



Forgotten Rules

Rule #1: Don't fall for your brother's best friend...

ELIAH GREENWOOD

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To whoever is afraid to try that new thing and fall...

What if you fly?

Prologue

Will

Oxygen. A necessity we take for granted.

Humans can be ungrateful sometimes, so focused on one wrong, we forget the million *rights*. I used to think I was the exception. Grew up cursing the lucky bastards who don't appreciate what they have.

Because the little things aren't little.

And their oceans of problems?

They're puddles.

But as I lie on the ground, lungs full of smoke, head spinning out of control, I know I'm one of them. The ungrateful bastards.

Turns out I never realized how much I liked breathing. And I'd kill for a breath of fresh air right now.

Get up, Will. Get the hell up!

I can't move, slipping away, choking on her name. *I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.*

I wonder what they'll say when they find my body. Probably "What kind of moron runs into a raging fire?" And if I make it out, I should tell them:

The kind that lit the fire in the first place...

One

Kassidy

I once read that airports have seen more sincere kisses than wedding halls. I don't know when—much less where—but it stuck with me, and from that day forward, I always wondered about the strangers saying goodbye to their loved ones.

My gaze drifts to the woman battling tears as she pecks her partner on the mouth. The man pulls back, gasps at his watch, and rushes off. Dabbing her eyes with her sleeve, she watches him dissolve into the crowd.

Maybe her husband's just been deployed. Maybe he's leaving for a business trip, but she knows his "business" is blonde, twenty-four, and a yoga instructor. Or... maybe she just realized she missed the finale of *The Bachelor*.

Yeah, I like that option better.

So many stories that will never be told.

So many words that will never be written.

I'm sure, in a way, that's a good thing. Real stories can be a little *too* real for readers sometimes. No happy endings, no fairy tales, no promises of everlasting love. And life's hard enough as it is, right? We don't want your depressing reality. Give us our happily ever after and babies.

But what if... the words we'll never get to read are the words we need the most?

In an attempt to glimpse above the never-ending stream of people, I hop from one foot to the other. I still don't see anything—well, except for the bald spot on the man in front of me. My brother, Kendrick, mocks my fiddling, eyes glued to his phone.

Today is the day.

The day Winter, my cousin from Canada—yeah, the irony isn't lost on me either—is moving in with us. Aunt Lauren shipped her over to my mom while she's away on a work trip with Uncle Harry.

Winter will be staying with us until graduation in a few months. To her greatest misery, *might I add*. Last I heard, she would've preferred ripping out her own hair one by one than completing her senior year in Florida.

When told the news, my brother gave my mom a shrug with a careless “Okay.” But me? I was over the moon. Winter's the fun cousin you can't wait to see at family gatherings, the relative you'd go as far as to call a friend. She and Aunt Lauren visit from Toronto every summer—or at least, they used to. They couldn't make it last year.

I missed my snarky cousin, and it sure won't hurt having another girl around until I go away for college. Me and Mom can't possibly compensate for all the testosterone my dickhead of a brother and his two-brain-cells friends drag back home every week.

I'm hoping Winter's presence will buffer this burning need I have to move to a deserted island away from the male species. And by “male species” I mean the herd of baboons Kendrick spends all his time with—Blake Nichols, Alexander Holmes, and William Martins, also known as the banes of my existence. Still working on that petition to get them transferred to the local zoo.

Maybe with Winter here, I'll even have someone to confide in about how out of control Kendrick's gotten since Dad left. What I mean by out of control, you ask?

Oh, boy, where do I start?

I recently found out my big bro decided to trade his video games violent fights for illegal, high-paying, very *real* street fights. I overheard him and his dumbass friends talking about it in the kitchen one night. They thought the house was empty—not that I can blame them. Mom was working a night shift at the hospital again, and I was supposed to be sleeping at a friend's place.

They were laughing, bragging about how much cash they'd made in the ring, throwing back the beers Dad left in the garage before he skipped town—special mention to Daddy dearest for taking off with his kids' bleeding hearts but leaving the booze.

Kendrick told the guys the fights helped him control his anger. I confronted him the next day. "How on earth does destroying people's faces help you control your anger?" I asked. "Drop it, Kass. You wouldn't understand," he answered.

In Kendrick's defense, I don't think there are many great ways to react to your father walking out on you without a goodbye, but news flash: I got abandoned, too, and I don't go around breaking noses for fun.

Kendrick made me promise not to tell our mom. And I didn't. But not because I wanted to protect him—not by a freaking long shot. Because I wanted to protect *her*. She's been through hell and back these past few months, juggling the divorce and becoming a single mother overnight. No way was I adding on to her plate.

And while I may not care to ask questions, as I'd rather eat Brussels sprouts for the rest of my life than get involved in my brother's drama, I have a feeling this street fight BS is way bigger than Kendrick would like to admit. It might've started out as a way to channel his anger, but now?

It's more.

Much more.

Impatient, I pull out my phone to check the time. Winter should be here any second. She's been sending me memes from the plane—you guessed it, her flight was boring. But not as boring as the lady next to her who thought showing a perfect stranger pictures of her cat for two hours straight was a good idea.

I crack a smile.

Been there, done that.

I've always been the Universe's favorite target when it's bored. I just have one of those faces, I guess. You'd think someone smacked "Talk to me when I have earphones in both ears. That means I'm interested" on my forehead. While we have that in common and a rare fluency in this advanced language called *Sarcasm*, my cousin and I are overall very different.

Winter is eighteen and one year older than me, like Kendrick, but we're in the same grade as I started school early. She's also more of a "Go with the flow" kind of gal.

I, on the other hand, have spent my entire life preparing and planning ahead. I can't let go of control no matter how hard I try, and my big brother loves to remind me of my controlling tendencies every chance he gets.

I got it from our dad, who made the drilling of his life mantra into my brain a priority: "You don't just get your dream job like me by leaving things to chance, Cassidy. Only losers believe in Destiny. Winners believe in odds and hard work."

Pretty ironic that my father turned out to be the one thing I couldn't have control over.

"How much longer?" I huff.

"Chill. She'll be here," Kendrick drawls, tearing his eyes away from his phone when mine pings with a text.

Zoey: I need you. CODE RED!!!!

My lips tip into a smile. Meet Zoey Michaels, expert drama queen, in love with love, vegan who forgets she's vegan when she wants a burger and—*drum roll*—my childhood best friend.

"What'd the idiot do this time?"

I flick my head to see Kendrick peeking over my shoulder without a splinter of shame.

"Really?" I clutch my phone to my chest.

"She dumped his ass yet?" he asks.

“No, of course your brother isn’t annoying, Kass,” I mumble under my breath. “Said no one *ever*.”

“Can’t blame a guy for trying.” He beams.

Technically, he’s wrong.

I could blame him. You see, my brother and I have only ever had one sibling rule: no dating, looking, or *breathing* near your sibling’s friends.

Ever.

In another world, I’d have a right to be pissed at him for crushing on Zoey. But... in this one?

In this one, I broke the rule first.

You know the awkwardness that occurs when you’re forced to see someone you dated after breaking up? That cringeworthy moment that makes you want to crawl under a rock and never come out?

That’s what I’ve had to deal with every single day for weeks now. In my own house, as if it weren’t bad enough. If you think running into your ex in public is bad, try coming home to find him on your couch.

Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you my ex-boyfriend and biggest waste of time: Blake Nichols.

Yes, as in the Blake I mentioned earlier. Brother’s friend, dark hair, muscled—you get the idea. I should’ve known he was trouble with a capital *T* from the first time I saw him. Kendrick had me beat in that department. He knew Blake was bad news from the get-go and strictly forbade me to date him.

Then there’s Alex.

The only genuinely nice guy out of all my brother’s buddies. He’s kind, respectful, the “mom” of the group if you will—I mean, if moms had rock-hard abs and striking green eyes.

I know Alex to have grown up with two younger sisters and overly strict, loaded parents, which raises the question of

how the guy with a picture-perfect life ended up dislocating jaws for money.

Illegal habits aside, Alex is a perfect gentleman who's only ever had a few girlfriends, as opposed to Blake, who got around more than the seasonal flu. Alex is the only guy my brother deemed Kass-boyfriend material, and so Blake and I came up with a plan.

After weeks of begging, we got Alex to cover for us. I pretended to date him, asking Kendrick to drop me off at Alex's, only to go to Blake's the second his car dashed down the street. I was so naive back then, so certain what Blake and I had was love. Until our "love" was murdered by a three-word text.

We're done. Sorry.

Blake ended our six-month relationship over text exactly two weeks ago. Alex told us he was done lying, and if Blake wanted to be with me, he had to put his big-boy pants on and tell Kendrick the truth. Blake decided he'd rather drop the whole thing than get his balls chopped off.

We haven't said a word to each other since.

Do I feel bad about breaking the sibling rule? Let's just say the fact that my brother has always had a very public crush on *my* best friend sure helps me sleep at night. I don't doubt for a second he would've broken the stupid rule in a heartbeat if Zoey was single.

Lucky for me, she has a boyfriend: Sean, some college guy with a big house, a big wallet, and an even bigger ego to match.

When they first started dating, Zoey would go on for hours about how much better older guys were. Turns out the only thing Sean excels at is sitting on his parents' couch playing video games.

They've been on and off for a solid year. These two break up like they breathe, and I've stopped counting the times she's sent me this exact text asking to come over after they had a fight.

I type a quick reply.

Kass: Can't. My cousin arrives today. I told you.

A few seconds go by.

Zoey: So??? Bring her.

Kass: But I promised I'd show her around town.

Zoey: You can show her around tomorrow. Today we'll show her a box of tissues and The Notebook.

Kass: Thanks but no thanks.

Zoey: Pleaseee. It's really over this time. I'm never getting back together with him.

Kass: I'm never going to eat cake again.

Zoey: Huh?

Kass: Oh, I'm sorry. I thought we were listing things we lie to ourselves about.

Zoey: Not funny.

Zoey: U coming over or what?

Kass: *sighs* You're lucky I love you.

Zoey: YAY! Bring popcorn.

Kendrick nudges me with his elbow, and I look up, smiling at the sight of my cousin scanning the crowd.

“Winter!” Kendrick waves. Her face lights up, and she hurries over, carry-on bag hanging off her shoulder and suitcase rolling by her side. Letting her luggage hit the floor, she walks straight into our arms.

“How was your flight?” I ask when we break away.

She crinkles her nose. “Almost threw the lady showing me pictures of Romeo the cat out the window, but good.”

Kendrick laughs, picking up Winter's bag with one arm and banding the other around her neck to tousle her hair. Making our way through the commotion, we answer my cousin's million questions about her substitute home for the following months.

“Oh, and some American guy on the plane made fun of the way I say sorry. Rude much?” She frowns, her Canadian accent drawing a chuckle from me. A piece of the family has been missing this past year.

But now?

We’re whole.

“Yeah, well...” Kendrick smiles. “Welcome to America.”

Two

Kassidy

I'm bursting into Zoey's one-bedroom apartment an hour later. Nudging the door closed with my elbow, I kick off my shoes and steer a course to the living room. The first thing I see when turning the corner is Zoey's floor, covered in a ridiculous amount of mascara-tinted tissues.

Eh. The usual.

On the ground, sitting on a throw up of pillows and blankets are Zoey and my other best friend, Morgan. A bowl of popcorn rests between them—let me rephrase, a bowl in which popcorn should *be* rests between them. The popcorn in question is all over Morgan's hoodie. Morgan, being Morgan, keeps trying to catch popcorn into her mouth and failing until the floor is covered.

These two are my ride or die. I have no idea how I would've made it to senior year without them. I met Morgan freshman year, while I've known Zoey since kindergarten, but it feels like the three of us have known each other our whole lives.

"Came as fast as I could," I pant.

Morgan snorts. "Hey, Zoey. Bet that's what your ex-boyfriend said."

Morgan dies laughing at her own joke, and I inevitably follow. That's Morgan James for you. Morgan's the girl with the laugh that's funnier than the joke, that bookworm friend who's never seen a penis in her life but loves giving dating advice. When she isn't crying over fictional characters, you can find her avoiding people.

"Stop!" Zoey whines, concealing her face with perfectly manicured hands. "Don't talk shit about him. I still love him."

“What happened?” I sit down.

“He said he needed *air*.” She flings her arms up. “What in the hell is that supposed to mean? Is he under-fucking-water?”

Morgan bites back a laugh, earning a scowl from Zoey. She can’t bring herself to take Zoey’s drama seriously anymore, and I can’t even blame her: it’s a weekly thing at this point.

“Zoey, with everything that’s happened, did you ever think that maybe... this is a good thing? I mean, the guy cheated on you,” I remind her.

She doesn’t miss a beat. “We were on a break!”

Ross, get out of here.

“Were you though?” Morgan winces. “He said you were over, had sex with some girl at a party, then came back the next morning saying he changed his mind. I mean, I’m no dating expert and all, but that’s pretty fucked-up.” Morgan throws another popcorn into the air, opens her mouth, and misses *again*.

“He was just confused. And I don’t blame him for that. He made a mistake. Love is about forgiveness.”

Vomit.

“I’m serious.” Zoey blows her nose into a tissue. “It’s been three days and he hasn’t called. I think we’re really done this time.”

She says that every time—*every single time*. And they always get back together. To Morgan’s and my great disapproval.

Everybody hates Sean.

Pretty sure even Sean’s mother hates Sean.

The guy is despicable, more concerned with the number of cars in his garage than the number of hearts he tramples. He just *loves* taking advantage of Zoey and her obsession with dating a college boy. Although I have to say she does have a

part to play in the way her conquests treat her. She always goes for the lost causes.

Like her obsession with Haze Adams, the school's ultimate player, a while back. Man, she just couldn't let this one go. Allergic to commitment, Haze made it clear he just wanted sex from the start, and initially Zoey agreed. Until she slept with him, got attached, and showed up at his house in tears the next day. They went back and forth like this for months.

Haze had the money, the popularity, and, I have no choice but to admit... the looks. This resulted in him scoring spot number one on Zoey's *to-have* list. She wanted to be his girlfriend so bad. More so she could say she managed to tame the unredeemable bad boy than to actually *be* with him.

Too bad the dude doesn't have the ability to love.

"Wait, weren't you supposed to bring that cousin of yours along?" Zoey realizes.

I scoop a handful of popcorn. "Yep. Told her I was spending the day with my heartbroken friend in her snotty apartment, and she decided she'd rather hang out with Kendrick. *Shocker.*"

Morgan chuckles. "What's her name again?"

"Winter."

Interest gleams in Zoey's eyes. "Speaking of, how is your brother?"

Oh hell to the no.

I narrow my eyes. "Don't even think about it."

"What?" She blinks at me.

"Nope. None of that innocent shit. I know you. Don't use my brother as a rebound."

"I won't." She feigns confusion. "I was just wondering. Haven't seen him in a while. *Jeez.*"

My shoulders deflate with relief.

It's taken all I have to keep her paws off Kendrick back when she was single. Same went for him. At least when she was with Sean, I had peace of mind. These two together would be a freaking disaster.

"What are we watching?" I grab the remote.

"I changed my mind. Nothing that has to do with this monstrosity they call love," Zoey says, and I sneer.

"I'll drink to that." Morgan sips on her water—because alcohol has never touched that girl's lips in her eighteen years of life. That would require her choosing a night out over a good book at least *once*.

My thoughts dart to my tasks for the upcoming day. I'm supposed to go job hunting, been planning it for a while now. Even printed out my résumés three weeks ahead of time.

Morgan agreed to come with me despite her already having a gig tutoring a few kids from school. Zoey will meet us back at my house when we're done to binge our favorite shows the way we do every Sunday night.

We spend the rest of the evening vegetating on Zoey's couch, commenting on the teen movie—which does contain romance despite our best efforts—while I try not to prove my brother right by meticulously planning my Sunday down to the last second.



Waking up has always been the worst part of my day. Like it's not bad enough that we're going to spend one third of our lives drooling on a pillow, we have to feel like shit most mornings, too. Why can't we just wake up with great hair and endless energy? Also, I need to have a chat with the people making movies where the girl wakes up with a full face of makeup.

Dragging my feet down the stairs, I wrestle with the last wavy strand of my blonde hair. I must've gone over the stubborn piece with the straightener a million times—*Nope*, it

won't budge. I eventually had to admit defeat not to be late, but I know it's going to bug me for the rest of the day.

I pluck my phone out of my pocket, scolding myself for sleeping in. It's past nine. I usually get up at seven during the weekend and six during the week. If I wake up any later, I feel awful about wasting my day.

Padding into the kitchen, I try tricking my brain into positive thinking: I will get a job. Everything will work out. I can do this. I have bills to pay. *Get a car*, they said. *You'll be independent*, they said. Little did I know that shit could break without a warning and cost hundreds to fix when I barely have twenty dollars to my name.

The car cost me all I had, and I refuse to take the bus until graduation. *Nuh-huh*. Over my dead body. Not when I spent the summer working my ass off at summer camp with grouchy, screaming kids for it.

"Morning, sweetie." Mom walks into the room, tucking a long-sleeve white shirt into blue jeans. Her hair and makeup are done. *Wait... is she wearing a bra?* You'd have to pay my mom to wear a bra on her day off.

"You going somewhere?" I pour myself a cup of coffee.

"Taking your cousin shopping for her first day in school." Excitement radiates off her.

Winter ambles into the kitchen next, her long brown hair sprawled over one shoulder and reaching her belly button. Still in her pajamas, she smiles at my mom and mouths, "Save me," when we lock eyes.

I swallow a laugh. My cousin's always hated shopping. She loves her leggings and comfy T-shirts more than should be allowed. Don't get me wrong, she isn't a tomboy. Just a very simple girl. She barely wears any makeup—not that she needs it—and looks so unrecognizable when she does you could accidentally file a missing-person report on her ass.

"It's not my first day in school, Aunt Maria. I'm a senior, remember?" Winter picks an apple from the fruit bowl and pours herself a glass of juice.

“I know. But it’s your first day in school *here*. You need lighter clothes. Come on, let me treat you.”

A forced smile stretches Winter’s lips. My mom’s phone rings, and she exits the room to take the call.

Winter sits around the table. “Is your day going better than mine?”

“Not exactly. I’m going job hunting today.”

“Fun.” She grimaces. “Got anything in mind?”

“There’s a convenience store five minutes from here. Last I heard they were looking.” I fill the seat next to her, setting my coffee down.

She nods. “I’m sure you’ll get it.”

“I hope so. I don’t know how much longer I can ignore the lights on my dashboard.”

Before my cousin can reply, a shirtless Kendrick breezes into the room, backpack dangling off his shoulder.

“What’s up, ladies?” He tosses his backpack on the table, making a beeline for the fridge. His half-opened bag catches my eye. I sneak a hand inside and pull out the assignment on top.

An English paper.

C-

“Not your grades, that’s for sure,” I point out, and Winter stifles a laugh. Kendrick seriously needs to get his shit together. Between the fights and school, he doesn’t study nearly as much as he should. Having a mean right hook won’t get him into college. Irritated, he speed walks to me, snatching the paper out of my hands.

“Mom should’ve swallowed you.” He shoves the essay back inside his bag.

“Aw, love you, too, bro.” I lift a palm to my chest.

“So, *sis*, how much time did you spend making your mental to-do list last night? Like six hours out of eight?” he

taunts.

I want to oppose but press my lips together in defeat. He's right. I did do a mental list last night. Fell asleep way too late because of it.

I don't miss a beat. "I'd rather count the things I have to do than the girls I did."

Winter chokes on her apple.

If she thinks my brother not saving himself for marriage is *choke-worthy* news, she's in for the months of her life. Last time she was here, Kendrick had just started dating his first girlfriend, Nicole. Don't think they'd even made it past first base yet. Then shit hit the fan, leading to a nasty breakup, a parade of rebound girls, and, ultimately, my brother's transformation into a world-class fuck boy.

"Is it always like this with you two?" Winter asks.

"Yep. Should've thought twice before leaving the beavers, cous." Kendrick pours cereal into a bowl, bracing himself against the kitchen island as he eats.

Winter raises an eyebrow, shooting him a look that says "Sure, it's not like my parents enrolled me into a new school in the middle of my senior year against my will or anything."

She settles for, "Whatever you say, *Kendick*."

His head snaps up.

"What'd you just call me?"

I smile at their bickering. *Kendick* is a nickname we came up with when we were kids. Winter mispronounced his name *once*, and it just stuck.

Does Kendrick hate it? Oh yeah.

Do we care? Absolutely not.

"Hey, show-off! Morgan is going to be here any minute. Put some clothes on." I gesture to my brother's bare chest. This is becoming a bad habit of his. He's turned into an exhibitionist since he's started working out obsessively for his stupid fights.

He scoffs. “Please, we both know seeing me shirtless is the most action Miss Goody Two-shoes could ever get.”

Harsh.

But not entirely false.

Morgan’s a self-proclaimed boy-repellant. She’s never been kissed or asked out on date. Whenever I bring it up, she says the hotties in her books love her and it’s all she needs, but I know it bothers her.

Weirdest part is, Morgan James is far from a troll. With her cute, hipster glasses, full lips, hazel eyes, long strawberry blonde hair, and oversized sweaters, she’s every teenage boy’s sexy nerd fantasy. Problem is, she’s shy and a bit awkward—okay, a lot awkward. She gets so nervous around the male population her language skills revert back to those of a fetus.

“I’m going to get dressed.” Winter jolts up, throws her apple core away, and hastens out of the kitchen. The second her footsteps fade down the halls, my brother ruins my mood.

“Oh, and I need the TV tonight. The guys are coming over.”

“What?” I sit up straight. “But I already invited the girls. Why can’t you just hang out somewhere else for once?”

He shrugs. “Sorry. No can do. It’s game night.”

“But—”

“You and your friends can just hang with us. I mean, I definitely don’t have a problem with Zoey staying.” He offers me a smug grin, trailing to the sink to wash his dishes and sort them away.

Fuming, I consider my options. A, stay holed up in my room with the girls all night, or B, watch a football game with my ex-boyfriend and my brother’s brain-dead friends.

I’d rather die, thanks.

Kendrick’s locked himself into the bathroom before I can argue.

“This isn’t over.” I belt.

I get a text from Morgan seconds before I go apeshit on the bathroom door.

Morgan: Be there in five.



Stomping toward my house with Morgan on my heels, I reprimand myself for not listening to my mom when she said you can never go wrong working retail. Unimpressed managers' faces burn in the back of my mind. Turns out summer camps and babysitting aren't worth much to the employers I met today.

Overall, this has been a long and, I'm sure of it, *useless* day. Looks like the check engine light will have to stay on my dashboard a little longer.

"I'm sure you'll get it." Morgan nudges me with her elbow as we walk. "They looked interested. They'll call you."

I smile at her weak attempt at making me feel better. "No, they won't. They weren't taking me seriously, I could tell."

Unlocking and opening the door, I lob my keys onto the kitchen table. Winter and my mom are still out and probably will be until later tonight. My mom texted me they went to the movies.

It comes back to me.

Kendrick invited the guys over tonight.

But his car isn't in the driveway.

Victory expands in my chest.

First come, first served.

Better to watch a show on a flat-screen TV than a crappy laptop if you ask me. Shit, I really hope Blake won't be there. I haven't even *looked* at him since we broke up. Truth be told, I didn't feel the same way about him either, and I'd be lying if I said his dumping me came as a surprise, but it still stung. It's not that I love him.

I think it's mostly that he doesn't love *me*.

Having someone ditch you overnight results in wondering what changed for them to lose interest. It bruised my self-esteem, pushed me to question myself. I once heard my dad say to Uncle Harry he thought relationships were basically watching someone slowly lose interest in you.

And he was right, wasn't he?

That's what happened between him and Mom.

"I'll make the popcorn," I tell Morgan, who nods and makes a run for the living room, way too many snacks huddled up in her arms. I hear her turn on the TV and launch herself onto the couch.

Minutes later, I'm resting the popcorn bowl on the low table and leaping next to her. We've just started arguing on what to watch when the front door swings open.

I stop breathing.

Please don't be Blake.

Relief rolls over me at Zoey's signature tune: heels ruining my mother's hardwood floor.

"Where you at, bitches?" she calls.

"Where we always are. The couch," Morgan hollers.

Zoey smothers a chuckle, making her superstar entrance. My gaze travels up her outfit. Her straightened black hair flows down her shoulders, completing her killer outfit: purple top, tight skirt, high heels. Zoey's gorgeous. There's no denying it.

She's also in excellent shape from doing extreme hot yoga every single day—I tried once and thought I was going to die in a puddle of my own sweat. Zoey's also that friend who can engulf the entire menu at McDonald's and still be a size zero. I assess her flashy attire, then my gray sweatpants and tank top, then Morgan's oversized hoodie and leggings.

Yup. We look homeless.

“That’s your outfit for movie night?” Morgan beats me to it.

Zoey cocks an eyebrow. “Yeah. Problem?”

“Can you even sit in that thing?” I chortle.

“Sure I can.” She does just that, wedging herself between Morgan and me with apparent difficulty. Then she point-blank betrays herself. “So... Where are your brother and his boys?”

Ah.

That’s why.

Girl, this isn’t your “movie night” outfit.

This is your “get with Kass’s brother” outfit.

“Not here yet,” I reply. Maybe I shouldn’t have told her they’d be here tonight.

Morgan puts the pieces together. “Wait, does that mean... Blake is going to be there?”

I give a faint nod.

“And have you talked to him since...”

“Not really. I mean, I’ve texted him. Four words. ‘*Come get your shit.*’ I had a box full of his crap in my room.”

“And did he? Come get his stuff?” Morgan asks.

I shrug. “No. Never even replied. I threw it out.”

“You know what you need?” Zoey chimes in, grabbing a handful of Jolly Ranchers right out of the bag. “A rebound.” Her eyes light up as if a stroke of genius just hit her, and she shrieks, “No, no! You need to hook up with one of his friends.”

I almost laugh. Me? Dealing with men again after what just happened? *What is she on?*

“I’m good. I don’t see Alex like that.” I cuddle up to the fluffy pillow next to me.

Zoey rolls her eyes. “Not him, dumbass. Hottie Blondie.”

I crinkle my nose at the nickname Zoey likes to give Will, Kendrick's *real* best friend—my brother would deny it with his last breath if you asked, but we all know Will is his ride or die. Blake is a close second.

“Will?” I snort. “You can’t be serious. Dude flirts with the entire planet. I don’t even think it’s possible to be special to him.”

“So? I’m not telling you to marry the guy. Just have some fun.” She wiggles her eyebrows. “I’m sure it would drive Blake crazy.”

“Which would be a good thing if I gave a crap what Blake thinks. I just want to move on.”

“Fine.” She throws a cherry Jolly Rancher into her mouth. “But you have to admit, Will *is* hot.”

I catch myself picturing him. Jaw as sharp as a knife, toned body from working out five days a week with the guys, deep ocean-blue eyes, dirty-blond hair. I’m not blind. Objectively, Will is *way* up there in the looks department, but I’ve never seen him that way. Was too busy being annoyed by his existence.

“He’s okay, I guess. Not my type.”

“Okay? *Okay?*” She’s scandalized. “Are you insane? He’s stupid hot, like in a damaged kind of way. I bet you he just needs someone to pierce through that tough exterior of hard muscles and sarcasm.” She releases a devilish smirk. “Hell, if you’re not up for it, I am.”

“What happened to wanting Sean back?” Morgan points out.

“He hasn’t called since we broke up. I’m done waiting. Time to start living again.” Zoey shrugs.

I know I should be happy for her. I’ve been waiting for Zoey to let go of Sean’s toxic ass for ages, but I also know it means she’ll be chasing her next prey soon.

And in this case... her prey is my brother.

Or Will.

Both terrible choices, really.

The front door opening lures my attention away from Zoey's not-so-secret agenda. What sounds like an entire classroom stumbles inside my kitchen.

Laughter, bickering, shuffling.

There's no escaping it this time.

The boys are here.

"You fucking moron." His laugh destroys every last shred of hope in my body.

Blake.

He's here.

Of course he is.

He just couldn't sit this one out.

Kendrick, Blake, and Will materialize in the doorway a heartbeat later. I'm assuming Alex couldn't make it. Blake stops laughing the second he sees me.

Refusing to acknowledge his presence, I zero in on the ceiling, the floor, the family pictures crowding the walls—every goddamn thing in the room but the dark-haired guy boring holes through my skull. Somewhere along my weak, desperate attempt to pretend he doesn't exist, I lock eyes with Will.

It must last like three seconds, if that.

Shit, Zoey's right.

He *is* hot.

And not just in a damaged way.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Kendrick snaps at me. "I told you we need the TV tonight."

"Cute, you think I actually listen to you." I offer him a shit-eating grin, to which he replies by tilting his head to the right and planning my murder. I know my brother, and right now? He's a mere impulse away from cursing me out. Clenched fists, flaring nostrils—an outburst is imminent.

That's when he notices Zoey.

His fists unwind. "Zoey, hey."

"Kendrick. Long time." She bats her eyelashes at him.

Ugh.

"What are you guys up to?" Funny how he asks about us but only speaks to her.

She twirls a piece of her hair around her index.

"Watching a movie. Wanna join?"

"Sure." Kendrick's reply is instant.

Blake's jaw falls.

"But we were supposed to watch the ga—"

Kendrick stares dagger at him. I call it the "*Cockblock me and I'll kill you*" look. Blake clamps his mouth shut, gaze straying to the floor. Meanwhile, Will is mentally calling him a pussy—I can tell just from the mocking grin on his face.

"What are we watching?" Kendrick asks, taking a seat alongside Zoey—no surprise there. Morgan is on Zoey's left, leaving one last spot between Kendrick and me.

When I realize Blake and Will are the last two standing, I regret telling my mom a four-seater couch would be enough after Dad left with half the furniture. I notice Blake eying the empty space next to me, and my entire body contracts. *He wouldn't*. He dares a step forward, his intentions clear as day, but Will beats him to the punch, filling the seat by my side.

My pulse drops.

Thank you, Jesus.

Irritated, Blake goes for the armchair besides the couch.

Will and I lock eyes again.

Only this time, he smirks.

Like he's telling me, "You're welcome."

What in the...

Did he just do that on purpose?

Does he know something?

The small leather couch renders personal space a foreign concept to us. I try to make myself as scarce as I possibly can, squeezing my thighs against the armrest and peeking at Will every once in a while.

He makes himself comfortable, sitting like a typical dude with his legs spread wide. He doesn't seem to give a flying shit that our bodies are squashed together. The proximity allows me to feel the heat radiating off his skin.

Holy hell, is he a human oven?

“You guys down for a horror movie?” Zoey suggests.

As if we just had the exact same train of thoughts, Will and I scoff. Could they be any more obvious? Kendrick nods in agreement, and Zoey begins scouring Netflix. I'm not big on horror movies, always end up not sleeping for a week afterward although I have to admit, I'm glad the boys didn't insist on watching the game. I don't know squat about football.

I'll never be the cool girl who impresses guys because of her sports knowledge. I'm the girl who can eat her body weight in food and still be hungry.

That's still an impressive skill, right?

“I'm not watching that. Too scary,” Zoey squeals.

“Don't worry, I'll protect you,” Kendrick replies.

I wish I'd choke on a popcorn and pass out.



We're halfway through the movie when Kendrick circles Zoey's shoulders and draws her flush into his chest. That's how I know I've reached my daily limit of cringeworthy moments.

I rise up. “I'm going to make more popcorn.”

Morgan glances up at me. “But we still have som—”

I scowl at her, a scowl that she instantly picks up on, as a best friend does, and she smacks her mouth shut.

“I’ll help.”

My pulse quickens when Will pushes off the couch, too.

Crap. He’s following me.

Now I really have to make popcorn.

The second we venture into the kitchen, he kicks the door shut and releases a heavy sigh.

“*Jesus*. About time. I was dying back there.”

A laugh slips out of me. Good to know I’m not the only repulsed by the idea of Kendrick and Zoey together. I glance at him over my shoulder, craning my neck to catch a decent shot of his face.

God, he’s tall.

How long has he been this tall? Reclining against the kitchen counter, he folds his arms over his chest, staring at me so hard I can feel the weight of his eyes digging into my shoulders as I reach for a water bottle in the fridge.

“What? You don’t ship it?” I bring the bottle to my lips.

“For the sake of the female population, Kendrick should only be shipped with his hand.”

My water goes down the wrong pipe.

“What’s...” *Cough*. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m just saying your brother’s not boyfriend material.”

I cough some more.

He fights a smile.

“What? And you are?” I say once I’ve caught my breath.

He gives himself a push off the counter, stalking toward me. He stops a tad too close, a lock of blond hair dangling before his eyes as he says, “I could be.”

His eyes flicker with something I don't recognize. He searches my gaze like I've buried the darkest, most troubling secrets inside. Like I'm some shiny new toy he didn't know he could play with until now.

The smell of his cologne floats around us. I used to hate Blake's cologne. Thought it was too strong. But Will's cologne? I don't mind it. It's nice.

Kass, focus.

"Please." I snap back to reality. "You don't have a boyfriend bone in your body."

He sneers. "Because you know so much about me from all the conversations we've never had before?"

He does have a point.

This is our longest conversation to date.

He didn't even bat an eye at my existence before. I have no idea why he's talking to me now.

"Well, you don't have a girlfriend, do you?" I point out.

"Oh." Discomfort colors his features. "I see what this is. Look, Kass, I'm really flattered, but... you're my best friend's sister. I think we should keep it PG."

My jaw hangs. "What? N-No. That's not... That's not what this is, I..."

Will watches me word vomit for a solid ten seconds before cracking a smile.

"You're fucking with me." I scold myself for falling for it.

"Took you long enough."

Somehow, I'm not surprised when he picks my water right out of my hands.

"Wow, you are really easy to mess with." He takes a sip.

He would know. He's the king of fucking with people. You know how each school has a funny guy? The prankster, the class clown? Well, Riverside High has William Martins. Sometimes, if you're lucky, the troublemaker isn't that hot.

He's popular, yes, because he's entertaining and endearing in a "Wow, you're really dumb" kind of way but...

When he's got the jokes plus the looks?

Hook, line, sinker.

I've known girls to catch a crush over *one* of Will's flirty jokes.

"This is going to be fun." He hands me my now empty water bottle. I can already picture it—him bugging me every time he comes over from now on.

"Stop acting like we're friends," I remind the both of us.

"Ouch," he pouts, walking over to the pantry to grab a bag of popcorn and shoving it inside the microwave. He selects three minutes.

I bite my tongue not to intervene.

He notices. "What?"

"That's way too long." I saunter to him and press the Reset button. "It'll burn. Two minutes tops, less if it stops popping."

A mocking smile reshapes his lips as I enter the right digits and push Start.

"Kendrick's right," he says after a while. "You are bossy."

I'm about to object when the door creaks open.

Zoey's head slips into the doorway.

"Kass, would you be a doll and bring us water, chips, and paper towels while you're at it?" Before I can gather a response, she tops it off with, "You're sweet. Thanks," and strolls back to where she came from.

A short moment of silence ensues.

Will fills the void. "Do you always do that?"

"Do what?"

"Let her boss you around."

His question cuts me deeper than expected.

“What? She doesn’t boss me around. She’s my friend.”

He cocks an eyebrow.

“I swear, that’s just how we are. She’d do the same for me.”

“Whatever you say.” He shrugs, retreating to the living room. “*Control freak*,” he adds seconds before he’s out the door.

I can’t suppress a smile.

I know I told him we’re not friends *now*.

But... that doesn’t mean we can never be.

Three

Kassidy

“Are you excited for your first day?” I ask Winter, taking an abrupt left that makes my car screech so loudly a lady walking her dog jumps two inches in the air. Glaring at my red car, she guides a hand to her chest. Shameful, I zoom down the street.

I'm sorry that I'm poor, ma'am.

I've grown quite familiar with that feeling recently—shame. I desperately need to get a job so I can afford to get my clunker of a car fixed. Still no luck. None of the places I applied to called.

“Excited for it to be over.” My cousin sighs, fidgeting with her clothes. I get it. Being the new girl ranks pretty high on the list of things that suck ass.

“Oh, come on. Don't be so dramatic.” I laugh. “You'll fit right in. Everything's going to be okay.”

“Anything I need to know? Any mean girl I should stay away from?” She shifts in my passenger seat.

“Bianca Reed and her minions,” I'm quick to say. Winter does *not* want to get in trouble with psycho Bianca. Everybody knows she's a little... intense. “Definitely don't give them a reason to hate you.”

She nods. “Noted.”

Pulling up into the school's parking lot, I snatch the first spot I can find and kill the engine.

I glance at her. “Ready?”

“Absolutely not.”

“It's going to be fine. You're not alone. Kendrick and I are here, remember?”

She doesn't reply, but I can tell the thought reassures her. She's family. I'll always have her back. We make our way to the entrance together. Diving deeper and deeper into the crowd, I catch Luke's smile as we pass each other in the hall.

Luke Jenson, typical jock and Riverside High's proudest accomplishment. He's our varsity team's golden boy, reputed best QB the school's had in decades. Zoey dated one of Luke's douche friends sophomore year, and although their relationship didn't survive its first month, Luke and I remained friendly. And by friendly, I mean we smile at each other in the halls and talk in art class.

As Winter and I weave our way through the halls, I scoff at her worried expression.

"See? It's just like any other school."

She doesn't reply, yet again too focused on trying to breathe.

"We're here." I stop in front of her locker—that I arranged for us to share so that she wouldn't have to be locker partner with a complete stranger—and she stacks her books inside.

This day is going to be so stressful for her. I'll do everything I can to make it drama-free.

Then I see him.

Down the hall.

The idiot Zoey spent all of last year blabbing about.

Haze Adams.

The students around us display the usual reaction. They keep their heads down, count the tiles, and wish to disappear from freaking existence. Nothing new here. I hate to say it—I hate to *think* it—but... I'm right there with them.

Am I scared of him?

You're damn right I am.

Apparently, if you're a female in this school, there are two ways you can feel about Haze Adams: you can either want to

jump his bones, or pee your pants whenever he walks into the room. Zoey's category number one.

I'm number two.

Don't get me wrong, I get the whole smoking hot, tattooed, damaged-bad-boy appeal, but... I know for a fact Haze is involved in the same street fighting nightmare as Kendrick. I heard Kendrick talking shit about him to Will once.

If I'm not wrong, he's also my brother's biggest competition in the ring. Haze is more than just the kid your parents tell you to stay away from. And while the people at school don't know as much as I do, they know enough.

Rumor has it Haze once broke a guy's nose for looking at him the wrong way. Is it true? *Probably*. I'm so focused on trying not to meet his gaze that I don't even think of Winter. I can barely comprehend what's happening when Haze stops dead in his tracks.

And stares.

At first, I think he's staring at me.

Until I realize I couldn't be more wrong.

He's looking at Winter.

"Tell me she didn't," I hear a girl mutter in the distance.

Shit.

She looked at him, didn't she?

Of course she did.

My bad. I didn't tell her about the dumbass rules of our school. Don't talk back to Haze Adams, don't get in his way, and *especially* don't look him in the eyes. The guy is like high school royalty, feared but popular, hated but loved, a bully *and* a heartbreaker. Whispers pour over us.

"What did you do?" I ask.

"You tell me." Panic rises in her tone.

"You got a problem?" a deep voice says.

Well, fuck.

He's standing mere steps away, his gaze dark and his face unreadable.

"Excuse her. She's new. She doesn't know," I word vomit.

He doesn't acknowledge me, analyzing Winter intently.

"What's your name?"

"Winter." She falters.

"She won't do it again. I'm so sorry." I hate that I'm such a little bitch.

"I'm not talking to you."

That's Winter's snapping point.

"Who the hell do you think you are, jackass?"

The whispers stop abruptly. Haze looks stunned, shocked.

"What did you just say to me?" He moves closer to her.

I grip her arm. "Winter, don't."

She looks back at me, defiance glowing in her eyes as she brings her focus back to the six-foot-something bully in front of her.

"You heard me."

It's all so sudden my brain needs a second catch up. Haze fills the distance between them, and Winter jumps as her back collides with the locker behind her. She closes her eyes like she expects him to hurt her, and a small laugh escapes his lips.

"What are you doing? I'm not going to hit you." A hint of mockery lingers in his voice.

He leans forward, ever so slightly, and pushes a strand of her hair behind her ear. She's trembling.

"I'm going to let this go because you're new, love. But watch your mouth from now on."

Then he walks off.

Just like that.

Winter doesn't speak for a while, struggling to reconnect with her senses. The color has completely deserted her skin.

“What just happened?” She blinks at me in disbelief.

I curse under my breath and brace myself for the Haze Adams biography I'm about to drop on her. So much for a drama-free first day, huh?



Entering the only classroom that doesn't make me want to rip my eyes out, I squeeze my notebooks against my chest. I couldn't wait for last period and the only class I remotely enjoy: art class.

The day elapsed at a painfully slow pace although it went much better than the way it started. Frankly, I'm surprised I didn't have to drive Winter to the airport so she could flee our mad country after what happened in the hall this morning.

Welcome to America, cousin.

Would you like a side of crazy with that?

On a brighter note, I got to introduce Winter to Morgan at lunch. They got along wonderfully, as I expected they would. Zoey isn't at school today. She said she's sick. Translation: she's swiping on Tinder and maxing out her mom's credit card online shopping.

Morgan and I stop by our table to drop our things. I greet Luke, who's already seated and getting a head start on his project. We were assigned the same table at the beginning of the year. Bianca Reed's supposed to fill seat number four, but she's never here. The girl ditches this class almost as much as she hooks up and gets her heart bulldozered by Haze.

My art teacher tells us we're continuing last week's project, but the class doesn't pay him much mind. We've been at this for a month. Word trees is what we call it. Consists of painting trees, finding words that resonate with us, and gluing them on where leaves should be. I don't speak art, obviously,

but I do speak honesty and the truth is that mine looks like shit.

Morgan and I stroll to the front of the class to collect our projects off the teacher's desk. Morgan is quick to shuffle through the pile, find her tree, and saunter back to her seat.

By the time I manage to push my way through the students, there are only a few projects left. I grab my piece-of-crap project, intending to walk away, but the tree beneath mine roots me in place.

It's not exceptionally beautiful. In fact, it almost looks... dead? No, what really stands out is the message it holds. The pain radiating from it. My eyes sweep over the words cut out from magazine pages and clumsily glued on.

What if,

Forgive,

Never;

Damn, this guy's life does *not* sound easy.

“Enjoying my talents?”

I jerk in surprise and whip around, expecting to find one of the loners of the class staring back at me, but the person I see instead... is the well-liked guy who always wears a smile.

Will.

I forgot I shared this class with him.

I blink at him. “Wait, that's yours?”

Only then do I realize I'm holding his project. Picked it up for a better look. He must think I'm a weirdo.

He arches an eyebrow. “Might be. Why? That so hard to believe?”

“It's just so...”

Sad.

“I know. Picasso ain't got shit on me,” he teases, swiping his project out of my hands and setting off for his table.

Except that his table isn't his.

It's mine.

Morgan's just as confused as I am when Will plops down in Bianca's seat without a care. I follow, sitting across from him. He notices our perplexed expressions and huffs a laugh.

"Teacher didn't tell you? I'm a 'nuisance' when I sit with Alex. I'm at your table now. Surprise."

Morgan and I exchange sideways looks.

"What's wrong, control freak?" His eyes lift to mine. "Are you not happy to see me?"

My cheeks heat up on cue.

What the fuck, Kass?

"About damn time they sent another guy here," Luke says, and he and Will start up a conversation.

My mind returns to his tree.

I would've expected his words to be downright stupid. I mean, that's *Will*, the guy who once got so drunk at my brother's birthday he sang "Hello" by Adele to every guest he saw for three hours straight. He's the guy initiating "how many hot Cheetos can I put into my mouth without puking" competitions with my brother.

Will is not a tortured soul.

Or deep.

Will is Will, *end of story*.

Kicking unwelcomed thoughts out of my brain, I focus on my own tree. I swear the harder I try, the uglier it gets.

"Did you get an interview yet?" Morgan asks ten minutes in.

I sigh. "None. And my car's getting worse. I almost gave a granny a heart attack this morning."

Morgan chortles. "You'll find a job. Stop stressing."

Luke's head jerks up.

“Sorry. Did you just say you were looking for a job?”

“Yeah,” I admit. “But every business in the world is conspiring against me, apparently.”

He laughs. “Your timing is insane. My aunt owns a pet store downtown, and she’s kind of desperate.”

At first, I’m ecstatic.

Until...

“Got any experience in retail?”

There it is.

“Not really,” I reluctantly admit. “But I want to learn.”

“She’s looking for someone with a bit of experience, but I think she’d be willing to meet with you. Since you’re a friend and all. It’s worth a shot. What do you say?”

I rejoice. “Are you kidding? I’d love that.”

“Great. I’m supposed to see her at family dinner tonight. I’ll talk to her and text you about an interview?”

“That sounds great.” I can barely contain myself.

“Shit.” Luke realizes something. “I can’t text you. You should give me your number.”

“Oh, right. Give me your phone.”

He slides it over to me so I can add my number into his contacts.

“Thanks, Luke. That means a lot.” I hand it back to him.

“Anytime.” He smiles and rises off his stool, retreating to the front of the class to ask the teacher a question.

As soon as he’s out of range, Will scoffs.

“I can’t text you. Give me your number. Seriously? You didn’t catch that? Come on, control freak, oldest trick in the book.”

I frown. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He looks baffled by my stupidity. “Come on, it’s *so* obvious the dude’s into you.”

“What? You’re crazy. He’s just being nice.”

Could it be?

Could Luke like me?

I mean, he’s definitely good-looking, but... is he my type? Is *any* guy my type after what happened with Blake?

“A little help here?” Will begs Morgan.

I turn to my best friend, a confident grin smacked across my face, but the backup I anticipated never comes.

She caves. “Well, it’s not *not* true.”

“Really, Morg? You too?” I wince.

“It’s just... he’s always so nice to you. Smiling at you in the halls, sparking conversations. I’ve always thought there might be something there.”

Traitor.

“See? Even your friend agrees.” Will gestures to Morgan. “You should give him a chance. He could loosen you up a bit.”

“Excuse me?” I’m offended.

“You know... make you less controlling.”

“I’m not controlling!”

Will wrestles a smile but doesn’t argue, reaching for the glue stick sitting in the center of the table to re-attach a word that keeps falling off his tree.

I can’t help myself.

“Don’t. Use the hot glue. Works a lot better.”

He stops moving, sharp blue eyes finding mine. It takes me a solid second to realize what I just did.

“See?” he smirks. “*Controlling.*”

“Shut up,” I grumble.

Butthurt, I keep to myself for the rest of the class. Will reports for duty as designated clown and takes it upon himself to make Morgan and Luke laugh until the bell rings. And I don't mean a "small chuckle"—I mean "I'm choking. Someone help."

As for me, I'm just wondering how I could be so dumb to think for a single *second* that we could ever get along.

I take it back...

William Martins and I are *never* going to be friends.

Four

Kassidy

“**T**hanks for coming in, Kassidy. We’ll call you.” Jenny, Luke’s aunt’s employee, holds out her hand to me, which I shake clumsily. She isn’t much older than me, a few years at most. Shaking hands with someone your age will never *not* be weird.

Once I’ve said my goodbyes, I exit the pet store, squealing to myself. It’s been a while since Luke offered to get me an interview, and I was so eager for an update, I ended up asking his friend for his number so I could text him first.

Control freak. Will’s mocking voice pops into my head.

Shut up, brain.

Luke and I have been texting here and there. We’ve barely scratched the surface, going from hello, to how are you, to what are you doing. It’s not flirting, but it’s something. I’m starting to think Will might be right about Luke liking me. I’m just not ready to ask myself if I like *him*.

A quick drive later, I’m unlocking the front door to my house and groaning at my stomach’s cry for help. I’m starving—haven’t eaten all day. I was too nervous for my interview.

Absentmindedly, I pour myself some cereal and hop on one of the stools surrounding the kitchen island. My phone screen lights up with a new message ten minutes later.

It’s Luke.

Luke: How’d it go?

Kass: Good, I think? Thanks again.

Luke: Don’t worry about it. Hey, you going to the party tonight?

There’s a party tonight?

Kass: What party?

Luke: At Bianca's.

My cousin ambles inside the house before I can reply. All smiles, she waves at me. I'm glad she's in a good mood. I know being the new kid hasn't been easy on her. Especially the part where she got branded as "the girl who called out Haze Adams" in her first five minutes at Riverside.

"Hey, stranger. What are you so happy about?" I say and finish my cereal.

"That obvious, huh?" Her smile widens.

"As obvious as an elephant in yoga class." I laugh, pushing to my feet and dropping my bowl in the sink. "Come on, spill the beans."

"Fine," she gives in. "I'm going to a party tonight. Who knows? I might meet people who see more when they look at me than the girl who looked Haze Adams in the eyes." She snorts, recalling her ridiculous first day.

I find a bit of irony in her desperation to forget about the Haze fiasco. She's nowhere near done with him. I know that beyond a shadow of a doubt. I accidentally overheard a conversation between her and Kendrick last week. Okay, fine, I snuck downstairs specifically to listen—*tomayto, tomahto*.

They were arguing, not giving a single fuck as to who could hear. They're lucky my mom agreed to cover her nurse friend's night shift and wasn't home to witness their shitshow.

I found out Winter followed Kendrick, Will, Blake, and Alex to some meeting with Haze. Let me tell you, in that moment, I facepalmed myself so hard I almost gave myself a concussion.

They caught her spying, and from there, all hell broke loose. From what I could gather, her presence pushed Haze to make some sort of deal with my brother regarding their next fight.

I hurried back upstairs midconversation, but I did hear one of them say Haze insisted the prize be Winter. Whatever it is,

it can't possibly end well. She's been hanging out with the guys at school since. Probably to keep Haze at bay.

"Someone invited you to Bianca's party?"

"Yeah. Blake." She nods.

Did she just say Blake?

As in my ex who dumped me over text two weeks ago
Blake?

My face must give me away because Winter asks, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I didn't know you were that close with Kendrick's friends, that's all."

She steps forward. "Kass. Seriously, what is it? Did I do something?"

"No, of course not." I refuse her eye contact. "Don't worry about it."

"Kass?" She raises an eyebrow.

She's not going to let this go, is she?

"I didn't think he'd move on so fast," I admit.

"Wait, what?" She frowns. "Who are you talking about?"

I can't bring myself to resume, unsure if carrying down this path is a good idea. This has been a secret for so long.

Oh, to hell with it.

She would've found out eventually.

Collecting every drop of courage in my body, I exhale. "Blake. I'm talking about Blake."

Confusion twists her features.

Right. She thinks I was dating Alex.

They all do.

Cornered, I tell her all about our stunt to date in secret, starting with how we got Alex to cover for us with Kendrick.

She doesn't speak for a short while, swallowing this massive pill the best she can.

Finally, she says, "What happened? Why did it end?"

"Alex said he was done lying. That we could either break up or tell Kendrick. And, well, Blake chose option number one. He refused to give me a solid reason. He said we should go our separate ways, and he sure didn't seem to feel guilty about lying to his best friend for six months."

"How long has it been since he ended things?"

The reminder cuts me open. Why am I this bothered? I was thinking of ending things myself, but I still can't get over the way he treated me. No consideration, not a sliver of respect. To think I gave him my first... well, *everything*.

"Two weeks," I croak.

She traps my hand into hers, sympathy clear on her face.

"Well, you know what? You're coming with me tonight."

I almost laugh. She has got to be kidding.

"What?"

"You heard me. We're going to that party together, having fun, and showing this guy what he lost."



Standing in front of the mirror, I debate on whether going to this party is a regular mistake... or a colossal mistake—*did I mention I think this is a mistake?* I'd gladly skip this cheap-beer party, but I can't deny Winter worked wonders on me. A quick reminder that, although my cousin doesn't bother with makeup most of the time, the girl knows her shit.

I give myself a slow, head-to-toe scan. My long blonde hair trickles down my back, the winged eyeliner Winter insisted I wear making my gray-blue eyes pop. This push-up bra is also doing my girls a big favor and my outfit molds my

body in all the right places—not that my leggings have much to work with; I’m a rather petite girl.

Freshman year, some dick from the football team told me I’d be prettier with tits and an ass. I called him an idiot and went on with my day, but... it stayed with me. Crazy how one comment can turn something we’d never noticed before into a long-lasting insecurity. From that day forward, I promised myself I’d never comment on somebody else’s appearance again.

“You ready?” Winter smiles.

Hesitant, I nod, matching my cousin’s footsteps out of the house. Blake’s car is waiting out front. Not exactly my first-choice ride, I’ll admit, but it’ll have to do. Will and Kendrick are also hitching a ride. As long as I’m not alone with Blake, I’ll live.

Winter and I scramble into the back seat with my brother. Blake seems a bit startled by my presence but doesn’t comment, firing up the car. As for Will, he’s sitting in the passenger seat, feet up on the dash without a fuck given. He’s laughing at something the guys said when he sees us... Sees *me*. He stops dead, his eyebrows shooting up to his forehead.

My stomach sinks.

Shit, did I go overboard?

I knew the eyeliner was too much.

He’s quick to tear his gaze away, but not without sneaking a second peek through the rearview mirror. We make eye contact. You’d think he’d be embarrassed, seeing as he just got caught staring at me, but his confidence doesn’t waver one bit.

Instead, he smirks.

I can practically hear him thinking, “*Hey, control freak.*”

Flushed—why am I flushed?—I divert my focus to the window, fidgeting with my clothes. I can’t help wincing at the memories clinging to the car’s leather seats. This car is where Blake first asked me to be his girlfriend.

Where we first kissed.

As if being in my ex-boyfriend's car isn't bad enough, Blake keeps mentally undressing my cousin. He's being so obvious Winter picks up on it right away, her shoulders shrinking in discomfort at every red light. When Blake's eyes find the mirror for the fifth time in a row, a twinge of pain shoots across me.

At least I got my answer.

This was a *colossal* mistake.



Reclining against the wall with my arms crossed over my chest, I watch Zoey down her rum and Coke like it's a chugging contest. A few hours into the party, I asked her if she thought I was a control freak—guess Will got under my skin with his stupid nickname—which resulted in her asking me why I wanted to know, which led to me telling her all about Will's newfound passion: annoying me.

“Well, he can call *me* a control freak any day,” she blurts out, fanning herself with her right hand. I wince, tracking her gaze to Will and Alex destroying a jock at beer pong across the room.

“Jesus, Zoey. Could you be any louder?” I hiss.

“I'm sure he could make *you* louder.” She winks theatrically.

I stifle a chuckle.

“You're going to hell, girl, you know that?”

“Can't wait,” she squeals. “So, how's that rebound going?”

“What rebound?” I try a sip of my drink and shiver in disgust. This rum and Coke is 98 percent rum, 2 percent Coke at best.

“Don't play dumb. Blake was drooling all over your cousin when you got here. Only one thing left to do. Hottie Blondie's right there for the taking,” she teases.

I cringe. God, even Zoey noticed? How heartless can Blake possibly be? With my own cousin? We *just* broke up.

I'm not saying I want him to die, but I would probably clap if he did.

"He has a name, you know? It's Will."

"Will as in... *Will* you take him home tonight?"

I can't suppress a grin.

"You're unbelievable."

"So I've been told." She gulps down her drink. "Oh, well, if you're not down for a rebound, I am. Mama needs her sugar." She begins to wander off, glancing back at me over her shoulder. "I'm keeping my hands off Hottie Blondie for now because he's the perfect revenge fuck for you, but my offer might expire soon. Just saying."

She's gone before I can blink. That's her thing. Leaving me alone at a party and only popping back up when we're leaving. Bad friend move, I know. But I couldn't be mad at her if I tried. I've known Zoey since I was four. She means nothing by it. I don't even think she's aware that she's ditching me. That's just who she is.

I reflect on her rebound obsession. Who decided it'd be a good idea to invite their heartbroken friend to a party? *This dumbass*. Technically, I didn't have to invite her because the whole school knows about Bianca's party, but she only decided to go when I texted her I'd be there.

As for Morgan, she doesn't do parties. Said she'd rather stay home and read. I have to agree with her on this one. I saw a guy throw up into a plant earlier, and that's making *me* wonder why I showed up.

I lumber around the party, eyelids growing heavier with each reluctant step, and check my phone. Eleven thirty—I'm usually in bed by now. Time elapses at a painfully slow pace. I drink alone for twenty minutes, watch wasted people play spin the bottle for thirty. *God, I'm bored*. An hour and a half later, I wonder if I should call it a night.

“Kass, finally.”

His voice is my answer.

I should’ve called it a night hours ago.

I swivel around, anger simmering beneath my skin.

“What do you want, Blake?”

“Have you seen Winter?”

Are you fucking kidding me?

“You do realize that’s the first thing you’ve said to me since you dumped me over text, and you chose ‘Have you seen Winter?’”

He winces. “I’m sorry. I’m not trying to be an asshole. It’s just... I really need to know where she is.”

Deep breaths, Kass.

“And I need to know how you can have your head so far up your own ass you lack basic human decency.” I give him my best *fuck you* smile. “Too bad we don’t always get what we want.”

His jaw drops.

With that said, I walk off.

The farther I get, the quicker any remnant of the love I ever felt for the idiot is drained out of my system. On second thought, I don’t care that Blake dumped me.

He lost me.

I didn’t lose shit.

The guys, Winter, and I were all supposed to carpool together after the party—Alex, the saint that he is, agreed to be the designated driver—but I’m not sticking around until midnight. I’ll just get an Uber. I’m texting Winter to let her know I’m going home early when someone taps me on the shoulder.

“Kass, hey.”

Seriously?

Again?

“Luke.” I barely manage a smile and reprimand myself for being rude. It’s not his fault I’m having a bad night.

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

Why? So you could also ask me where Winter is?

“Do you want a drink?”

No, I want to sleep.

“I’m good, thanks.”

“You sure?” he insists.

“Hundred percent. I was thinking of calling it a night.”

“Already? The party’s just started.” He sounds disappointed.

“I know, but I’m exhausted.”

He nods. “Oh, all right, then. Before you go, I wanted to ask...”

Please don’t ask me out.

“I was wondering if—”

“There you are.”

My breathing spikes when I take in the six foot something of sarcasm and muscles next to me. Holding a red cup in one hand and what seems to be a brownie in the other, Will stares at me, lazy smirk on display, eyes a bit red from... *I’m not sure I want to know.* At first, I wonder why he was looking for me. Then I realize I don’t give a damn, and he’s bringing me the perfect excuse on a silver platter.

“About time. What took you so long?”

Luke frowns.

“I asked Will to...”

Think, Kass, think.

My eyes drop to his brownie.

“Get me some food.”

In one move, I snatch the brownie out of Will's hand.

Will's eyes widen. "Kass, wai—"

But he's too late. I nearly groan in satisfaction as I chew and swallow it whole. It's so good I'm not even sorry.

"I'm also driving her home," Will tells Luke, grabbing my wrist and dragging me away pronto.

Damn it, his idea is so much better.

As soon as we turn the corner, he cracks up.

"What?"

He laughs louder. "You just—"

"What, Will? Spit it out."

"Trust me, *you* should've spit it out."

Panic settles in my chest.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Just give it thirty minutes, control freak. You'll know what I'm talking about."

It dawns on me.

"Will..." My eyes grow the size of a planet. "Will, what was in that brownie?"

"Do you really need me to say it?"

No.

No.

No, no, no.

"How much?" This can't be happening.

"A lot. Like *a lot*."

No.

Fuck.

Shit.

I did not just eat a pot brownie.

“I’m so dead.” I pace around the room. “My mom always waits up for me. What the hell am I going to do? I can’t go home like this. I can’t go home high! I can already feel it. I think I’m going to faint.” I raise a hand to my forehead like I expect to find a scorching fever.

He scoffs. “Calm down, drama queen. You can’t feel shit this early.”

“It’s hot in here. Why is it so hot in here?” I hyperventilate. “How could you not tell me? This is all your fault.”

“Me?” He laughs again. “You didn’t even give me a chance to speak before you inhaled the whole thing.”

“Was it yours?” Not important, but I’m curious.

“No. It was for a friend.”

We don’t speak until Will breaks out laughing again.

“Shut up. This isn’t funny.” I swat him in the arm, but he ignores me. So, I push him—more like *try to*. He barely tumbles back. “Stop laughing!”

He doesn’t give me the time of day, still howling. Irritated, I rattle his shoulder with hits until he snaps, snatching both my wrists and yanking me closer.

A little too close.

My breath gets stuck my throat.

I can’t help zeroing in on his lips, which are perfectly level with my eyes. It barely lasts three seconds. But three seconds is more than enough. Because something has shifted between us.

He’s not laughing anymore.

We stand there, staring at each other in utter silence. Then, as though we’ve both realized the exact same thing, we back away at superhuman speed.

Will clears his throat. “Then don’t.”

“What?” I can’t remember what we were talking about.

“Don’t go home.”

“You’re right. Good idea. I’ll just sleep in the dumpster outside. Looks real comfy.” I turn on my heels. “Thanks for nothing.”

“Where are you going?” he asks.

I shoulder check him as I walk. “I don’t know. Somewhere, anywhere. I’m going to try and find a way to stop this high from happening.”

I’m halfway to the front door when he calls, “Hey, control freak?”

I stop short.

“I think I might be able to help you with that.”

He’s right where I left him, except that now... he’s smiling. And it’s one of his *I’m going to get us in trouble* smile. I hesitate for a second, then think, *Screw it*.

I’m already in trouble.

He can’t possibly make it worse.



Wriggling in Will’s passenger seat, I tap my foot anxiously. I wasn’t sold when he told me his *miracle* remedy required for me to drive somewhere with him. But after he promised he hadn’t been drinking five times, I let him convince me. Although not without asking him why his car was at the party since Blake gave him a ride.

He said something about lending it to Alex to drive to Bianca’s since his ball-busting folks took away his keys again and he had no way of getting there. I’ll never wrap my head around how close these boys are. Lend someone your car just so he can come to a party? Talk about bromance.

“How did you know to come and save me?” I think back to my awkward encounter with Luke.

“I know a girl who needs an excuse to leave when I see one.” He shrugs, eyes fixated on the road. “What’s up with you and golden boy anyway? I thought you were giving him a chance.”

“He’s cute, sure, it’s just... I’m not really looking to date right now.” I press my forehead to the tinted glass.

“I get it. Can’t be easy. Having just broken up with Blake and all...”

My blood turns to ice.

How does he...

No one’s supposed to know.

He snickers at my surprise. “Oh, come on. Alex? Really? The guy can’t hold his tongue to save his life. It’s a miracle he didn’t tell Kendrick.”

“But... How long have you known?”

“Since the bonfire.”

I shrink in my seat.

We all went to this back-to-school bonfire near the beginning of senior year, aka the party where Blake and I first slept together. Losing your virginity in a tent in the woods? Not my best moment. *Literally*. I didn’t even have a good time. Blake lasted twenty-four seconds and fell asleep on top of me.

“Oh, God.” I bury my face between my hands. “Don’t tell me you heard us.”

“Nah, I went to take a piss in the middle of the night and saw Blake sneaking into your tent. I thought you were cheating, so I told Alex. Then he practically vomited the truth.”

“Oh.” I withdraw my hands from my reddened cheeks.

The tension in the air is somewhat thicker than it used to be. I can’t help scanning his features. The sharpness of his jaw, the slight crease on his forehead as he focuses on the road, his

short, messy hair. Zoey's voice echoes in my head. *Hottie
Blondie's right there for the taking.*

And all I can think is...

Is he?

“Where are we going anyway?”

He smiles and takes an unexpected left.

“To get you *unhigh*.”

Five

Kassidy

“Damn, Martins, I didn’t know you had so many coins,” I say, climbing out of Will’s car and slamming the door. I don’t recognize this neighborhood. Or the fancy, half-stone, half-stucco modern house standing tall in front of me. But then again I’ve never been to Will’s place before.

I take in the property: its long asphalt driveway, perfectly mowed lawn, and two garages. What the *heck* do his parents do for a living?

“This way.” He motions.

I follow as he rounds the garages, stops near a high wooden gate, and pushes it open. The backyard is big and well furnished. It has a pool, a barbecue, a pool house, and a hot tub inside what seems to be a custom-built gazebo.

“What are we doing?” I question.

Will leads me straight to the hot tub, removes the cover without a word, and chews down on his bottom lip not to laugh, like even *he* knows what he’s about to say is bullshit.

“I heard hot tubs sober you up.”

He can’t be serious.

“I-I don’t even have a swimsuit.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “So? You have underwear on, don’t you?”

That’s the last thing he says before taking off his shirt and pants in front of me.

No heads-up.

He just strips.

I swear I can feel my throat tighten when I take in his hard, defined body. Even in the dim-lit backyard, my eyes effortlessly trace along the lines of his abs. Broad shoulders, strong pec—

Holy fuck, he has the V.

If you're down to create a law that states William Martins has to be shirtless twenty-four seven, raise your hand.

He throws his T-shirt at me—probably for me to wear—but I'm so busy drooling over him that I jump out of my skin, failing to catch it. He laughs as I bend over to pick it up. I don't know if he saw me eye-fuck him, but if he did, he doesn't comment on it, which I'm immensely thankful for.

“Put it on if you want.” He gestures to the balled-up shirt in my hands.

I fold my arms over my chest. “This is BS. Hot tubs don't sober you up.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. You sure as hell aren't going to find out just standing there, are you?” He flashes me a cocky grin, slipping into the hot tub himself. Motion-activated blue lights come on, reflecting in the water.

“I don't even feel high. Maybe I'm immune or something.”

He scoffs. “It's only been twenty minutes. And that brownie was for a six-foot-five football player. Trust me, you're going to feel it. Come on, live a little. Or... is fun against your control- freak lifestyle?”

The challenge in his voice eats away at me.

I can't believe myself when I tell him to turn around and peel off my clothes to sling his T-shirt over my head. I tug at its extremities, relieved to see it covers everything it needs to, and usher myself to the tub, dipping my big toe into the sizzling water. I can't help flinching at the temperature, accidentally brushing Will's shoulder on my way in. The contact turns my stomach into a gigantic bag of knots.

What's with me tonight?

Oh, you know, you just had a pot brownie the size of your hand.

I'm about to give Will some "You were saying?" attitude when it hits me.

Like a tornado.

Like a punch in the face.

My head starts to spin.

My whole body relaxes.

Shit...

I'm high.



"You did not." I chortle so loud my own ears hate me. I don't think I've ever been this annoying in my life. And the craziest part? I don't even care. Being high is not as bad as I thought it would be, although I would never willingly put myself through this experience again.

I've spent the last thirty minutes laughing for no reason, putting on a killer show for Will, who seems to be having the time of his life roasting me.

"Why is it so hard for everyone to believe?" he argues.

"Because you're... you. You're Will, Willy, *Willy Wonka*." I'm so proud of my new nickname for him I could high-five myself. "You're the guy who shoves fries up his nose to make his friends laugh. You're against relationships. So, working at a retirement home for a whole summer? Forgive me for having doubts."

His face goes from amused to serious in a heartbeat. "What makes you think I'm against relationships?"

I'm a bit taken aback. "Gee, I don't know. Maybe the fact that you've never been in one?"

There was a rumor going around school these past few weeks. Something about a cheerleader having a massive crush on him. Last I heard, he let her down easy. Almost makes you wonder if he ever... *gets lucky*. I mean, a guy has needs, right?

“I’m not against relationships. I think they can be good.” His eyes meet mine. “Just not for me.”

Silence ensues.

I snort. “*Deep.*”

He fights a smile. “Shut up.”

“Let me guess, Willy’s afraid of commitment?”

“It’s not that I’m afraid of it, I’m just not...” He pauses. “*Interested* in it. Feels kind of pointless to me. Like it would only make my life more complicated. Plus, aren’t relationships just watching someone slowly get sick of you anyway?”

His last question bounces around in my head. That’s exactly what my father used to say. Also what *I’ve* been saying since my disastrous breakup with Blake. The difference is, in my case, I’ve always known this was nothing but a temporary feeling. I can’t imagine feeling like this forever.

A life without love?

That’s way too sad.

“Man, you must be horny all the time if you think that way.”

Smirking, he stares me dead in the eyes and says, “I said I don’t do love, control freak. I never said I don’t fuck.”

My cheeks combust.

I’m so unfamiliar with the way these words make me feel I’m tempted to sink underwater to try and wash the blush off me. I swear if I could hold my breath without dying, I’d be gone by now. So, he has meaningless hookups? Is he good? I wonder if he has a big...

Heart.

“So, you’re a hit it once and quit it kind of guy. Noted.”

“Eh. More like hit it again and again, then quit it,” he shamelessly admits.

I wonder if he’s better than Blake.

Probably.

Everybody’s better than Blake.

“What can I say? They always come back for more,” he says as a joke, but I know it’s true.

Well, he sure is honest.

“Must be nice. Never getting attached.”

“It’s not that hard, really. I don’t understand why it’s so difficult for some girls to differentiate sex and love.”

“Spoken like a guy who’s never been in a relationship.”

His smile falters for a split second.

Oh, don’t think I didn’t catch that, Willy.

“Who was it?”

“Who?” he asks.

“The girl who broke your heart.”

He arches an eyebrow. “How can you be so sure someone broke my heart?”

“Easy. The broken things don’t break on their own.”

He laughs. “Did you just call me a *thing*?”

“Yep. Because that’s what you are. A thing. An object. You don’t feel,” I tease, gliding shoulders-deep into the water.

He mock gasps.

“That’s not true.”

A beat of silence.

“Sometimes I get hungry.”

I break into a fit of chuckles, accidentally getting water into my mouth and choking because I’m classy like that.

“Sorry, not fooling me. Don’t you know? Those who pretend not to care, care too much.” I stick a finger in his direction.

“Spoken like a true hopeless romantic,” he scoffs, using my own lines against me.

Annoyed, I splash him. He returns the favor. We go back and forth for a while. It’s all fun and games until I realize we’re sitting side by side. We were on opposite ends of the tub five seconds ago.

Nothing but silence.

“Careful, control freak.” His voice is low. “High hopes will break your heart.”

I think I see his eyes drop to my lips.

“So, that’s it? You’re just going to be alone for the rest of your life? Pile up meaningless hookups and avoid anything real?”

“Maybe.” He shrugs. “I don’t know shit about the future. Never have. I just know what I want now.”

“And what’s that?” I dare ask.

I *know* I’m not imagining things when his eyes fall to my lips again. I wait for him to look away, but he doesn’t.

“You really want to know?” he says so quietly I find myself bending forward to hear better.

I reply with a small nod.

He smirks, inching closer.

And closer.

“I want—”

He’s stopped by the Darth Vader theme song.

What the...

What was in that brownie?

My concerns about my mental health vanish when I spot Will’s phone going off on the grass.

“Fan of *Star Wars*, huh? Good to know,” I sneer, but he doesn’t laugh. Doesn’t even crack a smile.

“We have to go. Now.” He charges out of the tub, holding out his hand and helping me out, as well.

“Why? What’s the rush?”

“Folks are coming home.” He picks his clothes off the ground, struggling to stuff wet legs into completely dry jeans.

Wow, this was a dumb plan.

He finally wins the battle against his pants, beckoning to help him move the hot tub cover back into place. I do just that and sweep my top and leggings off the grass. He must see the hesitation in my eyes as I glance at my clothes because he blurts, “No time. Come on!”

He bands a hand around my wrist, speed walking toward the gate. His touch sends shivers throughout my entire body. *Okay. High is not a good look on me.*

“What the hell is going on? Why are you acting like your parents are going to kick you out of your house?”

Will stops dead, flashes me his million-dollar smile over his shoulder, and says, “Who said it was mine?”

My jaw drops.

“*What?*” I shriek, but I know I won’t be getting an answer. Because he starts running. Allow me to revise—we start running, Will’s grip on my wrist leaving me no choice but to follow.

“Are you out of your fucking mind? This is breaking and entering. Whose house is this?”

My heart is beating double time.

He’s laughing so hard it’s hard to make out what he’s saying. “Alex’s. He had shit to do today, and I lent him my car. His parents were out tonight, and since he owed me a favor, I asked him if we could use his hot tub. He said he’d call when they were on their way. I thought we’d be gone by now.”

Alex’s.

Of course. His parents just moved, which explains why I didn't recognize their place. Will probably texted him when we left the party to collect that favor. *So much for their epic bromance.*

"How long do we have before they get here?"

"Ten seconds tops."

Ten.

We reach the car.

Nine.

Will squeezes his keys out of his wet jeans pocket and wrestles with the lock.

Eight.

He manages to yank the door open.

Seven.

I'm about to go to the other side, but he stops me, motioning to get in through his door.

Six.

I do.

Five.

We both scramble inside.

Four.

Will fires up the engine.

Three.

We reverse out of the driveway.

Two.

We see a red car turn the corner.

One.

We take off into the night at full speed.

I let out a breath of relief, watching Alex's parents pull into their driveway through the rearview mirror. We're so

pumped on adrenaline, it takes us a good five seconds to realize we've just barely made it. We lock eyes. And start laughing like we're five, which, right now, we *are*.

"Any other house you feel like breaking into tonight?" I pant.

His eyes light up. "Actually—"

"Don't even think about it." I scold.

He laughs.

"Usual high lasts six hours. We still have four to kill."

His statement catches me off guard. He didn't even ask, just assumed he was keeping me company.

"Oh... you really don't have to hang out with me all night, it's fine. I'll just face whatever punishment my mom has in store for me."

"Nice try. I'm having too much fun getting you out of your comfort zone."

A grateful smile defies my better judgment, peeking through without my consent. That's kind of nice of him.

"Okay, then. Where to?"

"There's something I want to show you" is all he says.

I pull my dripping wet hair into a loose bun, shivering in places I didn't even know I could—I'm still wearing nothing but Will's large soaked T-shirt on top of my underwear. He notices, cranking up the heat. I thank him with a nod, tugging his T-shirt farther down my exposed thighs. I hate myself for admitting it but... For a guy who acts dead inside,

He sure knows how to make me feel alive.

Six

Kassidy

“F or fuck’s sake, woman, calm down. I’m giving you the food,” Will laughs, swiping his card back from the employee and driving away from the Taco Bell drive-through in a rumble. We’re not even out of the parking lot before I’m snatching the bag out of his hands. Long story short, as soon as we fled Alex’s house, high Kass decided it was time for her favorite part of the day—*eating*.

“Hungry, I am. Food, you feed me,” I told Will in my best Yoda voice, and after he mocked me for five minutes straight, he complied and drove me straight to Taco Bell. He even paid.

“I’ll pay you back for that.” I pull out my taco.

“No, you won’t.”

“Yes, I will. I’m a woman of my words, *Willy*.”

“I’m not going to let you pay me back, *control freak*.”

Why do I sense I just started a never-ending nickname battle?

“How not to be controlling 101: shut up and learn to let people treat you every once in a while.” He pulls onto the highway.

A small grin stretches over my lips.

“Is that what this is? Why you wanted to hang out all night? You’re trying to fix me?”

“So what if I am?”

I toss a fry at him. “From what? Control? I’m not a prisoner.”

He picks up the fry that just landed on his jeans and lobs it into his mouth. Five-second rule? More like “I’ll eat anything

if the floor's clean enough" rule. Famished, I bite into my taco, nearly dropping sauce on my leggings in the process.

Will made a pit stop at a gas station so we could throw our clothes back on before raiding Taco Bell. I can't seem to forget the cashier's face when we walked in—Will shirtless, flaunting his six-pack, me pantless, rocking a knee-length T-shirt—and asked for the bathroom keys. *What kind of fuckery is this*, she was clearly thinking. And I couldn't agree more. This night couldn't be further from what I thought it would be.

"For the record, I'm getting that Yoda thing engraved on your tombstone," he deadpans.

"Hey, you're the one who wanted to hang out with me all night. I'm not responsible for any of the weird shit I say in the next few hours, thank you very much." I watch as Will aims for an exit I don't recognize. "Where are you taking me?"

Stealing a fry, he grins. "Somewhere even higher than you are."



"A walk in the woods? Seriously? It's four in the morning and you want me to *exercise*?" I whine, following Will down a hiking trail and wondering why high Kass lacks basic brain functions.

This is the definition of dumb, not to mention so *unlike* me. I would never, in a million years, advise someone to follow a guy into a forest alone at night, yet here I am, agreeing to my brother's best friend whack plan without blinking.

"Relax. It's a five-minute walk tops," he assures me.

I refrain from arguing, shadowing him down the narrow path. Will's "secret spot" turned out to be a lot farther from home than I expected. It took us almost two hours to get here. Crazy part is, I didn't mind the drive, too busy bickering with him about who finished the fries.

We can hear cars whooshing in the distance. This jogging trail is situated near the highway, separating the road from an obviously wealthy neighborhood. I've never been to this area before, but Will seems to know it like the back of his hand.

Yes, Will is dragging me into a random forest at four in the morning, but at least, it's a *nice* forest. The path is paved and bordered by white lights. I bet a bunch of vegan girls jog here in the morning and post about it on their Instagram stories.

"Somewhere higher than I am." I recall his words. "Are we climbing a tree?"

He slows the pace, thinking his answer through.

"That's exactly what we're doing."

What the fuck?

"Just a bit further." He motions, stepping off the trail and venturing into the woods.

This is it.

He's going to kill me.

"Okay, you've just reached a whole new level of creepy, Martins," I mumble under my breath.

He smiles at that but doesn't grace me with a response, focused on finding his way. His way to where, you ask? *The best spot to bury me, probably.*

Five minutes later, he stops.

"Thank fuck," he rejoices.

That's when I see it.

A tree house.

"I was starting to think someone tore it down," he adds.

I assess the wood structure and its hanging ladder for a few seconds. It's far from the path, well hidden, probably hard to find unless you know where it is. It's the kind of house Kendrick and I desperately wanted as kids but never got because our parents can't build shit. Dad always said he would do it only to bail whenever we reminded him.

I zoom in on the old, cracked ladder. The whole place looks like a dream. An old, faded, *abandoned* dream. My guess is it's been a hot minute since Will was here.

Fascinated, I move close—

“Careful!” he blurts, gripping my waist and yanking me backward so fast the breath is knocked out of me. Sagging against his chest, I screech and gape at my feet, realizing I almost stepped into some sort of ditch. It's covered in dead leaves, just about impossible to see. Looks deep, too.

“You good?”

I hear his question, but all I can think about are his hands on my waist.

“Kass?” he asks again.

“I-I'm sorry?”

“I said are you good?” He lets out a quiet laugh, so close the warmth of his breath tickles my ear.

“Uh, yeah, I-I'm good, great, fantastic.” I clear my throat.

He releases my hips.

“Come on. View's better up there,” he says, as cool as a freaking cucumber, and as I watch him climb up the ladder...

I can't help wishing I felt that way, too.



“Is this yours?” I ask, hair waving in the wind, feet hanging in the emptiness. We're both sitting near the edge of the open tree house, staring at the horizon.

The sun will be rising soon.

“It used to be. My dad and I built it when I was a kid,” he explains.

“Oh, you live in the neighborhood?”

“Not anymore. We moved.”

Well, *duh*. It took us a while to get here. He'd be way too far from school. I've never cared to find out anything about Will's life before, convinced he was nothing more than Kendrick's clown friend. But now? I wish I'd bothered to listen when my brother talks. Just so I would know a thing or two about the blue-eyed mystery next to me.

"Yeah? How long ago was that?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. Like ten years."

"No way you haven't been here in ten years." I scrutinize the cabin. Barely any leaves lie inside. This definitely isn't a decade's worth of dirt. Not to mention the foundation of the tree house feels rock-solid.

"I still come here from time to time. To clear my head."

"Let me guess, I'm the first girl you brought here?" I huff in expectation of a major cliché.

"Please," he scoffs. "I lost my virginity right where you're sitting."

Annd there he is.

He laughs. "Look, if it makes you feel any better, you're the first girl I brought here with no intention to shag."

I force a smile, nibbling at the inside of my cheek. Is he saying he doesn't want to shag me? As in *ever*? Not that I want him to want to shag me but...

Oh my God, Kass, shut the fuck up.

"Thanks. I feel real special." I cradle my legs to my chest, hugging them to my body and resting my chin on top of my knees. It's getting chilly out. "How is that a good hookup spot though? What's your line? Hey, want to go fuck in a tree?"

"Who says I need a line? Chicks get all mushy when you show them your childhood tree house," he jokes—*I think?*

"Is that why you brought me here? To make me mushy?"

He looks up and smiles.

"Nah. I brought you here for *that*."

My mouth dips open when I catch the distant mingle of colors blending through the trees. We have a perfect shot of the rising sun from up here.

“Holy shit.”

“I know,” he whispers.

We don’t say a word for over five seconds.

“Can we just never leave?” I ask.

“We’re going to have to, eventually. Preferably before you turn into a block of ice.”

So, he noticed how cold I am.

“I’m fine,” I lie.

He doesn’t say another word, removes his jacket, that he found lying in the back seat of his car earlier, and drops it on my shoulders, no questions asked.

I heave a chuckle. “You’re the most confusing guy on earth, you know that? One second you’re talking about shagging in a tree, and the next you’re giving a girl your jacket.” I stare up at him. “I feel sorry for anyone who’s ever had the misfortune of falling in love with you.”

When the words escape my lips, a mix of emotions race through his eyes. Pain, annoyance, or is it... *shame*? He avoids my gaze, suddenly colder than I am.

“Trust me.” He pauses. “I’m sorry, too.”

Woah, do I smell a backstory?

Just as I’m working up the courage to ask, he rises to his feet. “It’s getting late. Or early. Whatever. We should go.”

He’s making his way back down before I can even *attempt* to adjust to his mood shift. Confused, I rear myself up, smooth my wrinkled, still-wet clothes down, and mirror his actions.



It's past six a.m. when Will's car comes to a slow stop in front of my house. I'm 99 percent certain my high is over, but then again, when we needed the GPS on the way back, I forgot my own address.

"Hey, you never answered me earlier," I remind him.

Will pushes the gear into park, drops his head against the headrest, and sends a glance my way. He can barely keep his eyes open, just as exhausted as I am.

"You said you wanted to release me. But not from what."

"From yourself," he says like it should be obvious.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"All that pressure you put on your shoulders, this obsession you have of controlling everything, to please everybody, it's eating at you."

"There's nothing wrong with a little planning," I counter.

"Fine, don't believe me. Keep it all bottled up. The quiet ones make the best explosions."

Then, because this night isn't absurd enough already, my genius self decides to add, "Is this a silent fart joke?"

Never mind, still high.

Will laughs quietly, shaking his head like he's wondering what he's going to do with me. His dark blue eyes mix with mine.

"Anyone ever tell you you're fucking ridiculous when you're high?"

That's when it hits me.

Shit, I'm attracted to him.

Not only am I attracted to him, I've been attracted to him this entire freaking night. A week ago, I didn't even see his charm, much less appreciate it, but now... I can't deny my body's reaction to his dimples, those ocean eyes, that laugh.

"What I meant is you let people walk all over you," he continues. "Like that friend of yours, Zoey. She treats you like

trash and you don't even bat an eye. You're obsessed with controlling every stupid little thing in your life because you let others control *you*."

"Zoey? That's your argument? I'm just being a good friend."

He's not going down without a fight. "Aight. What about the time I pushed you in the pool two summers back? You never tried to get back at me. Never even said a thing."

I remember that time all too well. It marked the beginning of my boycotting of Kendrick's friends.

"Maybe I've been planning my revenge for months, you ever think about that?"

He scoffs. "You're not. I'd know."

"Nobody plans a murder out loud."

Rather than answering, he leans forward, wearing a confident smile. I stiffen as he breaches my space. Our eyes lock through the darkness of the car: his, teasing, mine, nervous and alert. He's not so close that I could call him out on it, but also not far enough for me to act unfazed.

I hold my breath when he leans in some more. Then he reaches for my handle and pushes my door open.

Relief takes up all the space in my chest. Except it's laced with something else. The most unexpected emotion.

Disappointment.

He reclines into his seat. "One day it's all going to be too much. You're going to lose it. And it's going to be fucking amazing."

I don't let the thought in. Not even for a second. He's way off-base here. Yes, Zoey can be a little selfish sometimes, I'll give him that, but she's a good person at heart.

"Whatever floats your boat, Willy." I unbuckle my seat belt, shake off his speech, and climb out of the car, keeping the door open long enough to say, "Thanks for sticking with me tonight. It was..." I pause. "Something."

He smiles.

“Anytime, control freak.”

I find myself grinning at the nickname. I know *control freak* is an insult, a mean thing to say, but the way *he* says it... it sure doesn't feel like it. I wave, shut the door, and jog toward my house. As soon as it engulfs me, he drives off.

I texted my mom that I was crashing at Zoey's after the hot tub disaster, but I highly doubt that she bought it. I should be worried about her grounding the life out of me tomorrow. But, to my greatest disbelief, right now, my mom's wrath is the furthest thing from my mind...

Because I just spent a night of madness with my brother's insufferable best friend.

And what's worse?

I *liked* it.

Seven

Kassidy

My eyelids weighing a thousand pounds, I take the exit leading straight onto the highway and cast a glance toward Winter in my passenger seat. We're both hungover, hissing at the sun like vampires at every street corner.

After Will dropped me off at six last night—or was it this morning—I collapsed into bed, only to be woken up by Winter and Kendrick bickering downstairs five hours later.

I stumbled out of bed and decided to go shopping with my cousin. Why? Because I felt bad for breaking my promise to spend time with her when she first got here. Oh, and because I do stupid things sometimes. *Like break into a stranger's backyard high as a kite with William Martins.*

I suggested we get out of the house in the hope that it would take my mind off my nonexistent job. I've been thinking—more like obsessing—over why I didn't get a callback from the pet store since my interview. Granted it's only been a few days, but I really need this to work out, and the wait is slowly driving me insane.

Here we are, driving back home, stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic after a few hours of wasting money and trying to convince Winter to touch anything with heels.

“So... About the party,” I start, my thoughts drifting to the text Zoey sent me this morning. She said last night took quite the turn, and after Will and I left, the cops showed up.

She also said, her voice loaded with jealousy, that she saw Winter leaving with Haze. No, wait—*running* with Haze. Something about Haze dragging her away from the police. Winter didn't come home until eleven this morning. It's not rocket science. She must've slept at his place.

“What about it?” Winter asks, rubbing her temples as though she’s hoping to make her headache disintegrate.

“Rumor has it you slept at you know who’s?”

She scoffs. “You can say his name. He’s not Voldemort.”

“Haze,” I barely say.

“Yeah. I did.”

I can’t help myself. “What’s the deal between you two, Winter? He’s dangerous.”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

“I’m serious. You need to be careful. I can’t believe you let him take you to his house. You need to stay away from him.”

“I’m trying to,” she assures me.

“Oh, really? Is that why you keep hanging out with Kendrick and his trouble-magnet friends? They’re involved in…” I stop, too much of a chicken to resume. “Some stuff.”

I hate lecturing her, but I have to do *something*. I know she thinks she’s safe, but she has no idea what she just got herself into. I don’t want anything to happen to her.

“Stuff?” she questions, and I almost laugh. We’re doing that thing where we pretend we’re not aware that Kendrick’s favorite hobby is punching people.

“Stuff.” I clear my throat. “Do you know what happened yesterday? I was already gone, but I heard it caused a panic.”

She zeroes in on her feet. “Cops.”

Winter’s always been a terrible liar.

Glad to see that hasn’t changed.

“I know that’s what everyone said, but it seemed like a lot more than that. Some people said they heard a gunshot.” My thoughts wander to the few posts I saw scrolling through social media.

“Cops these days.” She shrugs.

“Yeah.” I struggle to hide my frown. “I’m just saying to be careful. Haze Adams is not one to do romance and—”

She cuts me off. “Wait a minute. You were gone? With who?”

Shit.

“With... with a friend,” I stutter.

“Oh, come on. Who’s the boy?” she insists, and I scold myself for letting that last detail slip out.

“There’s no boy. Don’t try to change the subject. What were we talking about?”

“You were lecturing me about Haze.” She heaves a sigh.

“Right. All Haze wants is fun. Like what he does with Bianca. He keeps sleeping with her even though the poor girl’s head over heels in love with him. Just don’t let him fool you, too.”

I’d never forgive myself if she got her heart stomped on by Haze like Zoey and I didn’t at least try to warn her.

She holds her hands up. “Believe it or not, I’m actually not a fan of heartless douchebags. I’m one of the girls who don’t enjoy when a man doesn’t give a crap about them. Yes, we do exist.”

“Says the girl who literally just let him take her home,” I mutter under my breath.

“Okay. You know what? I didn’t sleep at his place willingly. Something happened to me, and I was in trouble. Haze helped and offered me a place to stay.”

Shocked by her honesty, I can’t gather a response.

I give in. “Some street fight trouble?”

Disbelief fills her eyes.

“You know?”

“I’ve known for a while now. I’m not blind. Neither is my mom. She knows Kendrick is involved in something she can’t control. I hear your fights at night. Kendrick needs to stop

taking the world for idiots. Not to mention Blake's behavior was so weird back when we were dating. Eventually, I put the pieces together."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"Because it's better to pretend not to know certain things, Winter. I don't want to get involved in his mess, and I've managed to do that successfully until..."

"Until me," she finishes.

"Well, don't get me wrong, but you literally threw yourself into the fire. What were you thinking following my brother when he goes out?"

She's astounded. "Seriously? You heard that, too?"

"You guys are pretty loud when you argue at night."

The following minutes are spent in utter silence. We haven't moved one bit, still stuck in traffic.

"Look at her." Winter motions to the lady dancing in the car next to us.

"Can't. I'm driving," I grumble.

"You're sitting in an unmoving car, actually."

I surrender, glancing over at the woman. "What?"

"I hope I can be this carefree when I'm older."

"If and only if you live beyond the age of eighteen." I regret my bitter words as soon as they roll off my tongue. I can't help myself when it comes to Haze. Listening to Zoey sob over this guy for a year gave me a full-blown Haze allergy.

"Harsh." She exhales.

Guilt coils in my throat.

"I know. I know. I'm being an asshole, I'm sorry. It's just... Haze Adams is only as nice as he needs to be to get your trust. Promise me you'll stay away."

It takes her too long to agree for my liking. "I promise."

I nod, focusing on the road and attempting to convince myself that I fixed it. That I fixed *her*. But deep down, I know... if Haze decides he wants Winter, homegirl is screwed.

Haze Adams always gets what he wants.



“Finally! Alex, they’re back,” Will shouts when Winter strolls into the house, dropping our shopping bags onto the tiled floor. I come in after her, immediately locking eyes with the broad-shouldered blond in my kitchen.

“Aw, did someone miss us?” Winter teases.

Tucking his hands in his sweatpants pocket, Will analyzes me. He looks like he’s debating on something. Then, as though he’s made up his mind, he cracks the ghost of a smile. It’s a two-second smile, if that, but in that last second...

Something different lingers.

Something *new*.

I feel like we share some sort of secret now, which is dumb seeing as we did nothing wrong—I mean, except break onto private property together. Intimidated, I sever the eye contact and pluck my phone out of my purse. I have two missed calls from an unknown number.

As if our return is the most anticipated event of the year, Alex rushes inside the room with nerve-racking anxiety flowing out of him.

“What’s up with you?” Winter asks.

“You’ve been gone for like two years, that’s what’s up,” Alex pants, eyeing our shopping bags on the floor.

I look up from my phone. “We’ve been gone for like four hours.”

“What the hell were you doing at the mall for four hours anyway?” Will mocks, making me want to slap the cocky grin off his face.

“Hunting elephants,” I deadpan. “Isn’t it obvious? We were shopping. What do you think we were doing?”

Will lifts an eyebrow. “Shopping for what? And don’t tell me shoes. You already have 2,433 pairs.”

“That’s not true,” Winter cuts in.

“Thanks, Winter,” I say, grateful for her support.

“She has 2,435.”

Alex and Will suppress a laugh. *What? It’s not my fault shoes bring me more joy than the male species.* Fighting the urge to roll my eyes, I pick up as many bags as humanly possible and take the stairs two at a time, eager to find out who the missed calls are from.



“Thanks, Jenny. Of course I’ll be there. Thank you again.” I hang up and drop onto my bed with a squeal.

I have a job.

Me.

I have a freaking job.

I spoke with Jenny, the store manager, for around twenty minutes, clearing up the last details. I unlock my phone to call Morgan and tell her I’ll be able to afford fixing my shitty car in the near foreseeable future, but just as I’m about to press the *Call* button, a new message pops onto my screen.

Unknown Number: I think you need glasses

I frown. I don’t have this number registered in my phone.

Kass: Who is this?

Minutes pass before my phone goes off again.

Unknown Number: I was in the kitchen just now and you didn’t say hi. Obviously you didn’t see me so I’ll let it slide this once.

I grin. How did Will get my number?

Kass: I never say hi to you. You never cared before.

Unknown Number: Yeah, but I took you to my secret spot. We're friends now.

Kass: You mean your shagging spot.

Unknown Number: Same thing.

Kass: Fine. Hi Willy Wonka.

Unknown Number: Don't call me that, control freak.

Kass: That nickname is never going to go away, is it?

Unknown Number: Are you going to stop wanting to control everything?

Kass: No.

Unknown Number: Then it's staying

I add his number to my contacts under *Willy Wonka*.

Kass: Are u still at my house?

Willy Wonka: Yep, waiting for your cousin. We have this thing tonight.

A thing? Probably some street fighting bullshit. I still can't believe how quickly my cousin got herself involved in my brother's mess. That's got to take some serious skills. She hasn't even been here a month yet.

Kass: What thing?

Willy Wonka: Would you believe me if I said fighting for world peace?

Kass: Nope.

Willy Wonka: Didn't think so.

Kass: Does that "thing" have anything to do with Haze by any chance?

Ten minutes go by.

Willy Wonka: Maybe

Of course.

Kass: Just watch out for her please. I know Haze's type. Winter is not prepared for that kind of player.

Willy Wonka: Believe it or not, I think he might actually kind of like her.

Kass: Good one.

Willy Wonka: I'm serious

Kass: Are you crazy? Because he helped her at the party doesn't mean shit.

Willy Wonka: I'm just saying.

I'm not sure how to reply to that, so I don't, letting the conversation die. I used to carry text conversations on my back all the time with Blake. I'd kill myself trying to rekindle our boring exchanges and come up with new topics, only to get short, one-word replies every time. I swore I'd never bend over backward like this again. Unless Will makes an eff—

Ding!

Willy Wonka: How's the hangover?

Ah. Shit. Stop smiling.

Kass: I'm still alive, aren't I?

Willy Wonka: I'm always here if you need a glass of water or... anything else.

Wait...

Kass: Are you hitting on me, Martins?

He takes a few minutes to reply.

I hate that I'm growing restless.

Willy Wonka: Do you want me to be hitting on you?

Do I?

Kass: Why are you texting me?

Willy Wonka: I felt something last night. A connection. I can't explain it. All I know is I'd like to get to know you better.

A bit flustered, I read his text on repeat. There's no way he means that. He's fucking with me.

Kass: Translation: you're bored waiting for Winter and need a distraction.

I hold my breath when three dots bob up on my screen. Two minutes go by. *Is he writing me a novel?* The dots disappear, then reappear, until finally...

Willy Wonka: Busted.

I knew it.

Another message comes through right away.

Willy Wonka: You're also not the worst person to talk to.

Kass: Gee, thanks

Willy Wonka: My pleasure.

Kass: Still didn't answer my question

Willy Wonka: What do you want me to say? I'm texting you because I want to. Or do I need a permit, officer?

Kass: That'll be \$300

Willy Wonka: Ha. Ha.

Kass: Now if you'll excuse me, I have other things to do than entertain you

Willy Wonka: Like what?

Kass: Like make an important call

Willy Wonka: Ooh, are you giving golden boy a chance?

I know he's referring to Luke.

Kass: Not quite.

Willy Wonka: Poor fella. Just put him out of his misery and go on a date with the kid already.

Kass: Why do you care if I date him or not?

Willy Wonka: I don't. I'm just saying you could use the experience.

I frown.

Kass: And what would you know about my experience?

Willy Wonka: Blake was your first, wasn't he? And, last I heard, you didn't have anyone else after him. Just putting two and two together.

Kass: My experience is none of your business.

Willy Wonka: Well, well. A control freak who has no idea what to do in the bedroom. Who would've thought?

My cheeks blaze. Is that really what he thinks about me? That I'm awful in bed?

Kass: And that's my cue to stop texting you

His reply is instant.

Willy Wonka: Come onnn

I head inside my bathroom, rest my phone on the counter, and stretch my arm out to start the shower. I strip off my clothes, but my phone pings again.

Willy Wonka: I'm sorry:(come back

Against all expectations, I smile.

Kass: Bye Willy

I switch my phone to silent and step under the scorching water, still with this stupid, unwanted grin plastered to my face. This is the first time Will's ever texted me.

And call me crazy, but...

I have a feeling it won't be the last.

Eight

Kassidy

Willy Wonka: Do you think honeybees know they're going to die before they sting you? Like do they have a little bee funeral and say goodbye to their family before they bite the fuck out of you?

Lying in bed with my eyes open a crack, I scoff at the text that pulled me out of slumber and double-check the sender. *Will*. He's still texting me?

It's barely seven thirty. Today is Sunday and my first day working at the pet store. I set my alarm for eight o'clock as I start at nine thirty.

Kass: You woke me up thirty minutes before my alarm goes off for THIS?

A few seconds elapse.

Willy Wonka: Yep.

Kass: I need to have a chat with whoever gave you my number.

He texts back right away.

Willy Wonka: Good morning to you too, gorgeous

When I feel a smile coming dangerously close to my lips, I tap out of our conversation and roll out of bed, marching toward my bathroom to get ready for my first day.

No one's distracting me today.

Especially not Will.



The bell hanging above the glass door chimes as I walk into the stone building I now get to call work. A nervous wreck, I analyze the squeaky-clean, blue-and-white-painted store. Jenny told me it was renovated recently, hence the modern look.

My gaze shifts across the room. More precisely to my new boss standing behind the counter. She's just finishing up with a customer. Jenny is a beautiful girl, taller than average—I'd say five foot nine—and rocks auburn, almost red mid-shoulder hair. She has a skinny frame and a rack that's pretty hard not to notice. I wish I was half as blessed as she is in that department. I can barely fill out B cups.

“Hey, Kassidy. Right on time.” She smiles, gesturing to come closer. The customer heads out, dog food hoisted under his arm.

We make basic chitchat, exchanging how are you's and complaints about the cloudy weather. Jenny then introduces herself. She's twenty-two, studying to be an English teacher, and working as store manager to pay off her student loans. She's been working here for three years.

She shows me around and tells me where everything is. I carry a notepad with me—because that's the kind of employee I am—and write down as many details as I possibly can. It takes all I have not to stop and stare at the puppies as we pass them.

Lunchtime rolls around and Jenny tells me I'll get to meet Isabella, Luke's aunt and the store owner, sometime this afternoon. Apparently, Isabella's visits are an event to celebrate as she owns a handful of stores all over town, basically making her too busy to breathe.

Another employee shows up for his shift a bit before my lunch break. Jenny introduces the tall, built African American guy as Ethan, who I come to find out is two years older than me. Once we've gotten the formalities out of the way, I retreat to the back of the store.



Luke is the first person I see when I pad back into the room thirty minutes later. Braced against the counter and flaunting the school's varsity jacket, he scrolls through Instagram.

A woman who appears to be in her late forties stands behind the cash register, absently organizing papers. I take in her dark frizzy hair, gray cardigan, and tanned skin. She looks up when I come into view and rounds the counter, heading toward me.

"You must be Kassidy." Isabella holds out her hand to me.

"That I am. Nice to meet you." I smile, giving her hand a slight shake.

She doesn't spare me a smile, nor does she say it back, but I doubt it has anything to do with me. Jenny said she can be a bit rough around the edges sometimes, but she's a big softie on the inside.

After giving me a brief, professional "Welcome to the team" speech, Isabella says her goodbyes and embraces Luke, her nephew, thanking him for lunch. *That's why he's here.* He must've followed her back to the store. Ethan comes back from the bathroom a heartbeat later, missing her by a wink.

"So, how's the first day going?" Luke asks me.

"Great. Thanks again for getting me an interview."

"Don't worry about it." He smiles. "Jen, not too hard on her, I hope?"

Jenny laughs. "I don't have to, she's a natural. But I do need my employee back sometime today, Jenson."

It's clear they know each other well. Luke probably hung around the store often back when his aunt ran it—this was her first store. When asked if he's got somewhere to be by Jenny, Luke starts fidgeting with his jersey.

He doesn't want to leave.

“Yeah, hm... Kass, before I go, I wanted to ask you... Can I take you out sometime?”

Shit.

I can feel Jenny and Ethan staring directly into my soul. There isn't a single person in the vicinity *not* awaiting my reply—I bet even the fucking fishes are on the edge of their seats. Everybody's impatient to see if I'm going to be *that* girl. The one who says no to her boss's nephew, not to mention the guy who got her the job.

“Sure.” I crumble to the peer pressure.

“Really?” His eyes widen. “I mean, cool.” He retracts his excitement, and guilt floods my stomach. He's such a nice guy. I don't want to lead him on. Truth is, I'm just not that interested. And at the risk of sounding like a walking cliché, it's not him, it's *me*. I need a break from boys. We can talk in a year.

“Next weekend?” he asks.

“Okay.” I force a smile.

“Great. I'll text you.”

I nod.

“See you at school.” Luke makes his way to the door, angles his head back for one last smile, and exits the now completely silent store. Immediately, Ethan goes off.

“Holy guacamole.”

Jenny muffles a laugh.

“It's his first time seeing Luke,” she explains.

So... Ethan is gay.

Cue the disappointed girls all over the world.

I trail back to the counter, punching in on the computer.

“What's wrong with you?” Ethan's scandalized. “How are you not more excited about this? Are you blind? He's smoking hot.”

It's my turn to restrain my laughter.

Jenny calls us to order. “Okay, back to work you two. These fish tanks aren’t going to clean themselves.”

“Women, I swear. They don’t appreciate the gifts of God,” Ethan puffs as he walks away.



Climbing inside my car after locking up the store with Jenny, I wonder if it’d be okay to tell my mom I need a weekend *on top* of this weekend. Today was downright exhausting. Squeezing years of information into a six-hour shift will do that to you. Firing up my car, I eye my phone on the passenger seat and catch myself wanting to text Will.

I select our conversation before I can overthink it.

Kass: You’ll be happy to know I decided to give Luke a chance.

Five minutes go by.

Willy Wonka: Weren’t you just telling me how much you don’t want to date him?

Kass: I know but I felt bad. He asked me out in front of my co-workers. On my first day at the job HE got me. What was I supposed to do?

Willy Wonka: Say you have a boyfriend?

Kass: I don’t?

Willy Wonka: He doesn’t know that.

Kass: You were bugging me to date him just yesterday. What happened?

Willy Wonka: That’s before I knew how goddamn annoying he was.

Okay?

Kass: Stop. He’s nice. I even bet when he says “Netflix and Chill” he means “Watching a movie”

Willy Wonka: Can you hear me snoring?

Kass: Shut up. Just because a guy is a gentleman doesn't make him boring.

Willy Wonka: Yeah but that's not what you need.

My mind runs a marathon.

Kass: You don't know shit about what I need, Willy.

Willy Wonka: Wrong.

Kass: Okay. What do I need?

Willy Wonka: You need a guy who can't keep his hands, eyes and mouth off you. Not some mama's boy who doesn't have the balls to kiss you.

Something in my chest gives a jolt.

But it's not my heart. It can't be.

I won't allow it.

I don't understand my body's reaction to his message, but what I understand even less... are the images invading my brain when I soak in his words.

I imagine him.

Will.

Doing all these things to me.

Kissing me, touching me, fu—

Willy Wonka: But that's just my opinion

I nibble on my lower lip. My mind went to a seriously weird place for a second there.

Kass: Yeah, well, if you know a guy who can do all these things, hit me up. Until then I'll keep going on my "boring" dates.

I blink at my screen, confused by my own damn self. I don't know why I said that, why I was just going on about how much I *don't* want to date anyone only to try and get a reaction out of Will a second later.

He doesn't text back. Not in the first five minutes, not in the next. Fifteen minutes later, I grow sick of waiting and

speed out of the store parking lot. As soon as I pull into my driveway, my phone lights up with his reply.

Willy Wonka: I'll let you get back to golden boy now.

First thing I learned today:

I can't figure out William Martins.

Second thing I learned today:

I sure as hell am going to try.

Nine

Kassidy

Groaning in annoyance, I rifle through my purse, desperate to find my keys. Stress ball, sticky notes, lipstick. *No keys.* I release a scoff, mocking myself for hoarding so much useless shit. I've never, in the five years I've had it, used that stress ball, but I still carry it around, just in case.

I've been working at the pet store for a few days now. The adjustment period wasn't easy—processing truckloads of information in a completely new environment never is—but the silver lining is, I got to meet my long-lost gay soul mate, Ethan. We skipped the awkward, work friend moment and jumped straight into the “let's hang out” phase.

He fed me bits and pieces of his life story, skimming over the details, but it didn't take a PhD to figure out it had something to do with his parents disapproving of his sexuality and shipping him to Florida to live with his older sister.

Unlocking the front door, I shuffle inside my house, checking the time. It's past 9:00. I was supposed to be out of work at 8:00, but a family of five walked in two minutes before closing. *Fun.*

Tonight is movie night. The girls have been blowing up my phone, whining about how late I am. I was supposed to meet them at Zoey's an hour ago. I just need to get changed and hop in the shower. Lobbing my purse and keys on the kitchen table, I begin texting them ba—

“Stop moving, for God's sake!”

I nearly drop my phone.

My eyes jump to the closed bathroom door. Someone's in there.

A *guy* someone.

I didn't see a car outside.

Or was I too exhausted to notice?

“Easy for you to say. You're not the one with this thing stuck on your head. Which, by the way, isn't exactly weightless.”

Is that... Winter?

“Oh, I'm sorry, princess. I shouldn't have given you a helmet. It's not like it can save your life or anything.”

Wait, I know that voice.

“We might have to go to the hospital. I mean, you can't exactly keep it on your head forever, can you?”

Winter laughs. “They could make a documentary about me.”

“Helmet girl. When Winter was eighteen years old, her head got stuck in a motorcycle helmet. People were never able to get it off. She's been living without makeup and hasn't brushed her teeth ever since.”

My cousin's laughter increases.

Failing to contain my curiosity, I walk over and swing the door open. What I see on the other side is... a shitshow.

No better way to put it.

My cousin, wearing a motorcycle helmet. And Haze Adams, hands dripping with soap.

“Winter?” I frown.

“This isn't what it looks like,” she stammers.

Haze bites back his laughter. “Tell me, what *exactly* does this look like?”

Fuck it.

“You know what? I don't even want to know.” I shut the door. I've had a long day, and I'd rather not waste the last of my brain energy on this. Hurrying to the fridge, I grab an

apple. I hear them burst into laughter and can't help listening.
Thin walls, okay?

"If she tells Kendrick, I'm dead."

"What could she possibly tell him? He had soap on his hands, and she had a helmet on her head?"

They don't say anything for the next minute. I'm halfway up the stairs when I realize I left my bag in the kitchen.

"I hate to put an end to our second date, but I have to go." I discern Haze's voice as I'm passing through.

Did he just say second date?

As in they had a *first* date?

"I'll see you at school?" he questions.

I don't hear her answer, only Haze's footsteps to the door.

"Hey, Kingston?" he says quietly.

Silence.

"Thank you for getting to know me."

"Hey, Adams?"

I hang on to their every word.

Wow, I am *such* a creep right now.

"Thank you for showing me you were worth knowing."

Haze is out of the bathroom a second later. I hide like the professional stalker that I am, awaiting the front door's slam. Winter wanders into the hall next, head free of Haze's helmet. I lurch out of my hiding spot, making her jump.

"Thank you for showing me you were worth knowing? Seriously?" I blurt out.

Winter, come on, you're smarter than this. He is so going to break your heart. Reeking of shame, she rounds me, rushing up the stairs without a word.

"When you catch feelings and he drops you, don't say I didn't warn you," I call right before she closes her bedroom door.

I instantly regret being hard on her. I don't *mean* to be the bad guy. I don't *mean* to be the annoying cousin, but she has no idea who she's dealing with. People don't change. Especially not the kind with bulging muscles and tattoos.

My phone lights up with another of Zoey's impatient texts, and I lock myself into the bathroom for a much-needed shower. Once I'm done, I change out of my work clothes into joggers and a crop top.

Lacing a hoodie around my hips in case I get cold, I zoom down the stairs, stopping short at the sound of my brother's voice. He's on the phone in the guest room. I don't think much of it, making a beeline for the front door.

"Going out?"

I jolt, spinning to see Will staring at me, back against the wall, buff arms crossed over his chest. He looks me up and down so shamelessly my stomach flips. I swallow hard, drinking in his appearance. We might've stopped texting after I told him about my date with Luke, but that doesn't mean I'm any less attracted to his dumb ass.

He's wearing dark sweatpants and an unzipped black jacket on top of a white tank top, which accentuates that ridiculous body of his. I'm guessing he just finished working out.

"What are you doing here?"

"Just hanging out with Kendrick. He had to take a call." He gestures to the distant guest room with a flick of his chin.

I nod, but I can't stop wondering what he'd look like if someone tore those sweaty clothes off him. Even better, if *I* tore those sweaty clothes off him.

Kass, knock it off!

"You?" he asks.

"Heading out. Movie night with my friends."

"Which friends?" He cocks an eyebrow. "And don't say Zoey because she doesn't qualify as one."

He still doesn't like her. *Noted.*

"What'd she ever do to you?" I slide into the pair of sneakers I left by the door.

"Me? Nothing. It's you she's constantly bossing around."

"She doesn't—"

My phone pings with a text.

"Hold on." I pick it out of my sweats pocket.

"Let me guess, it's her."

He's spot-on, but I don't tell him that, unlocking my phone to a list of things I have to get for movie night. Not that I'm surprised. We said we'd take turns buying food for our rom-com marathons, but Morgan and I are the only ones ever holding up our ends of the deal.

Zoey always forgets and texts me to grab some things on the way. She hasn't been able to pay me back yet, but it's okay. Although I have to admit I could've done without her list this week. I'm really short on money. Still haven't gotten paid.

"What does she want?" He reads me loud and clear.

"She's just asking when I'll get there."

He doesn't miss a beat, striding over to me and snatching the phone out of my hands.

"Hey!" I yelp.

His eyes comb through every word within seconds.

He frowns. "What is this shit?"

"It's nothing. Just a list of things I have to get."

His jaw twitches.

"You're not her fucking pet. Tell your bitchy friend to run her errands herself."

His reaction, as negative as it may be, makes me feel some type of way. A *good* some type of way.

"Why do you care?" I turn the tables on him.

Like I've just called him to order, he chucks my phone back into my palm, crosses the kitchen with slow, lazy strides, and slides back into his previous position—arms crossed, leg up— against the wall.

“I don't.” He shrugs. “Just feel bad for you, that's all.”

I swear this boy's mood changes at the flip of a coin.

“Tell me one good thing about her. I dare you.”

“No.” I stand my ground.

“So, you're admitting she's a bad friend?”

“Fine. She makes me laugh.”

He snorts. “Yeah, because she's a fucking joke.”

“Will!”

“What? I'm kind of an expert on the matter. Had a friend like that once. I would've done anything he asked, even when it was batshit crazy, because I thought he'd do the same for me.”

“And... did he?”

His voice plummets in volume, revealing a faint, easily missed edge of vulnerability. “Nah. He threw my ass under the bus the second things got rough.”

“That sucks. What happened?”

I can feel every inch of him pulling away from me when the words leave my mouth—Crazy considering he's halfway across the room.

“I'm over it. Shit happens. We move on.”

That's his way of telling me he's done talking about it. My phone goes off for the millionth time, but I don't bother checking. I know it's Zoey.

“Look, all I'm saying is I don't doubt for a second this Zoey chick would do the same if it ever came down to you or her. She'd choose herself. In a heartbeat. No second thought.”

“You don't know her,” I oppose, my mind racing with painful scenarios. Zoey isn't the easiest friend, I know that, but

I have to believe she'd stand up for me if I ever needed her.

"I don't know her personally, yeah, but I've known a million like her. And I've known a million like you. The pushover always loses in the end. You'll see."

Damn.

"Did you want anything else than to completely shatter my spirit today?" I ask, and he cracks a laugh, the serious tension slipping away.

"Nope. All done. You can go now."

I smile, reaching for the door handle.

"Nice outfit, by the way." He stops me. "It's very... *not* you."

He's right. I never wear crop tops. I swivel around, noticing the way his eyes linger on my body. My pulse throbs in my neck. Why does my skin literally *burn* when he looks at me?

"What do you mean?"

"It's just..." He hesitates on which word to use, then settles for, "Casual."

I have no idea how to answer that.

"You usually don't do casual," he adds.

I'm surprised he even notices these things.

"Thanks for the fashion advice. I should probably go before the girls send out a search party for me." I swing the door open, throwing one last glance over my shoulder. "Good night, Willy."

He releases a grin. "You too, control freak."



Twenty minutes later, I'm kicking Zoey's front door shut and wrestling with the pile of snacks in my arms. "I'm here," I

yell, only to be greeted by my best friend's thumping footsteps.

"About time," Zoey huffs, turning the corner and swiping the food from my hands.

"Nice to see you, too," I call out, watching her stomp off to the kitchen. She replies with a small laugh, at the very least acknowledging her rudeness.

Morgan's next in line, meeting me at the door for a hug. I feel like we haven't hung out outside of school in forever. Between my new job and homework, I haven't seen much of... well, *anyone*, really. I've missed our nights of stupidity.

The smell of popcorn sweeps across the apartment, a sign that Zoey's putting the money I shouldn't have spent to good use. Morgan and I spread across the couch.

"Tell me everything. How's the new job going?" She wraps herself into a soft blanket.

"The job isn't all that great, but my coworkers are awesome, so that helps."

We make small talk, catching each other up on the latest. Then she stabs me in the gut with one question.

"So... have talked to your dad lately?"

My breath staggers.

No, I haven't.

That would require him wanting to talk to me.

"No. He hasn't called since he left." I squeeze a pillow to my chest as if to protect myself. "Why?"

"It's just... my mom told me she saw him at the mall yesterday. She thought maybe he was back in town. But she's probably wrong."

A pang of sadness runs through me.

"It couldn't have been him. He... he would've called. He promised he would." My voice quivers with doubt.

“Hey. Don’t worry.” Morgan picks up on my distress. “She must’ve confused him with someone else. Just forget I said anything, okay?”

I nod, struggling to slap my happy face back on. It’s been close to two months since I came home to my dad packing his things. My mom was locked in the bathroom, sobbing her heart out. He said he needed time to figure things out. That he’d come back when he had his shit together and could be a good dad to us. I asked, *begged*, my mom to tell me what happened. Why he was leaving.

She never did.

Only said they were getting a divorce and they’d drifted apart.

Not a peep from him since.

All I know is Kendrick and my mom started acting weird as hell the weeks after he left. I’d constantly hear them whispering behind closed doors, notice a sudden conversation change whenever I walked into the room. But then again, I was always a bit paranoid.

God... is he really back in town?

Zoey joins us with popcorn and gummies before my daddy issues rain on my parade. We start scrolling through Netflix. I’d rather skip the lovey-dovey and go full-on comedy tonight, but Zoey insists we watch some steamy romance movie that just came out. As for Morgan, she just wants to keep eating.

I notice all the movies in Zoey’s “Continue Watching” section are... well, hot and heavy, to say the least.

“Zoey, would you happen to have an itch that needs scratching by any chance?” I tease, and she groans.

“Give me a break. It’s the closest thing I’ve had to some action in weeks. And trust me, it’s not for lack of trying.”

“You went back to Sean?” I dread her answer.

“Fuck Sean. Sean can go suck a dick.”

I frown. “Who are we talking about, then?”

“Haze, of course.”

Here we go.

“Seriously, Zo?” I cringe. “Again?”

She fiddles with her phone, oozing shame.

“But you said you were done. You know he doesn’t want a girlfriend.”

“Don’t give me that look. Nothing happened...” She stops and mumbles, *“Despite my best efforts.”*

“What are you saying?” Morgan asks.

“He rejected me.” Zoey flings her hands up. “Me! Can you believe it? He doesn’t do serious, I get it, but he never turned down sex before. I showed up at his place yesterday, and he practically chased me off his porch. Didn’t even consider it. What am I going to do without my mind-blowing fuck buddy?”

Morgan snorts. “How will you ever survive?”

“Morg, I’m serious. Do you think he could...” Zoey pauses as though she’s terrified to say it out loud. “Be seeing someone? Like actually *liking* someone?”

“Of course not. It’s Haze,” I reply.

Truth is, as much as I’d like to soothe her worries, part of me can’t stop replaying the moment I walked in on Winter and Mr. Player in the bathroom earlier. They did seem pretty friendly. With their next-level cheesiness and “second date” rubbish. Haze’s voice echoes in my head.

Thank you for getting to know me.

Could it be...

“Really?” Zoey continues. “Because from what I’ve heard, he was with your cousin today.”

How the heck does she know that?

Does she have spies?

I shrug. “So? Probably doesn’t mean anything.”

“What does he see in her anyway? Bitch is kind of ugly. Like a four on a good day.”

Anger eats at my insides. Winter is like a sister to me. I open my mouth to tell her off, but Morgan beats me to it.

“Are you kidding? The girl’s gorgeous. She barely wears any makeup, and she looks like *that*? I’m sorry, but I have to disagree on this one. If Haze were to like her, I’d get it.”

Fuming, Zoey sends Morgan a nasty glare and diverts her attention to her phone. I lock eyes with Morgan and crack a thankful smile, to which she replies with an *I got you* nod.

“Well, then...” Zoey speaks after a few seconds of boiling on the inside. “Guess that means I’ll have to go for my plan B, doesn’t it?”

She turns to me.

“Hottie Blondie. You don’t mind, right? I know I was giving him a pass because I wanted you to jump his bones and forget *what’s his name*, but since you didn’t take me up on my offer...”

The mere thought of Zoey anywhere near Will makes my flesh crawl.

“Why him?”

“Why *not* him? He’s a total dreamboat. Those eyes, that body, those hands...” She’s practically drooling. “You know what they say about big hands.”

I press my lips together, trying—and failing—to conceal my annoyance.

“Earth to Kass?” Zoey waves her hand in front of my face. “So... What do you say?”

How about fuck no?

“I’d rather you didn’t.” I shift in place.

“Why? Is something going on between you two?”

“No, it’s just...”

“It’s just what?” she pushes.

“He’s my brother’s best friend. You know how I feel about my friends getting involved with these clowns.” I’m lying my ass off. If I’m being honest, I don’t know why I almost hurled on the carpet at the simple mention of them together, but the pit in my throat is good enough for me.

“Kass, come on. If I can’t get anywhere near him, then at least let me have Kendrick.”

“What? That’s even worse! He’s my brother. I don’t want you guys to hook up. Zoey, promise me.”

She begins to answer but hesitates, considering her options.

“Zoey!”

“Fine, jeez. I won’t touch Kendrick,” she gives in. “But no promises about Hottie Blondie.”

Backed into a corner, I ignore the irritation stirring in my stomach and sit as far away from her as I possibly can.

I don’t know what I’m madder about:

The fact that my best friend wants to get Will...

Or the fact that it bothers me.

Ten

Kassidy

I've always loved the rain. And I don't mean the cute drizzle some people love to call rain. I mean the "we shall never leave our houses ever again" rain. I especially loved it as a kid because with rainstorms often came power outages.

When it trapped Kendrick, my mom, my dad, and me inside, I felt like I had a family. For that one, fleeting moment, time slowed down, the world stopped turning, and we were together. There were no pressing emails my dad had to reply to, no important phone calls he had to take, no TV. Just a family.

Playing cards in the dark.

On my twelfth birthday, remnants of a violent hurricane swept through town. We lost power. Dad and I played Go Fish for three hours with nothing but oil lamps illuminating the kitchen. Mom made us sandwiches, Kendrick picked up a book. It'd been ages since he'd bothered opening one of the novels Aunt Lauren, Winter's mom, gifted him at Christmas.

He read it all with a flashlight that night. It was the first time he'd enjoyed something other than video games in years. I don't think there has ever been a day where my family was happier than this.

Sitting in my car, I watch the pouring rain bounce off my windshield. Water pummels my piece of junk so hard I'm scared the glass is going to crack. I jerk at the distant thunder, glancing toward my house. It's past eleven. My mom is still at work, and the only cars in the driveway are Kendrick's and Will's.

He's still here.

I should run inside, crash into bed, and stop thinking about my dad. I'm good at that. Suppressing my emotions. Been

doing it for two months now. It's easy, really, only requires two steps. Step one: make excuses for my him. Step two: push the truth into the deepest corner of my mind.

It's always worked before, but not this time. What Morgan said is haunting me. He's back in town? Morgan's mom, Ms. James, wouldn't get this wrong.

She *knows* my dad, wouldn't confuse him with somebody else. But then... why hasn't he called? Silencing my better judgment, I dial the number I know by heart.

It rings.

Rings again.

What are you doing? If he wanted to talk to you, he would.

In a moment of panic, I rip the phone away from my ear, but a voice comes on before I can chicken out.

"Hello?"

My heart rate peaks.

I inch the phone closer, struck dumb.

"Hello?" the voice asks again.

But it's not my dad's.

It's a woman.

"H-Hi..." I inhale a sharp breath. "I'm looking for Nick. Is this the right number?"

"Who's asking?"

"His daughter."

Silence.

A load of it.

"Oh. Hm... He's not here right now. Can I take a message?"

"Yes. Please tell him I called, and I'd like it if he could call me back."

"Of course."

I don't remember how the call ended. Or the world's most awkward goodbye. The truth weighs on my heart when the disconnecting *click* reaches my ear.

He's with somebody else.

Already.

I will myself out of the car, taking my time, facing the storm head-on. A normal person would've run to escape the rain, but *this* person isn't normal.

I can't be normal and hurt this much.

The violent, cold rain is a relief, a release from the million questions spinning in my brain. It soaks me, frees me in a way I can't explain. If only it washed the pain away permanently...

I unlock the front door and push it open, rushing into the downstairs bathroom to dry myself. I can hear my brother swearing at someone, most likely Will, over the sounds of video game explosions. It's clear he just got his ass handed to him.

"Fuck you," Kendrick snarls.

"Buy me dinner first."

I smile at his voice.

Yeah, that's Will all right.

Done with this day, I scurry into the living room to find a laughing Will sprawled across the couch next to my sore loser of a brother. Kendrick is bruised—crazy bruised—but I don't question it. It happens every once in a while. He takes a beating, then disappears for a bit so my mom doesn't see him like this.

Except he usually doesn't come back home at all. I'm surprised he's even here. A bag of clothes sits at his feet. *Ah*. He probably just came to get his stuff before retreating to the shadows until he doesn't look like he got into an argument with a hammer.

I notice Will changed out of his distracting, too-hot-to-be-legal training outfit and is now wearing a plain T-shirt and

dark jeans. As soon as they become aware of my presence, Kendrick scoffs, raising an eyebrow.

“What happened to you?” Kendrick points to my clothes.

Right. I’m soaked.

“It’s called rain. It’s pouring outside.”

“It is?” He’s surprised.

“Yeah. You would know that if you opened the curtains every once in a while. How do you even see?” I glimpse at the drawn blinds, peeling wet hair off my face.

“Are you okay?”

These are the last words I expected to hear.

My gaze flies to him.

Will.

Conflicted blue eyes meet mine. I’ve never seen that look on him before. He’s not mocking me, or arrogant. He’s genuinely asking. And, I’m probably crazy, but he almost looks...

Worried?

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I sputter, caught off guard, and breeze past them. I catch Kendrick eyeing Will suspiciously on my way to the staircase. This has to be the first time Will’s ever directly addressed me in front of my brother.

“What? She looks like she just ran over a puppy,” Will says as I’m climbing up the stairs, and I swallow a smile. Seconds later, I’m shutting my bedroom door and falling backward onto my bed. I must lie there for twenty minutes, scrolling through social media and wondering what just happened.

Who’s the woman who picked up?

Why hasn’t my dad called since he left?

What happened for my parents to take the final step and get a divorce? I knew things weren’t going well, but moving out overnight? Isn’t that a bit sudden? Unless something’s

been going on behind the scenes this whole time and I was too blind to notice? I need to ask my mom, and I won't let her change the subject. Not anymore.

I assume the guys are leaving when I hear the front door slam. I rush to my window, and, as suspected, Will and Kendrick are parting ways, heading for their cars. Kendrick's the first to drive off. Exhausted, I decide I should probably change out of my wet clothes before catching hypothermia and lock myself into my bathroom to get ready for bed.

When I step back into my room in a T-shirt and shorts five minutes later, I expect to crash into bed, pass out, and hopefully let slumber wipe my tortured mind clean.

But what I definitely don't expect...

Is to find William Martins lying on my bed.

I screech so loud I scare myself, backing away too fast and slipping on God knows what. I fall on my ass, bumping my head on my dresser in the process because *why not?* Laughter instantly pours out of Will.

"Damn. I'm that scary?"

Dazed, I rub the back of my skull and look up, discerning his broad-shouldered silhouette a few steps away. Snickering, he offers me his hand.

"What the hell are you doing?" I ask.

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm getting you off the ground. How hard did you hit your head?" he mocks, driving his hand closer, which I reject, getting up on my own.

"No, as in here. What are you doing *here?* In my room?" I grimace, my fingers skimming over the small bump on my head. That's when the humiliating aspect of it all catches up to me. My cheeks redden. "You... You made me fall."

"Yeah, I tend to have that effect on women."

Someone give me the strength not to hurt this man.

"How did you even get in?"

"Want to tell me why you lied to me earlier?" he deflects.

I give him a look I can only describe as an “*Are you for real?*” look. When he realizes I’m not going to entertain him, he runs his finger across my desk and inspects the tip for dust.

“I saw you. You just left, Kendrick—”

“Kendrick *thinks* I left,” he corrects, scanning the rest of my room carefully before nodding like he’s made up his mind. “Your room is so clean it scares me.”

“Will! Answers,” I urge.

“Do you even sleep here? Is this an IKEA commercial and nobody told me?”

I can’t tell if it’s because I’m deliriously exhausted or because I actually find his dodging of my questions amusing, but I find myself smiling. Trying to understand what he’s doing in my room is pointless. That’s Will. My guess is he left for show and sneaked back into the house after my brother dashed down the street.

Lacking the necessary energy to fight him, I switch off the lights, crawl into bed, and pull up Netflix. I always fall asleep watching something, whether it be a show or movie. Been doing it for as long as I can remember.

Next thing I know, Will’s lying right next to me. Faking carelessness, I flip to the opposite side. The room is dark, its only source of light the lamp in the hall, which peeks under my closed bedroom door. I forgot to turn it off. Got busy squeezing a concussion in my schedule instead.

“What are we watching?” His breath fans my cheek.

My body tenses.

When the hell did he get this close?

He’s right behind me, hard chest pressed to my back. We’re not spooning exactly, but a few more inches and we would be.

“Are you ignoring me?” he says in a husky voice.

“Are you going to tell me why you’re here?” I say, sounding a bit strangled.

“Sure. If you tell me what’s wrong.”

This again.

“Nothing’s wrong.”

“Spare me the bullshit. The look on your face when you came into the house already betrayed you.”

While part of me is annoyed by his persistence, the other is... glad? I’m strangely happy that he noticed my pain. When I don’t reply, Will distances himself from me—to my unexpected disappointment—retreating to his side. I roll over to face him. He braces his head on his elbow, the hall’s gleam highlighting his cut jaw and chiseled features.

Good God, he’s hot even in the dark.

He speaks first. “Is it Zoey? Do I need to kick her ass?”

“Let’s say it was—what are you going to do? Punch a girl?”

“Fine. Then I’ll ruin her day. Break her heel or something.”

I chortle. “Is this really what you think ruins a girl’s day?”

“Hers? Yeah.”

“Shallow much?”

“I’m sorry, have you met the girl? A puddle looks deep next to her.”

I hate how easily he’s got me to laugh. I’m about to answer when a knock on my bedroom door launches my pulse to space.

“Kass, honey, are you still up?”

We both freeze.

My mom’s home.

It’s fine. Just pretend you’re sleeping.

“Sweetie, I heard you laughing. I know you’re up. Tell Morgan you’ll call her back tomorrow. It’s late. Can I have a hug good night?”

“Just a second,” I holler, staring at the annoyingly attractive problem next to me. *Hide*, my eyes scream. He does just that, opting for the world’s most original hiding spot: the gap under my bed.

“Come in.”

My mom obliges, twisting the knob and opening her arms for me. The hug good night is no biggie. It’s the conversation she gets into next that makes me wish I was deaf.

“So...” She sits on the edge of my bed. “I don’t mean to pry, but I overheard you talking on the phone with Morgan earlier today. You said something about a date tomorrow. With a boy named Luke, is it?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s just... You’ve never really had a boyfriend before, and I want to make sure you’ll be...” She hesitates. “*Safe* when the time comes.”

No way this is happening.

“Mom, I really don’t need you to give me the tal—”

“But I do. I need to give it to you. As a mom. Let me do this, please.”

No, no. Please don’t go there, my eyes plead. Not now.

“Sometimes, men are selfish, and I just... want you to stand your ground. It doesn’t matter if they say it doesn’t feel good with a condom, you stay safe, no matter what. It’s easy to let your partner convince you. It’s important that you find a man who gives you just as much pleasure as you give him. A selfish man in bed will be a selfish partner in life. Okay?”

Honest to god, someone knock me out.

“Got it. Thanks.”

It takes me a whole five minutes to get her to leave. As soon as the door shuts and her footsteps die down the hall, Will bursts out laughing.

Thanks, Mom.

“Shut up.” I drop onto my bed with a groan. Will slides out from under my mattress and plops down next to me, trying so hard to muffle his laughter he’s nearly suffocating. “Keep laughing, and I’ll out you to my mom myself.”

He ignores me, his contagious laughter chipping away at my anger until I find humor where I first found embarrassment.

“Damn it. What’s with the most humiliating moments of my life all happening in the two minutes you’ve been here?” I nuzzle my face between my hands.

“Please,” he scoffs. “The fall doesn’t even come *close* to this.”

I remove my hands from my face with a laugh.

“I hate you,” I tell him.

My mouth said one thing.

My smile said another.

He stops laughing, flicks his head sideways, and searches my eyes for a lie. One I’m not quick enough to hide. Long seconds pass before he smiles and says,

“No, you don’t.”

And the worst part is, he’s right.

I don’t.

“Don’t be mad at her. She’s a good mom.” He rips his eyes away, letting the tension taper off. His voice is a bit strained from laughing too hard. “Everything she said is true. I hope you’ll follow her advice.”

Is he trying to tell me something?

“With Luke, I mean.”

Oh.

“You guys are still on for tomorrow?” he asks.

“Yep.” I draw a sigh. “Although I’ve been trying to think of an excuse to bail.”

“Come on, don’t do the poor dude like that. Just give him a chance. I’m sure he’s the kind of guy to...” He takes on a high-pitched voice, impersonating my mother. “*Give a woman as much pleasure as she gives him.*”

I swat him in the arm.

Again, *thanks, Mom.*

“Yeah, well, he would be the first,” I mutter to myself, only realizing what I’ve just said when Will’s face falls.

“Wait...” His eyes grow. “Have you never...”

Why on *earth* did I have to say that?

“Like never? Not even by yourself? You’ve never c—”

“I know how to take care of myself, if that’s what you’re asking.” My face heats up to a thousand degrees. “It’s just Blake was never really...”

“Satisfying?” he finishes.

“Caring,” I revise. “He only cared about himself. I don’t think he ever even tried.”

“You’re fucking with me.”

My silence answers him.

“And you stayed with him for six months?” He’s appalled.

Uncomfortable, I nod, nibbling at the inside of my cheek.

“Fucking hell. Six months with a guy who can’t get you off. You’re some other kind of saint, control freak.”

I answer with a small shrug, hoping a change of subject is near. His disapproval hits me a lot harder than I’d like to let on. So, this *isn’t* normal. When I first told Zoey about the situation, she said, “Big deal. Most guys can’t get you there. Join the club.” I spent the whole day afterward convincing myself I was being difficult.

But right now, with Will lying next to me, telling me how much of a selfish bastard Blake was, I realize our sex was one-sided. There weren’t two of us in that tent the night he took my virginity.

Blake was the one having sex.

I was just... *there*.

I can't seem to forget the pit in my throat when he pulled out, rolled off me, and went right to sleep. It made me think that maybe I'd never find the guy my mom's been going on and on about since I was old enough to date.

The right guy.

I'm relieved when Will changes the topic, rescuing me from a dark place. We spend the next several hours talking, bickering, getting on each other's nerves. We watch a show, discuss how Kendrick and Zoey would be a match made in hell, and forget all the reasons why Will shouldn't be in my bed.

Two hours later, we're still talking, although barely keeping our eyes open. Just as I'm dozing off, Will brings up the painful memory I spent all night pushing down.

"You still haven't told me why you were sad earlier. What happened?"

"That's because I wasn't sad. You just assumed for whatever reason that I was."

He scoffs, not buying it.

"Yeah, let's try that again." He inches forward, as if to make sure he has my undivided attention as he repeats, "*What happened?*"

I draw a sigh.

"My dad happened," I cave.

He waits for me to elaborate.

"I called him earlier."

"And that's a bad thing?" he asks.

"It is if some random woman picks up."

Understanding flashes in his eyes. He already knows my parents are getting a divorce. He is still Kendrick's closest friend.

“Ouch.” He winces.

“Tell me about it.”

“And he didn’t tell you he was seeing someone?”

“That would require any form of communication. He hasn’t called once since he walked out on us two months ago.” I flip on my back, staring at the ceiling.

He does the same.

“What an ass.”

I laugh at his blunt remark.

“He isn’t. Or, he didn’t use to be. He was a good dad... *before*.” I tilt my head to look at him. “How much do you know about what happened anyway?”

“Just what Kendrick told me.” He shrugs. “That your folks got into a huge fight and your dad took off. Don’t know why though.”

“Well, that makes two of us.”

“You’re telling me you don’t even have *one* idea?”

“My guess is he cheated on her. It’s the only thing that makes sense. But why wouldn’t they just tell me that? If they felt they had to keep it from me, it must be worse. A lot worse.”

“Maybe they’re just trying to protect you,” he points out.

“I don’t need their protection. What I need is the goddamn truth,” I snap, instantly berating myself for taking it out on him.

He doesn’t so much as flinch.

“I’m sorry.” I exhale.

“Don’t apologize.” He couldn’t care less if he tried.

“The weeks after he left, Kendrick was extra nice to my mom, and you know how he is. Kendrick being a kiss-ass can only mean two things: either he wants something, or he feels guilty. There’s more to the story. There has to be.”

“Ever tried asking him about it?” he asks.

“Yeah, but he always denies it.”

“The truth will come out one way or another. It always does.” His heavy eyes shutter closed.

Mine follow.

“Hope you’re right.”

He lets out a deep, rough laugh.

“I’m always right, control freak.”

I can picture his stupid, sexy grin and sleepy face without looking at him. A short moment of silence ensues, but it’s not uncomfortable. We simultaneously glance at each other.

Damn you, Martins.

Why is it so easy with you?

“What about you? Got any bad parenting stories for me?”

He scoffs. “How much time you got?”

I know he’s joking, but his voice drips with truth.

“That bad?”

“Worse. Trust me, you don’t want to know.”

“What? Now you *have* to tell me. I don’t make the rules.”

“Man.” He drags a long sigh. “Where do I begin? Dad took off with every penny we had when I was eight, spent it all at the casino, and left my mom and I to live on the street.”

I’m left speechless. I did *not* see that coming.

“I’m... I’m so sorry” is the only answer I can come up with.

“Don’t be. Bastard got what was coming to him. They found him dead in the parking lot the next day. Shot in the head. But not before he’d gambled away every last cent.” He speaks as though it doesn’t affect him, like the story he’s sharing belongs to someone else.

“That’s awful. Did they ever find out who did it?”

“Nope. They think he just messed with the wrong guys. Or maybe he owed someone else money. Who knows?”

I remember the rich neighborhood we drove through the night Will took me to his tree house.

“That’s why you knew the neighborhood we went to so well, right? Because you used to live there before he...” I press my lips together. I could slap myself. Way to be insensitive.

“It’s fine. You can say it.”

“Before he died.”

“Yeah. We had to leave the house my mom spent years saving for after he took everything. She’d just quit her job to start her jewelry business, too. We were finally in a good place. She could afford to chase her dream. A week later, we were moving into a one-bedroom dumpster. Then into a homeless shelter. She had no one. No relatives. No friends. My toxic old man had isolated her for so long. I was in denial. I was eight, you know?”

My heart bleeds for him.

“The worst part is, he was always a good dad to me. He was the kind of dad to build you a fucking tree house just because you asked. That’s why I couldn’t hate him. I couldn’t believe he was dead, or that he’d emptied all of our accounts and left us with nothing.”

“What did your mom tell you?” I can’t possibly imagine explaining this to an eight-year-old boy.

“She spent years trying to convince me he went to the casino that night hoping to double the money he’d stolen and come back home to us. I believed her for a while, but now I know it was a load of bullshit. He wasn’t a saint. Or a caring parent. He was nothing but a sick man with a gambling addiction. When my mom’s folks passed away and she got her inheritance, he couldn’t take it anymore. He just snapped. Took everything and ran.”

So, not only did he steal his family’s money, he stole the money his wife got from her dead parents, too?

Because it wasn't bad enough.

“How’s your mom now? Please tell me she recovered.”

Something shifts in his eyes, but I can’t tell what.

“Yeah. She’s fine now.”

Thank God.

“She found work again?” I ask.

He gives me a faint nod.

“Good.”

A beat of silence.

“You win, Willy.”

Confusion blazes in his eyes.

“In the worst-parents department, you win.” I offer him an apologetic smile that he barely returns. From there, we stop talking, neither of us questioning whether he’s staying the night. The answer seems evident. I turn my back on him, ready to black out and feel him slip under the blanket with me.

But I’m far from prepared for what he does next.

He moves closer, bands his arm around my waist, and leads me to his chest. With that one simple move, my lungs bail on me. He holds me. No questions asked, no explanation. I can’t seem to wrap my head around this moment.

Will is in my bed. My brother’s best bud, the dumbass who pushed me in the pool too many times to count last summer, the guy I once thought had air where his brain should be, is spending the night in my bed. Cuddling me. What in the *fuck* is happening right now?

It should be weird.

But it’s not.

Somehow, it’s the most *not* weird thing that’s happened to me in a long time.

“I’m sorry about your dad, Will,” I whisper seconds before we pass out.

“I’m sorry about your dad, Kass.”

I smile. It’s a small smile, barely there, but it’s real.

Why?

It’s the first time Will’s ever called me Kass.

Eleven

Kassidy

“You are never going to guess what Callie told me in gym,” Zoey gushes when we settle around a table at lunch. Toying with the plastic fork in my hand, I assess the crowded cafeteria and its hideous orange brick walls. Meanwhile, Morgan and Winter don’t even *pretend* to care about the newest gossip, eyes fixed to their phones.

Winter recently started eating with us, although she keeps to herself most of the time. Today especially. She seems distracted, somewhere else. And I mean “another planet” somewhere else.

My money is on Haze.

“Hello?” Zoey presses. “I said you’re never going to guess what Callie told me.”

“She’s pregnant,” Morgan drawls.

“What? No, that was a false alarm,” Zoey debunks, and I almost snicker at the fact that Morgan said something at the top of her head and still got it right. It’s no secret that Callie Cooper, a good friend of Zoey, sleeps around. I say that’s her choice, but it earned her quite the reputation.

“Then what? Spill.” I take a quick bite of my food.

“Remember when I said I was after Hottie Blondie?”

My head snaps up.

“Yeah?” Morgan nods.

I stop chewing, like I’m afraid it’ll keep me from hearing what she says next.

“Seems I’m going to have to find myself another rebound because apparently he’s taken.”

I've never swallowed salad so fast.

"What?" I say a bit louder than intended and catch Morgan's eyebrows furrowing in suspicion from the corner of my eye.

Oops.

"Yeah, Callie's been hitting that. I had no idea."

"What do you mean 'hitting that'? Are they... dating?" I ask.

"Nah. They're just fucking. Or so she said, but it's obvious she wants more."

It feels like a pit the size of my fist is crawling up my throat.

"What's with the angry face, Kass? You should be happy. You didn't want me with your brother's friend. Now he's off-limits," Zoey says blatantly, missing every sign.

I'm not angry.

I'm *hurt*.

Why am I hurt?

My thoughts travel to the moment I woke up alone three days ago. Will snuck out when I was sleeping. Not that it bothers me. It would've too been risky for him to stay. My mom comes into my room every day at eight fifteen sharp. No, what rubbed me the wrong way was the text waiting on my locked screen when I rolled out of bed.

Willy Wonka: Thanks for the therapy session. You're a good friend, control freak.

I remember asking myself why the word "friend" bothered me so much. It shouldn't. It *couldn't*. Why else would he sneak into my room all worried after I came home looking sad? He was just checking on his *friend*. I dismissed the sinking feeling in my gut and texted back.

Kass: Anytime, Willy

I don't understand why I experienced these weird emotions then, and I definitely don't understand why I'm experiencing them now. The words he said to me the night we broke into Alex's backyard roar into my brain.

"I said I don't do love, control freak. I never said I don't fuck."

Of course he'd have a regular friend with benefits. I'm not sure what I expected. My phone lights up with a new text, zapping me out of Alex's hot tub and back into the school's busy cafeteria within seconds.

Speaking of the devil.

Willy Wonka: What are you doing tonight say 9ish?

I delete the conversation impulsively, loathing my own pettiness. He's been texting me like this since we "slept" together. Every day, I get a "*Good morning, control freak,*" a few messages throughout the day, and a good-night. Although our good-night usually come at 3:00 a.m. once we're done talking nonsense.

Will blamed our never-ending messages on insomnia, said it's a recurring problem with him. I claimed I couldn't sleep either when in reality my eyes were as heavy as concrete.

I've barely seen him since the night he snuck into my room, but I have art class with him last period. Isn't that great? I'll get to picture him banging Callie Cooper for a whole hour. Kissing her, twisting her hair around his fist as he...

My phone goes off again.

Willy Wonka: And you better not give me a shitty excuse like you gave Luke.

I delete his text once more.

I do feel bad about bailing on Luke. But I knew going to that date would mean leading him on, so I told him I was sick with food poisoning. That didn't stop him from continuing to text me. He even asked me out a second time. I had to tell him I was swamped with homework and I'd let him know if my schedule clears up—notice my usage of *if* instead of *when*

here. I don't know how to make it clearer that I'm not interested without rejecting him, and he's still my boss's nephew.

Twenty minutes go by.

A third text comes through.

Willy Wonka: U there :(

I'm burying my phone into my back pocket when Zoey suggests we go enjoy what's left of our lunch break. We vacate our table, following a stream of students out of the dining hall. Winter says she'll catch up with us later and walks off.



I'm treading into my art classroom an hour later. I scan the room, the nuisance in my chest sinking like a rock. Will's not here yet—emphasize on *yet*. Let's just say I've never wanted to cut class more than in this very moment.

“Okay, what's wrong?” Morgan pops up beside me.

“Nothing. Why?”

“You're mad. You've been mad since lunch. Something's going on. Spill.”

I lecture myself for being so transparent.

“I... I was just thinking about my dad,” I lie.

She buys it. “He still hasn't called?”

“Nope.”

“I'm sure he's just been busy. Or the mystery woman didn't tell him you called. There has to be a good explanation for this.”

I appreciate my best friend's efforts at salvaging what's left of my relationship with my father, but I can't make excuses for him anymore. He doesn't care.

Not about me.

Not about Kendrick.

Not about *anyone*.

“Yeah...” My smile wavers. “I’m sure he has a good reason.”

“How about he’s a pile of fuming shit who doesn’t deserve what he has?”

My pulse speeds up at the sound of his voice. I spin around, only to be met with beautiful, dark, unreadable ocean eyes.

Will’s.

He doesn’t wait for me to answer, invading my space until his mouth hovers near my ear.

“Check your texts,” he says, his breath grazing my skin.

Fuck off, shivers.

Then he walks away.

I don’t move a muscle, my brain lagging for a moment too long before I snap out of it and make eye contact with Morgan.

That’s when I see her O-shaped mouth.

Translation: I am *so* busted.

“Oh my God...” Her eyes grow two sizes. “It’s him.”

“What are you talking about?” I clear my throat, struggling to regain my composure and saunter toward the teacher’s desk to collect my project. She doesn’t miss a beat, shadowing my every move.

“He’s the dude you’ve been texting when you think we’re not looking,” she shrieks.

For crying out loud, how does she see *everything*?

“What dude?” I play dumb.

“What kind of moron do you take me for? I thought maybe it was Luke, but then this. It all makes sense. You’re into this Will guy. *That’s* why you were pissed at lunch!” You’d think she’s about to pat her own shoulder for putting the pieces together.

I pretend I didn't hear her so that I don't have to refute her crazy claims and dig through the jumble of projects on Ms. Janet's desk. Maybe if I don't acknowledge what she just said, it will be like it never happened. I refuse to consider, for even a fragment of a second, that she might be right.

That I could be dense enough to have a crush on Will.

It's one thing to be attracted to him—to have a natural, physical reaction to a sinfully hot guy—but a crush?

A whole damn crush?

Nope. Sorry. Not happening. Try again later.

That's Will.

You don't fall for a guy like Will.

Guys like Will never catch you...

I practically race to our table, cutting Detective Morgan's investigation short, but because my bad luck is on a roll, Will calls me out the second I sit down.

"You okay?" is all he says.

He knows something's off.

"Sure. Why wouldn't I be?" I never meet his eyes.

He frowns at my tone but doesn't insist. Luke joins us two minutes later. He greets me with a smile, which I return to the best of my "sorry I stood you up" ability.

Morgan, Luke, and I make small talk for the rest of the class. Will doesn't comment once, depriving us from his usual snarky remarks, which makes for a heavy, awkward period.

"So, you're feeling better?" Luke asks five minutes before class ends.

I stare question marks at him.

"You had food poisoning, didn't you?"

"Oh, right." I'm reminded of my lame excuse. "Yes, I'm much better, thank you."

Will not-so-discreetly scoffs.

I glower at him while Morgan glowers at *me*, confused as to when on earth I got food poisoning. Makes sense. She has no idea Luke asked me out. It just didn't come up.

"So... Does that mean you're going to the pool party tomorrow night?" Luke continues.

"There's a party?" I ask.

"Yeah, it's at Natasha's place. Everybody's going."

My gaze travels to Will, whose attention doesn't budge from his project whatsoever. His careless behavior sends my mind to a place I don't like.

A place I can't escape.

I picture him moving in and out of Callie, see her writhing beneath him, clawing at his back, and wonder if he slept with her recently. Probably. Maybe even the day he came over and slept in my bed. Why wouldn't he? He's single.

But so am I.

"I mean, will *you* be there?" I offer Luke a seductive smile, nearly wincing at the sour taste this bad decision leaves on my tongue.

That finally seems to be enough for Will's head to jerk up.

"Wouldn't miss it." Luke nods.

"So... you'll save me a dance, then?"

Why am I like this?

"Oh, I can save you a lot more than that." Luke's flirtatious response only fuels the disaster that is this conversation. I can feel Morgan's eyes burning into my skull, hear her thinking, "*Why are you leading him on?*"

But I can't answer her.

Because I'm wondering the same thing.

The bell rings and I make my way out of the classroom with Morgan on my tail. I beg her to accompany me to this party, tell her she owes it to herself to have at least *one* night out during her high school years, to which she replies with a

reluctant “I’ll think about it.” The second I lose her into the crowd, a tall silhouette materializes in my blind spot.

“What the fuck was that?”

I yelp in surprise when a strong body cages me into the tight corner couples use to make out near the girls’ bathroom. Will stands tall before me, eyes flaring with... something. Anger? Hard to tell. For all I know, I’m just seeing what I want to see.

“Hey, Willy. What’s up?” I falter, my confidence crumbling.

He cuts to the chase. “I thought you said you weren’t into him.”

“Oh, Luke? Yeah, I know. But I changed my mind. You’re right. I should give him a chance. Hey, you should bring a date, too. I’m sure Callie’s available.”

His jaw drops.

What’s wrong, Willy? Was I not supposed to know about that?

I’m long gone before he can even think of getting a word in. I push my way through the crowd, forbidding myself from enjoying this as much as I am.

Winter is nearly done packing her stuff by the time I reach our locker and shove my books into my backpack. We make small talk, steering toward the exit together. I also try to convince her to go to the pool party with me since I know Zoey will most likely bail on me the minute we get there, and Morgan, well... Morgan hates people.

Winter absentmindedly agrees, her gaze combing through the halls. Haze hasn’t been at school much lately. That’s his thing. Disappearing whenever he feels like it. Something tells me he’s to blame for my cousin’s half-assed answers.

Winter tells me Will is giving her a ride home tonight, and I have to stop myself from asking why she’s randomly riding with him instead of me. What trouble has their street fight mess lured them into now?

We part ways a few steps out of the building. I'm working tonight, and the last thing this crap day needs is a warning from Jenny for being late. I unlock my car door, my phone pinging with a text just as I'm dropping into the passenger seat.

It's Will.

Willy Wonka: Thanks for the advice. Callie said yes. I'll see you at the party.

Twelve

Kassidy

Kass: Hey. Is it true you're banging Callie Cooper?

Sitting on the edge of Zoey's unmade bed, I huff out a laugh at my own text and practically assault the Delete button. *Like I'd ever have the balls to send him that.* Granted it'd probably make things a lot easier—in the beginning, at least. Then it'd dig up secrets better left buried, shine light on questions better left in the dark.

Asking him would mean I give a damn.

A bit more than I should.

Shit... is Morgan right?

Do I like Will?

I didn't message him back after he texted me he'd found himself a hot date yesterday. Felt weird. Turns out I got used to our 3:00 a.m. banter. I hate to admit it, but...

The little fucker grew on me.

"Perfect. See you there." Zoey trails back into the room, hanging up her phone and securing it inside her bikini top.

"Who was that?" Morgan interrupts her wrestling with a curling iron to ask.

Yes, Morgan decided to come to the pool party, although she skipped the swimsuit part. Something about her cousins telling her she'd end up marrying books when they came to visit. She said one party couldn't hurt.

Still waiting for the hidden cameras.

"Callie," Zoey says, checking out her outfit one last time. Our ride should be here any minute.

I fidget with the short, sleeveless white dress I threw over my aqua bikini, tugging it up my cleavage for the fifth time as though I'm hoping it'll magically turn into a hoodie.

"She's making her move tonight," Zoey elaborates, swiping red lipstick across her mouth and smacking her lips together.

"What move?" I question.

"What do you think? Hottie Blondie asked her out to a place that is *not* the back seat of his car. She's freaking out. Thinks he's finally interested in dating her."

Morgan's accusatory eyes find me, the message they hold crystal clear. *Whose fault is that?* they ask. And she's right. I shouldn't have tried to make him jealous. All it did was come back to bite me in the ass. If Callie shoots her shot tonight and scores, it's on me.

I bite my tongue in an effort not to bury Zoey under a million questions and unlock my phone with the swipe of a finger.

I have one unread message.

My hopes sink faster than the freaking *Titanic* at the sender.

Winter.

She was supposed to meet us at Zoey's but texted me she'll be riding with the boys instead. Zoey informs us that the Uber will be here ten minutes later.

"Wait." Zoey shrieks on her way to the door and tries to run back to the kitchen in her five-inch heels. "We need shots."

We catch up to her, and I chuckle at Morgan's curious expression. She almost seems excited.

Girl, just wait.

Zoey pours three shots of vodka into small plastic cups and hands us our first bad choice of the evening.

"To an amazing night." She holds up her cup.

Amazing, huh?

We'll see about that.

We throw the shots back, Zoey's liquid courage burning my throat the entire way down, but I'm too busy watching Morgan's face to care. Disgust. Pure and utter disgust. She gags, her eyes watering as she gawks at us, clearly thinking, "What the hell is wrong with you people? You mean to tell me you drink this... *on purpose?*"

Zoey and I laugh at her reaction for five minutes before dashing out of the large apartment building and squeezing inside our Uber.



The house is packed. And I mean the kind of packed where you can't get around without wearing people's drinks. I had no intention of committing to the "pool" party aspect of this night, but some dimwit from the football team thought his beer would look better on my clothes. Had no choice but to toss my soaked dress and settle for my bikini top. So glad I decided to wear shorts just in case.

Morgan spent the whole drive here swearing she'd never drink again. Until she found herself a sugary, juice-tasting drink that sent her promises of sobriety right down the drain.

I've been warning her that these colorful "juice" drinks are still filled with a shit ton of alcohol, only to be told, "Kass, stop mothering me." I can't help it. I remember how *my* first time drinking ended all too well.

Hint: my head in the toilet.

Rounded up around the lousy game the varsity team likes to call the "shot roulette," I watch Zoey roll the dice that'll determine the kind of booze and number of shots she has to drink. She gets a four.

Meaning four shots of Fireball.

Her pleading eyes fly to mine.

“Fine,” I give in, and she laughs, passing me two of the four shots. We tip the shots back, and I almost puke—the usual. Next, Zoey drags us to the fridge to stash away her bottles of tequila. There are coolers full of beers scattered over the house, but Zoey’s only ever liked the strong stuff.

As for me, I’d like to still have a liver tomorrow.

“That’s the good shit.” She clutches the full bottle she’ll most likely carry around all night against her chest.

My phone lights up with a text from my cousin.

Winter: I’m here.

Two simple words.

How are they enough to make my stomach churn? I stiffen up without meaning to, triple-checking the door every five seconds. If Winter’s here, so is Will. She was riding with the guys.

“Want some?” Zoey shoves the bottle into my face.

I’m about to decline but...

Then I see him.

Him and his infuriating smile, tousled, dirty-blond hair, fit body, and white unbuttoned short-sleeved shirt. Worst part is, I don’t even get a chance to appreciate how insanely hot he looks. Because there’s something wrong with his arm.

Something weird glued to his bicep.

Something.

Someone...

Callie.

Wearing an itty-bitty yellow bikini top and jean shorts, she laughs at something Will said. Her bleached-silver, curled hair—she changes hair color every month—flows down her tanned stomach, all the way to her pierced belly button. I can’t even lie. The girl looks like a supermodel.

I see Will’s eyes fall to her cleavage for a split second when she arches her back to draw attention to her gigantic tits

—okay, maybe they're not *gigantic*, but they're much bigger than mine.

Yep. That'll do it.

“Give me that.” I rip the bottle from Zoey's hand, chugging it as she cheers me on.

Alex comes in after them, smirking as he elbows Will and shoots him a look I can hear from here: *Someone's getting pussy tonight*. I know it, Alex knows it. Hell, the whole party probably knows it. They might as well get a room now.

I spot Winter behind them and wave at her. She smiles, making her way over just as Zoey notices Callie's arrival and takes off to greet her. So, it took her a whole five minutes to ditch us. Not bad. That's longer than last time.

“Kass, Luke's staring at you,” Morgan sniggers ten minutes later.

She and Winter proceed to do the one thing you *don't* want your friends to do in a situation like this: turn around and stare. I don't bother seeing for myself, careful not to return Luke's attention. I already feel crappy enough about leading him on as it is.

“He's totally checking you out,” Winter agrees.

“He asked me out two days ago,” I admit.

“What'd you say?” my cousin asks.

“No.”

“What? Why?” Morgan is outraged. I get it. She first thought I had a thing for Will, but I never confirmed her suspicions. Then she saw me flirt with Luke, and it got her second-guessing everything. She must think I'm crazy to turn him down when I was acting so interested mere hours ago.

“Just not looking to date right now.” I choke on my lie.

I don't think that's true anymore.

And that's precisely what scares me.

“I have to go to the bathroom.” Winter downs her drink and takes off.

“Oh, okay, see you lat...”

She’s already gone.

Morgan’s eyes burn with intent. Crap, she’s totally going to grill me over this whole Luke thing.

“Found ’em.” A familiar voice stops her, piercing through the deafening music, and I glance behind me to see Zoey approaching with Callie.

Great.

Just great.

The one time Zoey decides *not* to ditch us, she has to invite Will’s fuck buddy to tag along.

“What did I miss?” Zoey extends one arm around my neck for a hug. Her tequila bottle, which was full a second ago, is now almost empty. *How?*

“Hey, girls.” Callie smiles, revealing white, aligned teeth.

Damn it, she seems nice.

Harmless, even.

It’s not her fault. Don’t be a bitch, Kass.

I knock some sense into myself and smile back.

“Hey, where’s your boy?” Zoey asks Callie, who briefly scans the crowd and shrugs.

“Don’t know. Lost him somewhere around the beer pong table.” She takes a sip out of a red cup.

“So... is he your boyfriend?” Morgan asks bluntly.

I glare at her, the plotting grin tugging at her lips giving her away. She’s obviously asking for me.

“Oh, no.” Callie shakes her head. “We’re just... you know.”

I grab Zoey’s booze bottle out of her hands for a second sip.

“Or at least, we were.”

My eyes drift back to her.

“It lasted for a while, but... he stopped talking to me a few weeks ago. Don’t know why. He won’t even answer my texts.”

The pressure in my chest decreases by a thousand.

“I thought maybe he’d found someone new, but then... he invited me here tonight, so that’s got to count for something, right?” she says, a painfully clear shred of hope flashing in her eyes.

Shit, I might’ve overreacted a bit.

“Do you *want* to date him?” Morgan glimpses at me from the corner of her eye. She’s enjoying this way too much.

“I wish.” Callie chews on her bottom lip, trapped in hot, sweaty Will memories I’m sure. “I mean, who wouldn’t? Those eyes. That smile.” She inches forward as if to tell us a secret, “And between us girls, he’s a fucking god in bed. His dick is huge and a bit curved, so it hits all the right sp—”

Okayyy, I’m not nearly drunk enough for this.

Telling Morgan I’m going to grab another drink, I edge my way through the crowd faster than Callie started oversharing. I can’t believe it. Now I get to hear about how good Will is in the sack, too?

Not cool, life.

Sucking in a breath, I reach for a beer in the stacked cooler on the kitchen table.

“I didn’t take you for a beer girl.”

Speaking of the devil.

I turn to find Will staring at me, a hint of a smirk on his face. I drink him in. His cut body, his right hand tucked in his pocket, his left clenching a Jell-O shot. It’s a no-brainer—he looks like my next mistake.

One I’ve been waiting my whole life to make.

I snap out of it. “I didn’t take you for a Jell-O shot guy.”

“Yeah, well...” He surprises me by stepping closer. “That just goes to show maybe you should get to know me better.”

Flustered by the sudden proximity, I move away, but the back of my thighs bump against the kitchen table, halting my escape. The smug bastard continues to lean in, cutting off my air supply and enjoying it. I’ve got *zilch* to go on when it comes to this guy’s intentions, so I do the only thing I can: swallow hard and wait for him to make a move—*any* move.

Finally, he does.

He drops his red Jell-O shot on the table behind me, “accidentally” grazing my arm in the process, and pulls back. Like nothing happened. Like he wasn’t *this* close to my face seconds ago. That’s his thing. Giving me just enough to make me wonder. Just enough to make me doubt my sanity.

He leaves behind enough bread crumbs to keep me chasing.

But never enough to be caught.

Am I crazy? Did I imagine it all?

Beats me.

Only... this time is different.

There’s a look in his eyes—a knowing look. It unveils the truth, exposes him for what he is. A cruel tempter. He’s doing this on purpose. He *likes* seeing me shudder.

The question is why.

“Think I know you pretty well already, Willy.” I collect myself. “You know, unless you go around telling your life story to everyone.”

My reference to the biography he graced me with the night he snuck into my room blows him out of the water. I’m right and he knows it. I’d be surprised if he told many people about what happened to his dad. I’m not even sure Kendrick knows.

“Where are your girls?” he deflects.

“With yours.” I motion to Callie, Morgan, and Zoey laughing by the door.

His eyes remain locked on me.

“My what?” He raises an eyebrow.

“Isn’t she your date?” I remind him.

“Oh, right... Yeah, I guess she is.” He looks like he doesn’t give a rat’s ass.

Eager to take the edge off, I begin fumbling with my beer cap, hoping it’s a twist-off—it’s not. Will scoffs, snatching the beer out of my hands and popping the cap in no time.

Breaking news: it *is* a twist-off.

I’m just weak as shit.

“Got enough alcohol in you to tell me why you’re mad at me yet?” He hands me my beer.

His bluntness stuns me.

Am I really that obvious?

“I—”

“There you are.”

Callie materializes out of nowhere, enveloping Will’s waist with her arms and clinging to his side. He doesn’t hug her back, but... he also doesn’t push her off.

“We’re playing Spill It or Drink It. Come on.” Callie releases him from her embrace, tugging on his arm, but he resists.

“Later.” His voice is as dry as it gets. “We’re in the middle of somethi—”

“Hey.” A masculine voice reaches my ear.

What seems to be annoyance crosses Will’s features. I whip my head to find the reason for his mood swing is none other than Luke.

“Hey, Luke.” I manage a weak smile.

What’s with the whole planet interrupting us tonight?

“Come on, they’re waiting.” Callie tugs on Will’s arm again, bored with our conversation, but he barely

acknowledges her.

“Been looking for you. You still owe me that dance, you know.” Luke smiles.

I open my mouth to ans—

“Kass, you coming?” Will cuts in.

I look up at him.

“We have a game to play,” he presses.

Taken aback, I stammer, “I-I don’t know the rules.”

“Rule, *singular*. You answer the question or take a shot. The end,” Callie explains before her eyes flash with a naughty idea. Pushing to her tiptoes, she whispers in Will’s ear, “Or... we could go play a game of our own upstairs.”

Hell no.

“I’ll play if you play.” My hand lands on Luke’s forearm, reigniting the distant hope in his eyes.

As his smile grows, my self-respect shrinks.

“Sure, why not?” Luke agrees.

I lock eyes with a tight-jawed Will just as Callie’s dragging him out to the living room. I shamle behind, unable to shake the feeling that I just started a dangerous, whole other type of game.

And the scary part?

I don’t think I can win.



Sitting on the floor, I prop my head back against Natasha’s—or whoever the owner of this place is—washing machine and wonder how I ended up here. Drinking tequila right out of the bottle in a stranger’s laundry room. Not that I’m complaining. The living room was crawling with sweaty party animals. The boys stumbled upon this closed space wandering around the house.

“I think I’m going to sit this one out.” Morgan rises to her feet.

“Everything okay?” I stop her.

“I’m fine. Just need to go to the bathroom. I’ll be back.”

I ask her around twenty more times if she’s feeling okay before letting her go halfheartedly. Speaking of bathrooms, Winter must’ve discovered a secret door leading to another dimension in there because she never came back.

Ironically, that’s when my phone lights up with a text from her.

Winter: Went home. Don’t worry about me.

I take in my surroundings. Zoey’s sitting on the dryer, feet hanging in the air, while Luke sits by my side. Across from us, squashed between a drying rack and a folding station, are Will and Callie. We’re all pretty wrecked from passing the tequila bottle around for thirty minutes.

“Are we playing this game or what?” Zoey’s complaint swings us into action.

The game starts off with Zoey asking us the stupidest questions. Have you ever had sex in public? What’s the wildest thing you’ve ever done? Think of a corny question—*any* corny question—they’ve asked it. A few rounds fly by, but I can’t bring myself to pay attention, worried sick about Morgan. In a fleeting, unwanted moment of weakness, I glance at Will.

Sitting with one leg flat on the ground and the other braced against his chest, he seems bored out of his mind—can’t blame him. I flush when he lifts his eyes to mine, catching me staring.

He smirks.

Busted.

Callie decides now is a good time to dump her leg over Will’s and nuzzle her cheek on his shoulder. He doesn’t push her away, but he also doesn’t return her affection, which almost soothes the burning jealousy in my chest.

Key word: *almost*.

I act without thinking, sagging against Luke's chest, who welcomes my body in a heartbeat. I regret it instantly, but the way Will's eyes flare keeps me in place. I think I see his jaw twitch for a second.

Or maybe I'm just drunk and crazy.

Five minutes later, I'm this close to ditching them to go check on Morgan. This isn't me. I'm leading on a perfectly nice boy and for what? For the guy with another girl on his lap?

Just as I'm about to get up, someone calls on me.

Will.

"Kass." He declares me his next victim.

I blink at him, but I can't find a sliver of kindness in his eyes.

"What?"

"Have you ever used someone to make somebody else jealous?"

Silence befalls our circle.

Did he just...

Is he accusing me?

I mean, he does have a point.

Shut up, inner Kass.

"Spill it or drink it," he nags me.

Fucker.

I bring the shot to my lips, throwing it back in seconds.

"Okay. Hottie Blondie." Zoey claims her turn.

He scoffs. "Name's Will."

She ignores him. "Have you ever fantasized about anyone in this circle?"

A hopeful smile tugging at her lips, Callie eagerly awaits his reply. I should excuse myself. Go find Morgan. I really don't need to listen to Will talk about how bangable Callie is—I mean, *duh*, he chose her as his friend with benefits for a reason—but I can't move a muscle. All I can do is sit there and brace myself.

“Yes.” It takes him forever to admit it.

Satisfied, Callie runs her manicured hand down his lap—let's be honest, it's not his lap she's going for—but he doesn't pay her much mind. In fact, he doesn't even look at her.

No, the person he's looking at...

Is me.

It becomes that much harder to breathe. He won't flinch. Not for one second. The craziest part is, I have no idea if that thing in his gaze is hate...

Or desire.

Intimidated, I split the eye contact, only to realize the others have already moved on to the next question. I can't seriously be the only one noticing this tension. *Jesus*. It isn't nearly long enough before Zoey's turn rolls back around. I know she's got a plan in mind when she shoots Callie a mischievous look.

What now?

“Will, who's the person you fantasized about in this circle?”

I can't blame her. She's only trying to help her friend out. So why do I feel betrayed?

“Is that even a question?” Callie snorts confidently.

Again, Will's eyes find me.

For fuck's sake, he's got to stop doing that. He's going to give me a heart attack.

Then, because my life is a bad joke, the exact moment Will looks at me is the moment Luke decides to grow some balls

and make a move, sliding his hand up my bare thigh. Will sees it, his glare shadowing Luke's movement.

“Hello?” Zoey urges. “Answers?”

Callie chuckles. “How's that for an answer?”

She doesn't waste a single second, gripping Will's face with both hands and smashing their mouths together for a slow, heated kiss. He doesn't kiss her back.

Until... *he does.*

She adds tongue.

He lets her.

That's how I know I have to fucking go. Because Morgan was right. My brain can deny it, but the ache in my chest doesn't lie.

It's more than physical.

I like him.

I like Will.

And I wish I was the one kissing him right now.

“I'm going to go check on Morgan,” I tell Zoey and rush out of the laundry room without so much as a goodbye. By the time Luke calls my name, I've already rejoined the raging party and lost myself into the crowd.

I triple text Morgan, check the first-floor bathrooms to no avail, and run into Alex, who tells me he found her puking her guts out in the upstairs bathroom. Anxiety and guilt grip me. I should've checked on her ages ago.

I knock once. “Morgan? Are you okay? It's me.”

“Come in,” the faintest of voices replies.

Zoey's words crawl back into my brain as I burst into the bathroom to find Morgan half-passed-out on the toilet seat.

Amazing night, huh?

Amazing, my ass.



“I’ll be right back with some water,” I assure Morgan, heading out of the vacant bedroom I transferred her into. Lying on the king bed in a star position, she rambles on about how she’ll never drink again. Funny enough, in contrast to the many drunk girls I’ve heard say that at parties in the past, I actually believe her.

I texted Zoey that Morgan was sick and it was time to call it a night over twenty minutes ago. Took her ten to answer, but finally, she did, promising she’d come and get us once the Uber is here.

Slipping inside the bathroom where I found Morgan, I wince at my reflection in the mirror. I threw my disgusting alcohol-steeped dress back on. The stain isn’t that bad, but the smell... Safe to say this dress met its expiration date.

Twisting the tap open, I fill up a glass I swiped from the kitchen and curse under my breath when the door creaks open behind me. I set the glass down and spin on my heels, ready to tell some random, drunk guy to get lost.

Except it’s not some random guy.

It’s Will.

Red-eyed, drunk as hell, cockier-than-ever Will. Looking me up and down, he doesn’t say a word, walks in—

And slams the door.

Thirteen

Kassidy

“**W**hat do you want?” I say, images of Callie eating his face off still fresh in my mind. Boiling on the inside, I divert my attention to my reflection, waiting for him to take a hint and leave.

He doesn't.

“Just here to talk to my friend. Or is that not allowed?”

I only hear one word.

Friend.

He stalks toward me, testing my resolve. *Just ignore him, Kass.* My body may not give him the attention he seeks, but my heart does. My heart is giving him attention all right. It's pounding like a goddamn idiot right now.

“I'm leaving. You should go back to the party,” I mutter.

That's his snapping point.

“Okay. Just say it.”

His outburst catches me off guard.

I spin. “Say what?”

“Whatever it is that's got you acting so weird. You're mad at me. Why?”

Shit.

“I'm not mad.” Even *I* don't believe me.

“Cut the crap. You've been cold as shit to me. You can't even look at me. Just fucking say it, Kass.”

Deep down, I know exactly what the true answer to his question is: I'm not mad at him. I'm mad at myself. No, I'm

furios at myself for catching feelings for the guy who has none.

But am I going to tell him that?

Heck no.

Instead, I inhale a deep breath, opting for the response I don't mean. It's my only chance, the only way I'll come out of this unscathed.

"I... I think we should stop talking."

"What?" He frowns, his tone a mix of anger and confusion.

"You know, texting, being *friends*. We should stop."

"But..." His voice softens. "Why?"

"I just think it's for the best." I attempt to clear the pit in my throat, only to have it expand in size.

I need to get out of this bathroom.

Now.

With my head hanging low, I round him, moving toward the door, but he stops me, snatching my wrist and jerking me to his exposed chest. His body is hard, burning to the touch. I want to push him off, run before his proximity turns my brain into goo, but I can't move a muscle, reminiscing about the good old days where I could breathe properly.

"Where is this coming from?" He searches my eyes.

"Look, I-I really have to go." I try to wriggle my way out of his grasp, but he tugs me back.

"Wait, please. Whatever I did, I'm... I'm sorry."

The guilt dripping from every word feels like a stab to the gut. He really *is* sorry, but it doesn't change the fact that I can't be around him anymore. I can't be his friend.

These feelings are a ticking time bomb.

And I have no intention of being here when it goes off.

“Can we just... do this some other time?” I give the tiled floor my sole focus.

“Kass, fuck, just... Look at me,” he begs, raising the tip of my chin with his index. Our eyes lock despite my best efforts. “Talk to me.”

Why is he making this so hard?

“You seemed mad when we were playing Zoey’s dumb game, too,” he has the audacity to add.

I’m surprised you even noticed with Callie’s tongue down your throat.

“Callie’s probably wondering where you are. Why don’t you go find her?” I retrieve my wrist, adding as much space as possible to the gap between us.

“Because I don’t fucking want to,” he snarls.

Hearing him say that makes my heart *way* too happy.

“Then why did you invite her here?”

“Why did you invite Luke?” He gives me a taste of my own medicine. Technically, I *didn’t* invite Luke, but I’m way too drunk to bother correcting him.

“What’s it to you?” I step dangerously close to him, my anger overriding my common sense. “Why are you here, Will? What do you want from me?”

A beat of silence.

“Honestly?” It should be a question, but he says it as a warning. A low “*You have no idea what you’re asking for*” warning.

“No, fucking lie to me!”

He doesn’t speak for a while, staring down my face as if he’s debating on something. The alcohol makes his blue eyes pop, tugging at my weaknesses. Disarming me completely.

Waiting for his reply feels like hanging off a goddamn cliff.

“Okay.” He exhales after a few seconds.

I pause.

“Okay?” I repeat.

“I’ll lie to you.”

Wait, *what?*

I almost yelp when he ends the distance between us with one stride, only stopping once he’s got me backed up against the bathroom counter. I can’t speak, the words dissolving on my tongue.

So. Freaking. Close.

“I don’t want to do *this*,” he rasps.

A jolt of electricity tears through me when he grips my waist with one hand and jerks my body flush to his.

What is he doing?

“Or this.” His available hand slowly climbs up my bare arm, unleashing shivers all over my body. I think he can feel my goose bumps because he smirks, sweeping my hair over my shoulder and exposing my neck.

“Will, you’re... you’re drunk.” My voice trembles.

God, the effect this guy has on me.

“I don’t want to do *this*.” He completely disregards me, cupping my face into his palm and skimming his finger across my cheek. But it’s when he runs his thumb along my bottom lip that I know...

I’m not getting out of this bathroom with my heart intact.

“I didn’t want it to be you earlier.”

Internal scream.

“And I am not fucking dying to lift you up on that counter and kiss you right now,” he says roughly, inches away from my mouth, so close I can smell the liquor on his breath. “That enough lies for you, control freak?”

Right then, I *really* stop breathing. Not because of what he just said. But because of the move he makes. The move that’s going to change everything.

He grabs the back of my neck and crashes his mouth against mine. Before my body's even had the chance to cue in my brain on what's happening, I'm kissing him back, repaying every touch, every sensation with interest. Our kisses start soft, slow, harmless, but the second he sucks my lower lip between his teeth, all bets are off.

His tongue slides into my mouth, and I'm pretty sure if we were in a cartoon, he'd see my heart dramatically jumping out of my chest. My fingers wander into his hair, fisting it, pulling it, while his travel from my shoulders, to my arms, to my hips. Just like that, we go from testing the waters to letting it drown us.

You are so going to get hurt, my voice of reason screams.

Shut up and enjoy the ride, my heart counters.

We sway back and forth, our mouths moving in sync like two pieces of a puzzle finally falling back together. It's perfect. And it terrifies me. Because a first kiss will usually tell you if two people are a fit, show you whether you can see a relationship going somewhere. And, right now, I can see myself doing *way* more than making out with him in a bathroom.

For lack of a better term, *I'm fucked*.

Banding his hands around the back of my thighs, he plants me on the counter without a warning. I grasp at his collar, yearning for the high I've been denying myself. He wedges his way in between my legs, strong arms closing around me as I allow my fingers to slip inside his unbuttoned shirt. I explore his body, memorizing every curve, every muscle. I'm not entirely sure I'm in control of my own actions when my hand drops to his belt. It lasts a second, if that, but his reaction is instant.

He grunts into my mouth.

Oh.

I jerk my hands away, but it's too late.

Shit just got real.

I can't muffle a moan when he grips my thigh, slowly bunching up the hem of my dress and squeezing my leg to the point of leaving a mark.

Kass, what the hell are you doing? This is supposed to be a kiss. Not porn with clothes on.

I'm overwhelmed by how much I want him. sirens blare in my head, begging me to hit the brakes before we crash and burn. My instincts say if I don't stop this, he won't either. If I don't move away, none of us will and we might end up...

"Kass, get your ass downstairs. The Uber is her—"

Will and I lurch away from each other so fast that I accidentally bump the back of my head against the mirror. Zoey stands in the doorway, mouth hanging, eyes as big as the mistake we just made.

"Oh, Lord, I'm sorry. I didn't... I had no... I'm just going to..." She staggers out the door.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

Then comes the moment I dreaded the most. The sobering moment where we fall back down to earth and let it sink in. Silent, we stare at each other, both chasing our breath. This has to be the first time I've *ever* seen Will speechless.

He's shocked.

Well, that makes two of us.

In a moment of panic, I do the only thing I can think of: push to my feet, swing the door open, and bolt. I check the room where I left Morgan, only to find it empty. Hurrying down the stairs, I spot Zoey near the entrance and drag her out of the house to catch our Uber, where she tells me Morgan is already passed out.

I plop down into the passenger seat, attempting to wrap my mind around what just happened. Unable to believe that Will just kissed me.

That I kissed Will.

That *we* kissed.

In the bathroom.

Hard.

“Look who finally took my advice,” Zoey sneers from the back seat as we speed off into the night.

Fourteen

Kassidy

Someone once told me the first moment of waking up after a night out is the worst. That it all comes down to ten seconds. The first five are made of blissful oblivion. For a short, brief memory lapse, you don't remember anything, including the fact that your liver took a massive blow.

Then come the slightly less pleasant part. The "Holy fuck. My head hurts," followed by the "Shit, that's right. I got hammered last night," and last, but not least, the "Crap, I have to barf." Zoey and I are currently experiencing the latest. Except *my* phase three comes with an epic dose of regret.

We've agreed: last night was a bad idea.

The shots, the drinking games?

Bad idea.

The hot-as-fuck make-out session in the bathroom with my brother's best friend?

An even worse idea.

Zoey's been bugging me about it since the moment we woke up—my bad for inviting her to spend the night. One thing is for sure: I am definitely *not* going to forget kissing William Martins on her watch.

"Are we ever going to talk about what the hell I saw last night?" she hounds me.

I nestle my head under my pillow, releasing a heavy sigh. How exactly do you go about answering a question you're asking yourself? On one hand, Will said so much. On the other, he didn't say squat. He didn't once mention if he had feelings for me. Or what this kiss would mean.

Or did he?

Any event that occurred *before* he caged me against the bathroom counter and kissed the breath out of me is a bit of a blur. All I remember vividly are his hands all over my body, his lips on mine, the way he—

“Kass, for fuck’s sake, I’m dying over here.” Zoey pulls me out of a daze. “What was that?”

“Well, you see, a kiss consists of two people locking lips —”

“Shut up.” She laughs. “You know what I mean.”

I pry my head out from under my pillow. “I don’t know, okay? It just happened.”

“Bullshit. A guy like that doesn’t just walk up to a girl like you and makes out with her.”

I can’t help taking offence to her remark.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean that you’re... *you*. You’re a good, respectable girl, Kass. He wouldn’t have made a move like that without you giving him some sort of green light. You’re not like Callie, bless her soul.”

“Ouch.” I’m upset for her. “So much for being her friend?”

“Oh, no, I’m not being mean. She proudly calls herself a ho.”

Well, then.

“Hey, don’t change the subject. What’s up with you two?”

“I’m not sure... We’ve been texting a lot recently. Hanging out. I guess we sort of became friends.”

Zoey snorts. “Honey, friends don’t almost fuck on the bathroom counter.”

“It was just a kiss.” I flush. Last night was euphoric. It was the most alive I’ve felt in a long time.

“Please, he was *this* close to bending you over the counter and taking you right there.”

“Zo!” I scold her.

She sticks her hands up. “Nothing but the truth, baby.”

“Shouldn’t you be mad?” I realize. “You spent the whole night trying to match him with Callie.”

“Are you insane? Don’t get me wrong, I like Callie. But you’re my ride or die. If I’d known about this, I would’ve been Team Kass in a heartbeat.”

Zoey might be a handful sometimes, but then... she says things like this. Makes you feel supported, loved. And *that’s* why it’s so hard for me to believe Will’s claims about her throwing me under the bus if it came down to me or her. She has flaws—we all do—but she also has these redeeming qualities, and for that one, short moment, when the good side comes out, it’s so easy to forget all that she’s done.

“I feel bad for Callie. She had such high hopes, and he still ended up in that bathroom with me,” I admit.

“Meh, I wouldn’t worry about it. He was just her flavor of the week. She’ll have found herself a new plaything by Monday.”

I wish I could believe her, but Callie’s dreamy eyes as she talked about Will last night suggest she most likely won’t go down without a fight.

“What do you think it means?” Zoey rolls to her side, propping her chin into her palm as she stares at me curiously. “Are you two like dating now?”

“Hell if I know,” I say, only acknowledging my lie when the words trickle out of my mouth. Unless Will turned into Prince Charming overnight, I *do* know. “I’m guessing it was just a drunken kiss. Until he tells me otherwise, that’s how I’ll look at it.”

Zoey proceeds to catch me up on what happened after I went searching for Morgan, telling me that as soon as I left, Will pushed Callie away and stormed off. No explanation.

“Water.” Zoey groans mid-boy-talk. “I need water. My mouth feels like the fucking desert.”

Four complaints later, I decide to put her out of her misery and go grab us cold water bottles out of the fridge.

“Can you get painkillers, too?” She gives me the puppy eyes.

“Coming right up.”

“Thanks, you’re the beesssst,” she slurs.

She’s clearly still drunk, and if I’m being honest, I am, too. The difference is, she doesn’t have to be at work in two hours. I do. I need to sober up. Tiptoeing down the stairs not to wake Winter, I almost slip on water and grip the railing for balance.

Who the hell put water all over the stairs?

I think back to the party gossips Zoey dumped on us in the Uber. Something about Bianca whining that she couldn’t find Haze anywhere after he broke off their “special friends” relationship. He told her it wouldn’t be right to keep sleeping with her knowing that she has feelings for him.

I know, that was... awfully decent of him. He must’ve gotten punched in the head too hard at the last fight.

I also happen to know Winter disappeared not even an hour into the party. Coincidence? I think not. My guess is they left together. Still doesn’t explain the water, but it’s the best I’ve got. Man, I hope she didn’t do anything stupid.

Says the girl who made out with her brother’s best friend.

Rubbing my eyes, I pad into the kitchen, instantly shivering at the icy temperature. It’s colder than Blake’s heart in here. I catch a glimpse of myself in the hall mirror on my way to the thermostat and cringe.

I look like a pile of shit.

And that’s putting it lightly.

I’m so glad no one can see me right n—

“Morning, control freak.”

You have got to be kidding me.

I shriek in surprise, swiveling around and spotting Will by the back door. He looks like he's on his way out, a black gym bag dangling off his shoulder. My brother probably sent him to pick up more of his stuff.

Because yes, Kendrick's still staying with Blake to keep from my mother that he got his ass whooped. Only heaven knows what crazy excuse he fed my mom for her to be okay with this. I saw him from afar at the party. His face is looking better every day. He should be able to come home soon—not that I miss living with this human headache.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I clutch my racing heart.

When Will's eyes rake over my body, I wish I could develop superpowers and go *invisible woman* on his ass. I'm wearing biker shorts, no bra, and the oldest, most hideous T-shirt I own.

At first, he seems as shocked as I am.

Until his gaze drops to my chest.

And he smirks.

Don't tell me you can see my—

Yep. You can see my nipples.

Note to self: *Life still hates you.*

Will chews on his bottom lip, failing to conceal his grin. “Rude. I don't even get a hi?”

I snatch the gray cardigan my mom hung by the door, flinging it on faster than a speeding bullet, but it's too late. Will's seen more than enough, and he's got his joke ready to go.

“Or maybe your friends want to say hi?”

This is it.

I'm crawling under a rock and never coming out.

“Why are you here?” I fold my arms over my chest as if to be *extra* certain he can't see through the fabric.

“Kendrick sent me to get some of his stuff for training.” He points to his gym bag. We’ve talked about me being aware of their secret before, yet I often forget about Will’s involvement in all this. That my crush also fucks people up for fun—Way to add to the already long list of reasons why I shouldn’t feel this way about him.

He speaks before I can answer, tucking one hand into his sweatpants pocket. “Not too hungover?”

“I’m fine. You?” Ironically, the pounding in my head gets five times worse when I say that.

“Can barely remember half of my night, but I’ll live.” He ruffles through his messy hair with his available hand.

Wait.

“Yeah, that tends to happen when you drink double your body weight in tequila.” I slap on a weak smile, debating on asking him about his memory loss. *To hell with it.* “How much do you remember exactly?”

“First half of my night at best.” He shrugs. “I know we played some lame-ass game with shots. Then everything is kind of a blur.”

My heart sinks.

“Oh.” I nod, failing to keep my feelings beneath the surface. Without another word, Will makes his way over to me, his steps slow but determined. My pulse throbs in anticipation. He only stops once the space between us is so small I catch a whiff of his cologne.

He nudges a piece of my hair that swerved in front of my eye behind my ear, and I stiffen, just as affected, if not more, by his touch sober as I was drunk as a skunk.

“Why? You remember something I don’t?” He gazes down at me, trying to read into the scowl I can’t wipe off my face.

“No, nothing.” The disappointment in my croaky voice is so impossibly obvious I wish I could suck the words back in and give this another shot.

“You sure?” He arches an eyebrow.

“Positive.”

He nods, turns away, and retraces his steps to the back door. Right. He was just on his way out. I watch him twist the knob, despising my stupid, flawless memory for remembering what he won't. A split second before he's out of the door, he shoulder checks me and says,

“Funny. One would think you'd remember my hands up your dress.”

My lips part.

He doesn't give me a chance to pull myself together, enjoying every bit of the shock swimming in my gaze.

Then he's gone.



“I'm so sorry I'm late. Traffic was crazy.” I burst into the empty pet store five minutes after the beginning of my shift. I had to drive Zoey back to her place, and truthfully, I wasn't looking forward to an eight-hour shift alone with Jenny. It's not that I don't like her, but I can't seem to get past her professional, guarded personality.

I've tried connecting with her, the way I've connected with Ethan, in vain. The two of us are worlds apart, which is weird considering the relatively small age gap between us. Behind the counter, Jenny is adding up the register cash. She doesn't acknowledge my presence. She looks... sad.

Something's wrong, no doubt.

“Jenny?” I request her attention.

She looks up.

“Oh, hey” is all she says.

Not a single comment about me being late for the first time. She doesn't crack a smile or initiate her go-to polite chitchat. Trying not to look too far into this, I drop by the break room to dump my belongings and return to the

storefront. Ten minutes of awkward silence later, I succumb to curiosity. The store is completely empty. Might as well confront her and spare myself a mind-numbingly boring eight hours.

“Jenny, what’s wrong?”

Color spills from her face. She knows she’s busted.

“That obvious, huh?” she breathes.

“I knew from the moment I walked in.”

“I’m going to put my happy face back on in a minute, I promise. I just need a second.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” I question.

“No, it’s fine.”

“Look, you can either talk about it or let it ruin the rest of your day.” I recycle my dad’s line. That’s what he used to say to get me to spill the beans as a kid. Taught me it was better to let it out, deal with your issues, and move on.

She pauses, hesitant to open up.

“So... there’s this guy,” she gives in.

She goes on to tell me she met him a year back. Some eye candy she was instantly attracted to. The feeling was mutual, but not only was he a taken man, he also had a kid with his partner. He kept coming in and out of her life, playing with her heart every time he felt like it, and while she knew he was wrong for her, she couldn’t stay away. I nod my head along to her story. She explains her family immediately disapproved of her dating him. Viewed her as a homewrecker. He’d constantly dangle promises of telling his girlfriend about them in front of her eyes but never did.

Until a while ago, when the guy’s girlfriend found out on her own. Jenny tells me she feels this relationship has been destructive and wonders if she made the right decision by staying with him.

She doesn’t elaborate after that, and I spend the first two hours of my shift comforting her. I end up making her smile

again, which awakes an unexpected sense of pride in me. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe Jenny and I *can* grow to develop a real complicity after all.

Will

“What the hell is up with you today, man? You still hungover or something?” Alex observes as he steps back into the ring, chugging the rest of his water bottle.

“I don’t know. Just a little out of it, I guess.” I wipe the blood dripping off my mouth with the back of my hand, and Alex grins. I have to admit he got me good.

“I don’t mind. I can beat your ass all day,” he mocks, but we both know he can’t pull off *cocky*. Alex doesn’t have a single bad bone in his body.

“Yeah. Try that again. See what happens.”

Alex is a good fighter, but I’ve been fighting longer than he has. I usually go easy on him, but today, my head’s not in it. It’s pounding like a little bitch, courtesy of yesterday’s party.

“Can’t really blame you. You looked *gone* last night.”

“You have no idea,” I mutter under my breath.

“Get any sleep at all? Or did Callie keep you up all night?”

Blurred, distorted memories wash over me. All I could see were shapes as Callie dragged my ass into a cab less than five minutes after Kass left me stranded with a boner.

“You saw us leave, huh?”

“The whole party saw you leave. Piece of advice, if you’re going to keep banging Callie Cooper, wrap it before you tap it. The girl’s been known to give dudes baby scares.”

I scoff. “Noted.”

I could tell him he’s got it all wrong. That even though Callie brought me back to her place, palming me through my jeans the second I stepped foot through the door, nothing happened.

But I won’t.

And I especially won't tell him that it didn't do shit for me. That *she* didn't do shit for me. That I jerked her hands away before she could get my pants down and bolted. Frankly, I don't think she'll ever speak to me again. Not that I care. I've got more important things to worry about.

Like why didn't she do it for me?

Is my dick broken?

Nah, it can't be broken, dumbfuck. Not when it twitched in your pants when you saw Kass without a bra.

Fuck, I'm thinking about it now.

Yeah, definitely not broken.

"Where's Kendrick?" I change the topic, glancing around the old, abandoned gym we use to train whenever we can't work out in Alex's attic.

"On his way over. He's going to try, but no promises."

I'm not the least bit surprised. Kendrick took such a savage beating that he had to slow down. We've been trying to get him back into the game unsuccessfully. We can't push him too far for now, but we need our leader back. The timing was terrible, to top it all off. The fight Haze Adams challenged him to is coming up quickly. He better have his shit together by then. His cousin Winter's future depends on it.

"Hey, you haven't heard the news." Alex captures my attention. "Blake's getting back together with Kass."

What the fuck?

"Sorry, he *wants* to. Told me he missed that ass last night."

Again, *what the fuck?*

"Woah. Everything okay, man?" Alex flinches.

"Yeah, why?"

"You looked like you wanted to murder someone for a second there."

I did?

I must still be wasted.

“Sorry.” I rub my eyes. “Just running on three hours of sleep.”

“Anyway, he’s going to be disappointed because I’m not covering for them anymore,” Alex resumes. “They barely got away with it the first time. Kendrick would rip his balls off if he found out Blake deflowered his baby sister.”

Guilt crushes me, because yes, he would kill him. Just like he would kill *me* for kissing her in the fucking bathroom last night. What the hell was I thinking? But most of all, why did I want to do *so* much more to her right there on that counter?

Granted, Kendrick ripping Blake’s balls off would not be the worst thing in the world. It’d save me the trouble of doing it myself. I remember how cocky he was when he bragged about taking Kass’s virginity. I didn’t give a flying fuck at the time, but now? I feel like he disrespected my friend. Like I have to defend her honor or some shit.

Sleep. You need sleep.

The texts, the night in her bed, the kiss... It’s all Blake’s fault. Blake and his blabbermouth. Sure, I’ve always known she was my type. Perky tits, gorgeous, tan. Don’t even get me started on those big blue eyes. Checked her out whenever I came over—especially in summer. Thank God for bikini season—but that’s as far as it went.

Then Blake had to go and pique my interest. Everything he told me about her sounded like a challenge. The way she struggled to open up, obsessed over all she couldn’t control, yet happily played doormat to her sociopath, self-absorbed best friend.

She strangely reminded me of me.

When I dropped by Blake’s place and found him burying his dick into another girl, he told me he’d dumped Kass over text the night before. I caved, told myself she was fair game, and gave in to my curiosity.

Started talking to her out of fucking nowhere.

Just to see how much of it was true.

All of it.

All of it's true.

I had no intention of bonding with her. But then again, I also had no intention of shoving my hands up her dress last night, and look how that turned out.

“I’m going to bail. I’ll put in the extra hours tomorrow.” I collect my T-shirt off the chair in the corner of the room and slip it over my head.

“Okay.” Alex eyes me suspiciously. Understandably so. I never bail on training.

You know what else I never do, Alex?

Say no to a good fuck, and last night, I did. Something’s off. And I need to fix it. I check my phone on my way out of the gym.

Guess I was wrong about Callie never speaking to me again.

Callie: Hey sexy. I have the house to myself. Come over for round two? ;)

But that’s not the only text I have.

I double-check the second sender.

Kass.

Kass: Just finished my shift and my shitty car broke down. Can you give me a ride?

Attached below is the address of the place where she works. Conflicted, I slip inside my car, read both texts over and over again, and sprint down the street in a roar.

Fifteen

Kassidy

When I receive a text from Morgan saying, “*Be there in ten,*” I sigh in relief, messaging her back “*Thanksss. I love you*” and hastening out of the pet store to wait for her.

That’s when I see it.

The name on the top of my screen.

Willy Wonka.

Wait, I texted *Will*?

How could I not realize I selected his name? In my defense, he and Morgan have been competing for the spot of the last person I texted lately.

Kass: Shit. Sorry. Wrong person. Forget it. I’ll manage.

I expect his reply to consist of a careless “Okay”—if he even replies at all—but instead...

Willy Wonka: Too late. I’m coming to get you.

My pulse quickens.

Kass: That was meant for Morgan. Don’t worry about it. I’m sure she can help me out.

A reply lights up my screen right away.

Willy Wonka: I don’t care. Wait for me.

A smile tugs at the corner of my lips.

That easy?

I doubt he had anything better to do if he said yes, but still. Scenarios of what he was doing when I texted him arise in my mind. He was probably working out. He seemed on his way to the gym this morning.

My joy quickly gives way to racking anxiety. I wasn't expecting to see him twice in one day. You mean I'll have to deal with my annoying crush *again*?

Conveniently, I found myself without a ride right as my mom was about to start her shift at the hospital. She couldn't bail just to give her daughter a ride, so she hit up a friend of hers who owns an auto repair shop. He towed my car thirty minutes ago with the promise of getting it back to me in two days tops.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm beginning to think Will was messing with me. Then I see his car pull up in the distance. He comes to a slow stop in front of the store, and I swallow hard, making my way over.

I open the door, slide into the passenger seat, and drink him in. He's wearing a black hoodie and his go-to gym sweats. He looks a bit sweaty—but hot sweaty—which tells me I was spot-on: he was training. He smiles at the sight of me, quickly averting his focus to the road.

"Hey," he says, his voice a bit strained. He looks exhausted.

"Hey." I fasten my seat belt. "Thanks for coming. You really didn't have to."

"What? And miss your heartfelt declaration? How else would I know how much you love me?" he teases, knocking the gear into drive.

"Shut up, I thought you were Morgan." I flush.

"Whatever you say, control freak." He speeds out of the parking lot, gaze shifting between the road and me for a few seconds. When we reach a red light, he straight up stares, eyeing me up and down and spurring my self-conscious side to life. I changed into clean jeans and a long-sleeved V-neck black shirt before work.

"What you looking at, creep?"

"Your shirt." He picks at the fabric of my sleeve.

"What?" I search my clothes for a stain of some sort.

“Where’d your friends go?”

I immediately connect the dots.

The fucker is talking about my nipples, isn't he?

“Oh, for the love of God.” I roll my eyes, and he bursts out laughing at his own joke. “I’ll jump out of this car, I swear.”

He lifts a hand to his chest, nurturing an imaginary wound. “You’re mean. I liked you better when you thought I was Morgan.”

I can’t help myself.

“I liked you better last night.”

His eyes flare.

Then we almost swerve off the fucking road—I wish I was kidding. Will doesn’t swing the wheel back into place a second too soon. He was *not* expecting that. It’s my turn to die laughing.

“That’s for pretending not to remember this morning.”

He lets out the fakest laugh I’ve ever heard and clears his throat, careful not to look my way again. I can’t help noticing how tightly his fingers are squeezing the steering wheel. The tension between us has shifted. It was playful, light, and now? It’s back to thick and heavy.

Maybe I should’ve kept my mouth shut.

Desperate for a topic change, I say, “I hope you didn’t have plans.”

“I could’ve.” He shrugs. “But I chose you.”

If that isn't cute, I don't know what is.

“Thanks.”

“You already said that,” he mocks, but he’s not nearly as confident as before.

We lock eyes at a stop sign.

“I meant it.”

He responds with a faint smile. That single look holds more meaning than his words ever could. It answers my question, informing me that everything is back to normal.

Yes, we may have been all over each other less than twenty-four hours ago, but I'm willing to bet Will's never going to bring it up again. His reaction to my blunt recollection made that clear.

He most likely won't give me an explanation. Because to him, there's nothing else to say. It happened and that's that. Doesn't mean he wants us to date. Nor does it mean that he's ready to change his beliefs about relationships. That's not how he works. The thought twists a knife into my stomach.

We're back to just being friends. Friends who made out.

Hard.

And that's okay...

For now.



Kass: Help. Help. Help.

Willy Wonka: What?

Kass: I managed to sneak away to the bathroom before dessert. I'm going to need you to call me in 5 minutes like we talked about.

Willy Wonka: About that. I think I underestimated the value of my services as a date crasher.

Kass: Willll!

Willy Wonka: Think about it. I have to stop what I'm doing in five minutes entirely for your benefit. What do I get out of it?

Kass: For fuck's sake. What do you want?

Willy Wonka: Nothing for now but I'll get back to you.

Kass: I hate you so much right now.

Willy Wonka: You can always drop my services and go back to your date.

Kass: He's been talking about his autographed baseballs collection for two hours. TWO HOURS.

Willy Wonka: Aww. He's just trying to impress you.

Kass: And failing. Are you in or out?

Willy Wonka: If I do this for you, you owe me a favor. Whenever, however and wherever I want.

Kass: How about a blowjob with that?

Willy Wonka: I mean... if you're offering

Remind me again why I'm friends with this guy?

Kass: That's it. I'm blocking your number.

Willy Wonka: Talk to you in 5.

Annoyed, I stomp out of the bathroom stall I've been holed up in for seven minutes now. What the hell was I thinking going on a date with some guy I met at work? He was cute, and when he swung by the counter to ask me out, I thought, "What's the harm?" But now, I'm calling my reasons into question.

Why did I say yes?

To forget Will? To convince myself I don't have a crush on him? That I never did? Didn't I learn my lesson stringing Luke along?

It's been a few days since he kissed me. As suspected, things went right back to normal. If I didn't know any better, I'd say that night was all in my head and nothing ever happened. We've been texting constantly, which doesn't exactly make getting over my dumb crush easier. I've never texted anyone as much as I'm texting this guy in my entire life. You'd think it's a good sign. And it would be.

With literally *any* guy on earth but Will.

I'm starting to put together a clear picture of who he is. To him, shit like that doesn't mean anything. Or if it does, he

doesn't let himself look too far into it. All he knows is he likes talking to me.

So he does.

I've seen him flirt with a few girls in the halls, too, a reality-packed reminder that our daily convos don't make us an item. I tell myself I don't care—going on a date with someone else was supposed to solidify that—but it's still a pinch to the heart whenever I see them. Will leaned back against a locker, flaunting his panty-dropper smile while his girl of the week giggles.

He told me during one of our 3:00 a.m. talks that his flirting doesn't actually translate to sex and he's just bored, but a part of me wonders if he's trying to distract himself. Perhaps lining up candidates to replace Callie, whom he is definitely *not* sleeping with anymore. Zoey said Callie's practically growing spiderwebs down there.

I scoff, thinking back to fourteen-year-old Kass looking up sad quotes on the internet and sharing them on social media.

One in particular comes to mind.

I thought I was special until I realized you talk to everybody like that.

William Martins summed up in one sentence, folks.

Shambling toward the table, I squeeze my phone and pray Will is going to hold up his end of the bargain. My awful date's name is Simon: he's good-looking, sure, but so full of himself I've wanted to bash my head against the table since he opened his mouth.

He hasn't once asked me a question about myself or shown interest in who I am. Pretty sure I could be an axe murderer and he wouldn't care as long as I listen to him talk.

As I'm closing in on him from behind, I see *You've just matched with Caitlin* flash onto his phone screen. Tinder? Seriously? Like this date wasn't enough of a disaster already.

"Hey, sorry it took so long." I take my seat.

“No problem, sexy. You want to get out of here?” He packs his phone into his back pocket.

Ew.

“Yeah. I’m exhausted, and I have to get up early tomorrow. Can you take me home?” I am *never* letting a guy pick me up at my house ever again. If I’d shown up with my car, I could’ve left, and believe me, I would’ve.

As though I’ve just offered him to fuck me right there on the table, he smirks. “Absolutely, babe.”

I curse his inability to take a hint.

The waitress is fast to make us pay.

Correction: make *me* pay.

Because he forgot his wallet at home.

Never. Dating. Again.

My phone goes off the second we exit the restaurant.

Will.

He’s right on time, yet a minute too late. The waitress was quicker than expected. I send the call to voicemail and shove my phone into my pocket, telling myself I’ll explain later. The entire drive, Simon tries to grab my thigh, make eye contact with me, ask me forward, sexual-based questions. I barely reply, my legs flush against the car door. I look desperate to get away from him. How does he *not* see that?

Or is it that he doesn’t care?

Endless minutes later, he drops me off at my house.

“Thanks.” I don’t spare him a look, hurrying out of the car.

He gets out, too.

Shit.

My phone won’t stop buzzing in my pocket, but I ignore it. Must be Morgan wanting to know all about my date. Simon walks me to my door at a painfully slow pace. His body language suggests he doesn’t want to part ways.

“Thanks for tonight. Goodbye.” I fumble with my keys, but before I can unlock the door, he grabs my arm, tugging me to his chest.

“What’s the rush?” He inches closer, allowing me to feel the warmth of his breath on my cheek. I shiver in disgust. It’s not that he looks bad. More that he’s so rotten on the inside it completely pulverizes any trace of his beauty.

“Like I said, I work early tomorrow. I should be asleep right now.” My voice quivers. *Get a grip.*

“That’s too bad. I was hoping we could do something other than sleep.” Dismissing my rejection, he grabs the back of my neck for a forceful kiss. I manage to whip my head just in time.

“Stop!” I try to shove him off, but he barely staggers. Fear paralyzes me. Kendrick’s not home—he’s still hiding from my mom in Blake’s man cave—Winter seems to be out, and my mom is at work. I’m all alone.

“You fucking tease. You’ve been making eyes at me the whole night, and now you don’t want it? Two seconds ago, you were practically begging me to fuck you.”

Balls smashing in 3, 2, 1...

“How fucking blind do you have to be?”

Simon leaps three steps away from me, caught in the act. I could cry when I glance over his shoulder and see Will slamming his car door. I have no idea why he’s here, but I couldn’t care less if I tried. He’s here. That’s all that matters.

“Who’s this clown?” Simon frowns.

“Someone who’s going to smash your face to the fucking concrete if you don’t get back in your car in the next five seconds,” Will says in a chilling, calm voice, the only indicator of his anger his clenched, blood-drained fists.

I watch as Simon considers his options: fight or flee. He has the good sense to opt for the latter and walk away. Wise choice. Not only does Will have a good four inches on him,

he's also buffer, bearing broader shoulders. He would murder him.

"You're fucking ugly anyway," Simon spits, trailing to his car.

That's what does it.

Will snaps. "The fuck did you just say to her?"

Uh-oh.

Will's strides toward Simon before I can blink.

"Will, no!" I screech just as Will's cocking his fist back and launching it square into Simon's jaw, who plummets to the ground like dead weight.

"Apologize," Will grits out, hoisting Simon up by the collar of his branded shirt. That's when it ceases to be about defending my honor. When it becomes about something else.

Something more.

Pure rage emanates off him.

I have *never* seen Will lose his temper like this.

"Or what?" Simon confirms he has a death wish.

There goes another punch. Will doesn't once let go of him, watching blood trickle down Simon's forehead.

"Last chance, rapist," Will hisses.

"Fuck you." Simon spits out blood.

"Get over yourself and do it!" I shout at the top of my lungs.

Will puts up another fist, and Simon's entire body tenses before he squeezes his eyes shut and yells, "Okay! Okay! Fuck. I'm sorry." He holds his hands up in surrender.

Will halts himself midswing, his fist drooping by his side. Can't blame Simon for backing down. I almost shit my pants for him.

"Leave." Will seethes inches away from Simon's face. "And lose her fucking number." He releases Simon's collar

with a strong push that sends him swaying. Simon stumbles to his car and disappears down the street in a deafening roar.

“What the hell was that?” I blurt out.

“It’s called saving your ass. You’re welcome.” Will spins around, steering toward his car.

“Bullshit.” I spring into his way, acting as a roadblock. “You could’ve just roughened him up a bit. It looked personal.”

“Are you serious? He tried to force himself on you. What else was I going to do? Let it happen *again*?”

Again?

Did I miss the first time?

“What do you think would’ve happened if I hadn’t been there, huh?” he continues. “You think he would’ve stopped at a kiss? You should be happy I showed up when I did.”

“Why did you even show up in the first place?” I ask.

“Doesn’t matter.” He aims for his car again.

“It does to me!” I slap my palms to his torso, desperate to slow him down. Only then does he stop, the quick rising of his chest dropping as he looks at me.

He avoids my gaze, his jaw tight as he admits, “You didn’t answer your phone. I got worried.”

My heart clenches in my chest.

Crap, stupid feelings are still there.

He has no idea how much harder he makes it for me when he says things like that.

“Thank you. I have no idea what I would’ve done if you hadn’t been there,” I say truthfully, and his features soften.

“I’ll always be there, Kass. You know I got your back,” he says, a whisper of emotion in his voice. It’s not just noise—he *means* it. The thought makes me want to hug the life out of him. “What happened? Why didn’t you pick up?”

“We were already on our way out when you called.”

“Next time you tell me what’s going on, you hear me?” he scolds. “No, you know what? Don’t allow next time to happen again. Period.”

I only want next time to be with you.

“I won’t,” I agree, watching his shoulders unwind.

The dust settles around us. Driving his hands deep into his pockets, he looks at me in silence.

“So…” He shifts from side to side.

“So…” I repeat.

“I’m going to go.” He motions to his car, turning to leave.

The words slip out of my mouth.

“Or you could stay.”

He stops dead in his tracks. Then glances at me over his shoulder, debating.

“W-We could watch a movie or just… talk,” I stammer in a weak attempt to cover up the fact that I basically asked him to spend the night in my bed again.

He stares at me intently for long, dragging seconds.

“Okay.”



“Are you ready to tell me what really happened out there?” I shut my laptop and roll to my side to see Will half passed out next to me. The movie was crap, but we stuck it out. My guess is we preferred the shitty movie over acknowledging what happened earlier. We needed a second.

Translation: Will needed a second.

“You’re not going to let it go, are you?” he exhales.

“Nope.”

He scoffs. “Didn’t think so.”

Will stretches, flipping on his back and guiding one arm under his head.

“I’ve never seen you so...”

“Angry?” he finishes.

I nod.

“What can I say? Douchebags being abusive to women piss me off. Sue me.”

There’s more. So much more he’s not telling me, I know it. I wonder how long he’s been doing this. Locking his soul up tight and throwing away the key. Does Kendrick, his supposed best friend, know more than I do?

Does *anyone* know more?

“You said you couldn’t let it happen *again*.”

“So? I spoke too fast. Didn’t mean anything.”

“But—”

“Kass.” He scowls at me, his tone warning me to let it go.

“Fine.” I concede defeat. “This dress is hell. I’m going to change.” I push off my bed, picking clothes out of my dresser and scurrying toward my bathroom.

I pause two steps inside.

I have to know.

“Are you... sleeping with me?” I choke on the words, my voice cracking like a little boy’s.

Instantly, a cocky smile spreads across his face.

Shit.

“T-That came out wrong.”

“I think it came out perfectly.” He scans my body in such a shameless way that tingles creep up my spine. He’s driving me completely insane. One second I’m certain he’s just as attracted to me as I am to him, and the next, I feel knee-deep into the friend zone.

I lock myself into the bathroom, trading my dress for leggings and a T-shirt—one that doesn't give Will a first-class view of my nipples—and walk out.

I find Will in the exact same position I left him.

Except that now... he's shirtless.

On my bed.

"What? Not what you had in mind?" He cocks an eyebrow.

Lord, help me.

"Or did I read that wrong?" he teases, rising off my bed and stalking toward me.

"You know damn well you read it wrong." I swallow hard. "I just meant that you could... grab some of Kendrick's clothes to be more comfortable or something. He has a bunch in his room." I trip over my words.

As soon as Kendrick's name is uttered, the smirk is slapped off Will's lips. He tumbles backward, eyes boring into mine like I just smacked him across the face with a wake-up call.

And I'm right there with him.

Kendrick.

My brother.

This is Will.

His best friend.

"I'm not spending the night. I... I think I should go, actually. I have this thing tomorrow." He rubs at the back of his neck, picking his T-shirt off my bed and dressing himself.

"Oh, okay, I-I'll see you later."

Will forces a smile before booking it down the stairs. The front door slams in the distance, and I plop down onto my bed.

I'm not going to lie, I'm mad that he left.

But mostly, I'm eager to find out what would've happened...

If he *hadn't*.

Sixteen

Kassidy

Two months earlier

Texting Morgan as Blake drives, I roll down my window to catch a breeze of fresh air. Today is Friday and one of the hottest, most humid days we've had in ages. Blake and I haven't said a word to each other since I climbed inside his car. Not that I'm surprised. It's been like this for weeks now. Weirdest part is, we're not mad at each other.

We just don't have much to say.

"How was your day?" I ask, peeling my thighs off Blake's sticky leather seats. That's how hot it is outside.

"Okay," Blake says, neglecting to return the question. Is the spark between us gone? Was it ever there to begin with? I'm not entirely sure. I've never had a boyfriend before. All I know is everything feels predictable now.

That's as far as our conversation goes. A few miles of silence later, he hits the brakes, dropping me off two blocks away from my house in case Kendrick's home.

"Thanks for the ride." I climb out of the car.

"Sure" is all he says before speeding away. No *I love you* or *I'll call you later*. He's not what one would call an expressive boyfriend. Rarely talks about his feelings.

I make my way to my house, flinching under the scorching sun. I only need one look at the cars lined up in the lot to know something's wrong. My dad's home. But his Mercedes is still running, its trunk wide open and brimming with stuff. He just came back from a weeklong business trip. He's probably unpacking—yeah, that must be it.

Approaching the door, I pluck my keys out of my pocket but quickly realize I'm not going to need them when my

brother swings the door open and scampers out of the house. He's mad. No, he's furious.

But why?

"Don't," he spits.

"What's going on?" I ask, the fear settling in my stomach.

"Kass, trust me. Do yourself a favor and don't go in there," he advises, shuddering with rage, and walks around me to get to his car. I watch as he reverses out of the driveway recklessly.

Deciding not to heed his warning, I push the door open to find him standing in the kitchen.

My dad.

Filling up a suitcase he threw on the table. Countless black garbage bags cover the kitchen tiles.

"Dad? What's going on?"

Sobs cut through the air.

I'd recognize her cries amongst millions.

They're my mom's.

"Where's Mom?" I glance around the room nervously.

Exasperated, my dad points to the bathroom.

"Mom!" I run to the closed door, knocking repeatedly. "Mom, are you okay? What's wrong?"

"Kass, baby, please..." *Sniffle*. "Please just go..." *Sniffle*. "Go to Morgan's for the night."

"What? Why? Let me in!" I wrestle with the locked knob.

"Kassidy, do as I say. I'll come and get you, I promise. I love you, baby, but you have to go, okay?" She can barely finish her sentence from crying too hard.

I blink back my own tears.

Nothing, *nothing*, is worse than seeing or hearing your mother suffer.

“Mom, stop. You’re scaring me.” I pound against the door

I hear the water running. She’s shutting me up. She can’t deal with me right now. Confused, I run back to the kitchen where my dad is standing in his thousand-dollar suit, prowling around the room and gathering all of his belongings.

“Are you going somewhere?”

“Kassidy, I really can’t do this right now. I’m sorry.” He zips up the suitcase, picks it up along with the last trash bags on the floor, and passes me by without so much as a look.

“What? Dad, please. Why are you leaving?” Panic consumes me. I follow closely behind him, helpless as he dumps the last of the trash bags into his trunk and slams it shut. He reaches for his car door. Desperate, I run to him, grasping at his suit and yanking him back.

“Dad! *Please*,” I cry out.

He sighs, finally acknowledging my existence and staring me dead in the eyes to say, “Your mom and I are getting a divorce, Kassidy.”

I blink back tears.

“What? No. You... You can’t leave.” I feel so helpless, desperately looking for the right thing to say—if it even exists. “You guys are strong. You’ll figure it out. Don’t do this.” Just like that, I revert back into the five-year-old girl begging her father not to leave her at school.

“I have to. Your mom doesn’t want me here. Plus, I have a job offer in another town.”

I’m not going to pretend I didn’t see it coming, because the truth is, my parents haven’t been fine for a while, always arguing and yelling when they think we can’t hear them. Blame it on the stupid business trips my dad always takes. Still, it’s not like my dad to give up. He worked so hard to get this job as a college dean. Why give it up now?

“What happened? What could be *so bad* that you have to move out of the house and quit your job?” I shout. I need them

to give me *something*. He turns his back on me, sliding inside his car. The opened window allows for one last false promise.

“I need time to figure things out. I’ll come back when I can be a better father to you and your brother.”

He drives until his car is nothing but a distant memory.



Now

Zoey: Girl, I’m sorry but I have to tell you. Callie just texted me. Will’s blowing up her phone. He wants to see her today.

Reading the text on my screen for the thousandth time, I try and trick my brain into believing that this is a misunderstanding. That there’s a rational explanation for this. One that doesn’t include Will deciding to pick up where he left off.

There’s no way he’s looking to fuck Callie again, right? I fight and fight, but the truth fights harder.

Ripppppppp.

That’s the sound of my heart cracking open.

Way to ruin my day off.

Kass: Thanks for telling me.

To think I believed we were going somewhere yesterday. I thought when he said he drove to my house because he was worried about me that maybe...

God, I’m so stupid.

If he’d been able to pay Callie a visit yesterday, I’m sure he would’ve. Acting on impulse, I pull up a text conversation I haven’t opened in a long time.

Luke, the recipient reads.

Kass: Hey. We never got to go on that date.

Ten minutes later, my phone pings with a reply.

Luke: How's tonight 8pm sound?



By the time I'm all prepped up and ready to go to Morgan's for the day, it's past eleven. Jogging down the stairs, I check my phone, still fuming at the thought of Zoey's message. *Fuck you, William Martins. I'm done wasting my time.*

Turning the corner, I freeze at my mom's voice and stretch my neck to see her roaming the kitchen, phone pressed to her ear. She doesn't seem in the best mood, and by the looks of it, whoever's on the other end of that call is to blame.

She keeps her voice down. "No, that's enough, Nick. You need to stop harassing Kendrick."

Nick.

She's talking to my dad?

"Do you have any idea how hard it's been to hide your calls? If your son wants to talk to you, he will."

Wait, has my father been trying to contact us?

"No, I won't talk to him for you. You've already said your piece. If he wants to meet you at Dale's, he will."

Dale's.

My mind runs a thousand miles. Where have I heard that name before?

"And if you knew your son at all, you'd know he always gets hungry early. Seven's way too late."

I discern my dad's muffled, barely audible voice but can't make out what he's saying.

"Goodbye, Nick," she snaps, hanging up on him.

I immediately google Dale's. The results trigger my memory, showcasing a restaurant downtown. A very fancy one at that. The kind of fancy where a glass of water costs fifty bucks. Shoving my phone into my back pocket, I pad into the

kitchen, hugging my mom good morning and telling her I'm going to Morgan's. And I am. For the majority of the day, at least. But I know where I'll be at seven tonight...



Pulling into an empty spot at the restaurant and killing the engine, I peek at the time on my locked phone screen—6:59—and click on Will's unanswered messages. He's been texting me throughout the day, asking me what I'm doing.

Well, I sure know what he's doing.

Or who.

I was in heaven when my mom called to tell me I could go pick up my car from the shop early. Let's just say I wasn't in the mood to crash my father's dinner by bus. When seven strikes, I get out of my car and smooth down my clothes, collecting the little courage I have left with a spoon.

Breathe, Kass. You can do it.

I march toward the entrance with my head held high. I may look confident, but on the inside, I'm barely holding myself together. My outfit earns me a full-body scan from the ginger woman at the front desk. She raises her eyebrow, clearly thinking "Are you lost?" Can't lie, she does have a point. I am definitely *not* dressed for this place.

"Hi, do you have a reservation?" she asks.

"I'm here to meet someone." I hope to hell Kendrick didn't change his mind and decide to show up at the last minute. I want my dad alone for this. "Nicholas Mitchell?"

Her eyes light up. "Of course. Follow me."

I do just that, my pulse thundering in my neck. I only realize what I'm about to do when the waitress tells me, "Just a little further."

I'm going to see him.

I'm about to see my dad for the first time in months and confront him. In a few minutes, I'll know what truly happened that day. My fears multiply when I spot him in a wide leather booth at the back of the restaurant. He's got his eyes locked onto his phone. He hasn't changed one bit.

I frown when a woman comes up behind him, all smiles, and slides into his booth. My jaw crashes to the ground as a scene worthy of my worst nightmares plays out in front of my eyes.

No, it can't be.

My hand flies to my mouth when she pulls on his face, plastering her mouth to his for a long kiss.

Finally, they pull away.

And my father sees me.

Panic twists his features. But he's not nearly as freaked-out as I am. Because the woman previously eating my father's face is not just any woman.

It's Jenny.

Yes, Jenny, as in my twenty-two-year-old boss. Jenny as in the girl who cried in my arms about her boyfriend who has a kid. The same Jenny who told me she couldn't stay away and had sex with him in his wife's bed when the family house was empty. Jenny... is the reason my parents got a divorce.

I want to puke, scream, grab a plate off a waiter's tray, and throw it in his face Frisbee-style. I want to *un*have a dad. It all goes down in less than five seconds, but it feels much longer—like an excruciating eternity. Jenny takes notice of my father's ghostly expression and follows his stare.

To me.

If my dad's face is worth a thousand dollars, Jenny's is worth a million.

“Kassidy, honey, let me explain.” My dad falters.

He has no idea how bad this is. He doesn't know Jenny is my coworker. He doesn't know she gave me explicit details

about riding him in my mother's bed and how much the forbidden aspect of it turned her on.

I think I might be sick right here on their expensive carpet.

“What's going on here?” Jenny questions, seeming genuinely clueless.

My dad exhales. “Jenny, this is my daughter—”

“Don't bother,” I cut him off. “She knows my name, don't you, Jenny?”

“You two know each other?” my dad gathers.

That's when I snap.

“Yes, we know each other, Dad. Want to know how? She's my fucking boss.”

My outburst is quick to capture the attention of surrounding customers. Good thing I couldn't care less.

“He's the guy you told me about? My dad?” I yell at Jenny, who won't even look at me, tears glimmering in her eyes.

Then it hits me.

The most probable explanation of how this all started. I always wondered why he quit his job as a college dean.

“Oh my God. Is she...” I almost gag. “Is she one of your students?”

Gasps run across the room.

My father looks mortified, which is how I know that I'm spot-on. *This* is why he quit. Because he didn't want to get caught. It isn't lost on me that Jenny altered her story, careful to exclude the dean/student details of the relationship, and said he only had one kid to make herself look better.

“How could you? Cheat on mom with a student? Dad, she could be my sister. *My fucking sister.*” My voice splits.

“Kassidy, that's enough!” he barks.

“Is she the reason you've been gone for months? Why you gave up on us?”

It's my father's turn to snap.

"I didn't! I didn't give up on you. I've been calling your brother. Why do you think I'm here? I want him to meet her. The love of my life."

Tears burn my eyelids. I've always suspected Kendrick was his favorite, but hearing him say it to my face still hurts like hell.

"Why not me?" I choke.

"Because you're judgmental, Kassidy. You always have been. Just like your mother."

That's the dagger in the heart I can't take. I begin to bawl, right there in the middle of a restaurant full of strangers.

"Don't worry. I'm done looking at you." I wipe my face with my sleeve. "I never want to see you again."

I barge out of the building, hyperventilating. As if this day wasn't shitty enough, I bump into someone entering the restaurant on my way out.

"Kass?"

I look up, barely recognizing my big brother through the tears. Looks like he changed his mind, after all.

"You knew?" I yell so loud he jumps.

Guilt fills his eyes. "Kass, please, calm down." He goes for my arm, but I fling it out of reach.

"Did you fucking know, yes or no?" I belt.

He gives in. "Yes, of course I knew. I'm the one who told mom."

This is why he was running out that day. Why he was so pissed. Why he and my mom were whispering for weeks after Dad left.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I try to punch him, but he dodges every blow—downside of attacking a trained fighter.

"I wanted to, Kass, I swear, but he was always your hero. I... I couldn't do that to you. I wanted him to tell you himself."

You have to believe me. I only came here to tell him to fuck off and stop calling me. I don't want to meet his toddler girlfriend."

"You mean my boss?" I huff out a bitter laugh.

"What?" His eyes grow. "No way?"

"Yep. My store manager is the one fucking dear old Dad. Isn't the world small?" I speed walk to my car, Kendrick on my heels.

"Kass, wait. Let me take you home, you can't drive like this. You're too emotional."

I ignore him, dropping into my passenger seat and locking the doors before he can drag my ass out like the overprotective brother he is. I reverse out of my parking spot, Kendrick's words haunting me as I drive away.

He was your hero.

He's right.

He *was* my hero.

Until the mask came off and I realized heroes are just villains successfully hiding their sins.



Will

"I knew you'd come back." Callie's chuckle rubs me the wrong way. When did her laugh become so fucking annoying? Lying on her bed, I watch as she locks her bedroom door, stripping off her dress and revealing dark red lingerie.

She looks at me with that pout that used to turn me on. See anything wrong with that sentence? *Used to*. That's what's wrong. God, I'm so fucking bored. Bored with the way she moves, the way her tits bounce as she crawls to me on all fours. Where's the adrenaline? Where's the itch to toss her panties to the side and jam myself inside her? I want more.

I want my dick to strain in need.

I want something that's not happening right now. Kneeling by my side, she grips me through my pants, leaning forward for a kiss I deny her so fast even I'm surprised.

"No kissing," I growl, reminding her of my only rule.

"Why not?" She pouts some more. "We did before."

She's right.

I did kiss her.

Once.

Long ago.

I remember that day vividly. I'd driven to Callie's place after mentioning my dad to my mom for the first time in five years. I wanted my mom to drop the act, to finally admit to me that he was nothing but a sick man. A poor excuse for a father, no more, no less.

Instead, she'd fed me more lies about how he planned on doubling the cash he'd stolen and come back to us that night. After all this time, she still couldn't tell me the fucking truth. I was miserable, wrecked, angry at the world, and... in desperate need of a distraction.

I can still picture it: Callie writhing beneath me, legs over her head as I pounded into her. Seconds before I shot my load, she asked what we were doing, what this meant. Her exact words: "Do you think we'll ever be more?"

So, I kissed her.

I slammed my mouth to hers to shut her up while I finished, emptying inside the condom for a short moment of relief. She was so happy. So certain I'd answered "Yes" without words. I felt so fucking awful afterward I never let her get anywhere near my mouth again.

"Will?" Callie insists.

I snap back to reality, the devil on my shoulder weighing a thousand pounds.

Why am I here right now?

You're here because you wanted to do something very nasty to a girl you can't ever, as in ever, get nasty with, the red devil replies.

I curse my own thoughts, because they're true. I did want to do something to Kass last night. Scratch that—I wanted to do *a lot* of things to Kass last night, which is why I had to leave. Because she's still Kendrick's sister. And I can't think of her that way. But man, did I want to pin her up against the wall and...

I get hard at the thought, and Callie rejoices. I wonder what she'd do if she knew it's not for her.

I judge myself for my own dirty, twisted thoughts. Still, I see her. Kass. Squeezing me through my jeans instead of Callie. Not to mention Callie recently bleached her hair blonde. Kass's color is more natural, but... maybe if I squint.

Maybe...

I twist Callie's hair around my fist, imagining Kass's pale blue eyes looking up at me. Her lips wrapped around my...

Fuuuck.

I get even harder, sucking in a breath and banishing thoughts of Kass from my brain. My arousal immediately dies down.

"What's wrong?" Callie hisses.

"Nothing," I snap.

What's wrong is you don't do shit for me anymore. My phone buzzes before she can respond. I pick it off her bed. Kendrick's calling. Four missed calls?

What the...

Something's up.

"I have to go." I shove Callie off me within seconds, jumping to my feet and adjusting my pants.

"Are you kidding me?" she spits.

“Look, it was great and everything, but I don’t think this is going to work out.”

“Are you...” She blinks in disbelief. “Are you saying you don’t want us to sleep together anymore?”

Appreciating her making this easier for me, I seize the opportunity to shut that chapter of my life.

For good.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” I swing her bedroom door open, dashing down the stairs without looking back.

“Fuck you!” she shouts.

“No, thank you,” I fire back, slamming the front door and sprinting toward my car. Kendrick’s call goes to voicemail before I can answer, so I call him back.

“What’s wrong?” I say the second he picks up, putting my phone on speakerphone and tossing it onto the passenger seat as I drive away.

“Have you talked to Alex today?” Kendrick blurts, the panic in his voice unmissable.

“No?”

“Damn it. Where the fuck is he?”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“I can’t reach him. Something happened with Kass.”

I hit the brakes so abruptly someone honks at me. Pulling over to the side of the road, I grab my phone and turn up the volume all the way.

“What happened to Kass?”

“I wanted to tell her. I never meant for her to find out this way. I’m so fucking stupid,” Kendrick rambles.

“Kendrick, what the fuck happened to Kass?” I growl, his semi-breakdown testing my resolve. I need answers. And *fast*. He tells me Kass heard about her dad wanting to meet up with Kendrick at some restaurant, showed up there herself, and

found out her parents got a divorce because he was banging one of his students, who also happens to be Kass's boss.

"Damn. And I thought my family was fucked-up," I mutter. "How'd she take it?"

"How do you think? She freaked. She went apeshit on me and took off. I can't find her anywhere. She's not at home, she's not at Morgan's. I'm worried something's happened to her."

I want to smack him for letting her drive in this state.

"I need to talk to Alex," Kendrick adds. "They used to date. He knows her better than anyone. He knows where she would go in a moment like this."

I almost laugh.

Yeah, right.

"Don't worry. She's a smart girl. I'm sure she won't do anything stupid," I reassure the both of us.

A distraught Kendrick hangs up the phone, leaving me to fend for myself against a million worst-case scenarios. I sit there, racking my brain for five minutes before I finally figure it out. Igniting the engine, I rejoin the traffic and speed down the street at full speed.

I think I know exactly where she went.

Seventeen

Kassidy

My heart in my throat and tears blazing my eyes, I stare blankly into the void ahead of me and wait. For what, you ask? Something—*anything*. Maybe, if I'm lucky, Will's tree house will collapse and put me out of my misery. As long as it brings this horrible day to an end, I'm on board.

I haven't cried once. Correction: I haven't *let* myself cry once. I knocked some sense into myself as quickly as Daddy dearest walked out on us—sorry, *too soon*? He doesn't deserve my pain. Did it stop the tears from trying me? Did it stop the painful pit from taking residency in my throat? Not one bit. But I won't break down for someone who doesn't care.

My father is a cheating, college-girl-banging piece of trash.

There, I said it.

Now I just have to learn to live with it.

I rub my eyes, which are terribly swollen from repressing my emotions, and make a mental note of looking up “can you get eye problems from holding back tears?” later.

I'm not sure why I came here, really. Why my shattered heart lead me to Will's tree house. From the moment I watched Dale's dwindle into my rearview mirror, I knew I couldn't go home. Then memories of the night Will took me to his “secret spot” resurfaced. I remembered how quiet, gorgeous, and peaceful it was there and found myself taking the exit without realizing it.

My phone lights up with another one of my brother's messages, and I consider powering it off.

Kendrick: Where are you?

Kendrick: Where the fuck are you?

Kendrick: You're not home.

Kendrick: Mom is worried sick.

Kendrick: Kass, at least tell us you're okay.

Kendrick: That's it. I'm calling the cops.

Kendrick: Okay I'm not calling the cops but come home.

I snort at his last text. He can call the cops all he wants; I have nothing to say to either of them right now. I'm about to delete his messages when I hear branches cracking.

I stiffen up.

Five buck says the Universe heard my prayer and sent a big-ass bear. Although, I have to admit, being devoured by a bear isn't exactly what I was going for.

"Thank fucking God." A familiar voice startles me.

My gaze descends to the ground.

He's right there.

Staring up at me with worry, doubt, and relief in his eyes.

Will.

Never mind, I'll take the bear.

"You're here," he pants.

Was he... running?

He came all this way for me? How did he even know where to find me? I sure didn't tell him about what happened. Come to think of it, I didn't text him once today. I'm quickly reminded of *why* I didn't text him.

Right. He's sleeping with Callie again.

"What are you doing here?" I zero in on the sunset.

He scoffs. "You're asking *me*? News flash, this is still my tree house."

I don't grant him a response, wishing he'd retire to Callie's bed and leave me alone. I've been hurt enough for one day.

"What are *you* doing here?" he returns the question.

“Oh, you know, just contemplating how people are heartless liars who will inevitably disappoint you in the end.”

I purse my lips in anticipation of a snarky reply that never comes. Dumbfounded, I look down at him.

“What? No sarcastic remark? No ‘*I warned you about feelings, control freak?*’” I scoff.

I get everything but a joke.

I get a look.

One that reeks of pity.

He knows.

Great.

“I take it from the sad puppy eyes that you know?”

He nods faintly.

“Kendrick is worried sick, Kass. You need to go home. Or at least call your brother.”

That explains it. He’s here as Kendrick’s messenger.

“So *that’s* why you’re here.” I scoff, hugging my knees to my chest as though it’ll keep my ruptured heart from completely shattering. “Kendrick sent you.”

He frowns. “What? No. He doesn’t even know I’m here.”

Lies.

“I’m here because you went through hell today and I was worried about you. Is that a crime?”

“I’m fine. You can go now.” I switch up on him, and he pulls a surprised face, assessing me carefully before climbing up the old ladder without a word.

Crap.

I don’t move a muscle, my knees still operating as shields between my heart and impending pain. I pretend like his presence doesn’t affect me. And I pretend even *harder* when he plops down by my side.

“I’m not leaving until you are.” He scoots closer to me.

Okay. That's kind of sweet.

Kass, he was probably just inside Callie, for fuck's sake!

"Sucks to be you, then, because I'm not going anywhere."

He shrugs. "Then neither am I."

Irritation cuts through me.

"I told you to go. I'm fine."

"Stop lying. You're not fucking fine." He sees right through me. "Why come here if you're fine, huh? Something happened tonight. And it hurt you. Just admit it."

"That's rich. The guy who'd rather go to the end of the world than admit his feelings is giving *me* lessons on how to feel?"

He's taken aback. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Forget it." I draw a breath.

"No, by all means, enlighten me."

"How's Callie doing by the way?" I spit.

His eyebrows shoot up.

He pauses, clearly wondering how I came to find out about his booty call. Then he nods in realization. It's not rocket science. *Girls talk.*

"Okay, I guess." He collects himself. "Although she sure didn't look too happy when I broke things off with her and left her to rot because my friend needed me."

Shit. The fucker got me with that one.

My heart feels lighter.

Like it shed a thousand pounds.

I make it a point to remind myself that it doesn't change squat. That I'm still just a *friend*. And he's still off-limits.

"Good for you. Can you leave now?" I shut him out.

I've managed to keep it together up until this point, but if he keeps pushing, I'll break.

“I’m staying. Deal with it.”

“Fine. Then I’ll leave!” I jolt up, aiming for the ladder. Before I know it, Will’s back on his feet, gripping my arm and hauling me to him.

He cups my face with both hands, forcing our eyes to meet. “I’m here. *With you.* I’m fucking here, Kass. Let me be here.”

My heart.

“What are you so afraid of?” he shouts.

I’m afraid if I start crying, I’ll never stop.

That’s when I start to shake.

My sight gets blurry.

My knuckles turn white.

Rage takes a hold of me, and I pray I can stay afloat a little while longer.

“You want me to talk to you? Is that it?” I propel him off me. “Okay. What do you want me to say, Will? That it fucking destroyed me to find out about my dad today? That I don’t think I’ll ever be able to trust a man again? Or believe in love? That I’ll never be able to walk into my mom’s bedroom without thinking of my father fucking my boss?” I push him once. Twice. I lose my shit, plain and simple. And the craziest part? It makes me feel better.

In control.

I need this rage. This burning, uncontrollable anger. If anger is my only lifeline in this ocean of disappointments, I’ll hold on to it until I drown.

“Kass, calm the fuck down!” Will yells, but all I can see is red. Red like my heart as it breaks from finding out the first prince in my life is a frog. Red like the blood that spilled out of me when my family drove a knife into my back.

I pummel Will’s torso with strong blows. He doesn’t flinch, taking every hit like a champ.

“Do you want me to say I’m barely holding it together and it’s taking me all I have not to break down right now? That I can’t believe that I thought for even one second...” My voice splinters. “I thought he gave up on *us*.”

I’m well aware that I’m probably not making any sense to him. No longer having it, Will clutches my wrist, holding me in place and keeping crazy Kass in check.

“You don’t get it,” I belt. “Nobody gets it. It’s not Kendrick he stopped loving. It’s not Kendrick who wasn’t worth it. He didn’t give up on us.”

I burst out crying.

“He just gave up on me.”

The second the first tear spills down my cheek, I know I’m done. I’ve lost. *Kass, 0, Life, 1*. Desperate to secure the remaining shreds of my dignity, I opt for my last option: run. Run before Will sees me collapse. I rush toward the ladder, but Will springs into action, almost as though he anticipated my escape, and spins me around in the same way he did before.

Only difference is, this time...

It’s to capture me in his arms.

He traps me into an embrace I didn’t expect, resting his chin atop my head. I fight, I kick, I claw, but he doesn’t let go. If anything, he only holds on tighter. His strong arms feel like home. But I don’t want to feel at home.

Not unless he feels it, too.

Once I’ve run out of rage, strength, and pride, I let my cheek hit his torso and take it all in: his scent, his warmth, his arms squeezing me tight. I listen to his heartbeat and let myself cry.

That’s all I do.

I cry and I cry while Will holds me. I imagined this moment so many times—his arms around me, refusing to let go. But I *never* would have thought it’d happen like this.

“You should’ve seen the look on his face.” I sob into his shirt, clasping the fabric. “He looked at me like I wasn’t his little girl. Like I was *nothing*.”

I pull away to see my pain staring back at me. It’s in his eyes. He took some of my suffering as his own, relieving me from parts of a burden I can’t carry. He *genuinely* feels for me—which only makes me weep harder.

“It hurts... it hurts so bad. God, just make it stop,” I blather between sobs. I can’t seem to make sense of my own plea. I don’t know what I’m asking him to do.

So then why...

Why do I feel like *he* does?

Interrogations flood his gaze. I watch as he debates on something, weighing pros and cons, torn between choices I never gave him. Eventually, they vanish.

I take it he found his answer.

Our eyes meet.

Then he kisses me.

He cups my face, wipes my tears, and smashes his lips to mine with a need I’ve never felt in my entire life. Surprised, I tumble backward, but he keeps me upright, kissing me so hard my body cries for his touch. He doesn’t seem to give a single shit that I was sobbing seconds ago, dismissing my swollen face and salty lips.

It’s like a switch.

Yes.

This is what I need right now.

My pain goes numb, lingering in the air, promising to return as soon as his lips leave mine. But right now... it’s gone. Along with my ability to care. Don’t care that it’ll never work between us. Don’t care that he’ll never give me what I want. Don’t care about the endgame.

I just want now.

And I want Will.

He ravages my mouth with his, backpedaling me against the wooden wall as his hands slink under my shirt. Our tongues dance along to the song we never got to finish when he kissed me at the party. And the fire sputtering to life in my stomach says we're not running this time.

We're here until the last chord.

The notes may be flat, the lyrics wrong.

But the melody...

The melody is lifelong.

This kiss bears more recklessness than our previous one. Might have something to do with the absence of a soul to stop us. The absence of a bump to trip over.

This could go too far.

But *too far* is precisely what I'm craving.

I lower my fingers to his belt, and he gives me the exact same reaction as he did that night in the bathroom, warning me with a low grunt. Knowing I'm the reason for his thinning self-control entralls me in a way I can't fathom. Determined to see how far I can push him, I keep my hands there, teasing, tugging at his waistband until he snaps. Squeezing my cheeks with one hand, he looks me dead in the eyes as if to drill the warning into my brain. He doesn't need to speak. I know exactly what his eyes are saying: *Do that again and I might just have to bend you over.*

My heart thundering out of control, I nod, and his mouth latches onto mine again. Next thing I know, I'm lying flat on the old, creaking wood flooring of the tree house with Will perched over me. He flips my shirt up to scatter slow kisses across my stomach, and I squirm, grabbing his neck at the base and leading him back to my lips. I try to convince myself I'm just using him to get the pain out of my system. That this won't change, nor heighten the way I feel about him.

But deep down, I know...

This is how you go from a dumb crush to liking someone. *Really* liking someone. But you know how you also go from a dumb crush to the real thing?

By letting the hot blond guy pop the button of your jeans.

I gasp at his initiative. Not because I don't want him to—I want this more than I need air—but because I expected him to stop. To bail before it got this far. A kiss is just a kiss, but this? He's got to know it would mean crossing another line, checking another step off my list. If we do this, he can't possibly carry on with his "friends" bullshit.

I can't silence a moan when his mouth trails along the curve of my jaw, attaching itself to the skin above my collarbone. He goes harder at the timid noises falling out of my mouth.

And... another thing gets *harder*.

I'm struck by a genius idea when he jerks my zipper down.

I should write a book.

How to get attached to a guy you know who won't ever commit, written by Kassidy dumbass Kingston.

Will hoists himself up, staring down my face with heat, lust, and doubt in his gaze. He's trying to decode my emotions, giving me one last chance to protest and save myself. But... *his eyes*. His fucking eyes.

They lure the truth out of me.

I'm totally falling for him, aren't I?

Unable to handle his piercing stare a second longer, I lurch forward, trapping his bottom lip between my teeth. He responds by sneaking a hand inside my jeans and resting a finger atop my underwear. My breath hitches as his index glides up and down the fabric repeatedly, driving me completely mad. I'm a solid 95 percent sure he can feel my arousal through my panties, and the way he grunts in appreciation when his hand dips lower bumps it up to a hundred.

One more kiss.

One more touch.

I can't get enough.

"Will." I let out a breathy moan.

That's his cue to start fingering me.

Kind of.

He rubs me, tortures me with slow, rough circles over my underwear.

Holy.

Freaking.

Shit.

I could punch him right now. How in the ever-loving hell can he make me feel this way without *really* touching me? A hint of a smirk tugs at his lips as his hand begins its climb toward my stomach. He pulls on my underwear, mere seconds away from crossing the point of no return, but just as his fingers start to slip under...

His phone rings.

Eighteen

Kassidy

The moment the loud ringtone cuts through the air, Will interrupts the kiss, disconnecting from me with a gravelly curse. His hand hasn't moved one bit, still resting on the outer side of my underwear.

Seriously, phone?

Now?

Our eyes meet on the third ring. I expect him to be horrified by the previous events, crippled with regrets, but he looks... strangely calm. Not panicked, not scared.

Neutral.

And horny.

Definitely horny.

Maybe it just hasn't sunk in yet.

Or...

Maybe he doesn't regret it?

The ringing continues for long, beyond awkward seconds. When it becomes clear whoever's calling is not quitting anytime soon, Will withdraws his hand from my pants and props himself up onto his palms. I keep waiting for him to pick up his phone. Until he curses again, stretches his right arm out, and swipes something off the floor.

My phone.

It's not his phone that stopped us.

It's *mine*.

Someone is calling me. Evidently, the first name that pops into my mind is Kendrick's, but the look on Will's face when

he takes a peek at the screen tells me I couldn't be further from the truth. *Cold* is what he becomes. Any warmth that might've ever resided in his eyes is replaced by annoyance as he tosses me my phone. My heart drops at the caller ID.

Luke.

The call dies down as Will pushes to his feet, shamelessly adjusting the massive bulge straining against his pants. My eyes follow the motion, and my cheeks flare. Shit. He looks big.

Kass, what the fuck?

Embarrassed by my own train of thoughts, I tear my eyes away. If he saw me gawking at his dick, he doesn't show it, clearing his throat and running a hand through his ruffled blond hair. My phone rings again, and I frown.

Why is Luke calling m—

Oh my God!

The date!

I had a date with Luke!

I check the time on my phone. 9:05. We were supposed to meet at eight. This is all my fault. I'm the one who asked him out. Even if it was for all the wrong reasons. He doesn't deserve to be treated like that. I zip up my jeans—which is so awkward I could die—and press Answer.

“Hello?” My voice falters.

“Hey, Kass. It's Luke. I'm so sorry I didn't call earlier. You must've been waiting for me. I know we were supposed to meet at eight.”

A wave of relief rolls over me.

Then comes the guilt.

No, I wasn't waiting for you. I was actually doing “things” with another guy, but thanks for calling.

Leave a message after the beep of shame.

“It's okay, don't worry about it.”

“I’m not going to be able to make it. I’m sorry. Believe me, I’d much rather be with you, but my aunt needs me.”

“It’s fine. Tonight’s not really good for me either,” I say, overly aware of Will hanging on to my every word. “Can I ask what’s going on? Is Isabella okay?”

“Let’s just say you and I are going to be seeing a whole lot more of each other.”

I peek at Will from the corner of my eye. He’s tense. His jaw, his fists, his shoulders—all tense as a rock. He looks like he could easily tear the tree house to the ground with his bare hands.

“How come?” I ask.

“My aunt’s training me to fill in as store manager. I’ll be helping out for a while.”

“Why? What happened?”

He gives me the missing piece of the equation.

“Jenny just quit.”

I’d like to say that I’m surprised. But all I can think about after hearing the news is “Of course she did.” There is no world in which this could’ve ended well for her. If she hadn’t quit, I would’ve, and she had no way of knowing if I planned on telling someone. She probably didn’t want to risk it and ran away so she could keep fucking her dean without issue.

“Did she say why?”

“Nope. Just said it was time for her to move on.”

Again, *of course she did*.

“Okay, then. I guess I’ll see you at work.”

“Yeah, see you, Kass. Sorry again.”

He hangs up.

The second I peel the phone from my ear, Will takes off. He gives me absolutely *nothing*: not a word, not a look. He just rushes down the crappy ladder and walks away.

“Will!” I shriek like a complete idiot.

I follow his lead, almost tripping on the vines covering the ground as I chase after him.

“Will!” I call again, but he doesn’t stop, striding down the rocky path. When I finally catch up to him, we’re standing in the parking lot where I left my car. The guy is fast.

“Wait.” I snatch his arm.

“What?” he drones, sounding uninterested. Bored, even. I’m a bit taken aback by his tone but try my best not to show it.

“Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine. Look, I have to get to training. I’m late. You should probably call Luke back. You know, so you can reschedule that date.”

With that said, he resumes walking.

“Okay, cut the crap.” I snap.

He stops cold.

“We just kissed, Will. *Again*. Y-You kissed me and you...” The words get caught in the back my throat. “You touched me. Please spare me the part where you pretend like nothing happened.”

“Fine.” He pivots. “It happened. What’s your point?”

He’s so detached, miles and miles away from the boy kissing me a moment prior. Is he faking it? Did I read this wrong? Does he really not care about me at all?

“My point is...” *You can do it, Kass*. “My point is we’re not fucking friends, Will.”

For a fragment of a second, my words seem to affect him, but he restores his default blank face too fast to tell for sure.

“What else would we be?”

For fuck’s sake.

He can’t do this anymore.

I gather all the courage in my body to say, “That kiss meant something, and you know it.”

“Fine,” he gives in.

Did he just... agree with me?

“You’re right,” he adds. “It meant something.”

I hold my breath.

“It means we had a moment and it passed.”

Ouch.

He turns to leave.

“Why did you kiss me?” I blurt. It’s a simple question. Yet, it all comes down to this.

He exhales, shaking his head as if to set his thoughts straight. “Fuck, I-I don’t know, okay? You were crying and you... you begged me to take your mind off it, so I did. It didn’t mean shit. If anything, it just means I was horny and you were there.”

My lips part.

It takes me a few seconds to realize what he just said. To process that I got rejected by not one, but *two* men I cared about in the same day. Swallowing the pill the best I can, I nod and mentally collect the pieces of my shattered ego.

He doesn’t like you.

He literally said it to your face.

Time to accept it.

“Message received loud and clear,” I reply, heading for my car. He stands there, watching as I unlock and open my door. Seconds before I slide in, I hear him curse beneath his breath.

“Kass, wait, I...” he tries—a dash of regret in his voice—but I ignore him, climb into the driver’s seat, and drive.



“I like this one.” Zoey squeals, parading around her bedroom in a glittery silver, fitted dress. Morgan and I have been

watching her throw every outfit she possesses onto the floor for two long hours now.

On any other day, we'd be whining, making jokes about how there's a whole world outside of her closet, but today? Today we keep our mouths shut and bend to Zoey's every will. Because today is the most important day of the year in Zoey world.

Her birthday.

Zoey's always been extra when it comes to celebrating her existence. Her absent mom usually rents out some ridiculously expensive place to host the thing, but this year, Mommy managed to steer clear of the birthday expenses.

How?

Sean.

Yep, Zoey recently got back together with her cheating, self-absorbed, selfish frat guy ex. How'd Prince Charming win her back, you ask? A text saying "*Sorry. Miss u.*"

And they say romance is dead.

I tried talking her out of it, but frankly, I'd much rather see her with Sean than barking up my brother's tree, or worse, Haze's. Not to mention Sean came back into the picture with an offer Zoey couldn't refuse: access to his uncle's club for her birthday. It's no secret that Zoey is obsessed with dating older guys. Thinks it makes her look cool.

So, hosting her birthday at one of the trendiest clubs in town around while underage?

He didn't have to tell her twice.

Bright side is, she had the good sense of only inviting a few people from school rather than her usual country. Sean's uncle is kind of—okay, *totally*—breaking the law here, and getting caught serving the whole senior class would definitely land him in hot water.

I haven't heard a peep from my dad since I found out about his indiscretions that day. Looks like he took my wish to never

see him again very seriously. Let's just say if I suspected he didn't care about me before, I'm definitely sure now.

I've barely said a word to my mom all week. And it's not for her lack of trying. Her new passion is blowing smoke up my ass and being nauseatingly nice. She's reaching out to me, building a bridge, and while I want to meet her halfway, I'm stuck on the other side.

They lied to me. Kept me out of the loop like I was a poor, fragile china vase waiting to break. She must've apologized a thousand times, but I'm not over it. I can't help eyeing her bedroom door every time I pass it.

She needs to burn her bed.

Ridding myself of negative thoughts, I check my phone to find an unread message.

From Luke.

Luke: We missed you at work today:) Tell Zoey Happy Birthday for me.

He wasn't lying when he said he'd be filling in for Jenny for a while. He's been working at the store ever since she quit. I thought it might be weird, seeing as he's interested in me, but he hasn't been acting on it, which relieves me to no end. Truth is, all this time spent together brought us closer. We're friends now. And not Will's version of *friends*. Platonic, don't-almost-fuck-in-a-tree house, friends.

Our dates constantly getting cancelled were probably the universe stopping me from using someone who didn't deserve it. I never want to be that person again.

A knock rattles Zoey's apartment door.

"Who is it?" Zoey calls from the bathroom. The shower is running in the background.

"Must be the Chinese food," I holler back, darting toward the entrance. Out in the hall stands a soaked-by-the-rain, green-eyed, dark-haired guy. Not going to lie, he's pretty cute, although his red eyes and the smell emanating from his jacket make it clear he's no stranger to smoking a blunt.

“Sorry about the delay. We’re getting our asses kicked out there.” He hands me the takeout bag.

“Don’t worry about it.” I offer him the fifty Zoey threw at me like it was nothing. She won’t miss it. “Keep the change. For your trouble.”

“Damn. Gorgeous *and* generous? Must be my lucky day.” He shoots me a seductive grin before retreating down the hall.

Something about him reminds me of Will. Maybe it’s the dimples, the attitude, or merely the way he carries himself. I can’t quite put my finger on it. I instantly want to smack myself for thinking about he-who-shall-not-be-named. I’ve tried everything. Deleting his number. Avoiding him like the plague. Nothing worked.

No matter what I do, I can’t shake him.

Next step is putting a penny into a jar every time I let him in. Or getting one of those elastic bracelets you snap on your wrist.

Sauntering to Zoey’s bedroom, I give Morgan her food and plop down on the bed next to her. Zoey pads into the bedroom in a towel fifteen minutes later. She hasn’t even taken two bites of her fried rice before she’s slapping foundation onto her bare face. Because, you know... *priorities*.

“So... Kass?” She winces mid-eyeliner-application. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Why do I feel like I’m going to be pissed?

“What?”

“Promise you won’t be mad.”

I brace myself for the worst. “Zoey, what did you do?”

“I might’ve... sort of slipped up when I was inviting people to the party.”

That’s all it takes.

She invited Will, didn’t she?

“You didn’t,” I beg.

“I’m sorry. It’s just... I invited this cute Alex guy because he’s single and I have a friend I want to set up and... Will was there. What was I going to do? *Only* invite his friend and tell him to shove it?”

I don’t bother arguing, falling backward onto Zoey’s unmade bed and groaning into my hands. I fessed up to the girls about what happened at the tree house. Morgan, being her supportive self, made a priority of telling me I deserved better every five seconds. As for Zoey, well...

We all know how that turned out.

Either way, I’ll be seeing Will tonight.



Will

“How the hell are you still going? You should be on the floor,” Blake accuses, ironically leaping off the mat himself. Wiping the drizzle of sweat off his forehead with a towel, he feels his jaw with a wince. Can’t blame him. I wouldn’t have wanted to be on the receiving end of that last punch.

“What? Am I too much for you, grandma?” I taunt.

“He’s right,” Alex cuts in from outside the arena. “What’s up with you? You juicing or something?”

“I told you, I just got a shit ton of energy lately,” I lie, watching Blake slink out of the ring. “Hey! Where are you going?”

“Where do you think?” He snorts. “It’s been five hours. I’m going home and taking a fucking shower.” Blake grabs his shit, heading for the exit.

“Coward,” I call, and he flips me off as he walks. “Alex, you down?”

“I’m good.” Alex shakes his head. “Think I’m going to bail, too.”

Kendrick skipped training again today. The fight with Haze will soon be at our door, but Blake insists Kendrick isn't ready to slide back into his routine and get his hands dirty.

I think Kendrick's fine, but Blake has been in the game longer than any of us have—although he doesn't measure up to Kendrick or me in the ring. If Blake says to rest, Kendrick rests. It's slowly eating at my sanity. If I didn't know any better, I'd say Blake is betting against us.

"You should do the same. Take a shower so you don't smell like ass tonight," Alex advises.

"Why? What's tonight?"

"Are you shitting me? You were there when she invited us."

I frown. "Who?"

"Zoey."

It clicks in my mind.

"Zoey... as in Kass's friend?"

"Yeah. It's her birthday. She's got an entire club waiting for us. She knows the owner."

Right. She came up to us in the hall earlier. I didn't listen to a single word coming out of her mouth, lost in my head.

"Who's going to be there?" I ask.

Alex begins listing people I couldn't give less of a shit about. Then he says the name I've been secretly waiting to hear.

Kass's.

It may sound stupid, because of course she'd attend her best friend's birthday, but I needed to hear him say it.

"Between us, you could stand to get laid, dude. You've been training twice every day this week. Get a life," Alex mocks.

Oh, the irony. He has no idea I've been training every single day *precisely* because I need to get laid.

Jesus Christ, I'm horny.

Going from having sex regularly to not at all will do that to you. Had to find an outlet for all that frustration. Fighting seems to be the only thing that takes my mind off it. It's more a temporary fix than a cure, really, but I'll take anything I can get.

To my surprise, I didn't hit up Callie—or any of the other girls who could've easily helped me with my blue-balls problem. Tried to scratch the itch myself, hoping it'd do the trick.

Spoiler alert: it didn't.

The way I left things with Kass hasn't exactly been helping. This fucking girl could give me blue balls for weeks.

“So, you coming?” Alex questions, slinging his gym bag strap over his shoulder.

I shrug. “Meh. I'll let you know.”

I highly doubt Kass wants me there, if her ghosting me is anything to go by. Alex nods, walking out of the crass building I've grown to know like the back of my hand.

I wait for the roar of his car to fade into the distance and hurry toward the old gym's showers. The plumbing screeches a high-pitched, hissing sound when I flick the faucet on, leaving me to wonder if this is the day a pipe finally bursts in my face.

I could probably shower at Alex's, but I'll die before letting the guys find out about my situation. Before I let *anyone* find out. I don't need them. I'll figure it out on my own.

I always do.

I strip naked, my muscles sore from the five hours I spent wiping my hands with Blake, and toss my phone onto a nearby bench before entering the water.

She hasn't texted me today.

Or yesterday.

Or the day before that.

Not that I'm surprised. I deserve every bit of her silent treatment. As much as I hate to admit it, I almost texted her a few times. Caught myself wishing I could tell her whenever something funny happened.

I think... I kind of miss her?

I promised myself I wouldn't touch her again, but... she was standing there, looking at me with those big blue, teary eyes, and it triggered *something* in me.

It gutted me.

Made me want to fix it.

Then she started sobbing in my arms, and every atom in my body spurred to life, begging me to make it stop. So, when she flat out asked me to, I did the only thing I could think of.

Kissing her was the plan.

Almost fingering her wasn't.

Shit, what are you doing to me, control freak?

I should've had more self-control, kept my mouth—and my hands—to myself. I can still feel how wet she was. I wasn't even touching her, and she was ready for my...

Fucking hell, Will, stop!

I give myself a stroke in the hope it'll expel her whimpers from my mind. The way she called my name, gasped at my touch. We were so close. Then she got a call from that dumbass Luke, and I lost my temper. She was supposed to be on a date with *him* while I was making her moan. I lashed out, told her a bunch of BS I didn't mean. I hurt her.

Trying to protect myself.

I know I made the right decision. I was being a good friend to Kendrick by walking away—fine, a slightly *less* awful friend—but then again, a good friend wouldn't be beating his dick to his friend's sister right now. It's wrong. Kendrick would kill me if he knew, but I can't change the fact that I want her.

Bad.

Maybe if I just get her out of my system.

Maybe if I just give in once.

All I know is I can't stay away anymore.

And, so tonight...

I won't.

Nineteen

Kassidy

The second Zoey, Morgan, and I step inside the piping hot, cramped club, the urge to charge back into the Uber slams into me. Zoey is quick to locate Sean and snatch mine and Morgan's wrists, hauling us toward the bar.

"There's the birthday girl." Sean flirts over the music, earning himself a luscious kiss from Zoey, who flings her arms around his neck, hungrily devouring his mouth. Morgan and I make eye contact, exchanging *Well, this is awkward* smiles like the five-year-olds that we are.

"I still can't believe you got us in. Are my friends all here?" Zoey gushes.

Sean directs a glance over his shoulder, most precisely at the man mid conversation with the bartender. His uncle, I presume. Sean says something I can't hear, and the bald forty-something-year-old nods.

"Yeah. They're here," Sean confirms. "Bouncers took their names at the door."

"Great, I'm going to go find them." Zoey sees someone in the distance. "Mia!" she shrieks, stumbling off without so much as a warning. Sean trails behind her, smacking her ass and looping his arm around her shoulders as they push through the crowd. *Mia*. I never met the girl, but if I remember correctly, she's the single friend Zoey is hoping to match with Alex.

I make "What the hell are we doing here?" eye contact with Morgan again and seriously consider jumping ship. Odds are Zoey wouldn't even notice I'm gone.

Morgan tells me she has to use the bathroom before we can order a drink, and I offer to come with. I'd much rather hang in smelly, questionable bathrooms than stand alone in a crowd

of horny guys that look at me like I'm an all-you-can-eat buffet.

The line is so long and the bathroom so tiny, I decide to spare myself the claustrophobic attack and wait outside. Morgan manages to get in after ten minutes, and I recline against the wall, arms folded over my chest.

Then I hear him.

“Remind me why we're here again?”

Will.

I crane my neck to catch a glimpse of him and Alex holding beers right around the corner. They haven't seen me yet.

“Because Zoey got me a hot date, and I'm not missing it.” Alex shrugs. “I'd tell you to go home, but... I know you won't.”

“Want to bet?” Will drawls.

“Will you just drop the act already?”

“What act?”

Alex tips his bottle back for a sip, taking his sweet time.

“What, Alex?” Will grows restless. “What makes you so damn sure I won't bolt?”

Alex snorts. “You're not going to bolt because Kass is here.”

My pulse shoots up.

What I wouldn't do to see the look on Will's face right now. I only have a clear view of Alex from here.

“What are you talking about?” He feigns confusion.

“Save your breath. Phone died earlier, so I grabbed yours to call Blake. You've been texting her like crazy. What the hell is up with you two?”

“Remind me to put a password on that shit later.” Will sighs, backed into a corner.

“I’m serious, man. Are you... getting down and dirty with Kendrick’s sis?” Alex presses. “Because I’m not covering for you like I did with Blake. I can barely live with myself as is.”

“No, of course not. We’re just friends.”

“Look, you fuck whoever you want, but if you don’t tell Kendrick, I wi—”

“I told you we’re fucking friends,” Will snaps, his temper slipping away, but Alex doesn’t buy it for a second. “I mean it. Okay, yeah, we’ve been talking. We have shit in common. I feel like she understands me, but she’s like a sister to me.”

Instant gag reflex.

A tsunami of emotions sweeps me away. Rage, disgust, pain. They infiltrate my lungs, destroy every ounce of hope in my system. A sister? He’s going to play the sister card when he practically *fingered* me?

With awful timing, Morgan comes out of the bathroom.

“Kass!” She waves at me.

The sound of my name is enough to capture the boys’ attention. They whip their heads back, noticing me standing there, eyes locked on them.

Eyes locked on *him*.

I can confidently say I’ve never seen Will look so pale.

Swallowing the pain crawling up my throat, I don’t say a word, grab Morgan’s wrist, and drag her away.



Resting my elbows flat against the bar and rising to my tiptoes, I attempt to grab the bartender’s attention with hand signals. Poor guy is swamped right now. In his defense, the club has officially reached its quota and closed access to new arrivals.

I got stuck with drinks duty after Zoey spilled her Bloody Mary on someone’s shoes. I’ve personally stopped drinking

over an hour ago as I'm not looking to recreate the last time I got wasted—wouldn't want to accidentally make out with someone who's not into me again.

“Shouldn't you be with your friends?”

I twist my head to see the pink-haired girl who was crowding me less than a second ago has shifted into Will. I expected to be hurt, sad even, the next time I talked to him, but right now, the only thing I can feel is burning annoyance.

“Shouldn't you be with yours?” I say dryly.

“Alex ditched me for Zoey's friend. Haven't seen him since.”

I don't reply, gesturing at the bartender again, who nods, acknowledging my existence and walking over at last. I check my phone notes, where I put down Zoey's drink of choice, and make sure to add in that glass of water for Morgan. She wasn't kidding about never drinking again.

As soon as the bartender leaves with my order, Will buries me with questions: *How are you, are you ignoring me, so we're just never going to talk again?* And that's just a few of them. I give the performance of a lifetime, motioning to my ear and pretending I can't hear him which pisses him off to no end. What did he expect? We're not okay. Or on good terms.

He hurt me.

Bad.

“Kass... About what I said to Ale—”

That's the line I stop being deaf for.

“Don't,” I stop him. “It's fine. Message received. You look at me like a sibling.”

I could gag just saying it out loud.

“But I—”

The bartender comes around with my drinks. Itching to get away from Will, I throw him a twenty and tell him to keep the change.

“I should go find the girls.” I swipe the two glasses off the bar and turn on my heels. I’ve barely moved an inch when he speaks.

“I miss you.”

I can’t take another step.

“That’s right, I... I miss you, Kass. I’m sorry about what I said when we...” He doesn’t dare finish. “It was dumb as fuck, and you didn’t deserve that. I’m sorry.”

I’m rooted in place, my back all he can see.

“I guess what I’m trying to say is...” He pauses. “I got used to us talking, and I’d like it if things could go back to normal.”

Normal.

As in back to me having an unrequited crush on him.

“You mean you want us to go back to being friends?” I surprise him by turning around.

He nods, exhaling in relief as though I just took the words out of his mouth. “That’s exactly what I mean.”

The answer is easy for me.

“No.”

His face is priceless.

“What?”

“I said no. I can’t be your friend.” I resume walking.

He holds me back. “Why not?”

“Because I caught feelings for you!”

His composure crumbles.

He tumbles a step back, his mouth falling open, but I don’t buy it. I don’t buy *any* of it. He must’ve known, if only a tiny part of him, that somewhere along the way, he’d make me laugh one time too many. That there’d be one inevitable moment where it’d become more for me.

He must’ve known.

I think even *I* always knew.

“I know you don’t feel the same, and that’s fine. It really is, Will. But I’m trying to get past it, so... I think it’s better if we stay away from each other from now on.”

Pain rips across his gaze like a shooting star. He chases it away, reducing it to a glimmer—God forbid he ever shows real emotions—and I’m left with the same, redundant question: Did I imagine it all?

“Now, if you’ll excuse me.” I swallow the pit in my throat, threading to Zoey and Morgan on the dance floor. I can feel the weight of Will’s gaze on my shoulders, his eyes stalking my every move.

Zoey shrieks at the sight of me, banding her arms around my neck for a swaying hug. She’s completely gone, one drop away from blackout. I deny Zoey the drink I ordered for her, and to my great surprise, she agrees, admitting to her excessive state. Fifteen minutes later, Morgan says she has to take a call from her mom and walks off. Sean pops up behind Zoey at around the same time, kissing her neck until she’s putty in his hands. I peel my eyes away, wincing. Maybe I’m just jealous. Maybe I wish it was me and a certain blond guy.

Or maybe Sean’s just a douche.

Will’s been watching me since I ended things between us—ironic considering there was nothing *to* end. Morgan must’ve told me he was staring at us five times in the past thirty minutes. I jump along to the music, hoping the deafening bass will numb my pain. Mute my broken heart.

Just until the song ends.

Then I realize Sean and Zoey are gone.

Probably off to bang in a bathroom stall.

“Excuse me?” Someone taps me on the shoulder.

I spin to see the guy who delivered our Chinese earlier.

“Aren’t you the cute girl I delivered to?” he asks.

I analyze him. He sure looks different dry. *Cuter*. I glance over his shoulder at Will. I doubt he can see the guy's face from where he is, but that doesn't stop him from staring holes into the back of his head.

"That would be me." I nod. "What are you doing here?"

"Same thing you are."

"Celebrating your best friend's birthday?" I raise an eyebrow.

He laughs. "Fine. Different reason, then. My boys and I rented a house downtown. We're going to keep the party going there after the bars close. Just looking for people to invite."

"Any luck?"

"Nah. No luck so far, but I think maybe I'm getting there. So... interested?"

"I don't know. You want to keep the party going when the party hasn't even started here," I point out.

He grins. "Shit. I guess you're right. Want to dance?"

I juggle with the idea and decide one dance can't hurt. Chinese food guy—what? I don't know his name—offers me his hand and draws me flush to his chest. He's charming, but something about his mannerisms reminds me of Will. The way he moves, expresses himself. Either they're long-lost brothers or I'm going mad.

"Got any brothers?" I ask Chinese food, and he laughs at my rather unusual question.

"Nope."

Going mad it is.

His hands drop to my waist, and I swing my hips along to the rhythm. It's fine at first. Until he sneaks behind me, getting a tad too provocative for my taste. He rubs himself against me, the arousal in his pants growing impossible to ignore.

"I-I don't feel so well. I'm going to bail."

"What? Why?" he asks, holding me firmly in place.

“I don’t need a reason. Let me go. Now!”

“Relax. We’re just having fun.” He presses his boner to my ass again, and I squirm in disgust.

“Get your fucking hands off me or I’ll scream,” I say as confidently as I can.

That’s when his true colors come out.

“Now, now, Kass. You can’t dangle food in front of a guy’s eyes and get mad when he wants a bite.”

I freeze.

Not because he’s a disgusting pervert.

Because I never told him my name.

Zoey ordered the food earlier. There’s no way he could’ve known.

“How do you know my name?”

“Shit, did I forget to mention?” He inches forward to whisper in my ear. “Simon says hi.”

Every hair on my body stands on end.

“Smile for the camera, baby.” He points at a red booth containing five guys across the room.

My heart drops.

In the booth glaring at me is Simon, my awful rapist date who got beaten up by Will. Bearing a black eye and holding his phone up in the air, Simon offers me a cruel smile and waves. That’s *why* Chinese food came on to me. He probably bragged to his friends that he’d delivered to me earlier, and Simon recognized me as the girl who earned him the beating of his life.

Why the camera? I’m not sure. Maybe he was hoping my dancing would prove his point: that I’m a tease who deserved to be assaulted. Or maybe he wanted to catch my reaction when I put it together. Either way, he must’ve gotten what he wanted because he puts his phone down, cheered on by his friends.

“Get the fuck away from me!” I yell so loud Chinese food jumps, startled. I manage to put distance between us, but he’s not having it, gripping my wrist so tight I cry out in pain.

Then I see him from the corner of my eye.

Will.

Jaw clenched, fist tights, chest puffing, he tears through the crowd in record time. Chinese food doesn’t see him coming, completely clueless as to what awaits him. Will stops a step behind the guy cutting off the blood circulation in my arm, his eyes so dark you’d barely believe they were ever blue to begin with.

The DJ jokes about getting high for the next song, and the crowd goes wild as artificial smoke fills the air, wrapping around the dance floor and making it difficult to breathe. Add that to the blazing heat and blinking lights, you have yourself a bunch of drunk girls very likely to pass out soon.

“Get your fucking hands off her if you want to keep them,” Will warns through gritted teeth.

Preparing to turn around, Chinese food cackles and releases my wrist. “Would you look at that? Someone thinks you’re worth saving, tramp.”

Will doesn’t miss a beat, shoving me behind him. A lone tear rolls down my cheek at my pulsing, red wrist. Can’t help it. I have no tolerance for pain.

Will sees the bruise.

And loses it.

“So young to die. Oh, well,” he quips, gripping Chinese food’s shoulder to spin him around and crashing his fist into his jaw without blinking.

A wave of “*Oooh*” streaks across the dance floor as Simon’s friend stumbles backward, nearly losing his balance. He looks dumbfounded at how fast this all went down. Chasing his composure, he looks up at Will, ready to say something, but his words trail off in an instant.

He blinks once.

Twice.

His lips part.

“No fucking way...” He blinks. “Will?”

Do they know each other?

The shock in Will’s eyes echoes my doubts. That’s recognition right there.

“Will, let’s just go,” I beg.

“Good to know you still have the same type, Martins,” Chinese food spits blood.

Wait, what?

“Shut up, Dixon,” Will barks.

They *do* know each other.

“What? Blonde, tight ass? You going to bullshit me and say you don’t see it? She’s a spitting image of Lyla.”

Lyla.

Who the fuck is *Lyla*?

Will threatens him with a step forward, and I skip into his path to stop him.

“Will, stop. Please. Let’s get out of here. *Please*,” I beg, but he pays me no mind, attempting to walk around me once more. The whole point was to stay under the radar tonight, and when I see two bouncers pushing through the crowd to reach us, I know we managed to do the very opposite.

“Oh yeah. Just like that. Give me a good look, baby.”

I see a camera flash and turn to find Dixon snapping a picture. He checks his phone screen, satisfied with the shot.

Realization finds me.

He just took a picture of my ass.

That’s what does it.

Will pounces, tackling Dixon to the floor and pummeling his face with hooks so powerful the crowd gasps in terror.

Taking notice of the fight, people scatter, giving them space to kill each other. The music climbs in volume, the bass in strength, making this moment all the more dizzying. Simon and Dixon's friends don't dare intervene, watching Will beat their buddy to a pulp. Dixon is barely fighting back, covered in blood.

The bouncers reach us a few seconds too late. It takes two of them to get Will off Dixon. One yells at Will to get the hell out of the club while the other helps Dixon to his feet, asking him if he's okay. It makes me sick to my stomach, but they're right. Will threw the first punch. For all they know, Dixon is the victim here.

Will yanks his arm out of the bouncers' grasp, telling him he knows the "fucking way out" and walking away.

But just before he dashes to the door...

He takes my hand and drags me along with him.

Twenty

Kassidy

Pulling up in my driveway, Will pushes the gear into drive and kills the engine. We haven't exchanged a single word since he led me out of the club with smoke oozing out of his ears. I didn't dare ask him any of the million questions driving me mad, in fear that it would distract him from the road.

I'd like to live, *thank you very much.*

I glance around the empty lot. My mom's still at work, and I assume from the nonexistent light in Winter's window that she's asleep.

"Who was that?" I ask.

"No one." He unbuckles his seat belt.

Is he serious right now?

"What kind of idiot do you take me for, Will? You knew his name was Dixon. Who is he?"

"I said no one. *Fuck.*" he snarls, storming out of the car and slamming the door. These two definitely have a past. And if Will lashing out at the mere mention of Dixon's name is anything to go by, it's a rather destructive one. I don't let his anger faze me, following him out of the vehicle and scampering to his side.

"Will, who was it?" I grab his arm.

"A fucking terrible friend. That's who!"

Seemingly annoyed with himself for telling me, Will curses, his chest rising with shallow, ragged breaths. For a reason I can't pinpoint, my instinct is to grab his hand—the way he previously grabbed mine on his way out of the club—to show my support.

His fingers are cold, rigid in mine, but he doesn't move away, staring down at our linked hands as though he can't compute my affection.

Rejection in 3, 2, 1...

He doesn't say a word and intertwines our fingers.

Wait, what?

"He's the guy I told you about." His shoulders relax like a burden was just lifted off his body. "The one I thought had my back."

Memories flood my brain. He's the friend Will told me was a masculine version of Zoey. Must be why he hates her so much. Because she reminds him of his past.

She's like salt to his opened wounds.

"I met him when I was seven at the homeless shelter my mom and I had to move into. We practically grew up glued to each other. He taught me to survive life on the street. Made it bearable. He's two years older than me, so I looked up to him. Wanted to be just like him."

This explains a lot. The similar way they carry themselves, the way they talk. They spent so much time together they eventually rubbed off on each other. This leaves me to wonder how Will and his mom ever got off the street. Will said his mom recovered from it all, and he obviously isn't homeless anymore.

So, what, or *who*, pulled them out of this hell?

"Then what happened?" I push my luck an inch too far, and he puts me in my place.

"Then we grew up, and he dropped me when it mattered the most. The end."

He unlatches our hands, stalking toward my house.

"And the girl he was talking about? Lyla? Who is she?"

Was she his first girlfriend? His first love? The girl who broke his heart and made him... *Will?*

Does she really look like me?

“No one.”

His stubbornness sets me off.

“Will, I swear to God, say ‘no one’ one more time and I’m kicking you in the balls.” I stick my finger in his face.

In response to that, he laughs.

Yes, *laughs*.

And I know this is arguably the worst moment for laughter, but it feels insanely good to see him smile. It takes me back to the beginning. Back to the nicknames, the jokes. *This* is the reason I caught feelings in the first place.

Our back-and-forth banter, the teasing.

That laugh.

I missed it.

Straightening out his hand, he asks me for my keys, which I dump into his palm.

“Come on, let’s get you inside.” He unlocks the door.

I’m not sure why he’s sticking around. My guess is he thinks I’m too drunk to function. I’ll admit drinking Zoey’s cocktail for her might not have been the best idea, but overall, I feel fine. But I can’t tell him that. I’m scared if I did, he’d leave.

And, at the risk of pissing off sober, done-with-boys, Kass...

I don’t want him to.

Knotting my arm around his shoulders, he pushes the front door open and helps me inside the kitchen.

“He was lying, by the way.” He catches me off guard.

I frown.

“She doesn’t look like you.”

I know he’s talking about Lyla.

He shuts the door as quietly as he can. “He just wanted to start shit between us. That’s so Dixon. I guess he thought... we were together or something.”

I wish, Dixon, I wish.

I want to ask him a thousand more questions, discover what Dixon did to make him so angry, who Lyla was to him, but something tells me I’ve gotten all I can out of him tonight.

“Let’s get you into bed.” He eyes me when he thinks I’m not looking, his gaze lingering on my V-neck for a second too long. I flush when he chews on the inside of his cheek, forcing his eyes off me. Does he *really* think I don’t see that?

That I don’t feel the tension when he looks at me?

Last time I was with this guy, his hand was in my freaking pants. I’ve been trying to ignore it, but I can’t repress my fervent need to finish what we started.

Kass, wake up! He literally called you his sister an hour ago.

Remembering what he said makes me angry—furious. With everything going on, I didn’t have nearly enough time to process it, and while I know he was probably just trying to get Alex off his back, I can’t let it slide.

“So, I wanted to ask... do you often make out with your sister?” I ask as he ushers me up the stairs.

He tenses.

“You weren’t supposed to hear that.”

I can’t stop myself.

“You weren’t supposed to *say it*.”

His poker face slips off for a second.

“I didn’t mean it. I don’t see you like that. I can’t. And believe me, I fucking tried.”

My anger fades away too fast for my liking.

“Is your mom home?” He changes the topic.

“Nope, night shifts again. And Winter’s sleeping.”

He nods and peels my arm off his shoulders when we reach my bedroom door, letting go of me to twist the knob. I could pout when he moves away, my inner self whining, “*Already?*” I hate how addicted I am to his touch.

“Hey, look, we’re alone! You can stop pretending like I’m just your friend’s sister now.” I scurry inside my room.

I’m not done being bitter, apparently.

“I don’t have to pretend. That’s what you are.”

“Really?” I arch an eyebrow. “So, you’re telling me you spend the night with all of your friends’ sisters? That you get into fights for all of them? That you text them all the time? Do you kiss them all? Alex’s little sister has always had a crush on you—is she next?” I snort and drop on my bed.

He focuses on every single thing in the room *but* me. “Look, I don’t know what came over me. That kiss was a mistake. Let’s just... put it behind us, okay?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Are we talking about the first kiss or the one where you fingered me?”

His mouth dips open.

Take that.

He clears his throat, slapping his *too-cool-to-care* façade back on. “I’m going to get you a glass of water. Why don’t you change? You need to sleep it off.”

Just as he’s walking to the door, it dawns on me. I need to get him out of my life. I told him I was trying to get past it. This is *not* getting past it.

“You never told me how you felt.”

He stops.

“I confessed my feelings to you. Your turn.”

He whisks his head back. “I don’t know what you want me to say, Kass.”

At first, I don’t either.

Until it becomes clear.

“Say you don’t like me.”

He’s startled. “What?”

“I... I think that’s what I need to get over you... *For good.*”

If he *really* doesn’t care, he needs to stop with the jealousy, the getting me alone and telling me he misses me, the hints and signs. He needs to let me go. He debates on his next move for a few seconds.

“Fine.” He blows out a breath. “I’ll say it.”

I never thought I could be satisfied *and* disappointed all at once. I nod, bracing myself for impact.

He steps closer.

Here it comes.

“I like you, Kass.”

My brain malfunctions.

“I like you. Of course I do. How could I not? You...” He cups my cheek, and my eyes fall closed. “*This.*” He traces along my cheek with his thumb. “I may be cold sometimes, but I would have to be fucking heartless not to feel it, too.”

My heart does a whole-ass backflip.

“And fuck, you’re stubborn. And blunt. But I like that.” He feeds the space between us, inches away from my mouth. “And if things were different, I’d throw you on that bed right now.”

I. Can’t. Breathe.

“W-Why don’t you?” I whisper.

“Because you’re...” He seems to forget how to speak when I’m hit by an unexpected surge of confidence and grip his collar. I see his Adam’s apple bob.

“I’m what?” I whisper.

He leans in, but seconds before we ditch the rules, he shakes his head, as though he’s just come to his senses, and pulls back.

“Because you’re Kendrick’s sister... We can never happen.”

His rejection cuts me to the bone. One second he’s letting me in, telling me exactly what I want to hear, and the next, I’m back to where we started.

One step forward, five steps back.

“Are you even listening to yourself? How can you say that after you *just* said you have feelings for me?”

“Don’t you get it? It doesn’t matter what I goddamn feel, Kass. We’re stuck. We can never be more than this.”

Screw it. I’ll play the eager chick if I have to.

“Why the hell not?” I blare. “What’s stopping us? Kendrick? He’d get over it.”

“No, he wouldn’t. You didn’t see how pissed he got when Blake made one, tiny comment about you that one time. You know he only agreed to let you go out with Alex because he’s a fucking saint compared to the rest of us. He made it clear. No touching his sister. That’s his only rule, Kass. And I can’t break it.”

My throat hurts.

“Well, you already did,” I remind him. “Over and over.”

Guilt crosses his face.

He heads for the door. “This conversation is pointless. You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Says who?” I screech.

“Says the shit ton of alcohol running in your veins. You can’t make your own decisions right now.” He opens the door. “I’ll go get you a glass of water. Get changed.”

Stunned, I watch him thump down the stairs. *Well, that went well.*

Squeezing out of my dress, I throw on an oversized white T-shirt and gray shorts before letting the ache in my chest guide me out of my room. I wander around the halls aimlessly.

I don't have the slightest idea of where I'm going. Yet, my feet come to an abrupt stop in front of my brother's room.

He's still at Blake's. He'd freak if he saw me in here. I twist the knob and barge in, flicking the light on and wincing at the mess. Dirty clothes all over the floor, a smelly, empty pizza box on his desk. *Boys will be boys*. At least his bed is made. Even gone, he's affecting my life. He's always been the first choice. The one who mattered. The priority. With Blake. With my fucking dad.

With everyone.

And now... It's happening all over again with Will. *In all fairness, it wouldn't hurt for you to stop going after his friends*. I know this one's on me. I've made my bed. Time to lie in it.

Will's voice echoes in my head. *You can't make your own decisions right now*. He still sees me as Kendrick's little sister. Poor, defenseless Kass. He needs to stop.

I'll make him stop.

"What the hell are you doing?"

He's standing in the doorway, a glass of water in hand.

"Oh, you know, just *making my own decisions*."

He sighs. "Let's get you to bed."

"No."

"No?" he repeats as if he misheard me.

"You heard me. I'm making the *decision* to stay here." I begin shuffling through Kendrick's stuff: the cheap trophy he won at soccer when he was a kid, the baseball he used to throw around with my dad, the math book collecting dust on his desk.

"Kass, let's go," Will presses.

"See? I can make my own decisions. I can choose to do this." I pick up the trophy, chucking it to the ground. Will winces. "And this." I give the dirty clothes on the ground a kick. "I'm free as free as a bird, Willy. The only person who can't see that is you."

“I said let’s go,” he scolds, venturing inside the room and seeking to catch my arm, which I throw out of reach.

“I can do *this*.” I continue making a mess of Kendrick’s stuff. Not that my brother will notice. “And this.”

Irritated, Will slams the glass down on the nightstand and shuts the door. Probably to snap my head off without waking Winter. This time, he successfully snatches my wrist into his hand. Our bodies collide. I don’t say a word, defiance devouring me as my fingers trail down his chest tentatively.

He holds his breath.

He just said it.

He said he feels it, too. That he’s attracted to me, and I sure as hell am going to use that to my advantage.

“But, you see, the best part about making my own decisions is... that I can do *this*.”

I don’t wait for my common sense to kick in. For wise Kass to take the reins. I push to my tiptoes, grab his collar, and crash my mouth to his. His lips are warm, soft—welcoming. At first, I consider the absence of a rejection a good sign.

Then I realize something.

He’s not kissing me back.

I just forced myself on him. What in the *fuck* is wrong with me? Ashamed, I back away, babbling a squeaky “I’m so sorry.” His blue eyes are dark, unreadable. He doesn’t accept nor acknowledge my apology, staring at me in shock. I search his features for a clue as to what might be going on in that messy head of his.

Nothing.

He gives me *nothing*.

His reaction seems to take forever when in reality, it’s pretty quick. He shakes his head, jerks me back to him, and kisses me again.

Harder.

Deeper.

He did what?

His mouth comes down on mine roughly, blaming me for snipping his already thin resolve. *This is all your fault*, his lips accuse. *I tried to do the right thing. Now it's too late.* Our kiss is just as heated, if not more, than the one we shared at the tree house. We barely pull away for air, reluctant to part for a split second. Is he scared, too? Scared that we'll wake up and realize how wrong this is?

Scared that we'll be forced to stop?

My hands climb under his shirt, my fingers shadowing his V line, as he tugs my head back to deepen the kiss. His tongue requests access and I give it to him instantly. Before I know it, I'm straddling him, legs on each side of his body, his chest flush with mine. We never stop kissing.

Until...

“Kass. Wait...” He pants. “We... We can't.”

Certain this is where our lapse of judgment ends, I try and get off his lap, but he holds me in place. With every protest coming out of his mouth comes another kiss, another touch. He's not letting me go.

He doesn't *want* to stop.

I jerk his T-shirt over his head, in awe of his fit, toned body as I sway my hips back and forth and create friction, which, judging by his grunts, he definitely can't ignore.

I'm practically grinding on him.

I'm sorry, who is she?

He's hard as a rock, and my thin shorts make me feel... *a lot*, to say the least. I'm positive I'm in trouble when he traps my lip between his teeth and strips off my baggy shirt, undressing me so fast I barely have a chance to realize I'm in my bra in front of him for the first time.

His eyes rake over my body hungrily, and he swings me off his lap, pinning me down to the mattress and smiling at my

white bralette, which displays bright, yellow smiley faces where my hard nipples stick out.

“And you blame me for seeing you as a good little girl?” he pokes fun at me. Refusing to let him mock me a second longer, I grip his dick. No warning. He sucks in a breath.

“Take it back,” I order.

“What?”

“You know what.” I tighten my hold on his length.

He smirks. “What? That you’re a good little girl?” He lures me back in to say against my mouth, “Something wrong with the truth, control freak?”

He once told me he thought I had no idea what to do in bed.

I’m going to prove him wrong.

Out for revenge, I unzip his jeans and wander a hand inside.

His eyes grow.

“Kass, you don’t have t—” he starts, but I plaster my mouth to his, gathering the courage to go all the way and grab him in his boxers.

“Holy shit.” He groans at my touch.

I push him off me, straddling his legs and yanking his boxers down to his knees in one move. He’s fully exposed now. There’s no denying it: *this would hurt*. When I spit on my hand, he responds with a surprised, carnal look.

I know, Will, I know.

Rest in peace, prudish Kass.

I lower my hand onto him, and he grips the blanket, a low “*Fuck*” escaping his lips, as he throws his head back. His reaction drives me wild. I work him slowly at first, then faster, until I feel him throb between my fingers. His eyes snap open, and he looks at me like he can’t believe what’s happening.

“Stop.” He jerks my hand away.

Fear fills me.

This is it. The part where he pushes me away.

The part where he runs.

I'm the one in disbelief when he does the polar opposite, trapping me under his body again and propping himself up as he kisses me. Except that he's completely naked now, and I can feel every *bit* of him push against the fabric of my shorts.

Crap, I'm totally going to do something stupid, aren't I?

I squirm as he kisses his way down my stomach, pulling my shorts down my legs and laying a hand on my panties the exact same way he did back at the tree house.

“Will,” I say, a bit nervous.

He looks up at me, a devilish smirk on his face, and begins placing kisses all over the inside of my thighs—payback for my teasing.

“We need to fix something.” He looks up at me, his warm breath fanning my center.

I catch on quickly.

I once told him I'd never been with someone who gave back. That Blake was so selfish in bed he never even tried. One move is all it takes. I can't, for the life of me, wrap my mind around how quickly he slides my underwear down my legs. My brain steps aside, passing the lead over to my body. If he does this, he's going to be the first guy to go down on me.

“W-Will, I've never—”

“I know.” He gives me a reassuring smile. “Which is why we're going to do this right.”

Before I can overthink it, he wraps his arms around my thighs and spreads them apart.

“Fuck, Kass.” He grunts at the sight of me, and I flush. Finally, he leans in, his tongue meeting the sweetest of spots.

My eyes shutter closed.

Beeeeeeeeeep.

That's me going into cardiac arrest.

His tongue is slow, hesitant, at first. Until he increases the pressure and my eyes roll back.

Oh, sweet Lord, have mercy on me.

One of his fingers joins the party, squeezing inside me and curling its way to my G-spot. Then comes finger number two. I can hear my own arousal, which is a first for me seeing as Blake made me as wet as the fucking desert.

I remind myself that Winter is sleeping right down the hall when he picks up the pace, climbing up my body again and biting on the skin under my ear while his fingers speed in and out of me. It's becoming harder and harder to be quiet. What he says next leaves me to question if he can read my mind.

"Don't moan, baby," he rasps into my ear. "You wouldn't want to get caught, would you?"

It feels like I'm going to have a heart attack just from that.

He goes back down on me, cupping my breast over my bralette and tugging at the fabric like he's this close to ripping it off me. It takes him a matter of minutes to make me shake. An overwhelming pressure builds up in my stomach.

"T-This doesn't feel like..."

"Like when you do it?" he finishes, and I nod, embarrassed. "That's the whole point, Kass."

"What kind of sorcery is this?" I say, and he laughs. I search his eyes for a logical explanation, but there is nothing logical about this. Nothing logical about us.

"Give it up," he commands.

"What?"

"Control." His order sucker punches me. "*Give it up.*"

I shake my head, the pleasure growing impossible to ignore. "But I—"

"I said don't fucking fight it." He pumps harder, the authority in his voice sending me over the edge. I surrender to

him, my stomach clenching as he twirls his tongue around me until I'm practically convulsing. Pleasure zaps through my body like thunder. "That's it, baby. Let go," he says, his voice thick with need.

I used to call the nickname baby cheesy, but now that it's mine and Will is the one giving it to me, *I'm keeping it*. Withdrawing his fingers, he gives me a second to catch my breath, but I don't want a second. I want him. All of him. Running on lust, I cross my legs behind his back and guide him closer. If we weren't breathing so heavily, he'd definitely hear my pounding heart right now. He kisses me. Long and slow. But... his lips on mine aren't all that I feel. He's at my entrance, bare and hard.

What the fuck?

What the fuck?

What the fuck?

This is wrong.

So wrong.

I dig the heels of my feet into his back without thinking. He inches himself deeper and deeper. Then, just as he's about to take the final step...

He stops.

His eyes snap open like he's just come out of a trance. So many emotions fill his gaze: panic, regret, fear. All the emotions you *don't* want to see in a guy's eyes when he's nearly inside you.

"What the fuck am I doing?" He blinks repeatedly.

I was wrong.

This.

This is the part where he runs.

"We're... This..." He can't bring himself to speak, moving off me and finding his boxers on the bed. He throws his clothes back on in a heartbeat, covering his face with his hand, on the verge of a breakdown.

“Will.” I falter.

“Do you... Do you realize how fucked-up this is?” he rambles, out of his mind. “We... I just... I almost had sex with my best friend’s sister on his bed. *His fucking bed, Kass!*”

It hits me twice as hard as it did him.

He’s right.

We *are* on my brother’s bed.

The truth sinks into me like a rock. This is Kendrick’s bedroom. How could I do something like this? For that one, blissful second, we forgot about the world. Forgot where we were, *who* we were. All that mattered was this.

Us.

And this moment.

“I have to get out of here.” He runs a nervous hand through his hair, heading for the door.

“Will!”

Truth is, I have no idea what to say. Maybe because he’s right. Maybe we can never be more than this.

Seconds before he’s out the door, he halts, shooting me a look full of regrets that makes my heart bleed.

“You were right to stay away from me” is the last thing he says before leaving me half-naked on my brother’s bed.

Twenty-One

Will

The chanting of the crowd echoing in my head, I march into the ring with perfectly rehearsed, automatic steps. Adrenaline pervades my being, seeping through every bone, every nerve ending in my body.

This fight. This moment. The next few minutes are going to determine whether the upcoming month of my life is hell. And I might not know shit about what I'm doing most of the time, but I know something about right now: *I can't lose this fight.*

Standing across the ring, ready to pounce, is Ian, leader of the Scars, our second most dreaded competitors after Haze and his fighters. Behind Ian, miserably failing to assert dominance and intimidate us, are his guys. All bearing the same creepy-ass mark beneath their eyes.

Four grand.

It's all I can see when I look at him.

Four fucking grand to beat his ass.

I glance at Kendrick, Blake, and Alex over my shoulder.

"You've got this," Alex hypes.

This was supposed to be Kendrick's fight. Been scheduled for a while now. But in two days, he'll be fighting Haze, and we can't risk him getting pummeled—cough, *again*, cough—before such an important fight.

Today, money is at stake.

In two days, it'll be his cousin's life.

We won't let Haze have Winter. Not if we can help it. She's a good person. She doesn't deserve this. Blake intended on taking this fight, so I came up with a shitty excuse about

needing to blow off some steam. Truth is, I desperately need the money. I haven't snagged any high-paying fight this month, and I'm starting to run out of options.

Man, what I wouldn't do for a good night's sleep. Haven't had one since the night I snuck into Kass's room and witnessed the most awkward mom sex talk of all time. I still can't believe how easily I fell asleep with her. How defenseless my demons were against the blonde, blue-eyed angel by my side.

Kass...

I wince at her name.

A hopeful, torturous voice in the back of my mind suggests maybe she's answered my previous text since I last checked my phone.

You fucking wish, dipshit.

Will, eyes on the prize!

Ian proceeds into the ring, glowering at me. He's a good fighter. He doesn't lead the Scars for nothing, but he's not desperate. Not like I am. The rules are called to the crowd, the deafening buzzing marking the beginning of a fight slicing through the air.

"Fucking destroy him, Will!" is the last thing I hear before launching myself at my adversary.

Kassidy

Willy Wonka: Hey. Can we talk?

4 days ago

Willy Wonka: Kass?

4 days ago

Willy Wonka: I know you're getting these. You always have your phone on you.

3 days ago

Willy Wonka: Kass please.

3 days ago

Willy Wonka: I don't want it to be weird between us.

3 days ago

Willy Wonka: Can we talk about what happened?

2 days ago

Willy Wonka: Did you move out of your house? Do we live on the same fucking planet? I haven't seen you all week.

2 days ago

Willy Wonka: I'm sorry...

1 day ago

Willy Wonka: About everything.

1 day ago

Reading Will's last text an unhealthy amount of times, I stop myself from replying and pad into the empty kitchen. A new text from Zoey pops onto my screen.

Zoey: Are you on your way?

Kass: Be there in fifteen.

Zoey: Okay. Grab me my usual at Starbucks.

Ignoring the absence of a *please* in her message, I grab my bag, pitch it over my shoulder, and amble to my car. My mind travels back to Will's text as I sink into the passenger seat.

No, I didn't move out of my house, Will. I've just changed every single thing about my schedule to make sure I never run into you.

I've been spending all my time away from my place lately. When I'm not at school or work, I'm at my friends'. I only come home to sleep and leave at the crack of dawn to pick up Zoey. Even managed to miss art class this week, courtesy of a fake headache.

Since I had to think up an excuse to feed my mom about why I leave so early, I've been driving Zoey to school every single day. She's been needing a ride since she broke up with Sean.

Again.

Zoey's birthday party ended with Sean's tongue down another girl's throat. I'm guessing this time it's really over, but then again, with Zoey, you never know. My phone buzzes with another text as I'm reversing out of my driveway. I don't get to read its content, but I do catch who it's from.

Willy Wonka.

I don't know why he's doing this. Why he's been texting me round the clock since the night he freaked out on me. He told me to stay away from him, hence my efforts to get him out of my life, but he hasn't been making it easy. The last time I saw this guy he was almost inside me. And now he doesn't want things to be *weird*? I'm sorry, Willy, but things will never *not* be weird between us ever again.

I pull up to Starbucks five minutes later, then drive straight to Zoey's apartment. It's past eight when I snatch the guest parking spot by the entrance. We have to be at school in an hour.

Zoey gave me a key to her building when it became clear I was reinventing myself as a taxi driver, so I don't bother waiting for her to buzz me in. I come to a stop in front of her unlocked door and step inside, careful to be as quiet as possible. The walls are paper here, and I don't want to wake up the cranky lady next door. She already hates us.

Seconds before I holler to alert Zoey of my arrival, a female voice captures my interest.

"I'm so sorry about Sean, girl. I heard."

"Don't worry about me. I rebounded thirty minutes later."

That's Zoey.

Curious, I follow the voices, tiptoeing down the hall toward her half-opened bedroom door. I see Zoey lying in bed on her stomach through the crack. She's on a video call with someone.

"No way? With who?"

She's talking to Callie.

“Okay, fine, I’ll tell you but...” Zoey pauses, glancing around as if to make sure she’s alone. I retreat into the shadows. I don’t have a visual anymore, but I can hear everything. “You have to promise not to tell anybody. Kass would kill me.”

I hold my breath.

“Pinky swear. Spill.”

“Well, you know how I told you Miss Perfect didn’t want me with her brother...”

My stomach twists.

“You slut! You didn’t?” Callie gasps.

“Let me finish. Since she made me swear off her brother, I had to find someone else. I mean... a girl has needs.”

Somehow, I don’t need to hear another word for my heart to break. The pain settles in pre-betrayal. I *know* she’s about to hurt me by naming someone a best friend shouldn’t touch with a ten-foot pole.

“Wait, so you didn’t sleep with her brother?” Callie asks, her goldfish brain struggling to keep up.

“No, I slept with her ex.”

There it is.

“That Blake guy? Her first?” Callie’s laugh drives the knife deeper into my chest. How the hell does she know so much about my life? How many of my most intimate moments has Zoey shared with her?

“Yeah. He came to pick up his friend Alex, but he couldn’t find him. So, after Sean kissed that whore, we...” She laughs into her palm. “We did it in the bathroom.”

Zoey slept with Blake.

My best friend... that I’ve known since I was five. The girl I defended when she treated me like disposable garbage. That same girl slept with my ex. The ex I cried about in her arms. The guy who dumped me over text.

“And between us... it wasn’t the first time.”

“What? When was the first?”

“Callie, I swear on my life, if you tell anyone about this, you’re dead.” Zoey hesitates.

“I won’t! Come on, you’re killing me.”

“Okay. Okay... It started back when they were together.”

Cue the waterworks.

The silence that ensues suggests even Callie is judging her, which causes Zoey to backpedal.

“Hear me out—I wanted to stop, I did, but he kept coming back. Every week. Like clockwork. The first time was at the back-to-school bonfire. After Kass passed out, he came to find me and... Well, I don’t need to draw you a picture, do I?”

A beat of silence.

“Damn, Zoe, that’s... kind of cold,” Callie accuses.

Kind of cold?

It feels like I’m being gutted on repeat.

That night, after I gave Blake my virginity, he...

They...

I can’t fucking breathe.

Fueled by rage, I kick the door open and Zoey yelps, jumping up to her feet. Standing in the doorway, I glare at her in silence.

Her face crumbles.

She hangs up the call. “Kass, you’re... you’re here. B-But you said you’d be there in fifteen.”

Refusing to waste another breath on her, I sprint to the front door.

“Kass, wait. Why are you leaving?”

Is she serious?

She catches up to me, gripping my arm to hold me back. “Why are you making a scene? It’s not a big deal. It’s not like you ever really loved him. Plus, it’s so clear you’re head over heels in love with Will.”

“It’s not a big deal?” I yell so loud she jerks back a step, letting go of my arm. “You really don’t get it, do you? It’s not about Blake. It’s about *you*. It’s about the fact that you, *my best friend*, could do something like that to me. For fuck’s sake, Zoey!”

“Says the girl who almost fucked her brother’s best friend on his bed. This is bullshit, Kass. Stop acting all high-and-mighty. You’re no better than I am,” she spits.

Maybe she’s right. I *am* a hypocrite, telling my friends not to hook up with my brother when I almost slept with his best friend myself. All I know is I should’ve never confided in her about what happened with Will.

“Don’t make this about me! I trusted you. We’ve been friends since kindergarten, and I always, *always* had your back. Even when people told me that you were selfish. Even when...” I start crying. *Damn it. Pull it together.* “When you ditched me again and again for some boy. When you invited me over so I could babysit your sister while you sneaked out. Even when you treated me like a fucking slave. Everybody said you were a bad friend. I never listened. Well, guess what? I’m listening now. You’re selfish, Zoey. Always have been. You’d throw the people closest to you into the fire to get what you want, and I’m done being your fucking puppet. *We’re done!*”

I swing the door open, but just as I’m about to storm out...

“You want to see selfish?” she hisses. “Fine. Maybe I’ll tell Kendrick about you and his best friend shagging on his bed. Or maybe since we’re *done*, I’ll finally go after the guy you like. How’s Will doing, by the way? Maybe you could give me his number. I’ll show him what a real woman can do. He obviously needs it. You know... since he was so disgusted by hooking up with you, he literally had to run out of your house.”

I can't speak, flabbergasted by her cruelty. I was best friends with that monster for thirteen years.

“Oh, well. Wouldn't be the first time I had to satisfy one of your boys.”

From there, I lose it.

I squeeze the chocolate chip Frappuccino in my hands and throw the drink in her face.

As in *all of it*.

I only understand what I've done once she screams, covered in whipped cream, coffee, and chocolate chips.

“Don't ever talk to me again.” I rush out of the apartment, slamming her door so hard the walls shake. Nearly suffocating, I hurry back to my car, breaking into sobs the second I'm alone.

I hate myself for how much I want to call him.

He was right.

Will was right.



Sitting in my car and observing the tall building staring back at me, I weigh my options: go to school today and see my ex-best friend or... tell my mom we have to move. To tell you the truth, option number two is looking damn appealing right now.

Blinded by the tears I spent fifteen minutes trying to dry, I drag myself out of my car and shamble toward the entrance. I march down the crowded hall, hoping to hell I'll survive this day, and unlock my phone to find the text I didn't open earlier waiting for me.

Will.

I forgot he texted me.

Willy Wonka: I can't fucking stop thinking about you.

I wince. *Goddamn it*, Will, why are you doing this to me? Shoving my phone into my back pocket, I turn the corner and...

See him.

Back pressed to my locker, his foot up against the steel.

Shit.

As long as he wasn't going out of his way to see me, avoiding him was within the realm of possibility, but I *definitely* wasn't prepared for him showing up at my locker. Time to face it—I'm stuck. I have art last period, and even if I did manage to dodge him now, I can't skip this class forever.

His features come to life when he spots me. He flashes a pleading smile, his gaze saying "*Please, hear me out.*" The puppy eyes, that razor-sharp jaw, the dark circles displaying his lack of sleep.

That's all it takes.

It hits me like a truck.

I was wrong.

Dead wrong.

I don't just like him.

I love him.

I'm in love with him.

And I'm the dumbest girl in the whole wide world.

I fell so quickly it's embarrassing. For the guy who doesn't believe in relationships, not to mention my brother's best friend, as if it weren't bad enough. And seeing him again for the first time since the night I gave myself over to him is brutally murdering my heart right now.

I halt my strides so abruptly someone almost trips behind me. I just found out the girl I considered my sister never once cared about me, never once respected me. That she slept with my ex throughout our entire relationship, and while I know kicking her out of my life was—*is*—the right thing to do, it

still hurts like a bitch. Thirteen years. Down the drain. Just like that.

Nope. I can't do this.

This is too much for one day.

Will frowns at my immobility, but I don't give him a single thought, spinning on my heels and streaking in the opposite direction.

"Kass!" He calls as I push through the crowd. I play deaf, counting down the seconds to my freedom. I don't have it in me to listen to him tell me he wants to be *friends* again.

Two steps out of the building, I spot Zoey climbing out of a blue car. Callie's car—well, it sure didn't take her long to replace me. She's laughing at something Callie said, looking like a million bucks. Her makeup is flawless, her outfit color coordinated. You'd never guess she became close friends with a Starbucks drink an hour ago.

"Are you okay?" someone asks.

I whip my head around.

Luke.

"No, I... I..." Tears course down my face.

"Kass, what happened?"

"It's..." *Sniffle.* "It's Zoey."

I watch Zoey and Callie saunter toward the school in the distance, a mix of panic, pain, and rage stirring in my chest.

Luke places a hand on my arm. "Do you want to get out of here?"

"What? You mean... skip school?"

He nods. "Just say the word."

"I—"

"Kass, wait." A voice erupts behind me.

His voice.

I pivot to see Will standing in the moving crowd, slightly panting from running after me. His attention immediately shifts to where Luke's hand connects with my skin.

His jaw twitches.

Then he sees my soaked cheeks.

And his features soften.

It isn't long until he clenches his fists, the worry in his eyes morphing into anger. His murderous glare is asking me a clear, definite question: "*Who do I have to kill?*" In that moment, all I want to do is run into his arms. Cry until I can't breathe. Tell him he was right. About everything.

But I can't.

I'll never be able to.

So instead, I turn Luke.

"Get me out of here." I wipe my face.

Luke nods, his hand dropping to my lower back as he nudges me into motion. Heartbroken, I follow Luke out of the school, Will's eyes burning into the back my skull.



It's past five by the time Luke's car slows down in front of my house. The day flew by, although I wish I could've skipped it altogether. The second I climbed into Luke's car, I burst out crying—and I mean the humiliating, *ugly* crying I usually reserve for the privacy of my bedroom.

I hated being vulnerable in front of him, but Luke, being the supportive sweetheart that he is, made me feel comfortable. He was beyond understanding when I told him about Zoey's betrayal. And, to my greatest relief, he didn't once make a move or flirt with me. I think he finally realized we're better off as friends.

I almost let myself forget, driving around town with him, why I skipped school for the first time in my entire life.

Scratch that—I *didn't* skip school. Not really. Zoey may be a bitch, but she isn't worth getting detention over. I told my mom I was still a mess over my dad—which isn't completely false—and I needed a personal day.

She agreed to call the school under one condition: that I be home for dinner tonight. My dear brother is finally returning from his “*let's hide from my mom that I got beat up*” vacation, and she wants us all together for one meal.

I caved. It's not like I have anywhere else to go anyway. Zoey's place is no longer an option, and Morgan... God, I can't even imagine what bullshit Zoey must've spewed to her today. I wanted to text her this morning, but after I called my mom, I powered off my phone, in desperate need of a break.

“So, William Martins, huh?” Luke's voice brings me back.

I inwardly curse.

How did he find out?

“What about him?” I play dumb.

“Something going on between you two?”

I unbuckle my seat belt. “No, why?”

“I don't know, it's just... This morning in the hall, he seemed pretty damn desperate to talk to you.”

I snatch my backpack at my feet.

“Not to mention he looked at me like he wanted to break every bone in my body for touching you, but hey, that's just a detail.”

I laugh.

“Believe me, he is *not* my boyfriend.”

“But you want him to be, don't you?”

Yes.

“W-What? No, I don't,” I word-vomit, but his smile tells me I've already betrayed myself.

“Don't bother. Ethan spilled the beans about you liking a guy you shouldn't the other day at work.”

I grin.

Freaking Ethan.

I knew I was smart not to tell him Will's name. The guy can't keep a secret to save his life.

"He's your brother's friend, right? This Will guy? That's why you don't want to be with him?" Luke puts together.

More like he doesn't want to be with *me*.

"Not exactly. I don't really want to talk about it."

"Oh, of course. Forget I asked."

"Don't worry about it." I reach for the car handle.

"Listen, I know my aunt hired a new store manager and we won't be working together anymore, but if you need me, I'm always here." He seems sincere.

"Thanks. You're a good friend, Luke."

He offers me a small smile in response, and I carry myself out of the car, watching him disappear down the street. My mom's car isn't in the driveway yet, but my brother's car is.

Along with Blake's—I'm going to vomit.

And last but not least, the car I *especially* didn't want to see...

Will's.

He's at my house.

I activate my phone as I'm unlocking the front door. I walk in, voices and laughter ricocheting all the way from the living room to the kitchen. They're all here. The second my phone lights up, it pings with a text.

Except it won't stop.

One message.

Two messages.

Three messages.

The many texts I didn't receive today all come through at once. I have two from Morgan.

And four from Will.

His last text was two minutes ago.

Willy Wonka: I'm literally losing my fucking mind, Kass. Answer me.

"Who the hell are you texting, Martins?" I hear my brother ask in the living room.

"No one," Will replies.

Me.

He's texting *me*.

"He's been like this all week. All secretive and shit. I'm telling you, it's a girl," Blake accuses.

My fists clench at my cheating ex's voice. If he so much as looks at me, I'll make key chains with his balls.

"Is she hot?" Kendrick snorts, and I cringe.

If you only knew, bro.

"Shut up. There's no girl," Will snaps.

Hoping I can pass through the living room without drawing attention to myself, I suck in a breath and walk in.

Instantly, they stop talking.

And stare.

Great.

"Hey, where were you all day? Morgan was looking for you," my brother asks.

"Didn't feel so good. Mom gave me the day off."

He frowns. "But... you just came home. Shouldn't you have spent the day resting?"

Shit, what do I say?

"How much longer until dinner, I'm starv—" A female voice saves me.

I swivel to find the last person I expected to see waltz into my living room. Nicole. My brother's ex and the only girlfriend he's ever had. Haven't seen her since they broke up a while ago. Not exactly a piece of cake, this one.

"Oh, hey, Kass." She waves, taking a seat on the couch.

"Hey?" I can't make sense of her presence. "Are you two back together?"

Alex scoffs. "Tonight, they are."

It all becomes clear. This must be Kendrick's excuse for disappearing after he got beaten to a pulp. He always comes up with something to ease my mom, but a fake girlfriend? *Seriously?*

"Wait, is that why mom wanted me to come to dinner so bad? Because you're introducing her to your fake girlfriend?"

"Yep." Kendrick beams.

"Let me guess, you told Mom you were staying with your girlfriend this whole time?"

"Yep," Kendrick repeats. "My *girl* over here—" He points to Nicole with his chin. "—was going through a rough patch."

"You're crazy," I scold.

"Tell that to Winter." Kendrick sticks his hands up. "She's the one who put us into this mess."

What is that supposed to mean?

Jesus, how much have I missed?

"Speaking of Winter, where is she?" I ask. I feel like we've barely spoken lately. We need to catch up.

"In her room." Kendrick shrugs.

"Anyway, we should get going. Your mom will be there soon." Alex leaps from the couch. "Guys?"

"Coming." Blake rises to his feet.

"Right behind you." Will joins him.

I can't help glaring at Blake as he passes me. To think I wasted six months of my life on this trash bag. Careful not to make eye contact with Will, I take the stairs two at a time with the intention to hide into my bedroom until dinner.

A shiver skitters down my spine the second I pad into my room. I left the window open. I receive a text from Morgan as I'm pushing it shut.

Morgan: Where were you today? Are you okay?

Relief overtakes me.

I was afraid Zoey would've turned her against me.

Kass: Something happened with Zoey.

Morgan: I know. She told me. Want to come over to my house tonight? My parents just left for their trip.

Kass: Be there after dinner

Morgan: Okay. Xx

I can't wipe the smile off my face. Well, it doesn't look like she loathes me. That's a start.

"Had fun with golden boy?"

I let out a startled yelp.

Will.

"Okay, you have *got* to stop doing that!"

He half smiles, standing in my doorway with his right shoulder braced against the wooden frame and his arms folded over his chest. He's wearing a simple, worn-out tee and jeans, and yet he looks unbelievable.

"Didn't you just leave?" I arch an eyebrow.

"I told them I forgot something upstairs."

I nod, not bothering to summon a reply, and he passes the threshold, kicking the door shut.

"You know the whole point of having a phone is to answer it?" he jokes, but I catch a whiff of irritation in his voice.

“Oh, is that what this thing is for?” I barely muster a weak, unconvincing smile. I don’t know how to act around him anymore. All I can think about when I look at him is where we left off.

“So... where’d you go today?”

“Nowhere.”

He snaps. “Goddamn it, Kass. How much longer are you going to be mad at me?”

“I’m not mad,” I say in the most quiet, calm voice, which catches him off guard. I can tell he expected me to fight.

To argue.

But I’m done fighting this boy.

“Like hell you’re not.” He exhales.

“I’m not. I’m just listening to you, Will. Staying away from you. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

He moves closer.

Zip it, heart.

“It should be.” He closes in on me until I have no choice but to crane my neck to look at him. “But... fuck, Kass, I... Tell me why it’s the last thing I want.”

His hand lifts to my cheek.

Shivers.

“That’s not what you were saying last week.” I steer clear of his hold, ghosting my wretched heart’s desperate pleas.

Five more seconds, it begs.

“What the hell was I supposed to do? Tell me. We were on Kendrick’s bed. I just... panicked.”

I cringe at the reminder.

I still can’t believe I did that.

Must’ve washed his sheets like five hundred times afterward.

“I know, I feel awful about it, and I’m glad you stopped it, but... You hurt me, Will. *Bad*. I can’t keep up with you anymore. One second you’re rejecting me, and the next you’re blowing up my phone. I’m just trying to listen to y—”

He cages me against my desk in one move, cupping my face, with both hands this time, and stealing my breath.

“Don’t.” He sounds pained. “Don’t fucking listen to me if it means you’re not going to be in my life anymore.”

Kass, be strong.

“No, you were right. We can’t be friends. And we can’t be together. So, I guess...” I choke. “I guess we can’t be *anything*.”

He releases me instantly, a million thoughts, questions, and possibilities racing in his eyes. I don’t think he’s hearing me.

He proves me right by saying, “Is this because of Luke?”

“What? That’s not what this is abo—”

“Is it because of Luke, yes or no?”

Maybe if I tell him what he wants to hear...

Maybe.

“So what if it is?” I lie my ass off.

His mouth falls open.

His eyes dip to the floor.

“Got it.”

Then he walks out.

Twenty-Two

Kassidy

Slogging into the kitchen, I ready my excuse and hope to hell my mom will let me skip dinner. I'm not done moping around about Will yet, and frankly, after the day I've had? I'd rather gouge my eyes out than watch Kendrick and his bratty ex pretend to be in love.

My "stomachache" goes up in smoke at the bright smile illuminating my mother's face. She looks ecstatic to have us all together. I can't ruin that for her.

It's just one dinner, Kass.

How could this day possibly get any worse?

Winter comes trailing into the kitchen once we're all seated. She looks just as annoyed with this fake-girlfriend dinner as I am, forcing a smile as she plops down into the seat next to me. I wonder what my brother meant when he said my cousin was responsible for the fake-girlfriend debacle. I know I insisted I didn't want anything to do with their mess, but... I'm getting sick of feeling out of the loop.

I'm relieved to see my mom ordered pizza and we're eating off paper plates. The quicker we get this over with, the quicker I can rush to Morgan's place and find out if I still have a friend in this cruel world.

Winter's phone buzzes with a text, but I don't pay it much mind, too focused on not rolling my eyes along to Nicole and Kendrick's rehearsed speech. Then, just as we're about to start eating, we're stopped by a knock on the door.

My mom lifts off her seat. "Are we expecting someone?"

"Sit down, Mom. I got it." I beat her to the door. Expecting a stranger to try to sell me something, I swing the door open and—

What

The

Fuck.

Why is Haze Adams standing on my porch? He steps inside before I can slam the door in his face.

Sure, just make yourself at home.

“I’m so sorry I’m late,” Haze says.

It seems to happen in slow motion. He locks eyes with Winter across the room, and the look she gives him sets my suspicions ablaze. She’s mad, panicked... flustered? I knew Winter was fraternizing with the enemy, but this is miles past “fraternizing.” *Something is definitely going on between those two.*

“I hope you didn’t start without me.” Haze flashes us his million-dollar smile. I may hate the guy, but I have to admit I do get the hype about him.

Winter settles on an emotion.

Anger.

Full-on anger.

He wasn’t supposed to show up, that much is clear. I glance at Kendrick, who’s staring daggers at Haze. I know them to be nemeses in the ring. Odds are Haze is only doing this to piss off my brother—and, by the looks of it, it’s working.

My mom cuts in. “I’m sorry, who are you?”

Haze peels his eyes away from Winter. “Of course, where are my manners? I’m Haze.” He holds out his hand, which my mom shakes hesitantly.

Glimpsing at Winter from the corner of his eye, Haze smirks. Winter bounces to her feet. She knows him. She *knows* he’s going to say something stupid, but she’s too late.

The damage is done.

“I’m Winter’s boyfriend.”

Yep. She's going to kill him.

“Honey, why didn't you tell me?” My mom rejoices, pulling my cousin into a loving embrace. “I knew something was going on. That's why you were so secretive. You've met your first boyfriend.”

I'm so unbelievably drained from the shitstorm that is my life, I don't even care that Winter didn't heed my warnings about this guy. I'm not even mad that Haze crashed our dinner.

Hell, I'm entertained.

Where's the popcorn?

Haze pouts. “I can't believe you didn't tell them about us, babe. I thought we were official.”

“Please, give me your coat. Welcome to my home,” my mom requests. Haze gives it to her with a “thanks.”

“What's wrong, honey bunny? No kiss?” Haze turns to Winter. She cringes at the cheesy nickname, to Haze's great satisfaction

He's so proud of himself.

“Of course. I'll give it to you in a second. I just have to show you the thing first.” Winter's jaw is tight, her grin so forced it looks painful.

“What thing?” he asks.

“You know that thing that I talked to you about the other day?”

“Aren't you eating with us?” my mom worries.

“We'll be back. Start without us,” Winter says, dragging Haze out of sight. I hear their footsteps thumping up the stairs.

Then her bedroom door closes.

Ah, shit.

Show's over.



I'm turning up on Morgan's front porch an hour later. Dinner ran longer than I thought. At least, Winter's "boyfriend" made for a much more interesting evening.

Inhaling a jerky breath, I knock on the Jameses' front door with one hope only: that I can salvage whatever mess Zoey made of my friendship with Morgan today.

"Coming!" Morgan calls from inside.

Footsteps.

The door opens.

Morgan appears on the other side, her hair up in a messy bun. Her reading glasses, sweatpants, and cropped hoodie complete her bookworm look. I notice the pen tucked behind her ear. She was probably filling out crossword puzzles—I know, my best friend is an eighty-year-old woman trapped in the body of a teenager. At first, her lack of a reaction worries me.

Until she pulls me into a hug.

"I'm so sorry," she whispers.

My shoulders unwind.

"You know about what happened?" I assume.

Morgan chuckles. "Nope. No clue, but I've watched you put up with Zoey's shit for so long, if you're done with her, it must be something big."

"Wait, she didn't tell you?" I break away from her.

I'm surprised Zoey passed on the opportunity to ruin my life.

"She just fed me a bunch of BS about you falsely accusing her of sleeping with Blake. Said that she was done with you, but I know her, and I know you. I didn't buy it for a second."

"So, you're not mad at me?"

"Mad at you?" She looks at me like I'm mental. "Kass, I only hung out with her to hang out with *you*."

I could cry when she says that. Come to think of it, Morgan and Zoey never made plans that didn't include me. Meanwhile, I'd hang out with Morgan alone on a regular basis. I've known Morgan four years, while I've known Zoey for thirteen.

This just goes to show that how long you've known someone doesn't mean squat. The person you met a few days ago might just be the one to pull out the knife your oldest friend drove into your back.

"I guess that means I can finally say it." She closes her eyes as though she wants to relish in it. "God, I hate that bitch."

We both break into laughter.

"Get in here." She sidles aside to let me in. Her house is the same it's always been: clean, quiet, and *empty*. Morgan is an only child whose parents are often required to go out of town for work. From the moment she was old enough to stay home alone, her folks trusted her to take care and entertain herself, hence her avid reader lifestyle. She says she doesn't mind the loneliness, but I think it's taken a toll on her.

The second we crash onto her bed, Morgan asks about my falling-out with Zoey. I fill her in on *everything*, from beginning to end: how Zoey slept with Blake during our entire relationship, how she threatened to go after Will to hurt me, how I ended up telling Will that I was into Luke earlier so he'd let me go. Morgan listens carefully, her eyes filled with empathy. Until she sits up straight, her palm flying to her mouth.

"Oh my God." She gasps.

"What?" I ask.

"We're going out." She leaps off her bed, digging through her walk-in closet for an outfit.

I chuckle. "Who are you, and what have you done to my best friend?"

"I'm serious. There's a kegger on the beach tonight. It was all Zoey could talk about today. We have to go."

“Why?” I groan.

“Because Will’s going to be there. And Zoey kept saying you were going to get what’s coming to you tonight.”

The pieces fall back together.

“He hates her. He’d never do that,” I counter.

“You just told him you were with Luke! He’s going to be all sad and miserable and drinking and... Don’t you see what’s happening here?” She holds her hands up. “You pain in the asses may be too freaking stubborn to get together already, but if you don’t go, you may never get the chance to try.”

She’s right...

Cornered, I nod, slinging my legs over the bed. Seems we’re going to a party tonight.

Will

The crowd is thick, the music loud, but nothing—absolutely *nothing*—could be louder than my self-hatred. Propped against a tree, I drag a sip of rum I don’t need, the glass bottle in my hands almost empty.

But you know what else is empty?

My fucking head.

No brain in there.

No, ma’am.

I almost had sex with her. On Kendrick’s bed, to make it worse. I almost took her. Hard. *What the hell is wrong with me?* I can still feel her squeezing me. Hear her shaky, unassuming moans when I finger-fucked her. She was so innocent, yet in perfect control, and it drives me completely crazy.

She drives me crazy.

It’s probably just lust. Nothing but my hormones speaking, but I haven’t been able to stop thinking about her since that night. I thought if I gave in to the temptation, I’d be free.

Cured.

I was wrong. If anything, I'm growing sicker every day.

I only came to this lame-ass kegger because I was hoping she'd be there. Zoey always drags her to those kinds of things. What do I hope to achieve by being at the same party as her? Not a clue. But I couldn't help myself after what she told me earlier. Luke fucking Jenson? *Really?* My blood boils as I recall them walking out of the school together. Who knows what they did all day? I visualize them going at it in the back seat of his car. On the hood. In the driver's seat.

The thought rips me apart.

Defeats me.

No, it straight up *disqualifies* me from our maddening game of cat and mouse. I used to be unbeatable. Number one player through and through.

I always won the game until winning meant losing her.

It's more than lust.

A lot more.

I like this girl.

And I want to give this a shot.

Screw the consequences.

I have to find her. I have to tell her. Even if there's a chance that I'm too late. Walking off, I begin my search, but luck isn't on my side, because I can't find her anywhere. I must seek her blonde hair for five minutes before stopping by the beer keg. Who knows if she's even here?

A voice startles me. "Drinking by yourself?"

Zoey.

"Can I help you?" I barely spare her a glance.

"Nope. But I'm hoping I can help *you*." She leans forward, feeling my bicep. I move away with a cringe. When is Kass going to accept this Zoey chick is a backstabbing bitch?

"I'd rather poke my eyes out with a fork, but thanks."

"Ouch." She pouts. "Kendrick is much nicer than you."

“Kendrick wants to fuck you, I don’t.”

She looks at me like I’ve just slapped her in the face.

“Is Kass here? You know, your *best friend*?” I remind her.

She quickly collects herself. “Nah, she couldn’t be bothered. She’s too busy with Luke.”

I squeeze the glass bottle so tightly at her statement I’m surprised it doesn’t shatter in my hands.

“What’s going on between those two anyway?” I ask.

“Oh, you don’t know?” She chuckles. “They’re a thing now. She told me they sealed the deal a few hours ago.”

They what?

She fucking slept with him?

She let him touch her... *like I did*?

When?

After I left?

After I didn’t say what I should’ve?

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“They... They slept together?” I nearly choke, hating myself for how transparent I’m being.

She nods. “Yep, she finally opened her legs. About time, if you ask me. She could use the experience.”

I told Kass the same thing once. Biggest lie I’ve ever told in my life. She knows *exactly* what to do in bed. My dick can attest to that. Jesus, is that what she meant by “*What if it is*” earlier?

She warned me.

Said it straight to my face.

I shouldn’t be surprised.

“Apparently, he’s huge,” Zoey says.

It feels like sandpaper is scrubbing my insides.

“Oh, don’t look so sad, Willy.” Zoey steps forward, and I flinch at the nickname—Kass’s nickname for me. Is this the Universe messing with me? Chill, Universe.

I’m already fucking dying.

“Forget her. She doesn’t appreciate you. I, on the other hand...”

I stare blankly into space.

“In fact, she said not to bother her tonight. Luke’s probably banging her as we speak.”

Explains why I can’t find her.

I lost her.

The girl who talks back at me.

The girl who *cares*.

I lost her because I can’t treat her right.

“It’s just you and I, Willy,” Zoey adds.

“Stop calling me that,” I hiss.

Zoey crowds my space, pushing to the tip of her toes with a vicious smirk covering her red lips. I can’t move. All I see is Kass moaning beneath Riverside’s golden fucking boy. Happy that she dodged a bullet—happy that she dodged *me*. Zoey’s mouth crashes against mine.

Will, wake the hell up!

It must last two seconds tops. I shove Zoey away from me, ready to bite her head off.

That’s when I see Kass.

Standing by the fire. Staring at us, eyes brimming with tears.

Then she runs off.

Kassidy

I want to scream.

Scream until my voice is so broken no sound comes out. But most of all, I want to cry until I can't feel my face. We must've gotten here less than five minutes ago and I'm already dying to leave. I only realize how fast I'm running when I bump into someone.

"Sorry," I mutter, rounding the stranger, whose arm goes out to stop me.

"Kass?"

I look up.

It's Luke.

"We really have to stop meeting like this." I wipe my cheeks, my embarrassment deepening. That's the second time he's seen me sob today. That's got to be some kind of record.

His eyes are pointed straight at me.

Those green eyes.

Those kind, loving, *I would never kiss your best friend* eyes.

"Are you crying? What's wrong?"

"Will... he..." I croak. "I can't believe him."

"What happened?"

"With... with Zoey," I manage.

He puts it together, shaking his head in disgust.

"Come on, let's get you out of here. I'll drive you."

"But Morgan..." I realize. "We came together. She just left to get us a drink. I-I can't leave her."

"Text her what happened. I'm sure she'll understand."

Defeated, I shoot Morgan a text and mirror Luke's steps to the parking lot near the beach. I'd rather not have to wait for a ride in this state. Luke manually unlocks his door, climbing into the driver's seat as I stand by, waiting for him to unlock my side. Then the last voice I wanted to hear echoes in the distance.

“Kass, wait!”

I flick my head to see Will charging toward us.

He must be ten feet away.

Nine.

Eight.

Seven.

Luke unlocks my door, the familiar click halting Will’s race. Our eyes meet across the parking lot.

“Don’t,” he begs, his voice strained. “Please.”

He doesn’t elaborate, but I know exactly what he’s saying: *Please don’t get in the car. Please don’t leave with him.* So, as a fuck-you for kissing my ex-best friend, I do just that. I slide into Luke’s passenger seat and shut the door.

“Where are we going?” Luke asks as we drive away.

Heartbroken, I say, “Let’s go back to my place.”

Twenty-Three

Kassidy

“He’s an idiot, whatever he did,” Luke says as I swing the door to my bedroom open. I don’t know why I told him to follow me up. The last thing I want is to give him the wrong impression, but I also really, *really* don’t want to be alone right now.

My mom is having dinner at an old friend’s house tonight, and my brother is at the kegger. Oh, and Winter is probably somewhere making out with Haze Adams.

Silent, I take a seat on the edge of my bed and swab down my tears with the heels of my hands.

I am so freaking *sick* of crying. I feel like I’ve been weeping all day.

Luke sits next to me. “Do you... want to talk about it?”

“Nope.” I sniffle.

My phone pings with a text.

It’s Morgan.

Morgan: I just thought you’d like to know I roasted the living heck out of Will, then he went right back to Zoey and dumped a whole beer on her head. Safe to say that girl’s luck with beverages is not improving?

He did what?

I crack a smile at the scene unraveling in my mind. He spilled his drink on her? That certainly doesn’t look like the behavior of a guy who purposefully kissed her. And he did push her away.

Stop, he still let her get close enough to kiss him in the first place!

I'm about to tell Luke about the message when he stops me.

One move is all it takes.

He places a hand on top of mine.

Please tell me this is a friendly gesture.

“You're amazing, you know that?” He smiles. “Smart, funny, gorgeous. He may not see it, but I do.”

Okay, definitely not friendly.

“Luke, I...” The words leave me.

I can't for the life of me figure out what to say. How do I turn him down after everything he's done for me? It'd be so much easier if I felt the same. If I liked the guy who likes *me*. The good guy.

The guy who'd never kiss my best friend.

Panic takes over my body when Luke zeroes in on my lips, leaning in. Ironically, this is the exact moment my brain decides to take a nap. For the first time in my life, I don't know what I want. I, Cassidy Kingston, the obsessive planner, have no clue what direction to take. But I know what I *don't* want.

And what I don't want...

Is to kiss Luke Jenson.

He is everything I need: stable, loving, respectful. I should want him. I *should* want the guy with the good manners and bright future, but what can I say? I'm a sucker for damaged blonds with walls higher than the Empire State Building.

I love myself a heart harder to penetrate than Fort Knox.

And yes, Will is probably never going to give me what I want. He kissed Zoey. Out of all people.

He *kissed* her.

But kissing Luke would be stooping down to his level.

“Luke, wait.” My hands fly up to his chest, but I don't get to push him away...

Because someone does it for me.

“In your fucking dreams!”

Luke is torn off me with such strength that his shirt nearly rips. I yelp as he wobbles a few steps backward, gripping my desk for balance. I take in the fuming, broad-shouldered guy at the foot of my bed. How did he...

I didn't even hear him come in.

“Will?”

Did I forget to lock the front door? Guess I was too busy drowning in my snot.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“I just... I had to see you. To explain,” he begs.

I can't handle his puppy eyes.

“So what? *Now* you give a shit about her, Martins?” Luke spits. “What happened? Did Zoey get boring?”

Radiating anger, Will tilts his head to the side. There are no more jokes in his eyes, no more escapes. Not a trace of the cocky, prankster guy I fell for. He's *this* close to ripping Luke a new one.

“Back off. This doesn't concern you,” Will cautions.

Luke overlooks his warning. “You've hurt her enough, don't you think? You can't be mad someone else wants to be with her when you don't, asshole.”

Will's jaw flexes and he inhales a deep, noisy breath as if to keep himself in check.

Then he says it.

“But I do.”

He moves closer.

“I really... really...” *Another step.* “Fucking do.” He stares me dead in the eyes as he says it, his voice so weak it's barely audible. He looks petrified by the mere thought of admitting that.

Luke scoffs. “You’re insane if you think she—”

“Luke,” I whisper.

He looks at me.

“Please, go.”

I hate being rude, but William Martins is talking about his feelings for once in a goddamn lifetime, and I don’t know how long it’s going to last.

It’s now or never.

Kass, why do you even care?

He kissed Zoey!

Luke frowns. “Excuse me?”

“I’m so sorry I brought you into this. I can handle it from here. Thanks for being such a good friend.”

The switch is instant. Luke becomes this entirely different person, his features twitching in fury.

“Are you fucking kidding me? Friends?” Luke snarls, rushing toward me, which kick-starts Will’s reflexes. Will extends his left arm in front of me, nudging me behind him.

Luke huffs out a bitter laugh at Will’s protective instincts, talking to me over my bodyguard’s shoulder. “It didn’t look like we were *friends* when you came running into my arms like a pathetic mess every time he fucked up. You slut, you did everything you could to make me think you liked me. Asking me out on a date? Texting me?”

Guilt sinks into me.

Will loses it. “Call her a slut one more time, I swear—”

“Stop!” I screech, wedging myself between them. “Luke, I admit it. At the beginning, I strung you along, and that was wrong. I’m sorry, I really am. Then we started working together and... I thought we’d become friends. I promise I never meant to play with your feelin—”

“Fuck this. You two deserve each other,” Luke snaps, racing toward the door. Seconds before he walks out, he stops.

“Oh, and Kass?”

I know exactly what he’s going to say.

“Consider yourself fired.”

Here we go.

His footsteps fade down the stairs, and the front door closes with a bang. We don’t speak for several seconds. Until Will elbows my door shut. I morph into a nervous wreck. We all know what happened the last time we were alone.

“Golden boy has a temper. Who knew?” He tries a joke, but I can’t bring myself to laugh.

“Are you seriously making jokes right now? You just kissed Zoey. How can you do that, then have the audacity to show up at my house and pretend to care about me?”

“I’m not pretending!” he argues. “And she kissed *me*. I would never do that to you.”

I pace around my room, lifting my hands to my forehead as though it will help me understand his nonsense. “Yeah, but you still let her get close enough to do it.”

“She told me you slept with Luke.”

“You keep stringing me along and you—” It takes me a second to realize what he just said. “What?”

“She said you were together. That you’d opened your legs today.”

Classy.

“That’s bullshit.” I’m outraged.

“I know that now. Morgan told me. She cussed the fuck out of me after you left.”

I think back to Morgan’s text and smile. *This* is what a best friend looks like.

“I’m such an idiot. I should’ve known better than to believe that bitch.” He beats himself up.

“It doesn’t excuse what you did,” I remind him.

“I know, I know, and I’m so fucking sorry. You have to understand I didn’t even realize what was happening. I blacked out after she said... I couldn’t deal with the thought of you choosing him.”

I can’t believe I’m about to say this but...

I kind of get it?

It’s not like this was a consensual kiss.

“Zoey and I aren’t friends anymore,” I admit. “Since this morning, actually.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You’re not?”

“No, you were right. She only cares about herself.”

He pauses.

“What happened?”

“Oh, you know, I found out she was sleeping with Blake during our entire relationship. No biggie.”

At first, he’s shocked.

Then he heaves a bitter scoff.

“Of course she was.”

The reminder feels like a stab to the stomach. That’s right, I lost my oldest friend today. Oh, and my job.

Can this day fuck off?

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“I’m fine.” I muster a faint smile. “With friends like that, you don’t need enemies, right?”

“If it makes you feel any better, I know a guy who’s going to get the beating of his life at training this week.”

I let out a laugh.

“I’m sorry, did I just get a laugh?” he teases. “I’m just saying I might not know where we stand if you still laugh at my jokes.”

“Sorry. Won’t happen again.” I fight a smile.

“Hey, for what it’s worth...” He nudges my shoulder. “I’m really proud of you.”

I know he’s referring to my standing up to Zoey.

“Thanks.”

I’m proud of myself, too.

In his own, clumsy way, Will was always looking out for me. He tried to warn me from the start.

“I’m not surprised she lied to you though,” I begin. “She told me she’d go after the guy I like since we’re not friends anymore.”

I only realize what I’ve done when his mouth dips open.

“The guy you like, huh?” he smirks.

Shit, shit, shit.

“Does that mean I still have a chance?” He chews on his bottom lip, his eyes gleaming with hope.

Stop looking so damn cute.

“Will.” I draw a breath. “We’ve been through this before. Sure, you may feel *something* for me, but... you don’t want a relationship. You made that more than clear last week. So, what do you want from me?”

It isn’t lost on me that I asked him that exact question the first time we kissed. He pauses, and for a second there, I think he’s going to bail. He has that look in his eyes, the one that shows up whenever we get too close to something *real*.

Only this time, he fights it.

He stands his ground, refusing to let the fear win.

“Everything,” he breathes.

“What?”

“Fucking everything, Kass. That’s what I want from you.”

He steps closer.

I let him.

“I want your control freak tendencies. I want your OCD, your quirks and kinks, your sense of humor. I want your big heart, that infuriating habit you have of bending over backwards to please others.” His fingers graze the outline of my jaw. “I want you, Kass. All of you. No more, no less.”

Sorry, Kass can't reply at the moment.

She's busy melting into a puddle.

“And just so you know,” he continues, “last week, when you didn't answer my texts, I thought I was going to die. Breaking my own fucking leg would've been more fun than living without your snarky replies for this long.”

I bite back a chuckle.

“I never had to worry about feeling this way. I never had to worry about feeling *anything*, really. Because before you...” He's at a loss for words. “Let's just say I haven't let myself care like this in a very long time.”

I'm scared what he really means is...

Not since Lyla.

It bothers me that I still don't know anything about her. Who is she? His ex? A casual hookup? Looking back, I realize I don't know much about Will's life either. I know about his past, his tumultuous, difficult childhood, but I've never seen his house, heard about his mom post-homelessness. But damn... it's *so* easy to forget all this when he looks at me like that.

His hand leaves my face, descending to my waist, and that simple touch is enough to make my thoughts blurry.

“I want to be with you, Cassidy Kingston. It scares me shitless. But it's true.”

My brain rejects the information.

Rebooting the computer.

Please hold.

Did he just say what I think he just said?

He shakes his head. “Shit, why the hell do people put themselves through this? I can’t believe they haven’t banned feelings yet.”

A laugh escapes me.

I want to cry, kiss him, and punch him all at once. He’s put me through so much, but now that he’s pouring his heart out, I’m right back to square one.

“Please say something.” I love how desperate he is.

How the tables have turned.

“Let me get this straight. You believe in relationships now?”

He hesitates.

“No.”

Was he messing with me?

“But I believe in being with you.”

Pretty sure my smile takes up my whole face.

“So... Does that mean you’re my boyfriend?”

“You can call me whatever you want, as long as at the end of the day, you’re mine.”

Cause of death: Will’s lines. I stretch my neck for a clear shot of his features. He’s tense, anxiously awaiting my answer.

“Okay, *boyfriend.*”

He smiles, angles my chin forward, and kisses me hard. Deep. Senseless. I reciprocate the kiss without thinking, an all-too-familiar rush bursting through my veins as I wind my arms around his neck and mash my chest against his.

I can’t imagine how hard this confession must’ve been for him. That’s *Will*. The guy who makes everybody laugh but never truly laughs himself. He can barely get through one sentence without slipping a hundred jokes inside.

So, a whole-ass declaration?

Give this man a prize.

I'll give him a prize all right. Cupping my ass through my leggings, he grunts, gives my cheeks a squeeze, and hoists me up into his arms. My legs clamp around his waist as he carries me to the bed.

Except he *doesn't* carry me to the bed.

He nails my body to the wall.

Holy f... Against the wall?

Yes, please.

His fingers clutch at the hem of my shirt, jerking the fabric over my head in haste. If he spent half as much time obsessing over our *almost-sex* as I did, we're not going to wait long. God, we were so stupid. He wasn't even wearing protection.

This would've been a terrible idea.

But that's what we are. What we've always been. We're a terrible, stupid-as-fuck, earth-shattering idea. And here. Now. We're going to do way more than break the rules.

We're going to completely forget them.

Planting my feet to the ground, Will tugs my leggings down my legs, stretching hot, greedy kisses all over my stomach in passing. He's stripped me down to my underwear before I can blink. It's only fair that I return the favor. Hooking a hand at the back of his neck, I urge him upward, allowing our lips to reconnect as I fumble with his belt. Try as I may, I can't seem to get his damn pants off. It's like we can't bear to let go of each other long enough for me to see what I'm doing.

"Hold on." He laughs against my mouth, shooing my hands away and unbuckling his belt himself.

The second his jeans trickle to the floor, he snakes a hand around me to unclasp my silk bralette. I kept it on last time, but I'm fully exposed to him now. I can't help feeling self-conscious. I don't exactly have the biggest rack, and the first guy to ever see that rack ended up screwing everything with a heartbeat behind my back. Maybe it's me.

Maybe they're... too small?

As though he can see the self-doubt plaguing me, Will grips my face with both hands, his eyes boring into mine as he rasps, “Do you have *any* fucking idea how perfect you are?”

Just like that, my insecurities go up in flames. He doesn't miss a beat, cupping a handful of my breast as his mouth latches onto my painfully tight nipples one by one. Licking, biting, nibbling—he knows exactly what he's doing. I feel electrified with each stroke of his tongue, slumping against the wall as he gives each tip his undivided attention.

Then he drops to his knees.

Right there.

On my bedroom floor.

All I have to do is take one look at him to know... *He's going to make me forget my own name, isn't he?*

Spreading kisses all over the inside of my thighs, he lifts a hand to my underwear, moving his thumb up and down the fabric. He's not gentle either. He wants me to feel it all.

And I do.

I squirm as he flicks my clit in slow circles through my panties, but nothing—absolutely nothing—compares to the desire I feel when he practically rips that last barrier off me, hitches my leg up, and starts tongue-fucking me.

His available hand presses down onto my stomach, drilling my body against the wall as his mouth locks onto every sweet spot. I can't defuse my moans, my head drawing back on its own. But it's when he squeezes a finger inside me, curling in and out of my body restlessly, that I lose my mind.

I want him.

Right now.

“Will,” I whine. “Please.”

He smirks. “I know, baby. But I'm not done.”

Bastard.

I can't cope with the sight of him on his knees, looking me dead in the eyes as he eats and fingers the life out of me. He twirls his tongue tentatively around my clit as I watch.

"God, I hate you," I whimper.

I start to tremble.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" He jams another finger inside me, curling harder. *Shit.*

He won't back down until he gets me off, and somehow, that fact alone spurs me over the edge. The pressure builds up in my stomach, my orgasm rolling through me at full force. Hell-bent on making it unbearable, he grips my ass and sucks my clit firmly into his mouth. The sensation is so intense I have to bite my lip not to scream—not moan. *Scream.* Thank God we're home alone.

I was never the loud girl in bed.

Until now.

Until *him.*

Slowly coming back to my senses, I shudder uncontrollably.

Holy motherfucking fuck.

I could get used to this.

Wiping his mouth, he rises to his feet and withdraws his hand, but not without giving my body one last, unexpected pump.

Cocky as ever, he places a light kiss on the corner of my mouth and whispers, "*Now, I'm done.*"

I hope he's going to give me a break. Allow me to catch my breath before we get down to business, but he clearly has other plans. Grasping the back of my thighs, he lifts me up into his arms and props me against the wall again.

He smiles at how comatose my orgasm left me and folds my legs around his waist himself, so unbelievably hard I can feel him strain through the stretched fabric of his boxers. He smashes his mouth to mine, not giving a single shit that he was

eating me out a few seconds ago. I see him reach for something on my desk. A condom.

When did he even put that there?

“Do you want t—”

“Yes. Yes.” I pant. “Just stop torturing me.” I rock against the swelling in his briefs, and he gives a jerk forward, responding to my body without meaning to. A satisfied grin on his lips, he tugs his underwear—the last thing standing between us—down, tearing the condom packaging open.

I watch as he rolls the latex down his length and guides himself closer, sliding between my lips and teasing my already sensitive clit. He moves back and forth, torturing me, shifting near my entrance without ever taking the last step.

“Will, you’re killing me.” I squirm.

“Not just yet,” he says, gaze locked onto where our bodies meet.

Fuck this shit.

Done with his games, I brace my hands onto his shoulders and give myself a push. In one move, I take him.

All of him.

We both gasp as I sink down onto him. Will because he wasn’t expecting this turn of events, and me because of how large he is. He stretches me painfully, an unwelcomed reminder of how long it’s been since the last time I had sex. His eyes flutter closed at the feeling. The look on his face makes the pain worth it.

“Shit, Kass, you’re... you’re so fucking tight. How are you this goddamn tight?” He crashes his palm to the wall, inches away from my head, like he needs a breather.

“It’s... been a while,” I admit, and his eyes snap open.

“Am I hurting you?” The fear in his gaze liquifies my heart. I’m *so* glad I’m doing this with him.

“No, it’s fine. Just go slow.”

Nodding, he kisses me gently, inching himself deeper inside me. I wince at the sting in my stomach.

He wasn't all in?

Squeezing my thigh with his hand, he nibbles at my bottom lip, thrusting in and out of me in a slow, uncertain place.

“Will.” I tremble, and the rolling of his hips speeds up on cue. He goes faster and faster, checking on me regularly. I reassure him every step of the way. Ironically, when he stops holding back, the pain morphs into pleasure.

“Talk to me, baby,” he orders as he picks up the pace. He almost seems annoyed with himself. Angry that he can't be as gentle as he wanted to be. I can't bring myself to answer, trapped in a daze.

This feels... *I have no words.*

“Kass?” He slows his rocking.

“K-Keep going. It feels better this way.”

In response, he pulls out completely, making me wait three never-ending seconds before filling me again with one powerful shove. *For the love of all that is holy.* I didn't even know it was possible to feel this good.

“Will!” I whimper, louder this time, and he grunts.

His mouth comes flush with my ear. “You can't fucking moan my name like that and expect me to go slow.”

Time of death: *right. fucking. now.*

Grabbing a fistful of my hair, he spreads my legs apart and starts pounding into me. And I mean *pounding*. My eyes roll back on their own. Now that I'm writhing in his arms, there isn't a single part of me that cares about Kendrick. I don't regret stripping Will down on my brother's bed. I couldn't care less that I'm breaking the sibling rule. Because it led me here.

To this moment.

To being with the guy I love.

He grips my ass with both hands, making me hop up and down on him until my stomach contracts. Our connected, sweaty bodies noisily rattle my bedroom wall. Safe to say it would be more than obvious that we're having mind-blowing sex to anyone in the house.

"Still think I'm a good little girl?" I tease, bringing him back to what he told me the last time we were getting down and dirty.

"Maybe... What are you going to do about it?" he says in a husky, challenging voice, his middle finger and thumb flicking my right nipple and sending a jolt of energy through me. Set on putting him in his place, I clench around him, bouncing faster. Harder.

His mouth drops.

"Kass, what are you—"

I momentarily silence him with a hot, hasty kiss.

"Stop fucking clenching, I won't be able to—"

I ignore him.

He starts to shudder.

I can't help but smile at the fact that I, the girl Will once said controlled everything but probably had no idea what to do in the bedroom, seem to be holding my own just fine.

"Kass, did you hear me?" he roars, his self-control thinning by the second. Consequently, I go twice as hard, jumping up and down his length until my thighs are on fire and I've got him right where I want him: inches away from the brink. "Jesus, woman, are you trying to kill me?" he hisses.

A laugh dies in the back of my throat, quickly overridden by moans I can't contain.

"Fine," he snaps at my stubbornness, the promise in his voice making me shiver.

He's going to give me what I want.

He carries me to the bed, dropping on top of me and slinging my leg over his shoulder for a deeper, almost surreal

connection. I cry out when he picks up where we let off, ramming himself inside me with such passion that my bedframe hammers against the wall.

It barely takes a minute.

The parting of his lips.

The look on his face.

They suggest victory is near.

“Fuck,” he grits out, his teeth digging into my neck as he slams into me with rough, separate thrusts. One, two, three more pumps. Then he’s a goner. He plummets back down to earth in ripples, his shudders growing distant as he collapses on top of me, completely spent. I can feel his heart thundering like a machine gun. I give him a second before claiming my prize.

“So much for not knowing what to do in bed, huh?”

Still out of it, he pulls back, searching my eyes.

“Is that what this was? You trying to prove a point?”

“Yup,” I shamelessly admit.

He laughs and cups my face to kiss me, his tongue sliding past the seam of my mouth and between my teeth.

“Well, point made. Best fucking sex I’ve ever had. Hands down.” He nuzzles his face into the crook of my neck. No words can possibly explain how happy his compliment makes me. He’s still deep inside me, but I don’t risk moving, hanging on to this fragile moment for as long as I possibly can.

“Willy?” I whisper, my heart in my throat.

“Yeah, baby?”

Milking every drop of courage in my body—that’s still trembling with aftershocks—I suck in a breath, squeeze my eyes shut, and say them. The words I mean with all my being but have been terrified to say. The words that could change everything.

“I-I love you.”

His blue eyes grow in size, but he doesn't reply. He simply scatters kisses across my collarbone, rolls off me, and tosses the condom. Then he slides back into bed to guide me into his opened arms.

I wait for him to say it back.

For him to say *something*.

But he never does.

Twenty-Four

Kassidy

The sound of my mattress squeaking and a deep curse pry me out of slumber. My eyes sealed shut, I wince at the foreign sensation between my legs. I'm sore.

Why on earth am I sor...

Will!

Peeling my eyes open a crack, I pat the right side of my bed, the tip of my fingers skimming across the empty space for a few seconds. Nothing—*no one*. He left? Anxiety slaps me awake, and I sit up straight, scanning my room through cloudy senses.

My shoulders flop when I find Will sitting on the edge of my bed, his jaw tight and his eyes riveted to his phone. Finishing a text, he drags a frustrated sigh and lobs his phone onto the mattress, the lean, defined muscles of his back twitching.

Only then do I become aware that I'm butt naked—*duh, I had sex over and over again last night*—and tug the blanket up my bare body. The motion catches Will's eye.

His head whips my way.

And his features light up.

“Hey, baby, you're awake.”

I'm overwhelmed with relief.

He doesn't look panicked, like he's drowning in guilt. His cursing doesn't seem to have been about us.

“Did I wake you?” he asks.

“Let's see, did you cursing like a sailor wake me?” I crinkle my nose. “Nah. All good.”

A small smile warps his lips.

“Sorry.” He rubs at the back of his neck anxiously.

Something’s up.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah. It’s just... the fight with Haze is tomorrow. I kind of let myself forget with...” He pauses. “Everything going on.”

He’s not alone. I’ve been so focused on him lately that the stupid fight Haze challenged my brother to ages ago completely slipped my mind. Part of me was hoping Haze would come to his senses and cancel it beforehand. He *clearly* doesn’t need a deal to spend time with my cousin.

“That still on?”

He scoffs. “Unless Haze grew a conscience overnight, yeah.”

What’s to say he didn’t? He and Winter left together yesterday after dinner, and we didn’t hear anyone, not even my brother, come home last night—except my mom, who came back from her night shift at 4:00 a.m. Who knows what happened between them? Is Haze having a change of heart really *that* far-fetched?

“Is that what you were texting about?” I gesture to his phone lying screen-down on my bed.

“Yeah, I have to be at training in thirty minutes. We won’t be able to catch a fucking break the next few days. Kendrick’s going to get his ass handed to him unless we...” He stops short.

The reminder seems to weigh him down. Kendrick. His best friend. We completely forgot about him last night.

Didn’t once bring up the “best friend’s sister” dilemma while we were getting together—*ahhh, we’re together*—or going at it against the wall. No way around it. We’re going to have to tell my brother we’re dating. Soon. Will’s mood switches from worried to distant in a blink.

“I, huh... I should go.” He clears his throat.

Oh hell no.

He does not get to shut me out again.

Not after we slept together.

Not after he didn't say it back.

I told him I loved him last night, and in response, he crawled down my body, spread my thighs, and gave me the third-biggest orgasm of my life. I tried not to overthink it—it was pretty damn hard to be mad with his face between my legs—but now that we've come back down to earth, I'm a bit... sad? Why didn't he say it back? Did I read his fairy-tale declaration wrong?

Come to think of it, nowhere in his speech did he say he loved me. He talked about “wanting to be with me” but never, not once, brought up the L word.

Ouch.

I watch Will roam my room in search of his pants, feeling like a dumbass whose one-night stand is leaving before blocking her on everything.

“Are we... okay?” My voice wavers.

He stops.

And stares.

When he sees me, sheet wrapped around my body, fearful eyed pointed at him, his face softens. He doesn't say a word, dropping his pants where he found them and making a beeline for my bed. Silent, he sits by my side, easing a strand of loose blonde hair behind my ear.

Then he closes the space between us. My heart gives a jolt when our lips touch. His tongue finds mine, the heat settling in my stomach almost as satisfying as the relief pouring over me. His hand drops to my shoulder, tracing down my arm and leaving a trail of goose bumps in its wake.

He presses his forehead to mine. “Definitely okay.”

I smile.

“More than okay.” I lure him in for more, falling backward onto my bed and ushering his body closer. The sheet skates off my chest as we kiss, exposing my left breast and earning an irritated groan from Will.

He brings his mouth to my tight left nipple in an instant, slowly grazing the tip with his tongue and making me squirm. The tension ramps up as his hand sneaks under the sheet, landing on my stomach and drifting to my... “Okay.” He pulls back, tugging the sheet over my body. “Put some clothes on before I jump you.”

I chuckle, my hand snaking down toward the bulging shape in his briefs. *Someone’s awake*. His jaw clenches as I run a finger up and down his arousal.

“What if I want you to jump me?”

“Kass,” he warns, but I can’t get enough of the look on his face. I love having him at my mercy. I give his length a squeeze, and he sucks in a breath. “I should really go.” He tries to convince himself, his eyes shutting at my touch.

I jerk my hands away.

“Okay. Maybe next time.”

His eyes snap open, and he looks at me in an “*are you fucking kidding me?*” manner.

“You should finish getting dressed. Don’t want to be late.”

“Way to give a guy blue balls.” He’s appalled.

“Sorry. Payback for yesterday.”

Letting out a bitter scoff, he kisses the tip of my nose and pushes to his feet, adjusting his briefs.

“I’m going to make you pay for that, control freak.”

“Uh-huh,” I tease, watching him throw his clothes back on. *Damn, he’s a snack*. “How long are you going to be off doing dumb street fighter things?”

“Don’t know. A few days at most. I’ll text you.”

“You better. I’ll only accept dead pet or family member if you don’t.”

He laughs, stealing one last kiss. “Trust me, a life would have to be in danger for me not to text you back.”

As I watch him trail to the door, I want to say it again.

Kass, don’t.

He won’t say it back.

But maybe you just caught him off guard last night.

Maybe...

“Willy?”

“Yeah?”

Fuck it. Are we together or not?

“I love you.”

I regret saying it as soon as the words leave my mouth. The most awkward smile of all time spreads across his face.

“I’ll see you when I get back,” he replies before scampering down the stairs.



Twenty minutes later, I get a text from him. At first, I think he’s going to apologize, or maybe—just maybe—say it back, but I’m quickly knocked back to reality.

Willy Wonka: Winter came in when I was walking out. I told her I forgot something at your house and came to pick it up before training, but I think she’s suspicious.

Butthurt, I don’t text back, grab some clothes, and stroll into my bathroom for a shower. So not only are his feelings not as strong as mine, he’s also paranoid one day into the relationship that someone will find out about us? We didn’t have time to discuss it. Does he expect us to keep this a secret?

To never tell Kendrick?

What did I just get myself into?

Thirty minutes later, I'm sauntering down the stairs to grab breakfast. I'm supposed to be working at two, and while Luke said I was fired, I never heard from Isabella. Checking my other messages, I notice I have one from Ethan.

Ethan: Isabella wants you to come in at 1.

Kass: Great. I'm getting fired.

Ethan: SIS, WHAT? We're both going to need a new job then. McDonalds? Starbucks? Take your pick.

I laugh. I can't believe he'd even consider getting fired with me. I love this weirdo. Another text from Will comes through when I reach the first floor.

Willy Wonka: I miss you already.

I snort. He feels guilty about blowing me off, and he's trying to smooth things over. *I see what you're doing, Willy.* I make a mental note to reply later, heading toward the kitchen. Just as I'm about to turn the corner, I hear something.

Sniffling.

I stretch my neck, careful not to make a sound, and see her. Winter. Sitting at kitchen table with her face nestled in her hands. *What the hell happened with Haze last night?*

I step out of the shadows. "Are you okay?"

She jumps at the sight of me.

"I'm fine." She wipes her eyes quickly.

I'm going to smash this guy's balls with a brick.

I take a seat at the table. "You're not fine. What did he do?"

She keeps to herself at first, fighting a war with her better judgment. She looks conflicted as to whether she can trust me with this. Can't blame her. I grilled her about Haze so many times. I regret it now.

"Winter, please. Let me be there for you."

She heaves a deep breath.

And tells me everything.

She tells me the day I walked in on them in the bathroom was when it all started. Haze had just taken her to a rooftop—more precisely the abandoned high school’s, a place well known around here for being nearly destroyed by fire—and from there, they started talking more and more.

Until she caught feelings, things happened between them, and then she found out about Haze’s terrible scheme to sleep with her, then dump her to piss off Kendrick. Not sure what he was trying to achieve. Maybe assert his power and dominance over Kendrick and the guys. Like an “I fucked your bitch” type thing. What upsets me the most is how she found out. Haze made it clear he didn’t care about her, or anyone—*his words*.

All I have to say to that is...

What a gigantic load of crap.

Fine, maybe Haze *did* want to use Winter to get to Kendrick, but... I saw the way he looked at her at dinner. I’ve seen this guy with Zoey, Bianca, and a never-ending parade of girls in the years I’ve gone to school with him, but I have *never* seen him look at a girl the way he looked at Winter last night. It’s so obvious the player lost at his own game.

“He didn’t mean it,” I state.

Winter glances at me through teary, wet eyelashes.

“He’s afraid, Winter. Typical boy.”

She scoffs. “Afraid of what? That I caught feelings and he didn’t?”

“No, dummy. He’s not afraid because you caught feelings. He’s afraid because he’s feeling it, too.”

My eyes jump to the clock, and anxiety grasps me when I realize I have to be at work in ten minutes.

To get fired, *but still*.

“Oh shoot. I’m late for my shift. I have to go. But please, call me if you need anything, okay?” I pull her into a tight hug.

“Oh, and don’t text him. Let him be alone with his lies for a while. Might be exactly what he needs.” I swing the door open, my gaze flicking to her. “Never underestimate a man’s capacity to run away from something he’s afraid to want.”

She nods, dabbing at her tears with her sleeve. As I sprint to my car, I can’t help hoping, with all of my being, all of my bruised, control freak heart...

That this is why Will didn’t say it back.



Entering the shop with a sinking pit in my gut, I tell myself that this is for the best. That maybe getting fired from a job I got from a guy I rejected is not so bad. But I don’t mean it. Truth is, I’ve grown to love this job. I love my coworkers, the work itself. If it were up to me, I’d stay in a heartbeat.

Two steps in, I catch sight of the long line of customers stretching all the way to the door. Evidently, Ethan and Isabella are swamped, only taking notice of my presence when I pass them on my way to drop my stuff in the back store.

“Thank God,” Isabella rejoices when she sees me.

“Where’s Diana?” I ask. Diana is the store manager Isabella hired to replace Jenny. Haven’t met her yet, but the fact that Isabella, someone who never picks up shifts, is working right now tells me something is wrong.

“Sick. She’s puking her guts out,” Ethan replies, and Isabella reprimands his crude words when a judgy lady in line pulls a disgusted face. “Sorry, she is busy emptying the contents of her stomach,” he revises, and I barely swallow a laugh.

Even Isabella bites back a grin.

“Hurry, we’re getting destroyed over here,” Ethan presses, and I oblige, joining them at the front to start my shift. Around thirty minutes later, the store is empty, and we can finally breathe again.

Isabella doesn't pull me aside. Not in the first hour. Not in the second. She acts exactly the way she always does, leaving me to wonder if she changed her mind about firing me. Ethan leaves an hour before me, but the end of my shift quickly rolls around and I close the shop per usual. I gather my stuff in the back, switch off the lights, and pad out of the building to lock up with Isabella on my tail.

I'm the first to gather the courage to say it.

"Thank you so much for this opportunity. I really enjoyed working here." I force a smile, turning on my heels.

Her hand flies out to hold me back.

"Kassidy, wait. What are you talking about?"

This is weird?

"Well, I'm sure you know by now that Luke and I got into a fight. He told me that I was fired and—"

"He did what now?" She's stunned. "Honey, he doesn't speak for me. He's my nephew, not my boss."

"You mean... I'm not fired?"

"Of course not. He called me last night, telling me to let you go, but I told him I'm not losing the best employee I've had in years because he's got a bruised ego. He'll get over it. It's not the first time he's sent one of his crushes my way, you know?"

Her revelation shocks me.

"You're the fourth. Two of them quit, the other one was let go because she was always late, but *not* because he asked me to fire them. Which he did. Every single time. What kind of boss would I be if I fired my employees without cause every time my nephew asks me to?"

I must have something in my eye, because a tear threatens to leak down my cheek. Embarrassed, I blink back my emotions. God, I'm such a baby, but I really thought I was out of a job. I've never been more relieved.

“Oh, honey, come here.” Isabella captures me into a quick embrace. I remember thinking she was a cold woman. I was wrong. Once she warms up to you, she’s the best boss you could ask for. “You’re not fired. Get that out of your head.”

“Thank you so much.”

We say our goodbyes and part ways. I jog to my car, coming to terms with my guilt. I don’t regret stringing Luke along anymore. Yes, I made mistakes with him, but I owned up to them and apologized. To know that I wasn’t the first. That he uses his aunt to get his way. That’s low.

Sliding into the passenger seat, I check my phone for the first time in hours. No new messages from Will—my bad, I didn’t answer him earlier.

I text back quickly.

Kass: I miss you too. How’s everything going?

I’m aware I should be mad at him for point-blank ignoring my “I love you” this morning, but right now, all I want to do is tell him about Luke’s stunt. Sure, he may not be ready for the L word yet, but I *have* to believe he does have feelings for me. You can’t just fake last night. Maybe he needs more time.

That must be it.

I wait for a reply, sitting in my car pointlessly for a few minutes. Not a peep. He warned me he’d be busy, so I don’t think much of it, fire up the engine, and drive off.



Will

The next day

Sprawled across Alex’s couch with Winter, Kendrick, Alex, Blake, and Nicole, I ignore the buzzing off my phone in my pocket and fight the urge to open her text. The fight is today, a few hours away to be exact, and while Kendrick’s been training since dawn, the anxiety is chipping at my sanity.

Kendrick and his psycho ex Nicole told the group they were back together a few minutes ago. Said it happened yesterday at the kegger, which explains why Kendrick didn't come home all night. I'm not saying I don't like Nicole, but... let's just say if Kendrick is half as bad at fighting tonight as he is at picking girls, we're *fucked*.

Blake has been acting weird as hell since we got here. He looks pissed at me, staring bullets into my forehead every chance he gets—not that I'm surprised. I beat his ass at training yesterday. Even gave him a black eye by “accident.” It took everything I had not to blurt out, “That's for fucking Zoey,” when I sent him straight to the mat.

“I have to take a piss.” I bound to my feet, setting off for the bathroom. When I walk back out fifteen minutes later, the living room is deserted. I'm assuming they relocated upstairs to prepare Winter for what she's going to see tonight. The fights are no picnic. We can't have her fainting on punch number one.

I trail into the kitchen and grab a beer out of the fridge—maybe it'll take the fucking edge off—but before I can open it, Blake's voice erupts behind me.

“Hey, man.”

I whisk my head back to find him reclining against the counter, arms folded over his chest.

“Hey?” I twist the beer cap off.

“I wanted to ask you... How's Kass?”

I stop moving.

“Or should I say how *was* Kass? The pussy still good?”

The beer nearly slips out of my hands.

How the hell does he know that?

“Don't look so surprised. People talk.”

The answer seems evident.

Zoey.

It has to be. They're probably shagging again. I bet she just couldn't wait to run her fucking mouth.

"I also saw you sneak out of her house like a fucking criminal yesterday morning."

Shit.

He did tell me he wanted to talk to Winter in person after Haze crashed the fake-girlfriend dinner. Probably turned up at Kass's house early.

"You spent the night there, didn't you? You fucked her?"

This *can't* be happening.

Not before the fight.

It would stir up a shitstorm—no, a *shithurricane*—between me and Kendrick, and we need him on top of his game right now. Struck dumb, I consider my options. I could bullshit him and say I crashed there because I was drunk—how much can he *really* know from standing outside her house?—but something tells me his mind is made up and set in stone.

"You're right. I did fuck her. And it was good as hell, thanks for asking."

He seems floored.

In disbelief that I came clean that easy.

If I were smart, I'd stop there. Stand down. But I find myself wanting to push his buttons for what he did to Kass. A beating wasn't enough.

"We did it everywhere. On the wall, on her bed, on her desk. She came on my cock over and over again. Oh, and she told me how she faked it your entire relationship. That what you wanted to hear, Blakie?"

His jaw hangs.

I mock gasp. "Shit, *TMI?*"

"You bastard." He lurches forward, throwing a punch that he fails to deliver when I duck. "Why her, Will? Why *Kass*? Couldn't you find some other girl to empty your balls?"

In one move, I grip his collar, slamming his back to the fridge without breaking a sweat. Blake's an okay fighter, but he's far from the best of us. He won't come at me if he knows what's good for him.

"It's not like that," I spit inches from his face.

"So, you two are dating, then?" He scoffs. "Is that why you've been ignoring someone's texts since yesterday? You're ghosting her, aren't you? Because you're freaking out. Typical Will."

I'm not ghosting her. I just need time to sort my shit out. I'll come back to her as soon as this is over.

"None of your business."

"You're right. It's not. But maybe it's Kendrick's. I'm sure he'd be happy to know you're plunging your dick into his sister every night, don't you?"

The thought makes my skin crawl.

Would he *ever* forgive me?

"Good point. Why don't we tell him together? You tell him about me, and I'll tell him about you, *deal*?" I quip.

Color spills from his face.

He's no better than I am. He dated her, too. Long before me. Even if it was a miserable, unfaithful relationship. Yes, I slept with Kendrick's sis, but Blake treated her like shit, cheated on her with her best friend the whole time, then dumped her over text. I'm going to go out on a limb here and say I have a better shot at forgiveness.

Plus, I really fell for her.

He didn't.

"You wouldn't dare." Blake tilts his head.

"Try me," I snarl.

Defeat is written all over his face.

If I'm going down, he's going down with me.

"Fine." He shoves me off him.

That's his way of saying he won't rat me out. Satisfied, I scurry to the stairs. Alex must be halfway dead by now. He's been Kendrick's punching bag for a while.

"Do you love her?"

His voice is ice-cold, but a hint of jealousy melts through. I feel so awful hearing the word "love" I'm tempted to carry on walking. Pretend I didn't catch that. She told me she loved me this morning. And I acted like some deaf asshole.

I can't go there.

I don't even know what that means.

"She's everything to me."

A deep laugh leaves his lips. "That's not saying you love her. Did you feed her that bullshit? Man, she must be a wreck."

Guilt slices through me.

"She said it, didn't she? She said she loves you?"

Who the fuck is he? *Dr. Phil?*

I don't reply, concentrating my anger into my fists.

"Piece of advice: don't flatter yourself. Bitch is so desperate for attention she said it to me the first time I screwed her, too. Blame it on the daddy issues."

I could strangle him.

I regain my composure. "About that, man. You should probably go see someone for your... problem. Maybe you can last a whole minute next time you fuck Zoey's loose cunt."

His eyes flare with surprise and rage—surprise because he wasn't expecting me to know about his history with Zoey, and rage, because well... *can't be easy being a minute man.*

"You know what?" He stifles a laugh. "Why am I even bothering? That's the thing with you, Will. I don't need to mess up your relationship. I don't need to ruin your life." He rams his arm into mine as he beats me to the stairs.

Seconds before he races up, he shoots me a poisonous, spiteful glare over his shoulder.

“You’ll do it yourself.”

Twenty-Five

Kassidy

“Are you going to eat that?” Ethan slants over me, swiping the untouched chocolate bar in my hand and taking a bite. Morgan stares at me in anticipation of a reaction—*any* reaction. She knows that, out of my many pet peeves, people touching my food is the biggest one, but to my great surprise, I can’t bring myself to argue.

All I can think about is Will.

It’s been four days since we slept together. Four long days since he said he’d be busy with the guys for a while. And he wasn’t kidding. I haven’t heard from him once. He promised the only reason he wouldn’t text me was if a life was on the line.

Boy, you better be dead.

When Morgan suggested we skip the school’s pep rally and spend the afternoon binge-watching movies at her place, I didn’t hesitate. I was foolish enough to think it would help get my mind off the hundred worst-case scenarios eating me whole. What happened at the fight with Haze?

Who won? Where the hell has everybody vanished to?

I haven’t seen my cousin, my brother, or any of the guys at school all week. Ended up texting Winter about it. No reply. Then I messaged Will, Alex, Kendrick, even Blake—yes, I was *that* desperate. Nothing. Not even a Read receipt. Or a thumbs-up to let me know they’re alive.

It doesn’t exactly help that I moved out of my house right as everything was going on. The day Will crawled out of my bed, Morgan invited me to sleep over. I got out of work, packed a bag, and drove straight to her place.

Then the strangest thing happened.

My mom, who's always limited my stay at Morgan's to a few days tops, called, allowing me to stay longer. Although, if I'm being honest, her tone suggested I didn't have much of a choice. I didn't argue because I know how much Morgan hates being alone when her parents are away, but... Why did my mom want me out of the way?

What are they not telling me?

Mom said Winter is bedridden with the flu, which is why she hasn't been at school, but I don't buy it. What are the odds of everyone evaporating at the exact same time? *A big fat zero.* I've been considering driving back to my house and seeing for myself.

"Still thinking about him?" Ethan's voice echoes in my brain.

I blink at him. "Who?"

"You know damn well who. You're thinking about this Will guy. Still no news?"

"None." I nibble on my bottom lip.

I'm not nearly as mad as I am worried. What if something happened to him?

"Dick move." Ethan presses Pause on the comedy I stopped watching two minutes in.

"I'm sure he has a good reason," Morgan chimes in, her knowledge of my brother's secret painting her a much clearer picture. I recently told her all about my brother and his friends' illegal habits. I couldn't keep it to myself anymore. Especially seeing as the guys consecutively fell off the face of the earth.

"I don't give a rat's ass what his reason is. If he wanted to, he would've. Period," Ethan objects. "Is he your boyfriend or not? Homeboy needs to figure his shit out."

My heart tightens in my rib cage.

He does have a point.

On a brighter note, the last few days brought me and Morgan the missing piece to our trio: Ethan. He filled Zoey's shoes better than she ever could. I invited Ethan over to Morgan's house after her parents flew out of town. We watched movies until 3:00 a.m., hit it off, and the rest is history. There isn't one day where we haven't hung out this week.

The microwave beeps in the distance.

"It's the popcorn, I got it." I spring to my feet, dropping my phone on the couch.

Morgan jumps out of her seat. "I'll come with. I'm thirsty."

"For water or for Alex?" Ethan teases.

Morgan's cheeks burn bright red.

"Shut up!" She picks a pillow off the couch, lobbing it square into Ethan's smug grin. "I didn't tell you that so you could use it against me every five seconds."

Ethan holds his hands up. "What are friends for?"

Morgan recently admitted to having a crush on Alex. And I don't mean a "drooling over him from afar" crush. She's been tutoring him in math for a while now. They've been texting. Flirting. Crossing lines—big, *important* lines, if you know what I mean. I couldn't believe how much I'd missed, and apologized for being so engulfed in my own drama.

I have reasons to believe they're on the outs right now. The first being the distant sadness in Morgan's eyes. She refused to go into details, but I did manage to squeeze a few not-so-fun facts out of her.

Apparently, Alex is seeing someone. A friend of Zoey's. Mia something. Regardless of everything that happened between them. And I thought Alex was the nice one...

I've tried keeping the boy talk to a minimum, but I can't help it. This is *Morgan*. As in the girl who's never had a crush on a guy that isn't fictional before.

Alert the media.

Morgan and I trot to the kitchen together. I grab a large bowl out of the kitchen cabinet, dumping the popcorn into it, while Morgan pours herself a glass of water. We end up talking about Alex for fifteen minutes before retreating to the living room. We turn the corner to find Ethan laughing his head off at something on his phone.

“What’s so funny?” I ask.

It takes me a solid second to realize it’s not his phone he’s staring at.

It’s mine.

No.

“What did you do?” My pulse escalates.

“Nothing he didn’t deserve.” Ethan shrugs.

He?

Who’s he?

Will?

I dash to the couch, snatching my phone out of his hands. I was right—Will texted me. Barely a minute after we walked out of the room. Ethan’s curiosity must’ve gotten the best of him on message number six.

Willy Wonka: Hey, I’m back in town

Willy Wonka: I’m so sorry I didn’t text you before. You’re never going to believe what happened

Willy Wonka: Where are you? I’ll meet you.

Willy Wonka: I’ll explain everything

Willy Wonka: Kass?

Willy Wonka: Baby?

So *now* he wants to talk to me.

I keep scrolling, nearly dropping my phone at Ethan’s reply.

Kass: Who the fuck are you and why are you texting my girl?

Great.

Just great.

The three dots pop at the bottom of my screen.

Willy Wonka: I'm her boyfriend asshole. Who the fuck are you?

I scoff.

He calls himself my boyfriend?

As in a regular male companion with whom one has a romantic relationship? Because, as far as I'm concerned, you're not a *regular* companion if I see you once every two years, Willy.

I stone Ethan with popcorn. "What. The. Hell. Were. You. Thinking?"

"I know you." He laughs, shielding himself with his forearm. "You would've been too nice to him, and he ghosted you for days, Kass. *Days!* Dude deserved it."

I open my mouth to retort, but a loud knock on Morgan's front door interrupts our bickering.

Then another knock.

And another.

And another.

The knocks grow louder, more insistent by the second. It sounds like someone's trying to beat the goddamn door down.

We all exchange quick "*Is this how we die?*" glances. Morgan is the first to make a move, but I follow close behind. I'm not letting her go alone. As for Ethan, he watches us from the living room. *Thanks, man.*

Morgan checks through the peephole.

"Holy shit." She gasps.

"What?" The suspense is killing me.

She pulls away, her eyes expanding in size.

"He's here."

I need a moment to make sense of what Morgan just said.

Will.

Will is here.

Why is it so hard to breathe all of a sudden?

“Who? Who?” Ethan shrieks, scurrying to us in no time. “Kass’s man? Let me see.”

How did he know where to find me? Or where Morgan lives? But most importantly, why is he here?

What does he want?

His cheeks mashed against the door, Ethan peers through the small gap for long seconds. It’s his first time seeing Will. He’s heard of him a little—*okay, a lot*—but they’ve never actually met.

“Holy fuck,” he mouths. “*That’s Will?*”

I nod.

He fans himself with his left hand. “Hot damn, I’d lie to my brother too for a piece of that ass.”

Morgan snorts a laugh. Another set of powerful knocks rattle the door, and Ethan jumps as though he forgot there was a real person on the other side. Will’s not going anywhere. My car’s parked in the driveway. He knows I’m here.

Might as well face him.

“Okay. Enough. Back to the living room. Both of you.”

Ethan doesn’t budge. “But—”

“Ethan, now!”

Morgan steps in, dragging him away.

“Ah, man.” Ethan mopes.

I take a breath, attempting to gather myself, and spin the knob with a trembling hand. He’s right there, on Morgan’s porch, in a plain black T-shirt and faded, torn-at-the-knees jeans. Dark circles mark his eyes. The second he drinks me in, his features light up.

At first, he smiles.

But it's only a second before his joy slips away.

"Who the fuck is that?" He shoves his phone into my face.

Our text conversation is pulled up on his screen. *Not what I was going for.*

"Are you serious? That's all you have to say to me? You disappear for days and—"

"Is he here?" He tries to walk around me, but my palms dart to his chest, keeping him on Morgan's porch.

"Will, stop!"

"Kass, if there's a guy inside I swear on my life I'll—"

"There isn't." I realize that's a lie. "I mean, yeah, *there is*, but it's not what you think."

And he's inside.

He whooshes to the living room before I can react.

"Is that him?" he snaps, going straight for Ethan sitting on the couch, minding his business for once in a blue moon.

"Stop! He's just a friend," I yell.

He pays me no mind, fisting Ethan's collar and hauling him off the couch effortlessly.

"You think you can touch my girl?" Will rages inches away from Ethan's face. "I'm going to fuck you up."

Against all odds, Ethan smirks.

"Gladly. Your place or mine?"

Will's face immediately pales.

"W-What?" I've never seen him this confused.

"Where are my manners? Hi, I'm Ethan, Kass's friend and very much gay."

I see the dots connect through Will's blue eyes. I've told him about Ethan before.

“You mean... Ethan as in the guy you work with?” he asks.

I nod.

He releases Ethan instantly. “Shit, I’m sorry.”

While Ethan seems to find great humor in this moment, I could murder Will right now. He just *attacked* my friend—screw the whole story—after abandoning me without so much as a text.

“I can’t do this.” I huff, heading for the door. I don’t know where I’m going. Maybe I’ll go for a ride, drop by my house to authenticate my mom’s BS story about Winter.

“Kass, wait.” Will trails behind me.

“It was nice meeting you, Will.” Ethan calls seconds before we scamper out of the house. Will shadows me all the way to my car, grasping my hand to keep me from leaving.

“Kass, just wait a fucking second,” he begs.

“What the hell was that?” I snap. “You have some nerve, you know that? To show up at my friend’s house and make a scene when you’ve been ignoring me for days.”

“I’m sorry, I thought—”

“What? That I was cheating on you? Look, this relationship might not mean shit to you, but it did to me.”

Panic flashes through his eyes.

“What do you mean *did*?”

“You just disappeared on me for days! Didn’t text, didn’t call. That doesn’t exactly scream ongoing relationship, does it?”

I don’t want this to end.

Of course not.

But I can’t let him treat me this way.

“Baby, please, listen to me. I’m so sorry—I know I promised I’d text you, but I couldn’t. I literally *couldn’t*.”

He moves closer.

I don't move away—I can't. My body won't allow it. The same way it won't let me inhale a proper breath when he cups my face, his eyes leveling with mine.

“This doesn't change anything about what I said last week.”

He zeroes in on my lips, leaning in.

“Or... what I want.”

No, no, no, don't let him kiss yo—

Shit.

The air flees my lungs when he smashes his lips to mine, his fingers gliding through my hair and tugging my head forward. His tongue pries its way between my teeth, and I can't contain a moan at how much I missed him. I kiss him back too fast for my liking, pushing to my tiptoes for deeper access.

I should be mad, but all I can feel is relief. Relief that he didn't disappear on me because I sent him running for the hills. Not that it would've surprised me.

I did say “I love you.”

Twice.

Triple cringe.

But Will going all Hulk on Ethan indicates he's not, as I feared, looking to exit my life after we slept together.

“For the record.” He pecks my mouth. “Four days is too fucking long to go without this.” His arms close around me, and I breathe in his cologne, forgetting how bad his silence hurt me with each loving touch.

Because he's back.

And he's here.

“How did you know where to find me?” I whisper, my head propped against his chest.

“Kendrick told me you were staying with Morgan.”

“And the address?”

He winces. “You’re not going to like it.”

“Well?” I urge.

“I asked Zoey.”

I back away an inch. “You did what?”

“What else was I supposed to do? I texted you, showed up at your house, at the pep rally. I couldn’t find you anywhere.”

“Do you think... she could tell Kendrick about us?”

Every time I pass my backstabbing ex-best friend in the halls, I wonder what’s stopping her.

“Eh. Don’t sweat it. I overheard her talking. She’s still with her ex. Turns out they didn’t break up at her birthday party. She never saw him with another girl. She just said that to make herself look better for fucking Blake after he left.”

Holy shit.

I was so wounded by Zoey sleeping with Blake, it never once occurred to me that she’d been cheating on her own boyfriend this whole time, too. No surprise that she let Sean’s indiscretions slip through the cracks.

“I made sure to tell her to keep her mouth shut about us if she didn’t want her boyfriend finding out about Blake.”

“I see.” I scoff. “Good old blackmail.”

He smiles, moving forward to press a kiss on my temple.

“What happened?” I’m reminded of most important matters. “Why couldn’t you text me? And where the hell is everybody? I haven’t seen anyone all week.”

Will heaves a sigh, his eyes zapping to the large window by the front door. I follow his stare to see the curtain waving back into place as Morgan and Ethan duck for cover.

I bite back a grin.

Creeps.

“Not here.” His hand circles my hip. “Let me take you somewhere, all right?”

“Are you telling me you want to go on a date, Willy?” I tease, winding my arm around his neck.

He inches forward, his mouth perched near my ear as he rasps, “I’m telling you I missed you so fucking much if we don’t get out of here in the next five minutes, I’m going to really give your friends something to watch.”

I think I just fainted.

I swallow hard. “Oh, hm, okay, I... I’m just going to go inside the house and grab my stuff and...” *Get a grip.* “I’ll... I’ll be right back.”

He grins at my jumbled speech, smacking my ass when I turn to walk away. Rushing inside, I grab my phone off the couch, call Morgan and Ethan stalkers in passing, and head back out to find Will inside his started car.

I slide into the passenger seat. “So... when are you going to tell me who almost died for you not to text me back?”

I expect him to smile.

Laugh it off.

But he doesn’t.

Instead, he reverses out of Morgan’s drive, and says, “Soon.”

What the hell?

Twenty-Six

Kassidy

“**W**inter got what?” I screech with such volume my own ears ring at the sound. Will drove us up a hill, then killed the engine near an isolated hiking trail. The area is completely deserted—crazy considering the view from up here. I might actually enjoy this moment if it wasn’t for what my boyfriend just told me.

Winter got taken. His words loom in my mind.

Will exhales, giving my brain a second to compute the piece of information it’s been fed. Too bad I’d need a whole damn month to even *begin* wrapping my head around it.

“She got taken. I know... it’s fucked-up.” He seems just as overwhelmed as I am. “It happened at the fight. But she’s fine now. She’s safe.”

My shoulders shed the heaviest of weights.

“Thank God.” I smack my palm to my racing heart. “What happened? Who would do that?”

“Haze’s brother, Tanner. That fucking psycho.” He clenches a white-knuckled fist around the steering wheel.

“But... *why?*”

“Something about Haze going soft because of her. He said he wanted his brother back. Whatever the fuck that means.”

While a part of me feels trapped in a real-life nightmare, the other has no trouble believing what he’s telling me. Haze *did* get soft. He fell for Winter. I knew it from the second he laid eyes on her when he crashed Kendrick’s dinner last week.

“How long was she gone?” They disappeared for four days. Was Winter locked away this whole time?

“You don’t need to know that.”

“How long?” I insist.

He caves. “Two days.”

Tears scrape at the backs of my eyes before coating my cheeks. *Poor Winter*. She must’ve been terrified. Here I was, blowing up her phone like an idiot, asking her where she was, while she was held somewhere, suffering and alone. No wonder she never replied.

“How is she? Is she hurt? Is she—”

“She’s fine.” Will’s warm hand envelops mine. I relax at his touch. “She cut her leg open when we were escaping, but she’s okay. And trust me, she’s lucky. Haze’s brother wanted her dead. It’s a wonder a fracture is all she got away with. She can’t walk right now, but she should be good to go in six weeks or so.”

I release a huge sigh of relief.

She’ll be fine. She’s alive. Breathe, Kass.

“And where is she now? Why isn’t she home? Does my mom know about this? She’s been acting so weird.”

“Slow down.” He gives my fingers a squeeze. “Yes, your mom knows about this. She’s the reason Winter didn’t bleed to death after she cut her leg. She called a friend of hers. He’s a doctor. Then she sent Winter to stay at a friend’s penthouse out of town.”

So, my mother *does* know about my brother’s secret. That explains why she asked me to stay at Morgan’s a while longer. She was buying herself more time, trying to come up with a believable explanation as to why Winter disappeared overnight. She wanted to keep me out of it. To keep me out of trouble.

Little does she know I’m *dating* trouble.

“Winter’s never coming home, is she?” I figure. “Not until she goes back to Canada?”

“No, she isn’t,” he confirms.

To think I had no idea the day I comforted her in the kitchen was the last time I'd see her in a very long time.

"It's not safe here anymore, and we can't protect her," he adds. "Especially now that we're a member short because of..." He stops, his eyes growing as though he's just remembered something. "*Oh.*"

My sadness gives way to fear.

"What? What is it?"

"It's... Blake."

"What's wrong? What about Blake?"

"He's a traitor."

Of course he is.

"He helped Haze's brother set the whole thing up. He's been working on both sides for months. Something about knowing things would go to shit when Winter got involved and looking out for himself." Will heaves a bitter scoff, disgust prominent on his face.

I know I should be shocked, *hurt* that my ex-boyfriend was not only a backstabbing piece of shit toward me, but he also betrayed his best friends. But somehow, I'm not even remotely surprised to hear the bastard who cheated on me with my own best friend had his own agenda.

"He took a bullet in the leg when we rescued your cousin. Kendrick also beat the shit out of him. Safe to say he won't show his face anytime soon."

"So, to recap, Winter will be living in another town from now on." I recall the story out loud in the hopes that it will feel real. "She's not there alone, is she?"

"No, Kendrick is staying with her. They'll both be graduating online. It took a shit ton of arguing with the school, and Maria feeding them a bunch of BS, but it was nothing doctor's notes from her friend couldn't fix."

I can't believe Winter won't be at prom. That she'll flee Florida and move right back to Canada as soon as the school

year is over and her parents return from their work trip.

“I-I could’ve stopped this. I could’ve done more. Warned her more often. I—”

“Don’t.” Will’s blue eyes flicker to mine. “Don’t do this to yourself. It’s not your fault. It’s Blake’s, and Tanner’s. End of story.” The authority in his tone puts out my guilt before it soars out of control.

“And Haze? What’s up with him?”

“Kendrick said he’s out of Winter’s life.”

Like hell he is.

“Although if I’m being honest, I don’t buy it for a second.” He speaks what’s on my mind.

“Why not?”

“Well, for starters, you’re never going to believe what Haze told Winter when she was passing out after she cut her leg.”

“What?”

He laughs quietly. “He told her he loved her.”

No way.

“I know. Haze fucking Adams said he loved someone other than himself. Can you believe it?”

The answer comes to me.

Actually, I think I *can* believe it.

“And that’s not even the end of it. He betrayed his fighters and worked with us to find her after the fight. Kendrick would rather cut his dick off than admit it, but Haze is not the monster he makes him out to be.”

“So, you disagree with my brother, then? You think Haze is good for her?”

Will snorts. “Fuck no. But I think Kendrick has no business telling people who they can and can’t love.”

A thick silence descends over us.

He's not talking about Haze and Winter anymore, is he?

“Anyway. That’s why I didn’t text you. I’m sorry, we spent every waking moment looking for Winter, I couldn’t—”

“Will, stop. Don’t apologize. You were trying to save my cousin’s life. I couldn’t be mad at you if I tried. I was just afraid that you...” I shut myself up.

“That I was what?” he presses, searching my eyes. “Running after we slept together?”

Running after I told you I loved you.

Twice.

And you didn’t say it back.

Ugh, I want to punch myself.

I know he doesn’t owe me the L word. After all, it is still early in our relationship, but I can’t help the disappointment creeping into my heart whenever I think about his deflection.

Does he not... feel the same?

I nod halfheartedly, diverting my eyes to my feet. Silent, Will trace circles in the core of my palm with his thumb.

“I’m not fucking running, Kass.”

My eyes cut to his.

He stares at my lips. “Not this time.”

With that said, he unbuckles his seat belt. Then mine. I’m confused until he grabs my wrist and guides me over the center console onto his laps.

Oh, it’s make-out time.

I straddle him, my legs edging his body. His lips close over mine in an instant, his hands curving under my top. Heat finds us like it never left. My heart beats hard and fast. Will groans when I suck on his bottom lip. I never thought a kiss so intoxicating could come with such clarity.

I’m not just in love with this man.

I’m addicted to him.

The tension keeps on risi—

HONKKK!

My ass accidentally crushes the steering wheel, and Will draws me back to his chest, nuzzling his nose in the crook of my neck to drown out his laughter. I don't bother containing mine, whipping my head to glimpse at the horn.

Only, it's the last thing I see.

The most colorful sunset catches my eye. A thousand shades of orange and pink blend across the sky.

“Wow,” I breathe.

Now that's what I call a sunset.

Will stretches his neck.

“Shit,” he agrees. “Am I the king of picking secret sex spots or what?”

“Secret sex spot, huh? Keep it up and I just might think you're ashamed of me, Willy.” I crack a fake laugh—damn my fake laugh game is *weak*.

We haven't had the chance to discuss what would happen now that we're officially together. We haven't even talked about the Kendrick problem. Does he want us to keep this a secret forever?

Will's smile fades. “Kendrick may be out of town, but people still have eyes.”

Hurt rips through me.

“Gotcha.” I whisper, attempting to wiggle off his lap, but his thumbs skid farther under my clothes, digging into my hips to keep me in place.

“Wait, that's not what I meant, I just...” He pauses. “I don't want him finding out from somebody else while he's away.”

“But... we are going to tell him, right?”

He hesitates, and that silence alone sends me spiraling. I keep my eyes glued to him. It all comes down to this moment.

To his answer. I refuse to be his dirty little secret.

I *need* to hear him say it.

“Yes.” He nods. “As soon as he comes back into town, I’ll tell him.”

“Pinky promise?” I lift my finger, sounding vulnerable—like I’m *begging* him not to hurt me—and I hate it.

He smiles.

And laces his pinky around mine. “Promise.”



It’s one in the morning when Will and I stumble through Morgan’s front door. Elbowing him in the stomach to remind him to keep his voice down, I muffle my own laughter at the stupid joke he just told me. Knowing Morgan, she’s already in bed. Ethan is here, too. His car is out front.

He took the couch. Said he’d rather crash at Morgan’s than stay at his sister’s house where he’s reminded every five seconds that his parents kicked him out of the family home. Especially seeing as he recently decided to defer college a year and he’s got all this time on his hands now.

Morgan’s parents will be coming back from their trip in a few days, which means Will is going to have to start sneaking in through my bedroom window to keep up pretenses. Highly doubt my mom will approve of us dating after the Winter fiasco.

We spent the night up on the hill, laughing, looking at the stars on the hood of his car, driving around. Remember when Will said he’d missed me? Well, once the sun went down, he proceeded to show me how much—*also* on the hood of his car.

Will spins me around two steps inside the kitchen, kissing me slow and making my stomach the victim of a herd of angry butterflies.

“Are you staying for the night?” I wrap my arms around his neck, pecking the corner of his mouth. “Or... maybe we

could go to your place?”

I expect a reply along the lines of “Sure, I’ll introduce you to my mom.” I mean, we *are* officially together, aren’t we? But what I get instead... Is an uncomfortable smile and a quick “Here is fine.”

“I just thought maybe you could show me your place. You know, since I’ve never seen where you live.”

He clears his throat. “Yeah... I’d rather not. My mom’s a bit strict on guests, and the place is kind of a mess.”

Okay...?

“Your mom, what’s she like? I’d love to meet her.”

His hands leave my waist. “She’s very busy. She’s actually out of town right now. I’d be surprised if you got to meet her anytime soon.”

Red flag.

Everything about this moment rubs me the wrong way, but I choose to drop it for the time being.

“All right. We’ll take the guest room, then.” I spring to my tiptoes, smacking a kiss across his cheek. His shoulders sink with a relief I’m pretty sure I wasn’t meant to see. We end up making sandwiches, emptying Morgan’s pantry and chatting for another hour. We laugh, make out, do all the things I used to dream about. But something feels... *off*.

I once asked him if his mom was okay. If she’d found a way to rebuild her life after Will’s father took everything and ran. He said yes, but... there has to be a reason he doesn’t want me to see his place. Why he acts differently at the mere mention of her. I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt, but I can’t deny what’s right in front of me.

Will is lying to me.

And I’m going to figure out why.

Twenty-Seven

Will

Getting into my car and slamming the door, I slump into the driver's seat, eyes fixed on the texts Alex just sent me.

Alex: Dude, why the fuck haven't you been taking Kendrick's calls?

Alex: He said to call him ASAP. He needs to talk to you.

I cringe. Kendrick's been calling me since the day I came back into town, but I can't bring myself to pick up. Why does he need to talk to me? Does he know? While I'd love to believe no one has been cruel enough to pull the rug from under me and tell Kendrick the truth, the odds aren't in our favor.

Blake, Luke, Zoey.

All people that know about us.

Also people that hate our guts—to help our case.

Objectively, Blake is nothing to worry about. I don't think Kendrick would ever believe anything he said after what he did, not to mention he'd kill him on sight if he showed his face. As for Mr. Football-Fucking-Scholarship, Luke already tried to get Kass fired and failed. I don't think he would go as far as to get involved in Kass's family for a bruised ego. The most likely culprit is Zoey. Although I did threaten to sell her out to her trash boyfriend about screwing Blake if she exposed us. Kass and I haven't even been together for a month yet. How do we already have so many loose ends to worry about?

Conclusion: we fucking suck at keeping this a secret.

We need to step up our game. Now. No more being careless. Going out in public. We got wrapped up in it. The

second we step foot inside school today, we need to be strangers.

There's a good chance Kendrick will never forgive me for touching his sister. But what he would *definitely* never get over? Finding out from someone else. He'd never trust me again. I will tell him. Eventually. But it has to be in person.

Only reason I haven't done it yet.

I start my car, firing Kass a brief text.

Will: Leaving now.

Her shitty car broke down again, which means she needs a ride to school. She said she'd take the bus, but I'm not letting her. I'll just have to drop her off a few blocks early so no one sees us together.

My phone rings.

It's Kendrick.

Shit.

You have to pick up. He'll be suspicious if you don't. I curse, press Answer, and guide the phone to my ear.

"Hey, man." I hold my breath.

A beat of silence.

"About fucking time. Thought you were dead for a second there." Laughter erupts down the line.

My body unwinds.

"I know. Sorry. Just been busy." I shift in my seat. "What's up? How's the penthouse treating you?"

"Can't complain. I play video games all day, and Winter's healing pretty good. But that's not why I'm calling."

"Yeah?"

"Listen, I know this is going to sound weird, but... I've heard a few things and I wanted to ask you about it."

My stomach drops.

"Shoot."

“It’s Kass.”

He knows.

He so fucking knows.

“What about Kass?”

“A friend of mine told me he saw her driving around town with some guy late at night last weekend. Couldn’t tell who, but I’d be surprised if it was Luke Jenson. Dude probably has a curfew.”

I curse myself for thinking we could get away with it.

That was a close one.

“Can you like... check up on her something? She’s been a mess since this thing with my dad, and my mom says she just started talking to her again. The last thing she needs right now is for some asshole to break her heart, you feel me?”

I’m going to hell for this.

“Look, you want to protect your sister, fill your old man’s shoes, I get it, but have you ever thought that maybe... this guy could be good for her?” I ask.

Kendrick scoffs. “Yeah, doubt it. She doesn’t know what’s good for her right now. So... will you do it? Keep an eye on her while I’m gone?”

I’ll keep an eye on her all right.

“Sure,” I choke out.

“I didn’t want to ask Alex since they have a past, you know?”

It’s my turn to scoff.

“Something funny?”

“Sorry. I coughed.”

“Oh, and there’s something else. You guys need to start recruiting again. Find a replacement for Blake. Fast. Rumors are spreading. Word is we’re weak right now. We can’t have that.”

“Will do.”

“What about you, man? How is everything? We haven’t really talked lately. Not to be a girl, but I thought you were mad at me or some shit,” he jokes.

Not mad. Just fucking your sister.

“I’m okay. Tired but okay.”

“Did the asshole come back?”

I tense. He knows I hate when he goes there.

“No, he hasn’t. And he better not,” I growl.

Thankfully, he takes the hint.

My phone pings with a text from Kass.

Control freak: Are you there soon?

Control freak: No, wait, don’t answer that. You’re driving. Don’t die.

I can’t help my smile.

“Got to go. Some of us still have to go to school, dipshit.”

He snorts. “Since when do you care about school?”

I don’t. But I care about Kass.

And she cares about school.

Which means I care, too.

“Quicker I get there, the faster it’s over.”

“Fine. Don’t be a fucking stranger, okay?”

“I won’t,” I lie.



Kassidy

Weaving my way through the crowded halls, I try reassuring my best friend to no avail. Morgan walks by my side, arms full of notes, going on and on about an exam she is terrified of

failing. She spent our entire lunch break studying and still says she's not ready.

Seeing Will walk into Morgan's house with that breathtaking smile on his face this morning felt surreal. I ran into his arms, he picked me up, twirled me around, Ethan faked gagged—it was perfect.

The guys spent breakfast bouncing jokes off each other. Will eventually made Morgan laugh so hard she choked on her cereal. If he wasn't best friend approved before, he definitely is now.

Ethan took it upon himself to play detective for Morgan and ask Will about Alex's relationship status. Will said he hasn't met Alex's girlfriend yet, so he's not sure how serious they are.

Then Morgan brought up prom, and the room filled up with this heavy, awkward tension. Will and I didn't get a chance to discuss it, but I'm guessing it goes without saying that we can't go together. That would defeat the purpose of keeping our relationship a secret until we can tell Kendrick in person, which Will insists on.

Will dropped me off a few blocks away from school this morning. We didn't kiss. Didn't hug. Just in case someone was watching. It felt gutting. Having to climb out of the passenger seat like the guy in the car wasn't my boyfriend. We exchanged smiles in the hall after first period, but it didn't go any further. It's weird. How I was in his arms this morning, yet to the world we're strangers.

It doesn't help that he didn't once spend the night with me this weekend. The only night he stayed over was Friday. Kept saying he had to train and he'd see me the next day. But then, first thing in the morning, he'd turn up on Morgan's porch with coffee, ready to spend the day with me. I was so happy to see him I couldn't be bothered to think twice about it.

I know this situation is fucked-up—boy, do I know it—but I still can't shake the giddy feeling in my stomach. Nor can I stop my heart from speeding at the mere thought of him.

Telling Morgan I'll see her in art class, I turn the corner and stop at my locker.

"No way? Haze came to see you?" a familiar voice squeals.

I flip my head back to see Callie walking by my locker with Bianca.

"Yep. And don't think I didn't notice he came back right in the time frame this Winter chick stopped showing up at school." Bianca cackles. "He got sick of her. I knew he would."

"Well, what happened?"

"What do you think happened?" Bianca smirks.

I cringe in disgust. I could punch Haze on my cousin's behalf right now. If only this guy was *ever* at school.

So much for saying he loved her, huh?

Kendrick was right.

He better be out of her life.



I've witnessed my lot of awkward moments in life. But sitting at the same table as the guy I rejected, who tried to get me fired from my job, and my boyfriend that I chose over said guy? I don't see how any situation could top that.

Working in silence, I focus on my art project, careful not to make eye contact with anyone. Bianca decided to show up for once in a lifetime, and she's been talking with Luke, which I'm grateful for, since the class started. I would hate for him to talk to me or Will—

"So, Will," Luke speaks up.

Of fucking course.

"Got a date to prom?"

Will doesn't reply right away, probably trying to keep his fist away from Luke's shit-eating grin.

"Wasn't planning on going," Will says.

"What about you, Kass? Are you going?" Luke asks, proud of the corner he's backing us into. He knows damn well Will and I can't go together. "Because my friend Greg's looking for a date. And I thought you two could go together. You know, since you're single."

Will's fists clench on cue, and he tucks his hands under the table to hide it.

"So? You interested? I'm sure he'd love to take you out. And you could use some action in that love life of yours."

"I don't know if that's a good idea." I shift in my seat.

"Come on, he's a nice guy. And he thinks you're cute. What's the harm?"

"Yeah, just say yes, girl," Bianca chimes in. "He's hot. If you don't, I have a friend who will."

"See? She has a friend who would be interested."

"Why don't you want to, Kass? Did someone else ask you? Are you not available?" Luke presses.

I glimpse at Will from the corner of my eye. He's fuming, close to losing his temper. I don't know why I keep waiting, hoping for him to step up, tell Luke to fuck off.

That I'm taken.

He won't.

He *can't*.

"No, no one asked me." My gaze falls to the floor, my voice so weak I barely hear it.

"Great. It's settled, then. I'll tell Greg he's got himself a hot date." Luke beams.

I don't find it in myself to argue. And in that moment, for the first time since we made it official... I regret dating someone who only wants me behind closed doors.



Relief pouring out of me, I trail to the school's exit with Morgan. About time this day ended. I unlock my phone. Ethan texted me that he's outside. He'll be driving me and Morgan home since Will has training tonight.

I notice I have a message from my mom.

Mom: Sweetie, I need you to come home from your friend's tonight. I also wanted to tell you, Winter has gone back to Canada early for a funeral. Your brother went with her.

I scoff, shaking my head at her story.

A funeral? Seriously?

Seconds before I pad out of the school, my phone pings again. I expect it to be a message from Will—we didn't get a chance to talk after Luke blackmailed me into going to prom with his buddy—but it's not.

Far from it.

It's from Zoey. I haven't said a word to her since I found out she slept with Blake.

Zoey: Isn't that your boyfriend?

Zoey: Not satisfying him already? That's got to hurt. Oh, well, at least it took longer than last time.

Zoey attached a picture.

With trembling fingers, I tap the file, zooming in for a better look. The picture shows a scene I wish weren't true.

Will.

Leaving a motel room.

Twenty-Eight

Kassidy

My footsteps are fast-paced, decisive. I can barely breathe as I lurch down the hall toward Zoey's locker. Crushing my phone into my fist, I pray that she hasn't gone home yet. That she can explain what the hell she just sent me.

I need to know *how* she took the picture, *where* she took it. I need to know everything before I bring it up to Will's attention. There has to be a good explanation for this. This can't be true. There's no way that Will cheated.

Maybe I'm dumb.

What else do you do in a motel room?

Kass, stop.

Is that where he ran off to every night he wouldn't stay with me? To a motel room? Anxiety burns within me. I'm such a mess I have to stop and gather a breath to prevent my emotions from rolling down my cheeks.

I spot the back of Zoey's head in the distance. She hasn't noticed me yet, emptying her locker into her bag.

"What the hell?" I blurt, holding my phone up to her face.

"Oh, hey, Kass. Yeah, sorry about that. Truth hurts, doesn't it?" She slams her locker shut, heading for the exit.

If she thinks she's leaving, she's got another thing coming.

"Where did you get that? You're going to tell me everything. *Now.*"

She huffs a laugh. "And why on earth would I do that?"

"Gee, I don't know. Maybe because you don't want me to tell Sean about what really happened on your birthday."

Fear flashes in her gaze. “You do that and Kendrick finds out all about you dating his best bro behind his back.”

It hits me.

She *shouldn't* know this. I didn't tell her that we're officially dating. That would require communication, and I've completely shut her out of my life.

“How do you know about that? I never told y—”

“You know, you should really be more careful which boy you lead on. Luke Jenson is quite the blabbermouth.”

Ah. Luke was there the night Will showed up at my house to tell me he wanted to be with me. Luke left before we got to the—ahem—*good part*, but Will's intentions were clear as day. I'm guessing he put the pieces together afterward, and Will's poorly concealed rage at Luke setting me up with another guy must've confirmed any suspicions he had.

“Why haven't you told Kendrick?” I ask.

That's Zoey. She *enjoys* making others suffer. I've had the proof of that during our countless years of friendship. I would've expected her to tell Kendrick the truth about me and Will the second we stopped being friends, but... she didn't.

Why?

“And spare you the fear of getting caught? Nah. Luke and I thought it'd be better to sit back and watch you kill yourselves trying to keep it a secret.” She bounds out of the school.

I follow as Zoey saunters toward Callie's running car parked out front. Her replacement best friend sits inside, waiting for her.

“Zoey!” I snap, and she stops dead in her tracks. “Look, I get it, you hate me, but we didn't *always* hate each other. We used to be best friends, remember? If you ever cared about me at all, you'll tell me about the picture... Please.”

She considers her options for a long, unbearable moment, then swivels around.

“Fine. Callie’s new fuck buddy works at the gas station across the street from some shitty motel. She saw Will sneaking into a room when she stopped by a while back and snapped a picture. Her boy toy said he’s been going into room thirty-five every night at around nine for days now.”

My heart tightens.

Nine is usually when he comes up with an excuse and leaves.

Do I even know this boy?

“Thanks.”

She doesn’t respond, resuming to Callie’s car. I think back to Will’s sketchy behavior when I questioned him about his life. How he avoids any conversation regarding his family—his mom. *God, is she dead?* Will said we can’t hang out tonight because he has to train.

But what if... that’s bullshit?

Maybe if I just went and checked.

The words ooze out of my mouth before Zoey climbs inside Callie’s car.

“Wait.”

She stops, holding the door open.

“Can you text me the address?”



Sitting in my mom’s car with the ultimate creeper shades on, I watch *jack shit* happen and tap my foot. Been doing it for over an hour now. I showed up here shortly before nine, expecting to see Will sneak into room thirty-five.

No one.

He’s nowhere to be found.

And the weirdest part? I saw a light come on through the room window. At first, I thought he’d gotten there early, but

his car isn't in the lot. I didn't want to let the thought in—not even for a second—but I have to be realistic. There's someone in that room. Maybe even a girl.

Waiting for Will with her legs open.

Jesus, I hate that I'm here right now. I hate that instead of confronting him about the picture like a mature, well-balanced girlfriend, I'm holed up in a car, surveilling some shabby motel.

Headlights flash in the distance.

A car pulls into the lot.

I duck, slouching into my mom's driver seat—I took her car when she passed out early tonight. Mine is still at the shop.

My breath threatens to leave me.

It's him.

Sticking my head out an inch, I watch as he parks in the spot by the motel room and hurries out of the car, his gym bag drooping off his arm. He really *did* train tonight. At least, that wasn't a lie.

He strides to the door, plucking a key out of his pocket. As though he knows he's being watched, he slows down, analyzing his surroundings. I yelp, dipping once more. By the time I look again, he's gone inside.

I tell myself to drive home and confront him later. To forget all about Zoey's texts, but I can't help doubting everything I thought I knew. It took me ages to get this guy to even *consider* being in a relationship.

Maybe he just couldn't take it.

Reverted back to his old ways.

I jerk in surprise when my phone chimes with a text.

Willy Wonka: I miss you so fucking much it should be illegal.

Will.

Argh. A mix of unwanted emotions wash over me. He misses me, *he says*. Then why is he lying?

Why is he keeping things from me?

I text back.

Kass: Remind me again why you can't come over tonight?

Minutes go by.

Willy Wonka: Had to train. But I'll make it up to you tomorrow. Promise.

Desperate, I opt for a bait as old as time. *The sex bait*.

Kass: You sure you can't spare me a second tonight? My mom is out cold and I'm horny.

The reply is instant.

Willy Wonka: Yeah? What are you wearing right now?

Hook, line, and sinker.

Kass: Nothing. Just got out of the shower.

Willy Wonka: Fuck. Don't tell me that.

Willy Wonka: If you give me a boner during training, Alex will never let me hear the end of it.

Kass: So, you're still at training?

Ten minutes go by.

Willy Wonka: Yeah.

His lie slices right through me. I don't reply, holding my phone tightly against my chest and climbing out of my car.

That's it. I'm going in. I creep toward room thirty-five stealthily and come to a stop near the door, preparing to knock. Seconds before my fist meets wood, I change my mind, settling for the handle.

This place is too cheap for electronic key cards. It's a regular knob, and I'd rather not give Will time to clean up and hide whoever's in there.

It's unlocked.

Time for the truth.

Slowly, I twist the door open, careful not to make a sound as I ghost inside the empty motel room.

No sign of a girl.

No sign of Will either.

On the other side of the door is a double bed pushed up against the left wall. The bed is undone, messy. All over the nightstand is Will's stuff: his phone, his keys. He even has a phone charger plugged in. He's not just passing through.

But what sets my thoughts onto a self-destructive course is the suitcase sitting at the foot of his bed.

Wait.

Does he... live here?

I've barely had time to let my discovery sink in when the most unexpected sound slashes through the air.

Someone puking.

And I mean *puking*.

My gaze darts to the closed door halfway across the room. The bathroom. Will's in there. He's got to be.

Is he sick?

"What the fuck did you take?"

That's his voice.

So, he's not the one throwing up?

He sounds distressed, panicked even.

"Why?" he jabs. "Why the fuck do you keep doing this to yourself?"

Then comes another voice.

This one female.

"I know, I'm sorry, baby, I'm so sorry. I'll stop, I promi—"

More vomiting. Unable to make sense of the events unraveling before me, I tumble back a step. I convince myself

it can't possibly get any worse until a scream reaches my ear.

That's when my heart crumbles into a million pieces.

Because the panic in Will's voice...

I've never heard it before.

"Mom! Mom! *Fuck!*"

Mom.

Motion.

Noises.

The shower starts.

"Mom!" he shouts at the top of his lungs. "Wake up!"

My guess is he just put her in the shower. Seconds pass. Will's heart-wrenching pleas diffuse through the room's thin walls. Then the puking picks up again. And I hear him sigh in relief. I can't handle his ragged, rough breathing. He's seconds away from a panic attack.

"I'm here, honey. I'm here," she says in a gruff voice.

"I... I can't." He chokes. "I can't do this anymore."

Kass, you need to leave. Now!

Get the fuck out!

"No, wait, I'm sorry. Don't leave me, William." She vomits in between sobs.

"I can't do this anymore." He articulates every word as if to get it through her head. "You drained everything! Four fucking grand. Gone in a matter of days. I'm done."

I feel like I'm going to faint when the bathroom door swings open. Will comes out, his eyes bloodshot, his features hard. He's barely holding back tears. But when he sees me? Standing by the door? Something shifts in his eyes.

Something *dies*.

Like he's just reached his limit of pain for a lifetime.

Speechless, we stand there, staring at each other. Waiting to see which one of us will speak first.

“*Kass?*” He blinks shock at me.

Before I know it, he’s grabbed me by the arm, leading me outside of the room. The instant the door closes, his shock is replaced by livid anger.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

I’m ashamed of my actions.

“It’s Zoey, she... She sent me a picture of you leaving this place and she said you were cheating and I—”

“Hold on,” he says as though he’s certain he misheard me. “You followed me here?”

“No. Well, not exactly. Zoey gave me the address, and I showed up here an hour ago.” I wince at my own words.

He seems baffled, furious, betrayed—*don’t forget betrayed*. Then his eyes blaze with understanding.

“But your texts... You were here this whole time?”

My words leave me.

I really messed up.

“You were testing me,” he realizes.

Say something! Fix this!

“Yes, I was, but only because I thought you were keeping things from me. Like your mom. You said she was okay. She’s not oka—”

“Don’t talk about her!” he snarls. “I can’t believe it. Do you... Do you even realize what you did? You *followed* me, spied on me! For fuck’s sake, Kass. Who do you think I am? Your puppet?”

Regret surges inside me.

“It’s not like that, I swear. It’s just... you’re always so closed off. You won’t tell me *anything* about your life.” The more I try to patch this up, the quicker he slips through my fingers.

I step forward, grasping his face between my hands. “I’m sorry, I messed up.”

He squeezes his eyes shut, fuming, and exhales a deep, self-soothing breath. Helplessness, fear—just two of the many things I’m feeling when I push to my tiptoes and sling my arms around his neck, hugging him with all I have. Not to sway his forgiveness, but because I feel so awful for what he’s had to go through tonight. I need this.

I *need* to be there for him.

He doesn’t reject me, which is a good sign, but he also doesn’t reciprocate the hug. I don’t care—I’m not letting go.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper, holding on tighter.

Something tells me he knows I’m not apologizing for my mistakes. I’m apologizing for life putting him through this hell. How long has his mother been an addict? Since his father took everything and ran? Has he been dealing with this his whole life?

Every single part of me relaxes when he returns my embrace, his arms circling my waist and drawing me flush to his chest. Relief fills me to the brim as he rests his chin atop of my head.

“I’m so sorry,” I repeat, but his only response is a heavy sigh. Then, stupidly, I add, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Just like that, the spell is broken.

His arms are off me, his body far from mine.

“Are you serious right now?” His face twists in fury. “Maybe because I didn’t want you to look at me the way you’re looking at me right now. Like I’m a broken toy who needs fixing. Or maybe because this is *shit*, Kass. My life is shit! All of it. And call me selfish, but I wanted to have one good thing. Just one *fucking* thing.”

I’m about to blab out another apology, but the devil on my shoulder laughs at me.

Silly, girl, don’t you know?

It's too late.

"I need you to go," he says.

My breath catches in my lungs.

I look up at him, searching his eyes for anger, sadness—I'll take any emotion—but what I see is... emptiness. Pure and total emptiness. It's like I can *physically* feel him shutting me out. Closing himself off to me all over again.

"W-What?" I say even though I heard him loud and clear.

"You heard me. I need you to go. Get out of here."

"Wait, Will, I'm sorry, I just..." My voice cracks. "I just wanted you to let me in."

"This was a mistake." He shakes his head. "Go."

It feels as though there's a piece of glass lodged in my throat.

"What was a mistake?" My heart swells with pain, and I manage to whisper a shaky "*Us?*"

He smacks his lips together, tasting the words wanting out of his mouth, fighting an impulse, fighting himself. Finally, he inhales.

"Just go. Please. I can't deal with this right now."

"But your mom. She needs help. I—"

"*I said fucking go!*" He yells so loud I jump back a step.

Will has never really yelled at me before. He's yelled *around* me, but never *at* me. But, right now, he's had enough. And I'm to blame. He's right. I need to go.

So, I do.

I nod, cursing the tears forming in my eyes, and walk away. He watches as I trail toward my car. As if he's making sure that I'm leaving. Like he doesn't trust me anymore.

I don't know that I trust me either.

I'm back into my mom's car within seconds, and as I drive off, I wonder if he was right.

If this *was* a mistake...

Twenty-Nine

Kassidy

Five days later

“Kass, so help me God, you check your phone one more time, I’m taking it away,” Morgan snaps, interrupting my obsessing with a threat I have no doubt she’ll follow up on.

“Sorry, I’m done,” I promise and power off my phone. I sure wish I could give my feelings the same treatment. How handy would that be?

Heart status: out of order until further notice.

Morgan does have a point. We’re supposed to be having a girls’ night. No boys allowed—not even Ethan. Too bad the blond intruder in my head didn’t get the memo.

It’s been five days since I put my nose where it didn’t belong. Five unbearable days since Will broke up with me—well, I *think* he broke up with me? Truth is, I have no idea where we stand, but if his radio silence tells me anything, it’s that we’re not in a good place. I haven’t seen him at school once. And I must’ve apologized twenty times.

He hasn’t answered any of my texts.

Not that I deserve any less.

Winter and Kendrick are still MIA, away on a last-minute trip to Canada—*or so my mother says*. I put on the performance of a lifetime pretending like the two of them disappearing this close to graduation wasn’t sketchy as hell. I’ve also been taking extra shifts at the pet store. It’s not like I have much to do after school anymore.

“Still no news?” Morgan picks up on my disappointment.

“None,” I mutter.

“Are you ever going to tell me what happened between you two? The guy is head over heels into you one second, then the next, he just vanishes. Something doesn’t add up here.”

I wince. I’d be lying if I said I haven’t been dying to share what happened with her, but that’s not my story to tell.

Just as it wasn’t my story to *know*.

At least, not yet.

Perhaps if I hadn’t tried to force it out of him, he would’ve told me eventually. But on his own terms.

And when he was ready.

“All I can tell you is I broke his trust,” I say, as vague as I can be. “I fucked up. Bad.”

It’s been five days. Maybe it’s time I take a hint. Stop checking my phone every two seconds. Stop hoping his name will pop onto my screen. In my defense, it’s hard not to think about him. I still have one of his hoodies.

He left it at Morgan’s.

In fact, I’m wearing it right now. I glance down at my outfit. This simple piece of clothing triggers a foreign reaction in me. I strip off the hoodie, grab my phone, and turn it back on while assuring Morgan it’s the last time.

He has every right to never want to talk to me again, but I need closure. I’ll die before recreating my breakup with Blake.

Kass: I just want you to know that I get your reaction. I would do the exact same thing, and I promise I won’t blow up your phone anymore. I’ll drop your hoodie at Alex’s sometime this week.

Then I shut off my phone.



“Kass, wake up.”

It's the middle of the night when someone shakes me out of slumber. In a daze, I groan, barely peeling my eyes open and blinking my senses back to life.

"Wait. Alex, slow down."

Morgan.

She's talking to Alex?

The memories come rushing back, knocking me awake and alert—right, I'm spending the night at Morgan's place. The room is pitch-black. I can barely discern my half-asleep best friend sitting on the edge of her bed, phone pressed to her ear. I check the clock on her desk. *2:06 a.m.*, the red digits display. We went to bed at midnight. No wonder I feel weary.

"What's going on?" I ask, rubbing my eyes.

Morgan puts the call on speaker, and instantly, Alex's deep, panicked voice rings through the darkness.

"Is Kass with you?"

What the...

"Yeah, she's here. Why?" Morgan is cold as ice.

Still having trouble in paradise, I see.

It's a trend these days.

"I've tried calling her a million fucking times. I need to talk to her."

His cursing takes me aback. Alex's not one to drop the f bomb for no reason. Something must be seriously wrong.

"She turned her phone off. We were having a girls' night. Why do you need to talk to her?"

"It's Will."

Fear slams into me.

"He... he told me he felt like she understood him once. That they were friends. I need her help. Might be a long shot, but maybe she can talk him out of it."

"Talk him out of what?" I cut in.

“We’re at some bar downtown. Lucifer’s Den. Will’s a fucking wreck. He’s been getting into fights, starting shit with everyone with a heartbeat. The owners are threatening to call the cops on him, but he won’t leave. I don’t know what to do.”

“What’s gotten into him?” Morgan panics.

“No clue. He won’t talk to me. He’s been acting weird as shit all week. Please tell me she can help.”

The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

“I’m on my way.”



I’m bursting through the doors to Lucifer’s Den twenty minutes later. The bar is gloomy, illuminated by red neon lights, hence its name. It really *does* feel like we’re entering the devil’s den. The second Alex hung up, I jumped out of bed, changed out of my pajamas into sweatpants and a T-shirt, and bolted into Morgan’s car. Luckily, there weren’t any bouncers at the door.

I spot Alex arguing with someone by the coat check. The manager most likely.

“Alex!” I wave, and his shoulders drop in relief.

He crosses the distance between us in one stride, then stops, analyzing his surroundings. “Morgan didn’t come with?”

Wait, was that disappointment in his voice? *I see*. He was hoping this would give him an excuse to see her.

“No. She stayed back.”

He snaps out of it. “Okay. Will’s at the bar. You have five minutes *tops* before they call the cops.”

I turn away.

“Kass, wait.” Alex grabs my arm. “He broke a bottle. There’s glass everywhere. Watch your step.”

This is worse than I thought.

I nod, diving deeper into the crowd and seeking Will's built frame at every corner. Then I see him. Hunched over the bar, gesturing to the bartender, who seems hell-bent on ignoring him.

"What kind of bullshit business is this?" I hear Will spit as I close in on him. "Now we can't get another drink at a fucking bar?" The ironic part is, he's got a half-full beer in front of him.

"Nah, it's just *you* who can't get a drink, mate. Take a hint," the bartender retorts with a thick British accent as he attends to other customers, all of whom are throwing Will nasty glances.

Not having it, Will rises from his stool, ready to flip the guy off, but my hand flies to his shoulder before he can open his mouth. Surprised, he turns around—okay, more like *staggers*—completely wasted. I can't possibly translate his features when he frowns, taking me in.

I expect him to be angry.

Sad.

So, you can imagine my surprise when he starts laughing.

"Wow, either I'm really drunk..." He sticks a finger in my face. "Or you look exactly like my girlfriend."

My pulse gives a jolt at his choice of words. Girlfriend, huh? Does that mean we're still together?

"Oh, wait, you *are* my girlfriend." He snorts.

"Will, come on, we need to go." I move closer, grasping his arm. "They're going to call the cops on you."

Why doesn't this place have freaking bouncers?

He shakes me off him, irritated.

"What are you doing here, control freak?"

The nickname stings me skin-deep. This is the first time he's called me that with a negative undertone.

“Stopping you from landing a criminal record, that’s what.”

“Why? I thought you were *done* with me,” he hisses.

I pause.

“What are you talking about?”

“Isn’t that what your message said? That you wouldn’t text me anymore? That you were going to...” He makes quotation marks with his fingers. “*Drop my shit at Alex’s?*”

Fuck.

Is that why he’s acting out?

My text?

“Whatever, I’m over you. You can go now.” He shows me the door, taking a swaying step forward and nearly tripping.

I hold him up. “Look at you. You can barely walk. Let me take you home.”

“Can’t. Don’t have one. But you know what I do have?” He stares me dead in the eyes. “A junkie mother who likes to OD in motel bathrooms.”

It feels like he just wrenched a knife into my chest.

“Shit, that’s right, you knew that already.” He heaves a bitter laugh. “*My bad*. I’ll be more careful next time you follow me against my will.”

I can’t get into this with him right now.

“You’re coming with me.” I tug on his arm.

He won’t budge. “Like hell I am.”

In one last, desperate attempt to save his ass, I cup his face, forcing our eyes to meet. “Look at me. If you stay here, you’re going to get arrested, do you get that?”

They could charge him with underage drinking, disorderly intoxication, disorderly conduct. The list goes on and on.

“Will, I’m begging you.”

He clenches his jaw, maintaining the eye contact, debating between options for a few seconds. Then he says the single most beautiful word I've heard all night.

“Fine.”



“One last step,” I caution, using the little strength I have left to help Will up the stairs. The guy is far from a lightweight. As soon as we got to Morgan’s house, I knew I needed to put him to bed. He was talking nonsense the entire ride home, rambling on about how he didn’t need my help. Or anyone’s help. That he never did before.

And wouldn’t start now.

He’s been on his own for so long, he’s convinced himself anyone who gets close to him is waiting with one foot out the door. Ready to bail at the first sign of trouble.

I would’ve had to be blind to miss Morgan’s face when she found out I’d invited Alex to crash on her couch. She waited up for us and clearly wasn’t expecting to see Alex stumble through her front door, but it was obvious Will wasn’t the only one who’d had too much, and I felt bad leaving him there.

Plus, the way he looked at Morgan when he saw her in her tiny pajama shorts and tight tank top suggests she might thank me tomorrow.

“Come on.” I drag Will to Morgan’s guest room, nudging the already unfastened door open with my elbow and venturing inside. “Here you go.” I unlink Will’s arm from my shoulders, guiding him down onto the bed as gently as my lack of muscles allows me to.

I expect to hurry back to Morgan’s bedroom, pass out, and take it up with him tomorrow, but it doesn’t seem to be in the cards for me because Will tugs on my hand, jerking me on top of him so suddenly a small screech escapes me.

His lips come down on mine before I can blink, sending my pulse through the roof. Part of me knows this is not the

right time, but the other is relieved. In *disbelief* that this is happening.

I thought I'd lost him.

So, when he pins me down under him, slides his tongue into my mouth, and curves a hand inside my sweatpants... I let him. I'm not wearing any underwear, which gives him clear access to my—

Shiitt.

“Fuck,” he rasps against my mouth, slowly curling a finger in and out of me. “I need you, Kass. I need you so fucking bad. Don't ever scare me like that again.”

I know it's probably just the alcohol talking, but the way he says it... It punches me in the feels.

He's talking about my text, isn't he?

“Will, you're not yourself. Y-You need to sober up.”

“I don't want to sober up.” He picks up the pace, easing a second finger inside me effortlessly and winning over a moan I kept locked up. His mouth connects with my neck, paying extra care to my collarbone, and I scold my body for disobeying my brain. I can feel his length digging into my thigh. “I want to fuck you so hard I forget what you did. I don't want to be angry anymore. *Let me forget,*” he begs, withdrawing his fingers and flipping my T-shirt over my bare chest. I didn't bother putting on a bra earlier. He grunts at the view, sucking my right nipple into his mouth with such pressure that my back arches.

This can't be happening.

Not like this.

“Will, we can't.” Heaven only knows how I find the resolve to push him away. My body pulsing with desire, I carry myself off the mattress, panting like I just ran a marathon. He stares as I smooth my T-shirt back down, putting much-needed distance between us.

He scoffs. “Right, I forgot... You gave up on me.”

Is he joking?

“Stop saying that. That’s not true.”

“Please.” He drops onto his back. “One peek into my life and you fucking ran. Then you wonder why I kept the truth from you.”

“I didn’t run! You pushed me away.”

Did he not get my gazillion texts this week?

He completely ignores me. “It’s fine. Can’t say that I blame you. She should’ve run, too.”

His voice decreases into a mumble.

“Then maybe she’d still be here.”

I can’t keep my nerves under control.

“Who?” I sit on the bed. “Who would still be here?”

The answer comes to me.

“Lyla?” My voice wavers.

Is she dead? Is that what he’s saying?

He doesn’t deny nor confirm my suspicions, pinching his eyes shut as though he can’t bear for me to see him like this.

“It’s all my fault.” He sounds pained.

“What is?”

“She trusted me. And I betrayed her.”

“What’s your fault, Will?” I insist.

“God, I... I wanted to be mad at you, Kass. I *tried*. I tried so fucking hard this week,” he rambles. “What you did... It’s not okay, but then... Then you send me one text. One stupid text that sounds like I’m losing you and I’m right back to...” He clamps his lips together, scolding himself for saying too much—*feeling* too much.

His red, exhausted blue eyes find mine.

“And I thought I would never forgive myself, but when I’m with you... I *do*. For that one, blissful second, I don’t feel

guilty anymore. And I hate it. I hate that I'm happy. I shouldn't... I don't deserve it."

I don't have the slightest idea of what he's going on about, but I decide to play along. "That's normal, Will. It's hard to move on after losing someone and Lyla." Her name leaves a bitter taste on my tongue. "She was important to you, wasn't she?"

He doesn't reply for the longest time. I secure his hand into mine, interlacing our fingers.

"Yeah, *she was*," he admits.

The confirmation hurts a tad more than expected.

"But with you," he rasps, his eyes falling closed. "With you, it's different."

"How am I different?"

He releases my hand, his answers growing apart. His body twitches with spasms, a clear indicator that he's drifting off to sleep. Then, seconds before he passes out...

He says something that splits my heart in two.

"You're different because I love you."

Thirty

Kassidy

I didn't sleep a wink after he said it. I lay in Morgan's bed for three hours. Tossing. Turning. Overthinking. Not that my best friend minded. She never made it up to her room. Pretty sure she spent the night on the couch with Alex.

I must've asked myself a million questions—Did he mean it? Was that the alcohol speaking? Is he going to remember any of this tomorrow?—all of which had the same answer: Only time will tell.

It's past ten when I drag my exhausted, zombie-looking ass down the stairs to quench my thirst. I assume I'm the first one up by the complete absence of noise in Morgan's house. Passing through the living room, I find Morgan and Alex asleep on the pull-out couch, snuggled up together.

I crack a smile.

Her thank-you better be epic.

I pad into the kitchen, flinching at the sun shining through the bay window, and down a glass of water. Then I make coffee. Resting my elbows against the counter, I sip on my espresso, listening to the only audible sound in the house: cars driving by.

Will's voice pops into my head. *You're different because I love you.* What I wouldn't give to hear him say that when he's sober.

"Morning."

I jerk in surprise, a splash of coffee flying out of my cup and onto the kitchen counter. Will stands behind me, in last night's outfit, his hair a tousled mess, and his eyes rimmed with his lack of sleep.

“Hey... you’re up,” I state, but it comes out as a question. Even pale and exhausted, he looks like *that*. How?

Freaking how?

“Unfortunately,” he groans, edging farther into the room and wincing at the light as I did. “Damn, that’s a lot of sun.”

I smile.

“How are you feeling?” I grab a mug out of the cabinet and pour him a coffee.

“Stupid, hungover, embarrassed. Want me to keep going?”

I chuckle. “I get the idea.”

He makes his way over. “I’m sorry. Whatever happened last night, I’m an idiot.”

Disappointment tugs at my heart.

“You don’t remember?” I hand him his coffee.

“Not a thing. It’s all a big blur.”

There goes his love declaration.

In contrast to the first time he pulled that amnesia prank on me, I actually believe him. He could barely walk last night. And the things he shared... he would’ve *never* told me had he been sober.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” I ask.

“I remember Alex and I sneaking into a bar. Your text.”

That damn text.

If I’d known how he would react, I would’ve never sent it.

“Then we got blackout drunk and... I’m guessing if Alex had to call you to come get my ass, I did something stupid?”

“Do you really want to know?”

He exhales. “Lay it on me.”

“You may have gotten into a fight or two.”

“And?” He knows there’s more.

“And almost gotten arrested,” I cave.

He cringes.

“Well, thanks for saving me, control freak.”

“Anytime, Willy.”

This is *weird*.

How he was kissing the breath out of me just last night, telling me how much he needs me, and now... I don't have a clue as to where we stand. Is he still mad at me? Are we still on the outs?

“Nice hoodie, by the way.” He gestures.

I flush in realization.

It's his.

I wear it to sleep every night lately.

I fiddle with the fabric. “Oh, right. Did you want it back?”

Please say no.

“Depends...” He eyes my lips. “Do I get you back, too?”

My heart flutters.

“I—”

“Don't talk to me. I need coffee.” Morgan comes streaming through the door the next second.

A shirtless Alex follows close behind. Chasing after her.

“Morgan, wait. Hear me out, please,” Alex begs, his green eyes small from having just woken up.

Weren't these two cuddling two minutes ago? What did the poor bastard do in *two* minutes?

“Just go, okay? It's too early for this, and I'm tutoring in forty-five minutes.” Morgan acts unfazed, but I see right through her.

She's hurt.

“Not happening. Either you listen to me, or I'm camping on your goddamn porch until you do.”

Morgan stares at him, calling his bluff.

“Don’t test me, James. I’ll go buy a tent right now,” he warns.

I can’t help grinning at his threat. Even when they’re fighting, I’m rooting for them. Will clears his throat as a reminder that they have an audience, and Morgan sighs.

“Five minutes. Outside,” she says.

Alex’s shoulders drop in relief. He directs Morgan to the balcony, shutting the door on his way out and leaving me alone with Will. My hopes of picking up where we left off are shattered by my phone buzzing in my pocket.

It’s the alarm I set last night.

Work at 11:30, it says.

“Shit, I have to be at work in an hour. I need a shower. Talk later?” I hurry up the stairs without awaiting his reply. I want nothing more than to mend my broken relationship, but I’d also like to keep my job.

I scurry inside Morgan’s bedroom, kneeling down on the hardwood floor and shuffling through my overnight bag for an outfit. Then I jog down the stairs, a tad disappointed when I zoom by the kitchen and see that Will is gone. I rush into the first-floor bathroom, turn the shower on, and tug Will’s large hoodie over my head.

A voice flares behind me.

“Not that I’m not enjoying the show, but...”

I nearly scream and spin on my heels to find Will leaning against the wall, arms crossed over his chest—thank God for my T-shirt. One more second and he would’ve seen *everything*.

“Will? What the fuck?” I shriek.

He smirks, blue eyes raking over my body unapologetically. He’s casual, relaxed, like sneaking into Morgan’s bathroom and surprising me mid-stripping is a walk in the park to him.

“I thought you left.”

He shrugs. “I didn’t.”

“What are you doing in here?”

“We weren’t done talking.” He pushes off the wall, stalking toward me with that carnal look in his eyes.

I know that look.

Normally, I’d *love* that look.

Especially seeing as I’m dying to make things right between us, but I can’t do this right now. I can’t be late to work. I step backward, which only incites him to move closer.

“Now, where were we?” He stops to think. “Right, I was about to do this.”

He shocks me with a desperate, needy kiss, cupping my face and sealing our opened scars with a single move. His lips rain down on mine, dispatching shivers all over my body. I’m not going to pretend I don’t kiss him back. Or that I put up the semblance of a fight—I don’t. I allow his tongue into my mouth, *welcome* it, and lose myself into his arms, this kiss, this moment.

I lose myself, trying to find him.

An oxygen shortage tears us apart, and I’m left with nothing but the aftermath of his touch: a racing heart, erratic breathing.

This lust.

And one burning question.

“Does that mean you forgive me?” I clasp his shirt into my fist, drawing a long, conflicted breath out of him.

He nods.

“I forgive you.”

I smile, over the moon.

He presses his forehead to mine. “What you did was fucked-up, but I can’t blame you for wanting to know more about me. I haven’t exactly been an open book, and... frankly,

if I'd received a text saying you were staying at some motel, I would've gone and checked, too."

His admission relieves me.

Is he finally ready to open up to me?

"In that case, I have questions."

He sighs, tucking his hands into his pockets.

"I figured you would. Which is why I got Ethan to cover your shift."

"What?" I pull back. "How?"

Ethan *hates* working on weekends. Will must've spun him one hell of a tale.

"Told him you were feeding the homeless, which, in a way, you are."

What on earth?

"Come on, hop in the shower, put on something pretty. I have to go get my car. Pick you up in an hour." He dashes toward the exit.

"That's it? You're not going to tell me what we're doing?"

I watch him swing the door open, dumbfounded.

"You wanted to see my life, didn't you?"

He shoulder-checks me.

"Well, I'm taking you right into it."

Thirty-One

Kassidy

Will briefs me on our plans for the day halfway to our secret destination. Turns out when he told me we were feeding the homeless, he meant...

Having lunch with his mom.

I scold him for his crude comparison, swatting him in the arm and kindling the following reply: “Trust me, if I didn’t laugh about it, I wouldn’t last a day.”

I understand him better now. The jokes, the snarky replies. He uses humor as a defense mechanism. I replay his words, picking them apart one by one.

“If your mom is homeless, where are we meeting her?”

He shifts in the driver’s seat, taking a right. “Well, technically, she *isn’t* homeless. Just doesn’t have a permanent address. She’s crashing at a friend’s trailer until the beginning of the summer.”

“Then where will she go?”

“I’m sure she’ll find something. Bounce around between places for a while, probably.” He shrugs as though this is old news.

And it is.

To him, at least.

That’s his life. Has been since he was a kid.

“I take it you don’t live together?”

He scoffs. “Fuck no. I’d lose my mind. She stayed in my motel room last weekend, and I nearly went off my rocker just from that.”

The truth sinks into my stomach like an anchor. This explains why he had to leave early. He was checking on her.

“So, you live in motels?”

All this time, whenever he left, I imagined him going back to a picture-perfect house. Thought he had a nice, comfy place to lay his head. A *home*. And all this time, he didn't.

“Mostly, yeah. Depends how tight the money is. I spent the past month at some abandoned gym where the guys and I train.”

His unbothered attitude is unsettling—disturbing. He says it like it's normal, while I want to cry just *imagining* him freezing in an abandoned building.

“Don't,” he says in a husky voice.

My head snaps up.

“Don't look at me like that. Please.”

Shit.

Be more transparent, why don't you, Kass?

His jaw twitches. “If you pity me, then I'll start pitying myself, and I... I can't go there.”

“I'm sorry.” I blink back tears.

I can't help my trembling lip.

He winces at my bloodshot eyes. “Baby, stop. I'm fine, I promise.” His right hand leaves the wheel, enclosing mine. “I never go hungry, I have clothes, a phone, a car. The fights pay well, and as soon as my mom gets her shit together, I'll be able to afford a place. Don't worry about me, okay?”

I recall what he said to his mother at the motel: “*You drained everything! Four fucking grand. Gone in a matter of days!*”

Does he pay for her... substances?

“So, you give your winnings from every fight to your mom?”

“Yeah, I keep a third of it, but she needs it more than I do.”

I hate how angry that makes me. I tell myself I'm in no place to judge, but I can't quiet the nagging voice in my head. Let me get this straight—a grown-ass woman is living on her eighteen-year-old's son back? And she squanders the money he brings home on drugs?

Once again, he reads me like an open book.

“I know how this sounds, but she just needs a push to get her life back on track. She's trying.”

“So, she has a job?” I question.

“Not yet, but she's looking. She promised me she would.”

Everything about this screams toxic to me, but I keep my mouth shut, strictly refusing to form an opinion on his mother until I give her a chance.

“Do the guys know about this?”

His features darken at the mention of his friends. “Only Kendrick does. I'm not close enough with Alex to tell him.”

I often forget how close these two are.

“We're almost there.” He changes the topic, leading my left hand to his mouth to lay a kiss on my knuckles as he drives.

We pull into an isolated trailer park five minutes later, driving down a bumpy, narrow road. I watch as mobile homes flow past the car windows, some in better shape than others, the majority run-down and decrepit. I know better than to think *all* trailer parks are poorly maintained, but this one fits square into the stereotype.

Will's car comes to a stop in front of a worn-out, white trailer addressed 50. A metallic gray car sits in the driveway, making Will pause. He frowns, killing the engine and narrowing his eyes to catch a glimpse of the license plate.

“What the...” I hear him say.

That's when a man stumbles out of the trailer, a beer in his left hand. He inspects his surroundings like a criminal.

“Stay in the car,” Will spits, the frost in his voice making it clear he’s not asking and rushes out of the vehicle without so much as a warning. I roll the window down just in time to hear him bark, “What the fuck are you doing here?”

The drunk stranger, who’s swaying down the trailer’s steps, heaves a throaty laugh at the sight of Will charging toward him.

“Long time, kid.”

“Answer the fucking question, Steve.”

“Just paying your mom a visit.”

“Where is she?” Will blurts, fear lacing his tone.

“Inside. I wouldn’t bother her. She’s... resting.”

Then the man zips up his pants.

My blood freezes over.

The man laughs again, tipping his beer back for a sip. Except the bottle never meets his lips. Will snatches the beer out of his hands, launching it against the trailer at full strength. I shriek as the glass shatters into a million pieces. I unbuckle my seat belt and reach for the car handle, ready to go over there.

“One beating wasn’t enough, huh? You need more?” Will grips the chubby man’s collar and punches him to the ground. That’s my cue. I’m at Will’s side in seconds, holding him back before he dives in for round two.

“Will, stop!”

“What the hell? I told you to stay in the car!” Will shouts, worry crossing his features when he sees me. The man jumps at Will’s inattention, seizing the opportunity to crawl into his car and bolt. The vehicle roars down the street before we know it.

“Fuck!” Will kicks the trash can by the trailer in anger. “I have her fucking money right here. I...” He gestures to his own car. “She couldn’t have waited a goddamn hour. She had to...”

Realization of what's happening here makes me sick to my stomach. I wanted to give his mother the benefit of the doubt, but the evidence is damning.

She's prostituting herself.

In exchange for her fix.

And I'm guessing Will is paying for her shit because he would rather give her money himself than watch her...

Oh my God.

Then, as if it wasn't bad enough, the door creaks open. A frail woman who seems to be in her early forties stands on the other side, her post-sex, honey-colored hair cascading down her shoulders. Wearing a lilac bathrobe, she looks like she just woke up. Her delicate features peek through the dark spots under her eyes. I'll admit, she's *nothing* like what I pictured.

Sure, she looks older than her age, exhausted and a bit worn-out by a hard life, but she's still beautiful—Will had to get his charm somewhere. Her good looks solidify my hunch. I'm sure she's got plenty of dealers willing to *negotiate*.

"Honey, y-you're here early." She tries to smooth down her hair. "I thought I heard something."

Lady, you *thought* you heard something? How about a violent altercation and a glass bottle being smashed against your house? I don't know what she took, but it's working.

"Oh." She notices me. "Baby, is that her? Your girlfriend? William, she's so pretty."

It's strange.

Hearing her call Will by his full name.

"Kassidy, is it? It's so nice to meet you." She holds out her hand to me.

I see it now.

She's the kind of person you *want* to believe. Charismatic, seemingly harmless—*manipulative*. Must be how she keeps her son wrapped around her pinky. I lift my hand to meet hers, but Will stops me, catching my fingers into his.

“You’re *not* meeting her. We’re out of here. Come on.” He urges me toward the car.

“William!” She runs after us, too intoxicated to notice the glass cracking under her slippers. “Why are you leaving? Sweetie, what’s wrong?”

Will spins. “What’s wrong is you fucking called Steve!”

His mom stops short.

“Honey, you have to understand, he... He’s helping me. He said he’d find me a job.”

Will’s anger decreases. *Don’t tell me he’s falling for it.* I squeeze his hand in the dumb hope it’ll knock some sense into him. Much to my surprise, it works.

“Let me guess, as his own personal whore?”

His mother’s jaw hits the floor, her skin paling.

“Save your breath. I saw him sneak out.”

She smacks her mouth shut, knowing damn well she’s busted.

“You were never looking for work, were you?”

“William, please. It’s just not the right time for me, I’ll... I’ll get back on my feet soon, I promise.”

Will opens my car door for me, willing me to slide into the passenger seat. As he rounds the vehicle to reach the driver’s side, his mom leaps in his way.

“William, wait,” I hear her beg through my opened window.

“What?” he snaps.

Slightly trembling, she has the audacity to ask, “Do you have it? The m-money?”

Wow.

“Are you kidding me?” he hisses. “*That’s* what you care about right now?”

“Of course not. Y-you know I love you, baby. So much,” she backpedals. “But I need it. I’ll pay you back when I find work. Please just... give it to me.”

He huffs a scoff.

Climbs inside the car.

And speeds away.



We spend the rest of the day driving around, listening to music and pretending like our “lunch” with his mom didn’t go to hell. I don’t bring up what happened once, talking about anything *but* the elephant in the room. Will seems to appreciate it, entertaining my drivel without hesitation.

The sun is setting by the time Will drives us up the hill he first took me when he came back into town, snatching a parking spot that’s the equivalent of a front-row seat to Mother Nature’s show. He kills the ignition, leaving the radio on and keeping quiet for a while.

“Do you see it now?” he eventually breathes out.

“See what?”

“Why I didn’t want to bring you into this?”

Pain spreads through my rib cage.

“Jesus, your first time meeting my mom and she...” He throws his head back against the headrest. “I can’t imagine what you must think of me.”

He can’t imagine what I must think of *him*?

“I’ll tell you what I think.”

I unbuckle my seat belt, propping my foot up on the seat and hugging my knee to my chest.

“I think you’re the strongest person I’ve ever met.”

“Right,” he scoffs.

“It’s true. I think you were dealt a shit hand in life, and you did the best you could with what you had.”

He once told me he didn’t want me to look at him like he was broken. What he doesn’t know is...

I’ve yet to meet someone who *isn’t*.

“Listen to me.” I snatch his hand into mine. “You’re insane if you think this could *ever*, in a hundred lifetimes, make me look at you differently. Are we clear?”

He stares blankly ahead of him, drawing small circles on the inside of my hand with his finger.

“Are we clear?” I press.

He doesn’t give me words.

But he gives me a nod.

Small victories.

“Can I ask who that guy was?” I change the topic.

He exhales deeply. “*That* was Steve, the dirtbag that got us off the street. Also the guy who got my mom into hard-core drugs when I was nine.”

My heart cracks.

How is he so casual about it?

“We moved in with him a year later. Long story short, he’s the typical abusive, piece-of-shit stepdad. Slapped my mom around for years, but he kept the dope coming, so she stayed. Then I started fighting.”

This piece of information alone fills a hundred gaps.

He learned to fight to protect her.

Not himself.

Her.

“He kept his hands to himself for a while. He knew I could take him. Until I moved out. The second I left, he started again. Gave her a black eye two months ago. So, Kendrick came over, and we returned the favor.”

There's a whole part of him I don't know. Hell, I don't even know my own brother.

"I got my mom into the car, moved her somewhere I knew he wouldn't find her. She promised she wouldn't tell him where she was. That she was done, and she'd get her shit in order, and well... you know how that turned out."

I'm angry for him.

She went running back the second the withdrawal hit.

"And I know I shouldn't give her money. I'm only enabling the problem, but I don't know what else to fucking do. I... I can't just sit back and watch her screw any willing dealer."

I'm at a loss for words.

This is awful.

Downright *awful*.

"Anyway, there you go. My sob story summed up in a few sentences. Anything else you want to know?" He heaves a resentful laugh. I know he said it as a joke, and this may be the worst moment to bring this up, but...

I have to ask.

"Actually, there is."

He waits for me to elaborate.

"Yesterday, when you were drunk, you... you said something about a girl. That asshole Dixon mentioned her at Zoey's birthday, too. Lyla... I think?"

As if you don't know what her name is.

That's what knocks his façade down.

Her name.

He swallows hard, his eyes turning red as his jaw flexes. He sounded so detached telling me the truth today. Really had me thinking he was okay with all of this. But he's not. He's been flirting with the line since this morning, flirting with the

edge. His heart isn't as solid as he'd like me to think. And sooner or later, all that is fragile...

Breaks.

"She was Dixon's stepsister." He clears his throat. "And my girlfriend."

I despise the sting of jealousy. *Loathe* it to my core. But it hurts all the same. A part of me always knew she had to be important to him, but I somehow deluded myself into thinking that she was a fling. That I was the first to gain the girlfriend title.

"What do you mean *was* Dixon's stepsister?"

"She died. In the Blue River fire three years ago."

Tragic newspaper articles flash in front of my eyes, memories of the devastating fire at a local high school compressing my lungs. I can still see the headline: *Eight students perish during a Saturday detention*. It was all everybody could talk about for months after it happened. Rumors and false information spread through town like wildfires. They'd say it was a cigarette that did it one day, and a faulty gas line the next. No one could figure out what started the fire.

Eventually, it was filed an accident.

Crushed by lawsuit from the victims' parents, Blue River High closed its doors, earning Riverside High, its competitor and the only high school I've ever known, a dramatic number of transfers. Then people moved on with their lives. Forgot all about it.

Even *I'd* forgotten about it.

"I'm so sorry" is all I can think to say.

"Don't be. It was a long time ago. I'm past it."

Sure didn't look like he was *past* it last night.

"Are you sure? Because yesterday, it sounded like you were blaming yourself. You said it was your fault."

"It was. *Kind of*. Took me years to forgive myself."

“What do you mean?”

“I’m the one who landed her in detention. She would’ve never been in the school if it weren’t for me.”

“Oh.” I nod, but I can’t shake the feeling that there’s more.

I remember the guilt on his face.

The agony in his voice.

There *has* to be more.

“You should go.”

His request stops my racing thoughts cold.

“What?” I blink at him.

He can’t be doing this again.

He scoffs. “You heard me. Go. I just told you my mom is a crack addict who prostitutes herself and my ex-girlfriend was burned alive. Why the hell are you still here? *Run*. Save yourself before my fucked-up life swallows you whole.” He gestures to the door. “I won’t hold it against you.”

I’m struck dumb.

“Is that what you think I want?”

He pauses.

“I think it’s what you need.”

If it weren’t for the fact that he can’t even look at me, as though he can’t bear the possibility of me coming to my senses and taking his advice, I might actually fall for it. I might actually *buy* that he wants me out of his life.

But acting was never his strong suit.

And giving up isn’t mine.

“No.”

His eyes cut to my face, full of question marks.

“No?”

“That’s right. *No*. You don’t get to decide what I need.”

A painful pit crawling up my throat, I unbuckle his seat belt, climbing onto his lap before he can protest. I straddle him, caging his body with mine, threatening to tear his walls down with a weapon he thought harmless.

Proximity.

If he's going to lie to me, he'd better look me straight in the eyes while he does it. And if he *truly* wants me gone, he's going to have to reach through my chest and rip out my beating heart himself.

He doesn't move a muscle, his gaze drilled to the dashboard.

"Look at me," I command, angling his chin forward and robbing him of a choice. He winces at the eye contact. "Read my lips. *I'm. Not. Fucking. Leaving.*"

I can see him fighting it. Fighting us. Swimming against the current of not one, but a thousand seas, facing a tidal wave he knows will kill him, but he'd rather it be him...

Than me.

"I'm going to ruin you, Kass."

"Then ruin me."

The second my lips descend upon his, he surrenders himself over, kissing me so hard I stagger backward. He holds me in position, his arm knotting around my waist. He kisses me like I'm his last wish and he's a dying man. His lips taste like all that is bright and warm in the world.

But... they also taste like all that is dark and cold.

He's falling apart.

I can't stomach seeing him like this.

How long has he been denying himself anything real? How many good things has he pulled the plug on in fear of life screwing him over? All I know is I can't take another minute of that look in his eyes. So, I do the only thing I can think of to chase it away.

I unbuckle his belt.

His breath jumps when I tug his jeans down with frantic, clumsy hands.

“Baby, wait, we don’t... We don’t have to do this,” he rasps, the lust in his voice dismantling his credibility.

He *wants* this.

I want this.

He just needs to let me give it to him. I sneak a hand inside his briefs and free him. He pops out between us.

Straining.

Thick.

Hard.

He opens his mouth to argue, and I shut him up with a slow, longing kiss, fumbling with the hem of his T-shirt and jerking it over his head. I pull back to drink in his ridiculously defined body, running my fingertips along the cut of his pecs, his abs, and finally, bunching the summer dress I wore to impress his mother up my thighs. His eyes flare as I wiggle my panties down my legs, tracking the movement with eager attention.

I grip his length.

He groans.

“Kass, did you hear me?”

I love that he’s trying to be a gentleman. To clarify that this *wasn’t* his end goal. And when I dig through the glove compartment of his car for protection, there’s not a single doubt in my mind. He didn’t think this would happen, hence his forgetting to refill his stash.

There’s nothing.

Not one condom.

Our eyes link up, the situation’s high stakes dawning on us.

I’ve never gone bareback with anyone in my life. And in that moment, when I look up at the damaged, blue-eyed boy in

the driver's seat, I can't think of a better person to do this with. But there are other factors to take into consideration.

"I'm clean. Just got checked." He reads my mind.

"Me too."

"You're on the pill, right?"

I nod.

That short conversation is the green light we needed. I crash our lips together, fisting my hand up and down his shaft, working him quick and hard. He heaves a curse as I guide his tip to my entrance. Only then does he seem to realize what we're about to do. His eyes fly open.

"Kass..."

It's one word. But it holds so much meaning. I read between the lines. Hear him loud and clear. He's telling me this is my last chance.

My last out.

He's saying, *If you don't run now, I'm never letting you go.* I cup his face, tears threatening to spill down my cheeks.

"I'm here." I tell him the same thing he once said to me, stifling a shaky plea. *"Let me be here."*

Then I sink down his length.

Inch by inch, I take him.

Until he's balls-deep inside me.

Bare.

For the first time.

A grunt resonates from somewhere deep within his throat, and his hands dart to my waist. Mine grip his shoulders. I hoist myself up, then slide down, creating perfect friction.

I do it again.

And again.

Will draws me in for a long kiss.

“Fuck, this feels...” He almost sounds in pain.

“I know,” I croak against his mouth.

He brings me down onto his lap roughly, intensifying my moans and jerking my dress out of the way to watch as he fills me. I slip my fingers into his hair, picking up the pace with every heart-wrenching second. The sensation is so intense, so strong, it’s almost... too much. I’ve *never* been this emotional during sex, and based on Will’s bloodshot eyes, I’d say the feeling’s mutual. He tugs at my dress, obviously annoyed that I’m wearing so much clothes, and yanks the fabric down my chest until my breasts break free, jiggling along to his wild thrusting. He devours my skin, his tongue teasing, swirling around my nipples. I can’t help clenching around him, needing more.

“If the World Was Ending” by JP Saxe and Julia Michaels plays on the radio, our hearts beating along to the chorus. He releases my nipples, his hand banding around the back of my neck for a hungry, breathtaking kiss. Our eyes meet, my lips dipping open when his hips press into me, pumping deeper. He nudges a loose strand of my blonde hair behind my ear.

“Will.” I can’t suppress a breathy moan.

It’s like a click.

Like I just gave him his heart’s version of an insurance policy. Like he needed me to go through hell with him, see his demons up close and still come out the other side before he could say it.

“Fuck, I love you,” he chokes out.

My lungs feel constricted.

My heart squashed into a fist.

“I love you, Kass. So much. Too much,” he repeats.

Someone tell that thing in my chest to calm down. Tears soak my cheeks, streaming down my face.

“I love you.” I kiss him with salty lips.

Our lips join with each thrust.

Somehow, I know these three little words just destroyed one of the last walls standing between us. And when we both find our release, I dare hope that we've been through the worst. That my brother will be happy for us when he comes back. Forgive our lies. And everything will fall into place.

But as Will once said, that's the thing with high hopes...

They break your heart.

Thirty-Two

Kassidy

Seven weeks later

“**W**hat the fuck?”

It’s just before 6:00 a.m. when Alex’s voice jolts me awake. Out of it, I rub my eyes, crippled with back pain, and catch myself wishing I’d stayed at my own house last night instead of crashing with Will. Not a fan of the shitty inflatable mattress he calls a bed. I usually don’t make a habit of staying with him. He sleeps in Alex’s pool house, which means Alex could walk in on us any second and...

Wait.

Realization smacks me right across the forehead. My eyes fly open and I sit up straight, nearly having a cardiac arrest at the sight of Alex standing inside Will’s temporary home, staring at us with this striking shock in his eyes.

“Alex, wait... This isn’t... It’s not what you think,” I lie.

Will and I are lying in bed.

Together.

Cuddling.

Might take more than “It’s not what you think” to get out of this one. I shake Will’s shoulder, who groans as an answer. I shake him again.

“What?” he growls, his cheek propped on my stomach, and blinks a few times. I motion to Alex, and Will sits up, taking forever to comprehend the shit we’re in.

I expect him to panic, back me up, feed Alex a bunch of excuses, but instead, Will—being Will—yawns, stretches, and says, “Oh, hey man.”

Smooth.

“What in the hell? You two?” Alex’s gaze sways between Will and me for a second. “But... you said you were just friends.”

“And *you* said you didn’t scratch your mom’s car last week. Look at us. Like two peas in a pod.” Will grins.

I elbow him.

“Don’t listen to him. There’s a perfectly rational explanation for this,” I sputter.

Why am I even bothering?

We are *so* busted.

Alex scoffs. “You mean to tell me you didn’t fuck in this bed last night?”

“No, we didn’t,” I say truthfully.

Will shrugs. “She’s right. We fucked in your hot tub.”

My eyes grow three sizes.

“Will!” I screech.

When I convinced Will to confide in Alex about his homeless status, I was hoping the Holmeses could spare him a room until he got his own place. Alex’s parents reluctantly agreed to let Will use their all but empty pool house, only allowing him inside the house to use the bathroom.

No one was home yesterday and Will convinced me to spend the night with him against my better judgment. I told my mom I was sleeping at Morgan’s. He assured me Alex and his family wouldn’t be back until later. And well, from the looks of it...

He was wrong.

“You had sex in my hot tub?” Alex blurts out.

“To be fair, you did fuck that Mia girl on my bed last week. Call it even?” Will suggests.

My mouth drops.

Alex did *what*?

Does Morgan know?

Holy shit!

Granted, last I heard they're not on speaking terms anymore, but I thought Alex wasn't over her. *At least, until now.* I can't believe he's still with that Mia chick.

"I told you nothing happened." Alex clenches his jaw.

"Right." Will snorts. "That why I found a condom wrapper in the pool house? Because nothing happened?"

"Nice try changing the subject. How long has this been going on?" Alex points an accusing finger at us.

I make eye contact with Will.

We seem to share the same reasoning.

He's already figured it out.

No point in lying anymore.

"Since the kegger," Will admits.

"Two goddamn months?" Alex spits.

It *is* crazy to think it's already been seven weeks since Will and I exchanged I love you's and worked through our issues. Seven weeks of sneaking around, kissing in dark corners, and ultimately, being so happy we make single people sick—and by people, I mean Morgan and Ethan, who are the only souls that know about us as of now.

Oh, and Alex.

Alex nods in understanding. "*Of course.* She was the only one who could pull you out of the bar when you lost your shit... Jesus, how the hell did I miss this?"

"Don't beat yourself up. We're pretty good at sneaking around." Will attempts to soften the blow.

Alex's eyes light up.

"Does Kendrick know?"

Here it is.

The defining moment.

“Not exactly.” Will cringes. “We were kind of wondering if you could—”

That’s Alex’s detonator.

“You finish that sentence and I’m out of here.”

His reaction was to be expected. Alex had to cover for Blake and me with Kendrick once before, and he *hated* lying.

“Dude, it’s not like that. We just didn’t get a chance to tell him ye—”

“Yep. I’m out. Got to give Kendrick a call.”

Alex stomps off, slamming the door.

“Shit,” Will mutters. He doesn’t miss a beat, leaping to his feet and chasing after Alex with nothing but the bedsheet covering his ding-dong—his fault for sleeping undressed. I don’t know how I wanted Alex to find out. But I know this... It *didn’t* include Will chasing after him naked.

I can hear everything as Will catches up to him.

“Look, I’m not asking you to cover for us for three fucking years here. I’ll tell him as soon as he’s back. I just couldn’t do it over the phone.”

“Do you realize what you’re asking from me?” Alex scolds. “You want me to lie to our friend *again* so you can keep tapping his sister behind his back. Out of all the girls, man. All the girls in the goddamn world. You had to choose her!”

“You think I wanted this? That I meant to fall in love with my best friend’s sister?” Will snaps.

A beat of silence.

“The hell did you just say?” Alex says in disbelief.

More silence.

“It’s true, I... I love her, man.”

Butterflies wreak havoc in my stomach. Hearing him say that will *never* get old.

“And I don’t want to fuck this up, so *please*, I’m begging you, don’t say anything. Let me talk to him.”

Alex hesitates, keeping quiet for long seconds.

“Fine.”

Thank God.

“Thanks.” Will exhales.

“Don’t thank me yet. There’s a reason I came into the pool house at the buttcrack of dawn. Had to tell you something.”

I know what Alex’s going to say before he says it.

“Kendrick and Winter are coming back today.”



“Thank the Lord,” I hear my mother say downstairs a few hours later. The front door closes, distant voices emerging in the kitchen as I hop off my bed in a frenzy.

“Is that Winter?” I yell from the second floor, scampering down the stairs in no time to welcome my cousin home. I’ve been worried sick about her. My mom stuck to her funeral story for a while, then started singing a different song once the time frame stopped adding up. Seven weeks is a hell of a long funeral.

She said Winter and Kendrick were taking a vacation in Canada—because them taking a vacation right before the end of senior year isn’t weird at all. Eventually, I decided enough was enough, sat my mom down, and told her I knew everything.

She wasn’t nearly as shocked as I’d anticipated. She admitted to suspecting I was in on it due to my lack of interest in the matter. My mom knows I can get real neurotic sometimes. After all, I hounded her with questions about my dad for weeks after he left, so for me not to bat an eye at my own brother leaving town?

Might as well write *I know* on my forehead in red Sharpie.

Turns out Winter has been staying with Haze in a secluded town for a few days now, although she spent the past five weeks locked up at the penthouse with my brother. I wasn't the tiniest bit surprised to hear Haze had tracked her down and stolen her away to his hometown to keep her out of harm's ways. He hasn't been at school for a while.

We sure weren't expecting Winter back into town so soon—Scratch that, we weren't expecting her back *at all*. She was supposed to be flying straight to Canada at the end of the school year. Then my brother called my mom, informing her that he'd secured a deal with Haze's psycho case of a brother, allowing Winter to move back home. Terms are, she'll remain unharmed as long as the morning after prom, she's on the first plane back to Toronto.

The second I turn the corner, I find myself mentally listing all the ways to chop off Haze's balls. Because Winter's eyes are teary, her makeup smudged down her cheeks, and her heart seems so miserably broken, I'm tempted to kneel down at her feet and pick up the pieces. Safe to assume her getaway with Haze didn't go as planned?

I don't say a word, closing the gap between us and trapping her into a tight, tear-jerking embrace. She starts to sob almost instantly. My mom joins in on the hug, whispering reassuring lies, the first being "It's okay."

Whatever he did, it's *not* okay.

And it probably won't be for a while.

But she's home now.

And I'll be there to help her through the storm.



It takes my cousin a whopping two hours to tell me *everything*. She walks me through an unexpected, gasp-worthy story, the twists and turns keeping me on the edge of my seat. To think I believed her tears were the product of Haze being a typical

scared-of-commitment asshole. There's so much more to this guy. This whole side of him I never would've thought existed.

We hear the front door close.

"Canada, come say hello!" a deep voice calls downstairs.

Will's.

Two other voices reach my ear—my brother's and Alex's. I'm surprised their new recruit didn't come with. Will and Alex found Blake a replacement while Kendrick was out of town. Some guy named Ryder.

Will had to go retrieve his belongings from the pool house this afternoon. Alex's parents made it crystal clear his time was up. Something about Alex's mom disapproving of Will running around in her backyard naked—*go figure*.

My anxiety shoots up by a thousand, my pulse quickening as I give Winter a quick hug and excuse myself to my bedroom to finish "homework." I can't believe this is the time. The moment we shed this weight from our shoulders, chase the black cloud constantly hanging over our heads. The moment we tell Kendrick the truth.

Winter zooms down the stairs to greet Will and Alex. I wait for Will's text, following the plan we crafted this morning to a T. Will said he'd text me to come down once he'd pulled my brother aside so we could talk to him together.

I wait and wait.

He takes his sweet time texting me. Finally, my phone pings. Only problem is, the message on my screen is not the one we agreed upon.

**Willy Wonka: Not the right time. I'll tell him later.
Promise.**

Thirty-Three

Kassidy

Have you ever tried ghosting someone while living in the same house? Let me tell you it is *not* an easy task.

When my brother took pity on Will and convinced my mom to let him crash on our couch for a while, I was ecstatic. Thought surely it meant Will would find the right time to tell Kendrick about us.

Maybe squeeze in a revelation at breakfast. Fit a quick chat into one of their video game tournaments.

Nothing.

Zero.

The *right time* must be one hell of an elusive bastard because Will still hasn't delivered on his promise. Three days have gone by, all of them a blur, and we've barely spoken once. Turns out it's a lot harder to sneak him into my room with Kendrick on the other side of the wall.

He's been texting me.

A lot.

Asking why I've been giving him the cold shoulder. Why I sweep past him in the halls. I've been turning a blind eye to his existence, dead set on ignoring his lingering stares when I walk into the room. Let's just say if he hasn't figured it out by now, it doesn't bode well for us.

Willy Wonka: Upstairs bathroom. Five minutes.

I sigh at Will's text and get dressed, slipping on a pair of high-waisted jeans and a crop-top hoodie. I tie my blonde hair into two loose braids as a finishing touch—thought I'd try something new. Winter and I are going to the movies with the guys in an hour. Then I'm covering Ethan's afternoon shift at

work. Late payment for my getaway with Will two months ago.

I pad out into the hall, inspecting the vicinity and tiptoeing toward the bathroom. I slip inside to find Will waiting for me, leaning against the sink. Silence drifts between us. He smiles, looking painfully beautiful, as always.

“Lock it.” He gestures to the knob with his chin.

I oblige.

In response, he cuts across the room, anchoring me to the door and ravaging my lips with an openmouthed kiss I return right off the bat. His tongue pushes past my teeth as he finds one of the blonde braids cascading down my shoulders and swirls it around his index.

“Fuck. Love the schoolgirl look, by the way.” His voice is packed with lust, his lips remolded by a mischievous smirk. I come to my senses just as he’s angling my chin for more.

I mash my palms to his chest, keeping him at a safe distance.

His smile wears off.

“What’s wrong?”

I peel our bodies apart, wriggling out of his hold. His features pinch with worry.

“Do you really have to ask?”

He nibbles on his bottom lip, knowing damn well what I’m getting at. We were so happy just three days ago. He seemed so *sure*. Like there wasn’t a doubt in his mind as far as telling Kendrick went. He even asked me to prom. Convinced me my brother would know about us by then and now...

Now we’re hiding in a bathroom.

And that speaks volumes.

“Will, you promised we’d tell him.”

“I know.” He exhales.

“It’s been three days.”

“I know, I’m sorry. It’s just... not the right time.”

“Don’t you get it? It’s never going to be the right time. He’s going to be just as pissed whether we tell him now or in two months. The quicker we rip the bandage off, the quicker he’ll get over it. Because he *will* get over it. Unless, of course... you changed your mind.”

He clamps his mouth shut, obviously conflicted. His lack of a reply hits me where it hurts.

“Got it.” My gaze strays to the bathroom tiles. I turn away, but he beats me to the door.

“I didn’t”—he cups my face—“change my mind. I *didn’t*. I’m never changing my mind about you. Fucking never, okay?”

I refuse him the eye contact he seeks.

“I’ll talk to him. I promise. No more lying,” he relents.

He kisses me once more, and I feel my pain decreasing at his touch, my body softening under his fingertips, and it scares me shitless. Because I know a few more minutes of that kiss—who am I kidding, a few more *seconds*—and I’ll be right back to where I started.

Back to making excuses for him. Back to believing promises he has no intention of keeping.

After Blake, I swore on my life I’d never be that girl again. The one you sweep under the rug. The secret.

And I won’t.

Not even for him.

“Okay?” he asks again.

I cave. “Okay.”



“Man, you’re never going to guess what I found out,” Kendrick says halfway through an arcade racing game. Our movie ended twenty minutes ago, and while Kass, Winter, and Ryder wanted to get coffee across the street, Kendrick, Alex, and I decided to hit the arcades by the theater. Okay, fine, we sent Ryder on coffee duty.

Consequences of being a newbie.

“What?” I act uninterested, but inside, I’m counting down the seconds to my last breath. If Kendrick found out what I think he found out, I won’t survive the rest of the day.

“Blake fucked my sister.”

I swear when he says that, I squeeze the fake steering wheel so tight I swerve off the virtual tracks and crash into a concrete wall at full speed. GAME OVER, the screen taunts, and the irony isn’t lost on me. My gaze flicks to Alex, who shifts in his seat, eyes glued to his console.

Snitch.

“Really?” I clear my throat.

“Yeah. For six months, too. They dated behind my back. Can you believe this shit? She’s been with two of my friends. Fucking *two* out of three.”

Looks like Alex skipped the part where he covered for them the whole time and never *actually* dated Kass himself. How convenient.

“What’s next? She’s going to sleep with you, too?”

Someone kill me now.

“You going to talk to her?” is all I can bring myself to say.

He shrugs. “Nah, last I heard, the asshole broke her heart. Plus, it’s not her I blame. She grew up with a shit dad, so she goes for the shit guys. Oh, except you, man.” His gaze whisks to Alex, who nods in appreciation, playing the part.

This is getting ridiculous.

“So, you’re fine with Alex dating her but not Blake?” I ask.

“Yeah, because Alex is... Alex. Blake is a self-serving asshole with girls. He doesn't do serious.”

“Neither do you,” I point out.

Kendrick's only ever dated one girl: Nicole. And it always ended with him hurting her. *Always*. This time, it was him leaving town overnight with Winter that did it.

“Exactly. I know guys like you and me, man, and I'd die before letting a guy like that anywhere near my sister.”

My stomach twists.

“Mark my word, if the bastard was still here, he'd wish a bullet in the leg was all he got away with.” Kendrick refers to Blake's injury the night we rescued Winter. “If that piece of shit ever shows his face again, he's fucking dead.”

I don't speak again, my mind racing faster than the arcade game's pixelated cars. The guys go on to talk about an open house party happening tonight, but I don't give a flying shit about some party.

My phone buzzes with a text.

From her.

Control freak: Winter heard us in the bathroom this morning. She knows.

Control freak: It's only a matter of time before Kendrick finds out. I'm working all afternoon, but I think we should tell him tonight.

He'll get over it. Kass's words loom in my brain.

And it kills me...

Because she's wrong.

Thirty-Four

Kassidy

The end of my shift rolls around quicker than expected—all credit goes to Luke on that one. I was cleaning the fish tanks when he came strolling through the front door with his tail between his legs. It would seem Isabella abused her aunt status and demanded her nephew apologize for trying to get me fired.

The apology in itself didn't come as a surprise.

The invitation to prom, *on the other hand*... Pretty sure my jaw took a dive into the fish tank.

Isabella stopped by the store last week and asked me if I had a boyfriend to take to prom. I told her I didn't, and I wasn't sure I'd be going at all. Best part is, I didn't even have to blow off Greg, the jock Luke set me up with. He got expelled for stashing a massive amount of weed in his locker.

Will hadn't asked me to go with him yet, which broke my heart to an embarrassing extent. Isabella exclaimed, "*Why, a pretty girl like you?*" and, by the looks of it, took it upon herself to remedy the situation.

Luke apologized and said he felt like an ass for meddling in my relationship. Seemed to be under the impression that I'd broken up with Will since I didn't want to go. Then he offered to take me if I didn't have anyone to go with. *As friends*, he specified. I didn't have it in me to correct him.

Especially considering how things are looking right now. At this rate, I probably *will* be single soon. I thanked him, promised I'd think about it, and he left.

It's past seven when I pull into my driveway and amble inside a quiet house. My mom is at work, I'm guessing Winter

is holed up in her room, and heaven only knows where the boys are. I check social media on my way up the stairs.

There's a party tonight.

It's all everyone's been talking about. I close the Instagram app, noticing I have two unread texts from Will.

Willy Wonka: Hey, I thought about it and... we can't tell him tonight.

Willy Wonka: I'm sorry.

I reread his messages five times, trying my best to swallow the pill. Swallow his lies. Yesterday, he said tomorrow. And this morning, he *promised* he'd talk to him. If I let him push it back again, odds are "later" will never come.

In a shit mood, I swing my bedroom door open with every intent to change into the ugliest, most comfortable sweats I own until I have to get ready for the party. If only Will wasn't sitting at my desk.

My breath catches when I see him. I don't make a sound, kicking the door shut and enabling us to speak freely. He spins on my desk chair and rises up, trailing toward me.

"Why are you in my room? Kendrick will—"

"Kendrick's out. Booty call." He shrugs. "Come here." He leans in for a kiss, which I deny him instantly, flicking my head and introducing him to my cheek.

"What are you doing?" I say dryly.

I'm not sad anymore. We passed "sad" a million stations ago. Now I'm on a speeding train to "angry." Last stop: chew-his-head-off town.

"Kissing my girlfriend?" Will frowns.

His girlfriend?

Good one.

"Oh... I'm sorry, are we dating?" I scoff. "Because it sure doesn't look like it.

He's taken aback by my tone.

Then he understands.

I have my reasons.

“Kass...” He drags out a sigh. “Don’t be like this.”

“Then how should I be? Tell me, Will. How should I react to my boyfriend constantly breaking his promises?”

He purses his lips.

I have a point, and he knows it.

“How should I react to my boyfriend treating me like a dirty little secret?”

“Baby, you have to believe me, the last thing I want is to hide you, but...” He grows irritated. “Fuck, I don’t know what to do, okay? He’ll never forgive me, Kass. *Never.*”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do,” he snaps. “He found out about you and Blake today.”

“He what?” I blurt, quickly berating myself for being this loud with Winter right down the hall.

“Alex couldn’t keep his fucking trap shut. He told your brother... You should’ve heard the things he said. He straight up told me he’d rather die than let a guy like me date you. I can’t tell him. Not now. Not when he’s already pissed about you and Blake.”

I get where he’s coming from. It’s not like he’s ashamed of people seeing us together. His I-don’t-give-a-fuck attitude when Alex walked in on us in bed made that clear. He’s just terrified of losing his closest friend. There’s a cruel, twisted irony in the fact that if he doesn’t tell him, he’ll end up losing us both.

“Then when? Tell me a date.”

He chews on his lip.

It hits me.

He *can’t*.

He can't give me a date because he's not planning on doing it anytime soon. Not tomorrow. Not next week. Not *ever*. In a moment of irrational anger, the words slip out of my mouth.

"Luke asked me to prom."

That's all it takes for the jealousy to kick in. I see it in his eyes.

"What?" He seethes.

"He stopped by the shop today, apologized for what he did, and asked me to prom. No secrets, no lies, just a boy asking a girl out. The way it should be." I twist the knife into his flesh, and I hate myself. Because I can't stop. I want him to know how it feels. I want him to hurt like I do.

He doesn't say a word, eyes darkening by the second. Then I finish him.

"I think I'm going to say yes."

My attempts at hurting him backfire, evidently having the opposite effect. His fists wind into white-knuckled balls, his jaw flexing in frustration. The darkness in his eyes isn't pain.

It's anger.

"Fine," he spits.

Then he's out the door.



Will

I think this girl is going to kill me. Don't know how, don't know when, but she will.

It might be the thought of her going to prom with Luke fucking Jenson that does it. Having to pretend like we're strangers when all I want to do is spend every waking moment with her. Or...

It might be seeing her in that dress.

Because hot damn.

The party is ear-splitting, jam-packed. How to find it? Just follow the smell of regrets and drunken mistakes. I haven't been able to peel my eyes off Kass since we got here twenty minutes ago. The worst part? She knows it. She *wants* me to be looking at her. She wants me to stare.

To suffer.

And it's working.

She put on the tightest fucking dress she owns. One that makes my dick twitch every time she moves. I tried, but I can't help watching her ass bounce as she walks around the party. I can't stop fantasizing about wrapping my fist around that blonde hair and showing her she's mine. Not Luke's. Not any of the drunk bastards ogling her.

Mine.

We didn't speak again after she ripped me a new one. And while I know she most likely said that last part to piss me off, I'm scared it comes from a place of truth.

I assess her from across the room. Track her every move as she leans against the pool table, laughing and chatting with Winter. Oh, and there's some brunette whose face I can't see from here. I remember Alex saying he was inviting the girl he's been seeing.

Mia, I think?

"Is that Alex's girlfriend?" I ask Kendrick, who's got a barely conscious, busty ginger on his arm. She's been "whispering" the dirtiest, cringiest things in his ear for ten minutes straight. I say "whispering" because the poor girl is way too hammered to be discreet. Now the whole party knows she can deep-throat.

I've never actually met Alex's girlfriend before. Heard a lot about her though.

"Talking to you, asshole." I elbow him.

"Fuck off, I'm busy," Kendrick growls, hooking a finger into the ginger's deep V neck as if to take a peek inside. She

smacks his hand away with a giggle.

I don't give a shit. "Is that Alex's girlfriend? The one in the pink shirt?"

Irritated, he checks. "Yeah, it's her."

"How do you know?"

Why does she look so familiar?

Sure, the back of her head looks familiar, Will.

"Saw her and Alex come in together earlier. Now shut up."

I never thought I'd be jealous of Haze Adams one day. But when he pops up by Winter's side, surprising her by looping his arms around her waist from behind, I'm so fucking envious I could go apeshit. I want to do that to Kass. I want to be able to hold her in public and not give a damn who's watching. Kendrick got over them being together, and he *hates* Haze's guts. How is me dating his sister any different than his enemy dating his cousin?

Flustered, Winter frees herself from his embrace. Then Haze says something that makes Winter choke. She *literally* chokes on her drink. Soon after she's done coughing, she excuses herself, dragging Haze's drunk ass into an isolated corner to talk.

Alex and Ryder are back with drinks for Kass and Mia a few minutes later. Eventually, Winter rejoins their small circle, minus Haze. Nothing happens for a solid five minutes.

Until I see him.

Luke.

Staring at Kass. Fine, *drooling* over Kass. Guess I'm not the only one who noticed that dress. Greg, Luke's dumbass friend, tells him something I know is about her. I can't hear squat, but I'd bet a hundred bucks it runs along the lines of "Are you going to hit that?" and Luke flashes a cocky smile.

Then he's making his way over to her.

He taps her shoulder.

She turns around.

Smiles at him.

It's just to be polite, but still.

I can't do anything. And since I'm the designated driver tonight, I can't even get blackout. All I can do is stand there like a brain-dead fucking moron while the school's quarterback flirts with my girlfriend.

Fifteen minutes in, I decide I can't take any more of this hell. I tell Kendrick I'm going to get some air before storming off. Too bad he can't get his tongue out of the ginger's mouth long enough to reply.

I grab a beer in a cooler on my way to the backyard.

Fuck it.

I step onto the perfectly mowed lawn, wandering around and finding a quiet spot to drown my sorrows. I must chug my beer in less than five minutes.

She's in there.

With him.

And I'm here.

Drinking the truth away. The truth being that she'd be better off with someone like him. Someone who wouldn't hide her.

Rage spurts inside my stomach, and I lose it, chucking my empty beer against the brick house. It smashes, but the impact isn't nearly as satisfying as I'd hoped, the noise drowned out by the booming pop music inside.

"Feel better?"

I jump, spinning to find Kass staring at me, worry plaguing her clear eyes. How long has she been standing there?

"Not even a little," I say hoarsely.

She threads forward hesitantly.

"I've been looking for you."

She has?

“Why?” I sneer.

“I-I was hoping we could talk about... earlier.”

“What? Sick of Luke already?” I snap.

She’s caught off guard.

“Look, if you’re going to be like this, I’m just going to go.”

Shit.

She hasn’t even taken a step before I’m striding across the lawn, leaping into her way and crashing my lips to her. She yelps in surprise, staggering backward and granting me a short, fleeting moment of peace. Our lips chase each other. Hungry. Avid. And I couldn’t give less of a fuck that someone could find our lonely spot and see us at any moment.

I grip her waist with both hands, easing her against the old shed sitting in the backyard. I suck her bottom lip between my teeth, and she moans into my mouth, flattening her tits against my chest. We claw at each other’s clothes, faces, necks, making out until my dick strains against my zipper.

“I love you. Is that what you want me to say?” I rasp in between kisses. “Because I’ll say it a hundred fucking times if I have to. I love you, Kass. I love you. I love you. I *need* you. Isn’t that enough?”

Hurt flashes in her gaze. She knows that’s my way of asking her to look past this Kendrick thing.

“Will,” she whimpers, but I don’t want to hear the rest. I’d rather go deaf than hear what she says next.

She’s going to leave me.

I know it.

I *feel* it.

“Remember that favor you owed me?” I croak.

She blinks at me, perplexed.

“That time forever ago when you asked me to crash your date with that rapist dude Simon? I said you’d owe me a favor.”

She nods.

My eyes burn with unwelcomed emotions. Shit, am I... *tearing up*? What the hell has this girl done to me?

“Well, this is it. Right here. I’m calling it in.” I cup her face, choking on my plea. “I need you to fucking stay.”

My request sends gallons of tears pouring down her cheeks. They fall hard and fast, yielding me a sliver of hope. This could either be a good sign... or the worst sign in the world. I hold my breath, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Finally, she answers my first question with a sob. “No, it’s not enough.”

There’s the other shoe.

It feels like my goddamn heart is trying to claw its way out of my rib cage. Trying to run. To escape before it comes.

The end.

“You were right. Maybe we shouldn’t tell him. Maybe...” She sniffles. “Maybe there should be nothing to tell.”

“What? No. *Fuck* no. Don’t say that.” I clench my teeth together to keep the pain at bay.

She wipes her face. “I don’t want a secret relationship. I’ve been there before, and I promised myself I’d never let it happen again, and I...” *Sniffle*. “I can’t be your secret, Will. No matter how much I love you, I can’t do this to myself. I’m sorry.”

“What are you saying?” My voice gets stuck in my throat.

“I’m saying...” She’s shaking, her body howling with sobs. “I’m saying it’s over.”

Then she takes her heart and walks away.

Just like that.

I watch her give up on me.

And take it all in. Every scenario, every bit of what my life is going to look like without her. I picture us never speaking again. Imagine things going back to the way they were. Before. Back when she was nothing but my best friend's controlling sister. Then I realize I don't have a choice.

And if I do have a choice...

I choose her.

"Go get him," I command.

She stops cold, gaping at me over her shoulder.

"W-What?"

I make my way over to her.

"Go get your brother. We're telling him. Now."

She's shocked, keeping quiet for an excruciating while.

"R-Really?" She cries harder.

I nod.

"I don't care what I have to do. I'm not losing you."

I've *never*, in the many years I've known her, seen her look this happy. She flings her arms around my neck, planting a salty, tear-soaked kiss on my lips. I pull her into me, relishing in every second. Usually, she'd take my breath away, but right now... her kiss feels like CPR. It lets me breathe again. Fills my lungs with missing air.

"God, I love you," she cries.

"I love you, control freak," I say, and she laughs through the tears.

"Are we really doing this? I mean... are you sure?"

"As sure as I'll ever be."

"Okay, I'll go get him." She squeals and pecks my mouth. "Stay here."

She takes off running toward the house. The moment it engulfs her, I feel relieved.

Free.

I haven't even told Kendrick yet, but knowing this will all be over soon is the equivalent of getting out of jail—except I *chose* to step inside the cell. And I was holding the key this whole time.

Fifteen minutes go by.

Not that I'm surprised. Might take her a while to find Kendrick in there. If I had to guess, I'd say he's somewhere upstairs getting someone pregnant. My phone chimes with a text from Kass.

Control freak: Found him. On our way now.

Just as I'm typing a reply, a laugh flares behind me.

“Seriously? Your best friend's sister? You haven't changed at all, have you?”

I stop moving.

Breathing.

Doing *anything* that requires functioning like a human being.

That croaky, honeyed voice...

I know it.

I swivel around, my throat feeling clogged when I drink in the ghost staring back at me. I saw that pink shirt earlier tonight. My eyes dip to her necklace. To the name written in gold.

Mia.

What the fuck?

“Are you going to say something or...?” she mocks.

One second.

That's all it takes to send me back there. A single second and I'm reliving the worst day of my life. Back to suffocating. Gasping for air in a burning building. Praying the truth about what *really* happened that day will die along with me.

But I can't run anymore.

Because behind me,
Is the girl I killed...
“Lyla?”

Thank you so much for reading Forgotten Rules.

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Eliah Greenwood is a Canadian author who started her writing journey online at the age of fifteen. She wrote the majority of her first book *Unwritten Rules* on the bus on her way home from school. When her debut gathered **34,000,000** reads on the internet, she decided to publish the series that set so many hearts, including hers, on fire. When she's not writing and screaming at her computer screen, you can find her binge-watching her favorite TV shows on repeat or reading in a warm blanket. She is currently working on the fifth book in the Rules series.

