can.

I walk out of the patient room, leaving the grumpy fifteen-year-old boy who I just saw with his mom. He came in with a sprained wrist, although his mom swore it was broken, even though X-rays proved otherwise. Cara, the nurse working with me, assured her so, but she needed to hear it from me as well.

I walk down the hallway and into the next patient’s room. The patient is a middle-aged man. He is sitting quietly in the hospital bed, his back toward me as I enter the room.

“Hello, sir. I’m Dr. Hart. Can you tell me your name?” I smile over at him, hoping to gain his attention.

He continues to stare at the window on the opposite side of the room, not acknowledging me. I slowly approach the other side of the room so that I am in his eyeline.

“Excuse me, sir? Can I get your name?” I ask him, but he still doesn’t look at me.

“No,” he says, barely above a whisper. “No, no, no.” He continues to whisper the word under his breath. He abruptly stands from the bed, beginning to pace back and forth in the small space between the bed and the window. At this point, it seems pretty clear that something isn’t right.

“Sir, can you tell me your name and what is wrong?” I keep my voice calm and quiet, hoping it will ease him. He continues repeating himself, closing his eyes.

“I can’t do that,” he says, a little louder than a whisper this time.

It’s the way he says the words, almost in shock, that makes me certain he isn’t talking to me. I look out the glass door of the patient room to see Cara approaching, I make sure the patient still isn’t looking at me before mouthing, “potential code white” to her and she nods, immediately understanding.

“Is someone talking to you, sir? If you tell me what they’re saying, maybe I can help.” I stay still in front of the bed as he paces next to it.

“They don’t want to talk to you. They want to talk to me. They always want to talk to me.” He pauses. “No, I can’t do that. No, that is too much. But maybe not enough. It is too much. No, no, no.” He goes back to whispering the word over and over.

The way he talks leads me to believe he is having auditory hallucinations. I stay calm, trying to talk with him but not pushing him too hard while I wait for a team from the psychiatric department to come help. I keep subtly looking through the glass door as I wait for help to arrive.

“Can you talk to me a little about what you’re hearing, sir?” I ask, but he doesn’t answer me, rather the hallucinations.

“No, no, no,” he repeats at almost a yell now.

I try to discreetly reach into the pocket of my scrubs to grab my phone and check on where the team is, but the

movement startles him. His eyes lock directly onto mine before zeroing in on where my hand is in my pocket.

“Stop it,” he yells loudly, his eyes slamming closed again and his hands pushing out in front of him as if he’s trying to forcefully push someone away. Unfortunately for me, I’m now standing directly in front of him.

He is a good six inches or so taller than me and must have at least a hundred pounds on me. Both of his hands are locked in fists as they push me forcefully back. His right fist connects with my left cheek and ear, while his left fist connects with my shoulder. The pain radiates through both areas. The force causes me to fall to the floor behind me, my butt slamming harshly against the tile.

“Shit, Lo. Are you okay?” I hear Theo’s voice, and at the same time, I hear a separate voice say, “Call a code white.”

I open my eyes to see him squatting down next to me.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I reach up, wincing when my fingers touch my cheek. I pull them away and see blood covering them. I look up to see the team Cara brought handling the situation.

“Come on, Lo. I got you.” Theo wraps my arm around his shoulder to help me stand. I then notice Cara walking back into the room with a wheelchair that Theo ushers me into.

“This is ridiculous. I’m fine.” I go to stand, but Theo immediately stops me, looking concerned.

“Well, I’m going to make sure of that,” he says. “Now, keep your ass in that wheelchair and let me check you out.”

I roll my eyes, sitting down and letting him wheel me over into an empty patient room. I zone out as he asks me a million questions, all while lecturing me for getting myself into bad situations. I placate him, letting him check the wound on my cheek that I already know is superficial, my shoulder that is no more than a bad bruise, and my head to rule out the concussion that I do not have.

After he finally agrees with me that it’s all just bumps and bruises, giving me some high-dose ibuprofen for the pain, he

agrees to come with me to talk to my attending. Something I tell him is unnecessary, but he insists. We find my attending, and I explain the situation, which he's already been informed of and file an official incident report. Luckily, Dr. Andrews is one of the nicest attendings on staff, so he tells me to go home and take the rest of the week off. Something that is more than generous since it's only Monday.

He asks if I'm okay to drive home, to which I answer yes, and at the same time, Theo answers no. I roll my eyes, assuring Dr. Andrews I'm fine, but he agrees to let Theo drive me home anyway. It's not worth the argument, so I nod my head, thank him, and follow Theo out the doors to the car. Theo is quiet during the drive, probably suspecting I've been through enough for one day.

"Go inside, take the pain meds, and get some rest," Theo says as he pulls up to my building, puts the car in park and turns to look at me. "Call me later."

"I will. Thank you for everything, I mean it."

"Always, Lo. Now, go ice that pretty face of yours before it gets covered in hideous bruises." I laugh at him, getting out of the car and making my way upstairs.

I open the door to my apartment and step inside, ready to crash, when a male figure on the couch catches my attention and scares the shit out of me.

"Kade, what are you doing here? You nearly gave me a heart attack." I catch my breath, putting a hand over my chest to calm my pounding heart.

"Theo texted Demi that there was some sort of incident at work, Demi texted me, and I rushed over here. When I realized you weren't here yet, I tried to go to the hospital, but Demi calmed me down and told me to wait here for you." Kade rushes off the couch toward me, cupping my hurt face gently into his hands. "Who the fuck did this to you, Logan? Who the fuck thought—"

"Hey, relax, it's okay. I'm okay," I cut him off, resting my hand over his, reassuring him. "I promise. And it wasn't his

fault. He had paranoid hallucinations, felt crowded and scared. He didn't mean to hurt me. He probably didn't even realize that he did." I see a mask fall over his face as I speak. His eyes go blank of any emotion, and suddenly I feel completely disconnected from him. I recognize his defenses going up, considering I do it so often myself.

"Kade? Where'd you go?" I reach for him with my other hand, but he takes a step back, dropping his hand from my face and releasing me altogether. "What just happened?" I pry, even knowing I would hate it if he was doing it to me. His eyes meet mine in a blank stare.

"I'm sorry. I have to go." He brushes past me, nearly running out the door and slamming it behind me, causing me to wince at the loud sound. I don't know what I said to trigger the defense mechanism, but I recognize it, nonetheless. He's running. Avoiding. Hiding. It's everything I constantly do, but it feels different having it done to me. I look toward the door, a part of me thinking, *wishing* for him to come back in here and explain himself, but I know that he won't.

I turn away from the door, sigh, and make my way toward my bedroom. I follow Theo's instructions, showering the day off of me before taking the meds and crawling into bed. I close my eyes, urging sleep to come, but the urge to open my night table drawer is stronger. Misery loves company after all. I ignore my common sense once again and grab the journal, opening it to where I left off.

TWENTY-ONE

BARGAINING

December 24, 2014

To whom it may concern,

Been a while again. Six months to be exact. I told the good doc that I was done with journaling after my last entry. She didn't force the subject, only said that if it didn't feel right for me, then we shouldn't force it. We, because she and I are a team. But only half of the team has any idea what it feels like to watch their school classroom be sprayed with bullets. Only one of us knows what it feels like to watch their best friend bleed out and die right in front of them.

I'm not sure why I'm even writing in this journal now. I just opened my night table drawer, saw it sitting there, and here we are. Me writing my feelings on paper for nobody to read again. It's been a long six months. The therapist says I'm doing my best, taking each day as it

comes, that's all anyone can ask for. That's a lie. I tell her what she wants to hear, but I know I'm not getting better. Every day is worse than the last. I can see myself spiraling, but there isn't anything I can do to stop myself.

Logan is in college. She stayed home, commuting back and forth to the University of Miami, which is only forty-five minutes away from us without traffic. She had her pick at out-of-state schools, getting full rides to most of them, but she stayed here because she didn't want to leave me. She's here, constantly checking on me, caring for me, loving me, being the selfless sister she's always been. And here I am, wondering what it would be like if she'd died instead of Emersyn.

Yeah, I know. How fucked up of a twin, or rather a person, am I that I could even think about something like

that? The first time it happened was a few weeks after my last journal entry. It was what would've been Emersyn's eighteenth birthday. June 28. I had just gotten home from visiting her grave and walked into my room to find Logan sitting on my bed. She was holding a plastic bag with three joints inside of it. I don't think I'd ever seen her that angry with me. She screamed at me for ten minutes straight. She screamed at me, saying hadn't we had enough loss? How could I even think of getting involved with drugs? How stupid could I be?

She kept yelling and all I could think was if she were dead, then Emersyn might be alive. If the shooter had turned left first instead of right, it would be Logan gone and Emersyn would be here with me right now, celebrating her eighteenth birthday. We would be mourning my twin

instead, but rather than lecturing me, Emersyn would be smoking the stupid joint right next to me. Because she would've understood that I wasn't doing drugs to be stupid, I just didn't want to feel the pain anymore.

It was in that moment that I found myself begging whoever could hear my thoughts to take Logan so I could have Emersyn back. The thought only lasted a second before I proceeded to run to the toilet and vomit up the very little amount I had eaten the past few days. But then the thought happened again a few weeks later when Lo and I got into another argument, and I found myself not wanting to think or feel anything anymore. So, I smoked another joint. Then, I did it again a few weeks later. And then the weed wasn't enough anymore.

So, I found my mom's old Xanax prescription and started

taking those. Those worked well, so when the prescription ran out, I found someone to get me more. I've always been careful with them. I follow the directions, never taking more than I'm supposed to, and it's worked. I even started feeling a little better. Anything besides pain was better, right? So, then I stopped them, thinking maybe I didn't need them anymore. But that didn't work out well.

I felt like I was losing my mind. I showed up at Emersyn's house, banged on her door and begged her parents to let me see her. I told them they were lying, that she was alive, they were evil and just keeping her from me. I cried and I begged, and then when I remembered she was really gone, I started begging the sky to bring her back. I eventually calmed down enough to apologize to Emersyn's mom and make my way home.

I got home, planning to head straight to my room and take another Xanax. Clearly, I couldn't survive without them. But I walked into my house and Logan was sitting on the couch right near the door. She took one look at me, my hair a knotted mess and mascara streaking down my face, and I saw sympathy fall over her face. I hated it. I didn't want her sympathy, I just wanted her to understand. I wanted someone to understand. Emersyn would've understood, why couldn't Lo? There was that intrusive thought again. The one that made me hate myself every time it popped into my head. What if she was here instead of Lo? With that, I ran back to my room and popped another pill, ready for the numbness to take me away from my own horrid thoughts.

That was about a month ago. I haven't missed a pill

since. They numb me. They help me. It could've been my therapist that prescribed them to me. They clearly help. Yet she didn't think to. So, I'm self-diagnosed, I got the pills myself, and they're working, that's all that matters. Well, they were working.

Today is Christmas Eve. I should've been home earlier, pretending to be happy to celebrate with my mom and Lo. Instead, I went to the apartment of a twenty-three-year-old graduate student who sides as a drug dealer, asking for something stronger. About four months ago, I started working at a nail salon. I sit at the front desk, answer phones, and take people's money. I hate it, but it's how I've come up with the money to pay for the medication I need. I paid the kid, and he handed me the bottle of Vicodin. I shoved it into my purse, got in my car and drove myself

home.

The house smelled like Christmas when I walked inside.

The tree was lit, presents crowded underneath it and I

could hear my mom playing Christmas carols in the

kitchen. She yelled that dinner would be ready in half an

hour. I ran straight to my room and opened the journal.

Now here I am. The bottle of pills in one hand, pen in the

other. Maybe me writing this is my way of trying to

convince myself to stop. To not take the pills because deep

down, I know nothing good could come of this. The issue is

that, on the surface, I just don't care. I take a pill out of

the bottle, then shove it back into my purse.

I stare at the white pill for a moment, maybe in a

last-ditch effort to stop myself, even though I know that I

won't. I throw the pill into my mouth, swallowing it in one

motion. I sit here, thinking about what I've just done, but as time goes on and the effects of the medication kick in, all thoughts seem to fade away.

I feel numb, empty, and a heaviness that I can't identify. And then it hits me, and I figure it can't hurt to self-diagnose myself again. So, I do because the answer is right there in front of me. Depression.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-TWO



Kaden

I've been sitting on the sidewalk outside Lo's apartment for the past three and a half hours. I haven't moved since I left her standing inside the apartment, wondering what the hell happened. Seeing her like that, hurt and with the look of defeat on her face, it killed me. When Demi texted me that she'd been hurt, I felt terrified. Then I got to her apartment and had to sit there, waiting for her, completely helpless. But when she walked through the door, all I felt was anger.

I took one look at her and vowed to find the man who did this to her and make sure he was never able to lay a hand on anyone again. But then she explained what had happened. She said the one thing that put a halt in my plans and apparently my brain function. The man had schizophrenia. Every memory that I thought I'd buried from my childhood came rushing back and I just shut down right in front of her.

I'm supposed to be in there, comforting her, loving her. Instead, I'm sitting on the dirty concrete, the scar on my chest searing through my shirt as a reminder of exactly what the word schizophrenia means to me. I try to focus not on the scar itself but on what's underneath it. My heart beating steadily beneath my chest, and the reminder that right now, and I think since the first time I saw her, it is solely beating for her.

I stand up off the curb, brush the dirt off my black joggers and make my way back inside the apartment building. I take the stairs to her floor and stop when I get outside her door. I gently knock my hand against the door and wait. Minutes pass

by and there's no answer. I consider turning around and leaving, doubting she wants to see me anyway. I can't just leave again though. Instead, I grab the door handle and push it down to find it unlocked. I open the door and step inside, looking for any sign of Lo. I already know Demi won't be home until late, she made sure to tell me before she left for her shift, so I know she's still alone.

I walk over to her bedroom, gently push open her door, and find her in bed asleep, a worn journal of some sort lying next to her. I turn around, planning to go back into the main room and sit on the couch while I wait for her to wake up, but I stop myself. In a moment of hesitation, I step farther into her room and close the door behind me. I quietly walk over to her bed and gently slide under the covers next to her. She's lying on her side facing away from me, so I turn toward her, pressing my body gently against hers and pulling her into me.

The second I feel her body mold to mind, everything in me settles and I feel a calmness wash over me. She has that effect on me that nobody else ever has. As I press myself as close to her as I can, wanting to revel in how she makes me feel, I feel her body stiffen for a second as she becomes aware of the intrusion, but she relaxes just as quick. It's like her body recognizes the feel of mine. I hear her breathing quicken, different from the steady pace it flowed just minutes ago, alerting me that she's awake now. She doesn't say anything though, and neither do I. We just lie there in silence, the closeness of our bodies providing comfort that words never could.

We stay that way for a long time until our breaths align, and we now breathe steadily as one. I can't undo all of the lies and secrets I've hidden from her, but I can decide to give her one piece of me that I've never given anyone else. I gently tug her onto her back, grabbing her hand and guiding it underneath my shirt until it sits right on my chest above my heart. I guide her fingers over the scar, no bigger than two inches, allowing her to feel the rigid edges raised on my skin.

“When I was sixteen years old, my mother tried to kill me. That's what that scar is.” I wait for a response from her, but

other than a small gasp under her breath, she gives me nothing. She stays silent, attentive, just listening and allowing me this moment. “Not long after I was born, she was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia.” I run my fingers through her hair, trying to keep myself present in the moment and not allow the memories to take hold of me.

“She managed it on and off over the years. I tried to keep track as I got older and understood it better, tried to make sure she followed her treatment plan. But I was just a kid. I didn’t want to be overbearing in making sure she was taking her medication. One day, she eventually stopped taking them, saying she was feeling better and didn’t like how they were making her feel.”

Logan turns her body to fully face me, and I turn onto my back to allow her to rest her head on top of my chest. Her hand slips back under my shirt, resting flat over the scar, over my heart. It’s the first time I’ve felt a heat coming from the area that isn’t a painful reminder.

“When I was fifteen, my mom started dating a man named Randall. He seemed normal enough when I first met him. He wasn’t the most hygienic or clean man, but he was charismatic, so I could see why she went for him. They were together for six months. The first two months were normal. My mom was doing pretty good. She was working at a diner at the time, and everything seemed to be under control. About three months into the relationship, something changed. It was four months in the first time I found cocaine all over the bathroom counter.” I pause, remembering the scene like it happened yesterday.

I had just gotten home, and I was exhausted from school, football practice, and work. I knew my mom wasn’t home because the car was gone. We had two bathrooms in the apartment, one in the hallway across from my room and one in her room. I walked into the one in the hallway, ready to shower the day off of me, only to find white powder covering the counter and some loose in the sink. A rolled-up dollar bill sat next to the faucet. It was my bathroom, the bathroom of her fifteen-year-old child. She didn’t even try to hide it.

“I tried talking to her, yelling at her, helping her, but she wouldn’t listen to me. The drugs had gotten to her. She started skipping her shifts at the diner until they had no choice but to fire her. She and Randall started arguing and finally broke up, but even with him gone, the drug use stayed. In fact, it got worse. And then she stopped her medication. The hallucinations resurfaced, and on my sixteenth birthday, they took over completely.”

Logan rubs gentle circles around the scar, reminding me she’s right here with me. Listening to me, supporting me, loving me, even if she hasn’t said the words.

“I was wearing a black Metallica T-shirt. It had the band logo on the left corner of my chest. As soon as I walked inside the apartment, I knew she was in the middle of an episode. Her latest delusions had been that people were watching her, waiting for the right time to come and kill her. She was mumbling to herself about them being on their way when I walked in. When she looked over at me, she stopped mumbling and looked terrified. She started yelling at me that they had already gotten to me. She thought the logo on my chest was a device implanted into me to spy on her. I’d always been able to calm her down up until that day, so I followed her to the kitchen, trying to rationalize to her. I didn’t even see it coming when she grabbed a steak knife and stabbed me with it. She ran out of the apartment and left me there after that. I dialed an ambulance, and I was lucky the knife hadn’t punctured anything major, and I was okay.”

Logan is silent, processing everything I’ve just revealed. I give her the time. I don’t even need a response from her. I just needed her to know. A few moments pass before she speaks, “And your mom?” It’s a question I expected and one I’m finally okay with answering.

“She was in and out of psychiatric care, on and off with her medication. There were good times and bad. But she eventually relapsed. When I was twenty-one, I found her lying in bed with a needle in her arm. She overdosed on heroin.”

She nods her head, not offering me anything else. She doesn’t offer me the standard apology most people would, just

like I didn't for her. It's because she understands that I don't want sympathy. Just the understanding, something she has in spades.

“My twin sister started doing drugs to feel numb and quiet her thoughts. Her thoughts that she wished I had died in the school shooting we were a part of, instead of our best friend.” My stomach sinks as Logan speaks. L, or rather Lennox, told me about the shooting, the loss of her best friend, about people's lack of understanding, about her reliance on drugs. But she never told me about that.

“That journal.” She nods her head to the journal lying on the bed next to her that I noticed when I first walked in. “She details all of it in there. I've read the words so many times that I could probably recite them, and it never hurts any less.”

“It wasn't your fault.” I look down at her.

“And everything that happened with your mom wasn't yours.” She looks up at me. I've heard it from King a dozen times, but hearing it coming from her may be the first time I'm starting to believe it.

She looks away, cuddling herself farther into my chest and I pull her in tighter against me. We lie together in the comfortable silence we always seem to find ourselves in. Her breathing becomes steady, and I think she's fallen asleep when I press a gentle kiss to the top of her head.

“Hey, Kade?” she speaks softly, her voice more timid than I've ever heard it.

“Yeah, baby girl?”

“I think I love you.” I feel her entire body stiffen as she waits for my response, and I can't help the smile that spreads across my face. She has no fucking idea. I grip her chin between my fingers, forcing her to look up at me.

“Well, that's good because I'm so fucking in love with you, Logan Grace Hart.” The smile on her face is the last thing I see before I crush my lips against hers.

Her hand grips my T-shirt between us, trying to pull me closer even though we're already completely pressed against

one another. She kisses me back with abandon. An intensity present between us that I've never felt before.

I kiss her slowly, savoring each brush of her lips, each swipe of her tongue, swallowing each and every moan she fails to conceal. Her hands find the bottom of my shirt and I reach behind my head to pull it off, making it easier for her. I grip the bottom of her sweatshirt, lifting it, every inch exposing more bare skin. I discard her sweatshirt on the floor and bring my fingers to the bottom of her stomach, gently following the same path the sweatshirt just did. She squirms under my touch, arching her body into me, desperate for me to relieve her of the tension building inside her.

I stare into her eyes, then down to her bare chest, then lower and lower. I try to memorize the masterpiece that she is lying beneath me, for me. I brush my lips against hers once more before moving to follow the opposite path my fingers did with my mouth. I kiss her jaw, her neck, and her chest until I reach the two hard peaks begging for my attention.

I lower my mouth to her right nipple, suctioning it into my mouth and causing her to forcefully arch off the bed, pushing herself farther into my mouth. I lick a circle around the pink bud before gently tugging on it with my teeth. She cries out and I wrap my lips around it again to soothe the ache. I move to her left side, giving it the same attention as I did the right, then continue to lick and kiss down her stomach.

“Please,” she begs as I kiss where her stomach meets her tiny-ass shorts.

I grab the top of them, slowly pulling them down her legs. I lick my way back up her leg, stopping with my face right between her thighs. I blow hot air directly where she is desperate for my touch, and she whimpers, opening her legs wider, spreading herself fully for me.

“Fuck, you're so perfect.” I run my fingers from where wetness is seeping out of her to her throbbing clit. “Tell me who this pussy belongs to.” I continue my ministrations, taking my time, playing with her perfect cunt.

“Yours, Kaden. All yours. Please, Kaden.” Her voice is raspy, and it sounds like she’s struggling to get the words out as she continues to squirm underneath me.

“That’s it, all fucking mine,” I say before burying my face in her pussy.

I suck her clit into my mouth, her hands flying down to grip my hair between her fingers as she cries out. I alternate between circling the bundle of nerves and sucking on it before licking lower to spear my tongue inside her. I moan into her as her sweet taste explodes over my taste buds. I go back for more, savoring each taste like it’s my last meal.

“Fuck, your pussy tastes like heaven, baby girl.” I move lower, circling her other forbidden hole with my tongue and she nearly bucks off the bed. “You like that, my dirty girl?”

“Fuck, Kaden. I need to come, please,” she pleads. I lick her from ass to clit, sucking the tiny bud into my mouth again while spearing my fingers inside of her. She’s exploding all over them within seconds. I drink her in, licking up every last drop she has to give me before climbing back up over her.

“Open,” I say, and she immediately listens, opening her mouth wide. I bring my lips close to hers before spitting directly into her mouth. Her eyes widen with surprise at first and then excitement. “Taste that, baby girl? The mixture of me with your cum still coating my tongue?” I move my fingers to gently close her jaw and she nods at me eagerly. “Good girl. Swallow.”

She does so immediately before reaching both hands to my shoulders, pushing me to lie on my back, which I do.

“My turn,” she says, moving down my body, yanking my pants and underwear down in one go. I lift my hips to help her, kicking them off of me.

She moves back up to where my dick stands straight up, desperate for her touch. She wastes no time, locking eyes with me as she licks me in one stroke from base to tip before swallowing me whole.

“Fuck, Lo.” I grip the sheets beneath me as I hit the back of her throat. I try to keep my hips down and give her full control. She suctioned her mouth around me tightly as she lifts back to the tip, licking her way around the sensitive spot before repeating it all again. Her throat opens around the tip of my dick each time, and if it isn’t the best fucking feeling I’ve ever felt.

It’s only minutes before I can’t take anymore, pulling her mouth off me and moving her farther up on top of me. “Ride me, baby girl.”

She follows the order, slowly sinking down onto my cock, her cunt swallowing every inch.

She keeps going until she’s completely seated with me inside of her, and then she starts moving. Torturously slow, she lifts and lowers herself onto me, grinding her clit against my stomach with each stroke. She throws her head back, moaning as she takes her own pleasure from me.

“Fuck, you’re so beautiful. Getting yourself off while riding my cock. Your pussy squeezing me like a fucking vise.” I keep talking and she increases her speed, her breaths coming quicker. “That’s it, baby girl, keep going. Use me to make yourself come. Let me feel you soak my cock with your pleasure.” I reach down, pinching her clit between my fingers and she throws her head back as she explodes.

I let her ride it out. Her pussy clenches around me as her arousal drips down onto my balls, and finally her breathing starts to even out. I pull her off of me, flipping her onto her back before sinking myself back inside of her.

I lower my mouth down to hers, kissing her as I thrust inside of her. I reach down, wrapping my hand around the back of her neck, my thumb resting over her pulse point. I keep going, never letting up, and her pulse begins to quicken beneath my digit.

“Kaden,” she whimpers. Her body meets mine stroke for stroke. Our skin, slick with sweat, rubs against each other with each motion.

“I know, baby girl. Give me one more.” I increase my speed while reaching between us to rub her clit simultaneously. I pound into her, and she cries out, clenching around me as she comes again. I follow seconds behind, my movements jerky as I empty myself inside of her.

We lie there, connected, until we both catch our breaths and I slowly pull out of her. I stand and walk to grab a damp towel from her bathroom.

“Where’d you go?” she asks, her voice barely above a whisper. She’s lying on her side, looking at me, her eyes heavy with sleep.

“Got to clean you up, baby girl.” I reach down, gently cleaning her with the towel. I throw it in her hamper when I’m done and slide back in behind her. I pull her close into me once again, wrapping my arms around her tightly.

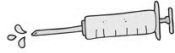
“I love you,” she whispers. “So much.”

“I love you so much more, beautiful girl,” I say, meaning it with everything I have. I press a gentle kiss against her head. “Sleep. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

I lie there, Logan wrapped in my arms, listening to the sound of her breathing even out as she falls into a deep sleep. It’s only after I’m sure she’s asleep that the tiredness takes over and I feel my eyes start to close. The last thought on my mind before sleep takes me is that all the lies, all the complications, none of them matter. All that matters is the perfect girl who I’m so fucking in love with sleeping in my arms, and I’m never fucking letting her go.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-THREE



Logan

“You his newest groupie?” Asher says from where he’s leaning against the door to Kade’s room in the tattoo shop.

I’m sitting in a spinning chair in the corner of the room while Kade tattoos a man named Justin. He’s probably in his midfifties and he’s completely covered in tattoos, a lot of which Kade did. He is currently adding to some sort of design on his calf.

“Bring your girlfriend to work day.” I shrug, smiling over at Asher, who laughs at me before turning his attention to Kade.

“Girlfriend, huh?” he pokes at him.

“Shut up.” Kade doesn’t even spare him a glance, focusing on the art in front of him.

“How’s it going, Justin?” Asher asks.

Kade told me Justin is a regular in the shop, so the fact that Asher knows him doesn’t come as a surprise.

“It’s going really great, Ash. I am a big fan of bring your girlfriend to work day.” He winks over at me.

“Watch it,” Kade warns, still focusing on the tattoo. Justin and Asher just laugh.

Having time off from work felt weird at first. Work has always been the place I run to, the place that helps distract me from my own issues by throwing myself into helping others. I

thought I would start to go crazy without it, but I haven't, and it's all because of Kade. We've practically spent every second together since he opened up to me four days ago. I've spent every night since then with him at his apartment.

I feel bad leaving Demi alone so much, I promised her I'd be home tonight, but she doesn't seem to mind. In fact, she seems to be out a lot more too. I'm not sure whether she's working more or if she's finally seeing someone, but it's on me for not asking. I've been a shitty friend, basically ditching her the past few days for her brother. I've never been this type of girl, wanting to spend every second with her boyfriend. But Kade makes me feel things I've never felt before and things I haven't felt in a long time. He makes me feel things I was scared to feel, like happiness.

Just sitting here, watching him work, doing what he loves, I feel a calmness that's been absent in my life for as far back as I can remember. He gets lost when he tattoos people, similar to how I get lost while watching him.

Since I've been spending so much time with him, I've started to notice small, new things every day. Things like the fact that he knows how to cook, and he actually seems to enjoy it, he hates watching TV, he is constantly inspired by things I find insignificant at first, which leads to him drawing masterpieces in his sketchbooks that proves me wrong. Oh, and he absolutely detests chocolate. We got into a huge argument over that one, considering it's one of my four main food groups. I made a joke about him being a vanilla person after that and he then proceeded to show me exactly how not vanilla he is.

It feels weird learning new quirks about him every day, but also incredibly natural. What worries me most though, is that even the ones I hate, I love. It's like I can't find any fault in him. But everybody has faults, so the fact I haven't found his has left me with constant anxiety over when the other shoe's going to drop. He's a contradiction, making me feel safe and comfortable but also just as fearful as I am excited about a future with him.

“So, when are you going to let me tat that virgin skin of yours?” Asher pulls me out of my thoughts, still leaning against the doorframe.

“The only one touching her skin will be me,” Kade speaks before I have the chance. “I’m working on something. It’s not ready.”

“For real? You’re gonna let him ink you? Come on, Lo, I know he’s your boy and all, but I gotta tell you, I’m much, much better than him,” Asher jokes. The more I’m around him, the more I’ve realized that sarcasm is his default setting. “Fuck.”

I look up in time to see Kade’s water bottle smack Asher in the middle of the chest.

“Nice.” Justin chuckles, reaching out to fist-bump Kade. Kade bumps his knuckles with his, rolling his eyes at Asher before getting back to work.

“Help, doctor, I’m injured. I think I need a full-body exam.” Asher pouts at me, clutching his chest in fake pain.

“You better get out of here before he hits you with more than a water bottle.” I laugh at him.

“Aren’t you a medical professional? Isn’t it your job to prevent people from getting hurt? Are you condoning his violence against me?”

“Technically, my job is to fix people after they already got hurt. I promise if he actually messes you up, I won’t let you die.” I shrug.

“This is outrageous. I’m disappointed in you, Lo.” He shakes his head sarcastically before backing out of the room.

I go back to playing Candy Crush on my phone while Kade works, occasionally sneaking glances at him in his element. Who knew watching his muscles flex and the veins in his hands pop out through his gloves around the tattoo gun would be such a turn-on. Kade finishes Justin and starts on his next client less than fifteen minutes later.

I've become pretty comfortable in the shop and have met almost all of the employees. I spend the day going back and forth between watching Kade and hanging out with Darla, the sweet older woman who works the front desk. According to Kade, she's in her midsixties but refuses to ever slow down. She has two full sleeves of tattoos and a nose ring, making her look completely badass. I won't lie and say she didn't intimidate me at first, but then she opened her mouth and started shoving pictures of her grandkids in my face and we became fast friends.

Kade was supposed to have an hour break to grab lunch from the sub shop next door, but a walk-in came in requesting him, and I've learned he isn't one to turn anyone down. So, I grabbed lunch with Asher instead. Asher is fun to hang out with. He's a total manwhore who flirts with anything that has a pulse and speaks in complete sarcasm more times than not, but underneath it all, he's a good guy. I can tell.

He asked about Kade and me, my work, and he tried his best to check in with me about the incident at work even though I could tell it made him uncomfortable. He even asked about Demi and how she was doing. It was the way he asked about her that intrigued me the most, like he was genuinely interested, desperate for any crumb I'd give him. I don't think Asher would ever act on anything with Demi because of Kade, but something tells me that he wants to. I'm not entirely sure she wouldn't want to as well.

I hang out at the shop until around nine at night, knowing Demi doesn't get off until then anyway. Kade is still in the middle of an appointment, but I have my own car with me, so after saying good night to him, I drive myself home. I end up still making it home before Demi, so I shower and change into sweats before plopping onto the couch to watch TV while I wait for her.

"Hey, stranger." Demi walks in, not even ten minutes later, still in her waitress uniform. She's smiling, although she looks completely exhausted.

"Long time no see, roomie." I smile back at her, moving over on the couch to make room for her. She drops her purse

onto the counter with an audible thump and then moves to plop down on the couch next to me.

“So, update me on your life. I feel like I’ve barely seen you. I know our schedules are always crazy with work, but it seems like we keep missing each other more than normal lately.” I turn my body sideways on the couch, so I’m facing her completely, crossing my feet under me to get comfortable.

“My life has been busy. I’ve been working extra shifts since we had two employees quit on us a few weeks ago and they still haven’t hired anyone new. It’s been pretty much work, eat, sleep, and repeat for me. That’s all.” She shifts, her eyes looking anywhere but at me. It’s how I know she’s hiding something from me.

Demi has always been a pretty shit liar, and most of the time, I let her get away with it, but I already feel distant from her the past few weeks, so I’m not in much of the mood to let this one go. I raise my eyebrow at her, letting her know that I’m fully aware she’s full of shit. She sighs, bringing her hands into her lap, anxiously wringing her fingers together.

“I’ve also been hanging out with Asher.” I open my mouth to ask her when the hell that happened, but she keeps going before I have a chance to cut in. “And before you overreact, it’s not like that. We’re just friends. I thought it could’ve been something more at first, but he’s loyal to my brother, he’s not going to go there, and it’s for the best that I don’t either. He’s just a good listener and fun to be around. I swear it’s nothing more than that. Plus, it’s your stupid fault.”

“Excuse me, miss, how is it my fault? And if it is my fault, you should clearly be thanking me.” I laugh and Demi reaches out to playfully slap my arm.

“So not funny. It’s your fault because I was meant to be hanging with my brother and trying to form a better relationship with him. But then you went and fell in love with him, and now my brother and best friend spend every second alone they have together. Last week, I got home from work, and you were spending the night at Kaden’s. I was bored, so I went to Carl’s. Asher was there alone, and we just started

talking. You guys have been busy, but not in a bad way. I promise I'm happy for you both, but it's just left room for Asher and me to hang out. It's been fun."

"Well, I am sorry for monopolizing your brother and for not making as much time as I should for you. Even if we are happy together, that doesn't mean I still don't want to hang with you." I smile at her, reaching across the couch and squeezing her hand in mine. "And as for Asher, I'm happy you guys are friends and hanging out. He's a good guy. He should just be prepared for Kade to castrate him when it turns into something more."

"After he went after my best friend? Please, the asshole has no leg to stand on." She rolls her eyes.

"So, you agree? It is going to turn into something more?" I smile at her, knowing I have her trapped. She stares at me, confused for a second, before putting it together.

"Oh, fuck off." She throws a throw pillow at me that I manage to dodge, laughter crawling its way up my throat. "We're just friends. I mean it."

"Okay, fine, sure. I believe you." I keep laughing as she throws another pillow at me. "I've missed this."

"I have too." She smiles at me. "I'd ask how you and my brother are doing, but I don't think I want any details." She scrunches up her nose, the idea of knowing exactly what Kade and I have done disgusting her. I smile to myself, remembering every little detail that she doesn't want to know.

"We're really good." I smile wider, the thought of Kade in general amplifying it. "I won't give you all the details, but I don't know. He's just surprised me. He makes me really, really happy, Dem."

"I've never seen you like this before. I know we don't talk about the deep and dark stuff, but I know you, Lo. Anyone you could've maybe been happy with in the past, you've run from. But with Kaden, you run toward him. He's the same with you. You guys are good for each other. I'm happy for you, Lo."

She's silent for a moment before continuing. "I'm proud of you."

Her words cause a lump to form in my throat that I promptly swallow down. The last time I heard those words was almost six years ago. I had just gotten accepted to med school. I was the happiest I had been in a long time, and Lennox was happy for me. It was one of her better days. I remember she hugged me tight and said them. "I'm proud of you." I haven't heard them since then.

"Thank you, Dem. I love you; you know that, right?" And I mean it. Demi has been my sounding board over the years. Quietly offering me strength even when I was too stubborn to ask for it. I've done everything I can to be that person for her too, and I'll always continue to. She crashed into my life at a time I didn't even know that I needed her, and she's been a light in it ever since.

"Well, of course you do. Have you met me? Who wouldn't?" I shake my head at her as she laughs. "I love you too, you dork. Now, what are we watching?" She reaches across the coffee table to grab the TV remote.

"You pick." I lean back onto the couch as she scrolls through the channels. Lennox pops into my head, and for the first time in a long time, sadness doesn't follow. I think about how much she'd love Demi, how much I think she would love Kade. I think about how she'd be proud of me. And for the first time in my life, I think I'm proud of myself.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-FOUR



Kaden

“One” by Metallica blares through the speakers at Carl’s as I sit at a small table in the back corner. June must have gotten control of the playlist again. The woman loves her metal. Can’t complain about it though. I’d much prefer Metallica over whatever the newest trending pop song is.

I’ve been sitting at the table for about forty-five minutes now. Alone for about thirty of those forty-five minutes. Asher came with me but called me boring once I pulled out my sketchbook and left me to go try and pick up women at the bar. I may look bored sitting in the corner alone with my sketchbook on the table and pencil in hand, but I have limited time to work on this piece.

Logan is supposed to be meeting me here as soon as her shift finishes, which was two minutes ago, meaning she should be here in the next fifteen minutes. I’ve been working during every free second that I have when I’m not with her to get this tattoo done. Her tattoo. It’s taken me longer than any drawing I’ve ever done. I just need it to be perfect for her.

I’ve thrown out countless sketches since she first asked me to create something for her. Drawing has always come easily to me, the art creating itself, but this has been different. Trying to come up with this piece for Logan, it’s felt like I’ve hit a wall. It’s like when you’re trying to talk to someone and the words are on the tip of your tongue, but they just won’t come out.

That was until she told me she loves me. Since then, it's as though the floodgates for creativity have opened and I know exactly what I need to design for her. Perfecting it hasn't been as easy, but I'm nothing if not a hard worker. The biggest issue has been trying to keep it from her. I don't want her to see it until it's one-hundred-percent finished, something she fights me on every chance she gets. The woman is fucking stubborn, but I haven't cracked yet and I don't plan to.

"Hi, handsome." The sweet sound of Logan's voice fills my ears as I slam the sketchbook closed. "Anything in there you want to show me?" She smiles, raising her eyebrows at me as she comes into view, standing next to the barstool I'm sitting in.

"Hi, pretty girl." I angle my body in the chair toward her, wrapping my arm behind her lower back and pulling her to stand between my legs. "And no, I don't. It's—"

"It's not ready yet." She tries, although failing, to mimic my voice. "I know, I know. It's what you always say. I still want to see."

"You will. When it's done. Now, come here, I missed you." I pull her closer to me, wrapping my free hand around the back of her neck to lower her lips to mine.

Her body melts into me, her soft lips instantly molding to my own. Each time I kiss Logan, it feels like coming up for fresh air after spending a lifetime drowning. She revives me every time.

"I missed you too," she says after pulling away, a soft smile on her face.

Those beautiful green eyes that captured me at first glance shine brighter than ever, filled with love and happiness that didn't use to be there. There's no guard over her eyes, no hiding things from me anymore. She knocked down her walls for me. The gut-wrenching feeling in my stomach reminds me of my guilt that I haven't done the same with her. That I don't know how I ever will. I will the thought away as she jumps up onto the barstool next to me at the four-top table, angling her body toward me.

“Get yourself a drink or get the hell out of my bar.” I look straight ahead, across the table, to meet the face of the raspy voice, already knowing who it is. Her eyes are focused on Logan though.

“How’re you doing, June?” Logan leans her elbows onto the table in front of us, propping her head up on her hands.

“I’d be doing better if you weren’t robbing me blind.” June places her hands on her hips before turning to me. “And only a beer for you? I sell top-shelf liquor here. You couldn’t go for any of the more expensive stuff?”

“You have a packed bar, June. The bartenders look overwhelmed by the number of people up there. I assure you we aren’t robbing you blind.” Logan laughs.

“You two together now?” June raises her eyebrow, ignoring Logan and keeping her attention on me.

“Yeah.” I look to Logan, a smirk tugging at my lips. I place my hand on her thigh under the table, giving it a gentle squeeze. “We are.”

“Good luck with that,” she says, not even trying to hide the snark in her voice. I can’t help but laugh.

“Is that my favorite lady?” Asher says to June as he approaches the table, sliding up next to her and wrapping his arm around her small figure.

“Now he is a good customer.” She gestures to Asher.

“Yes, I am.” Asher smiles wide, proud of his newest title.

“But I’m nobody’s lady, sugar.” She promptly pushes his arm off of her. He fake pouts at her, crossing his arms over his chest.

“He’s a good customer because he drinks like a fish, June.” I chuckle at her as she brushes off the shoulder Asher’s arm was just touching.

“He’s right. I wouldn’t want to see his liver,” Lo adds in, laughing with me.

“He is fine. He’s a big, strong boy who needs sustenance. He can handle it.” June pats him harshly on the back, making Asher cough and Lo laugh harder.

“That’s not really how it works,” Lo says.

“Nobody asked you,” June interrupts. “What are you drawing now?” She nods her head toward my sketchbook. Asher moves around her, pulling the barstool across from Lo out and sitting down.

“A tattoo for me,” Lo says before I can answer. “Although he won’t let me see it yet because he’s evil.”

“I’m not evil, it’s just not ready,” I correct.

She rolls her eyes at me while June looks back and forth between the two of us.

“You two will get married,” June speaks.

Asher nearly chokes on his drink, trying to hold back his laughter while Lo’s eyes look two seconds from popping out of her head.

“You’ll pay me to supply the booze. Understood?” She looks at me.

“Understood.” I chuckle under my breath. June nods at me, flashing a dirty look at both Lo and Asher before turning to walk away. Demi walks up to the table just as June walks away. June stops before passing her, looking her up and down.

“Don’t break anything,” she says to Demi before walking away. Demi opens her mouth to speak back, looking half-surprised, half-offended. But with a parting stare from June, she keeps her mouth shut.

“I don’t break things.” Demi plops down into the barstool next to Asher, looking like a kid who got their candy stolen.

“Yeah, babe, you do.” Asher laughs at her, and she pouts further. The fact that he calls her babe doesn’t go unnoticed, but I will myself to remember that it’s Asher. He would probably call a rock babe.

I look over to Lo, thinking she must have invited Demi, and she looks just as surprised to see her as I am. Her eyes flicker back and forth between Demi and Asher.

“What are you doing here, Dem?” I ask her, confusion evident in my voice.

“Same thing as you, I assume. What, am I not allowed to come drink at my favorite bar?” Her eyes look everywhere but at me as she says it. I stay quiet, staring at her and waiting for her real answer.

“I invited her,” Asher says casually, shrugging his shoulders.

“Since when do you talk to my little sister, Asher?” I ask.

Logan places her hand on top of mine which is still resting on her thigh, trying to calm me down from getting pissed at my best friend.

“Oh, fuck off, it’s nothing like that. Demi’s cool. We’re friends. I wasn’t vibing with anyone at the bar and I got bored so I texted her to come hang.” I stay quiet, mulling over his words. “Kade, trust me,” he adds.

“I do,” I finally say. Demi lets out a breath that it seems like she’s been holding for the entire conversation while Asher smiles cheekily at me before taking a swig of his drink.

“Alright, Ash, come buy me a ginger ale.” Logan stands from the table, pulling Asher up by his arm.

“I still can’t believe you’re drinking that shit at a bar. You’re ruining my reputation here,” Asher whines as Lo pulls him toward the bar, leaving me alone with Demi.

The silence rings loud between the two of us. I’ve seen Demi less than a handful of times since she cooked dinner for us. Demi is a good person, and it took me too long to realize that. I’ve put more effort into getting to know my little sister in the past few months than I have my entire life, but even I can admit it’s still not enough. We’re friendly with each other, but there are still walls up on both of our parts. Neither of us is willing to talk about the elephant in the room, which is her

father. I say her father because he never cared to live up to that title for me.

“How have you been?” I ask her. She lifts the beer bottle set up on the table in front of her, taking a swig of it before setting it back down.

“I’ve been okay. How about you?” She runs the tip of her finger around the rim of her bottle, focusing on the motion rather than looking up at me.

“I’ve been good.” I pause, trying to gauge whether she is distracted or pissed at me. “I’m sorry I haven’t seen you much in the past few weeks. Life has been busy, you know?”

“I know that, Kaden. My life is always busy, yet I still found time to practically stalk you since I found out you existed, begging you to let me into your life. I thought we were finally getting somewhere, and then you met Lo. Don’t get me wrong, I’m beyond happy for the both of you, but I mean, really, Kade? I’ve talked to Asher more in the past few weeks than I’ve ever talked to you.”

“Logan is your best friend, and I’ve been doing everything in my power to make her happy, which is something you should be happy and supportive about. I’m sorry I haven’t had as much time to spend with you, but the jealousy is a little childish, Demi. And I still don’t understand why the fuck you’ve been talking to Asher so much.”

“Fuck off, Kaden. Asher and I are just friends. He’s been there to listen to me when nobody else has. He’s asked me about myself, my life, anything besides the stupid small talk you and I always seem to end up making. All I’ve ever wanted was to know you, my older brother. Not the surface-level douche who’s sitting in front of me. And how fucking dare you say I’m jealous of your happiness. Logan is my best friend, and all I want for her is to be happy. You’re my brother. All I’ve ever wanted is for you to be happy. You both deserve the type of happiness that you seem to find with each other. I would never not support you both. But I still exist, Kaden. Which is something that you seem to have forgotten.”

Her words light a fire in me. Anger courses through my veins. Realistically, I know that everything bad that's happened in my life is not Demi's fault. She was a child. She had no say, same as me. But the spiteful part of me still places blame on her. Maybe it's simply because she's the one here.

I raised myself while taking care of my mother. I had a father who beat her for being sick, then found a new perfect woman to knock up and go play happy family with when he was through. I watched the life leave my mother's eyes with every day he was gone, I watched her give up, I watched her find drugs, and I found her after she was gone.

Demi had a stable family. Two parents who loved her. A dad who taught her how to ride a bike and then later drive a car. A mom who baked cookies for the school bake sale. A family who celebrated holidays together, who was there smiling and clapping for her at her high school graduation. My mom was too high to bother showing up to anything for me. And my asshole sperm donor, well, he was with her.

"I haven't fucking forgotten about you, Demi. How could I ever forget about you? Like you said, you've stalked me for fucking years. I did everything in my power to be kind to you, civil. I never wanted a relationship with you. I never wanted a relationship with daddy dearest's golden child. You have everything you could possibly want. Why the fuck you would want a relationship with the kid your father left is beyond me. But you pushed and fucking pushed. And I gave in. I'm fucking trying, Demi, but sometimes it's hard to even look at you because all I see is him."

"And what the fuck do you think I see when I look at you?" Demi's voice is loud, gaining the attention of the people surrounding us. Tears fill her eyes as they meet mine dead on. The same eyes as mine. The same eyes as him. I know I look like the piece of shit, too. It pisses me off every time I look in the mirror. But I've never thought that would be a problem for her.

"Alright, that's enough," Asher says sternly from where he now stands with Lo at the end of the table.

I don't know how much they heard, but Logan looks concerned, and Asher just looks pissed. He rests a hand on Demi's arm, comforting her. It should piss me off that he's earned the right to comfort her sometime in the past few weeks, but as I process her words, the guilt that there's a possibility I was wrong about her perfect life sets in. I'm her big brother. I should be comforting her and protecting her from assholes, not being the one to make her cry. Right now, I'm thankful to Asher for stepping up and being who I cannot.

"What's that supposed to mean, Demi?" I ask, my voice low, trying to stay calm instead of letting the anger consume me. I watch as she swallows back her tears, quickly wiping away the single stray that drips down her cheek. I look over to Asher, whose jaw shifts back and forth. I don't know that I've ever seen him this pissed.

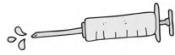
"Nothing, Kaden. Just nothing." She stares at me for a long moment before turning to Logan. "Drive me home, please?"

"Of course, let's go." Logan doesn't hesitate, turning to follow her to the door. Demi doesn't spare me another look, practically sprinting to get out of the place while Asher stares at me, exuding nothing but anger.

It's when Logan subtly turns around just before following Demi out the door, disappointment covering her face, that I know just how badly I've fucked up. The shame sets in and I know that I never want to see that look on her face again, let alone be the cause of it. The sad part is, I know I will.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-FIVE



Logan

“Do you want to talk about it?” Demi slams the door to the apartment closed after I follow in behind her. She ignores me, walking straight toward the kitchen. I follow her, curious as to what the hell she’s doing.

She moves frantically around the kitchen. Moving from cabinet to cabinet, grabbing bowls, utensils, and ingredients from each. She pauses for a second to flip her head upside down, gathering her hair together and then wrapping it into a messy bun on the top of her head. She then moves on to the pantry and refrigerator, grabbing ingredient after ingredient so quickly I’m not sure she even knows what she’s grabbing.

“Dem, what are we doing here?” I ask hesitantly. She doesn’t acknowledge me yet again. She moves over to the counter to look over the ingredients she’s now laid out. She starts mumbling something to herself, but it’s too quiet for me to make out the words. “Demi,” I say louder, finally gaining her attention.

“What?” she asks, looking completely frazzled. “Oh. We’re baking. Cupcakes,” she says as if it’s the most normal thing in the world. I stare at her for a second before nodding.

“Okay, can I help?”

“No.” Her answer is so quick that if I wasn’t aware of how bad I am at any sort of cooking or baking, I’d be offended. “Don’t touch anything.” She pauses, taking the first breath

I've seen her take since we got home. "You can just sit there. Okay?"

"Okay." I sit back, watching her carefully as she gets back to it. I've seen Demi in a panic more times than I can count, but this is different. This is avoidance. This is what I do.

I think back to the bar and what Kade said to her. I'm pissed the fuck off at him. But I also know the full story of what he went through. I know what he's thinking. That Demi had it all while he was left with shit. Demi's never told me the full story of her parents and her homelife, but through comments over the years, I can confidently say it's not what Kade thinks it was. Regardless, it still doesn't make it okay for Kade to speak to her that way. But I also remember times I spoke to Lennox much worse.

My phone vibrates from where it sits next to me on the counter, and I know that it's him. While he didn't hurt me, and I don't need any sort of apology from him, he did hurt the girl who has been there for me when nobody else has, even if he didn't mean to. I saw the regret on his face as we walked out. It was sincere. He cares, even if a part of him doesn't want to. It's his job to let her know that, though. I pick up the phone and open the text thread.

Kade: Is she okay?

Me: She will be. You fucked up.

Kade: I'll fix it.

Me: Good.

I put the phone back down on the counter, knowing there's nothing left to say. I sit back and watch as Demi works through her mental breakdown with a bowl, spoon, and some batter. She stays quiet the entire time, and so do I. She makes the batter, fills the cupcake pans, and puts them in the oven. Then she focuses on making the frosting as they bake. She

starts cleaning up the disaster that our kitchen has become while they cool, and then finally, she frosts them. It's only when there are two dozen cupcakes, fully baked and decorated, sitting on a large serving plate in front of me that she finally stops and looks up at me.

"He's wrong," she whispers. She sounds broken and looking in her eyes, for the first time since I've known her, she looks it. "I didn't have the perfect family he thinks I did."

"I know, Demi. I know." I try to keep my voice sympathetic but not pitiful. I know how pity feels in situations like this, and I know Demi well enough to know it's not what she'd want. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to, Dem," I say softly. She stares at me, and I see the tears fill her eyes before she looks down at the counter, hiding them from me.

"He beat me." She sounds small as she says it, a complete contrast to the loud and light Demi I've always known. "Constantly. And she watched. She told me it was my fault for making him angry. Part of me felt bad for her though, because he hit her too. But then that was also my fault." Her voice shakes as tears are freely sliding down her face. "She was right. It was my fault. Not because I made him angry but because I took it. I stayed quiet and I let them abuse me for years. I was weak. I am weak."

"You're a survivor," I say, my voice firm. I stand from the barstool, walking around the counter to stand in front of her. I gently grab her hands from the counter, forcing her to look at me. "You were a child. Every single thing they did is a reflection of them, not you. They were supposed to be the two people who loved you the most, and they failed. But you survived and persevered, not because of them, but in spite of them. You are not now and never have been weak, Demi. You are a strong and beautiful survivor."

She drops her head onto my shoulder as she sobs. I wrap my arms around her and hug her tightly. We stand there for minutes, her tears soaking through my shirt. I just hold her, letting her break down until there's nothing left. A flashback to Lennox sobbing in my lap directly after the shooting plays

through my head, and I clench my jaw to fight back any emotion of my own.

The parallel between the two moments hits me hard. And for just a moment, I hug Demi tighter and imagine she's Lennox. I imagine a world where my twin is still breathing. A world where she may have been broken down, but she survived. I imagine that my sister is a survivor. I squeeze my eyes shut, wanting to live in a world of pretend for just a moment. But then her crying slows and she pulls away, and it's Demi standing in front of me, not Lennox. And I remember that my sister isn't a survivor anymore. She's a victim.

"You are too, you know?" Demi's voice brings me back to reality. "A survivor. And you don't have to feel guilty for that."

"I don't," I lie. Her words feel like a punch in the gut. My stomach sinks at the realization that I don't hide things as well as I thought I did.

"You do," she says right back. "I see you, Lo. I watch you read that journal over and over, I've watched you deny yourself happiness for years because you don't think you deserve it, I've watched you work yourself ragged to avoid actually living."

I look away, hating that she's right about every piece of it.

"Look at me, Logan." I do. "It is not your fault that they're gone. It is not your fault." She emphasizes. I feel wetness rolling down my cheeks, but I don't wipe it away. I stand there, letting the silent tears fall as I let her words sink in, urging myself with everything that I have to believe them. "The world has taken from us, and we've survived. But we don't need to survive anymore, Lo. It's time for us to live."

"Okay." It's the only word I can manage.

"Okay?"

"Okay." I take a deep breath, wiping the tears from my face. "Let's live."

"Let's live." Demi smiles wide and I can't help but smile with her because I not only said the words, but I mean them.

“You look like a raccoon. You know that, right?” She starts laughing, loud and carefree.

“Well, so do you.” I join in with her.

This is what I’ve always wished for me and Lennox. For us to overcome together. I’ve blamed myself for years for it not happening, but with Demi’s words still ringing in my ears, the guilt weighing me down for years lessens. I don’t know if it will ever fully disappear, yet still, I let myself hope. Demi’s laughter slows and I watch her face become serious again.

“You can’t tell Kaden any of this, Lo.” I never would, and I think she knows that, but I understand her need to make sure.

“I would never do that to you, Demi. It’s not my story to tell.” I pause, debating whether I should bite my tongue or not.

“But you think I should.” She says the words for me, and I nod. “I will. Eventually. But I’m not ready yet.” I go to speak, but she cuts me off, knowing me well enough to know what I’m going to say again. “I know that he blames me because he thinks my life looked a lot different than it has. If I told him the truth now, he would just pity me.”

“I don’t think he would, Demi. I think he would understand you.” I understand the fear of being misunderstood. I tried to understand Lennox, and I never could. But this, Kade would get.

“Whether I was abused or not, he owes me an apology for tonight. He was a dick.”

I nod, agreeing with her.

“But I hear you. I promise I’ll tell him when I’m ready.” She pauses, a mischievous smile overtaking her face. “If you promise I, not Theo, can be maid of honor when you marry my brother.” I snort-laugh, not at all surprised that this is where the conversation has led us, considering this is Demi.

“If, heavy on the if, there is any sort of marriage, and I decide to have some extravagant wedding with bridesmaids and groomsmen, then I promise you’ll be maid of honor. Now, I’m going to shower the raccoon off of me and go to sleep.” I smile back at her and turn to walk toward the bathroom. “Plus,

it'll only make sense since Asher will probably be his best man. We can't have Theo stealing your man from you," I yell back to her, laughter following.

"Shut up, he's not my man," is the last thing I hear yelled back at me before I close my bedroom door behind me and walk into the connected bathroom.

I close and lock the bathroom door as well and stare at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. I look disgusting, yet I somehow feel better than I have in a long time. I don't cry often, and I hate it when I do. It's not the crying itself that I hate, but it's this moment right here, looking at myself after it's over. Mascara drips down my face. My eyes are red and puffy, the same eyes I share with her. I look like Lennox.

Not shocking considering we were twins, but I mean, in this moment, when I look broken, it's when I look most like her. She wasn't always broken. She was once full of joy, love, and light before she succumbed to the darkness that filled the world. She stepped into that black hole and could never find her way out of it. What hurts is that this is how I remember her most. This is the version of herself she left for me to remember, eternally written in that stupid journal of hers to torment me.

I continue to stare until it isn't my sister's face I'm looking at, but my own. It's only then that I realize the main difference between myself now and Lennox then. Our eyes may be the same, but there's still light in mine. Hope for something more. Hope for the future. Hope is something she never had. Even when I've tried not to hope over the years, it's there, lingering. It's how I've managed to get myself to where I am. I realize it's time I stop looking at it as such a bad thing.

I turn on the shower, letting it heat up as I get undressed. I step inside, letting the scalding water burn my skin. I stand there until my skin is bright red and pruned. Then I finally move. I wash my body, my face, my hair, and I shave. It's not until I'm done that I even realize I cut my ankle with the razor. Flashbacks attempt to roll through my head like a fucked-up movie as I watch the blood fall. I watch it mix with water and circle down the drain.

Red. Blood. So much blood. It's all there, seared into my memories as a painful reminder of what I lost. A painful reminder of the losses I'll never escape. But it's also a reminder that while the loss will always be there, Demi is right. It's time for me to stop living in the past and enjoy my life in the present.

I step out of the shower, dry myself, and get dressed before walking back into my bedroom. I grab the journal from the night table drawer and climb into bed. I open it to entry number four. The last entry that I'll read since I refuse to read the fifth. I stare at the words in front of me, the words I've read hundreds of times and decide this will be the last time I read them. This will be the last time I torment myself with her words. And with that, I start reading.

TWENTY-SIX

DEPRESSION

July 1, 2016

To anyone who will listen,

Surprised to hear from me? Me too, to be honest. It's been almost two years or something since I wrote in this thing, right? I'd like to give the excuse that I just forgot, but I haven't. I just haven't had much to say. It's a lot of work to put pen to paper, and my capacity to do any sort of work is below zero these days.

But something happened today. Something that forced me to pull this book out from under my mattress where it's been hidden since my last entry. I wish I could say it was a good thing, but I'd be lying. Before we get into that, I guess I should catch you up on what you've missed over the last year and a half.

I'm still taking Vicodin, probably more than I should be. I've tried to stop a few times since we last talked. One

time it even worked, but it only lasted a little under four months, until the two-year anniversary of the shooting, to be exact. Is anniversary even the word to use?

Grammatically, it should be, but it sounds so wrong.

Anniversaries are normally dates that should be celebrated. The day of the shooting is not one of those days.

Logan practically ignores the day, treating it the same as she would any other. She says letting what happened that day two years ago define how we look at it every year is giving them power. I can understand it, but I also can't just dismiss it how she does. Especially when the news likes to make sure to shove it in our faces in every way possible. Even if I wanted to escape it, there're reminders everywhere I turn.

Anyway, the point is I'm taking the pills again. I'm not sure how much they're even working anymore with the tolerance I've built, but I'm taking them, nonetheless. Last year was a mess. I spent far too much time in fancy rich kids' college dorms. My mom thought it was great. I was going out, making friends. It was more like I was sitting in a drugged-up haze in the corner while college kids partied around me because I was too high to get myself home. But she didn't need to know that.

Logan always knew something was up, but she never said anything. We hadn't been doing much of saying anything to each other those days. Last year she signed me up for community college without telling me and we got in a pretty big argument over that one. I won it and dropped out before I even started. She kept pushing

though, trying to get me to do things, to live. Problem was I didn't really care about living anymore. I still don't.

Our only conversations became arguments. Her begging for her twin sister back, me trying to explain to her that the Lennox she was asking for died right next to Emersyn. My body is alive, my organs are functioning, but everything else is gone, destroyed, decayed. Around the end of September last year, she broke down. She sobbed and begged me quite literally on her knees to go back to therapy, to try. Lo never cried. I gave in.

I went back to therapy for a few months, and it actually helped. That's when I was able to stop the pills. Let me tell you, it was not fucking easy, withdrawal is hell, but I did it. I wouldn't say that I felt healed in any way, and I was still struggling, though I felt slightly better. I

felt like just maybe I could survive.

My therapist set me up on this app around October.

It's called "Safe Space," and it's an app for those who

struggle with mental health to talk to other people

anonymously who are also struggling. The idea is that you

find someone on there who understands what you're going

through, and you can help each other work through it

together. I talked to a couple people back and forth on

there, can't say any of them really helped or made me

feel any more understood. I tried though.

There was one woman that I liked though. I knew her

as Momma036, but I later found out her name was

Jocelyn. She was probably the only person on the app

that I had some really good conversations with. Funnily

enough, mental health was one of the few things we didn't

discuss.

She would ask me how I was doing, I'd say like shit, and she'd respond with a laughing emoji saying, "Me too, sweetheart." We talked about random things, favorite foods, movies, books. We just talked, and she made me laugh. It was the only normalcy I felt in a world that felt like a sham. On November 12, I received a message from her account that looked something like this.

Momma036: Hi. I'm sorry to bother you. My mother, Jocelyn, who you've been talking to, it seems, passed away a couple of days ago. I'm not really sure how this app works, but I found her phone and saw your messages and I felt like it's something I should tell you.

I stared at the message for over an hour before I

responded, and even then, all I wrote was, "Fuck." What else was I supposed to say? The only person I liked on the app was dead and now her kid was messaging me, and it just felt like a fucking mess. I figured that would be the end of it, but he responded. "Yeah, fuck." was all he said, and I couldn't help but laugh because it sounded exactly like something his mother would say.

I'm not sure how or why, but we kept talking after that. First about his mother, then about him, then about me, and then just random things. We talked like friends, having normal conversations. I talked to Jocelyn's son, who had become my only friend even if he had no clue who I was, I worked, and I went to therapy. I was acting normal. Even so, I still felt like I was dying.

By the time January hit, I decided I was done with

therapy. I gave it another try like Lo begged me to, but I'd hit a plateau. I was good enough at pretending I was fine to get through the sessions, but I didn't want to talk. I was done with talking, it was too painful. I just wanted to be. Therapy didn't allow me to do that, so I quit.

Then, I started taking Vicodin again and things have been steadily downhill since. I just can't find it in me to care anymore. I still talk to Jocelyn's son. Not as much as I first did, and our conversations often lag. I still try to message him every now and then though. After all, it is one of the very few human interactions I still have in my life, even if it is through a phone screen.

Lo was upset when I quit therapy, though she couldn't say much. She asked me to try, and I did. Instead of arguing with me, she now walks on eggshells around me,

coddling me. She treats me like I'm broken, and she's right. I am. And now you're pretty much all caught up. That's what you've missed on the life of Lennox. Now, for what happened earlier today to make me pick this stupid journal up again.

I had just gotten out of the shower. I didn't bother taking my mascara off before I went in and it wasn't until I was already soaking wet that I realized my face wash was on the counter, so I figured I would just wash my face after. I stared in the mirror at myself. Black mascara surrounded my eyes and dripped down my face. My eyes were red and puffy from the tears that I didn't even notice fell in the shower. My face was pale and sunken in from my lack of appetite lately. I stared into my own eyes, searching for something. Anything. But

there was nothing. I was empty.

That was my rock bottom. And I no longer have the energy or want to claw myself out of the early grave I've let myself sink into. Every day feels like more of a struggle than the last. I quit work a few weeks ago. My drugs are running out and I don't have the money to replace them, but I can't think about that.

Logan got into medical school in Seattle. I was so fucking proud of her, and I used all the energy I could muster to make sure she knew. A couple days later, she asked me to come with her, live there with her. I'd already used so much energy to congratulate her, I couldn't find any more to argue, I just nodded yes at her. She smiled so wide, she seemed so happy. Damn, happiness? That's something I barely even recognize anymore. We are supposed to be

moving the first week of August. She will move there the first week of August.

I spend my days in the gazebo. That's where I am now. I lie here on the hard wooden floor that splinters into my back, staring through the cracks of the decayed roof at the sky. The sun shines bright, but everything still looks dull from my point of view. I do this every day. I walk here and then I just lie for hours on end, surrounded by nothing but the trees.

But it's gotten harder to get myself here, and then once I do, it's even harder to get myself home. My bones feel heavy and it's becoming difficult to get myself to move. Just getting out of bed feels like what I would imagine climbing Mount Everest would feel like. Even the numbness hurts now.

My point is I'm just fucking tired. And I'm tired of being tired. And I guess that's why I'm writing this.

Because none of this is what I wanted, none of this is what I want. But I've finally acknowledged it. I think I finally have acceptance.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-SEVEN



Kaden

“Hey, can we talk?” I ask Asher as I walk into the back room of the shop that functions as our break room. It’s not much, a small room with a mini fridge and microwave, a black leather couch in the corner, and a wooden table with chairs in the middle. Asher sits on the couch, his face glued to his phone, actively ignoring my existence.

He’s been acting this way all morning. After Demi and Lo left last night, he looked like he was ready to lay into me. I rarely ever see Asher get pissed. Normally he’s the one calming me down when I lose my temper. Last night though, he looked like he was using every ounce of self-control he had to stop himself from pounding his fist into my face. I get it, I was a fucking dick, I’d want to beat the shit out of me too. Why he was acting that way for Demi though is what concerns me.

“Ash, come on. You can fucking yell at me if you want, but I already apologized to Demi. We’re good. What I don’t understand is why you and I aren’t?”

He keeps his attention on his phone, his fingers moving quickly over the keyboard typing. I wait a minute, watching while something or someone on there makes him smile. I’m about to give up when he finally looks up to me, all traces of the smile gone from his face.

“Your sister’s a good person, and she’s got her own shit. I don’t know what and even if I did, it’s on you to ask her, but

she doesn't deserve the shit you put her through last night. I don't want to yell at you, it's not my place. Demi and I are just friends. I won't lie and say my mind hasn't gone there. You know me well enough to know it has, but I would never act on it with her. I don't do relationships. She deserves more than I could ever offer her, and she knows that too. That doesn't mean I like seeing her treated that way."

"I fucking know that, Ash. She's my sister. I don't want to see her upset either, and I definitely don't want to be the one making her upset. I let my own shit stop me from seeing the full picture with her. It was fucked, and I regretted what I said as quickly as I said it. I apologized and made sure she knew," I say, and I mean it.

I called Demi as soon as I woke up this morning. I felt like shit all night, and I would've called sooner, but I'd talked to Lo before she went to bed, and she told me to give her some space for the night. Demi was quieter than I'd ever heard her on the phone. Completely different from the loud, lively, and sometimes annoying little sister I've been getting to know.

I apologized to her and tried to explain that everything I said had nothing to do with her and everything to do with her father. Not that that's an excuse for speaking to her the way I did, but I needed her to understand that I didn't mean the words that I said, and she seemed like she did. She said she forgave me, and we both agreed we needed to actually talk, and not over the phone. I know there are pieces of her life that I've created in my head that probably aren't true. I just hope that one day she trusts me enough to fill me in as to what those pieces are.

I walk over to the couch and sit down at the opposite end. "And as for you and Demi, I trust you. Mostly."

"You should trust me, Kade. I'm not gonna fuck around with her. Like I said, I can tell she's got enough of her own shit. She's just a good friend," he says, and I nod.

"So, we're good?" I ask.

"Yeah, we're good." He smiles genuinely. "Shit, I got an appointment." He jumps up after looking at the time on his

phone and walks out the door.

My next appointment isn't for another fifteen minutes, so I stay sitting on the break room couch, scrolling through my phone to pass the time. Lo is working until eight o'clock tonight and then spending the night at home with Demi again. She said Theo and Gabby are also coming over for movie night since all three of them have off tomorrow. I'm happy that she gets to have a stress-free night with her friends. But I'm also jealous as fuck that she's spending her night with them instead of me. Both things can be true.

"Have you told her yet?" King's voice pulls my attention as he walks into the room, a serious look on his face. He closes the door behind him and leans against it, crossing his arms over his chest.

"No." I sigh, running my hands through my hair. "I haven't."

"God fucking dammit, Kade. What the fuck are you doing?" His expression is a mixture of concern and disappointment.

"I know I have to tell her, King. The fact that I haven't is fucking eating me alive every time I'm with her. I'm just waiting for the right time."

"There's never going to be a right fucking time, Kade. If there was, it would've been right when you figured out who she was." He shakes his head. "Come on, kid. You're better than this."

"Am I? Because, from where I'm standing, the thought of telling her now and watching her leave me feels a whole lot fucking worse than not telling her."

"Don't do that shit. You know you can't keep this from her forever. I like Lo and it's damn obvious that you love her. The longer you lie to her, the worse you'll hurt her. And you'll end up hurting yourself too."

"Fuck." I drop my head into my hands, pulling at my hair to stop myself from punching something. "It all leads back to her, you know?" I stand up from the couch and start pacing.

“This started with her, my mother. I only started talking to L, or I guess I should call her Lennox now, because of that stupid app on her phone. Then Lennox had to give me, a guy she doesn’t even fucking know, the stupid responsibility of finding and taking care of her sister. I avoid it for years, then Lo shows up in front of me, and of course she has to be the best fucking person I’ve ever known. And now here I am, keeping all sorts of fucked-up secrets from her. It all fucking started with her.”

“Grow the fuck up, Kaden.” King grabs my shoulders, forcing me to stop my pacing and look at him. “Your mother was ill. None of this leads back to her. It may have been her conversation to begin with, but you were the one who chose to continue it. Maybe none of that happened and you still found Logan. Or maybe all of that is what led to you finding her. Who the fuck knows. What I do know is that this is your situation now, and you can’t hide this from her forever.”

“I don’t know what the fuck is wrong with me.” I sit back down on the couch and King moves to sit down where Asher was before.

“Nothing is wrong with you. You love her. You’re scared of losing her. I know the feeling.”

“Jillian didn’t deserve you, King. You did nothing but try to make her happy. You gave her everything she ever wanted. The fact that it wasn’t enough for her is on her, not you.”

“She wanted an abortion, you know?” I didn’t. “When she got pregnant with Ellie. I begged her not to, asked her to marry me. She said yes. I don’t regret it for a second, not if it led to me having my girls. But I knew it wasn’t what she wanted, and I asked for it anyway. She didn’t want to be a mother, and I tried to force her to be one. I still fucking hate her for staying long enough to know them before she left, but I also can’t say it wasn’t partially my fault.”

“She could’ve told you no,” I say. He laughs, but it lacks any substance.

“I didn’t give her much of a choice.” He shakes his head. “My point is, we all make mistakes, Kade. Your mom made them, Lo’s sister made them, you’ve made them, and hell, I’m

sure Lo has made plenty too. Tell her the truth, fix this one before you don't have the chance to."

He stands up, walks back over to the door, and opens it. He turns over his shoulder to look at me before stepping out of the room. "Your appointment starts in two minutes if they're not already here. Take a minute and then get out there."

"King?" I call as he starts to walk out the door. He pauses, turning around to look at me. "Thank you."

He nods his head before turning back around and walking out, leaving me alone in the room. I know everything King said is right. I have to tell her, and there's never going to be a right time to do it. I also know that when I do tell her, there's a good chance that I'll lose her, and I'm not ready for that. Not yet. Not ever. I stand up and walk to the lobby to meet my client but find it empty aside from Darla.

"Hey, hon. He just called. He's running late, should be here in about fifteen. That alright with you?" Darla says, only looking up long enough to see that it's me before going back to whatever she's doing on her computer.

"Yeah, no problem. Just send him back when he gets here if you can," I respond.

"You got it, sugar."

"Thanks, Darla." I nod at her before walking back to my room in the shop. I leave the door open behind me, sit down on my stool and grab my sketchbook. I open it to Lo's tattoo.

It's almost done. I just need to add the finishing touches and then it will be ready to show her and hopefully ink onto her if she loves it as much as I do. I've been working on it tirelessly to make it everything she wanted, and I think I've finally done it.

No, not think. Know. I know this is exactly what she's been wanting. Fuck. If she does leave me, the thought of someone else tattooing her, someone else having their hands on her skin, is probably enough to drive me to murder. It may be selfish, but I want my mark on her. It may be everything she asked for, but it's also a reminder of me to her. The person

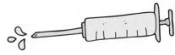
who created it for her. Fuck knows I'm taking advantage of that.

With that in mind, I know that I can't tell her until it's inked. It'll be ready by tomorrow and I'll ink it on her as soon as she lets me. It's only a couple more days that at this point won't make any difference. I can hear King's voice in my head, hell, I can hear my own inner conscience telling me this is wrong. But with Lo, I can't seem to stop myself from making wrong decisions.

Maybe it's love, or maybe it's obsession, but she's never fucking getting rid of me. With my ink on her skin, I'm hoping it'll be harder for her to forget that. Harder for her to forget me. Logan Hart is mine and in this moment, I promise myself that she always fucking will be.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-EIGHT



Logan

“So, tell me all the details.” Theo rests his chin in his hands, leaning forward with his elbows resting on the coffee table in front of him. All of his attention pointed directly at me.

He, Gabby, Demi, and I have been spending the night bingeing the newest episodes of whatever Theo’s reality show of the week is. I honestly already forgot the name of it. The three of them decided somewhere during the second episode they were going to take a shot every time one of the girls said, “Fuck.” I didn’t participate, thinking there should be at least one coherent person between the four of us. And thank goodness I didn’t because the three of them are completely shit-faced.

We just finished the last episode about half an hour ago and it’s already one in the morning. Theo and Gabby decided they were sleeping here before they started drinking so at least I don’t have to worry about that. All four of us are now sitting on the floor surrounding the coffee table while Theo complains to us about his latest fling. Well, that’s what he was doing.

“Details about what?” I play dumb, hoping Theo is drunk enough that his attention span isn’t clear.

“About Doomsday’s brother, duh. I want all the details, specifically about the sex. Is it mind-blowing? Tell me everything.” I hoped wrong.

“Tell him nothing. I do not want to hear the words sex and my brother used in the same sentence. Ever.” Demi gags. “Lo can do whatever she wants with him, but I refuse to hear about it.”

“Actually, I’m with Theo on this one. I’d kind of like to know,” Gabby chimes in.

“Traitor,” Demi gasps.

“Everything is great, fantastic, mind-blowing, and whatever other synonyms you can think of. I’d rather not watch Demi puke everywhere, so that’s all you’re getting, okay?” I respond.

“See. This is why she’s my best friend.” Demi smiles an overly drunk smile, grabbing on to my arm and leaning her head onto my shoulder.

“You’re such a buzzkill, Tink.” Theo rolls his eyes. He takes a sip of the water bottle I forced him to start drinking after he almost fell trying to get to the bathroom.

“Shut up, Alvin,” Demi and I say at the same time. We look at each other briefly before bursting out in laughter, Gabby joining.

“Whatever, you bitches. I’m tired and I need my beauty sleep. Doomsday, I’m sleeping with you in your bed.” Theo stands, walking to her room.

“Ugh. But you snore.” Demi chases after him, leaving me and Gabby still laughing at their expenses.

“I’m good here on the couch,” Gabby says, grabbing the blanket Theo was using from the floor and moving to lie across the couch with it.

“Are you sure, Gab? I don’t mind sharing my bed with you, it’s really no big deal.”

“I’m sure. Trust me, after living with Kyson I think I could sleep just about anywhere.” She yawns.

“I’m sorry, Gabs. Is he still bothering you?”

“All he does is bother me.” She yawns, her eyes closing of their own volition. “I think I bother him too, though,” she mumbles so quietly I’m not sure she even knows she said it out loud.

“Gabby?” I get nothing in response. She’s fast asleep within seconds.

I turn off all the apartment lights and head to bed. I lie there, exhausted from the night. Sitting around, spending time with my best friends is exactly what I needed. I smiled and laughed and for the first time in a long time, I didn’t feel guilty about it. I felt genuinely happy. I feel alive. And even as I close my eyes, I know I want to keep this feeling.



“So, I heard you and your girlfriend got into a screaming match at Carl’s the other night.” I recognize Kayla’s voice loud and clear as I approach Kaden’s room in the tattoo shop. I slow my steps, stopping about a foot away from the door, not wanting my presence to be known just yet.

“You heard wrong.” Kade’s voice is firm. Annoyed.

“Hmm.” I hear her heels click against the floor and it takes everything in me to stay still. “So, the two of you are still together?”

“Yes, Kayla. We’re still together. Now, I already told you, if you’re looking for ink, talk to Asher or King. Not me. And if you’re looking for anything else, you can get the fuck out of here and go find it.”

“I just want to talk to you, Kade. I know you miss me, and I know there was an argument at Carl’s. Plus, I don’t see your little plaything here now.”

“Now you do.” I walk into the room. “And my name is Logan.” I saunter over to Kade, swiftly kissing his lips. “Hey.”

“Hey, baby girl.” He smiles up at me. He leans back in his stool, crossing his legs out in front of him, clearly content at my entrance as I turn back to Kayla.

“Do you need anything else?” I ask, my voice sweet as can be. She stares at me silently, her eyes narrowed, chewing on her bottom lip.

“He’ll never marry you. You do know that, right? He’ll never give you the perfect family you want. He’s too screwed up. Just take it from someone who’s been there, you’re wasting your time.”

“Who says I care about any of that?” I ask her. “And if we’re being honest, I’m probably a little bit too attracted to the screwed-up part of him. But hey, I guess I’m pretty fucked up too, so maybe we just fit each other.” I shrug while laughing. Kade chuckles under his breath while Kayla looks outright horrified.

“Whatever. You two deserve each other.” She shakes her head, turning to storm out of the room.

“You’re wrong there. I definitely don’t deserve her,” Kade says, the words aimed at her, but his focus never leaves me. “But I’m keeping her anyway.”

Kayla doesn’t slow her steps, practically bolting out of the room and, I’m assuming, the shop, leaving us alone.

“Fuck, I missed you.” He grabs my hand, pulls me down to sit on his lap, and kisses me. I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him back with the same urgency.

“Give me a few minutes to clean this shit up and then we can head upstairs, sound good?” He nods over to the mess of papers he has covering the keyboard of his computer.

“Sounds good.” I smile at him, standing up off his lap. “I’m going to go say hey to Asher if he hasn’t already left.” I walk out of Kade’s room and to the one next door, closer to the lobby. The door is closed so I gently knock.

“Come in,” Asher yells from the other side of it. I open the door to see him sitting on his stool in the same spot I just left Kade, scrolling through his phone. “Well, this is a nice surprise. Did you finally leave that asshole next door and come straight to me? I could think of a few ways we could celebrate.” He smiles cheekily at me.

“Sorry to crush all your hopes and dreams, but I’m still with the asshole. He’s cleaning up, so I just came to say hey.” I laugh.

“Damn it, I thought I was about to get lucky.” He laughs with me. “So, you two are doing good?”

“We are.” I smile at him. I walk over to the tattooing chair, jumping up onto it to sit with my legs crossed under me. “We’re happy.”

“Good.” He pauses. “So, how’s Demi?” The words come out almost timid. His phone dings with a message. He picks it up, looks at it, and a genuine smile covers his face. Not a joking one, or a flirty one, but a real one.

“I think I should be asking you that.” I nod my head toward his phone. “What’s going on with the two of you, for real?”

“She’s just cool to talk to,” he says. I give him a look, calling him on his bullshit. “For real, we’re just friends, Lo.” He sighs.

“Why?” I ask.

“What do you mean, why? Why are we friends?” He looks confused.

“No, I mean, why are you just friends? Come on, Asher. It’s obvious you both like each other. Why not try for something more?”

“It would never work. I don’t do relationships, Lo. Demi deserves more than what I could offer her. I’m not saying I don’t think she’s great. She is great, a great friend that I don’t want to fuck up and lose.”

“I get it, but I think you’re wrong, Asher. I think the two of you would be good together. The fact that you’re both too blind to see it makes it all the more of a perfect pairing.”

“Hey, you ready?” Kade stops right outside Asher’s door.

“Yup.” I stand up and walk toward the door, pausing just before I’m all the way out. “For the record, I think you’re pretty great too. Stop selling yourself so short.” I smile back at Asher.

“Thanks, Lo.” He nods at me.

“Anytime.” I intertwine my fingers with Kade’s and walk with him down the hallway and up the back stairs to his loft.

“What was that about?” Kade asks as he unlocks the door.

“Nothing important.” I step inside as he opens the door for me. “So.” I turn toward him as he closes the door behind him. “What was this you were saying about missing me?”

His lips are on mine seconds later. Devouring me in the delectable way he always seems to. Every time Kade kisses me, I have to fight the urge to beg him to never stop. I wrap my arms around his neck as he slides his hands over my ass and onto my thighs. He lifts me and my legs instinctively wrap around his waist.

“I could use a shower.” He walks farther into the apartment and into the bathroom, kicking the door shut behind us. He lets my legs slide to the ground and reaches through the glass shower door to turn on the water. “Care to join me?” He looks back at me, lifting his shirt over his head.

I can’t help but stare. Drinking in each divot of muscle in his chest, his stomach, his shoulders. He looks like the epitome of strength, doing nothing but standing shirtless in front of me. It doesn’t matter how many times I see him like this, I don’t think I’ll ever not be obsessed.

“Lo? You’re really fucking testing my patience looking at me like that.”

I smile up at him slyly as an idea pops into my head.

I slowly lift my long-sleeve shirt over my head, dropping it next to me. I unclasp the bralette I have on and let it fall to the floor.

“Fuck.” He leans back against the glass shower door, crossing his legs at his ankles and tucking his hands into the pockets of his joggers.

I turn around so my back is facing him. I bend over and slide my leggings down my legs, leaving my thong in place. I stand up and go to turn around, but Kade is behind me, his front pushed against my back before I have the chance to. His arm wraps around my stomach, pulling me flush against him. He must have taken off his pants when I was turned around because I can feel all of him. The only thing separating us is the thin fabric of my thong.

“Such a dirty girl, teasing me like that.”

The warmth of his breath so close to my ear causes me to shiver. He bends down, sliding the scrap of underwear down my legs, I kick them off of me. His breath is warm against me, but his lips never actually touch my skin as he slowly stands back up. Until he gets to my ass, and I feel a gentle tug from his teeth as he bites into the flesh before continuing to stand up fully. My breath gets caught in my throat as wetness pools between my legs.

“Is that what you want, Lo? To be fucked like the dirty little girl you are?” He slides his hand slowly up my stomach and wraps his fingers around my neck. He doesn’t apply enough pressure to cut off my air, just enough to let me know he could. My breathing quickens, but not from fear. The thought of letting him have this amount of control over me, of him quite literally holding my life in his hand, should terrify me. Instead, it excites me.

“Yes.” The word is barely out of my mouth before I’m turned around with his lips pressed against mine. He pulls me into the shower and under the spray of water with him, closing the glass door behind us. The water immediately drenches us. It’s hot against my skin, but nothing compared to the heat I feel from Kade.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, baby girl.” He pushes me up against the shower wall and watches as the droplets of water slide down my body. “I swear you were put on this earth to fucking torture me. To make me question what in the world I did in this life to deserve to look at you this way. Vulnerable. Sexy. Fucking exquisite.”

His words make me feel loved. No, worshiped in a way that consumes not only me but him. He makes me feel like every nerve ending in my body is on fire and he’s the only one capable of dousing the burn.

“I’ll fuck you how you need to be fucked in a minute. But first, this is for me.” He drops to his knees in front of me, looking up at me. “Put your leg over my shoulder, baby girl.” I do as he says, lifting one leg over his shoulder as he slides one hand under my ass as the other grasps my hip to hold me steady. Then his tongue is on me, and I’m a goner.

Kade wastes no time. He slides his tongue inside of me, hitting places I didn’t even know existed. Steam surrounds us. The tile wall is cold against my back, but the heat coming from Kade’s mouth makes me feel like I’m burning up.

He keeps his left hand gripping the sensitive skin of my ass while bringing the right one up to my mouth.

“Suck.” He places his thumb against my lips. I obey, wrapping my lips around the digit, swirling my tongue around it as he pulls it out of my mouth. “Good girl.” He brings his hand back to my ass, using that same thumb to circle the hole that’s been forbidden to everyone except him.

“You like that, dirty girl?” He pushes the tip of his thumb inside. My head falls forcefully back into the wall, the pain is nonexistent though. All I feel is pleasure. He slips his thumb in and out of me while suctioning onto my clit and I see stars. I try to catch my breath as I come back from the earth shattering around me. I look down to see Kade’s eyes looking up at mine, holding the promise of what else is to come, and I know that I’m ready for anything. Everything. As long as it’s with him.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-NINE



Kaden

I gently lift Lo's leg off of me, placing it on the ground. I run my hands up her thighs, holding her steady. Her bright-green eyes, filled with a mixture of lust and love, are locked on mine. I lick my lips and taste her sweetness, still coating my tongue. Her taste is like a drug, and apparently, I'm addicted to it.

"Hold on to me, baby girl." I stand up, fusing my mouth with hers. She follows my orders, wrapping her arms around my neck. "Tightly," I say as I slide my hands between her legs, gripping her thighs and lifting her up. I slide her down onto my cock. "Fuck," I say, and at the same time, a moan leaves her lips.

I lift her up and down, my cock sliding in and out of her slowly at first, giving her time to adjust. It doesn't take long before she is using her own strength to try and bounce herself quicker.

"Please, Kaden," she begs and how could I possibly deny her?

I lift her up and slam her back down in quick motions. Pounding into her, hitting her sweet spot with every thrust. I bring my mouth to the hard peaks practically right in front of my face. Sucking and nipping the pink buds as she cries out.

"That's it, dirty girl. Let me feel that pretty pussy of yours soak my cock." I never let up my pace, pounding into her with all the strength I have. She throws her head back, her cunt

strangling me as she explodes, and it takes everything in me to hold back and not follow her.

I rip her off my cock, placing her feet on the ground and turning her so her ass is pressed against me. Her body is practically limp in my arms, but she quickly finds her footing.

“Bend over. Hands against the wall,” I whisper into her ear.

She listens, bending over and placing her hands against the shower wall. I lean over, placing one arm on the shower wall over her, and wrap the other around her waist to support her.

“Tell me what you want.” I rub my cock, that’s still soaked from her, against her from ass to clit slowly, teasing her. I pull back each time she tries to push against me.

“I want you to fuck me, Kade.” She’s practically panting, a new fire already building inside of her after her last release.

“How do you want to be fucked, Lo? I can fuck you sweet and torturously slow. Or I can fuck you fast and hard, like my dirty little whore. Tell me what you want, Lo.”

She turns her head around, locking eyes with mine. “Fuck me like your dirty little whore, Kaden.”

“Fuck.”

I slide inside her roughly, fucking her just like she asked. She presses against me just as hard, meeting me stroke for stroke. I slide my arm farther up, wrapping my hand gently around her throat. I squeeze, applying the slightest bit of pressure as I continue to slam into her, and she explodes, squirting all over me. This time I don’t hold back, jerking my release into her.

I slowly slide out of her, holding her up as she finds her balance again. I turn her to face me, to watch me as I lower my fingers down to her pussy, coating them in the wetness seeping out of her. A mixture of her and myself. I bring the same fingers to her lips, and she opens, knowing exactly what I want.

“I fucking love you,” I say as she sucks every last drop from my fingers. I pull them out of her mouth, immediately leaning down to kiss her deeply, savoring what she just did.

“I fucking love you too.” She smiles up at me, her bright-green eyes glimmering with satisfaction.

“Turn around.” I reach behind me, grabbing the shampoo bottle she brought here a couple days ago and squirting a dollop into my hand. I massage it into her hair and then my own, allowing her to rinse first. I do the same with the conditioner. I pour out the body wash, lathering it together in my hands and taking my time cleaning every inch of her body. She does the same to me, and it takes everything in me not to bend her over and fuck her a second time.

But I don't. I shut off the water and grab two towels, wrapping one around Lo before wrapping a second one around myself. I follow her out of the bathroom, leaning against my bedroom door, watching her as she unwraps the towel from her body to dry her hair. She walks over to my drawers, opens the one she has practically deemed her own, and grabs a fresh pair of underwear and pajama shorts. She slides them on, closes the drawers, and walks over to my closet, grabbing one of my T-shirts that fits her more like a dress. She slides it over her head before looking back at me.

“Enjoying the show?” She puts her hands on her hips, amused.

“Always, baby girl.” I walk over, pulling her into me and kissing the top of her head. I hold her there, reveling in the feel of her tucked into me this way.

“Good.” She smiles up at me. “Now get dressed, I'm hungry.” She stands on her tiptoes to kiss my cheek before walking out of the bedroom toward the kitchen. I slide on a pair of gray sweatpants and follow her out.

I walk into the kitchen to find her sitting on a barstool, drinking a glass of water. I'll never get tired of seeing her in my space, in my clothes, in my life. She crashed into my life when I wasn't looking, and now, I never want her to leave.

“How can I help?” she asks as I start to take ingredients out of the fridge to cook dinner.

“By keeping your ass sat in that chair and not touching anything.” I laugh while she pouts.

“You and your sister are exactly the same, you know? Neither of you ever let me help with any of the cooking.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a reason for that, baby girl.” I look over at her. “You burn everything you touch.”

“Well, it’s not my fault everything is so easy to burn.” She rolls her eyes. “I just won’t be the mom that bakes cookies for the bake sale. I have Demi for that.” She laughs and I smile at her before going back to chopping vegetables.

“So, you do want kids?” I ask.

“Well, not now. But eventually, with the right person, I think so.” She hesitates. “Do you?”

“Yeah, I’d like a kid or two one day.” I turn around, pausing what I’m doing to look at her. “This right person, you think you’ve met him yet?”

She looks up at me, her eyes locking onto mine. “Yeah, I think I have. Have you?”

“Definitely.” I don’t hesitate and her smile is immediate. I turn back around to continue what I was doing.

I finish chopping vegetables and slicing up some chicken breast, then dump the box of pasta into the boiling pot of water. I pour some canned sauce into a second pot to heat up and put the chicken breast I just sliced into a hot pan. I cook the chicken and add the vegetables once it’s halfway cooked through to cook with it.

I look over to Lo occasionally between stirs, but her attention is focused on her phone, most likely playing *Candy Crush*, which I’ve learned she’s addicted to. I’d never thought much about having kids before Logan. I’ve never even thought about a long-term relationship before her. I’d had plenty of opportunities to make something more with the women I’d seen in the past, yet when it got to that point, my first instinct

was always to end it. She changed everything for me without even meaning to.

I dump the now-cooked pasta and sauce into the pan with the chicken and vegetables, combining them all together. I've always liked cooking. Never in the way Demi does, but it calmed me down to have a task to focus on when my mom wasn't in the right state of mind. She was rarely stable enough to be home to make any sort of meals for me growing up, and when she was stable, she was working. So, with the help of Google, I taught myself. After years of practice, I'm not half-bad at it.

I grab two bowls and split the contents of the pan between the two. I give us each the same amount even though I know she won't finish and will give her leftovers to me. It's become our thing, even when we're out to dinner. Lo is the definition of her eyes being bigger than her stomach. She orders loads of food and finishes about half of it. Not that I mind at all, frankly I think it's adorable. The girl could order the whole damn menu at a restaurant, and I wouldn't care. Anything to see her smile.

"Kade, this looks amazing." She puts her phone down as I set the bowl in front of her. "And smells amazing."

I put my bowl next to hers and grab us forks and napkins.

"It's nothing special, just a quick meal." I set the utensils down and sit down on the barstool next to her.

"You and Demi both always undersell your cooking skills. I mean, obviously, for her, it's her craft, but you're great at it too." She takes a bite of the pasta and makes a noise that sounds a whole lot like a moan. "Damn, this is delicious."

"I'm happy you think so, but you keep making noises like that, and the food isn't going to be the only meal I'm looking to eat." I raise an eyebrow at her, and a blush covers her cheeks as she laughs.

We sit next to each other in comfortable silence, eating our food. Like I assumed, she eats about two-thirds of the bowl before sliding the rest over to me with a smile. I laugh at her,

finishing my food and then hers. She demands to do the dishes since I cooked, but I help her anyway.

Once we're done, I follow her over to the couch. I sit down and she follows, sitting next to me, then turning her body to drape her legs over my thighs. I wrap my arm around her to hold her into me and she rests her head in the crook of my neck.

"So, I have something to talk to you about," I say as we sit there. I run my hand through the ends of her hair, twirling the strands through my fingers.

"Okay." She looks up at me skeptically. "That sounds cryptic."

"It's not. I finished your tattoo."

"What?" She practically jumps off of me, standing to look down at where I'm still sitting on the couch. "When did you finish? When can I see it?" She's smiling from ear to ear.

"I finished it this morning. And you can see it now." I stand up and walk over to the entryway table where I left my sketchbook. I walk back over to her with it in hand.

"Wait," she says just as I go to open it up. "When can you tattoo it on me?"

"Whenever you want, baby girl."

"Now?" She doesn't hesitate.

"Well, sure, the shop is closed, but considering I live right above it, I don't think King will mind. But why don't you look at the sketch first before you commit to that?"

"No. I don't want to see it."

"What? You've been begging me to see this thing since I started drawing it."

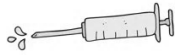
"Well, I changed my mind. I don't want to see it until it's on my skin, Kade. I trust you. So, tattoo it now. I'm ready." She smiles up at me and everything inside me ignites before realization hits.

She trusts me. This is the moment, right here, right now, that I should be honest with her. I mentally prepare myself, urging the words to the surface. But no matter how hard I try, the only word that comes out is, “Okay.”

I’ve never hated myself more.

CHAPTER

THIRTY



Logan

I follow Kade downstairs, more than ready for him to permanently mark my skin with whatever masterpiece he's been hiding from me. Some people may think I'm crazy for getting a tattoo, permanently marking myself with something I've never even seen. But from the second he told me it was done, I knew this was what I wanted to do.

In the time I've known Kade, he's come to know me practically better than anyone, and for that reason and so many more, I trust him. He turns on the hallway light and we walk down it into his room in the shop. I sit down on his stool and watch as he sanitizes the tattoo chair. He pulls over a table on wheels, draping it and then placing whatever tools he needs on top of it. I've watched him tattoo other people before, so I know that he's clean and meticulous in everything he does.

"You can sit in the chair now. I'm going to print the stencil from my computer, so if you really don't want to see it, turn away now."

I stand from the stool, and he takes my place on it, sliding it in front of his computer.

"Do you know where you want it?" he asks as I sit down in the chair.

"I think my rib. On the right side. I know it's probably not the best place for my first tattoo, but I don't mind a little pain."

“It’s different for everyone. Some people feel pain there, but others don’t mind it at all. You’re tough, you’ll be okay. Give me a few.” I turn my body away from him and the screen and pull out my phone, scrolling through my emails, deleting loads of junk while I wait.

“Okay, I’m going to need you to lift your shirt so I can shave and clean the area before I lay the stencil on.”

“Your shirt,” I correct him, smiling at him.

“You look better in it.” He smiles back. I face toward him, lying on my side and lifting the T-shirt up and over my right shoulder and lifting my arm over my head, so the area is wide open for him. His face turns serious as he focuses on the task at hand.

He gently shaves the area of any peach fuzz, making sure it’s silky smooth, and then cleans it with rubbing alcohol. He then uses soap to lightly wet my skin before applying the stencil. I keep my eyes closed to avoid seeing the piece, but he talks me through every step, making sure I know what is going on and that I’m comfortable. Once it’s on my skin, I open my eyes, looking up at him.

“I’m just going to do a small line now, so you get used to the feel of it. Ready?”

“Ready,” I assure him.

Loud buzzing fills the silent air as he turns on the tattoo gun. He does exactly as he says, drawing a small line first so I can get used to the feel of it on my skin. It hurts like I expect it to. It feels like a thousand tiny pinpricks, uncomfortable and painful. But I know the end product will be worth it.

“Okay for me to keep going?” He pauses, looking to me for confirmation.

“Yup, I’m good.”

“Okay, we’ll take breaks in between.” He starts up the tattoo gun again and gets to work. I rest my eyes as he tattoos the image onto me. The constant buzzing sound is almost soothing in a way and it distracts me from the pain. I open my

eyes occasionally to watch him work. His eyes stay narrowed in on where he's inking, and his lips purse in concentration.

The process takes longer than I expect it to. Hours pass and we take multiple breaks. He encourages me to continue drinking water and stay hydrated. I start to wonder how big the tattoo actually is after a while, not that I mind, but it makes me curious to see what it is. He turns on music as he works. It starts off with various rock and metal songs, but then more music I recognize comes on.

"Did you add my music to your playlists?" I ask him, realizing all the songs that have been playing are songs that I've either played while with him or have mentioned to him. Currently, "Son's Gonna Rise" by Citizen Cope plays through his Bluetooth speaker.

"Just a few songs." He plays it off and I don't push him to elaborate. Just the fact that he was thinking of me. That he has these songs playing, listening to them in his playlist when he's not with me, shows me how much he cares. And that he remembered all of them enough to add them to the playlist shows how much he pays attention and listens to me. It's such a small gesture, but it's just another way he makes me feel seen and heard.

He keeps going, and I let myself relax. Any sort of pain is lessened at this point as I listen to the playlist he put on, thinking of me. I'm half falling asleep in the chair and the arm above my head is practically numb by the time he finishes. He puts down the tattoo gun, stretching out his hand.

"Are you ready to see?" he asks, and suddenly I'm nervous. Not that he didn't get the tattoo perfect, because I don't doubt that. But having the meaning behind it, of what I asked for from him, permanently inked into my skin. A reminder of good and bad. Suddenly, I don't feel ready, but I no longer have a choice. I have to be.

"Yes." I carefully stand from the chair, making sure to keep my arm lifted and away from the area since it isn't wrapped yet. I walk over to the full-length mirror in the corner of the room and turn to the side to get a full view of the tattoo.

“Wow.” The word comes out in a barely there whisper as I stare at the masterpiece Kade created.

It’s a fairly big tattoo, starting just underneath and to the side of my right boob and going down to about where my ribs end.

It’s a colored tattoo, and it almost looks like it’s inked in watercolors, a contrast to the dark ink he’s covered in. There are two long green stems crossing over each other, leaves hanging off of them that ultimately lead to the most beautiful blue flowers with purple accents. Some are bloomed and beautiful, alive; others aren’t quite there yet, still trying to open up. And then there are a few that look like they’re falling apart. The flowers dying and the petals falling with nothing there to catch them.

“It’s perfect.” I mean it. I can’t even explain what about it makes it exactly what I’ve been looking for, I just know that it is. “What type of flowers are they?” I look up to see him watching me. He doesn’t answer right away, looking contemplative.

“Maybe I’ll tell you one day.” He smiles softly at me, and I don’t even question his answer. I know him well enough to know that if he isn’t telling me yet, there’s a reason, and he’ll tell me when he thinks I’m ready to hear it. “Now, let me wrap it up.”

I sit back down on the chair, letting him take care of the tattoo and cover it in cling wrap. He explains to me all of the aftercare instructions and I write them down, even though I know he’ll remind me daily. He cleans as I continue to stare at the fresh ink through the cling wrap. The more I stare, the more I feel connected to it in a way. It may sound stupid, it’s just a tattoo, but to me, after all this time, it just feels right.

“You really love it?” he asks, walking up to stand behind me. I look up to meet his eyes through the mirror.

“So much,” I say. “And I love you, Kaden. Thank you for this.” I turn away from the mirror, letting my shirt fall over the wrapped tattoo, and look up at him.

“You never have to thank me for anything. I love you, beautiful girl.” He reaches up, cupping my face and brushing strands of hair away with his thumb. “Plus, the fact that I got to permanently mark you with my artwork is pretty fucking hot.”

“You sound like a caveman.” I laugh at him, although I don’t disagree. The fact that he is the one who created and inked the artwork onto me does add an entire layer of attraction to it. I like knowing when I look at the tattoo that it came from him, and it’s a reminder that he’s all mine. Just as I’m his. “I kind of love it,” I say and he laughs.

“Only for you.” He kisses me gently. “Always for you.” He kisses me again and I get lost in his lips. We kiss and nothing more. His lips soft and smooth against my own. The kiss is tender, fragile. A softness that we rarely allow ourselves to partake in. Yet our connection feels stronger than ever.

Minutes pass and our lips never leave each other’s. We make out like teenagers, with not a care in the world for our surroundings. Kade makes it hard to remember there’s anything but him.

Lennox taught me to love the rain, but I learned to love storms all on my own. Living in South Florida, I was no stranger to hurricanes growing up. They’re natural disasters that we’ve experienced way too often. When they were bad, they were terrifying. But when they were only a category one or two, I couldn’t help but kind of love them.

The thunder and lightning would argue back and forth, lighting up the sky and crying out for everyone to hear. The wind would howl, wreaking havoc on anything that got in its way. It felt like a chaotic argument we people were always stuck in the middle of.

But then there was this moment during the storm called the eye. Everything would die down, the sky would clear, the wind would slow, and you could walk outside and look at the damage that nature had caused. Standing there in the middle of it all, there was a calmness.

That's what Kade is to me. My life has been full of different storms I've had to weather. They've knocked me down, they've weakened me just as they have strengthened me, and they taught me what to look for in the midst of them.

The storm that is my life had been drowning me for so long I didn't even realize how short of breath I was. He yanked me out of it. He brought me back to life. In a life that has been full of chaos, he is the calmness in my storm. And every time I'm with him, he reminds me of it.

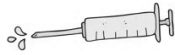
He finally pulls away, resting his forehead against mine. My eyes flutter open, and they instantly find his in the way they always do. The thing about Kade is that he understands my storm. He's even been battling his own. And when I look at him, I see it. I see that I'm his calm too.

I've never understood a person how I do him, not even my twin. I feel connected to him in a way that feels surreal. A bond so strong that it feels like nothing could break it. I've never been good at letting people in. I've never wanted to after losing practically everyone that I did. But I broke my rule for him. I let him in. All of him. And in this moment, I can't imagine how I could ever regret it.

Famous last words, I guess.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-ONE



Logan

“Hey, best friend of mine. Fancy seeing you here.” I turn at the voice, surprised to see Demi sitting on the lobby couch of Blackheart Ink as I walk in. She has her legs kicked out onto the coffee table and a lollipop in her mouth.

“Well, hi best friend of mine. What are you doing here?” I walk over to sit down on the chair next to her.

“Asher lost a bet, so I’m owed tacos from that food truck down the street that I love. Possibly ice cream too, if I can talk him into it. Which I’m pretty sure I can.” She smiles.

“Interesting. And what was this bet?”

“I was his wingwoman the other night. He wanted a no-strings hookup. I picked the perfect girl. She was hot, and she kept looking over at him with the look. Not that ‘I want to marry you’ kind. It was totally the ‘I want to fuck you, then forget you exist’ kind. I mean, I was the perfect wingwoman, couldn’t have set him up better. But no, he wanted the blonde in the corner who was giving him ‘pick me, choose me, love me’ eyes all night.” She huffs, rolling her eyes. “Anyway, I warned him it wasn’t a good idea. He told me I was wrong.”

“Ah. So, you bet him?” I chime in.

“Precisely.” She smiles. “I told him that if she even tried to ask for his number, then I was owed as many tacos as I could eat.”

“So, she asked for his number?”

“Oh, no. It was so much worse than that.” She snort-laughs. “So they went to her apartment, and they had sex. Then he gets up to leave, she obviously asks him to stay, and he says he has to get going. She asks for his number. He gives it to her. Such an asshole move, by the way, since it’s not like he’d ever answer her, but whatever. Then she starts telling him about how special their night was and how connected she felt to him. She says she can see a fucking future with him.”

“Uh-oh. To be fair, you did call it.”

“Oh no, just fucking wait. It gets worse.” She struggles to hold in her laughter as she keeps talking. “So, he’s practically sprinting out of her room and to the door while she falls in love with him. Then right when he’s almost out of there, her roommate walks in. Her roommate, who he just so happened to also fuck then ghost.”

“No.”

“Yes. So now he has two women screaming at him for what a dickwad he is. It was a solid half an hour before he finally got out of there, clearly traumatized. But anyway, I was right and now I get tacos.”

“That doesn’t even seem real.” I laugh with her.

“I wouldn’t have believed it myself if he hadn’t called me straight up freaking out from the car. I swear I thought he was going to cry.”

“I was not going to cry.” Asher walks out, joining the conversation. “But if I would have, I’d have every fucking right to. That shit was terrible.”

“Well, maybe stop sleeping with everything that has a pulse, and trust that I’m always right. Then maybe you won’t keep running into these issues.” Demi sticks her tongue out at him, then pops the lollipop she’s been holding back in her mouth. I watch his reaction. His eyes go straight to her lips, a hunger filling them only momentarily before it’s gone.

“Whatever. I’m parked in the back. Meet me out there when you’re ready,” he says to Demi. “Later, Lo.”

“Bye.” I wave. “So, you’re picking out his hookups now? You guys are really sticking to this whole friends thing.”

“Yeah, we are.” She smiles, but it lacks its usual Demi luster. “I better head out. He gets cranky when he’s hungry.” She stands up and I walk with her toward the back of the shop. “My brother is already upstairs, by the way. He finished a little while ago.”

“Thanks, Dem. Enjoy your tacos.” She waves as she walks out the door, and I turn to walk up the stairs. I get to the top and don’t bother knocking. I turn the doorknob and find it already unlocked for me.

“Hey, it’s me,” I call out as I walk in. I place my bag on the entryway table next to the door and take off my jacket and hoodie. I swear I’ll never get used to this type of cold after growing up in a place that rarely dropped below sixty degrees, but I’ve learned layers are key.

“Hey, I’m about to get in the shower just to rinse off real quick. I’ll be out in a few,” he yells from, I’m assuming, the bathroom. Now that I’m paying attention, I can hear the water already running.

“Take your time,” I yell back, walking into the kitchen. I’ve had the worst headache all day that I just can’t seem to kick. I open up the kitchen cabinets, searching for some ibuprofen. I’d say I’m more than comfortable in Kade’s home, but the kitchen is probably the place I’m least familiar with. Probably because he never lets me close enough to risk me burning something. Can’t say I blame him.

I climb on top of the counter to open the cabinet above the fridge that I can’t reach. Sure enough, there’s a bottle of Tylenol sitting right at the front of it. I pull the bottle out of the cabinet and go to close it, but something catches my eye. An old phone sits on the top shelf in the corner.

I’ve never been one to pry into people’s business before, especially because I hate when others do it to me. But there’s something that has my brain screaming at me to look at the phone. I slide it out of the cabinet. I figure if it’s dead, I’ll just

leave it alone. But it's not dead, and it's on, the lock screen popping up as soon as I click it.

I step off of the counter, bringing myself down to solid ground. The lock screen is a picture of what looks like a younger version of Kade and his mom. My gut sinks at what an invasion of privacy this is as I slide open the phone. It has no password, so it opens easily.

I don't even know what I'm looking for as I scroll through the phone, something in me just telling me there's something here. I hear the shower turn off and I'm about to close the phone and put it back where it belongs, but then I see it. An app that catches my eye. An app that I know.

I recognize it because it's the same app I saw on Lennox's phone after she died. I looked it up, so I know what it is, what it's for. I never opened it though. There was a good chance she was talking about me on there, and that was something I didn't want to know.

I don't know what urges me to click on the app, but I do. The app automatically opens to a thread of messages with QueenL3N. There are a dozen messages reaching out to her, asking where she is, asking if she's okay, but no response. I scroll up, finding the last message the user sent and my heart sinks to the bottom of my stomach as I stare at the words in front of me.

QueenL3N: Logan Hart. Find her. Look after her. I'm sorry.

"Logan," Kade says my name. I can hear the guilt and unsaid apology in his voice, but none of that matters right now.

"What the fuck is this, Kaden?" I look back and forth from him to the screen, hoping my eyes are playing tricks on me. Between the words staring back at me through the screen and the look on his face, I know they're not.

"Let's just sit down. Just let me explain, Lo, please." He takes a step toward me, and I instinctively take a step back.

“No, Kaden. I’m not going to sit down. You’re going to tell me right fucking now why my name is in this phone.” I’m not yelling, my voice eerily calm, but everything inside me feels like it’s about to explode. I’m gripping my last shred of control with everything in me. “Is QueenL3N my sister?”

“Yes.”

“How?” I say immediately.

“It was my mom’s phone. Your sister had been talking to her. After she died, I saw the messages. They talked practically every day. I messaged her to tell her what had happened, and we just kept talking.”

“Were you in love with my sister?”

“Fuck no, Lo. She was just someone who knew the shit I was dealing with but didn’t really know me. She was easy to talk to. That was it.”

“And then she tasked you to look after me before she killed herself.” Anger floods my voice. “Is that what this was, Kaden? You found me and were fulfilling orders she left you? Fuck, did Demi know about this?”

“No, fuck. No, baby girl. Demi has no idea about any of this. And I never looked for you. I never looked up your name. I didn’t know anything about you until you came into my life completely by chance.” His face begs me to believe him, but any trust I had for him was shattered the second I opened that phone. Maybe it wasn’t as strong as I thought it was to begin with, considering I’m the one who picked up the phone in the first place. Although clearly, I had a reason to worry. I look down at the message again and a thought pops into my head, panic immediately starting to rise.

“That message. The one with my name. Do you remember what day she sent that?” My voice shakes as I ask.

“July fourth.”

I feel the tears cloud my vision as soon as the words leave his mouth. That message on that date. He was probably the last person she talked to. Ever. I feel the tears drip down my face and my body begins to shake. I let the panic take over,

knowing there was nothing I could do to stop it. Kade tries to take another step closer to me again, but I take another backward.

“When?” I ask. “When did you figure out who I was? Was it before you kissed me or after?” He stays quiet and I already know the answer. “Fucking when, Kaden?” I’m yelling now.

“When I came into the hospital with the cut on my hand,” he finally admits.

“I can’t do this right now.” I speed walk toward the door. I grab my jacket and bag, not bothering with the hoodie. I open the door and sprint down the stairs, sliding the jacket over my shoulders as I go.

I hear Kade calling after me, but I am in too much of a panic to make out what he’s saying. I keep moving, walking through the shop that’s still open toward the front door. I normally park in the back, but since I was early, I parked up front, figuring I’d move my car once the shop closed. It probably wasn’t the best idea to do that today, but I push through, keeping my head down as I walk through the shop.

I push through the front door and am immediately pelted by the rain. Lennox was wrong about the fucking rain. Right now, I’m back to hating it. The cold droplets mixed with my tears make the world blur in front of me to where I can barely see a thing. I move anyway, jogging across the parking lot to my car. But I don’t make it there.

I feel the car before I see it. The impact as the front of it slams into my body. My head as it bounces against the windshield. The wind as my body essentially flies over the car. And then I’m on the ground, and I feel nothing at all.

I hear muffled screaming and can vaguely see the chaos surrounding me. People gathering in the parking lot to witness the tragedy. It reminds me of the last time, eight years ago, when I was surrounded by another chaos I couldn’t control. I think about how the blood is probably on much more than my shoes this time. It also occurs to me that this time, the blood is mine.

“Logan. Lo. Fuck. Please, baby girl. Please stay with me.” I hear Kade’s voice, but it sounds far away. “King, where’s the fucking ambulance?”

It’s only now that I realize he even chased after me. All the way to my car. He was never going to let me walk away. I try to form words, but I don’t think anything is coming out of my mouth.

“The ambulance is almost here, baby girl. It’s going to be okay. You’re going to be just fine. You hear me, Logan? You’re going to be okay. You’re going to be better than okay. You’re going to be fucking perfect. Like you always are. My perfect girl.” I’m not sure if he’s trying to convince me or himself, but either way, it feels like a losing fight. I think I even see him crying, but that can’t be right. Kade never cries.

I feel my eyes getting heavy, and suddenly, I can’t hear anything at all. Kade’s face and the pain covering every inch of it is the last thing I see before it all fades to black. Images flash through my head of shattered glass, flying bullets, blood, and lost lives. My sister’s childhood bedroom, her blood-stained sheets, and her lifeless body on top of them. Images of me failing to save the ones who needed me. Failing to save everyone I loved. And now finally, when it’s come down to it, I officially can’t even save myself.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-TWO



Kaden

I hate hospitals. My mom ended up in them so many times over the years, and then I ended up in one because of her. If we were here, it meant something was wrong. And things were wrong more than they were right growing up.

I spent a lot of time in this exact waiting room as a child. I was a pro at it. I would watch people while I was here. I'd watch families come in and out of here. I'd watch them sit and grieve, waiting to hear news about their loved ones. I'd watch the doctors as they came to talk to the families. If they were smiling, it was good news. If their faces were solemn, I knew what was coming.

I watched families break down as they figured out things weren't going to be okay, that it was worse than they thought, that their nightmares had become their reality. I waited for the day I was told that news about my mother. I always walked into the hospital prepared for it. But it never came. Because when it was her time, the doctors weren't there to notify me. I saw it myself, and the sad part was I was prepared for that too.

This, though. Sitting in the hospital waiting room, blood from the woman that I love covering my hands, waiting to see if she's alive. This isn't something I was prepared for. I look around to see others looking over at me, and it hits me. The families I've watched sit in this waiting room over the years, the people that were so stricken with pain and fear, I've now become one of them.

“Kaden. Let’s go to the bathroom. You need to wash your hands. Theo said it’s going to be a while until we hear anything.”

I look up to see Demi standing in front of me. Her eyes are red, but all things considered, she seems to be holding it together pretty well. I stand up and follow her to the bathroom. It feels like the world is spinning around me, but I’m stuck in a haze I can’t seem to get out of.

“I’ll be right out here if you need me. Asher is getting us some coffee and will meet us back in the lobby, okay?” I nod at her, barely registering what she’s saying. I walk into the bathroom and over to the sinks. It’s silent in here, the urinals and stalls all empty.

I turn on the faucet and put my hands under the running water. Some of the dried blood immediately rinses off my hands. I watch it circle the drain, bright red against the white porcelain. I feel wetness on my face, and I look up in the mirror to see tears dripping down. I don’t remember the last time I cried. It feels almost unfamiliar.

I stare at my reflection. My eyes are red, my cheeks wet, my hair a mess from yanking it out of my head. I look like a fucking mess. Maybe I deserve this shit, but I’m fucking positive Logan didn’t. I grab the soap and start furiously scrubbing my hands. Determined to get every last drop of blood off of them.

“Kaden?” Demi’s voice echoes through the empty bathroom as she slightly pushes the door open, peeking her head in. She walks inside, coming to stand next to me at the sinks.

“This is the men’s room. You shouldn’t be in here.” I keep rinsing. Demi reaches over to turn off the faucet, then places her hand in mine.

“They’re clean.” She looks down at my hands. She reaches over to grab a few paper towels and hands them to me. I take them, drying my hands. “She’s going to be okay.”

“You don’t know that.” I look down at her.

“No, I don’t. But it’s better to believe that than to start thinking about the alternative.” She quickly wipes a stray tear that falls down her face, turning away from me. “Let’s go.”

I follow her out of the bathroom and into the lobby, where Asher is waiting for us. He hands me a cup of coffee and I sip it mindlessly. Nobody says anything as we sit there. I sit in a corner seat, Demi next to me and Asher next to her. King and Darla show up a little while into the waiting. He walks up to me, squeezing my shoulder, just letting me know he’s here, and then sits across from us.

We wait for what feels like hours, but I can’t say I have a good concept of time right now. Finally, Theo and Gabby walk out with who I’m assuming is the surgeon, and I immediately stand up. Everyone follows my lead.

“Hi, I’m Dr. Cowen. I was one of Ms. Hart’s surgeons. Which one of you is family?” He looks between all of us.

“I called her mom. She’s getting on the first flight out from Florida,” Demi says.

“Okay, is there any other family here I can speak with?” the doctor asks.

Demi goes to open her mouth, but I cut her off. “I’m her fiancé.”

He looks at me skeptically for a second but finally nods his head. “Can you come with me, please?”

I immediately stand up and follow him. I follow him through the double doors and into the elevator.

“She’s okay. She’s in the surgical ICU. She hasn’t woken up from surgery yet, but everything went the best it could have. I’m going to take you to her room now.”

I feel a gust of air leave my lungs, knowing that she’s alive. That she’s okay. I follow Dr. Cowen out of the elevator and through the ICU. Toward the end of the hall, he opens the door to a room, and I follow him inside.

My throat feels tight as I walk into the room and see her lying in the bed. She has various IV lines connected to her and

tubes down her throat. She has a huge bruise covering the left side of her forehead and a cast on her right arm from her hand to right below her elbow. That same arm is also in a sling.

“She was extremely lucky, all things considered,” the surgeon begins speaking. “She has a grade two concussion that we are monitoring closely. She has three broken ribs, as well as a distal radius fracture. Her shoulder was dislocated, but we were able to reduce it. That’s what the sling is for. She had a lot of internal bleeding when she first came in, coming from a ruptured spleen, so we had to perform a splenectomy to remove it. The surgery went well. However, she did lose a lot of blood and we are keeping a close eye on her. Right now, we just have to wait for her to wake up.”

“Thank you,” I manage to mumble, moving to sit in the chair next to the hospital bed she’s lying in.

“No more than two visitors at a time right now while she’s recovering.” He nods to me before leaving the room, giving me the privacy to sit with her.

I stare at her, lying so still, too still, in the hospital bed. She looks so small and fragile, hooked up to so many machines. The steady sound of her heart monitor beeps in the background, and it gives me comfort. The beeping lets me know her heart is still beating. Letting me know that she’s alive.

All of this is my fault. No, I didn’t hit her with the car, but how she ended up there leads back to me. I should’ve told her sooner. I should’ve explained it all to her the second I started having real feelings for her. But that was before I even knew who she was, if I’m being honest with myself. I had so many different opportunities to tell her, but I avoided it every time. Then she had to find out from the messages instead of from me. All I could offer was a rushed explanation after being caught lying to her.

It’s my fault she was running out of the building, it’s my fault she was distracted, and it’s my fault she’s here now. I sit in the chair, gathering my thoughts and attempting to pull myself together for what seems like a long time, but it is only

a few minutes. Time feels like it's passing slower as I wait for her to open those beautiful green eyes and show me that she's okay.

I walk back out to the lobby, knowing it will still be a little while before she wakes up. I relay everything the doctor told me to everyone who's been waiting and then Gabby re-explains it better than I could. After filling everyone in, I head back to her room, bringing Demi with me.

I let her sit in the chair next to her bed while I stand with my back pressed against the window. We stay silent, only the sounds of the beeping monitors filling the empty space as we wait. I pace to keep myself busy. Demi doesn't move, sitting still in the chair, her eyes moving back and forth between Lo and the monitors. Theo and Gabby sneak into the room, even though they'd said only two visitors. I'm sure they could get in trouble for being in here, but neither of them seems to care. I'm standing against the wall, my head in my hands, when I finally look up to see her eyes opening.

"I'm going to grab her nurse," Gabby says, exiting the room. Lo looks around sluggishly as she processes her surroundings. Gabby is back in less than a minute, a nurse by her side to extubate Lo. The nurse removes the tube from her throat, and Lo coughs, wincing as she does.

"Do you know where you are? Do you remember what happened? How are you feeling?" Theo steps up to her as the nurse moves out of the way. Lo slowly moves her head toward him.

"Hospital. Hit by a car. In pain, your voice isn't helping," she whispers back to him, her voice scratchy. He smiles and Demi chokes out a loud sob, grabbing Lo's attention.

"No crying. I'm okay, Dem."

"You fucking bitch. You scared the shit out of me. I forbid you from ever putting me through this again." Demi smiles at her through her tears.

"I'm sorry for putting you through so much." She pauses, swallowing to try to ease her throat before speaking again.

“I’ll make sure to take that into consideration before ever getting hurt again.” She half smiles at her, although she looks like she’s in pain. Her eyes look past Demi and finally land on me.

“Baby girl...” The words trail off, at a loss of what to even say to her. Nothing I ever say could possibly be enough right now.

“No,” she says, her voice itself weak but the word firm. “Not now, Kaden. Leave.”

“Please, Lo. Just don’t make me leave, not like this.”

“I can’t have you here right now. I just need...” She trails off. “Just, please go.” Her voice sounds broken, the fight having been fully knocked out of her. I’m the one that broke her. She gave me her heart, trusting me to protect it, only for me to be the one to smash it to pieces. Crushing my own heart right along with it.

“Out, Kaden. Now.” Demi doesn’t hesitate, turning to me and demanding I leave. It makes me feel good to know that Demi has her back without even knowing what I did.

“I love you, Logan,” I say as I force myself to take the steps toward the door. I hesitate as the sliding glass door opens in front of me. My feet feel cemented into the ground, not wanting to leave her side even for a second.

“Out,” Demi says again, her tone leaving no room for argument. I step out of the room and the door slides shut behind me.

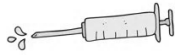
I force myself to walk away, walking to the nearest hallway wall and slumping down against it. I sit there, my back against the wall, my elbows resting on my knees in front of me, and my head in my hands. My life has never been easy by any account. I’ve dealt with the hard things, and I thought I’d been through the worst.

I was wrong. This moment right here is the worst. The woman I love lying in a hospital bed, bruised and broken. Me being forced to walk away from her at a time I should be there for her the most. Never in my life have I felt more helpless

than I do right now. I have no fucking clue how to fix it. All I do know is that I have to. I will.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-THREE



Logan

I love the hospital. Most of the time, it's one of my favorite places to be. It's where I get to help patients and save lives. It's where I feel like I'm doing the most good. Right now, though, I'd rather be anywhere else than here. Except maybe with him. Although even after everything, I know that's a lie.

Being a patient sucks. I've never been good at sitting back and trusting others. I've never been good at handing over control. I've only been here for two and a half days, and I feel like I'm going out of my mind. Most of my injuries were pretty cut and dry and will just require time for recovery. The only reason I'm still here is because of the concussion and my blood loss. They wanted to keep me for observation a little longer.

I chose emergency medicine for many reasons, but the fact that I'm not a fan of sitting still in one place for too long definitely plays a part in it. I like to be moving or feel useful. I do not like to be stuck lying in a hospital bed, barely moving at all. I've watched two seasons of a new reality dating show since I've been here. I should not have that type of time on my hands to do that. Thankfully, I get to go home tomorrow.

Although, what I really want is to hurry up and heal so I can get back to work. If I've learned anything since this accident, it's to always look both ways before crossing any sort of road or parking lot and that I very much prefer being the doctor over the patient. Also, I suck at being the patient. But that's neither here nor there.

My mom showed up sometime in the middle of the night on my first night here. She cried at my bedside for a whole two hours while I consoled her. The lecture came after she calmed down. How could I not have been looking where I was going? Was I on drugs? Did we need to sue anyone? Her thoughts were chaotic to say the least. Lucky for me, my ridiculous best friend was there to egg her on every step of the way.

I know Demi was scared when she called her. She did what any best friend would do and called my family when I was hurt. But I wish I'd never had to worry my mom with this. Yes, she can make me crazy at times to the point where I want to slap her. But she's already lost one daughter. I wish I could have saved her the fear of getting on a plane and flying here thinking she may lose another one. But that's what she did. My mom has shown up for me since the day she found out she was pregnant, and she never won't. That's at least something I can always count on.

I finally convinced her to leave and go back home this morning. She didn't want to, but I told her that I was fine and that she was of better use helping people at her job as a nurse back at home than here with me. I promised to call her once a day with updates and she finally agreed to go.

Demi, on the other hand, hasn't left my side. I mean, literally, they have to drag her out of here at the end of visiting hours. She's been having people cover her shifts at work and is with me every second of every day that she's allowed to be. Asher has been here multiple times to check in also, but I think I'm just his excuse to check on Demi.

He hasn't mentioned Kade, although I'm sure he's become privy to what's going on by now. Demi brought him up once, asking me what happened. I told her I wasn't ready to talk about it and she hasn't brought it up ever since. It's the truth, I'm not ready to talk about it. I'm barely capable of thinking about it.

Although that doesn't stop me from thinking about him. From missing him. Theo stopped in here earlier this morning and mentioned that he's been practically living in the lobby.

There's a part of me that wants him with me more than anything. For him to hold me, comfort me, and tell me everything is going to be okay. But then I remember that while he may not be the actual cause of my physical pain, the emotional part of it was all him.

It's all just confusing. That's the thing about loving someone wholeheartedly, though. Even when they hurt you, even when they make you question everything, the love doesn't disappear. I don't even know yet if I want it to. All I do know is I want out of this place so I have a chance to figure it out.

Demi's laugh brings me back to the present. She has the chair she's been glued to pushed up next to the bed and her laptop resting on the bed next to my legs. Some sitcom that she's been watching, something I've barely been paying attention to, plays on the screen. She clicks pause on the show as a knock sounds on my door. I look up as the door is pushed open, expecting it to be a nurse and surprised to see King standing in the doorway.

"Hey, okay if I come in?" he asks, already stepping inside, the door swinging closed behind him.

"Yeah, of course." I sit up a little straighter in the bed, trying not to wince as I do.

"How are you feeling?" He sets a vase of flowers down on the table next to my bed. The vase houses a large bundle of some of the most beautiful blue flowers I've ever seen. They look familiar, but I can't put my finger on why. They don't look like anything bought from a store, but I don't know where else I would've seen them.

"Been better." I smile at him, looking away from the flowers. "But I'm doing okay now. Getting better every day."

"I'm glad to hear it," he says. "Demi, would you mind if we talked alone for a minute?" Demi looks at me for approval and I nod my head.

"I'm going to go see what food the cafeteria has today." She closes the laptop, sets it on the chair, and makes her way

out of the room.

Both of us are silent for a moment as she leaves. It's not that King makes me uncomfortable. I've talked to him multiple times, and he's a genuinely good guy with some cute-as-hell kids. But we aren't close enough for him to truly care about me that much and I can tell by the look on his face that he has ulterior motives for being here.

"Thank you for the flowers." I break the silence.

"They're not from me," he responds, and I look away from him, not wanting him to see my thoughts about who they are from. "I told him to tell you sooner."

"You knew?" I ask instantly. I look back up at him and can see the guilt on his face.

"I did." He nods. "Look, Lo. I'm not here to defend Kade's actions. I told him he should've told you sooner, and I stand by that. But you've also got to understand that he was scared. He was scared to lose you, and then he almost lost you anyway."

"The car accident wasn't his fault. If it was anyone's, it was mine. I wasn't paying attention before I crossed the road. And scared or not, he lied to me. Not a small lie either. A lie that was possibly the only reason our relationship started in the first place."

"You don't believe your relationship was because of your sister, just like he doesn't believe the accident wasn't his fault." He sighs. "I don't know your story, Logan. I know you've lost, but that's where the information I know ends. I do know his story though, and it hasn't been easy for him. Kade doesn't let people in very often. It took him years to confide in me. It only took weeks with you. That's not because a message told him to, it's because the boy's in love with you."

"He confided in me but left out the part where everything I confided in him, he already knew. I told him about Lennox. I told him about who she was as a person. Meanwhile, toward the end of her life, he probably knew her better than I did and failed to ever mention it."

“You’re right that he hid it from you, and if you want to be angry at him for that, then you should be. Just don’t forget that even though he didn’t tell you this one thing, and yes, it’s a big thing, it’s like I said, a singular thing, and he told you dozens of other things. And all of those things were real. The love between the two of you, that was real. Be angry at him, hate him. But don’t stop loving him.”

I look away, not having a response as tears fill my eyes. Everything he’s saying is the truth. In my heart, I know the things Kade did confide in me were real. The scar on his chest that I felt, that wasn’t a story to gain favor. It was his life. It’s why I trusted him so much. While my love for him hasn’t faded, my trust has disintegrated. That’s something I don’t know how to go about fixing.

I know that King means well. I know he sees two people who are in love and in pain and wants to help fix that pain, but every second he stands here makes me want to forgive Kade even more. Which I’m not ready to do yet. I don’t know when I will ever be.

“Don’t write him off just yet, okay?” I look back up at him, nodding, and he smiles at me softly. “I’ll let you get some rest. I’m happy you’re okay, Lo. Me, my girls, and all of us at the shop are here if you need anything. Regardless of what’s going on between you and Kade.”

“Thank you, King. I really appreciate that,” I say, and I mean it. He turns to the door to leave. I look back over at the flowers he brought in that I know are from Kade. Staring at the beautiful bouquet of them, I notice the purple accents and it clicks.

The flowers are the same ones he tattooed on me. The ones he refused to tell me the name of. I hate that he still has that piece of me. He had a reason for withholding the name of them from me but lying here in a hospital bed, my heart feeling the most bruised of all my injuries, I decide I no longer care for his reasoning.

“King, wait.” He’s half a step out the door when I stop him. He turns around to look at me. “The flowers. Do you

know what kind they are?”

He looks over to the flowers and back at me before answering. “They’re forget-me-nots.”

I bite my lip, emotion clogging my throat and nod at him as he turns and leaves.

Forget-me-nots. He understood me. Every word I said. The blossoming flowers representing life, the falling petals representing loss, beauty and pain, the end and the beginning. It’s all there, wrapped in a beautiful assortment of flowers that represent those gone but not forgotten. It’s something real. Real how I know him and me were. The only fault I now find with it, the ink on my skin, the flowers next to my bed, is that he’s made it so I’ll never forget him either. He’s made it so I’ll never want to.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-FOUR



Kaden

“You need to go home, Kaden.” Demi sighs as she opens the door to her apartment to find me sitting against the wall next to the door.

She tells me this every day, and still, I sit here every second I can. It’s been two weeks of this. Two weeks of not seeing Logan. Two weeks of not speaking to her. Two weeks of complete silence. If I’m not working or sleeping, I’m here. Hoping by some slim chance, today will be the day I’ll be allowed inside. It’s completely pathetic and I couldn’t care less.

“I’m good here.” I move, sitting up straighter and wincing at the strain in my lower back. Demi looks at me like she pities me. It’s how I know that she doesn’t know what happened. It’s how I know Lo hasn’t said anything to her about why I’m sitting out here and not in there with her.

“Well.” She steps out of the apartment, closing the door behind her. “If you won’t leave, I guess this is a good chance for us to talk.” She sits down on the floor across from me.

“What exactly are we talking about?” I don’t mean to come across as dumb. There’s just so much she could be referring to. So many things that could fall under one simple statement.

“Anything.” She sighs. “Everything. We’ve been working on this brother-sister relationship between us for months and I still don’t know anything beyond surface level about you.

Just... tell me something real.” She looks nervous, and there’s a hint of desperation in her voice.

“What do you know about how our father ended up with your mother? And what do you know about my mother?” I ask her, not knowing where to start talking but knowing that it’s time to.

“I know that he left your mom for my mom, but that’s it. He never really mentioned your mom. He did call her crazy one time, but that’s the only thing I can remember.”

“That’s on brand for him.” I scoff. “My mom lived with paranoid schizophrenia. She was never crazy. He just never cared enough to help her.”

“I didn’t know,” Demi says, a solemn look on her face. “So, your mom started showing signs of mental illness and instead of getting her the help she needed, he found my mom, got her pregnant, and left the two of you for us.” She shakes her head. “No wonder you hate me.”

“I’ve never hated you, Demi. I hate him. Somewhere along the way, I let my resentment for him rub off on you and that was never fair. And as for Alexander Rhodes, our scumbag of a father, I think the only thing I don’t hate him for is leaving. Yeah, growing up wasn’t easy, and it sucked a lot of the time. But he wasn’t a good guy to us. It would’ve been worse with him there.”

“You’re right.” Demi bites her lip, looking more anxious than I’ve ever seen her. “Having him in your life is much worse than not having him in it.”

I stay silent, waiting for her to continue. Waiting for her to explain. I can tell she wants to, but she seems to be struggling every time she opens her mouth.

“You wanted to talk, Demi. I need you to be honest with me too. I want you to explain.”

“Yes, I wanted to talk and I’m trying. It’s not about what you need right now,” she snaps back. “Just give me a second, okay?”

“Okay,” I say immediately, and she nods.

The silence stretches between us. I watch her as she seems to go back and forth in a battle within herself. And then finally, she sits up straighter and it seems like she's won whatever war was waging within her.

"How much do you know about our father after he left you?" she asks.

"Not much. I know he got some fancy job and did well for himself. I know he's still with your mom. I know he's an asshole. That's about it."

"Okay." She nods to herself. "Our father, he wasn't just a bad guy to you." She pauses, and my stomach sinks. "He was okay when I was younger. I was a daddy's girl. He bought me pretty dresses and would take me to the club to show me off to all of his friends. I doted on him, and he loved it. Stupid." She laughs humorlessly.

"One day, he took me and my mother to dinner at the club with him and his colleagues. The main course was duck. I was six, I didn't want it, and I told him that. He told me to stop being a brat and eat it. I told him no. He told the waiter to bring me some chicken instead. He acted like it was okay in front of his friends, and the evening went on as normal. We drove home in silence, and when we walked into the house, he told me to go to my room. He followed me up the stairs and once we got to the top, he pushed me down them. That was the first time he abused me. He continued to until the day I turned eighteen and left." Tears are falling freely down her cheeks by the time she finishes. She doesn't acknowledge them though.

"Fuck, Demi. I didn't know—"

"Nobody did," she cuts me off. "Alexander Rhodes is a professional liar. To the outside world, he was the perfect father and husband. Inside the walls of our home, he was a monster."

"What about your mother? I'm assuming he abuses her too. She never tried to get you out? She's never tried to get out herself?"

“Yeah, he abuses her too. Well, he did. I’m assuming he still does. But she never tried to get us out. Alexander has narcissistic tendencies. My mother always blamed me, even if it made no sense. It was my fault for making him angry at the both of us. I’m not sure what her excuse is now that I’m gone. I tried getting her out once, not long after I left, but she wouldn’t go. She loves him. Fuck knows why.”

Everything I pictured as Demi’s life, everything I despised her for, comes crashing down. All this time, I thought she was the lucky one. I thought she lived the life I dreamed of as a kid. Turns out she probably had it worse than me. And I never knew because I was so caught up in my own shit I never thought to ask.

“Fuck. I’m an asshole. Nearly my entire life, every time you reached out to me, I turned you away. I resented you for a life that never existed. I could’ve helped you, but instead, I ignored you. Fuck, Demi, I’m so sorry.”

“You don’t know that you could’ve done anything that would’ve made a difference. I had your number. I texted you to hang out, not because our father was abusing me. I wouldn’t have told you then, Kaden, and I’m not telling you now for your apologies or your pity. I don’t want either of them. I just wanted you to know. Okay?”

“Okay.” I nod at her, but I don’t believe it. If I had taken her up on hanging out with her any of the number of times she asked, I might’ve seen it. I might’ve figured it out. I might’ve been able to help. No, I can’t know that for sure. But I never even tried. That’s a regret I’ll always have. “He deserves to be in prison.”

“I agree. It’s not that easy though. I was always too scared to come forward. He’s a powerful man, Kaden. Even if I did speak up now, it’s years later, I have no proof, and my mother will lie for him. She doesn’t know how not to.”

“We’ll find a way, Demi. He doesn’t get to get away with all of this.” She nods at me, a sad smile on her face. Even if she doesn’t believe me now, I mean it. I’ll find a way to get

him behind bars if it's the last thing I do. "So, can you tell me how she's doing?"

"Tell me what you did that has you sitting outside our door like a sad puppy dog every day and I'll consider it."

"I fucked up." I sigh.

"I gathered." She raises her eyebrow at me, waiting for further explanation before she's willing to give me any information.

"It's a long story. I kind of knew Logan's sister. I never met her, and I never knew her real name until I met Logan. Before my mom died, she used to talk to people anonymously through a mental health app. After she passed, I talked to Lennox on there. Just occasionally about life and random things. She was like an anonymous friend to me, although she knew my name."

"Okay." Demi looks confused. "So, if you didn't know her name. How did you figure out the person you were talking to was Lo's sister?"

"We started talking less and less until we barely spoke at all. Then one day, she sent me a message that she was sorry. She sent me Logan's name. She told me to look after her. I never looked for her. But then she was put right in front of me, and she was this incredible woman that I fell in love with, and it had nothing to do with her sister."

"And you never told her? You never told her that you knew who she was? Or that you knew about Lennox?" She puts the pieces together.

"I was going to. It was just never the right time. And then she found the old phone in the cabinet, and it was too late."

"You're a fucking idiot." She laughs. "I mean, you're a jackass too, for keeping secrets from my best friend. But also, you kept the phone in your fucking cabinet? What is wrong with you?" She laughs harder.

"I had looked through the messages not too long ago. I was trying to convince myself it wasn't her name. I put it back

there and forgot about it. I'm happy you're getting a laugh out of my stupidity though."

"I am, thank you very much." Her laughter settles. "Seriously though, Kaden. The stupidest thing you did was not being honest with her. Lo doesn't trust easily, and she trusted you. You broke that."

"I know that. I'm trying to fix it if she'll ever speak to me again. I've texted and called her over a hundred times. I'd prefer to talk in person, but that's not looking too likely either."

"Her phone got crushed in the accident. She's been using mine. She was planning on going out and getting a new one when she was feeling more up to it."

"So she's doing okay? She's been healing and feeling better?"

"Yes, she's doing well, physically, at least. She's healing well..." She pauses. "Do you really love her, Kaden? Like forever kind of love?"

"I love her more than anything," I answer instantly. "She's the person I want to wake up to and the last one I want to see before I fall asleep. She's been through hell, and she never stops fighting. She woke up parts of me I didn't know even existed anymore. She's kind, she's beautiful, she's courageous, she's funny, she's just everything. I don't know how to explain it, Demi, but she's it for me. And I think I'm it for her."

"Okay." She stands up, brushing off her legs.

"Okay?"

"I'll talk to her. I'll do what I can. Just keep showing up." She turns to open the door but stops, turning back around to look at me. "We turned out okay, didn't we? You know, all things considered." She laughs.

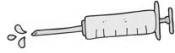
"Yeah, Demi. I think we turned out pretty great." I smile at her. "I know I suck at this big brother crap, but I promise I'll get better at it with time."

“I think you’re doing a good job already.” She smiles back at me. She turns, walks into the apartment and closes the door behind her.

I’ve lost more hope every day that I’ve sat here outside this hallway, begging for any crumbs Lo would give me. But tonight, I finally feel some of that hope renewed. I feel determined to do anything and everything to get her back. I remember Demi’s words about Lo’s phone, and it may not be much, but at least now I know where to start. Logan Hart is my forever. I just need to prove that to her again.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-FIVE



Logan

“Hey, I’m going in the shower. There’s something for you on the kitchen counter,” Demi says, peeking her head into my room.

“Okay, thank you.” I slowly stand up from my bed as she walks away. It’s been a little over two weeks since the accident. Since the truth came out. Since everything. It’s been a slow two weeks. My broken ribs still bother me the most, and my arm is constantly itchy in the stupid cast on it, but other than that, my injuries are healing well. Honestly, I’m just impatient.

I walk out to the kitchen to see a small white box sitting on the counter. I pick up the folded note on top of it and look down at the box that I now realize holds the newest iPhone. I pick up the note, already having an idea of who the phone is from.

Lo,

*A new phone, since it was my fault
the last one got crushed. I’m sorry.
The words seem so insignificant just
written on a piece of paper like this
but know that I truly mean them.
Just know that I’m here fighting for*

you, baby girl. Fighting for us. I'll wait as long as it takes until you're ready to talk to me. I'd wait a lifetime for you. Fuck that, I'd wait infinite lifetimes for you. Only you. I love you, baby girl.

Kade

The longer I stare at the note, the more I feel my chest crack wide open, my heart pounding out of it. I close my eyes, trying to imagine him in front of me. Trying to imagine his voice saying those words to my face. I know it's my doing that he hasn't.

The truth is, I miss him so much it hurts. I think I've even forgiven him. I understand why he would be scared to tell me. I still don't know how to trust him again though. So, I avoid it and push him away. It's my go-to. I don't want to keep doing it, but I also don't know how not to.

I slide the note into the pocket of my hoodie and grab the box, bringing it back with me to my room. I pull the phone out to see it fully charged. A picture of Kade and me from the night of the gala flashes on the lock screen, the same photo my previous phone had.

Theo had insisted on taking a picture of the two of us, even when I tried to tell him no. The picture on the screen is a candid one he took before either of us was smiling at the camera. I'm looking up at him while he looks down at me. Our eyes locked as if in that moment, the world around us didn't exist outside of each other.

I unlock the phone and see it's exactly like my old one. I click through the apps and the settings and see all my accounts are connected. If I had to guess, he had help from Demi getting all of my passwords. I open my texts and see dozens of missed ones from him. All asking how I am, if we can talk, if

he can see me, telling me how sorry he is, how much he loves me.

I pull the note out of my pocket, looking back and forth between it and the messages. I let my fingers hover over the keyboard. I fight with myself over whether it's a good idea to say anything and, if I do, what to even say. I stare at the phone until my fingers take over and start typing.

Me: Did you seriously buy me another phone just so you could make sure I'm getting your messages and then maybe I'd answer you?

Three dots pop up instantly to indicate he's typing. I sit and wait as they disappear and reappear a handful of times.

Kade: No. You needed a new one, so I went and got it for you. I did hope you might answer me, but I never assumed. Although, it seems this master plan you created for me is working.

I smile down at the phone. It's crazy how he has that ability. To say the most mundane things and still make me smile. He holds such a strong grip over my emotions, one that I allowed him to have, and it's scary. Because as happy as he can make me, he also can make me feel like I'm drowning if he chooses to.

Even as I think it, I know the truth. I don't think he ever would choose to. Lying to me about Lennox, I think in a screwed-up way, he was trying to protect me rather than hurt me. I'm sure he was protecting himself also, but Kade has never been selfish. I can't imagine he didn't take into account how I would feel. I can understand it was a shitty situation, and while I still think he should've told me as soon as he knew, I just think he didn't know how to not hurt me in telling me. So, he avoided it. And avoiding is definitely something I can understand.

Me: I don't know exactly how ready I am to talk yet. I don't think I know what I want to say. I'm trying though. I just wanted you to know that the accident, me getting hurt, that wasn't your fault.

Kade: You were out there because of me. You were running because of me. You were distracted because of me. My actions led you there, Lo.

Me: That doesn't matter. You weren't responsible for me forgetting to pay attention. You weren't responsible for the torrential rain obstructing the driver's view. You weren't responsible for her not stopping in time. It was an accident, and everyone is okay. Just please stop blaming yourself. Not for that, okay?

Kade: I'll do my best. And, Lo?

Me: Yeah?

Kade: When you're ready to talk, I'll be here. Waiting. I'd wait forever for you, baby girl.

I smile down at the message. I close the text thread and set it next to my bed just as a knock sounds out on my door. Demi opens it a few seconds later. She doesn't come inside though. She just leans against the open doorway, a nervous look on her face.

"What's wrong?" I ask her, and she fidgets against the doorway before deciding to come inside. She sits at the edge of my bed, facing me.

"I need to talk to you about something. You're not going to like it, but it's something you need to hear."

"Okay." I hesitate, concerned. "What is it?"

"Kaden told me what happened," she says, and I nod at her. I'm not too shocked that she got the details that I wasn't willing to share, from him.

"Do you want to forgive him?" she asks. I'm confused about where she's going with this, but I answer her question anyway.

“I do. I think I already have.” I sigh. “I just don’t know how to trust him again.”

“That’s what I thought.” She blows out a breath of air she seems to have been holding in. “You don’t know how to trust anyone, Lo. You never have, and I don’t blame you.”

“What are you talking about?” I sit up straighter against the headboard of the bed. My defenses shoot up, even though I know they don’t have a real reason to because this is Demi I’m talking to.

“Your father left you before you were even born. Your mom worked constantly, and yes, that was for you, but it meant she spent less time with you growing up. Your best friend died. Your sister left you in the most final way that she could.”

“Are you listing all my trauma for fun, as if I haven’t lived through it all myself? Or is there a point to this?” I cut her off.

“My point is, you’re not good at trusting people because anyone you should’ve been able to trust has let you down in the past, or the world let you down on behalf of them. You’ve learned to trust me over the years because I’ve forced you to. I’ve practically made it my life’s mission at points to break down the walls you had up when we first met. Kade, you learned to trust on your own. You finally let yourself trust someone again. And then he broke that trust.”

“Okay, so you’re making my point. I have some fucked-up trust issues and he made them worse. So, how am I supposed to trust him again? I’m not going to put myself in the situation to be hurt again when this time I should know better.”

“Lo, people are let down all the time. They’re lied to, and they find ways to forgive. Because that’s what we do. When someone we love lies, when someone makes a mistake, we forgive them. We learn to trust again. We don’t shut down and shut people out. But that’s what you do. It all leads back to Lennox.”

I fidget, looking down to where my hands are clasped together in my lap.

“You’re so bad at forgiving people because you’ve never forgiven yourself. You’re so bad at trusting people because you don’t even trust your own self. You didn’t see the signs before she died, and you still blame yourself. You need closure, Logan. You need to read the last chapter of her journal.”

“How do you know I haven’t read it?” I look up, shocked by her words. She’s not wrong about any of it. I just didn’t expect her to bring Lennox’s journal into this.

“Because I read it.” She sighs, looking guilty. “You’re constantly rereading it, constantly reliving the pain, and I wanted to be able to help you, Lo. I had to know what you were dealing with to do that. I know it was wrong, and you can scream at me about it all you want later. But I know you haven’t read the last entry because I have, and there are things in there you need to read. Things I know that you haven’t read.”

“I don’t know whether I’m more pissed at you for snooping through my most private thing or grateful to have a friend like you. You pay attention and do everything you can to help me even if you know I’ll be mad. If it means being there for me, you do it anyway.”

“You would do the same for me,” she says. “I just want you to be happy, Lo. Anything I can do to help you get there, I will. Even if it does mean I’m a tad overbearing at times.” She laughs, and I join.

“I’m still pissed at you. But you’re a really good best friend, Demi. And as far as trusting you, you may have pushed me, but you earned every bit of my trust.” I smile at her.

“Well, you’ve earned every bit of mine too.” She smiles back. “I know it’s scary, Lo, but just read the last journal entry. Please trust me when I say they’re words that you need to hear.”

I nod at her, and she walks out of my room, closing the door behind her. I open my nightstand and pull out the journal that I haven’t touched in weeks. It feels heavy in my hands, although, in reality, it’s relatively small. The worn leather

cracks against my skin, reminding me of everything it's been through.

I've always been scared of reading the last journal entry. I turned the page to it once, and all I saw was the date before I slammed it closed. July 4, 2016. The day she died. I'm scared of what I'll find if I read it. Does she explain her decision? Does she apologize? Does she address me?

It's funny. People are scared of the unknown, and because of that, they go out of their way to make sure whatever it is they're afraid of isn't known. It's been my biggest avoidance yet, but I'm tired of letting fear hold me back.

Demi said to trust her, and I do. She's right, I do need closure. I need to know the last words my sister wrote. I need to try to understand. I need to forgive her, and I need to forgive myself. And most importantly, I need to try to find the acceptance I don't believe she ever did. I flip open the journal.

THIRTY-SIX

ACCEPTANCE

July 4, 2016

To Logan,

I've been staring at this page for half an hour, trying to decide what to write. There's no point in addressing this to anyone but you anymore. I know you're the one who will end up reading it. I know you're the one who was meant to. There's so much I have to say to you, but I'm struggling with finding the words. Partially because I feel like anything I say now will never be enough and partially because I'm just so fucking tired it's hard to find the energy to even move this pen across the paper.

I'm struggling, Lo. I know somewhere deep down, you've seen it. You're probably avoiding it on the surface. I wish I had that skill, but I don't. I've never been able to avoid anything. I feel everything deeply and all at once, and I never know how to shut it off.

When I first started therapy, the doctor explained the five stages of grief to me. She told me the signs and symptoms of each stage. She told me how to cope with them. She told me to let myself feel what I needed to feel so that I could move forward. But I haven't been able to move forward, Lo. I've been stuck for so long now. I've searched for the acceptance I should have come to at every corner, but it's just not there for me. I can't find any sort of light at the end of the tunnel anymore. I've been fighting and searching, and I'm just so tired, Logan. I'm sorry I'm so tired.

This entry isn't supposed to be about me though. I've talked enough about myself in here. It's about you. I'm using every last morsel of energy I have left to write it for you, so you better read it closely.

You, Logan Grace Hart, my beautiful twin sister, are extraordinary. You have fought in ways I have not been able to. You have gone on to fulfill every goal you've set out to accomplish. You've overcome all the horrible things life has thrown our way. You are strong. You are everything I wish I could be.

It's how I know that you will survive, even when I cannot. It's okay to be angry with me. I don't blame you. I'd be angry with myself too, if I could muster up the energy to get angry. It's okay to be sad. It's okay to feel lost. It's okay to miss me. And it's okay to not miss me.

You say being twins is different than being sisters. We understand each other in a way nobody else ever will. We feel each other's highs and lows. We feel each other's pain. But you don't understand this, Lo. I've wanted so bad

for you to, for anyone to, but nobody gets it. You don't feel my pain this time, and I don't want you to. I hope you never will. You're my twin, but you're so much more than that. You will always be so much more than that.

I know that you've always thought that we never needed anyone else as long as we had each other. You say we each have half a soul, and together we are whole. We are each other's true soul mates.

You're right, Lo. I do believe we each only have half a soul. I believe everyone does. I believe one of our main missions in life as humans is to fill that other half. To find someone who understands us completely, to love us, to make us whole.

I need you to know I'm not your soul mate though, Lo. I'm not your other half. But I did find him. His name is

Kaden Pierce.

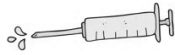
It's okay to be happy, Logan. It's okay to let people in and be open to the idea of love. You don't have to avoid the good things. You don't always have to run away. It's okay to find people and a place that makes you want to stay still. You're going to do amazing things in life, and I will always be proud of you.

I love you eternally, Lo. I believe he will too.

~Lennox

CHAPTER

THIRTY-SEVEN



Logan

I stare at the final journal entry, or rather the letter. The letter she wrote to me, probably only hours before she took her own life. Demi was right. I have always blamed myself. If I had looked harder, I would've seen what I didn't want to at the time. I would've seen Lennox struggling. Maybe I could've helped more. Maybe I wouldn't have walked into what I did.

The day is vivid in my memories. I can't imagine a time it won't be. It was the Fourth of July. Mom was working, and I had begged Lennox to come out with me to a party a girl I had met in college was throwing. The party wasn't even my scene, I had never cared for them, but it used to be Lennox's. So, I figured getting out and celebrating would be good for her.

I asked her a couple days before and she had agreed to go. I thought this was it, she was agreeing to start living her life again. Then it was twenty minutes until we had to leave, and she told me she couldn't come. I asked her why and she said she was too tired. At the time, I thought it was a stupid excuse, but now I realize she was more than just physically tired.

I was angry at her. She told me to go to the party without her, and any other day I would've told her no. I would've stayed with her. But I was frustrated that she had finally agreed to do something her old self would've, only to cancel. I was tired of her being tired. So, in that single moment, I chose to be selfish. I chose to go to the party, and I left her there alone.

I tried to have fun at the party. I tried not to think about her. I didn't drink because I had driven. I talked to people. I kissed a random guy at midnight whose name I still don't know. I watched the fireworks and I let myself live my life. It was 12:07 a.m., the fireworks still booming in the sky, that I realized my mistake.

I listened to the loud booms, and I was reminded of what they may sound like if you let your mind trick yourself. My heart sank into my stomach, and I ran to my car, leaving the party behind. I drove home as fast as I could, but I was half an hour away. I had a gut feeling that I never should've left Lennox. My mom didn't get off until six in the morning, and Lennox was all alone while fireworks rang out around her. Fireworks that could very easily remind her of gunshots. That could take her right back to that day, that moment, the worst moment of her life.

I pulled into the driveway and the house lights were off. That was my first clue something was wrong. Then I walked inside, and it was silent. So silent that you could hear a pin drop. That moment was the second time in my life I felt paralyzed by fear.

I walked slowly to her room, feeling the weight of each step I took. I stood outside her door and I knocked. I called her name, and I knocked, and I waited, and nothing. I tried to prepare myself as I opened her door, but nothing could've prepared me for what I saw.

My beautiful twin sister lay in her bed in her childhood room which she would never have a chance to grow out of. What seemed like her entire blood volume poured out of her and onto the sheets, dripping onto the floor. A gun lay on top of her stomach, her hand limp next to it. As I ran closer to her, I saw the bullet hole in her chest, right below her collarbone.

I felt for a pulse, but there was nothing there. I called 911, but it felt like hours before they showed up. I opened the door for paramedics, who ran to the aid of my sister, only to tell me what I already knew but didn't want to believe. She was gone. She chose to be gone, and I was so fucking angry at her. Part of me still is.

As a medical professional, I know that living with mental illness can be paralyzing. I know that Lennox may have felt like this was her only option. I knew, on some level, it wasn't her fault. But as her twin, it was hard not to look at the situation and think that she had given up. She left me. It was hard for me to believe there was nothing else she or I could've done. It was hard for me to believe she was so physically and mentally exhausted that she thought it would be too much to keep breathing.

I found out about a week and a half later that Lennox had purchased the gun legally. She stole money from my mom, who didn't even notice it was missing and drove to a weapons store only fifteen minutes from our home. She walked in, purchased the gun, and came back two days later to pick it up. That was on July 3.

Technically, the store did nothing wrong. They ran a background check on Lennox and found nothing. If they were looking hard enough, they could've seen she wasn't okay, but they didn't care to.

They asked her what she wanted the gun for. She told them she wanted to feel safe. They didn't ask her why she never felt safe in the first place. If they did, they would've known it was because she watched her best friend get killed by someone else who shouldn't have been able to own a gun. They didn't ask her if she was okay. They didn't ask her about mental illness.

They saw a seemingly healthy twenty-year-old girl who was looking to purchase a weapon and did their job by selling it to her. It should've been so much more difficult to obtain a weapon that could have such a catastrophic outcome in the wrong person's hands. But it wasn't. It's not.

I went to that store once I found out. I walked in and the cashier smiled at me and told me to let him know if I needed any help. I walked up to him and put a printed picture of Lennox down in front of him.

I asked him if he remembered her. He stared at her picture longer than he should've had to and then it finally clicked for him. He smiled at me and confirmed that he did.

“Quiet girl,” he said.

Lennox had never been a quiet girl. Not until she had nothing left to say. Nothing left to give. He asked why and I just stared at him. I stared at him until the smile that was glued to his face fell.

Then I finally said, “She’s dead. She shot herself.” I didn’t wait for his response before picking up the picture and running out of there.

We had a funeral for her, and I packed up my life and moved to Seattle a week later. My mom begged me to stay, I wasn’t supposed to leave for another two weeks. But I couldn’t. I was so mad, but I also missed her so fucking much. I couldn’t be in that house, that city, that state. I couldn’t be anywhere that reminded me of her. I still can’t. I haven’t been back since I left. My mom visits me here, but that’s the most of my past I’ve been able to handle.

I guess that’s why Demi told me to read the journal in the first place. She knew I needed closure. She knew I needed to hear that this was Lennox’s struggle, and truthfully, anything I said to her probably wouldn’t have made a difference. I could’ve told her we’d find a way to help her, and I could’ve promised her it would get better, but I don’t think she would’ve believed me or even heard me.

It was the last few sentences that were the reason Demi knew I hadn’t read it though. I reread the words over again.

I need you to know I’m not your soul mate though, Lo. I’m not your other half. But I did find him. His name is Kaden Pierce.

I love you eternally, Lo. I believe he will too.

She knew. Just from a couple messages, she knew what I’ve come to find. She didn’t leave him my name just for him to take care of me. She left us each other’s names, believing we could take care of one another.

She told me to not be scared of the idea of love, and I always had been. I don’t think I even knew or understood what real romantic love was. Until him. Until he stormed into my

life, and I fell head over heels in love with him without any thought or care about the consequences. All I cared about was loving him because I didn't know how not to. I don't know how not to.

Kaden Pierce controls every piece of my heart, just like she knew he would. I always felt like a piece of me was missing after Lennox died. The missing piece was him. I was never his burden. I'm his soul mate, just as he is mine.

I stare at the words inked into the paper one last time. I stare at her name signed on it. The last thing she ever wrote. I let myself remember, and instead of the pain that always comes with her memory, I let myself smile. I let myself believe that she wanted me to live. She wanted me to be happy. She wanted everything for me, even if she couldn't see it for herself.

I close the journal and stand up, passing by my night table. I pull out a box that holds all of my old childhood memories. A box that sits in the back of my closet and rarely moves. I open it up and place the journal right on top. I close the box, push it back into the corner of the closet and shut the doors. I walk out of my room and find Demi sitting on the couch.

"Hey, I need a ride," I say, and she smiles wide.

She jumps up, slips on her shoes and grabs her keys before following me out the door. She doesn't ask me where I need to go. She knows.

She stays silent during the car ride. Maybe so she doesn't scare the courage out of me. Maybe because she knows there's nothing left to say. She turns on the radio and "Light Me Up" by Ingrid Michaelson plays through the speakers. I sit back, listening to the words and letting the music run through me. We pull up and she puts the car in park before turning to me.

"Call me if you need me, okay?"

"Always." I open the car door and get out.

"Lo." She stops me just before I shut it. "I'm proud of you," she says, and as good as the words feel, for the first time in as long as I can remember, I feel like I don't need to hear

them. I feel like maybe I'm proud of myself. And that feels like enough.

"Thanks, Dem." I smile at her before closing the car door and walking up to the tattoo shop. I walk inside and see King sitting at the front desk. The corner of his lips tilts up just slightly, showing that he's happy to see me here. Happy I finally came to talk.

"He's upstairs," he says. I nod at him and walk through the shop. I walk up the stairs and stop in front of Kade's door. I pause, taking a deep breath before knocking on the door.

I hear movement in the loft until, finally, the door swings open and Kade stands in the doorway. He looks like he hasn't slept in days, and he's run his hands through the top of his hair a few too many times. He looks like a mess, and yet, he still looks so fucking perfect to me. I stare into his blinding blue eyes that captivated me from the first look, and for a second, I let myself drown in them.

Lennox never found her acceptance. I thought I had, but I was wrong. I hadn't, until this moment. The past, the pain, the memories, the guilt, the happiness, the joy, the unknown. I accept it all. And finally, I let myself move on.

"Hi," I say.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-EIGHT



Kaden

This doesn't feel real. This is the moment I've been waiting for, to see my beautiful girl standing in front of me. It's finally here, and I feel frozen. Paralyzed by what her presence does to me. She looks nervous, but she's also smiling.

"Hi," I finally say back to her, my voice raspy from little use. We stand there for a minute before I finally pull myself together. "Fuck. Come inside." I open the door wider for her and usher her in.

She walks inside slowly. She's bundled up in sweatpants, a hoodie, and slippers that she slips off her feet. Her hair is a wild mess of waves around her head, and she doesn't look like she has any makeup on. I stare at her as she walks farther into the apartment toward the couch, and I'm reminded of her absolute beauty. As if I could ever forget.

I follow her to the couch and sit down next to her, angling my body to face hers. It's killing me not to be touching her, but I'm trying to let this be on her terms. There's palpable tension between the two of us. Emotional and physical.

"I had this whole plan coming over here." She laughs awkwardly. "I knew exactly what I wanted to say, what I wanted to ask. But now you're in front of me, and all I can think about is how much I've missed you."

"I've missed you so much more, baby girl. I'm so fucking sorry. I'm sorry for not telling you the truth, I'm sorry for the

way you found out, and I'm sorry for what happened after. I'm sorry for hurting you, Lo. I would take every ounce of your pain if I could."

"I know you would. It's why I'm here." She smiles softly. "You and Lennox. What did the two of you talk about?" She doesn't seem angry, just curious as she asks.

"It depended on the day. Some days, she'd message me wanting to hear about any clients I had or how the weather was. Other days, she'd talk about how she was struggling. She never went into much detail on those days though." I hesitate. "And then sometimes she'd talk about you. I didn't know it was you at the time, but I do now."

"What would she say? About me?" She crosses her legs underneath her and leans against the back of the couch.

"She would say that you're good." I smile, recalling her words. "You were good in every way. You were good at school, good at life, good with people, a good person. You were just good. She was right. She always seemed amazed by you."

"I was amazed by her. Before everything happened, Lennox lit up every room she entered. She never tried to be the center of attention; she just was. She had this rare ability to make you laugh at any given instant. You could be crying one second, and the next, she'd have you smiling, having forgotten what you were even sad about."

A tear falls from her eye, and I instinctively reach across to wipe it from her cheek. She looks up at me through her lashes as I do. She leans her cheek into my hand, closing her eyes, and I savor the feeling of my skin against hers before she pulls away.

"Do you remember Lennox's journal I told you about?" she asks.

"Yes, of course."

"I read the last journal entry in it today. Right before I came here actually. It was the first time I read it. It wasn't so much an entry as it was a letter addressed to me. She wrote it

the day she took her own life. The same day she messaged you.”

“Fuck, Lo. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I think I actually am.” She smiles. “She mentioned you in the letter. She used her last words on the two of us, for the two of us. She said you were my soul mate.” She bites her lip anxiously. “I think she was right.”

“I know she was, baby girl.” I gently pull her onto me, needing to be touching her now. She sits sideways on my lap, and her head rests against my chest.

“I still miss her, and it feels okay to miss her. I always thought that if I let myself move on, if I let myself be happy, I would be betraying her. Now it feels like the opposite. It feels like if I don’t live my life, I’m disappointing her. I finally feel like I can move forward without erasing her memory.”

“Nothing you do could ever erase her, Lo. You’ll see her every day in the things that remind you of her.”

“Like in the flowers. Forget-me-nots.” She smiles at me. “Promise me something?”

“Anything.”

“One day we’ll have a house with a big backyard surrounded by a white picket fence that’s so cheesy we can’t help but laugh at it every day. It’ll have lots of rooms for all the kids we may or may not have. It’ll feel like a home. And you’ll plant me a field of forget-me-nots that I can lie in and watch the sunset.”

“We’ll watch it together.” I kiss her. The truth is, I’ll build her any house she wants. I’ll plant her a field of flowers. We can fill the rooms with ten kids or none at all. Our house will be exactly what she wants it to be. But my home is anywhere she is, and it always will be.

I gently lift her, cradling her in my arms as I carry her to my bedroom. I lay her down on the bed and let my lips find their way back to hers. I let them find their way home. I kiss her slowly, gently. I kiss her without urgency because there isn’t any rush. With her, I get forever.

I help her undress and then undress myself. I kiss down her body. I kiss every square inch of it. I kiss her bruises that are still fading. I kiss the small scar on her stomach, where they removed her spleen. I move all the way down and up her body before stopping at the part of her begging for my attention.

I lay my tongue flat against her and she presses into me. I languidly lick as her sweetness floods my mouth. I circle her clit and the sensitive bundle of nerves pulses beneath my tongue. I suction it into my mouth, loving the way she squirms beneath me.

I continue to lick slow circles around her bud as I bring my fingers lower, coating them with her. I gently slide one inside of her, slipping it in and out slowly before adding a second. I slide them in and out of her, curling them into her to hit the spot that has her moaning. I pull them out of her, replacing them with my tongue. I keep all my movements slow, taking my time to build her up.

“You’re so beautiful, baby girl. I could watch you like this forever. Me playing with this pretty little pussy of yours while you squirm beneath me. I love when you show me how much you want me like this. How much you need me.”

“Please, Kade. I need you so bad. Please,” she begs as I circle around her clit again, barely applying any pressure at all.

I continue my ministrations until I have her panting beneath me. Then I wrap my lips around her pulsing pink bud once more and she lets go. A gush of liquid floods my mouth, and I lick up every last drop before moving back up over her.

I hover over her, careful to not put any weight on her, so I don’t cause pain to any of her injuries. I align myself with her and gently slide inside. Heaven. No, better than heaven. That’s what she feels like. That’s what it feels like being connected to her this way.

I’ve never viewed physical touch as a way to connect with someone emotionally, not before Lo. It was always a means to an end or a way to have some fun. Then she came in and shattered the glass around it all. Our physical connection only strengthens our emotional one.

We move fluidly as one. We cling to each other, desperate for the closeness. I press my lips to hers, our tongues dancing to the same tune as our bodies. Our tempo stays slow, rhythmic almost. Right now, there isn't a need for anything more.

There are no words, no rush. The world disappears, and it's just the two of us escaping into each other. Loving each other. That's how it's been since the first second I saw her. The world stops spinning, time stands still, and we are transported to another dimension where nothing else matters.

I angle my hips so my stomach rubs against her clit each time I press into her. I keep my pace slow, hitting that sweet spot inside her every time. We let the fire build between us with each stroke, with each kiss, with each look into each other's eyes. And then we let it consume us together. She clenches around me, her wetness mixing with mine as it seeps into her.

We stay that way, connected, our foreheads pressed together, our breathing aligned, our hearts beating to the same rhythm, until we can't anymore. Then I pull out and stand, walking into the bathroom to get a damp towel. I clean her and myself before sliding back into bed next to her.

I lie on my back and gently pull her into me. I hold her close, stroking my hand through her waves as she lays her head against my chest. I could stay like this forever. Never leave this loft, never leave this bed, as long as I get to hold her for the entirety of it.

"I love you, Logan Grace Hart. More than anyone's ever loved someone before. You're the light in my life. You're the air that I breathe. You're a part of me I never want to lose."

"You'll never lose me. I'm so disgustingly in love with you, Kaden Pierce. I tried to be angry at you. I tried to force myself to push you away. I couldn't do it, though. You're in my veins. You're in my head. You're in my heart. You're everywhere, and still, all I could do was miss you."

She adjusts her body so she can look up at me as she lies against me. "No more secrets. Ever. Promise me?"

“I promise.” I kiss her forehead.

“So, what do we do now?” She laughs up at me. A big smile covers her beautiful face, and I feel my lips quirk up in turn.

“We live our lives. We love each other. We plan our future. Anything in this world that you want, we can do it, baby girl. We have forever. Only you. Only us, my beautiful girl.”

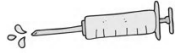
For once in my life, there’s no weight bearing down on my shoulders. I feel light, I feel happy. And it has everything to do with her. I’m no longer scared for the future but excited about it because I get to spend it with her.

She looks up to me with her big, grassy-green eyes, full of pure, unfiltered love, and says, “Only us.”

I don’t think there will ever be a moment more perfect than this.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-NINE



Logan

Two Months Later - February 14

Nine years ago today was the day my life catastrophically changed. I lost my best friend and my innocence, and though I didn't actually lose Lennox that day, it felt like it.

I sit on the damp grass in front of my sister's grave, staring at the headstone engraved with her name. It's the first time I've seen it since this is my first time back here since her funeral. It was Kade's idea to come here. He wanted to see my old life, meet my mom, know where I came from. I think he also wanted me to face this part of my life that I'd been hiding from for so long, though he never admitted it.

I was able to get a few days off from work, and we flew in yesterday. My mom sold our old house about a year ago and now lives in a townhouse with her boyfriend, Daniel, whom she's been with for a little over a year. He's a good man, from what I can tell.

We had dinner with the two of them last night and I can't remember the last time I saw my mom that happy. We ate, and we talked, and we laughed. I thought being here would only cause me pain. Instead, it reminds me of the happy memories before everything went to shit. Florida may have been home to some of the worst moments of my life, but it was also home to many of the best.

At the end of the night, my mother offered Kade and me their spare room, but we opted for a hotel nearby. Kade said

this was still a vacation and there were things he wanted to do with me that he definitely couldn't do under the same roof as my mother. I made no objections at all.

I woke up this morning expecting to feel the reminder of the day, and in a way, I do, but it's not debilitating in the way I thought it would be. It rained all night, but this morning the sun shines bright. I knew where I needed to go today. I got ready, threw on a yellow sundress and white Converse, and woke up Kade, who insisted on coming with me.

Now here I am. Kade stands a couple feet behind me, giving me my space but never going too far. I made him stop at the drugstore on the way here so I could get flowers. Pink roses were always her favorite. I lay them across the grass in front of the stone, adding color to the otherwise depressing place.

"I'm not sure how to do this." I laugh nervously. I'm sure Kade can hear me, but he stays silent, knowing I'm not talking to him. "I don't know if I believe you can hear me right now. I'm not sure what to say, even if you can. I could fill you in on everything you've missed, but I like to think you already know. That you've been watching. I like to think you're with Emersyn, and you're not in pain anymore. You're just happy."

I pick at the flowers in front of me. I pull off a petal, rubbing it between my fingers as I try to articulate my feelings. "I hate that you couldn't find a way to be happy here, with me. I'm still angry with you, I don't know that I ever won't be. I also just miss you. I don't think that will ever change either. I've realized I can miss you and be happy now at the same time, though. I'm really happy now, Len. I guess that's partly because of you." I turn to look at Kade, who still stands behind me, an encouraging smile on his face.

"I love you, Len. Always." I stand up, brushing the grass off my knees. I close my eyes and lift my head to the clear blue sky. I let the warmth of the sun soak into my skin, and I smile. Goose bumps rise over my arms and for a second, it feels like she's smiling right back down at me.

“I’m ready.” I turn to Kade and walk over to where he’s standing.

“Give me a minute, okay?” he asks, walking over to stand in front of Lennox’s headstone.

“Okay.” I smile at him. “I’ll meet you in the car.”

He nods at me, and I turn my back and start walking away. I’m probably about ten feet away when I hear his voice, and it stops me in my tracks.

“I just wanted to say thank you,” he says.

I slightly turn around to see his back toward me. He’s talking low, so I can just barely make out what he’s saying. “Thank you for giving me the best thing in my life. I’m sorry I didn’t trust you and look for her sooner. I just want you to know that you were right to send us to each other, and I promise I’m going to take care of her and love her infinitely.”

I smile at his words, my heart full of all the love he’s constantly making me feel. I turn my back and walk to the car. I heard everything I needed to. I lean against the car for a few more minutes before he joins me.

“Everything good?” he asks me, coming to stand in front of me.

“Perfect.” I stand on my tiptoes and press my lips against his lightly. I pull back and smile up at him.

“Yeah, it is.” He smiles back at me. “Come on. I have somewhere I want to take you.” He walks around to the passenger side of the car, opening the door for me and closing me in before getting in himself.

“Where could you possibly have to take me? I’m the one who used to live here. Have you ever even been here before? Do you know where you’re going?” I fire off the questions one by one.

“Just trust me, okay?” He laughs at me.

“I do.” I sit back in my seat, easily agreeing to what once would’ve been the most difficult decision for me.

He drives past my old neighborhood, and I sit up straighter, paying attention to where we're going. He keeps going until he pulls into the parking lot for a nature preserve that I recognize. It's part of the same trail that connects to my house, and suddenly, I know where he's taking me.

"How did you know where it was?" I ask, knowing he's taking me to the gazebo. I'd told him about it in passing, but I never realized he paid such close attention.

"Well, you described the area to me, and when you fell asleep yesterday, I snuck out and went looking." He says it so casually, as if it isn't a huge deal. Maybe to him, it isn't, but to me, it's everything. That he listened to how much this place meant to her, and in turn, to me. That he made it his mission to bring me back here.

He gets out of the car and comes around my side to open my door. I get out and he closes it behind me. He takes my hand in his and I follow his lead. We walk on the path surrounded by nature, and then he cuts right through the small opening that leads to the gazebo. We walk through the trees into the open space, and the gazebo comes into view, but it's not how I remember it.

It's the same white worn-down gazebo, the paint chipped and the wood splintering so much I'm surprised it's still standing. But now wrapped around each wooden beam are flowers. Not just any flowers, Forget-me-nots. There are also two rows of them on the ground, leading a pathway from where we stand to the gazebo.

"How?" I look up to Kade with tears in my eyes. My heart feels like it's about to implode from how beautiful it all is, from how beautiful he is.

"I have my ways." He smiles down at me, wiping a fallen tear. "Come on, beautiful girl." He leads me into the center of the gazebo. I follow him, my eyes drifting around in awe of what he's done.

"I know this place is special to you. It was hers, and then it was yours, and now I'm hoping it can be ours," he says, and I turn my attention to look up at him.

“Today is the day that took so much from you. It’s a day that caused so much pain and darkness for you and so many others. It’s a day that’s left you with nothing but bad memories. I don’t expect to ever erase those or the past, but I thought we could also make it a day to celebrate our future. We can create goodness, happiness, and love on a day that stole those things from you. Something good can come out of all of the bad.”

I’m openly crying now. Tears fall down my cheeks, and I make no effort to wipe them. Everything he’s saying is everything I’ve needed to hear without even knowing it. He doesn’t realize it, but he’s made this day everything he’s saying and more with only his words, with this place, with these flowers, with his presence. He drops down to one knee in front of me, pulling a small black box out of his pocket. I bite my lip to hold back the sob threatening to break free.

“Logan Grace Hart. You are my soul mate, my other half. You make me whole. Forever will never be long enough as long as I’m with you.” He opens the box to reveal the most beautiful ring I’ve ever seen. “I love you more than words could ever describe. Marry me, beautiful girl.”

He doesn’t ask it as a question, and he doesn’t need to. He already knows my answer.

“Yes.” I pull him up to stand. “I love you so much. A million times, yes.” I throw my arms around him, kissing him until I can’t breathe.

He pulls out the ring and slides it onto my finger. It’s a thin gold band with one large oval diamond in the center of it. It’s so simple, yet so perfect.

“It’s perfect.” It fits perfectly onto my finger, and not only because of the measurements. It just feels right. “You’re perfect.”

“No, baby girl. That’s you.” He presses his lips to mine again, and my body melts into him. He pulls away, placing a featherlight kiss on my head.

“Lie with me,” I say. I pull him down to the dirty gazebo floor with me, not caring about the mess it’ll make on our clothes.

We lie there together, our backs against the rough wooden floor, our hands clasped together, and our heads to the sky.

My sister lay in this exact spot. She stared through the cracks in the roof of the gazebo, surrounded by trees. She stared at the sky, searching for a way to claw herself out of the darkness that had captured her.

Now, I lie here. In the place that used to be an escape from sadness and has now turned into a direct pathway to my happiness. I lay my head against Kade’s shoulder as we stare at the sky together. Clear, bright, beautiful. I smile because even though I’ll always be sad, she could never find her way from the darkness. In this moment, with the love of my life that she inadvertently found for me, with my fiancé, all I see is light.

EPILOGUE



Kaden

Three Months Later

“How are you feeling? Are you nervous? I feel nervous.” Asher paces back and forth in front of me, clearly freaking out even though this isn’t even his wedding. It’s mine, and for the first time in my life, I don’t feel nervous at all.

“Nope, I’m good. How are you doing?” I ask him.

“I’m freaking out. You’re getting married. That’s legally binding shit. I know it’s Lo, and you love her. But seriously, how the fuck are you not freaking out?”

“Because it’s right.” I shrug, leaning back against the bar. He looks at me like I’ve grown two heads.

“I need a drink,” he says before walking away while I watch him, amused.

Not long after I proposed, Lo and I started talking about wedding plans. It took us about five minutes to figure out the big wedding and all the intricate details that came with it were not for us. When she suggested we get married at Carl’s, the place we first met, we both knew it was right.

She begged June, who agreed with little argument. Probably because of the amount of money we’re paying her to rent out the place. We put Demi in charge of the food and cake. Theo cleaned up the bar. Well, he ordered Asher around to clean up the bar, and then he and Gabby decorated it with

dozens of different flowers. And King got ordained online to officiate.

There's a makeshift aisle carved out in petals in the center of the bar. Barstools line the sides for people to sit in, although we kept it small. Lo's mom, Julia, and her boyfriend, Daniel, King and his girls, Asher, Demi, Gabby, Theo, Darla and her husband, and June, of course.

Julia and Daniel sit on the barstools talking to Darla and her husband. Asher is now drinking what looks like whiskey on the other side of the bar. June sits in the corner behind the bar with an annoyed look that never seems to leave her face, even when she's happy. Theo and the rest of the girls are in her office getting ready. King's disappeared somewhere. And I'm just waiting. Waiting to officially marry the love of my life. Waiting to be able to call Logan Hart my wife. Fuck, I can't wait to do that.

"We're ready," Theo shouts as he comes skipping out from the office. King and the rest of the girls follow him out.

Everyone takes their seats while I meet King at the end of the makeshift aisle. Lo decided she didn't want to do the whole bridesmaids and groomsmen thing. She didn't even want a flower girl. She said she wanted it to just be us. Her at one end of the aisle, me at the other. Her mom offered to walk her down the aisle, but she said it was something she wanted to do alone simply because she knew she could.

"You ready?" King asks me as I step up beside him. It's the easiest answer I've ever had to give.

"Fuck yes."

He nods at me, his lips slightly tilting up into a smile.

"I've never been more ready for anything in my life."

"Can't Help Falling in Love" by Haley Reinhart plays through the bar speakers, and I turn my attention toward the aisle. I hear the office door open and then she's there, standing at the end of the aisle across from me, so fucking beautiful.

She's wearing a short, long-sleeve white dress. Loose on the top and flowing down to her midthighs. She holds a

bouquet of forget-me-nots in front of her as she walks. Her hair flows down her back in a mess of blonde waves and her makeup looks only a little heavier than she'd do it on any other day. She looks like Logan. My beautiful fucking girl.

I smile at her, bigger than I've ever felt myself smile, as she walks toward me. Emotion clogs my throat at how lucky I am in this moment and every moment that I get to spend with her.

She gets to the end of the aisle, handing her flowers to Demi, who sits on the nearest barstool, before taking my hand and standing across from me.

"Hi." She smiles up at me and I laugh down at her.

"Hi, baby girl."

"When Kade asked me to do this officiating thing, I was surprised and a little bit concerned," King starts, and everyone laughs. "I've never done this before. I'm not very traditional at all, and I'm not the best with words. Then I remembered the reason we're here isn't for me but for the two people standing in front of me. I thought of what I should say and realized I shouldn't be the one who was talking. So, I'm going to let them tell you why we're here. Why they want to marry each other. Kade." I feel him look to me, but my eyes never leave her.

"Lo, my beautiful girl. My soon-to-be wife." I smile down at her. "You are everything that's good in the world. Lennox told me so before I even knew your name, and she was right. Our lives haven't been easy. Fuck knows I've made plenty of mistakes."

"Language." King nods toward his daughters while Lo laughs. I ignore him, smiling at Lo before I keep going.

"But I'd do it all again, live through every bad moment as long as it gets me to right here, right now, with you. There isn't anything that I haven't said to you before about how much I love you. So, I guess now, I'll just promise you. I promise to always take care of you even if there's a point you can't take care of yourself. I promise to always support you

and be proud of everything you accomplish, everything you have accomplished. I promise to never stop making you smile and laugh. I promise to keep trying to make all your bad days good.” I reach out to wipe the stray tear from her cheek.

“I promise to love you even when you make me feel like I’m losing my mind. I promise to keep making you feel that same way. I promise to love you until my last breath and long after. Forever, baby girl.”

“Forever,” she whispers back to me. She looks at King, who nods at her. She wipes the rest of the tears from her cheek, taking a breath and looking into my eyes.

“I always believed in soul mates as a kid, but never in a romantic way. I thought Lennox was mine because we got each other. I never believed in fairy tales though, or meant to be. Not until I met you. You crumbled every wall I had spent years building up to guard myself with a single look across this bar. You stole all of my control and taught me how to trust not only you but myself. With some help of course.” She smiles over at Demi, winking at her.

“You say that I’m everything good in the world. But everything I am in this moment is solely because of you. Lennox tried to lead us to each other, although we were both too stubborn to follow through.” She laughs. “Turns out we found each other anyway. You are my soul mate, Kaden Pierce. We make each other make sense. I promise forever to you. I love you eternally.”

“Kade, do you take Lo to be your wife?” King speaks. A simple question for a simple answer.

“I do.”

“Logan, do you take Kade to be your husband?”

“I do.” She smiles up at me.

“By the power vested in me by getordained.com, I now pronounce you husband and wife.” He looks at me. “You may kiss your bride.”

I waste no time yanking her into me and slamming my lips to hers. She throws her arms around my neck, kissing me

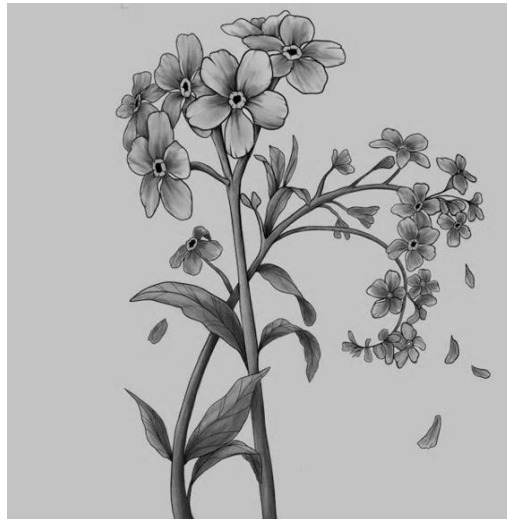
back. Everyone cheers around us, and she smiles into the kiss, pulling away slightly to look into my eyes. Grassy green locked onto ocean blue.

“I love you, husband.”

“I love you more, wife.”

LOGAN'S TATTOO

A huge thank you to Lexie Hall, also known as [@lexieroseart](#), for bringing the tattoo Kaden creates for Logan in the story to life.



THANK YOU FOR READING!

If you loved Kaden and Logan's story, please consider leaving
a review!

Blossoming Beginnings Book 2 is coming soon.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Wow. I honestly cannot believe I'm here right now, that I've actually published my first book and made myself an author. This has been my dream for as long as I can remember and there are so many people that played a huge part in making this happen.

To my family and friends: Thank you for allowing me to believe that this dream could be my reality. Thank you for always supporting me on this journey. And thank you for always loving me. Let's just pretend those spicy scenes didn't come from me? Cool. I love all of you.

To my soul mate: We both know better than anyone that life comes with struggles. We've lived them separately and together. Having you by my side has made me a better person. I could not have done this without your endless support. Thank you for listening to me ramble about plotlines even though you didn't understand a single thing. Thank you for pushing me to finish even when I lacked motivation. Thank you for always being proud of me. Thank you for being the absolute best person I know and inspiring every love story I'll ever write. You are my superman. I love you eternally.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jess Taylor is an author of romance in all of its many forms.

She fell in love with romance as a reader at a young age, and it wasn't long before she started creating her own fictional love stories. She aspires to write love stories that are equal parts steamy and swoon worthy.

Jess currently lives in South Florida with her two baby kittens, Boo and Luna. When she isn't writing, you can find her at the theme parks, reading, or binge-watching reality tv.