

I won't let your world **crash**.
I'll **give** you a whole new
world to **live** in.

FEI STUMBLE

Kristin MacQueen

If I Stumble

Prescott High Book Three

Kristin MacQueen

If I Stumble – Prescott High Book Three

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Sabotage – Bebe Rexha

Stitches – Shawn Mendes

Let It Go – Chandler Leighton

Tragic Endings – Eminem, Skylar Grey

Beautiful Nightmare – Tre Bolton

Misfits – Magnolia Park, Taylor Acorn

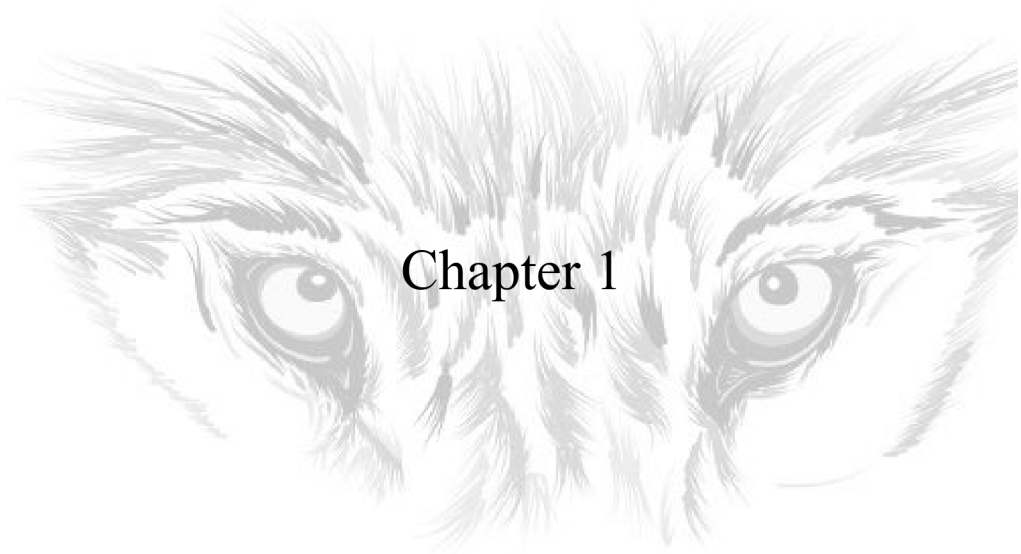
Welcome to the Chaos – Fame on Fire

I Hate Myself – Citizen Soldier

The Monster – Eminem, Rihanna

On My Own – Ashes Remain

Illuminate – Justin King, Breana Marin



Chapter 1



London

Tapping my fingers against my leg, I try to talk myself into hitting send. I've been dying to talk to him. We've kept in contact since Connor left Sandywood, but it's not the same.

I miss the way he'd peek over at me and smile shyly. I miss how he'd sit quietly and observe the room while I painted something. He was always willing to just be with me. We didn't feel the need to fill the silence with noise and I liked that.

I don't get to see him every day now and I hate it. I miss the way his deep voice would wash over me. It brought me comfort and would wrap around me like a warm hug.

Connor would sit in the gazebo with me and read a book out loud. He knew how much I liked his deep voice bringing whatever story we were reading to life. He had this calming effect on me. Something no one else has ever been able to do.

I nibble on my bottom lip and glance around my room. I hate starting conversations. I never know if he really wants to talk

to me and I don't want to bother him if he doesn't. I don't want to feel like an obligation to Connor.

My phone slips out of my hand and bounces on the floor before sliding under my bed.

“No... where'd you go?” I groan, hanging off my bed and trying to fish it out while not falling onto the ground.

My fingers brush the edge and I'm finally able to get a grip on it. I do a little fist pump... until I see the screen. I must've pressed a button when I was trying to grab it and I hit send on the message to Connor.

“No! No, no, no.” I bury my face in my pillow and let out a scream. “It's ok. I just asked how he was feeling. That's not too bad, right? I'm showing I'm a caring friend. He won't read too much into it and realize I like him. It will be fine.”

I suck in a deep breath and blow it out slowly. I need to stay calm and see how he reacts.

Connor was shot in the thigh while trying to rescue one of his friends. But... he was shot by my brother. It wasn't on purpose, a total freak accident. Yet, I feel like he could hold that against me. Maybe he won't want to be friends with the sister of the man that freaking shot him! Who could even blame him for that?

Brian's a cop and he was undercover. The people he was investigating kidnapped Connor's friend and Brian was trying to get her out of the warehouse when the cops came to raid it.

He didn't want Hadley to get hurt or for someone to try to use her as a shield.

One thing led to another and Brian got tackled by someone. When he went down, two people got shot. Connor and his friend Mac. They're both fine... mostly. They're alive, but in a little pain. Just a few more scars on their body.

My phone pings and I jump in surprise. I practically toss the device in the air and it falls, hitting me in the forehead.

"Ow," I groan, rubbing the sore spot.

Connor: Like shit.

He answered right away. That's a good thing, right? I take a deep breath and try to calm my nerves. This is Connor. I can be honest with him. That's how we are with each other.

London: Brian told me what happened. I wanted to come see you, but I wasn't sure if you'd be ok with that.

Seconds after I hit send my phone starts ringing in my hand. I click the green button before I can stop myself and pray he doesn't hate me.

"Hey," I whisper, unsure of what to say. We've never spoken on the phone. We've only texted since Connor left Sandywood.

"Hey. How are you?" Connor's deep voice washes over me and I feel like I can breathe for the first time in days.

"I'm ok. I just got home yesterday. It's a little weird getting back into things. My brother's pretty awesome. He's taking

good care of me. Steve and my sister came over last night. It's really nice to have family around all the time."

I hesitate. I want to tell him I miss him and how much I want to see him, but I don't know if he'd be open to the idea. I don't really want to put myself out there if he doesn't feel the same way.

"But?" He pushes, making me smile.

Connor doesn't settle for surface level things. He wants to see the parts of you that are hidden from everyone else. We connected on a deeper level, in a way I've never connected with another person.

He not only sees the pain I carry around, but he understands it. He knows when I'm struggling and how to help me through it.

"But I miss you," I whisper my confession.

"I miss you too... you can come visit me whenever you'd like. I'd say I'll come to you, but I don't think that's really a possibility right now."

"Really? You don't mind?" Hope floods my voice. I never thought Connor would want to get together once we left Sandywood. I figured our relationship would stay in the old wooden gazebo forever.

"Mind? I'd love to see you, London. I've been a little lost without you."

"I can come tomorrow! My brother said I can borrow his car until I get my own." My heart hammers against my ribs. I

can't believe he wants to see me.

“That sounds great.” I can hear the smile in his voice and I can't help my own from spreading across my lips.

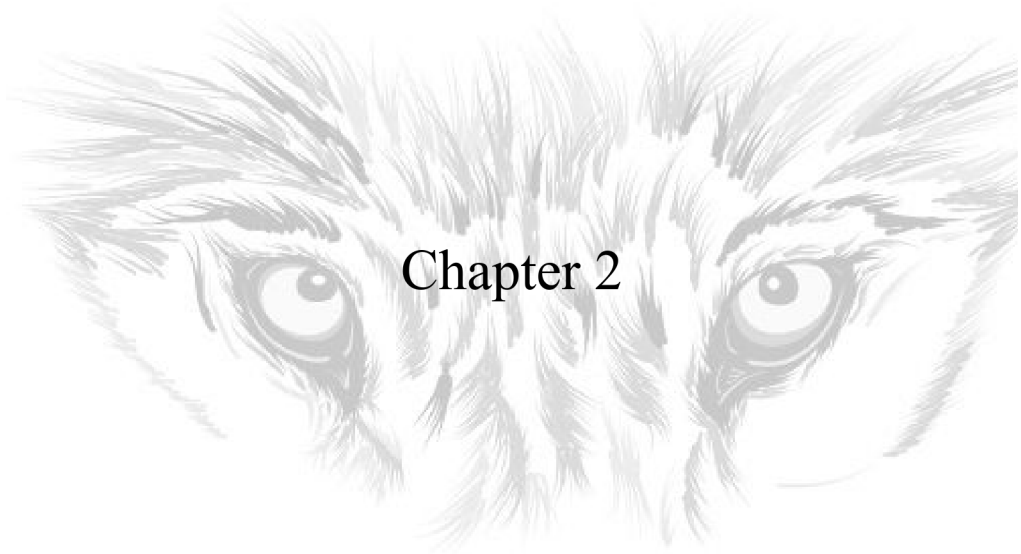
“I can't wait to-” The words die on my lips when Jessica appears in my door with tears streaming down her cheeks.

“What happened?”

“We have to go to the hospital. Brian and Steve were in an accident... the doctors aren't sure if they're going to make it.”

“Oh my gosh! No!” My phone slips out of my hand and clatters onto the floor.

I couldn't care less about it. My sole focus is on the boys. I can't lose my brother or Steve. Them and Jessica are the only family I have left. I need all of them if I want to survive.



Chapter 2



Connor

I dial her number again and again. I need her to answer. I have to hear her voice and know she's ok. A million thoughts are running through my head. The different ways she could be hurting. The things that could force her to relapse and end up in Sandywood all over again. Except this time, she wouldn't have me to lean on. She'd be there all by herself.

“C'mon, London. Pick up the damn phone,” I murmur to myself again and again.

After the tenth try, I scoot to the edge of the bed and attempt to stand by myself. I'm going to her house if she won't answer her phone. I need to know she's ok.

“What the hell are you doing?” Grayson scowls at me and rushes to my side to help me.

“Something's wrong with London. She isn't answering her phone and the line cut out with her sobbing. I need to see her.” I shove him away when I'm balanced enough to stand by myself and take slow steps towards my dresser.

Grabbing a shirt, I slip it over my head and thrust my arms through the sleeves. I'm glad I was already wearing sweatpants. It takes forever to get pants on right now.

"How do you think you're going to get there?" Gray folds his arms over his chest and scowls at me. "And who's London?"

"You'll take me." I shrug and push past him to slowly make my way down the stairs.

"And if I won't?"

"I'll beg Piper," I growl.

Grayson follows me down the steps and into the living room where Piper's sitting. Her brows crease as she watches me struggle to move around

"Can you take me to London's house?"

"Who's London?" A slow smile spreads across her lips, making me roll my eyes.

"Will you take me or not? Did Roger leave for the night?" I glance around the open concept first floor like our chauffeur is going to magically appear.

"He left maybe five minutes ago."

"I'm going to call him." I slip my phone out of my pocket and search for Roger's number.

"You will not!" Piper jumps off the couch and snatches my phone out of my hand. "It's his anniversary. He was taking his

wife out for a nice dinner. If you tell me who London is, then I'll take you to her house.”

I reach for my phone and Piper hides it behind her back with a smirk. She knows if I go after it or touch her, Grayson will be at her side in seconds. I'm not fast enough with my injured leg. Walking or moving in general hurts like a bitch, there's no way I could take on Piper, let alone Grayson.

“Can Mac drive? He only has a shoulder injury. He should be fine, right?” I scratch my chin and think.

“You're not calling Mac!” Piper laughs. “He can't drive and he's taking so many pain meds I'm not sure he'd even know how to start a car right now. Tell me who London is!”

She stomps her foot like a spoiled little brat, except she's not. She's actually the sweetest stepsister I could ask for. I hate to admit it, but Piper saved my life in so many ways. Her kindness is something I'll never be able to repay, but I'll always try.

My ringer fills the air and I hold my hand out to Piper. “Give me the phone, Pipe.”

“Aw, London's calling. Maybe I should answer it and introduce myself to her.” She wiggles her eyebrows.

“Please, Piper! She's important to me and something bad happened to her.” I run a rough hand through my hair and suck in a deep breath, squeezing my eyes shut. My emotions are running high and I'm fighting to stay in control of myself. I

don't want to flip out, but I can feel my breaking point creeping up on me.

I was taught in therapy to count to ten and take deep breaths. To walk away from conflicts when I can. But I can't do any of that where London's concerned. I need to know what's going on with her.

"I'm sorry, Con. Here." Piper's face falls and she holds out my phone to me. I think she realizes this isn't a game and something really is wrong. I snatch it away and answer the call as I lift the phone to my ear.

"London? What happened?" I turn my back on Piper and Grayson. They shouldn't be witnesses to anything between London and me. What we have is private.

London is pure and perfect. She's the innocence my dark soul craves. Relaxing me is something that comes easily to her and I'm so thankful to have her in my life.

"Connor... Brian and Steve were in an accident. I'm on my way to the hospital." A sob breaks free and I know she's hurting. Her family is everything to her.

She's already had so many people stolen from her. I know she's thinking of them right now and wondering if her brother and brother-in-law will be joining them soon.

"Where's Jessica? What hospital are you going to?" I'm trying to keep my tone calm, but I sound frantic even to my own ears.

“She’s with me. We’re almost to St Augustine’s. I’m scared, Connor.”

I scrub a hand down my face and pain flares through my chest. I hate hearing the agony in her voice. She’s one of those people I don’t want to see become jaded or broken.

“It’s ok, sweetheart. I’ll meet you at the hospital. I should be there in twenty minutes, ok?”

“You don’t have to-”

“I want to. Let me be there for you, Lon.”

“Ok. I’ll see you soon.” She hangs up before I’m able to say goodbye.

I let out a long sigh and take a second to compose myself. I need to stay calm or I’ll be of no help to London and she needs me. I’ll be the strength she can rest on through all of this. I’ll do whatever she needs, if it makes her life a little bit easier.

“Please?” I spin around and face Piper and Grayson. “Can you please take me to the hospital so I can be there for London?”

“Let’s go,” Piper whispers, already slipping her shoes on and grabbing her jacket.

Piper’s car doesn’t even come to a complete stop when I’m swinging open the back door. I can’t waste a single second. Each moment I’m away from London is another moment where she’s alone or stuck in her head.

She can't get overwhelmed. She could relapse and I don't want that to happen. She's one of the strongest people I know, but she doesn't realize that. She views herself as weak and broken. I'm going to do whatever I have to do to help her and support her.

"Connor, wait!" Grayson growls, climbing out of the passenger's seat. He runs ahead and grabs a wheelchair from inside of the emergency room and brings it out to me. He practically shoves me into the seat and starts wheeling me into the lobby. "You can be a real dumbass sometimes."

I ignore him. Nothing matters except for London. Once I see her, I'll be able to breathe a sigh of relief.

"May I help you?" A woman in scrubs is standing behind a big desk. She smiles at us and settles herself in front of a computer.

"I'm here to see Brian Jenson. Can you tell me where he is?"

She types away on her computer before she frowns at the screen. She's not going to tell me. I know that.

"I'm sorry, are you family?"

"No."

"Mr. Jenson's in the intensive care unit. Only family members are allowed up there. You'll have to wait until he gets moved to a normal floor before you can visit."

"Ok, thank you."

Grayson spins the wheelchair around and begins leading me out the door. Piper meets us right outside, just coming in after parking the car.

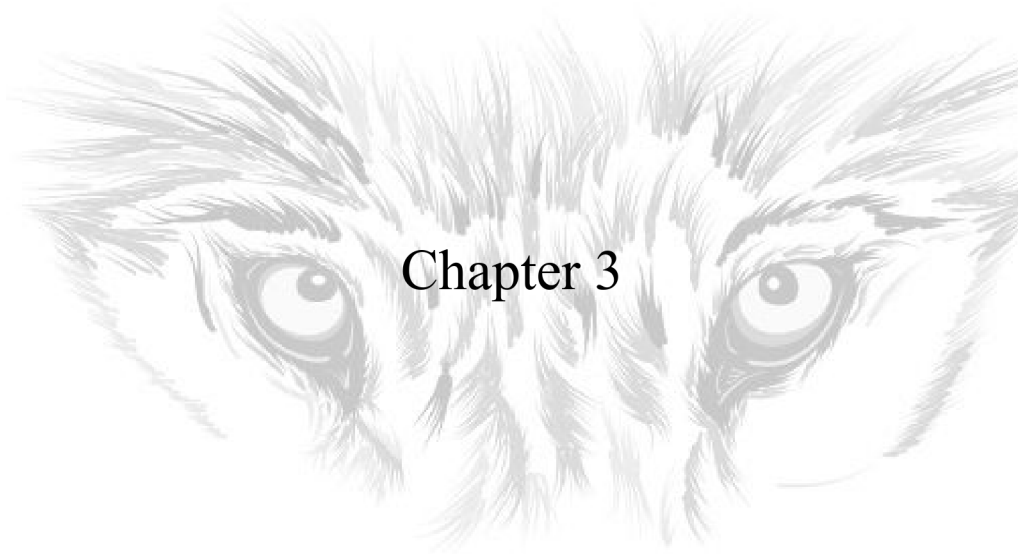
“Go to the right.” I point to where I want Grayson to go.

“She said you can’t go up there.”

“I don’t really give a shit what she said, Gray. If it were Piper, would you be going home right now?” I don’t look at him. I don’t want them to see how vulnerable I am when it comes to London.

“Shit,” Grayson murmurs under his breath. “Fine. Do you have a plan?”

“I don’t need one. The intensive care unit was paid for by the Ward family in honor of my Mom.”



Chapter 3



London

I pace the length of the waiting room and wrap my arms around myself. I don't want to be here. I want to go back to Sandywood and curl up on the couch next to Connor to watch a movie. Things were simple there. I was able to hide from the world around us and all of the bad things.

Brian and Jessica kept any bad or negative information from me while I was in the facility. They didn't want me to stress out or become overwhelmed. If I did, I could relapse and no one wants that to happen.

But it does. It happens more often than I care to admit.

Every time life seems to be spinning out of control, I control the one thing I can. I limit the amount I eat or I work out to burn enough calories that the food I did eat doesn't help my body. It's unhealthy and an addiction I don't know how to beat. One I know I'm going to be battling for the rest of my life.

I was a gymnast for years. I competed and ranked high in every meet. There were rumors that I could be Olympic material if I kept things up. But I couldn't do it.

My trainers were constantly on me about maintaining a certain image and sticking to a strict diet. If I gained weight, I got yelled at. Thanks to years of watching everything I ate and being stressed beyond belief; I developed an eating disorder and image issues.

When I look in the mirror, I see every imperfection magnified. I don't see an underweight girl whose clothes hang off her body. I think I'm plump and could stand to lose a few more pounds. I'm well aware of my issues, but I can't stop myself. I can't change how I view myself.

Stress makes all of it worse. Things like your brother and brother-in-law being in a horrible car accident and not knowing if they're going to live? Yeah, that type of stress.

"Sit down, London. You're making me anxious." Jessica reaches out and grabs my wrist. She tugs me into the chair next to her.

"I need to do something. Do you think there's a gym here?" I run a hand through my hair and glance around like a caged animal searching for an escape.

"Really? You want to work out right now?" Jessica scowls at me.

I open my mouth to respond when a deep voice rumbles behind me and has me spinning around with wide eyes.

“London...”

“Connor!” I leap out of my chair and try to figure out how I can hug him, but he’s sitting in a wheelchair.

Even after all of the time we’ve spent together, I only got to hug Connor when he left Sandywood. They didn’t allow us much physical contact with other patients in the facility.

“Give me a second.” He smirks and takes his time standing. I don’t miss the way he winces or tries to hide his groan.

“It’s ok. Sit. You don’t need to get up.”

He waves me off and as soon as he’s standing to his full height, he holds his arms open and smiles when I step into him.

“I missed you, London,” he whispers in my ear, hugging me tightly against him.

“I missed you too. Thank you for coming here.”

We pull away and Connor settles back into the wheelchair. He props his leg on the rest and glances up at me with a little smirk.

He looks so different from the boy I spent time with at Sandywood. Connor’s hair is a little longer now. It looks like he’s been running his fingers through it as much as I have mine. There’s a light stubble of dark hair on his normally smooth jaw and I wish I could rub my fingers over it.

His dark blue eyes are bright and there’s a joy in them I’m not used to seeing. It’s his clothing that’s changed the most

though. We were only allowed to wear baggy sweatpants and sweatshirts or t-shirts at Sandywood. Tonight, Connor's wearing a pair of joggers that fit him nicely and a tight athletic shirt. He's more attractive than ever before.

“Of course. I wanted to make sure you were ok... This is my stepsister, Piper.” He motions to a beautiful brunette standing behind him. “And this is her boyfriend and my best friend, Grayson.” He points to a devastatingly handsome man with dark brown hair and bright green eyes.

The two of them together look like something out of a magazine. They're perfect in every way, making me wish I looked a little bit more like Piper.

“It's nice to meet you. I've heard so much about both of you.” I smile at them. Connor talked about them, Mac, and Hadley constantly. It's nice to finally put faces to the names.

“I wish I could say the same, but Connor didn't tell us about you until he needed a ride.” Grayson scowls at his friend.

“It's none of your business,” Connor hisses and glares at Grayson. “How's your brother and Steve?” He reaches for my hand as he turns his full attention back to me and intertwines our fingers.

“We haven't been allowed to see them yet. I'm really worried and scared.” I swipe at my cheek, brushing away a stray tear.

“It's ok. I'll stay with you for as long as you need me here.” He squeezes my hand and flashes me a sad smile.

“You don’t need to do that. I’m sure you have better things to do.”

“London, look at me,” Connor whispers. As soon as I glance down at him, he begins talking again. “You mean more to me than anyone else. I’m not leaving you.”

“Mrs. Daniels?” A doctor enters the waiting room and glances around. Jessica jumps out of her chair and turns towards me.

“Stay here while I talk to the doctor.” She meets the doctor at the door to the intensive care unit and there’s a lot of nodding happening on Jessica’s part. She’s probably understanding very little of what he’s saying.

When they’re done talking, she comes over to me with tears trickling down her cheeks.

“The doctor said Steve and Brian are stable, but in bad shape. Steve has woken up since he got here, but Brian hasn’t.” Jessica’s voice cracks. I’m sure this is really hard for her. This is her husband and brother, but both of them are my brothers.

Brian and Jessica are twins and twenty years older than me. Jessica and Steve started dating when I was a toddler and when I was seven, they got married. I don’t remember a second of my life without Steve in it. He’s just as much of a sibling to me as Brian and Jessica are.

“What are their injuries?” My voice is emotionless. I need to know the facts so I know the chances of them both surviving.

“Brian’s left leg was pinned between two cars. He was lucky it wasn’t worse. When he was hit, they think his head slammed into the car in front of him. He’s been unconscious since. They did surgery and set his broken leg. Only time will tell how severe his injuries are though. When he wakes up, they’ll have a better idea of what we’re dealing with.”

“Why was he out of the car?”

“I don’t know. Some sort of traffic stop or something.”

She glances away and sucks in a deep breath. I know she’s trying to hide something. She thinks she’s protecting me by keeping secrets, but that’s not going to help. My mind will just run wild with possibilities.

“What else? What about Steve?”

“Steve had some internal bleeding, but they were able to control it during surgery. He has a collapsed lung and air is filling the space around it. They had to put in a chest tube to remove it.”

“When can we see them?” I glance behind Jessica like my brothers are going to magically appear and wrap me in a hug.

“It’s going to be a while. They just got out of surgery and neither of them are awake. Do you want to go home and I’ll call you when they wake up?” She eyes me with hesitation.

“No. I’m not leaving this hospital until I see them.”

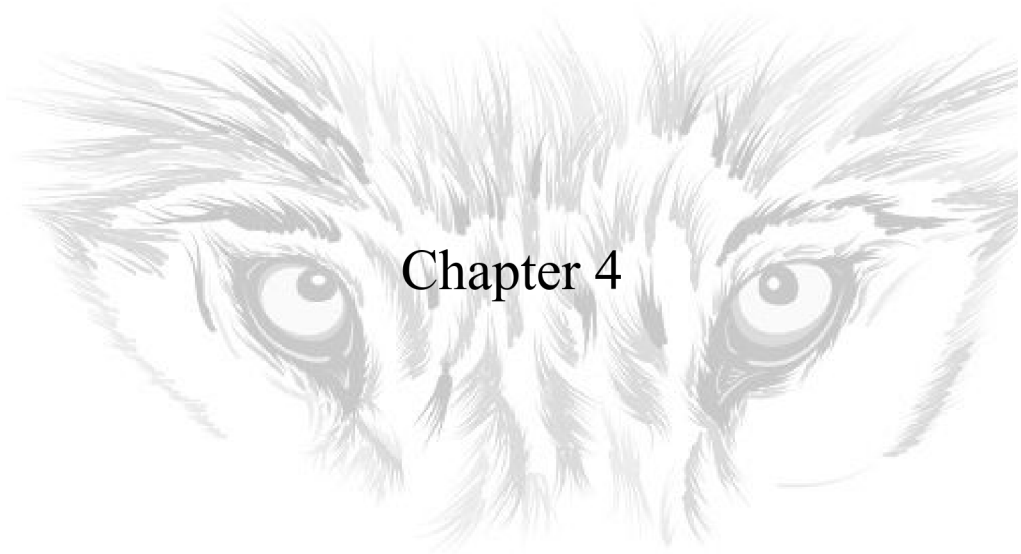
“Ok, but after you see them, I want you to go home for a while. There’s no reason for both of us to be here.”

“Then you go home. I don’t want to.” I fold my arms over my chest and glare at her.

I love my family, but I’m tired of them babying me. I’m eighteen. A legal adult and I can make my own decisions.

“Sweetheart, come sit with me.” Connor rolls next to me and takes my hand in his.

Wordlessly, I nod my head and push his wheelchair over to a two-person seat. I wish he could sit next to me and hold me. I’d give anything to be wrapped in his strength and his scent for a little while.



Chapter 4



Connor

I struggle to stand from the wheelchair and get settled on the seat next to London. I hate feeling limited on what I can physically do. I want to be a pillar of strength for her, but that's hard when the pillar can't even stand on it's own.

“Hey, talk to me, pretty girl. Is there anything I can do to help?” I tuck a few strands of her blonde hair behind her ear and keep my full focus on her.

“No,” she whispers, but I can tell there's something she's not saying.

“C'mon, there's gotta be something I can do to make you feel a little bit better.” I nudge her with my shoulder.

“Could you...” She trails off. She doesn't want to ask me for help, she wants to be strong all by herself.

“Can I what?”

“Hold me?” She whispers, sounding more defeated than ever before.

“Of course.”

I hold my arm out and my heart swells when she collapses into my chest. Her small body shudders with a sigh and it kills me. I wish I could fix everything in London’s life. I’d make her the happiest woman in the world if she’d let me.

At Sandywood we weren’t allowed any sort of relationship with other patients. We could be friends, but nothing more. The moment I set my eyes on London, I knew she was different. She’s so good and pure. Completely innocent with everything life has thrown at her.

She’s the type of woman I should stay away from. I’ll only stain her with my dark soul and the monster that’s still lurking inside of me.

I refuse to bring London anything except happiness. I’ll do whatever I have to do to make sure I use my darkness to protect her light. The monster that will always live inside of me will protect the angel she is.

We’ve been waiting for almost two hours before Jessica and London are finally allowed to see the guys.

I’m surprised when Jessica returns to the waiting room first. I expected her to stay with her brother and husband for as long as they’ll allow her. I’m even more shocked when she takes the seat next to me and hangs her head.

“Hey, I know she’s going to want to stay here with Brian...”
Jessica takes a second to compose herself. She’s stronger than

I thought she would be. She's trying her hardest to keep it all together for London, but I can tell she's about to break.

“But?”

“But... I don't want her here. You know how hard she's been fighting to get her disorder under control. I'm terrified that this is going to push her over the edge and she's going to relapse again. I can't keep an eye on her right now. There's only so much I can do, so much I can handle.” She glances up at me, begging me to understand.

“Do you want me to take her home with me? She can stay at my house until things settle down a little.”

“Does it make me a horrible sister if I say yes?” She whispers as her gaze drops to her hands.

“No. It makes you human. You can't do it all.”

“I know, but she needs me. If something happens to one or both of them... I'm all she has.”

“That's not true. She has me too. I promise I'll take care of her and I'll make sure she eats.”

“She's going to try to exercise too. You can't let her. She'll run for hours a day. She'll keep going until her body collapses... I can't lose my sister, husband, and brother all at once.” Jessica's body shakes as emotion takes over.

I wish I could do more to help her. I'd fix Steve and Brian in a second if I could. I can't, I can help with London though and I'm not going to give up on her. I'll make sure she not only survives, but comes out of this doing better than ever before.

“I’ll take care of London. I can’t help with anything else, but I can handle her. You worry about the guys, and leave London to me. I’ll call or text you if I need help.”

“Thank you, Connor. London loves you and I think she’s been a little lost without you since you left Sandywood. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to repay you for everything you’ve done to help her.”

“You never need to repay me. She means the world to me.”

I can feel Piper and Grayson watching me. They can definitely hear what Jessica and I are saying to each other.

I don’t particularly want them to know how I feel about London, but I’m not going to hide it either. I’m done hiding behind a mask, at least where my friends and family are concerned.

London Jenson’s the most important person in my life and I don’t care who knows it. It’s about time I love someone more than myself. Someone I’m willing to place above everything else in life.

“Are you sure your parents don’t mind if I stay over?” London nibbles on her bottom lip and stares out the window at the passing scenery.

“I called Dad. He said he doesn’t mind at all. He’s more than happy to have you stay for as long as you’d like to.” Piper glances over her shoulder at London and smiles.

“You called Dad?” My brows pull together.

“Yup. I figured you didn’t and I wanted to prevent any issues that could have arisen. We’re on the same team, Con.” Piper watches me for a few seconds.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

I’m still trying to get used to having people look out for me. Don’t get me wrong, Mac and Grayson always had my back, but they didn’t try to handle things before I asked them to. I think that’s because half of the shit they did, they never would’ve done if I weren’t in their lives.

That’s part of my past I need to learn to deal with. I’ve seen the type of men Mac and Grayson can be. I know the darkness that lives inside of them because I put it there. I pushed them to become just like me even though I knew they were better than me.

I’m ashamed of what I turned them into. Sure, they did it all willingly, but that doesn’t justify the part I played. I’m done making excuses for my actions, I’m going to take responsibility for all of it.

No one has ever cared about me the way Hadley cares about Mac or Piper cares about Grayson. I don’t want to admit it, but I’m jealous of my friends and what they found in Piper and Hadley. I know those women will make sure Grayson and Mac remain the good guys of the world.

“You’re welcome!”

We pull into the driveway a few minutes later and Grayson parks Piper's car in the garage next to mine. It's weird seeing him drive after such a long time.

I forced Grayson to race against some kids from a different school last year. He lost control on black ice and collided into a tree. The guy he was racing crashed into Grayson's car and died on impact.

Mac rushed to save our best friend and I walked away. I went home and pretended Grayson wasn't dying on the side of the road. I acted like I was completely faultless in all of it.

My stomach rolls as I think about the man I used to be. I'm honestly shocked anyone has given me a second chance. I definitely don't deserve it. I treated all of them like shit and I should be in jail.

Piper's the only reason I'm not. She believed I could get better and I'm thankful for her every day.

We climb out of the car and London grabs my hand. She's so scared and I'm the only thing she has keeping her together.

"Hey, sweetheart." Lauren pulls London into a hug as soon as she enters the house.

Dad and Lauren met London at Sandywood. They don't know why she was there, but they liked her instantly.

I hated Lauren when she first married Dad and moved into the house. Now, I've realized she isn't trying to replace Mom or force me into this role she expects me to play. Lauren Ward is the most selfless person I've ever met. She'd give you a

lung if you needed it. She just wants to be here for me and to help me through everything. Maybe if I had accepted her from the beginning, things would've turned out differently.

If I hadn't started a whole war between Piper and myself, then we could've been a happy family from the beginning. Do I regret the things I did? Yes. I was a fucking monster and I couldn't stop myself no matter what. It was like I lost complete control of everything I said or did. I felt like I was watching myself do these horrible things, but I had no way to prevent myself from doing it.

As much as I wish I could change how I treated the people I love, I wouldn't trade my time at Sandywood for anything. It's where I met London and I wouldn't give her up.

"It's nice to see you again, Mrs. Ward," London says softly.

"You too." She smiles before turning her attention to Grayson. "Are you staying over, Grayson?"

"Aren't I always?" He smirks. Lauren adores him and he can do no wrong in her eyes. "Well, except for when I con Piper into staying at my house."

"You're lucky I trust you with my daughter and I love you." She chuckles.

Dad and Lauren have given up trying to keep Grayson and Piper away from each other. Just like Mr. and Mrs. Young, they know they'll just lie about falling asleep at each other's houses. I think they figure after everything that's happened

over the past year, they're just happy to know their kids are safe at one of their houses.

"I'm lucky Piper loves me too." Grayson wraps his arms around Piper and lifts her into the air. He starts climbing the stairs and stops halfway up. "Let me know if you need us, Con."

I nod my head and he disappears out of sight. London stands awkwardly at my side and I wonder if she's comfortable with being here. She's been awfully quiet since we left the hospital.

"London, you can stay in Connor's room or there's a spare room next to his. I set it up in case you wanted your own space. Fernando left some dinner in the fridge if you're hungry. I'm going to bed, but I'll see both of you in the morning." She smiles before she follows Grayson and Piper up the stairs.

"Did you eat dinner?" I ask as soon as we're alone.

"No. I'm not hungry though." She snaps the hairband on her wrist and I know she's lying. She does that whenever she's stressed out.

"Well, I'm hungry. I'd be really happy if you ate with me."

She stares up at me with big gray eyes. Her blonde hair is pulled back into a high ponytail, the tips brushing her shoulders.

She's wearing a pair of yoga pants that fit her snugly and a tank top with an off the shoulder sweatshirt over it. She's adorable and I can't stop looking at her.

I take her hand in mine and slowly make our way into the kitchen. I find the dinner Fernando made and smile. London loves Italian food and he made lasagna tonight.

Placing the dish on the white marble countertop, I grab two plates from the cabinet and scoop some food onto both of them. Putting the first one in the microwave, I spin around and watch London.

Her eyes move around the room, taking in everything. I wonder what she thinks when she sees my home. I know it's fancier than she's used to and I hope she won't be uncomfortable here.

“Why are you smiling at me like that?” London asks when her gaze finally returns to mine.

“I like seeing you in my space. I don't think I realized how much I missed you until I finally saw you today. Hop up here and sit until the food is ready.” I pat the counter top and smile when she doesn't hesitate.

As soon as she's perched on the edge of the counter, I close the distance between us. I lean with my back against the cool marble, my hip touching her knee. I took a pain pill on our way home from the hospital and it's finally kicking in. If I didn't get a little bit of relief from the pain, there's no way I'd be standing right now.

I didn't take as much as I should've, but just enough to relieve the overwhelming agony. I'll deal with the remaining pain for as long as I have to. I need to stay awake so I can take care of London.

“Talk to me, I hate how quiet you’re being,” I murmur, watching the time on the microwave countdown.

“Connor,” she whispers in a broken voice. My head snaps towards her and the first tear slips down her cheek.

“What can I do, sweetheart?”

“Can you... Can you just hold me?” She swipes at her cheeks, trying to get rid of her tears, but nothing can stop them.

I step between her legs and cradle her head in my hand as I bring it to my chest. London snakes her arms around my waist and melts against me.

“I’ve got you. You don’t need to be strong, London. You can break down and I’ll help you put yourself back together in the morning.”

I’m still holding her long after the microwave beeps and our food grows cold. I couldn’t care less about the food or anything else outside of London.

I don’t let go of her for a long time, but when I do, she’s calmed down a little bit. I know it’s going to be a few days before the shock of tonight wears off. Even then, I’m not sure how she’s going to respond to her brothers being in the hospital.

Once London’s feeling a little bit better, I heat our food up one more time. We sit down at the island and devour our dinner. I haven’t had good lasagna in a long time and this one is delicious. Everything Fernando makes is.

Sandywood served decent food, but it was nothing compared to Fernando's cooking. After we've finished our plates, I put the dishes in the sink and grab a few cookies Fernando made for dessert.

We slowly make our way up to my room and I lower myself onto the mattress carefully. It's only been a few days since I got out of the hospital and my thigh still hurts like hell.

"Do you need to take medicine? I'm sure you're not supposed to be on your leg as much as you have been today." London stands at the side of my bed.

"I should take more, but I don't want to fall asleep yet. The meds make me really tired. I took enough to take the edge off."

"Oh... ok." She glances uncomfortably around my room. I hate that. I want her to feel at home in my space.

"Lay down with me, London. We can watch a movie and eat some cookies."

"How do you eat like this and still have a body like that?" She motions to me.

"Miss Jenson, are you telling me I look handsome?" I smirk, enjoying the blush that spreads over her cheeks. "Lay down with me, Lon."

"Are you sure your parents aren't going to care?" She peeks over her shoulder at the closed door.

"If you're uncomfortable with me, you can go into the spare bedroom. I'd never do anything to hurt you though,

sweetheart.”

“I’m not uncomfortable with you,” she whispers, stepping closer.

“Then what is it?”

“I haven’t been around a lot of guys. At Sandwood there were rules and we couldn’t really touch. But now...” She trails off and I think I understand what she’s hinting at. She thinks something is going to happen between us and she isn’t ready for that.

“Nothing will happen. I promise. I’ll keep my hands to myself like a good little boy unless you tell me otherwise. Deal?” I arch a brow.

She nods her head and carefully climbs onto the mattress next to me. We prop pillows behind our heads and click on the TV.

I settle back and get comfortable, but London’s stiff next to me. I want to help her relax and the only way I know how to do that is by distracting her.

She’s too lost in her own thoughts. She’s terrified over what’s going to happen to her brothers. I can’t blame her. I’m afraid one of them is going to take a turn for the worse and she won’t be able to handle it.

London’s one of the only people I’ve ever cared about. I can’t sit by and watch her tumble down and fall back into her bad habits. I’ll do whatever I have to do to make sure she doesn’t relapse.

She's gained almost ten pounds since we met and she's just starting to look healthy again. She said she's still about fifteen pounds underweight, but she's working on it and that's what's important.

At one point, I was in love with Hadley, or at least I thought I was. Now, I'm not so sure that was love. Hadley is Grayson's twin sister and one of the sweetest people I know. She never liked me, but I always had a special place in my heart for her.

I knew I couldn't have Hadley, I was too corrupt and her innocence is what drew me to her. But London is so much more. She's the light in my world of darkness. She's the one thing that helps me breathe a little easier when I'm fighting my demons.

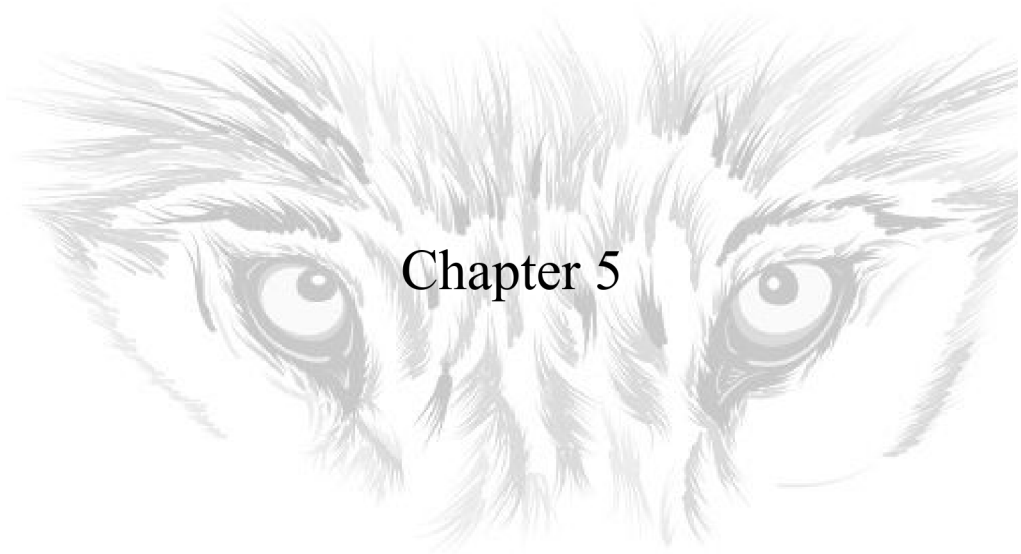
"Sweetheart, you're killing me. What can I do to make you feel more comfortable? Or to make you feel better? I hate seeing you so sad." I intertwine our fingers and give her hand a squeeze. "I can go sleep in the spare room if you'd like."

"No. I don't want to be alone... can I sleep in your arms?" She blinks up at me with her bottom lip between her teeth.

"Of course. I'd love that." As much as I want to take another pill to relieve my pain, I'm not going to do it. I want to be available if London needs me.

Scooting down lower in the bed, I hold my arm out for her to lay on my chest. London strips off her sweatshirt and tosses it on the ground before she snuggles into my side. She lays her head on my shoulder and her hand on my chest.

It doesn't take long before her breathing evens out and she's snoring softly in my arms. I hold her a little tighter and drift off to sleep with her. This is the only time I've ever slept with a woman in my arms and I already understand why Grayson insists on being with Piper every night.



Chapter 5



London

Falling asleep in Connor's arms is like a dream come true. He's such a great guy. He cares so much about me and making sure I'm doing ok.

I don't think I would've done as well at Sandywood as I did if he hadn't been there encouraging me. When we first met, I was nervous around him. He was definitely cuter than any of the other guys in the facility. But he had this air about him. He didn't seem like he wanted anyone to talk to him. He was happy being alone.

It took a week or so before he started hanging around me a little bit more. He was constantly watching me, but he didn't say much. I hated that he wouldn't talk to me so I started randomly telling him things. One day I told him I hate piña coladas, but I loved getting caught in the rain. I'll never forget the slow, sexy smile that spread over his perfect lips.

Connor didn't talk to any of the other patients at Sandywood, but he'd seek me out. After a few days, he followed me into the gazebo. He plucked my book right out of my hand and

began reading it out loud. That was the day I knew I didn't want to lose him. He didn't see me as the girl with the eating disorder, he saw me as a beautiful woman who was struggling with life.

He encouraged me and checked in with me every day. He asked me how I was doing and what he could do to help me. I didn't hide things from Connor. He knew exactly why I was at Sandywood and he didn't shy away from me because of it. Instead, he'd check to see if I had eaten and would give me his brownie whenever we got one, just so I'd eat a little bit more that day.

I want to get healthier. I'm sick of being tired all the time. I'm annoyed with how hard it is to concentrate and the dizzy spells. Being constantly cold sucks too. I want to feel like an ordinary teenager.

I normally can't handle the idea of eating around other people, but somehow eating with Connor doesn't bother me. He's almost a soothing presence to me.

A side effect of my anorexia is not sleeping well. Getting up multiple times a night is normal for me.

When I wake up in the middle of the night, Connor's hand is resting on my hip. His thumb moves slowly back and forth like he's caressing me.

His other hand is covering mine on his chest. He makes me feel so loved and cherished. I wish I could find a guy like him to keep in my life forever. But no one wants to date someone with as many issues as I have.

“What’s wrong, Lon?” Connor whispers softly.

“I can’t sleep.”

“Me either.”

“Why?”

“Insomnia. And I’m hot.”

“What do you normally do when you can’t sleep?” I peek up at him.

His eyes are closed, his long lashes resting softly against his skin. His lips look so soft and plump. I wonder what it would be like to kiss him.

“I used to plan out how I was going to destroy someone’s life. Now, I think about all of the people I’ve hurt over the years and how I don’t want to become that monster again. I wonder if I’ll ever find someone to love me the way Mac and Grayson have Hadley and Piper.”

“Were you thinking about all of that before I woke up?”

“Nah. I was thinking about how lucky I was to have you in my bed. I was contemplating how I can make this a constant thing in my life.”

My heart hammers against my ribs. Did he really just say that or am I dreaming? There’s no way Connor actually wants more than friendship with me, right?

“What do you mean?” I whisper so quietly I’m not even sure if he can hear me.

Connor shifts me onto my back and he moves so he's lying on his side and facing me. He trails a finger down my jaw and neck, stopping at my clavicle. A small smile tugs on the corner of his lips as he watches me.

My chest is heaving with anticipation. I'm not sure if I want him to kiss me or if that would make things worse. I've never had a boyfriend. I've never been kissed. I was always too focused on gymnastics and my weight to worry about boys.

"I mean... I like you, London. A lot. I'd love to have you as more than my friend."

"You want me to be your best friend?" I squeak out.

"No, baby. I want you to be my girlfriend." Connor cups my cheek and stares deep into my eyes. I feel like he can see every thought running through my head.

I don't know what to say. I'd love to have him as my first boyfriend, but I think he deserves better than me. He should date someone who doesn't have as many issues as I do.

"But... I'm guessing you don't want that," Connor whispers in a sad voice. He starts to pull away from me and I panic.

"No!" I grab his hand and hold it against my cheek. I don't want to lose the physical contact. I need him. "I do want that. I just think you deserve better."

"That's where you're wrong. You deserve better, London. But I'm too much of a selfish bastard. I don't want to let anyone else have you."

"I've never had a boyfriend," I murmur.

“Then every guy who’s ever met you is crazy. I knew you were special the first time I laid eyes on you. I couldn’t wait to talk to you and get to know you. It just took me some time to pull myself out of the funk I was in before I could talk to you.”

Connor leans down and presses a soft, lingering kiss to my forehead. It’s a sweet and intimate gesture. I wonder if he’s giving me the opportunity to get used to him kissing me before he does it for real.

“We should go back to bed. You need more sleep. I can see how tired you are.”

“I thought you were hot.” I smirk.

“I am. It’s hard sleeping in sweats and a t-shirt, but I want you to be comfortable.”

“You can take off your shirt.”

“Are you sure?” He arches a brow.

I love when he looks at me like this. His lip always quirks up in the corner and he looks like a sweet boy next door type.

“I’m positive.” I take a deep breath and do something I’d never dream of doing.

I grip the hem of his shirt and slip my hands under the fabric. I slowly run my fingers over his body, dragging his shirt higher and higher until I tug it over his head.

His chest and stomach are so tight and toned. I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone this muscular. Connor told me he had a competition with Grayson and Mac on who could get the

most defined abs. I just didn't believe he had this hiding under his t-shirt.

Connor leans back and rests his weight on his elbows. When his eyes return to mine, they're darker than they normally are.

"I've been dying to feel your hands on me, baby." He leans in again and I swear he's going to kiss me. Then his lips brush against my cheek, not my lips.

I want to groan in frustration, but I know I'm not ready for him to kiss me for real. I need to get used to the attention he's showing me before I can handle us getting physical. And somehow, I think Connor knows that too.

Connor moves back to his spot next to me and this time he turns me on my side and slides closer until my back is against his chest. He slips an arm under my head and tugs me flush against him.

"Can I put my hand on your stomach?" He whispers in my ear, making goosebumps spread over my skin. I nod my head, unable to find my voice. "Can I have it under your shirt? I want to feel your bare skin."

"Yes," I whisper.

His warm fingers slide under the hem of my shirt and he spreads them wide. His hand covers most of my stomach and has my skin heating up quickly. It feels so good, I don't want to admit how much I'm loving this.

"Are you comfortable sleeping like this?" He's so sweet the way he keeps checking to make sure I feel safe, especially

with our evolving relationship.

“I’m more than comfy. I’m perfect.”

Connor snuggles impossibly closer and kisses the soft skin right below my ear. Tingles spread through my body and I know this man is going to turn my life upside down, but I’m powerless to stop it. He could easily become my favorite addiction.

When we wake up, the sun is streaming through Connor’s window, lighting up the room. I stretch my arms above my head and smile when his eyes roam over my body. He makes me feel perfect.

He doesn’t look at me with disgust like some people do. He likes me just the way I am, but he also encourages me to keep getting healthier and gain more weight.

“Morning, sweetheart. Are you hungry?”

“A little bit.”

“Good. Fernando makes the best breakfasts ever.”

Connor slowly climbs off the bed and holds a hand out to me. I take it without hesitation and he leads me to the door. I can tell he’s in pain and I hate how he’s not taking as much medication as he needs so he can take care of me. I know he won’t listen to me though.

“Wait, I need my sweatshirt.”

“London, if you want it because you’re cold, then get it. But if you want it so you can hide your body, then leave it on the floor. There’s absolutely nothing you should be ashamed of. You’re beautiful and you always will be.”

He rests his hand on my hip and I know he can feel how much my bones stick out. I’ll never forget the horrified look Brian gave me when he realized just how much weight I had lost.

“I’m going to help you get through this and get healthy. I promise. But that means you can’t hide from me.”

“I’m not hiding from you... but other people might be awake and eating with us.”

He watches me for a moment, thinking things through. He’s always thinking. Always weighing his options and what he should do. I find it intriguing. I’ve never met someone who’s so calculating and sure of every decision he makes.

“Grab your sweatshirt and if anyone’s at the table, then you can put it on, deal?”

“Deal.” I snatch my shirt off the floor and take his hand again.

Connor leads me down the stairs and towards the dining room. We move slowly because of his leg, but I don’t complain. I don’t want him to get more frustrated with his injury than he already is.

James, Lauren, Piper, and Grayson are all gathered around the table. Connor pauses just out of view and turns to face me.

“You can put on your sweatshirt if you want to, but you have no reason to hide, baby. No one in this house will judge you. I’m not going to stop you either way. I want you to feel comfortable.”

He stares at me for a second, and when I tie my sweatshirt around my waist, Connor flashes me a beautiful smile. He intertwines our fingers and we walk into the dining room.

“Good morning, kids!” Lauren smiles brightly at us. “I hope you had a good night’s sleep.”

“I did. Thank you.” I take the seat Connor pulls out for me.

“Have you heard from your sister? I’ve been praying for your brothers all night.”

“I... I don’t know where I put my phone.” I pat my pockets frantically.

“Calm down, babe. You left it on my nightstand. I’ll go get it,” Connor whispers in my ear, pressing a gentle kiss to my temple before he moves as quickly as he can up the stairs.

He reappears at my side a few minutes later and gives me my phone. I quickly swipe through the screen and find several texts from Jessica.

“Steve’s awake and doing better. Brian woke up for a short period of time and they were able to evaluate his condition a little bit. They don’t believe he has any brain damage, but he’ll need to stay awake for a little bit longer before they can really evaluate him.”

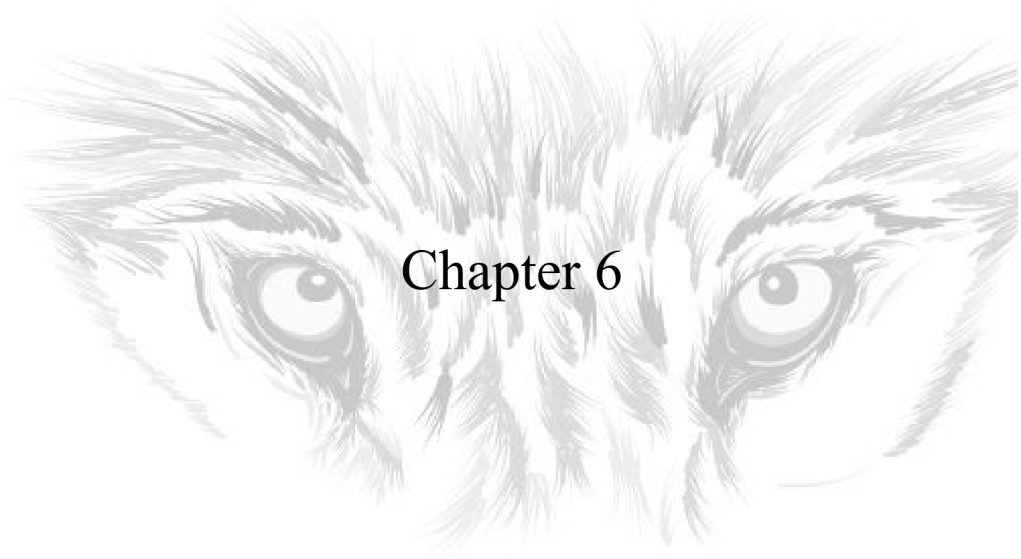
I keep my attention on my phone, texting Jessica back. I want to go to the hospital. I need to see them with my own eyes so I know they're ok.

Connor slips his hand around mine and brings my knuckles to his lips. He presses a soft kiss to each one and keeps his eyes on me.

“That’s good, baby. Do you want to go see them?” He lowers our joined hands and rests them on his good thigh.

“I’d love that. Thank you, Connor.” I stare up at him and know I’m the luckiest woman in the world to have a man like him in my life.

“Ok, let’s eat, then we can go.”



Chapter 6



Connor

I hate not being able to drive us by myself. I want the time with London to be just the two of us. I really don't want to be chauffeured around by Roger. It makes me feel like a little kid who needs their parents to do anything.

“Are you ok?” I squeeze London's hand gently and wait for her to peek up at me.

“Yes. I really want to see them myself. I want to talk to Brian and know he's going to be ok.”

“He might not be awake, babe.” I stroke my thumb over the back of her hand. Her skin is so soft and I swear I'm quickly becoming addicted to touching her.

“I know. I'm hoping he'll wake up for at least a few minutes though.”

We pull up in front of the hospital a few minutes later and Roger grabs a wheelchair out of the back of the car. He sets it up and offers to help me, but I wave him off. I want to do this by myself. If I knew I could walk through the whole hospital, I

wouldn't even use the stupid wheelchair, but I know it's too far and I'd be in too much agony if I tried, especially with taking less medication.

Once I'm settled, I tell him I'll call when we're ready to leave. He nods and disappears back into the driver's seat. I'm sure he's going to park and wait. Dad and Lauren don't need him for anything today.

"Are you ready?" I peek up at London.

I hate feeling weak when she needs me to be strong. She needs someone to lean on and I'm trying my hardest to be that person right now.

She nods her head and steps behind me. The wheelchair moves forward and I'm surprised she's pushing me.

"You don't need to push me, babe. I can do it myself." I stare up at her with my brows pinched together. I don't want her to pity me.

"Please let me do this. I need to help someone and I'm certain I'm going to be useless to Brian and Steve."

"Ok, you can help me."

"What else can I do for you? Like when we get home."

I face forward to hide the huge smile taking over my face. London just referred to my house as home. I love that.

"I don't know. I can do almost everything myself. And I'm getting better every day."

"Tell me what you can't do or what's hard to do."

“Showering and getting dressed, but I don’t expect you to help me with that stuff. I just push my way through it and it takes a little longer than normal.”

She’s quiet and I wonder what’s going through her head. I’m not going to push her though. She’s overwhelmed right now and she doesn’t need to feel like I’m constantly questioning everything she says or does.

Soon we’re in the waiting room of the intensive care unit and London’s walking to the receptionist. She says we can both go back to see Brian and Steve. Apparently, Jessica told them I’m family and I should be allowed back.

I leave the wheelchair in the waiting room, knowing there probably won’t be space in the rooms for it. London helps me stand and slips her hand into mine as soon as I’m steady on my feet.

“Thank you, beautiful.” I press a kiss to her head and we slowly walk to Steve’s room.

“I just want to peek in on Steve, then spend more time with Brian. I know Jessica will spend most of her time with Steve.”

I nod my head, knowing I’ll do whatever she wants. She’s the one in charge today, I’m just a support system for her. I’ll do anything she asks with a smile on my face.

Knocking softly on Steve’s door, we enter when Jessica says to come in. As soon as Steve comes into view, London gasps. He’s banged up and looks nothing like the man I met at

Sandywood. He has a few bandages on his face and there's a decent amount of bruising and swelling.

London's tense beside me and I know I need to do something to calm her down. From what I understand, Steve's in better condition than Brian. I can only imagine how she's going to react when we go next door and see him.

"It's ok, London. I promise my handsome face is under here somewhere." Steve motions weakly to his face.

"You look awful," she whispers, stepping closer.

I keep my hand on her lower back. I want my touch to be a constant reminder she has someone to lean on. Someone who's here for her and her alone.

"Gee, thanks." Steve laughs and winces. "Damn, don't ever get a collapsed lung. It really sucks." He adjusts the nasal cannula on his nose and breathes in deeply.

"Hey, Steve. How are you feeling?" I position myself behind London when she reaches the side of the bed.

I rest my hands on her hips and squeeze her gently to remind her I'm here. She leans into me the slightest amount and it makes me smile. I love how she's so strong, but she's still willing to let me see how much she needs me. She's more than comfortable leaning on me.

"Pretty awful. But I guess I should be happy I feel the same way I look and not worse." His gaze drops to my hands on London's hips and he arches a brow. Well... he tries to arch his brow. With all the swelling, it's almost impossible. "What's

going on here?” He motions to the two of us, barely lifting his arm off the bed.

London peeks up at me. Her mouth opens and closes, but I know she’s unsure of what to say. She turns her attention back to Steve, but she still doesn’t say a word.

“We’re dating,” I answer honestly.

“Isn’t she staying with you?” Steve narrows his gaze on me.

“Yes, and I’m going to keep her safe and healthy.” I arch a brow, hoping he understands the hidden meaning in my words.

London knows she has a problem, but she doesn’t need her flaws to be front and center every second of her life. She doesn’t need constant reminders of how she’s underweight and destroying her body.

Steve eyes me for a moment before he nods his head. He understands where I’m coming from and wants London to get better just as much as I do.

“Good. You two look good together. You better treat her well or I’ll kick your ass.”

“He does,” London murmurs, peeking up at me with a big smile.

“You could try. I think I’m a little better off with my injury right now than you are with yours.” I chuckle.

“And keep your damn pants on,” Steve growls.

“Steve!” London stares at him with wide eyes.

“What? He’s attractive and I don’t want him to use his pretty boy smile to get you to drop your defenses. The last thing we need is you getting pregnant.”

“Oh my gosh, Steve! Shut up!” London hisses.

“Hey! You have to be nice to me. I’m an injured man.” He sticks his bottom lip out in a pout.

“Yeah, well, I’m going to smack you if you talk about my damn pants or what could happen inside of them,” London huffs.

“Ok, ok! Jeez! Message received!” He holds his hands up in defense as high as he can. He smirks the slightest amount and I wonder if London’s going to yell at him all over again.

“On that note, we’re going to see Brian. Clearly you’re fine.” London folds her arms over her chest and glares at Steve.

“I’m in the hospital, in the intensive care unit, clearly I’m not fine.”

London’s face falls and I know she feels bad about snapping at him. She opens her mouth to respond, but Steve stops her.

“Don’t you dare apologize. I love you, London. I’m glad to see you happy. I was worried about you.”

“I’ll be fine after you and Brian get out of here... have you seen him yet?”

“Nah, they won’t let me out of this bed. Apparently, I’m going to be moved out of the intensive care unit soon. I don’t think I’ll be going home for a while though.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. I move to her side and wrap an arm around her waist. She’s about to break and I want to be there to catch all the pieces. I’ll take my time putting her back together the best I can.

Her eyes fill with tears and they slowly trickle down her cheeks. I cup her face and pull her into my embrace. The tears quickly soak through my shirt, but I don’t care. I’ll take a wet shirt any day if it helps her feel better.

“Don’t be sorry, Lon. I’d rather stay here even though I hate it. I don’t want Jessica to feel like she needs to pick between staying home with me or coming here to see Brian. This makes it slightly easier for her.”

Steve reaches out a hand and London takes it without hesitation. She moves to the side of the bed and sits down gently.

She’s so beautifully broken. I can see each crack in her armor and I want to heal every single one. I’ll do whatever I have to do to help her.

“I’m always here for you. No matter what. You’re my little sister and I’ll always be by your side. You can come to me if you need to talk. I don’t care if I’m in a hospital bed or not.”

“Thanks, Steve.”

“Go see Brian, then I want you to get out of the hospital and have some fun. You shouldn’t have to deal with all of this.”

“We’ll see.” London squeezes his hand.

“Can you give me a second to talk to Connor alone?” Steve asks London, making her roll her eyes.

“Fine. I’ll be waiting just outside of the door. You can tell him to shut up whenever you want.” She pats my chest as she walks by.

“What’s up, man?” I take a step closer to the bed.

“I’m worried about her. This is going to put her in a bad place mentally.”

“I know. I’m taking care of her. I’m making sure she’s eating and I’m trying to distract her so she doesn’t think about Brian or you.”

“Yeah, I can only imagine how you’re keeping her distracted.” He rolls his eyes.

“It’s not like that. I haven’t even kissed her yet. I know she’s vulnerable and I don’t want to do anything she might regret later on.” I fold my arms over my chest and glare at him.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t assume things... but I’ve heard a lot of rumors about you over the years. Cops talk.”

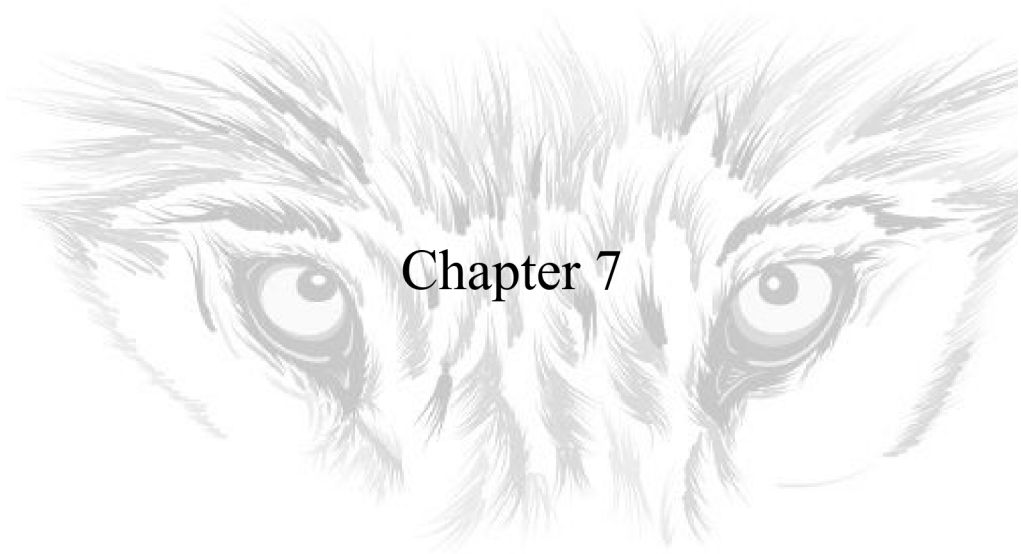
“I know. I’m not the same man anymore. I’m not proud of who I used to be, but I promise I’m taking steps to fix myself, just like London is. I’m going to help her through this and I think she’s helping me just as much.”

“Good. Take her out for lunch to a greasy burger place. As soon as I’m out of the hospital, she can come stay with me.”

“Yeah, we’ll see about that.” I turn my back on him. “I’ll fight you for her and I’m certain I’ll win.”

“That’s cheating! I’m an injured man!” Steve chuckles.

“Then I’d suggest you give up before you even try.”



Chapter 7



London

Standing outside of Brian's room, I suck in a deep breath and let it out slowly. I know he's going to look bad and seeing him like this is going to kill me.

"Do you want me to go in first? I can see if he's awake and if he's not, we can go home and come back later."

"No, I need to see him."

"Let me at least see if he's awake. Then you can prepare yourself for talking to him or just seeing him. Please, baby."

Connor squats down until he's eye level with me. I stare into his dark chocolate eyes and see so much love and concern staring back at me.

"Fine, but hurry up."

He kisses my temple before disappearing into Brian's room. He comes out a minute later and takes my hand in his.

"He's asleep, but he looks better than Steve did. He has a few bruises, but not nearly as much swelling."

“Ok.”

“I’m going to hold your hand the entire time and if you need to leave, you let me know. This is going to be hard, sweetheart, but I’m right here with you.”

I nod my head and intertwine my fingers with his. We slowly walk into the room and I pause at the foot of Brian’s bed.

Connor’s right. He looks better than Steve and he has minimal bruising and swelling. He looks like he’s just sleeping.

Moving to the side of the bed, I sit next to his hand and cradle it in mine. Connor takes the chair next to us and watches me carefully. This is the hardest thing I’ve ever done.

My parents died when I was young and I don’t really remember going through the grieving process. I think I was just numb to everything. Soon after that was when I started throwing myself into gymnastics. I didn’t know how to handle my loss and thought keeping myself busy would be better.

Now it feels like it’s happening all over again.

I rub my thumb over Brian’s hand and stare at him, willing him to wake up. A slow tear slips down my cheek and drips onto our hands.

“You need to wake up, Brian. I can’t live without you. I need my big brother.”

I drop my head to his chest and let the tears fall. His heart beats strong beneath me and I wish I could stay like this until

he wakes up. It would be a constant reminder of how he's still alive and his heart is still pumping.

Placing my hand over the other side of his chest, I squeeze my eyes shut and try like hell to compose myself. I'm sure Connor's sick of seeing me like this.

"It's ok, London. I'm here for you," Connor says softly, rubbing a hand up and down my back.

I don't know what I'd do without Connor. He's been such a huge support for me. I'm sure I'd be even more of a mess if I didn't have him.

A large hand covers mine over Brian's chest. My eyes snap open to see who's there and I find Brian's hand slowly stroking the back of mine.

I sit up so quickly I almost fall off the edge of the bed. If Connor's hand wasn't on my back, I probably would have.

"Brian?" I whisper, not believing he's awake.

"London," he murmurs sleepily. His eyes open the smallest amount before they fall shut again.

"Open your eyes. I need to see that you're ok." I cup his cheek, wishing I could do more.

Connor leans over the bed and presses the call button for the nurse. I didn't even think about letting the nurse know he's awake, but of course Connor's taking care of everything for me.

"I'm tired," Brian mutters.

“I know you’re tired, but you need to open your eyes. The doctor needs to check you out.”

“Doctor?” His brows form a deep crevice and he still doesn’t open his eyes.

“You’re in the hospital. You got hurt at work, so did Steve. I don’t know what happened, Jessica won’t tell me.”

“I don’t remember... Where’s Steve?” His eyes peek open again and he glances around the room.

Brian and Steve were friends before Jessica started dating him. They went through the police academy together and joined the force at the same time. They became partners and other than the short period of time Brian was undercover, they’ve always had each other’s backs.

“He’s in the next room over. He’s ok. Just a little beat up. But he’s going to be fine.”

“Is everything ok?” A nurse walks into the room with a slight frown.

“He’s awake. Does the doctor want to do anything before he falls back asleep?” Connor asks.

I’m too engrossed in talking to Brian to care about her or anything else. My brother’s awake and that’s all that matters to me right now.

“Yes. I’ll get him right away. Please keep him talking, I don’t want him to fall asleep again.” She scurries out the door in search of the doctor.

“Do you hear that? You have to keep talking to me. No sleeping yet.” I rub my hand over Brian’s chest.

“Who are you exactly?” Brian stares at me, his eyes are open a little bit more than before.

“I’m London, remember? You just called me London.” My brows pull together as a million thoughts fly through my head.

“I don’t know who you are. I heard someone say London, so I assumed that was you.”

“I’m your sister,” I whisper, unable to believe what’s happening.

How does Brian not know who I am? I live with him. He’s the only person who takes care of me. He’s my best friend and my rock. And now he doesn’t know who I am?

“No, Jessica’s my sister.” He shakes his head gently.

“You have two sisters.”

“No. Just one. We’re twins though most people don’t believe it.” A small smirk tugs on the corner of his lips.

He’s right, most people don’t believe they’re twins. Brian is tall and broad. His hair is dark and his eyes are light blue. He’s rough and no one messes with him.

Jess is the complete opposite. She’s short and tiny. Blonde hair falls down to the bottom of her back and she has the darkest brown eyes. She’s soft and gentle with everything she does.

“Mr. Jenson! It’s nice to see you’re finally awake. I need to ask you a few questions and do a couple of evaluations to see how you’re doing.” A young doctor stands at the bottom of the bed with a smile.

“Ok,” Brian murmurs, his gaze still locked on me. He’s examining me like he’s trying to place where he might’ve seen me before.

“Do you remember the accident?”

“No. She told me I got hurt at work. I don’t know where I work though.”

“He doesn’t know who I am,” I whisper. I can’t look at them. I can’t handle the thought of Brian not knowing who I am.

The first tear falls down my cheek and dozens are quick to follow. I keep my attention on my lap, praying no one will witness my breakdown.

A large hand covers my own and squeezes gently. Connor’s trying to comfort me. Somehow, he always knows where my head is and when I need his silent strength to lean on.

My tears splash onto his skin and he quickly pulls me off of Brian’s bed and into his arms.

“I only have one sister, but she’s saying she’s also my sister,” Brian’s confident in what he’s saying. He doesn’t think a second sister is even an option.

“Mr. Jenson, from my understanding and talking to Jessica, you have two sisters. London is your little sister. She’s twenty years younger than you.”

“Where’s Jess? I want to talk to Jess!”

“Could you please check Mr. Daniels’ room?” The doctor turns and asks the nurse.

“Of course.” She disappears and comes back a few moments later with my sister in tow.

“Brian! You’re awake!” Her voice breaks and I know she’s seconds away from sobbing.

“Jess, tell these people it’s only you and me. We don’t have any other siblings.” Brian folds his arms over his chest, getting more and more annoyed as the seconds tick by.

“Brian...” she whispers, glancing from him to me crying on Connor’s shoulder. “London’s our sister. She lives with you. After Mom and Dad died, you insisted you wanted her to live with you. No matter how hard I tried to convince you to let me have her, you wouldn’t listen.”

“C’mon, Jess. Mom and Dad aren’t dead.” Brian rolls his eyes.

“Brian... How old are you?” The doctor asks slowly.

“I just turned twenty.”

“We’re thirty-eight,” Jess whispers, her hand flying up to cover her mouth. “How does he forget the last eighteen years of our life?”

“Does Jessica look different than the last time you saw her?” The doctor scribbles a few things into Brian’s chart before he glances at my brother again.

“Nah, she looks the same. Maybe a couple more wrinkles. Jess, are you not using sunscreen again? I told you countless times, you’ll get old looking skin if you don’t.”

The doctor glances at Jess and frowns.

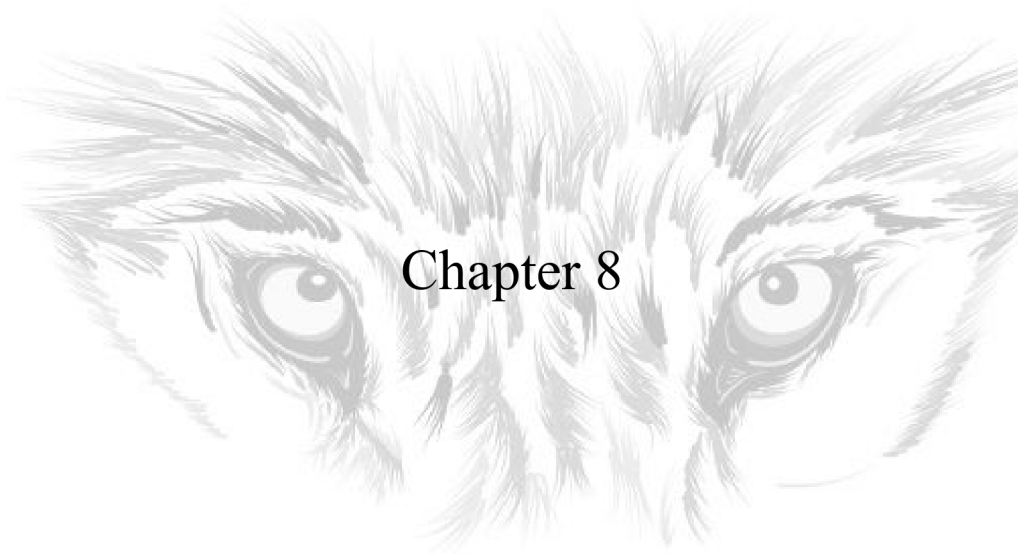
“She looks the same as when she was a teenager,” I murmur. “But he doesn’t.” I point to Brian.

I’ve seen pictures of my siblings from high school and Jess looks identical to her sixteen-year-old self. Brian looks nothing like his high school self though.

“Ok, Brian, I want you to remember what you look like. Now, I’m going to give you a mirror.”

The doctor grabs a small mirror from the nurse and hands it to him. Brian’s features tighten and he frowns at himself.

“What’s going on? I don’t look like this...” His eyes snap to mine and he stares at me. “I just... I don’t remember you.”



Chapter 8



Connor

My heart is breaking for London. She's destroyed over this. Her own brother doesn't recognize her. The one person she's counted on for the last ten years thinks she's a complete stranger.

"It's ok, babe. I've got you," I murmur into her hair, wrapping my arms a little tighter around her.

The doctor left after he finished his exam. He said Brian has amnesia and his brain still needs time to heal. He's hopeful that Brian will regain all of his memories, but there's a possibility he won't.

"London," Brian whispers, reaching out a hand to her.

"No. Don't touch me." She cries even harder into my chest.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, sweetheart," he murmurs over and over again. Each time he becomes more frustrated with himself for not remembering.

It took Jess and the doctor a while to convince him that he's lost his memory. Now, he's watching London with the most

heartbreaking expression I've ever seen. He's physically hurting over the thought of not knowing his sister.

"I want to go home," she whispers so only I can hear her.

"Ok. We can go then."

I don't try to convince her to stay. I think it's important for London to make her own decisions and for me to let her handle this situation however she wants to.

I don't know what I'd do in her situation, but I guarantee I wouldn't want to be surrounded by someone I love dearly when they don't know who I am.

London stands and lifts the hem of her shirt to wipe off her face. I watch Brian's attention zero in on her stomach and how her bones protrude. He glances at me and I shake my head. If he makes a comment about her body, I'm not sure she'll ever recover from it.

"You don't have to leave." He sounds so broken, so upset over what's happening.

"I think it's best if I do. You need to heal and... I'm not sure I can handle this right now." She shakes her head as a fresh wave of tears washes over her face.

"Will you come back? I want you to come back." He holds out his hand to her and she eyes it for a moment before responding.

"I don't know. I hope you feel better." She squeezes his hand and quickly exits the room.

“Get better, man.” I give him a tight smile and begin to follow London.

“Wait! Please, wait one second.”

“What?” I pause and spin back around to face him.

“Who are you? Am I supposed to know you too?”

“I’m not important in your life. We’ve met a few times. The last time I saw you, you shot me.” I point to my thigh. “It still hurts like hell.”

“Why would I shoot you?” Brian frowns at me.

“It was an accident. If anything, it was probably my friend’s fault.” I chuckle and shake my head.

I’m not mad at Grayson. Hell, after the shit I’ve done to him over the years, I wouldn’t blame him if he had shot me himself, on purpose.

“Who are you to London? Are you dating?”

“Yes. We just started dating. I know she’s not someone I want to lose.” My words are true, but I’m also hoping it will enforce the idea of how important she is. Maybe encourage him to get to know her.

He nods his head and stares at me. “Please bring her back again. Seeing her cry over me is killing me when I have no memories of her.”

“I’ll try, but I’m not doing anything that will hurt her more... She’s in a fragile state right now.”

“Make her eat something,” he whispers softly so she can’t hear him from the hallway.

“I’m handling it, don’t worry about her.”

“She’s the only thing I am worried about. Every time I look at her, I get this feeling that she’s familiar to me and I’m supposed to be concerned, but I don’t know why. Do you know why I’d feel like that? Did something happen to her?”

“Yes, but you need to talk to her about it, not me. I’ll try to bring her back soon. Try to rest until then. Maybe your memory will come back.”

This time I don’t wait around to see if he has anything else to say. I exit the room and quickly gather London into my arms.

“What are we doing here?” London glances at the building.

“Well, I’m hungry and I wanted a burger. You should eat too. It’s been a long day.”

“I’m not hungry.” She glances away from me and I try to remember I need to be patient with her. Upsetting London isn’t going to help, she’ll only become more withdrawn.

“I know, but you need to eat, sweetheart.” I reach over and take her hand in mine. “Brian needs to heal and so do you. The last thing you want to do is end up in the hospital again or go back to Sandywood. He needs you. Hell, I need you.”

“You don’t need me,” she whispers.

“Yes, I do. I need you as much as I need a burger right now. You’re a big part of the reason I got better.”

“How?” Her brows furrow.

“The first time I saw you, I knew you were different. I knew I wanted to get to know you, but I couldn’t be the person I was. You deserved better... so I made myself work harder. I actually listened to what the counselors and therapists were saying and I put in more effort. Sometimes I wonder if I had never met you, would I have healed and gotten healthier? What if you weren’t there when I arrived or you came right before I left, would I still be where I am today? I like to believe I would’ve still overcome my demons, but I’m not sure. Hadley’s reaction to me pushed me in the beginning, but you’re the reason I kept going.”

“You could do better than me,” she murmurs.

That thought is my breaking point. I climb out of my car and slam the door behind me. I stomp over to her door and fling it open. Spinning her body to face me, I plant one hand on either side of her hips and lean in close.

London’s eyes widen and she looks terrified, but I’m not going to stop. She needs to know I’m serious.

“London, I want you to listen to me and really hear what I’m saying. You are the most amazing person I’ve ever met. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with you and it kills me when you act like there is. I want you in my life. By my side. In my bed sleeping next to me. Do you understand me?”

She stares up at me with wide eyes and nods slowly. I wish I could show her how I see her. How strong and resilient she is. I'm going to make it my life's mission to help her get better. To view herself the way everyone else does.

“Now, will you please come inside and eat a burger with me?”

She nods her head again and when I hold out my hand to her, she takes it without hesitation. I lead her into the burger joint and to the back where there's a booth that gives us more privacy.

We look over the menus in silence and after the waitress takes our orders, we still don't say a word.

I place my hand in the center of the table with my palm up. I don't say anything, I don't even look at her.

London places her hand in mine and I can't help the smile spreading across my face.

“What's going through that pretty head of yours?” I ask softly.

“I just don't understand how he doesn't recognize me. How am I supposed to live with someone who doesn't know who I am? That would be really uncomfortable.”

“You don't need to live with him, Lon. You can stay with me for as long as you'd like. My dad and Lauren don't mind. They love you and are happy to have you at the house. Hell, Grayson practically lives there too. And I'm sure once Mac is healed, he'll be over with Hadley a lot.”

“I’d love to meet them... I was supposed to start back to school tomorrow, but I don’t know what’s going to happen now.”

“I think Brian and my dad were talking about that before the accident. I believe you’re starting at Prescott High tomorrow.”

“What?” Her gaze snaps to mine. “I’m not going to my old school?”

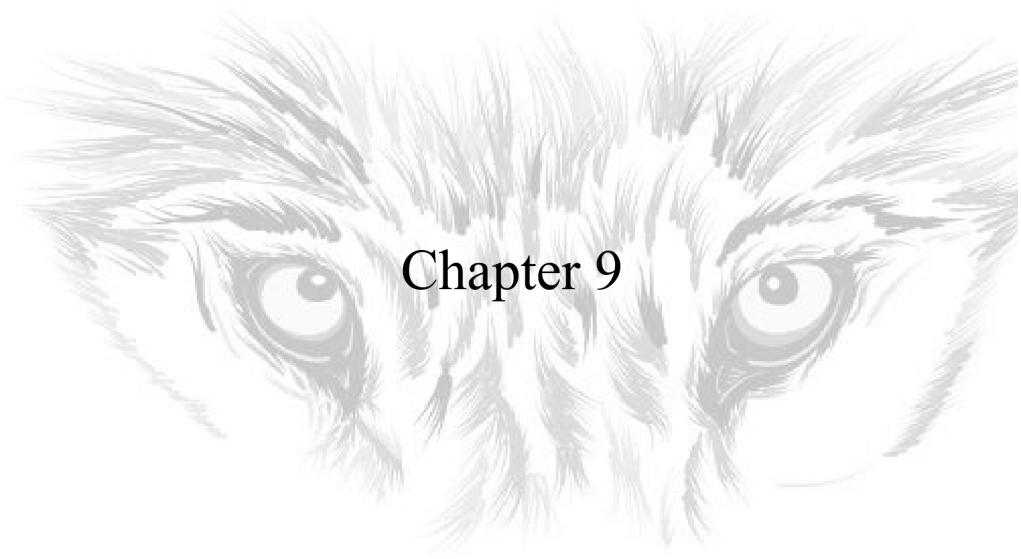
“No. Brian was worried about you going back there. I told him I was sure my dad could get you enrolled at Prescott High and I got the two of them in contact with each other. We can check with Dad, but I think starting tomorrow was the plan.”

“I’m going to school with you?” She arches a brow.

“You are. Let’s hope we have all the same classes too.” I wiggle my brows.

I already know we’re in the same classes. I made sure of it. I wasn’t going to let anyone make comments to her or let Cherie get her claws into London.

The best way I can protect her is by having her at my side the entire time. No one screws with Connor Ward and there’s no way they’ll touch my girl.



Chapter 9



London

I take the first step into Prescott High and blow out a long breath. Connor squeezes my hand and tugs on it gently. He's been my cheerleader all along and I don't think I'd be able to do any of this without him.

If I had never met him, I guarantee I'd be sitting in the hospital right now. I'd be crying my eyes out and wondering how I was going to make it through all of this. Connor has made me keep moving. He's forced me to keep living and I appreciate that more than he knows.

Piper and I went shopping yesterday after we got home from lunch. Grayson and Connor tagged along and Connor held our bags while Grayson pushed around his wheelchair the entire time. It was fun being around another girl who wasn't judging me or trying to knock me down to help themselves feel better.

Connor bought everything I picked out, no matter how many times I tried to argue. He spoiled me beyond belief, and I don't think I can ever thank him enough for it. He wanted to make sure I felt comfortable in what I wore to school. Now that I'm

here, I know the clothes I had would've made me stick out in this sea of designer brands.

“It’s going to be ok. We have your schedule and your locker number. We’re in the same classes and the only time you’ll have to leave my side is when you have to pee.” Connor squeezes my hand as he walks slowly beside me. I tried to get him to use his wheelchair, but he insisted that he didn’t want to. Instead, he gets to leave classes five minutes early so he can get to the next class on time and I get to go with him.

I giggle and glance up at him with a big smile. Through everything, Connor has been the one thing that can always bring a smile to my face. He knows exactly how to make me relax.

He hasn’t forced me to go see Brian or Steve again. Even though I know I should, I don’t want to. I’ve already lost my parents, but losing Brian is different. He’s right there in front of me. He’s alive and able to interact with me, yet it isn’t him. I’ve lost my rock and there’s nothing I can do about it.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for me. I don’t think I’d be able to do any of this without you.”

“I’m always here for you, Lon.” He squeezes my hand again, giving me a little bit of reassurance. “Hey, there’s Mac and Hadley. Do you want to meet them?”

“Yeah, I guess.” I glance away. There’s nothing I hate more than meeting new people. I always have to worry about them judging me or criticizing how I look.

Connor pulls me to a stop and backs me up until I bump into the wall behind me. I blink up at him as my brows tug together. I'm not scared of Connor. I know he'd never hurt me, but I don't know why he's caging me in like this.

"They're going to love you. Hadley's the nicest person in the entire world. She'll be your best friend before the end of the day. Mac's the friendliest guy in this school. Before him and Hadley started dating, I would've told you to stay away from him, but now I'm more than happy for you to become friends."

"Why wouldn't you want me to be friends with him before?"

"Because that asshole has a way of charming the panties off of every woman he meets. Ever since he started dating Hadley, he doesn't notice women and definitely doesn't charm them." He tilts my chin up. His gaze drops to my mouth for a moment before returning to my eyes.

I've been waiting for him to kiss me. Dreaming of it happening, but he hasn't made a single move yet. I wonder if he doesn't want me, or if he's just taking things slowly and giving me time to adjust back into a normal life.

"Do you want to talk to them now? Or we can walk right past them and pretend they don't exist."

"You can't do that." I swat at his chest playfully. "They're your best friends. I don't like meeting new people, but I want to know the important people in your life."

"We still don't need to talk to them today, Lon."

"No, I want to."

“Ok, let’s go.” He holds out his hand to me and as soon as I take it, he threads his fingers through mine. I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of the attention he shows me. “As soon as you’re done talking to them, squeeze my hand and I’ll make an excuse to leave.”

With each step we take towards his friends, my heart hammers a little harder against my ribs. I want to turn around and race out of here. I miss Sandywood and it just being Connor and me. I’d give anything to go back there so I can forget all about the real world.

“Hey, man, how are you feeling?” Mac glances at us.

“Sore. How’s the shoulder?” Connor smirks.

“Sore,” he chuckles. “Hey, I’m Mac and this is my girl, Hadley.” Mac smiles at me.

“I’m London.” I wave shyly at them.

“Oh my gosh! Is this the girl you were talking about?” Hadley glances at Connor before looking at me again. “You’re so pretty! It’s so nice to meet you!”

“It’s nice to meet you too,” I say softly, a little more than shocked at how sweet Hadley’s already being towards me.

“Are you excited for your first day in a new school?”

“No, not at all,” I chuckle and Hadley joins me.

“I get it. I don’t think I could handle it... but if I had Mac by my side, I swear I could conquer the world. I’m sure it helps having Connor with you.”

“Yeah, it does.” I glance up at Connor and find him already staring at me. “I don’t know what I’d do without him.”

“We should go on a triple date!” Hadley claps excitedly.

“I’m not sure that will work.” Connor shakes his head.

My heart plummets. Does he not want me around his friends? Is he ashamed of my eating disorder and doesn’t want them to see what it’s like to eat a meal with me? But I’ve eaten with Piper and Grayson several times and Connor never seemed embarrassed.

I shake my head. Connor isn’t ashamed of me. He didn’t need to welcome me into his home or school. I don’t need to put any pressure on Connor. We’re just figuring out how to live outside of Sandywood, we don’t need any added stress.

“Oh.” Hadley frowns, her lips forming a small pout.

“I’m sure we can all hang out as friends, it doesn’t have to be a date, Hads. We rarely go on dates anyway.” Mac rolls his eyes. He’s cute and looks like a stereotypical surfer. “Plus, Gray gets annoyed when I kiss you in front of him. And if we’re on a date, I’m going to kiss the hell out of you, baby.”

Mac kisses Hadley’s neck, making her giggle and swat at his chest.

“Don’t kiss her neck at school, man,” Grayson groans as he and Piper join our little group.

“See, told ya!” Mac points at Grayson with a big smirk. “He gets annoyed every time I touch you.”

“Because I’ve heard her scream your name when the two of you thought no one was home,” Grayson growls.

“Hey, that’s not my fault. Maybe you should make your presence known a little more. A simple text message could go a long way in preventing emotionally scarring events.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t touch my sister!”

“Man, you’re dating my sister!” Connor’s deep laugh fills the air and I swear it’s my favorite sound.

“Oh please! She’s your step-sister and we started dating when you still hated her.” Grayson rolls his eyes.

Connor tenses beside me and I know what’s going through his head. He hates being reminded of the person he used to be. He’s confessed to me on more than one occasion about how embarrassed he is over his behavior and actions since his mom died.

Piper was one of his biggest regrets. He went out of his way to make her life miserable and he hates himself for it. He knows he can’t change the past, but that doesn’t mean he wants to be reminded of it.

“Connor,” Piper whispers, stepping up to his side. She grabs his arm and stares up at him.

“No, it’s fine. He’s not saying anything that isn’t true.”

“Shit, I’m sorry, Con. You know I didn’t mean it like that. I wasn’t trying to make you feel bad or drag up old history. Just stating facts.” Remorse fills Grayson’s eyes and I know he’s a good guy. He doesn’t want to hurt his friend.

“I know. It’s fine. I have to live with my actions.” He glances at his watch and turns towards me. “We should head to your locker so we’re not late for our first class... see you guys later.”

I wave over my shoulder as Connor leads me down the hall and out of sight. I wonder if we actually needed to go or if he just needed some space. I know he keeps his distance at times when he needs space.

He shows me where my locker is and opens it for me. I stuff my backpack and jacket inside and grab a few things I’ll need before slamming it shut.

When I spin around to face him, I see the storm brewing in his eyes. He hates his past. It’s something that’s going to haunt him for the rest of his life. Something he can’t change no matter how hard he tries.

“Hey, stop it.” I tug his hand, bringing him closer to me. I love how he doesn’t hide how he feels from me. When he first came to Sandywood, he hid behind a mask and kept these massive walls up around his heart. All of that has changed between us.

My back is against my locker and Connor’s a step away from me. I pull him closer, wanting the rest of the world to fade away from us.

Connor braces one hand next to my head and the other one gets planted on my hip. He stares down at me, but I’m not sure he’s really seeing me.

“I hate seeing you upset,” I whisper.

“I can’t help it. I know I did all of those things, but I wish I hadn’t.”

“I know. I understand where you’re coming from. No matter how much I want to eat and get healthy, it’s hard.”

“I’m going to help you, babe.”

“And I’m going to help you.” I place my hand on his chest, right over his heart.

I love feeling it beat hard against my palm. It’s a reminder of how strong he is. How easily he can protect me from everything around us.

He’s quickly becoming my protector and my comfort. The person I can count on no matter what’s going on around me.

Connor leans in and I hold my breath. I’ve been waiting for him to kiss me since we were in Sandywood. There were dozens of times when we were alone that I thought he’d try to steal a kiss without anyone seeing, but he never did.

He’s been calling me babe and baby for so long. The term of endearment feels comfortable between us, almost like a natural thing.

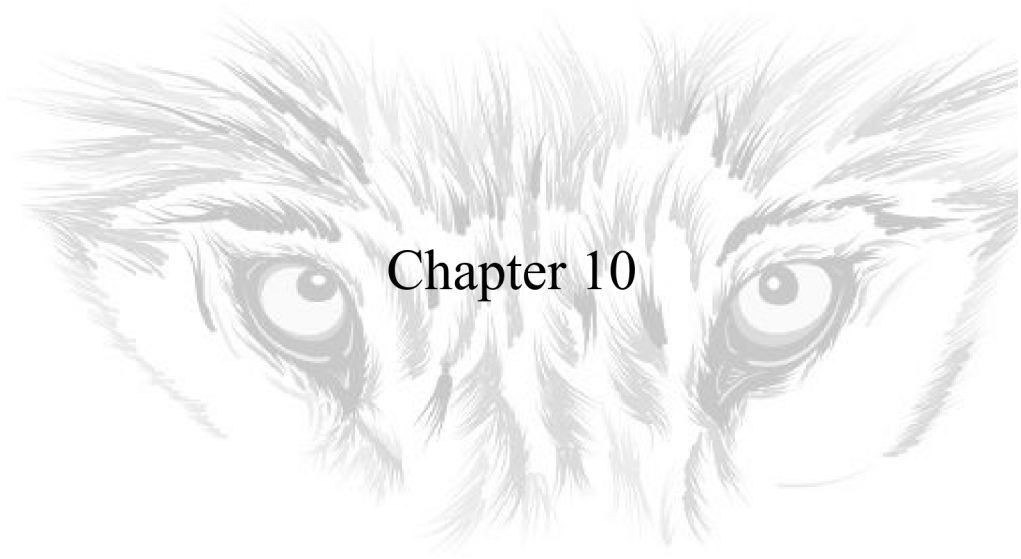
He presses a lingering kiss to my temple and slips his hand into mine.

“Are you ready to go to class?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” I sigh, pushing away from my locker and following Connor down the hall.

I'd pay good money to know what's going through his head.
To know how he really feels about me.

But I might never know.



Chapter 10



Connor

There have been so many times throughout the day I've wanted to tug London into my arms and kiss her until we're both breathless, but I don't know how she'd respond.

I've had a crush on her since we met, but couldn't make a move on her. Not at Sandywood. When one of the nurses saw how I watched London, I was instructed that if I crossed that boundary, they'd move me to a different floor so we wouldn't get any interaction at all.

Because of that, I was nervous around London. I was terrified I'd do or say something that would have her taken away from me and I didn't want to lose something so precious.

I'm not used to working for someone's attention. Most of the time, I could have my pick out of anyone in the room. I've never had to put effort into a relationship.

I think that's part of the appeal of London. She doesn't just fall at my feet and beg for my attention. She's herself. She doesn't change who she is depending on who's around.

The entire morning, I made sure we've sat next to each other or I took the seat behind her in every class. I plan to keep doing the same the rest of the day.

I want to be close to her. I want to make it clear to every guy in this school that London Jenson is off limits. Anyone who even glances in her direction will have me to deal with.

She doesn't want or need any attention from these assholes. Plus, if I'm by her side, the girls will stay in line. They'll keep their mouths shut and their claws to themselves.

I've seen how nasty girls can be to each other. I witnessed it with Hadley. The only reason they stopped their attack on her is because I threatened each and every one of them. Hadley's sweet and innocent, just like London. She didn't deserve their abuse, but she took it with her head held high. They targeted her because she was the only one who could get close to Mac, Grayson, and I. She was always welcome in our circle and they hated it.

We make our way through the lunch line and I buy both of our meals. I quickly find Mac and Grayson sitting at our old table.

"Do you want to sit with them or by ourselves?" I nod towards my friends.

"We can sit with them if you want to."

"I want whatever you want, baby." I stop and stare down at her. "Whatever makes you more comfortable."

“I want to sit with them. It’d be nice to have some friends. But could you maybe sit next to me?”

“Of course.” I lead her to the table with a hand on her lower back and sit across from the guys. “Hey.”

“How was the first half of your day?” Mac smiles at London.

“It was ok. I think classes at Prescott High are harder than my old school was.”

“If you need any help, let me know. I’ve been tutoring Hadley for years.”

“Really?” I frown at Mac.

“Yeah. Sometimes she has a hard time learning things. Whenever she didn’t understand something, I helped her see it in a different way.” He shrugs like it isn’t a big deal.

“He’s amazing. I’m fairly certain I’d be failing school if it weren’t for him.” Hadley settles onto the seat next to Mac and kisses his cheek softly.

“Thank you for the offer. I’ll let you know if I need any help.” London smiles at them.

“Have you made any new friends?” Piper asks excitedly.

“Not exactly. People seem to be giving me a wide berth.” She frowns down at her chicken fingers and fries.

“That’s my fault. They’re scared of me and because you’ve been by my side, they’re not going to talk to you,” I mutter under my breath, embarrassed for the first time over how I’m treated at this school.

“Seriously?” Her brows raise in surprise.

“Yeah, I can back off and sit further away from you.” I rub the back of my neck and focus on my lunch. I didn’t think about people avoiding her because of me. I thought I was protecting her by making sure the girls didn’t torture her.

“What? No. That’s not what I want at all.” London places her hand on my good thigh and squeezes it gently. I place mine over hers and wish I could keep her like this forever.

“I’d rather have you by my side than make a bunch of fake friends that know nothing about me. You see me, Con. You know everything that’s happened and how my brain works. I need you, not them.” She motions around the cafeteria.

“And I only need you,” I whisper in London’s ear.

“Aww, look at how adorable they are together!” Hadley places her hands over her heart and watches us.

“I never thought I’d see the day where someone called Connor adorable.” Grayson chuckles and shakes his head.

“Please start calling him cute little pet names! Something he’d kill anyone else for calling him, but he loves when you do it.” Mac smirks.

“Like Babycakes or Pookie!” Piper adds with a wink.

“Are you guys finished?” I roll my eyes.

“I like Honey Bunny,” Grayson mumbles under his breath.

“Then Piper can start calling you that. Leave me and London alone.”

Everyone chuckles and conversations turn to what we're doing this weekend. I snake my arm around London's waist and grin when she leans her head on my shoulder. We stay this way for the rest of lunch. Maybe I just needed a beautiful woman at my side to keep me from wanting to destroy the world around me.

Throughout lunch, London laughs at everyone and listens to all of the conversations. I realize she's been eating the whole time and I don't even think she realizes it. She's so caught up in their banter and funny stories that she almost finished her entire lunch.

I glance at my watch and see we only have a few minutes left of lunch. I want to be alone with London. I need a few minutes to just recharge and catch my breath.

"Do you want to come with me while I get something out of my locker?" I keep my voice low so only she can hear me.

"Sure. I don't think I need anything out of mine. But I'm ready whenever you are."

I stand and gather both of our trash, tossing it in the can a few feet from our table. Then I stack both of our books together and pick them up so she doesn't have to carry them.

"Damn, he's even a gentleman now?" Mac blinks in surprise.

"See ya, fuckers." I flip them off, making Mac chuckle. Then, I slip my hand into London's, leading her out of the cafeteria.

I head down the hall and past my locker. I don't need anything, I just wanted to get out of there.

“Connor, we just passed your locker, where are we going?”

“This way,” I murmur, taking a door that leads to the stairs, I move into a little space below the steps and drop our books to the ground.

Placing my back against the wall, I grip London's hips and pull her into me. She places her hands on my chest and stares up at me with such trust.

I don't know what the hell I did to deserve someone like her in my life, but I'm never going to question it. I'll hold onto her with everything in me. I'll make sure no one will ever be able to take her away.

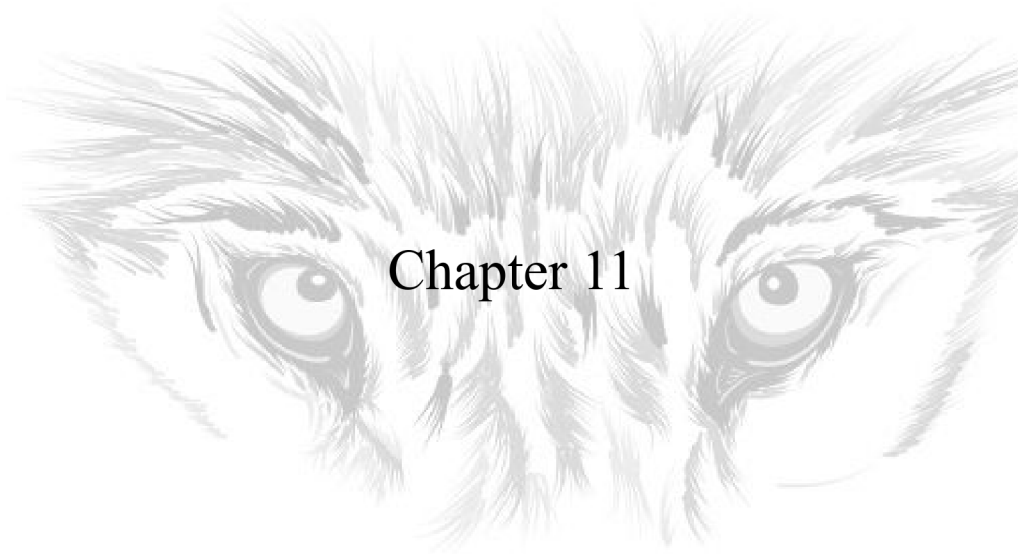
“What's wrong, Con?”

“I just needed a second to breathe.” I drop my forehead to hers and suck in a deep breath.

“Oh, then I'll go to my locker and give you some time alone.” She starts to push away from me, but I tighten my grip on her hips.

“No, baby. I need you here. Having you in my arms helps me relax.”

Instead of trying to pull away again, London slips her arms around my waist and rests her cheek on my chest. She hugs me to her and makes everything else fade into the background. All I can focus on is her. I could get addicted to how she makes me feel.



Chapter 11



London

My first day of school was exhausting. Nothing bad happened, but it's the first time I've had to interact with so many people in such a short period of time in months.

As soon as we step through the door of the Ward home, Connor leads me upstairs and we toss our backpacks into the corner of his room.

He wordlessly takes my hand and leads me over to his bed. We both kick off our shoes and climb beneath the covers.

Connor lays on his back and holds an arm out for me. I don't hesitate for a second. I quickly scoot into his side and rest my head on his chest.

"Want to take a nap with me?" Connor whispers, pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead.

"Always. How sore are you?"

"It's pretty bad. I'll take some medicine then take a nap with you."

I know he probably won't sleep. He's doing this because he knows I'm tired, but I'm going to take the chance to nap in his arms. It's something I crave and I'm not going to pass up any chances I get.

I drift off to sleep quickly, and when I wake up, Connor's wide awake. His thumb rubs over my side in slow movements, soothing me to the point I want to go back to sleep.

"Jess called," Connor whispers. I don't know how he knows I'm awake, but he always does. It's like he can sense it.

"What'd she want?" I trace small circles on Connor's chest, avoiding his gaze completely.

"Steve is getting discharged in a few days. Brian will be staying a little bit longer."

"Oh, that's good." I keep my voice free of emotion.

Hurt bubbles up inside of me no matter how many times I try to fight it. My own brother doesn't know who I am. He refused to believe I could be related to him and that was the hardest pill I've ever had to swallow.

He was my best friend. My caretaker and confidant. We talked about anything and everything. I don't know what I'm supposed to do now or how I'm supposed to act.

When I got my period for the first time, Brian didn't call Jess to come over and deal with me. He took me to the store and I swear he bought one of every box of tampons and pads on the shelf. We watched YouTube videos the rest of the night so I could learn how to use a tampon.

I still laugh when I think about that night and how hard he was focusing on what they were saying. He didn't get grossed out or tell me to have fun. Nope, he sat there and endured all of those awkward videos by my side without a single complaint.

“Brain wants to see you.”

“Why? He doesn't even know who I am,” I whisper. The weight of my words hit me square in the chest and if I weren't lying down, I'm sure I'd be struggling to stand.

“He knows how upset you are and he wants to talk to you.”

“What if I'm not up for it? What if I don't want to talk to him or don't want to see him?”

“Then we'll stay here and lay in this bed the rest of the night. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do, baby.”

“I don't want to go tonight. I want to pretend for one more day that none of this is happening. I want to act like my world isn't crashing down around me.” I snuggle closer to him.

“I won't let your world crash, London. I'll give you a whole new world to live in.”

I don't want to be here. I hate hospitals. Last time I was excited to be here just so I could see how Steve and Brian were doing. Now, I'm dreading every step I take. Each one is bringing me closer to Brian. Closer to hurt and misery filling me again.

“Hey, come over here.” Connor tugs me into a little alcove. He cups my cheek and brushes his thumb over my skin. “What can I do to help?”

“What do you mean? I’m fine.” I stare up at him, wishing just once he wasn’t able to see through my mask so easily. I’ve always been able to trick everyone else, but not Connor.

“Don’t lie to me, baby. We’re not walking this slowly because of my leg, we’re doing it because you don’t want to do this. All you have to do is give me the word and I’ll take you away from here. I’ll make it all go away.”

“You can’t just make my problems go away.” I roll my eyes.

“Maybe not, but I’ll do anything to make you smile.”

I turn my head to the side and press a soft kiss to Connor’s palm. I don’t know why he thinks I’m so special, but I’m not going to discourage him.

“I want to get this over with. Then I want to go home and fall asleep in your arms.”

“I can definitely make that happen.” A lopsided grin takes over his lips before he leans down and kisses my forehead.

When Connor pulls back, he holds out his hand to me. I intertwine our fingers and we begin walking towards Brian’s room again.

Since Brian was moved out of the intensive care unit, he’s been sharing a room with Steve. The doctor figured it would make it easier for Jess to be with both of them, but they’re also

hoping that by having him with the people who know him the best, maybe he'll start remembering again.

I pause outside of their room and suck in a deep breath. This is going to be one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. Connor squeezes my hand, silently reminding me he's here for me. I know all I have to do is ask and he'll do whatever I need.

I softly knock on the door and smile when I hear Steve's booming voice tell me to come in. Squeezing my eyes shut, I take one more second to gather my emotions before I push the heavy wood open and step into the large room.

Steve's bed is next to the window and Brian's is closer to the door. I walk right past my brother without even really looking at him. It hurts enough to be here and be reminded that he doesn't remember anything.

"Hey, sweetheart. How are you doing?" Steve wraps me in a hug when I stop next to his bed.

"I'm ok. How do you feel?"

Connor takes a seat in the chair behind me. I know his leg is sore today. He refuses to use a wheelchair at school, and walking that much takes a toll on him.

"A hell of a lot better than the last time I saw you. Let's hope this trend continues and soon I'll feel back to normal."

"That would be good. I'm sure you're anxious to get out of here and back to normal life. When do you have to go back to work?" I swallow hard, hating the thought of Steve and Brian being put back on the streets.

“I won’t be going back for a while, London. I’d say we have at least six months before they’ll even ask.”

“I’m glad. I don’t want to see you get hurt again,” I whisper. “Where’s Jess?” I glance around the room, but I refuse to look at Brian.

When we walked in the room, he sat a little straighter and his attention was focused on me and nothing else. I can still feel him watching me and every little thing I do.

“She ran down to the cafeteria to get something to eat. I know she wants to talk to you. We’ve been discussing what’s going to happen when Brian and I come home.”

“And I already fucking told you, London’s coming home with me,” Brian growls from behind me.

I spin around to face him as my brows draw together. His hard gaze softens when it lands on me.

“I think it would be better if London came home with Jess and me,” Steve says softly.

“Why?” Brian narrows his gaze on his best friend, refusing to back down.

“Because you don’t fucking remember her!” Steve loses his cool. I’m sure this has been a constant argument or Steve wouldn’t be this frustrated so quickly.

Brian and Steve are stubborn as can be. Neither one of them are ever willing to back down when they think they’re right. Luckily, they normally agree on things, but when they don’t, things get tense.

“So what? I’m not going to learn anything about her if you all keep her away from me!”

“It’s going to be more difficult for her if she’s forced to live with you and you know nothing about her. You’re not going to be able to look out for her. You won’t know what signs to look for.”

My entire body stiffens and I suck in a sharp breath. Brian notices immediately and worry consumes his features.

“What are you talking about? What do I need to look for?” Brian glances from me to Steve and back again. “London, what are you fighting?”

I sink my teeth into my bottom lip to keep it from trembling and squeeze my eyes shut. I hate how they all view me as someone so weak they need to keep a constant eye on me. I’m not a baby and I’m getting tired of everyone acting like I am.

“You don’t need to worry about me. I’m not staying with you.” I lift my chin and meet his familiar gray eyes.

“See! She’d rather live with us!” Steve says.

“I’m not living with either of you.” I glare at Steve before returning my attention to Brian.

“Please, London. I can’t lose you,” he whispers in a broken voice.

“But you already did! How can you lose someone you don’t even know?”

“It’s better if she’s with Jess and me. We can take care of her.” Steve’s voice softens, but he’s standing firm on this.

“No, it’s not. It’s better if I stay with Connor,” I keep my tone strong and confident. If they think I’m a mess, they’re not going to let me choose where I stay. Right now, I think Connor is the only one who can hold me together. Without him, I have no doubt I’m going to relapse and I don’t want the months of work I’ve put in to all be for nothing.

“Like hell you are!” Brian roars. “I shot him! There’s a reason I did that. I might not know what it is, but I don’t make a habit of shooting people for no reason.”

“You shot me because Grayson’s an idiot and tackled you. The gun went off by accident.” Connor rolls his eyes.

“Why the hell was he tackling a cop?” Brian folds his arms over his chest and glares at Connor.

“Because you were undercover and he thought you were the one kidnapping his sister. Shit, did you not fill him in on anything?” Connor looks at Steve like he’s a complete failure. “What can you possibly be doing in this awful room all day and night? The least you could do is fill him in on his sister and the man she’s staying with. I’m sure braiding each other’s hair gets boring after a while, doesn’t it?”

“We didn’t think it was right for us to tell Brian everything about London... We thought it was better if he learned about her over time.”

“So, you thought it was smart to expect her to present all of her skeletons on a platter to someone who doesn’t know her from a stranger on the street? How stupid can you possibly be? You have no clue what it’s like to be London. You don’t understand her struggles or how difficult things are for her right now. Did it ever occur to you that maybe, just maybe, you should consult her and ask London what she wants? Contrary to what you idiots believe, she’s a fucking adult and she doesn’t need you anymore. If she wanted to walk away from the three of you and never see you again, you couldn’t do a damn thing to stop her.”

I blink in surprise at Connor. I’ve never had someone stand up for me like this before. I’ve never felt so seen and understood. He doesn’t need to ask me how I’m feeling because he understands without me saying a word. I swear he can see into the darkest parts of my heart and mind. He isn’t uncomfortable and doesn’t pity me. He’s just like me. Our fights are different, but we’re both battling against our own minds and bodies. We understand each other on a level that no one else can.

“Fuck! Can I just have a private conversation with you for an hour or so?” Brian runs a rough hand through his hair and watches Connor. “Clearly, you know London better than that asshole. Please tell me I wasn’t this dense when it came to you, sweetheart.” Brian turns his attention to me and I see the torment he’s feeling written all over his face.

“Last month, there wasn’t a person in this world I was closer to. You were the one I could always count on in life.” I smile

sadly as the first tear trickles down my cheek.

“That doesn’t have to change. Please, London! Give me a chance!” The absolute agony in his voice breaks my heart, but I’m not sure it would be good for me to stick around. I’m not sure I can handle it.

“It’s already changed. You don’t know anything about me now. You don’t know my favorite food or what I do when I’m upset. You don’t know what my favorite movie is or what kind of shampoo I use. Hell, you probably don’t even know what Sandywood is or why I was there for three months.” I toss my hands up in the air in frustration and let them fall to my sides again.

“I know what Sandywood is,” Brain whispers. “But you’re right, I’m clueless about everything else... Why were you in Sandywood, London?”

“Stop,” Jessica says from the doorway. She marches straight into the room and glares at Brian. “You’re not allowed to ask her that.”

“Why? It seems no one else wants to share even a crumb of information with me about London. About the sister I apparently take care of. According to you, I’m her sole caregiver, yet no one wants to tell me anything!”

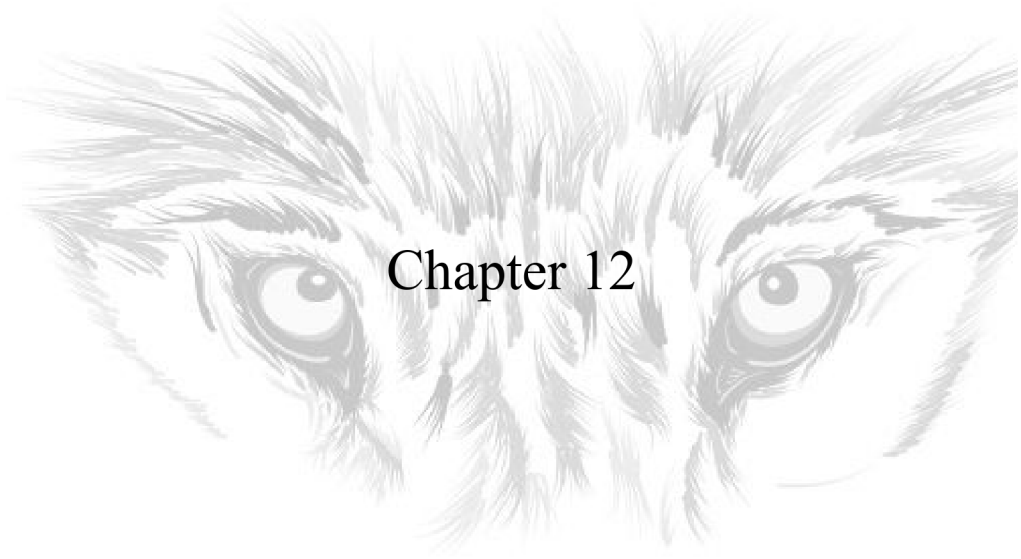
“Because this isn’t good for her! She’s going to end up working out until her body collapses. She’s going to starve herself or throw up every bit of the tiny amount of food she’ll give her body. She’s going to relapse and end up in the damn hospital again! You don’t understand, Brian. She’s hanging on

by a thread and talking about it is only going to make it worse.”

My hands tremble at my sides as I listen to what my sister really thinks of me. She believes I’m weak and helpless. She thinks I can’t handle even the smallest upset in life or I’ll end up spiraling. The worst part is, I’m not sure she’s wrong.

What if this is my life? What if I can never get better and people constantly have to shield me from the bad in life? I’ll be a burden to whoever’s around me. I don’t want that. I don’t want that at all.

“Connor, can we go home?” I say, barely above a whisper.



Chapter 12



Connor

Standing to my full height, I wince as pain spreads through my thigh. I need to take medicine, but I can't do that until we get home. Even then, I need to make sure London's ok before I take anything. The last thing I need is to fall asleep when she's hurting so much.

"Of course." I tug my phone out of my pocket and send a quick text to Roger, asking him to bring the car around for us.

London stands by the door, waiting for me to follow her. I can see how much today has affected her and I wish I could scream and yell at her siblings for what they just did to her.

I understand that none of this is Brian's fault. He didn't willingly lose all of his memories of the past eighteen years, but Steve and Jessica are making one stupid decision after another.

"I'll meet you in the waiting room, sweetheart. I just want to talk to Brian for a minute," I say softly.

London pinches her lips together before she nods. She knows I'm on her side and I won't do anything to hurt her. As soon as she's away from the door, I shut it and spin around to face the idiots she calls her family.

“The three of you might be the biggest idiots in the world.” I fold my arms over my chest and glare at each of them. “Jessica, you clearly view your sister as weak and a burden. That's why she doesn't want to live with you! It's why she keeps her distance from you more than Brian. She doesn't need a replacement mom, she just needs a sister who she can talk to without feeling like you're looking down on her all the time.”

Jessica opens her mouth to respond, but Steve threads his fingers through hers and shakes his head. I'm sure he sees it and knows exactly what I'm talking about. Maybe he can help her see where she's going wrong and help her form a healthy relationship with London.

“Steve, London views you as just as much of a brother as she does Brian. Step the fuck up and show her you can be the type of person she needs in her corner. Put your wife in her place and show her how she's hurting London rather than standing by and letting it happen.”

Steve ducks his head and nods. He isn't trying to defend himself and I have a little bit of respect for him because of that. He's owning his mistakes and he's going to try to make it better. I know it.

“Brain...” I shake my head and chuckle. “You’re her hero. She looks at you like you created the entire universe just for her. You’re by far the only person she needs in her life to survive and you were just ripped away from her. It hurts more than losing your parents because you’re sitting right there, yet you aren’t the man she needs. You’re a complete stranger, yet her biggest confidant. I suggest you take some time and look through every photo or video you have of London. Learn as much as you can about her and work your ass off to get through to her. If you have any questions, you can text me and I’ll help however I can. I want to see you and London get back the relationship you once had.”

“Well, shit. Now I feel bad I shot you.” Brian tosses his hands in the air and looks annoyed with himself for ever questioning my character.

“You shouldn’t because if I weren’t injured, I’d be beating some sense into the three of you instead of speaking sternly to you.”

“How do I know we can trust you with London?” Jessica’s back and ready to fight. Her arms are crossed over her chest and she’s ready to pounce.

“I don’t really give a fuck if you trust me with her or not. I’m all she has right now. I’m the one making sure she doesn’t fall apart. I’m the one holding her when she cries. I’m making sure she’s eating and not letting her work out. I know everything I need to know to keep her safe from herself. When you dropped her off at Sandywood and walked away, I stepped

into her life and became her strength. I see the woman she hides and I'm going to show the world how strong she is."

I grab a piece of paper and a pen off the table next to Brian's bed and scribble out my number. I hand it to him without another word and leave the room. I need to focus on London right now, not them.

I wince as I lower myself onto the sofa in the den at Grayson's house. My thigh is killing me. I wanted to go home after we left the hospital, but Grayson called me and invited us over to his house to hang out. Considering London needs a distraction and Grayson never invites me over, I figured I didn't have much of a choice.

"When was the last time you took medicine?" London settles next to me with a furrowed brow.

"Last night," I hiss.

"Do you have it with you?"

"Yeah, the bottle is in my backpack, but I don't want to take any right now." I lean back and try to force my body to relax.

"Why would you want to stay in pain?" London folds her arms over her chest and arches a brow at me.

"I don't want to be in pain, baby. I'm not taking them because I want to make sure I'm fully aware of what's going on around me. I need to make sure you're ok."

“That is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard!” London glares. I’m pretty sure if I wasn’t an injured man, she’d probably smack me right now.

“Uh, oh! Connor’s in trouble!” Hadley singsongs as she collapses onto the couch next to me. The movement causes my body to jostle and I clench my jaw in pain.

“Hads, you’re going to make him cry if you keep jumping around on the couch.” Mac slowly lowers himself onto the spot next to her.

“Oh, shit! I’m sorry! I forgot! You should see how often I’ve hit Mac in the shoulder since he got hurt. Last week I’m pretty sure he cried.” Hadley nods her head with wide eyes.

“I one hundred percent cried last week when you shoved me away with every ounce of strength your tiny body has. Seriously, Hads, did you start working out? I’m fairly certain I was whimpering for days.” Mac eyes her with caution.

“We could wrestle and find out.” She grins.

“The only wrestling I’m interested in when it comes to you is if we’re naked and in a bed.” Mac wiggles his brows.

Two months ago, it would’ve pissed me off to see them like this. Now, I’m glad they finally put their relationship first and are happy together.

I don’t want Hadley anymore. I’m happy with London. Happier than I ever could’ve been with Hadley. She might’ve been the person that made me realize what a monster I was,

but London made me want to keep being better. She gave me someone I wanted to protect above everyone else.

“What did I tell you would happen if I heard you talking about my sister like that again?” Grayson growls as he takes the spot on the other side of London.

“In my defense, you weren’t even in the room yet.” Mac rolls his eyes. “And, you’re the reason I got shot. While I was rescuing your sister, I might add.”

“Shut up. You’re an idiot.” Grayson chuckles as he tugs Piper onto his lap.

“How are you feeling, Connor?” Piper eyes me. I swear she has a sixth sense when it comes to me being in pain.

“I’m fine.”

“No, he’s not! He’s in a ton of pain but he won’t take any medication because he’s afraid he’ll fall asleep on me.” London glares at me again.

“Normal girls would be happy if their boyfriend wants to spend time with her and not fall asleep.” A smile tugs on the corner of my lips.

“Hold up. Did you just say boyfriend? Have you been holding out on us, Ward? When did this happen?” Mac motions between the two of us with a devilish grin.

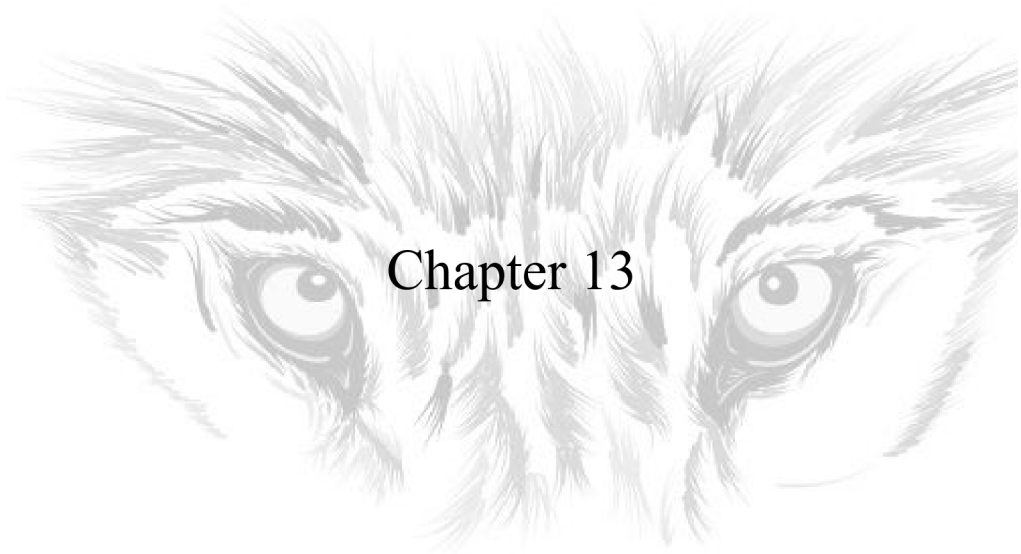
“Yeah, I have no clue why I didn’t want to tell you,” I deadpan.

“How was the first kiss? Did he use too much tongue? I could totally see him being too much.” Mac leans forward and grins at London.

“Ignore him,” I growl. “His parents never taught him manners.”

“London, would you mind helping me get some drinks?” Piper jumps off of Grayson’s lap and walks towards the door.

“Oh, sure... I’ll be right back.” She follows Piper out of the room and I wonder what she’s up to. She definitely asked London for a reason.



Chapter 13



London

“Where are his pills?” Piper paces around the kitchen.

“He said they were in his backpack, why?”

“Because he needs them! He doesn’t want anyone to know how much pain he’s in, but he’s suffering right now.” Piper throws her hands in the air and lets them drop to her sides. She cares about Connor more than I’d expect.

I’m fully aware of everything Connor’s done in his life. We had a few therapy sessions together and we shared our past. It was interesting to see someone else who lost a parent take out their emotions in a different way than I do.

Connor made Piper’s life a living hell after she moved here. He did everything he could to break her and get her to leave. He took it so much further than you could imagine. Now looking at him, it’s hard to believe he’s the same person.

If Piper hated him and wished the worst for him, I wouldn’t blame her one bit. I’d probably feel the same way. But she

doesn't hate him. In fact, she wants the best for him and that says a lot about her as a person.

“He's not going to take them. He's too worried about me,” I whisper.

Piper stops her pacing and spins around to face me. Her brows crinkle together, but she doesn't say anything. She knows I was at Sandywood, but she doesn't know why. I'm sure her mind is spinning with dozens of possibilities.

“I know we don't really know each other, but you can trust Hadley and me. We make really good friends if you'd like a couple more.” She smiles sweetly at me. “I'm not pushing you to tell us anything, but we're here for you if you need us.”

I take a deep breath and blow it out slowly. As much as I'd love to keep all of my secrets hidden deep inside of me, I know I can't. Not if I want to get better. I need a support system and people I can lean on who aren't related to me. I need people who will call me out when I'm letting myself slip back into bad habits.

“I could definitely use a few friends. Can you help me drug my boyfriend, then maybe I can tell Hadley and you what's going on?”

“Oh, it would be my pleasure to help drug Connor.”

“I'm so tired,” Connor groans, letting his head fall on my shoulder. “I feel like I already took my medicine... wait a

second!” He sits up so fast he almost falls over again. “My leg doesn’t hurt nearly as bad. Did you drug me?”

Connor’s gaze turns to Piper before moving back to me. He stares at us with wide eyes and he looks a little shocked.

“Yes, I did. I’m tired of you not taking care of yourself because you’re too worried about me. I’m a big girl, Con. I don’t need you to constantly look out for me, sometimes I need to take care of you instead.” I cup his cheek and run my fingers over the scruff on his jaw.

“So, you drugged me? What the hell, baby!”

“Just take a nap for a little bit. I’ll still be here when you wake up. You can yell at me then.”

“Fine, but I’m using your lap as a pillow,” Connor grumbles under his breath. “Then you definitely won’t be able to leave.”

Mac and Hadley scoot over to make more room for him as he lays down and places his head in my lap. I run my fingers through his silky black hair and smile down at him. I love being able to take care of him even if I had to drug him to do it. It’s nice feeling like I’m needed for something.

“Dammit! Now we can’t talk. We’ll have to stay in here.” Piper pouts.

“Mac and I can leave so you three have a chance to talk in private.” Grayson kisses her cheek.

“No, it’s ok. I might as well get this all out in the open. The four of you are Connor’s best friends. You’ll eventually find

out and even if you don't, you'll always wonder..." I trail off unsure of how to continue.

In a way this is easier with Connor knocked out. I don't need to worry about him jumping to my rescue or him telling me I don't need to do this. Everything is up to me and how much I want to share. Yet somehow his physical presence helps me relax, even if he's completely unaware of what's going on in his drugged state.

Eventually I'm going to have to talk to Brian and explain everything. This will be a good practice for all of that. Who knows, Brian might never get his memory back and I can't stay with the Ward family forever.

"You don't need to tell us anything, London. There are no conditions with our friendship," Mac says softly. "We'll be here for you no matter what."

"I appreciate that, but I want to tell you. It's just hard." I keep my attention on Connor as I replay my past. "I was a gymnast for as long as I can remember. I was good. Not just good, I was good enough to go to the Olympics. Being at that level comes with its own set of difficulties though."

"Damn. And here I am, not even able to do a simple cartwheel." Hadley chuckles, killing some of the tension in the room. I smile at her, loving how easy they make talking about serious topics.

"I was eight when they realized my potential. Most days I practiced for four hours or longer. I basically lived and breathed gymnastics and school. I didn't have time for

anything else. After my parents died when I was eleven, I threw myself even deeper into it. No matter what the coaches told me, I grasped onto it like a life line and took it to heart. I felt like I needed to be the best because my life was crumbling in every other way.”

I take a deep breath and blow it out slowly. No matter how many times I’ve told my story, it never gets easier.

“My coach told me I was getting fat around the time I started high school, so I went on this massive diet. I had to be perfect. I wanted to make it to the Olympics and get a gold medal. I wanted to do it in honor of my parents for the money and hours they spent on the mats with me practicing. I thought not eating would help me. I think Brian knew something was going on. He started watching me more closely at dinner and I knew I had to eat. So, I ate dinner like normal and forced myself to throw up later on. I worked out every spare second I had because I wanted to make sure the little bit of food I kept down wouldn’t turn into fat. By the time my brother really figured out what was going on, it was too late.”

“I’m so sorry, London.” Piper squeezes my hand.

“That kind of pressure must’ve been awful,” Grayson adds.

“It definitely wasn’t easy... I’ve been diagnosed with body dysmorphic disorder. Basically, I obsess over my physical imperfections and flaws. Most of the time it’s things you’d never notice, but I see them like they’re neon flashing lights. I know I’m not fat, but when I look in the mirror, all I see is the places I could stand to lose a few pounds.”

“London,” Mac whispers. “Sweetheart, what can we do to help you? You’re breaking my heart.”

“I know Connor’s really good at knowing when I’m about to spiral. He distracts me, which is probably why we’re here and not at home right now. It’s also why he’s not taking his medicine. He knows everything going on with my brothers and sister is stressing me out which makes me more likely to relapse.”

“I’m good at distracting people.” Mac perks up and grins. “Especially with my tongue.”

“Ew! You perv!” Hadley palms his face and shoves him back into the couch.

“Fuck, baby. That hurt.” He grips his shoulder and groans in pain. “I wasn’t volunteering to distract London with my tongue, that’s just for you. I’m just saying I’m good at it!”

“Crap! I’m sorry! I forgot again!”

“At this point I’m never going to heal.” He sticks out his bottom lip in a pout.

“That’s what you get for making comments like that.” Grayson smirks.

“I want to help. Anytime you need a distraction, feel free to call me and we can do something,” Piper says softly. “I want to be your friend. Connor means a lot to me and I’ve never seen him care so much about someone, which means you have to be pretty great.”

“Me too! Be friends with me too!” Hadley bounces in her seat.

“Way to be desperate.” Mac snorts with laughter.

“You’re going to be desperate if you keep being mean to me.” Hadley folds her arms over her chest and glares at Mac.

“C’mon, babe. I’m injured. You have to love me.”

“Tackling your brother and getting Mac shot might be the stupidest thing I’ve ever done,” Grayson says to me as he rolls his eyes. “He’s milking it for all it’s worth.”

“Oh, I’m milking something for all it’s worth.” Mac grins.

“I wonder if Brian or Steve will lend me their gun. I could give you a matching wound on the other side so you can’t milk anything.” Grayson glares at him.

“Well, that wouldn’t be fair to Hadley. I’d be calling her all the time to come *help* me.” Mac smirks.

“I swear I’m going to fucking kill you one day,” Grayson growls and tries to get off of the couch.

“Stop it, Gray.” Piper giggles and throws herself across Grayson’s lap. She’s trying to keep him in his spot, but if he really wanted to go after Mac, she’d never be able to stop him. “Mac, keep your mouth shut. You’re really pushing it tonight.” Piper pins him with a look and he has the decency to look at least a little bit sorry.

“So, what’s going on with your brothers? Do they get to go home soon?” Hadley curls up next to Mac and leans her head

on his good shoulder. He presses a soft kiss to her head and tugs her even closer to him.

“Well, Steve will be going home soon. He has a long recovery ahead of him. I know Jess will be really busy with him. Brian’s going to be in the hospital longer, but I don’t know how long. He’s going to need help and I honestly don’t know how Jess is going to handle both of them.”

“Maybe Brian will have to move in with them.” Grayson shrugs.

“A few weeks ago, I think that would’ve been a great option and something they all would’ve liked, but now things are tense,” I say softly as I trace my finger over Connor’s features.

“What happened?” Piper’s tone is full of concern. I’m so happy Connor has someone like her in his life. I just hope I can keep her in my life too.

“Brian has amnesia.” I blow out a long breath and try to keep myself from crying.

“Damn, that’s got to suck for him.” Mac shakes his head.

“Well, he remembers everything up until the age of twenty.”

They all stare at me, clearly not understanding what that means for him. For me.

“Brian’s thirty-eight. He doesn’t remember me being born or our parents dying. He has no clue who I am and fought with everyone when they told him I was his sister. As far as he’s concerned, Jess is his only sibling.”

“Shit,” Mac and Grayson mumble under their breaths at the same time.

“London, that has to be so hard,” Hadley reaches out and squeezes my hand, trying to show she’s here for me.

“It is. It’s really hard. Especially because I live with Brian and only Brian. I’ve lived with him since my parents died. Coming home from Sandywood was a difficult adjustment, but this is so much worse. I don’t even have a real home to go to. It’s just a house now, one with tons of reminders that life as I knew it is gone. I have no clue if Brian’s memory will come back. He might always look at me and wonder why he can’t remember me.”

I’m quiet for a few moments, trying to gather my thoughts. This is so hard to talk about, especially with people who don’t know much about me. I’m raw and vulnerable, letting them see all of my insecurities.

“Jess let her true feelings show today. There’s no way I could live with her and Steve. It would be more harmful than good for me... I just don’t know if I could live with Brian.”

“You don’t have to.” Piper shakes her head and watches me carefully. “My parents love having you with us and they’d never kick you out. I guarantee if they knew everything that was going on, my mom would beg you to stay with us for as long as you’d like. She always wanted a house full of kids and I’m all she got. She adores when Grayson, Mac, and Hadley come over. Now that Connor’s home and things are better between them, she loves him like the son she always wanted.

She's already told me how much she enjoys having you stay with us. So do it. Stay at our house. It's not like there isn't enough room." Piper rolls her eyes.

"You're still annoyed with the Ward's money, huh?" Mac smirks.

"I'm not annoyed with it." Piper rolls her eyes. "I just don't think everything needs to be extravagant all the time. Mr. and Mrs. Young have money but they don't feel the need to flaunt it like James does."

"Ahh, I love when Piper talks about how amazing I am." A man, who looks like an older version of Grayson, steps into the den and winks at Piper.

"Papa Young! I haven't seen you in forever!" Piper leaps off of the couch and throws herself into his arms. He chuckles and gives her a tight hug.

"Didn't I see you over the weekend?" He teases her.

"That was like four days ago! I'm going to go through withdrawal." Piper blinks up at him with big innocent eyes.

"Grayson, drop to one knee and propose to this woman! I love her and I'm not going to let you screw this up! I'll pay for whatever ring you want." He shakes his head, but a big smile never leaves his face.

"What about me, Papa Young?" Mac smirks from his spot on the couch.

"I'm not buying you a ring, Mac." Mr. Young rolls his eyes.

“Why do you like her better?” Mac pouts. “I know you love me even if you don’t want to admit it. Hadley told me how sad you were when we had that misunderstanding a few months ago. You didn’t want to lose me.”

“I’ve said it a million times, son. You just need to put on your listening ears and actually pay attention. Are you ready?” He arches a brow and waits until Mac nods eagerly. “Piper. Makes. Me. Cookies. And. They’re. Delicious,” he says slowly.

“Oh, that’s bullshit! I can buy you whatever type of cookies you want!” Mac glares at him.

“They won’t be made with love like hers are.” Mr. Young winks at a grinning Piper before turning his attention to me. “I’m Gray. I’m assuming you belong to the sleeping bear.” He motions to Connor.

“This is London. She’s dating Connor and just started school at Prescott High. She’s the sweetest thing ever.” Hadley smiles at her dad.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Young.”

“Oh, don’t call me that!” He waves his hands through the air like he’s trying to erase my words.

“Yeah, he’ll think he’s an actual adult of real children if you call him Mr. Young.” A beautiful woman steps up to Mr. Young and slips her arm around his waist.

“Oh, shush. I’d rather be called Gray or Papa Young. What’s wrong with that?”

“I’m glad you like *my* nickname for you so much.” Mac flashes him a smug grin.

“Hi, London. I’m Elizabeth, Grayson and Hadley’s mom.” She ignores Mac and focuses solely on me. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Hadley’s been telling us so much about you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too.”

“Is there a reason Connor’s sound asleep?” She arches a brow.

“I drugged him,” Piper singsongs as she shrugs her shoulder.

“I feel like I should be yelling at you for this, but I can’t.” Papa Young strokes his chin and narrows his eyes on her.

“He won’t take his pain medicine because he wants to be fully alert if I need him. So instead, he’s in excruciating pain.” I roll my eyes. “My brothers are in the hospital. They’re police officers and were involved in an accident. He wants to make sure I’m ok.”

“That’s very sweet of him.” Elizabeth smiles kindly. Hadley looks so much like her. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do for you or your family. I’m a good cook too.” She winks.

“She’s the best cook! I love coming here for dinner.” Mac shakes his head. “She makes the most amazing chicken pot pie. It’s to die for.” He kisses his fingers like he’s giving her a chef’s kiss.

“Oh, stop sucking up to my wife.” Papa Gray scowls at Mac.

“No! Piper’s your favorite, I wanna be Mama Young’s favorite!”

“You could do better, Hadley.” Papa Gray shakes his head, but there’s a smile tugging on the corner of his lips. You can tell how much he loves Mac.

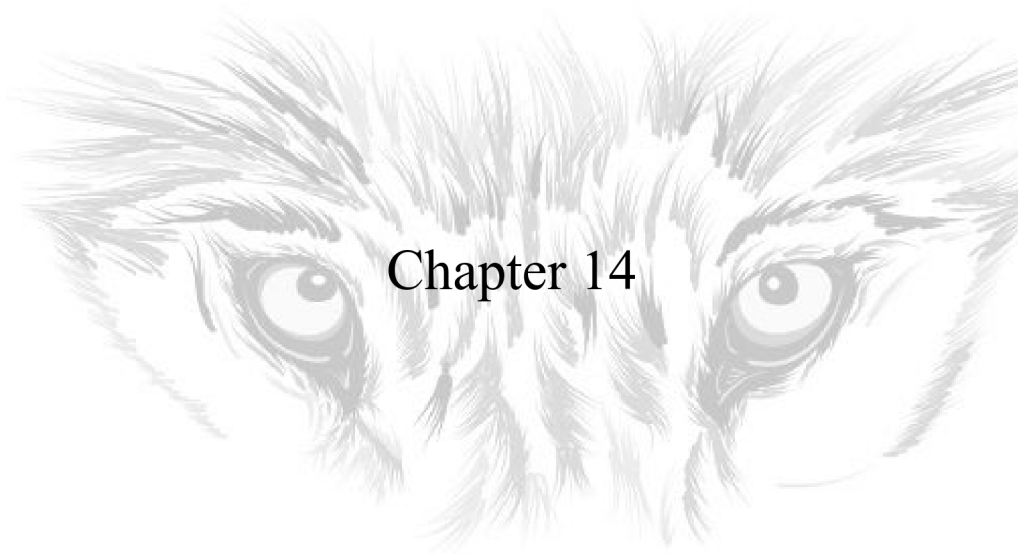
“Well, before this escalates even more, let’s go to bed.” Elizabeth slips her hand into her husband’s and tugs on it.

“I’m coming. No babies will be made in this house tonight. Do you understand me?” Papa Gray points at each of the guys and they roll their eyes.

“That counts for you too.” Grayson smirks.

“You know, when you go to those parenting classes when you’re expecting, they never tell you what smartasses the babies turn into. They only discuss the cute little babies. Someone should change that. All of these young first-time parents think it’s going to be so much fun... then BAM! Your kid turns into a smartass who’s trying to cockblock you and give you blue balls.” Papa Gray shakes his head.

“On that note, I’m gonna puke.” Hadley grimaces as she stares at her parents.



Chapter 14



Connor

I slowly blink my eyes open and scowl. Why am I in a bed? The last I remember was falling asleep on London's lap in the den.

I glance around the room and realize this isn't my room. Attempting to sit up in bed, I wake up London.

"It's ok, Con. Go back to sleep." She runs a hand up and down my chest.

"Where are we?" I ask, still barely awake.

This is why I don't like taking these meds when I'm with London. I want to know what's going on, especially with her.

"Grayson called this the Blue Room. I don't know. It's a spare bedroom in the Young's house."

"But how did I get up here?" I run a hand through my hair. "I don't remember anything."

"Well, when everyone got tired and you were still dead to the world, Mac and Grayson carried you up here and said we

could just sleep here. You were out cold.” She grins up at me.

“It’s not my fault my girlfriend drugged me.” I scowl down at her.

“I’m not sorry for doing it and if you keep this up, I’ll do it again. You need to take care of yourself. You can’t be in agony all the time. There’s no reason for it.”

“I just want to make sure I’m there for you when you need me.”

I roll onto my side and take London with me. Pulling her back against my chest, I splay my hand out on her stomach and let out a long sigh. I love sleeping like this. I don’t want her to ever go home.

“Let’s go back to sleep. I’m still sleepy from the medicine and I doubt you’ve slept much.”

I place a gentle kiss on the back of her neck and drift off to sleep a few minutes later.

Unknown: I spent the whole night looking at every photo and video I have of her. I made Jess go home and grab my computer.

Unknown: I still don’t remember her and it’s killing me.

I groan and scrub a rough hand down my face as I read my new text messages. I’m so happy London’s taking a shower right now and isn’t here to read these. This would make her so sad.

It's been a few days since we were at Grayson's house, but we haven't gone to the hospital to see Brian since then. She hasn't brought up going, and I'm not willing to suggest it. She obviously needs more time.

She wants to be there for Brian so badly, but it hurts her too much. I can only imagine how difficult it would be to have someone forget your entire existence.

After quickly adding Brian's number to my contacts, I give myself a few minutes to think. I want to make sure whatever I say to him is smart. My number one worry in this situation is London and no one else.

Connor: I don't know how to make you remember. All I can do is try to help.

I drum my fingers on my good thigh and watch the three little bubbles appear and disappear over and over again.

Brian: She was at Sandywood for an eating disorder, wasn't she?

Connor: She has body dysmorphia. It led to her becoming anorexic and bulimic. When she did eat, she'd workout enough to burn off every calorie she ate and more.

I hate talking to people about London's issues. It's not because I feel like I'm betraying her trust or anything, it just makes me so depressed. She's such an amazing person and yet she views herself in such a horrible light.

I spoke to London this morning and told her how I gave Brian my number. At first, she was a little upset, but once I explained my reasoning to her, she was more than ok with it. I think she's happy for me to field some of the questions for her. I can't tell Brian everything he needs to know because I don't know it all, but I can at least take some of the emotional burden off of London.

Brian: It's pretty bad if she ended up at Sandywood, isn't it?

Connor: Yeah. She said she was in the hospital a lot before she went to Sandywood. She did really well there.

Brian: Is she going to be ok? Am I ruining all of her progress?

I take a moment to really think about things. I don't want to give him a surface level answer. I want to make sure whatever I tell him is going to help London the most.

Connor: I'll be honest, this isn't making things easy for her, but I don't think you've ruined any of her progress. I'm with her almost all day and night. I'm making sure she isn't working out. We have an amazing chef and she loves his cooking. I truly think she's going to be ok.

Brian: But?

Connor: But I'm not sure moving home with you is a good idea. Not yet.

Brian: I don't know how to make this better! I hate that I'm hurting her. I constantly have this feeling in the back

of my head that she's important to me and I need to help her, but I have zero memory of her. How does that even happen? Hell, I don't even know where we live.

Connor: I have an idea, but I want to discuss it with London first... When do you get out of the hospital?

Brian: They're saying two to three days.

Connor: Ok, I'll get back to you on this.

“What are you doing to me?” London stands in the doorway of my bathroom and frowns at me. Her wet hair is combed out, and hanging down to her waist. Her cheeks are still a little bit rosy from the heat of her shower.

“What are you talking about?”

“I've gained five pounds since I moved in here!” She folds her arms over her chest and stares me down.

“Are you mad?” I'm nervous this could throw her off the deep end.

“No,” she says softly. “You're helping me more than anyone else has.”

She closes the distance between us and lifts up the hem of her shirt. I don't hesitate to run my hands over her body. I love touching her.

“My bones aren't showing nearly as much.”

“They aren't. How do you feel about that?” I ask softly. I know she might be freaking out about this.

“It's really hard,” she whispers as her eyes fill with tears.

“Talk to me, baby. I’m here for you any time of the day or night.” I grip her hips and tug her a little closer. She lowers herself onto my good thigh. I love how comfortable she is around me now.

“When I look in the mirror, all I see is how I need to lose weight... but then I see the way you look at me and I feel beautiful. You’re not criticizing me for gaining a few pounds or telling me I should go workout. You’re loving me and shoving more dessert in my direction.” She giggles as she brushes away a few tears.

“You look good with the extra weight, baby. You’re looking healthier and healthier. I’m so proud of how you’re handling things right now. You’re so much stronger than you give yourself credit for. Stronger than other people give you credit for.”

She nods her head slowly. She knows I’m talking about Jessica and what she said yesterday.

“I wouldn’t be doing this well without you.” She slips her hand around to the back of my neck and her attention flickers to my lips before moving back to my eyes.

She wants me to kiss her. She’s been wanting it for a while, but I could see her hesitation too. She’s not hesitating anymore.

Gently gripping the back of her neck, I tug her closer and tilt my head to the side. I’m taking this slow and giving her an opportunity to push me away. But she doesn’t. Her chest rises and falls a little faster as she waits to see what I’m going to do.

My lips brush over hers in a quick kiss and she melts into me. I take that as her being ok with this and kiss her again. This time I press against her a little longer and with a little more pressure. London shifts her body so she's a little more in front of me and less sitting on my thigh. She can't be comfortable like this.

I kiss her one more time before I pull back and watch her carefully. She looks like she's drunk with lust and that has me readjusting myself so she can't see how turned on I am. I feel like my desire for her has been building and building since she moved in here. So many times I've stopped myself from kissing her because I wanted to do what was best for her.

Pushing her back a few steps, her brows furrow together as she tries to figure out what's going on. I stand to my full height and move so I can sit with my back against my headboard. If we're going to keep kissing, we should be comfortable.

"Come here, baby." I pat my lap and love how she easily does as I say.

She tries to figure out how to sit without hurting me and I chuckle. She's always thinking of me and worrying about me, just like I do with her.

"I just took some pain medicine. You can sit on my thigh and it won't hurt."

It will. It's still going to hurt, but I'm more than willing to deal with the pain if I can have her like this.

London carefully places one knee on either side of my hips and slowly lowers herself down. She's waiting to see me wince in pain, but I'm not going to. I refuse to let her think I'm suffering because then she'll move. I grip her hips and hold her in place as soon as she's seated on my lap.

"Are you ok with this?" I softly brush her hair away from her face and tuck it behind her ear.

"Yes." She loops her arms around my neck and leans in closer. A sexy little smile plays on her lips. She looks so adorable right now.

"I have the most beautiful girlfriend in the world. Do you know that?" I kiss her softly.

"And I have the most handsome boyfriend." She grins against my lips.

This time when I kiss her, I tug her impossibly closer. I mold our bodies together and tilt my head to the side so we can deepen our kiss. I trace my tongue along her bottom lip and when she slowly parts her lips, I don't hesitate to explore her mouth. She matches my movements, tasting and savoring me just as much as I am with her.

She moans and fidgets on my lap to try to get more comfortable. Every time she moves against me, my cock thinks it's time for it to join the party. I'd love nothing more than to have her splayed out on the bed underneath me, but I can't do that with my injury and she isn't ready for us to take that step.

“You have to stop doing that, baby,” I groan as she shifts again.

“Doing what?” She pulls away from me so she can meet my gaze. With her sitting on my lap, she’s barely eye level with me.

“Wiggling around on my lap.”

“Am I hurting you?” She tries to get off of me, but I’m not letting that happen.

“Oh, you’re hurting me, but not in the way you think.” I chuckle. “My leg is fine.”

“Then what hurts?” She places her hands on my chest and stares at me, trying to figure out what’s going on. Without a word, I grip her hips and grind her center against my hard cock. She lets out a soft gasp.

“You’re turning me on and making it painful to keep my hands off of you,” I whisper in a gravelly voice.

I’m not a virgin by any means, but it’s been a long time since I’ve been with anyone. I’d guess at least a year. Even then, I didn’t sleep with many women. I stayed away from anyone who I thought was lower class than me or anyone who didn’t come from money. The last thing I wanted was for some poor girl to claim I got her pregnant.

“Oh,” she whispers softly. London sucks her bottom lip between her teeth and nibbles on the flesh softly.

“That’s my lip to bite.” I smirk as I use the pad of my thumb to remove her lip from between her teeth. I cover her mouth

with my own and kiss her until she's moaning against me again.

I swear I'm never going to get tired of this woman's lips on me. I know tonight was her first kiss. I'm fully aware that she has no experience when it comes to dating or doing anything more physical. She's a virgin in every sense and somehow, I find that even hotter.

London takes the lead this time. She moves her lips over mine and when I part my lips, she strokes her tongue against mine. She rocks her hips and I'm not sure if it's to tease me or if she's trying to make herself feel good.

I slip my hands under the hem of her shirt and slide them up until they're settled right below her breasts. She's not wearing a bra, but there's something built into her tank top separating me from touching her. I know I could get past it, but I'm not going to take advantage of London. She needs to control how fast we move.

She moans as I rub and massage her. I take that as an opportunity to move my mouth down her jaw and to her neck. I nip and suck at her skin as she grinds herself against me. I swear she's going to make me cum if she keeps this up, but I don't want to stop. She seems like she's enjoying herself way too much.

"That feels so good," she groans.

"I'll only ever make you feel good," I murmur against her skin.

London grips the hem of my shirt and lifts it until she's able to touch my stomach. I've noticed she really likes to touch me. I think after being at Sandywood for so long, she just wants to feel more connected with people.

I pull back and drag my shirt over my head before tossing it onto the ground. If she wants to touch me, I'll make it easier on her.

"I don't deserve you. You could have someone so much better than me," she whispers.

"Sweetheart, there isn't anyone better. You're the only one for me."

London stares at me for a few moments before she drags her nails up and down my torso. It feels so good. So relaxing. I hold onto her ribs a little tighter, but am careful I don't hurt her. That's the last thing I want. She groans when I rub my thumb along the bottom of the fabric covering her breasts. I want to touch her just as much as she wants me to, but I won't do it unless she tells me to.

"I'm not taking this any further, London," my voice is almost a growl. I know I'm holding on by a thread. I'm not used to taking things slow.

"Why not?" She whimpers as she grinds herself against my cock again.

"Because you need to be in control. If you want something, you need to tell me or just do it. Or we can just keep kissing. Whatever you want, baby."

“I want to be consumed by you,” she murmurs.

She runs her fingers over my chest again and this time she rocks her hips in the same rhythm. Forget me, she’s going to cum if she keeps doing this.

I massage her ribs, letting my thumbs rub against the bottom of the built in bra again. I’m fighting with myself to keep my hands in place.

London grabs my right hand and slips it under the fabric until I’m cupping her breast. She lets out a low moan and the sound goes straight to my cock. It jumps against her center and she lets her head fall back in pleasure.

I slip my left arm around her waist so I’m holding her against me. I kiss up and down her neck and I rub my thumb over her tight nipple. She runs her fingers through my hair and pushes against my dick even harder. She’s so close to falling apart and I can’t wait to see it.

Returning my mouth to hers, I roll her nipple between my thumb and index finger. She gasps and I swallow the sound before anyone can hear her. I’m not sure if we’re alone in the house, but I’m guessing not. My bedroom door is shut, but it’s not locked.

“Can you be quiet?” I murmur softly and meet her gaze.

She swallows hard and her chest rises and falls with her uneven breaths. She nods her head and her lust filled gaze stays trained on me.

She watches as I tug the top of her tank top down until her breasts pop out. Her gaze never leaves mine as I lower my lips to her nipple and suck it into my mouth. She hisses as her breaths come a little faster. I massage the other breast as I nibble on her nipple.

“Connor,” she whimpers.

“Hmm?” I ask without ever removing my mouth from around her tight bud. The vibrations are driving her even more crazy.

“I’ve never felt this good before. Is it always this good?”

“Never. It’s never been this good,” I growl, barely able to keep myself from exploding in my pants. She’s grinding against me so hard, dry humping me like I’ve never been before.

“I don’t want to stop. Holy shit.” She lets her head fall back, exposing her long neck and perky tits even more.

“I can make it even better. But you have to trust me.”

“I trust you more than anyone else in the world,” she whispers. My heart swells with happiness. No one has ever looked at me the way London does. She’s not just telling me what I want to hear. I can tell she really does trust me.

“Can I touch you wherever I want? You can stop me at any point if you’re not comfortable.”

She nods her head eagerly, making me chuckle. I love how she looks right now. Her hair is a wild mess from her letting it air dry, but also from the number of times she’s run her fingers

through it. Her cheeks are flushed and her lips are puffy from kissing me.

I wish I could snap a photo of how she looks right now. I'd keep it hidden from anyone else because this look is just for me. I guarantee I'd stare at it every night though.

Sucking her nipple into my mouth again, I swirl my tongue around her bud as I move my right hand lower. My left is cupping her ass and helping her rub herself in a consistent rhythm. I slip my right hand under the waistband of her yoga pants and her panties. London freezes and I instantly release her nipple and turn my attention to her.

“You can stop me at any time, baby. Do you want me to stop now?” I don't move a muscle as I wait for her to answer... Well, I try not to. My dick has a mind of its own at this point.

“No, I want more,” she whispers breathlessly. “Keep going.”

I slide my hand lower and swipe my finger through her wetness. London jumps at the sensation and I chuckle. I know no one else has ever touched her like this. Hell, I'm not even sure if she's touched herself. Her body image issues were so consuming she might not have.

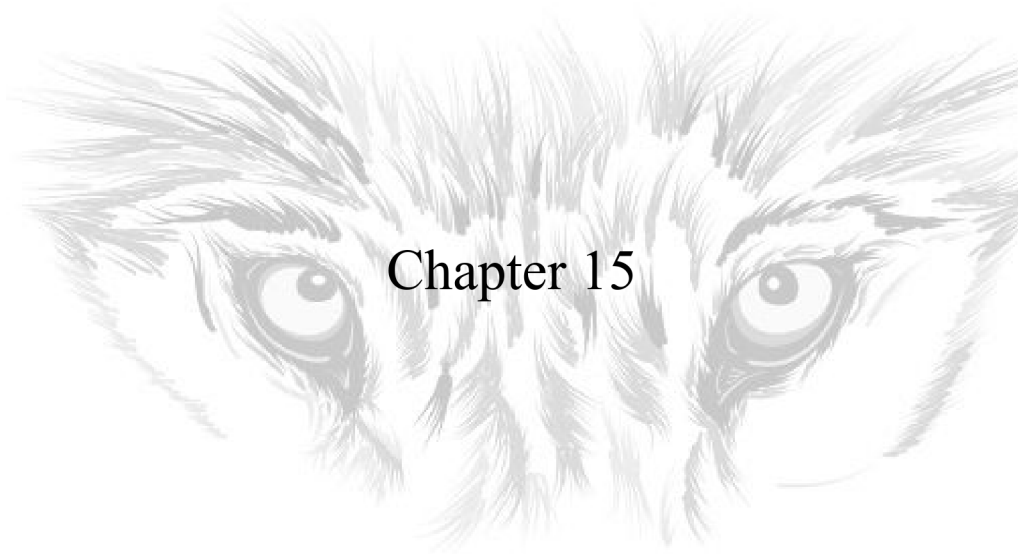
I grip her ass a little tighter to hold her in place and move my finger slowly up and down her slit. She whimpers each time I rub against her clit. I love every noise that comes from her. I wish I could record her so I could watch her time and time again.

“Connor,” she whimpers over and over again. I’ve never been so addicted to hearing someone say my name.

“You’re right there, baby. You just need to let go and fall over the edge,” I murmur right before I latch onto her nipple and pinch her gently. I swirl my finger over her clit and she bucks against me. I move my hand from her breast to her head and cradle it in my palm. I lead her to my shoulder so she’s quieter. “You can bite my shoulder and moan into my neck, but you need to be a little quieter or someone’s going to come check on us.”

As soon as she has her mouth pressed against my neck, I pinch her nipple again and swirl my finger faster and faster against her clit. She’s as wet as can be and it’s not going to take much for her to cum. I slip one finger further and run it over her opening. She gasps and this time bites onto my shoulder. She rocks against my hand and soon she’s tensing in my arms as she finds her release and tumbles into ecstasy. I release her nipple and grab her ass, helping her keep the same rhythm she was moving at. I don’t want the pleasure to stop until she’s ridden out her orgasm.

I grunt as I lose control and find my own release. I could only hold on for so long, but with how she’s moaning, whimpering, and panting in my ear, there was no way for me to last any longer. The sad thing is, this dry humping session was the most erotic thing I’ve ever experienced. I have a feeling that has everything to do with the woman riding my hand and nothing to do with what we did.



Chapter 15



London

Connor lets out a low grunt as I continue rocking myself against his hand. I've touched myself before, but it never felt like this. Having his lips on me made me want to straddle his cock and feel him deep inside of me.

I know he's waiting for me to make the move for that to happen, and I want to, just not yet.

I slow my movements until I stop completely. Connor leans back against his headboard and tries to catch his breath. I didn't realize how close he was until it was too late. I kinda feel bad that he was doing so much to make me feel good and I've barely even touched him at all.

"That was the sexiest thing I've ever seen," he murmurs softly as his eyes fall shut.

"Really?" I watch him, trying to figure out if he's lying. I could brush it off and act like I don't believe him, but Connor's never lied to me. I don't know why he'd start now.

“Yes. You’re absolutely addicting.” He slips his hand from my pants and lifts his fingers to his mouth. He sucks on his index and middle finger, letting out a groan. “You taste so good.”

I don’t really know how to respond to that. I glance down at his cock and see it bob in his pants.

“Did you?” I motion to it.

“Yeah, I was trying not to, but you were way too erotic for me to control myself. Now, it’s going to be a bitch to get cleaned up. I need to change too.”

“I’ll be right back,” I whisper as I fix my shirt, then climb off of him.

I go into Connor’s ensuite bathroom and clean myself up before I grab a washcloth and wet it with warm water. I stand next to Connor’s bed and place the wash cloth on his nightstand then reach for the waistband of his sweats.

“What are you doing, London?” He asks carefully.

“I’m helping you clean up.”

“I can do it. It’s ok.”

“What if I want to?” I nibble on my bottom lip and peek up at him through my lashes.

“Ok.” He lifts his hips and lets me drag his sweats down his legs.

I swallow hard when his cock pops out and I think about what it would feel like to have him inside of me. I want my

first time to be with Connor. I don't trust anyone else.

Carefully washing him off, I glide my fingers up and down his length and he hisses at the contact.

“You're killing me, baby.”

“Maybe I could make you feel good?”

“You already have. Right now, I just want to cuddle with you. Could you just grab me a pair of boxers?”

I nod and quickly grab them for him. After I've helped him slide them on, I strip off my leggings. My panties are soaked and I'm not going to be comfortable in them. I quickly change and when I'm done, I find Connor staring at me intently.

“This hip needs to heal faster so I can do the things I want to do to you.” He lets out a sigh and shakes his head.

I chuckle as I slip under the covers with him. I only have on my panties and tank top, but I'm comfortable with Connor. He only has on a pair of boxers so his warm body is pressed against me, making me drift off to sleep quickly.

“It's time to wake up, sleepy head.” Connor kisses my neck softly.

“Mmm, do we have to?”

“Yup. Piper just texted me and told me we have five minutes to get downstairs for dinner. Fernando made your favorite.”

“What?” I perk up at the thought. That man is an amazing cook. I have no doubt that every ounce of those five pounds I gained are because of his cooking.

“He made breakfast for dinner. Waffles, pancakes, eggs, hash browns, every type of meat you can think of, and toast. You are getting a buffet, baby.”

“Did you have anything to do with this?” I peek up at him.

“Of course. I texted him when you fell asleep.” He flashes me a sheepish grin.

“And that’s why you’re the best boyfriend ever.” I slip my hand around his neck and pull him down for a kiss.

“Good. Let’s get up. I still need to get some clothes on. Mine seem to have disappeared.”

“Stay in bed. I’ll help you.”

I climb off the mattress and quickly get dressed before grabbing Connor some clothes. Helping him get his feet through his sweats, I get him steady on his feet so he can pull them up the rest of the way. He slides his shirt over his head then intertwines our fingers and leads me downstairs.

“That was the fastest I’ve gotten dressed since I got injured. Can I just hire you to be my personal dresser and undresser?” He flashes me a devilish smile and I playfully swat at his chest.

“Stop it. Someone’s going to hear you,” I murmur.

“Do you regret anything we did?” He asks softly, his voice full of vulnerability.

“No. Maybe we could do more soon.” I peek up at him, not at all used to talking about this with other people.

“Like after dinner?” Connor wiggles his brows.

“I guess we’ll see.”

I’m beginning to love being around Connor’s family.

Everyone is so nice and welcoming. Lauren’s the sweetest woman and James is so happy and cheerful. I’m glad Connor has such an amazing set of parents.

Piper and Grayson haven’t been here as much lately. Connor says sometimes they stay at Grayson’s house more if Mac and Hadley are going to be there. I almost want to ask if we can go hang out with them too, but I like having my time alone with Connor.

“Hey, can we talk for a little bit?” Connor brushes his thumb back and forth over the back of my hand and stares into my eyes.

“Sure. What do you want to talk about?”

“Brian.”

“Ok...” I trail off, unsure of where this conversation is going. Brian’s still a difficult subject for me, but I’ll have to face this issue sooner or later.

“He’s been texting me since we last saw him.”

“That was over a week ago.” My brows pull together into a frown.

“Yes. He’s been asking questions and trying his hardest to learn more about you. He was discharged from the hospital two days ago and has been staying at home by himself. Apparently, he won’t let Jess or Steve help him.”

“But he’s going to need help!”

“Not really. I mean he still has his leg in a cast, but the rest of his physical injuries are pretty minor.”

“Oh.” I sit completely still and stare at the blank TV. I don’t know what else to say.

“He wants to see you, London. I told him I’d talk to you and I wouldn’t push you to do anything you don’t want to do.”

“What do you think?”

“I think you should do it. We could invite him here and that way if it becomes too much you can retreat to our room, or we can go to him and leave whenever you’re ready. I was thinking of asking Fernando to make something special for us and we have dinner with him.”

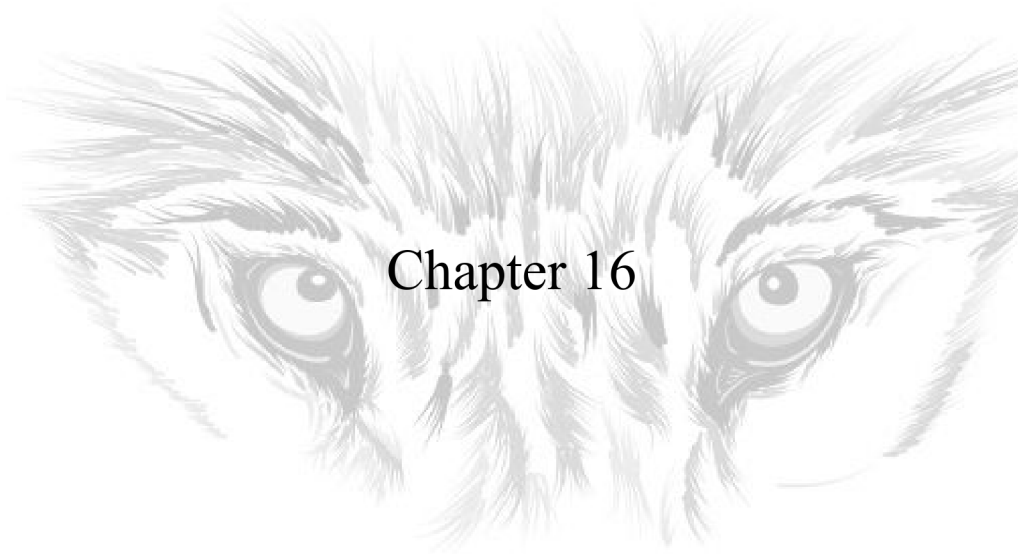
Connor’s quiet as he waits for me to process what he’s saying. I’m not sure what I want to do. I don’t particularly want to see Brian, but I know I can’t ignore him forever. Things aren’t going to magically resolve where we’re concerned.

“I’d rather go to him. If we invited him here for dinner it would be awkward with your family around.”

“Sweetheart, all I’d have to do is ask them to go out and give us some time alone with Brian. They’d happily agree. It’s whatever you want.”

“Then could we stay here? I’m not sure I can handle going home. I think it’s going to be too hard with the memories that house reminds me of.”

“That’s what I was worried about. Let me reach out to Brian and I’ll talk to my dad. We’ll work everything out. You don’t need to worry about anything.”



Chapter 16



Connor

London's pacing around the living room like she's going crazy. She's a nervous mess about seeing Brian again and it's killing me. I just want her to be happy and I don't really care what I have to do to make that happen.

"Lon, stop it. You're going to wear a hole in the floor."

She glares at me, making me chuckle. I love how comfortable she's gotten with me over the past week. We haven't taken our physical relationship any further, but I think she wants to. I'm just waiting for the green light from her before we do anything else.

The door to the garage opens and I can hear Roger chatting quietly with someone. I knew Brian couldn't drive, so I told him Roger would pick him up and take him home. I want to make this as easy on everyone involved as possible.

London's frozen in place as she waits for Brian to appear. When he does, she sucks in a sharp breath and stares at him. Gone is the hospital gown and in its place are sweat pants and

a tee shirt. He's dressed just like I am because with the cast, I'm sure he can't wear anything else.

Brian's scrapes and bruises have healed and he almost looks back to normal. I just wish his brain would heal and he could remember London again.

"Hey, Brian. Welcome to my home." I stand and shake his hand.

"Thank you. This place is amazing." He glances around the house, taking it all in.

"Do you want to sit in here, or go straight to the table? I know what a bitch it can be to get up and down." I motion to his leg.

"Uh, do you mind going to the table? After dinner we can sit on the couches." He's uncomfortable and I can't blame him.

He wants to form a new relationship with London so badly, but she keeps rejecting him. I understand where she's coming from, but I also see Brian's side. I think they need to find some common ground if they ever want to repair their relationship.

"Not at all." I stand and take London's hand in mine. She's been silent this entire time, but she needs to start talking sooner or later.

As we take our seats, Fernando places our dinner on the table. Everything looks delicious. London told Fernando what Brian's favorite meal is and he promised to make it.

"Good evening. Tonight, we have... I want to think of a fancy way to say this, but let's be honest, it's basically chicken

nuggets, mac and cheese, and broccoli. There's a carrot cake in the fridge for dessert. Would you like me to stay to serve that, Connor?"

"No. You can leave for the night. Thank you, Fernando."

I never used to like Fernando and I definitely treated him like shit. Since I returned from Sandywood, we've gotten closer. He's taught me how to make a few things and I've found I actually enjoy cooking. I don't know how good I am at it, but I like cooking.

"And London, there's some chocolate chip cookie bars I left in the secret spot for you." Fernando winks at London, making her laugh.

"Thank you, Fernando. You're the best!"

Fernando leaves and the room is blanketed in silence. I'm sure I'm going to be carrying the conversation tonight.

"How does it feel to be home?" I ask Brian as I dish some food onto my plate and London's.

"It's been challenging. I definitely didn't think it would be this difficult to take care of myself, but I'm managing. It's not like I have a whole lot of things that need to get done. Mostly it's just boring."

We're quiet as everyone begins eating. It's not a tension filled quiet, but everyone is thinking about things. I want to see if London and Brian will talk if I don't say anything.

"I still don't have my memory back, but I'm starting to remember bits and pieces. It's like a blurry memory." Brian

watches London carefully.

“What do you mean?” She asks slowly and cautiously.

“Well, I keep picturing this little girl with a stuffed animal duck. She keeps coming into my room and telling me she’s scared. She asks to sleep with me and when I tell her she can, she snuggles into my side and drifts off to sleep pretty fast. That was you, wasn’t it?”

Brian’s desperate to remember London. To make some sort of connection to her. I can only imagine how hard this is for both of them.

“Yes. I used to sleep over at your house some weekends. I’d have nightmares and beg you to let me sleep in your bed.”

“Did I ever live in the same house as you?”

“No. You were twenty when I was born. You were already living by yourself and I believe you were in the police academy. But you always wanted to hang out with me. You’d invite me over almost every weekend. Mom and Dad used to joke and say they had a permanent babysitter.” London smiles sweetly at the memory.

“Did you stay with Jess and Steve?”

“Sometimes, but not often. I’ve never been particularly close to Jess. It was always you I wanted to hang out with.” London lifts her shoulder in a shrug.

“Did... Did we used to lay on my bed and eat ice cream while we watched movies?” Brian asks slowly.

He almost doesn't seem to want to know the answer. He's hoping his memories are coming back, but he's terrified they're not.

"Every Friday night," London whispers. "We'd put peanut butter, marshmallows, and Nutella on our ice cream. Sometimes we'd add peanuts and way too much whipped cream. Other times we'd just squirt whipped cream right into our mouths as we laughed at whatever movie was playing."

"Did you do gymnastics?" There's a little bit of excitement in Brian's voice as his eyes light up.

"Yes. Since I was three years old. I stopped about a year ago when I got too sick to compete." London's gaze drops to her hands and her cheeks stain a bright red.

"I, uh, Jess brought my computer to the hospital so I could look at the photos and videos I had saved on there. I've been fighting to get my memories back. To get you back," he whispers softly. Brian shakes his head like he's trying to get back on topic. "There were so many videos of you. I think we had a place for you to practice set up in the basement, but I couldn't go down the stairs to check. You were amazing, London."

"I almost made it to the Olympics." She smiles shyly. "And then my whole world came crashing down around me."

Brian looks at me, silently asking if I told her about us talking. I'm not stupid enough to keep things from London. I've seen too many relationships crash and burn because

someone was trying to hide something. I don't plan on us being one of those.

"I told Brian about Sandywood. We talked about your condition and what you struggle with." I place my hand on London's thigh and squeeze gently.

I've realized she doesn't like to talk about her body dysmorphia, but she's comfortable with you talking about her struggle or her condition. I make sure to avoid words like anorexia, bulimia, and body dysmorphia so she doesn't get upset. She knows what her issues are, she doesn't need me to constantly vocalize them.

"Sweetheart, you look so much healthier now. I'm so proud of how well you're doing," Brian says softly. "Is there anything I can be doing to help?"

London peeks up at me and holds my gaze for a few moments. I think I know what she's asking, but she needs to make this call herself.

"I'm not moving in with Jess. Do you think you could deal with her?" London's brows furrow as she waits for Brian to answer her.

"Lon, I already did. I told her there was no way you were staying with her after what I saw in the hospital. She was being a bitch and I didn't think it would be good for you to be with her."

"You already handled it?" London's bottom lip trembles and I know it won't be long before the first tear slips down her

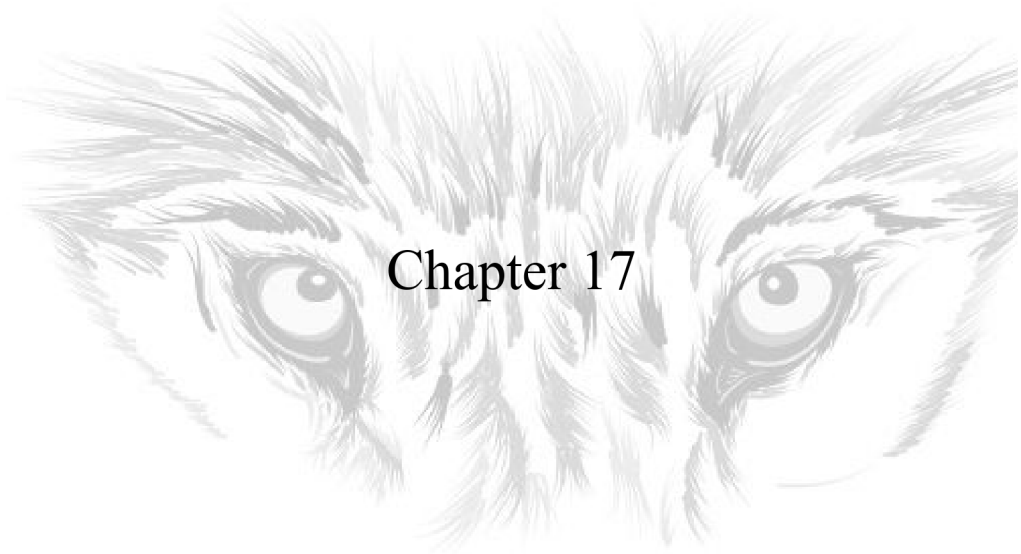
cheek.

“Come here, baby.” I pull her chair closer and place my arm around her shoulders. She buries her face in my chest as her body shudders with her tears.

“Did I do something wrong?” Brian glances back and forth between the two of us.

“No, you did exactly what she needed. She’s crying because you picked up on all of that even though you don’t remember her. You’re making the right decisions for her through all of this.” I run my hand up and down her back, trying to calm her down.

“I’m really trying. And I’m not going to stop until every single memory comes back, or I make enough new ones that I know everything about you again.” Brian’s eyes water and he looks like he’s barely able to keep his emotions in check. “I’m not going to make you come home, London. I realize home is more than a location. It’s being around the people who mean the most to you. The ones who have your back and can help you through life. If I’m not that anymore, I’ll accept that and work on getting back to that point. If you feel better being here with Connor, I’m not going to fight it. I want what’s best for you... but maybe we can continue to have dinner together once a week or something like that.”



Chapter 17



London

“Why are you trying so hard?” I ask softly.

My chest aches each time he says something that reminds me of the Brian I’ve known my entire life. Of the man who’s stuck up for me more times than I can count. The one I knew I’d always have at my back. He didn’t just support me through everything, if I wasn’t strong enough to fight, he’d sweep me into his arms and fight for me until I was ready to go back to battle for myself.

“Do you want me to stop?” Brian’s brows crinkle together.

“No. It’s not that. It’s just... I’m a stranger to you. Why are you putting so much time and effort into remembering me? You could easily walk away. Hell, your life would be easier if you did. I wouldn’t be a burden to you anymore. You’d be free to do whatever you wanted.”

“Every single picture I have in my house has you in them. Every room had something girly sprinkled throughout it. And we turned the basement into a gymnastics area... Clearly, you

meant a lot to me, London. I'm not going to walk away from that. I never asked for an easy life, I just want one full of love, family, and friends. Deep down, I think you're all of those things to me."

"Why don't we move into the living room so we can be more comfortable?" Connor stands and holds a hand out to me. I love how comfortable he is around Brian and how he isn't afraid to take the lead on things.

I grasp Connor's hand and stand up. When Brian struggles to get out of his chair and onto his feet, I rush to his side to help.

"Thanks. I forget how difficult things are with this stupid cast," he grumbles under his breath.

I help Brian move into the living room. He takes a spot on one end of the couch and Connor takes one on the other end. I slowly lower myself to the center cushion and into Connor's outstretched arm.

"So... what's going on with the two of you?" Brian motions to us.

"We're dating." Connor wraps his arm around me and presses a soft kiss to my temple.

"And you're treating my sister right?" Brian arches a brow.

"Of course. She's the most important thing in my life."

"He's been skipping his pain medicine so he can be there for me because he's an idiot like that." I roll my eyes.

“Yeah... Can I get the rundown on why I shot you?” Brian grips the back of his neck and frowns.

“Steve didn’t tell you?” Connor asks.

“Nah. Apparently, Steve and Jess have decided I’m supposed to be kept in the dark about the last eighteen years of my life. We’re not really on good terms right now.” He scrubs a hand down his face and lets out a long sigh.

“I’m sorry, I can’t imagine how hard this is for you,” I say softly, reaching out a hand to him. Brian takes it and intertwines our fingers, just like he always did.

“I’ll be fine. I’m more worried about you. Connor said you just got home from Sandywood. I know it can’t be easy to readjust to life and then all of this happens. You started a new school on top of all of it.” Brian shakes his head. “You need support now more than ever and I’m letting you down time and time again.”

“It’s ok. I’m doing really well. Connor’s been amazing for me and if I stay in this house much longer, I’m going to have to worry about buying bigger clothes. Fernando is a much better cook than you ever were.” I flash him a grin and giggle when he frowns at me.

“Did we used to make pizza from scratch?”

“Yeah. You loved pizza and you liked to get creative with it. Sometimes we had taco pizza. You’d throw everything you’d normally eat in a taco onto a pizza crust and instead of using sauce, you’d mix up cream cheese and sour cream. It was

really good. We've done breakfast pizza too. Basically, any meal we could throw on a pizza crust, we did."

"London," Brian pauses and sucks in a deep breath. He almost seems nervous over what he's about to say. "Were you happy living with me?"

"Yes," I whisper as tears fill my eyes once again. "I don't think I could've been happier anywhere else. You were the perfect brother and guardian. I loved every second of my life with you."

"Would you consider coming home someday?" He stares down at his hands and it breaks my heart. "Connor can stay over too. I just... I'd like you home with me. I'm wondering if it would help me remember more."

I nod my head, but Brian isn't looking at me. I think he's too scared I'm going to say no. Connor kisses my head, being the silent strength I always need.

"We can definitely stay at your house. How about we come over on Friday after school and spend the night? If things go well, maybe we can spend the whole weekend with you."

"How are you feeling about everything?" Connor whispers as I curl up against his side.

"I'm hanging in there. It's hard, but Brian's making things a little bit easier. You're my rock though. I'm almost positive I'd be back at Sandywood if it weren't for you." I peek up at him, wanting him to know how serious I am.

“I’ll always be here for you, Lon. I love you.” He kisses my forehead, making me feel loved and cherished.

“You love me?” I push up on my elbow so I can peer down at him. I’ve been dreaming of hearing those three little words fall from his lips for a while, but I never thought it would actually happen. Connor could have anyone he wants.

“Of course. I think I fell in love with you the first time we sat in the gazebo and I read to you.”

“I love you too,” I whisper as I lean down and cover his lips with my own.

Our kiss starts out slow and sweet, but it quickly builds into something else. Connor lets out a deep groan as I straddle his hips, never removing my mouth from his.

He slips his hands under my tank top and grips my waist firmly. We haven’t done more than kiss since the first time he touched me, and I want more.

Sitting up straight, I strip off my tank top and toss it towards the bottom of the bed. I nibble on my bottom lip as Connor’s attention sweeps over my body. I try to ignore the little doubts and insecurities that keep popping up in my head. This is Connor. I can trust him. I know he loves me for me.

“You are so fucking beautiful, baby.” He skims his hands up my ribs and over my breasts. The second he brushes over my nipples, need spreads through my body.

I drag his shirt up and he grins as he sits up enough for me to tug the fabric off of him. As soon as he’s lying back against

the pillow, I kiss him again. I swear I'm never going to get enough of him.

Connor rolls my nipple between his fingers as he thrusts his tongue into my mouth. I rock my hips against him, feeling him harden beneath me.

“You're so sexy. I love how you don't hold back,” he groans as I swivel my hips.

He gently guides me onto my back and in the next second he's hovering over me. He's been doing better at taking his medicine and his thigh hasn't been hurting as much. He kisses down my neck and over the swell of my breasts. My breaths come faster and faster as Connor touches me and memories of last time we did this come to mind.

He sucks my nipple into his mouth and rolls his tongue over my sensitive flesh. I run my fingers through his hair and tug on the ends gently. My back arches off of the mattress as he bites down and a shot of lust goes straight to my core.

“Connor, I want you,” I whimper.

He releases my nipple and moves to my other breast, repeating the same moves. Then he's kissing down my ribs and over my stomach. He peeks up at me as he grips the waistband of my pants. He's asking for permission and I love that about him. I know if I shake my head, he's going to respect me. But I don't want that. I want everything with him.

As soon as I nod my head and lift my hips, Connor drags the fabric down my thighs, taking my panties with it. He sits back

and takes in my body. This is the first time he's seen me completely naked and the way he's staring at me makes me feel beautiful, loved, and desired.

"I don't know what I did to deserve you, but I'm so glad I did it," he murmurs so quietly I almost don't hear him.

Connor grazes his fingers up my thigh and through my slit. I'm sure I'm already wet for him. I'm more than turned on.

I reach for his pants, but Connor stops me. He watches me carefully and I know he's wondering if I'm really ready for this.

"Sweetheart, are you sure? Once we take this step there's no going back. You'll be mine and only mine."

"I'm positive." I lock my eyes on his and this time when I tug at his pants, he doesn't stop me from taking them off completely.

I push on his shoulders until he moves onto his back again. I know he shouldn't be on top. I'll constantly be worried about his thigh and if he's in pain. I quickly straddle his hips and rub against his hard cock. He groans as he massages my breasts. His hands are so big he's able to cover them entirely.

"I need to grab a condom." He reaches into the drawer and grabs a small foil packet.

"Can I do it?" I ask softly. I don't know what I'm doing, but I want to learn.

"I'd fucking love it."

Connor watches me as I open the packet and pull out the circle of rubber. I swirl the tip of my finger over his head and he tightens his hold on my hips as he groans again. Slowly rolling the condom down his hard shaft, I watch how he reacts the entire time. Every noise he makes, every move, turns me on more and more.

As soon as it's fully in place, I sit up and position myself over him. Connor holds onto my hips and helps me lower myself slowly. There's a slight pain and I suck in a sharp breath. He freezes and his brows furrow the smallest amount as he stares at me.

"Are you ok?" He cups my cheek and brushes his thumb over my swollen lips.

"Yeah, just a little bit of pain."

"It will go away, sweetheart, I promise. If you want to stop, we can. I just need you to talk to me."

"No." I shake my head. "I want this. I want you."

I lower myself a little bit more and give my body time to adjust to him. I keep doing this over and over again until he's fully inside of me. He lets out a long hiss as I shift my knee into a different position.

"Am I hurting you?" I slide my hands up his chest and lean down to kiss him.

"No, you're just really tight. You feel amazing and it's been a really long time for me."

I keep my eyes locked on his as I slowly lift my hips and drop down again. He clenches his jaw and swallows hard. He looks like he's barely hanging on.

"I love you, Connor," I murmur against his neck as I do it again.

"Fuck," he groans. "I love you too, London... As soon as you're comfortable, I need you to move faster. I'm not going to last long at all. I hate this. I don't want this to end quickly."

"That just means we can go for more than one round tonight." I swivel my hips and find a good rhythm. I move faster and faster, chasing the orgasm that's building inside of me.

I love how he lets me be in charge, even though I don't know what I'm doing. I love that he's letting me figure this out on my own and enjoying every second of it.

I grab his wrists and move him until his hands are cupping my breasts again. I let my head fall back as my pleasure builds. Connor's attention is focused solely on me. He pinches and rolls my nipples between his fingers. He watches how I respond and changes what he does to make me feel the best.

"Connor, I'm so close," I whimper.

"Me too, baby. So fucking close," he growls.

Connor lifts his head off of the pillow and sucks my nipple into his mouth as he grips my hips and helps me move up and down his hard cock faster. His growl vibrates against my sensitive skin as he tumbles over the edge. I can feel him

release himself into the condom and it makes my own orgasm rocket through me.

“Fuck! oh, fuck. That feels so good,” I moan breathlessly.

I keep riding him until my body stops tightening around him and I can catch my breath. Connor envelopes me in his arms and tugs me down until I’m lying on top of his chest. We stay like that until long after our breathing returns to normal and our heartbeats aren’t so erratic. He runs his fingers up and down my back the entire time, soothing me to the point where I almost fall asleep.

“London,” he murmurs in a sleepy voice.

“Yeah?” I lift my head and rest my chin on his chest.

“You’re mine now, baby. I’m not letting you go.”

“Good. I don’t want you to.”

We’re quiet for a few more minutes before Connor traces his index finger along my bottom lip. I nip at his finger and he chuckles.

“Let’s go take a shower, baby.”

“Together?” I squeak.

“I’m thinking of the environment.” He smirks. “But if you don’t want to shower with me, then no. You know I’d never expect you to do something you didn’t want to do.” He kisses the crown of my head and carefully lifts me off of him.

After grabbing a tissue and dealing with the condom, he climbs out of bed. It takes him a little bit longer and I’m sure

his thigh is hurting. I stare at his ass as he moves around his room. He disappears into the bathroom and a second later I hear the water turn on.

I nibble on my bottom lip for a whole two seconds before I grab something out of his nightstand and follow him into the bathroom. Connor's already standing under the warm spray of water. I slip in behind him and wrap my arms around his waist. I press soft kisses down the center of his back.

He spins in my arms and wipes the water out of his eyes. The grin that spreads across his lips makes me more than happy that I decided to join him, and that I grabbed the second foil packet out of his nightstand.

"What are you doing in here, baby?" He squirts some body wash into his hands and starts lathering up my body.

"Well, I was thinking about all of the fun we could have in the shower." I swipe some of the body wash off of my breasts and slip my hand between us. I stroke his cock up and down, grinning when he lets out a low growl and begins getting hard.

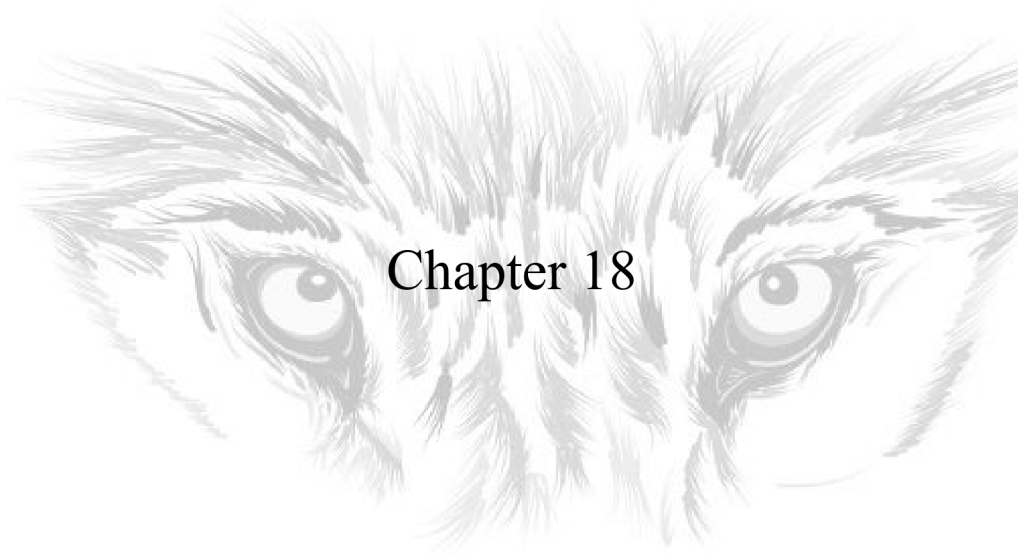
"You're going to be the death of me."

Connor quickly washes off my body, but I take a little bit longer as I tease him. When all the soap is off of me, he pins my body against the cold tile wall. I gasp at the shocking change in temperature and he plunges his tongue into my mouth.

As he continues his assault on my mouth, he grabs the condom out of my hand and quickly slips it on. He spins me

around and places my hands on the wall, showing me how to bend forward. Holding onto my ass with one hand, he lines himself up at my entrance and slowly pushes inside of me from behind. My mouth falls open as he fills me again and Connor lets his hands roam over my body. He massages me and moves until he gets to my breasts.

“You’re like a fucking drug that I can’t beat. But I think I’m happy being an addict forever,” he growls as he pulls out all the way, then thrusts back inside of me in one movement.



Chapter 18



Connor

Holy shit. I used to make fun of Grayson and Mac for being whipped by Piper and Hadley, but now I completely understand it. If London asked me to dress up as a unicorn and walk the halls of Prescott High, I'd probably do it with a smile on my face.

After our shower last night, I climbed into bed and slept the best I have in years with London's head on my chest and her naked body pressed against mine. I promised myself, I'm going to make it my mission to make this a nightly thing for the rest of my life.

I take my seat behind London in Math and sigh. I'm so done with being in school. I can't wait for the year to be over so I can focus on the rest of my life. I've already been accepted into the college of my choice, but I'm willing to go wherever London wants to. I don't want us to be apart.

I have to meet with the school counselor in ten minutes and it's the last thing I want to do. I can't stand Mrs. Gowen. She's an absolute joke of a woman and she's too stupid to realize

what's going on around her. All she cares about is feeling like she has power when she really doesn't.

"Babe, I need to go to the counselor in a few minutes. Will you be ok staying here by yourself, or do you want to come with me?" I lean forward and speak quiet enough that no one else will hear me.

"I'm ok here. Nothing's going to happen." London grins.

"I know, I just hate not being with you."

"You'll be back before this class is even over." She shakes her head, but her smile is lighting up her face.

"Fine, but don't let any boys talk to you." I point a stern finger in her direction, making her laugh.

"I promise." She tilts her head back and lets me press a soft kiss to her lips before I walk out of class.

"So, how are you doing?" Mrs. Gowen folds her hands on her lap and watches me carefully.

Part of the conditions for me coming back to school at Prescott High is that I have to meet with Mrs. Gowen at least once a month to check in. I think it's one of the stupidest things in the world because Mrs. Gowen doesn't know anything going on in this school, but I do it to keep peace.

"I'm fine." I fight to keep my hands in my lap and to not fold them across my chest. I'm trying my hardest to appear like I'm innocent and not seem like I'm trying to hide something.

There's nothing for me to hide, but it's my default response to someone asking me questions. I need to remember I'm not trying to defend myself anymore. There's no war I need to prepare for. Everything is fine.

"Are you doing anything to keep yourself busy? You don't have football anymore; you need something else to focus your energy on." She taps her pen against her notepad. The noise drives me crazy. I take a deep breath and count to ten. I can't get angry. This is the one person who could get me kicked out of this school forever. I can't allow that to happen now that London's here.

"I have a new girlfriend. I'm spending a lot of time with her and helping her through some personal things." I smile as I think about London and how much my life has changed since I met her.

"What sort of personal things?" Mrs. Gowen tilts her head to the side and watches me.

"Personal ones. Things that aren't anyone else's business." I fight to keep the growl out of my voice.

Who the fuck does she think she is? She has no right to ask about London or what's going on in her life. She didn't do anything to give Mrs. Gowen a reason to poke her big nose in London's business.

"It's my business if I say it is. I'm the one who decides if you're in a mental space to stay in this school. Depending on what's going on in your girlfriend's life, you could easily revert back to old habits." She folds her arms over her chest

and narrows her gaze. She has me just where she wants me and she knows it.

“Her brothers were in a car accident and are healing from their injuries. I’m helping her through that.” This time I don’t even try to stop myself from getting defensive. I mirror her position and fold my arms over my chest. If she keeps pushing, I’ll be going to Principal Bell’s office over this.

“Maybe I’ll call her down here and have a conversation with her.”

“I never said my girlfriend went to school here. You have no clue who she is.”

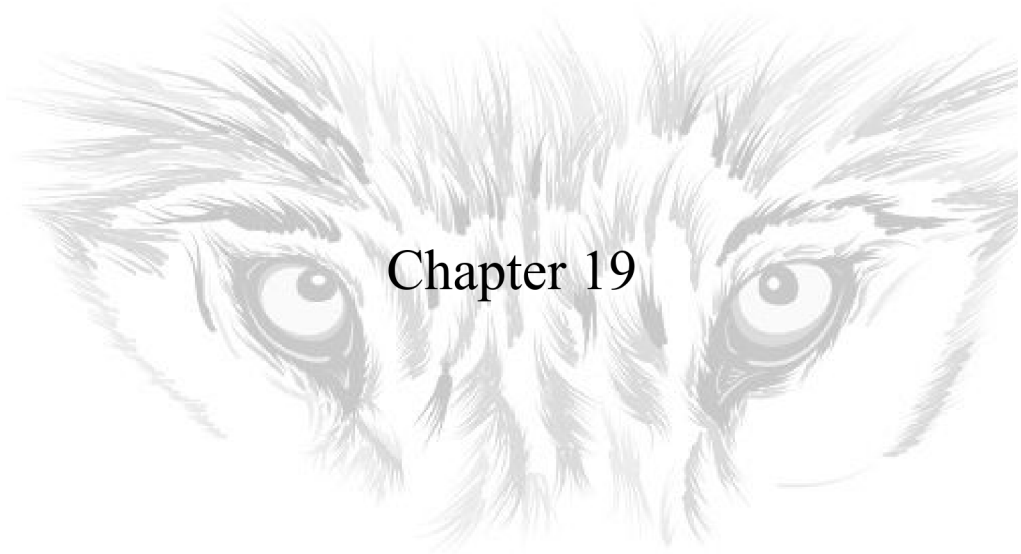
“Well, considering I’ve seen a blonde girl attached to your hip recently and you never allowed anyone to get that close to you before, I’m willing to bet it’s her. I’m also willing to bet there’s more issues going on than just her brothers being in a car accident.” Gowen arches a brow and a smug smirk spreads over her lips.

“Do you remember how I used to do whatever it took to destroy those around me? I was able to hide this monster who lives inside of me and make everyone believe I was fine? Yeah, he’s still in here.” I pat my chest three times. “It’s like being an addict. I’m learning to control my urges, but they’re still there. I’m doing well, but I guarantee if someone were to go after the woman I love, I won’t be able to control myself. What I did to Piper would seem like child’s play in comparison to what I’d do to someone threatening to hurt my girl. Do you understand me?”

“Connor,” she hisses. “You will not threaten me.”

“I’m not the one threatening anyone, you are. If you speak to her, I guarantee you’ll do more harm than good. Stay away from my girl or I’ll make it my mission to get you fired.”

I stand to my full height and loom over her. I don’t really care if she’s not done with our conversation or not. No matter what, I’ll be speaking to Principal Bell. I’m going to make sure London is protected from this nasty woman and her power issues.



Chapter 19



London

Grabbing my gym uniform out of my locker, I hesitate to get changed in front of everyone. I don't even know the last time I had to get undressed in front of anyone. At my old school, Brian had worked out an agreement with the principal. Because I worked out so much with gymnastics, I didn't need to take physical education at all. I was able to fill that time in my schedule with other classes, and I could leave early to get to gymnastics early.

"It's ok, London. We're both here with you," Hadley says softly. She strips her shirt over her head and I can't help but look at her body. She's toned and muscular, looking every bit of what my personal goal is for my own body.

"I wish I looked like you," I groan.

"We'll help you. You're definitely closer than when you moved in with us." Piper smiles at me. She's been such a huge support for me recently.

Ever since I told Piper and Hadley about my struggles, they've gone out of their way to help me. We've had some 'girls' nights' that ended up being crashed by the boys, but none of us minded. We love our guys and are always happy to be with them.

"I blame Fernando." I chuckle as I pull my shirt over my head and toss it in my locker.

"Oh, Fernando's to blame for more than a few of the pounds on my ass." Piper sighs.

"Oh, please! Grayson loves your ass. I swear if he could build a shrine to it, he would." Hadley giggles. "Last night when you bent over to pick up something, I thought his tongue was going to fall out of his mouth."

"Well, no one's tongue is going to be falling out when they look at the new girl," someone mutters under their breath and a bunch of girls giggle.

"Excuse me?" Hadley whirls around to glare at them as my cheeks heat and I quickly slip my gym shirt over my head.

"No one is talking to you, Hadley," one of the girls sneers.

"I don't really give a fuck who you're talking to, Sarah. I care about the shit falling from your lips." Hadley folds her arms over her chest and pops out her hip. She looks so pissed off.

"It's fine, Hads. Just ignore them and let's get out to the gym before we get in trouble," I say softly.

It's bad enough to hear these girls talk about me like this, it's even more embarrassing having my closest friends around to witness it.

"Aww, and she's a goody two shoes too," someone coos.

"Watch yourself, Cherie," Piper growls.

"What do you care? We aren't talking about you. We're talking about the skeleton." She motions to me with disgust.

My stomach rolls and I feel like I'm going to be sick. I'm so tired of dealing with girls like her. Ones who go out of their way to put others down without a care in the world. I've dealt with more than my fair share of Cherie's in my life and I'm tired of it.

"Oh, bitch, you just made a massive mistake," Hadley chuckles and shakes her head.

In the next second, Hadley smashes her fist into Cherie's nose. She stumbles back and Piper grabs her by the hair to keep her standing. Hadley punches her two more times before Piper lets her fall to the ground. Cherie's friends gape at them and stare down at Cherie in horror.

"Does anyone else want to be a bitch and make unnecessary comments?" Hadley wipes her bloody hand on her shirt and grimaces.

They all stare at her in alarm and shake their heads.

"You bitch! I think you broke my nose!" Cherie shrieks from the dirty floor. Her jaw and left eye are already starting to

swell and blood is trickling out of her nose and all over her white sports bra.

“Aww, and I heard your daddy just lost his job. I wonder who’s going to pay for your nose job now.” Hadley sticks out her bottom lip in a pout.

“Maybe you could sleep with the surgeon. That’s how you scored those tits, isn’t it?” Piper tilts her head to the side and watches her carefully.

“Fuck you!” Cherie shrieks again.

“No, fuck you for thinking you’re so much better than everyone else. You and your bitch squad have gone out of your way to make our lives horrible.” Piper folds her arms over her chest and levels them all with a glare that could rival Grayson’s.

“We’re tired of you putting down other people because you’re a miserable, worthless human being. You owe London an apology.” Hadley gets right in Cherie’s face and I swear the girl looks like she’s going to piss herself.

“Hads, Piper, it’s fine. I don’t care.” I try my hardest to end this. I don’t even want an apology from her. It’s going to be insincere anyway. She doesn’t care if she hurt me.

“It’s not fine. She tried to do the same shit to me and Hadley. She’s just jealous of us.” Piper doesn’t take her eyes off of the crying girl on the floor. The rest of her friends are still watching us carefully.

“Why would she be jealous of me?” I ask softly.

“Because she’s been trying to get in one of the Kings’ pants for years.” Hadley rolls her eyes. “She’s never come close. They avoid her like the plague.”

“The Kings?” I frown, trying to figure out what they’re talking about.

“Grayson, Mac, and Connor are referred to as the King’s of Prescott High. No one fucks with them. That’s why these bitches have stayed away from you. They knew they couldn’t touch you as long as Connor was nearby. They took the first chance they had to attack. Apparently, they’re too stupid to realize we’ve spent enough time with the Kings. They’re no bullshit approach has rubbed off on us and we’re tired of dealing with them.”

“Connor doesn’t want you,” Cherie hisses as she wipes away more blood from her face.

“Well, he clearly doesn’t want you!” Piper lets out a deep laugh. “How many times have you attempted to throw yourself at him? I mean, fuck, it’s gotta be close to five dozen times since I moved here. He loves to talk about how desperate you are. How he wouldn’t touch you if you were the last woman on Earth.”

“And you think he’s going to want her?” She points a shaky finger in my direction.

Her comment hits a little too close to home for comfort. I ask myself almost daily what Connor can possibly see in me. What do I have that these girls don’t? I always come up empty.

“I’m positive he does.” Hadley grins. “He told me this morning how much he loves her and how lucky he was to find someone as amazing as London. I’m fairly certain he’s found the woman he wants to spend the rest of his life with.”

“Over my dead body!” Cherie growls. She looks ridiculous. She’s crumpled on the floor with her hair sticking up in every direction. I’m pretty sure there’s a clump of her hair on the floor next to her. Mascara and eyeliner are streaked down her cheeks and blood down her chin. She’s only wearing a sports bra and a thong. I grimace at the thought of having my ass cheeks touching the dirty floor.

“What’s going on in here, girls?” The physical education teacher stomps into the locker room with a frown on her face.

“They attacked me!” Cherie wails and points at us.

“Miss Young, what happened?” The teacher sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose.

“I punched her.” Hadley shrugs like it isn’t a big deal.
“Three times.”

The teacher’s head snaps up and she stares at Hadley in shock. From what Connor’s told me, Hadley never causes trouble and keeps her nose clean.

“Care to share why you punched her three times?”

“Sure. She was harassing London and bullying her. I’m tired of Cherie getting away with shit, so I channeled my inner Grayson and just went with it.” She flashes the teacher an innocent smile.

“Were you involved, Piper?”

“I just held her up when she started to sway.” Piper blinks like she did nothing wrong.

“She grabbed me by the hair and only let go after Hadley was done!” Cherie growls.

“London?” She rolls her eyes and turns her attention to me. “Did you have anything to do with this?”

“I mean, she insulted me and called me a skeleton. I didn’t lift a finger though,” I whisper.

“Ok, ladies. I want all of you out of this locker room in the next sixty seconds. I’ll be taking Cherie to the school nurse and then I’ll be back to deal with the rest of you.” When no one makes a move to finish getting changed, she lets out a sigh. “I said get changed,” she barks before marching to her office and slamming her door shut.

The locker room is silent as we each finish getting dressed into our gym clothes. Hadley and Piper keep an eye on Cherie and her bitch squad the entire time. As soon as I’m ready, they each flank my side and walk out to the gym.

Connor’s mid conversation with a bunch of guys, but the second he sees me, his brows crease and he walks away without saying anything else.

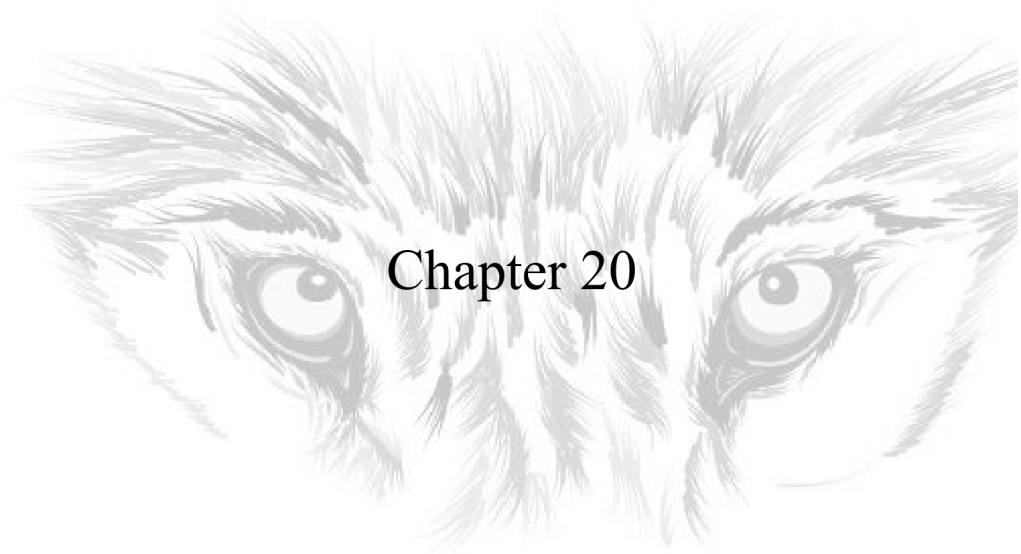
“What’s going on?” He looks me over before glancing at Hadley and Piper. They both have blood on their shirts and Connor’s brows furrow even more.

“Baby, what the hell happened?” Mac sweeps Hadley into his arms. “Sometimes I swear you’re acting more and more like your brother every day.”

“Piper? Whose blood is that?” Grayson wraps an arm around her waist and pulls her into him.

“Cherie’s,” she singsongs.

“Motherfucker,” Connor grumbles under his breath.



Chapter 20



Connor

As soon as I saw London exit the locker room, I knew something had happened. She wore the same expression after Jess made her feelings known about London in the hospital.

Though her eyes were glassy, she refused to let those tears come. She's hurting and I can only imagine what happened.

"What did she do?" Grayson growls. He despises Cherie with a passion and doesn't trust her at all.

She was always someone I could use to carry out my plans. She has no problem getting her hands dirty, and she'd do just about anything for money, or my attention.

"She was insulting London so I punched her."

"Hads, what the fuck? You really are turning into your brother." Mac pulls back and stares down at his girlfriend in horror.

"She broke her nose." Piper snorts with laughter and shakes her head.

“London,” I whisper her name and as soon as she blinks up at me, I slip my hand into hers. I tug her out of the gym and into the hallway. I need to talk to her with no one around.

“Talk to me, sweetheart.”

I press her against the wall and place a hand on either side of her head. I want her to feel like we have privacy, even though I know we don't. Not really. Anyone could walk out here at any second.

“What did she say, London?” I place my knuckles under her chin and tilt it up until she meets my gaze.

“I don't want to talk about it. It's embarrassing,” she whispers softly.

“Baby, you shouldn't let anything she says to you make you feel bad about yourself. She's always thrived on putting other people down and she'll stop at nothing to do it... She's a lot like how I was before I went to Sandywood,” I whisper my confession. “Now, that's something to be embarrassed about.”

London places her hand on my chest and I know it's her way of silently reminding me I'm no longer that person. At one point in time, I was though. And it's still a hard pill to swallow.

“She told me no man would drool over me and that I look like a skeleton.” She drops her gaze to my chest and this time I let her. This was hard enough for her to admit, I'm not going to push her to maintain eye contact with me while she does it.

“You know that isn’t true.” I slip my arm around her waist and tug her against my body. I want her to feel how hard I am and know it’s her that does this to me. “Do you feel that? That’s what you do to me, London. You make my cock jump to attention every time you’re around. If it were more socially acceptable, I probably would stand here and stare at you all day with my mouth hanging open and drool dripping down my chin.”

She giggles and the sound warms my heart. I love hearing her laugh almost as much as I love when she moans my name.

“You don’t look like a skeleton, babe. We’re still working on you gaining weight, but you’re more than skin and bones. She’s just jealous. For as long as I’ve known Cherie, she’s been on a diet and trying to lose weight.”

“Are you embarrassed by me?” She traces a little design over my heart and refuses to glance up at me.

“London Jenson,” I growl, making her gaze snap to me. “Don’t you ever fucking ask me that again. There isn’t a cell in my body that’s embarrassed by you. I’m more than proud to call you my girlfriend. The only reason I don’t just sit at lunch and make out with you is because I didn’t think you’d like people watching us kiss like that. Hell, for all I care, I’ll strip down and let you ride my cock while we eat lunch.”

“Connor!” Her eyes widen to a comical level.

“I’m not hiding my feelings for you because I’m embarrassed by you, Lon. I was doing it so less people were in

your business and I figured you didn't want the unnecessary attention."

"I love you," she whispers as she stands on her tiptoes and presses a soft kiss to my lips.

"I love you too." I slide my hands down to her thighs and lift her into the air. Pressing her back against the concrete wall, I pin her between my chest and the wall. My thighs ache with the extra weight, but I don't care. I'll ignore it if I can make her feel better.

She tilts her head to the side and deepens our kiss. She slips her tongue past my lips and rolls it over mine. I'm lost in her kiss as her hands rake through my hair, tearing a moan out of me. I don't notice the door to the gym opening and closing. I don't notice the footsteps or the person clearing their throat. I'm too consumed by the girl I love.

"Mr. Ward, would you mind putting Miss Jenson down before you get her pregnant?" Principal Bell sighs.

"I guess if I have to," I grumble under my breath and let London slide down my body. I make sure she feels how hard I am as she goes. She needs to see how much I desire her and her body.

I stare at London for a few more seconds and watch her cheeks heat with embarrassment. I'm sure the last thing she wanted was for Principal Bell to catch us making out with her pinned against the wall. However, I couldn't give a shit less.

“What do you need, Mr. Bell?” I let out a long sigh and tear my attention away from London so I can face him. My hand curls around her hip and I pull her into my side.

“I wanted to check on London and see how she’s doing.” His gaze drops to my girl and she stiffens in my arms. “I’m sorry about what happened today, London. We’re taking steps to make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

“What’s going to happen to Hadley and Piper? Are they going to get in trouble?” Her voice is barely above a whisper. I love how quickly she’s become close to Hadley and Piper. She needs people like them in her life. She really needs more people she can count on and know they have her back.

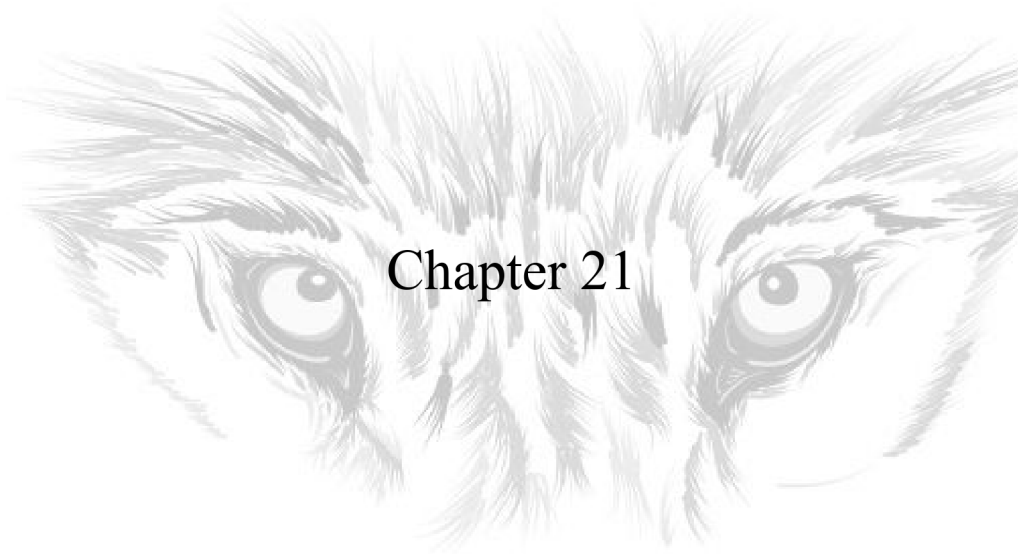
“Technically they should be expelled.”

“No! That’s not fair! Cherie’s the one that kept attacking me, they were just defending me!”

“London, I’m not expelling them. They’ll have in school detention for one day. I’m well aware of how Cherie acts, but she’s normally able to hide it and most of the girls are too afraid to stand up to her or report her. She knows she can get away with things because I can’t prove anything... until now. She’s going to be held accountable for her actions. Piper and Hadley have given me details of other students Cherie has attacked verbally or physically. I’m going to take care of it. I just wanted to make sure you’re ok. Is there anything I can do for you?” Mr. Bell’s features soften. He’s contacted Dad a few times about London. He wanted to know if there was anything he could do to make school a little easier for her.

“Could we leave?” I speak up for the first time. “I think London needs to get out of here. I know we have three more classes before school’s over, but could we head out early?”

“I think that’s a great idea. Go get changed and then you can leave. I’ll have my secretary let your teachers know.” Mr. Bell nods his head in agreement before he turns his attention back to London. “I’m sorry Cherie came anywhere near you. If you need anything at all, just ask. I hope both of you have a good weekend.”



Chapter 21



London

Standing outside of Brian's house, I take a deep breath and blow it out slowly. Technically this is my house too, but it doesn't feel like home anymore. Connor's room feels like home.

"Do you think we should come back later? Brian's not expecting us until later."

"I already texted him and let him know we'd be early. He was really excited." Connor places his hand on my lower back and applies light pressure.

Putting one foot in front of the other, I close the distance to the front door. I lift my hand to knock, and freeze. Am I supposed to knock? This is still my home, but it's not. Why does this need to be so awkward?

Before I'm able to make a decision, the door opens and I'm face to face with Brian. A big smile spreads over his face and he tugs me into a tight hug.

“London, I’m so glad you’re here. We have so much to talk about!”

He ushers us into the house and drops down onto his favorite chair in the living room. It’s an ugly, old, leather recliner that used to be Dad’s. After Dad died, Brian refused to get rid of it. He says he’s going to get it reupholstered one day, but I’m not holding my breath.

“How was school?” He’s sitting on the edge of his seat, more than excited.

“It wasn’t great.” Connor doesn’t bother sugar coating it. I love that about him. He’s real. Raw.

“Oh... what happened?” Brian’s eyebrows tug together as his gaze ping pongs between the two of us.

“It’s not important.” I wave him off. He’s the last person I want to discuss this with. “What do we have to talk about?”

“Well... this morning when I was making breakfast, I opened the cabinet to grab a plate. I saw your pink plate and I remembered it. I remembered when we were at the store and you saw it. You begged me to get it for you. I remember you eating every meal on that plate for weeks.”

“Ok.” I glance at Connor, unsure why Brian’s so excited about this. “I feel like I’m missing something...” I trail off as my brows tug together.

“London, I remembered,” Brian says softly. “I remember everything. I remember when you fell on your tenth birthday when we went ice skating. You knocked both of us over and

we were laughing so hard we couldn't get up. We didn't even notice you cut your arm until after we got into the car."

I open my mouth to respond but nothing comes out. I don't even know what to say.

"After Mom and Dad died, I remember moving in here so you didn't have to move. I wanted to make sure your life was upset as little as possible. I didn't care about anything else except taking care of you. For the first two months, you slept in my bed every night. I remember going to gymnastic meets with you and arranging my work schedule around yours."

"You remember all of that?" I whisper like an idiot. He has to remember, no one else knew about these things.

Tears spring to my eyes and I swallow around the lump in my throat. I've been praying for Brian to regain his memories for weeks on end, but I honestly didn't think it would happen. I was getting used to the idea of him being a stranger.

"I remember taking you to Sandywood... Fuck, London. As these memories flooded my brain, I literally fell to my knees and cried. It was like it was happening all over again. This intense feeling of helplessness washed over me and I felt like I failed you even more than I did when I lost my memory."

"Then why were you so happy when I got here?" I frown at him.

"Because, having my memories back means that I can be there for you and support you. I won't be a stressor in your life, but someone who can help when you need it. You'll have

a comfortable and safe home to come to at the end of a long day. Everything goes back to how it should be, Lon.” A grin takes over his face and makes me smile.

I love how excited he is to deal with a teenager struggling with body image issues and an eating disorder. I don’t know many people who would want to deal with this.

Brian could’ve walked away from me after he woke up with amnesia. He could’ve gone on to live his life for himself and no one would’ve faulted him for it. But he didn’t. He fought to remember me. To get my life back to how it used to be because he didn’t want me to feel alone.

“Thank you,” I whisper as the tears filling my eyes finally begin flowing down my cheeks. Connor wraps his arm around me and presses a soft kiss to my head.

“Does that mean she can’t stay with me anymore?” Connor narrows his gaze on Brian.

“I’m not standing between the two of you.” He holds up his hands and chuckles. “I know how much you’ve helped her over the last several weeks and I’d be stupid to tell you to stay away from London. She needs more people in her corner.”

“So, he can still stay over tonight?” I peek up at him.

“Yes... but I don’t want to hear any moaning coming from your room. So bury your face in a pillow, turn on music, or just don’t screw while you’re here.” Brian grimaces.

“Brian!” I gasp. I can’t believe he just said that! Sure, Connor and I have had sex multiple times, but that doesn’t

mean Brian knows. Nor should he comment about it.

“Oh, please! I was eighteen once upon a time.” He waves his hand through the air. “I can tell just by looking at his face that he’s... done stuff to you.”

“You know what?” I stand and stare down at Connor. “I think I want to live at your house. Brian’s all better, he’ll be fine by himself. C’mon, let’s go.”

“Baby,” Connor chuckles and shakes his head. “Sit down.” He grips my hips and tugs me onto his lap. He secures his arms around my waist so I can’t get up again.

“This is unfair! Let me go!”

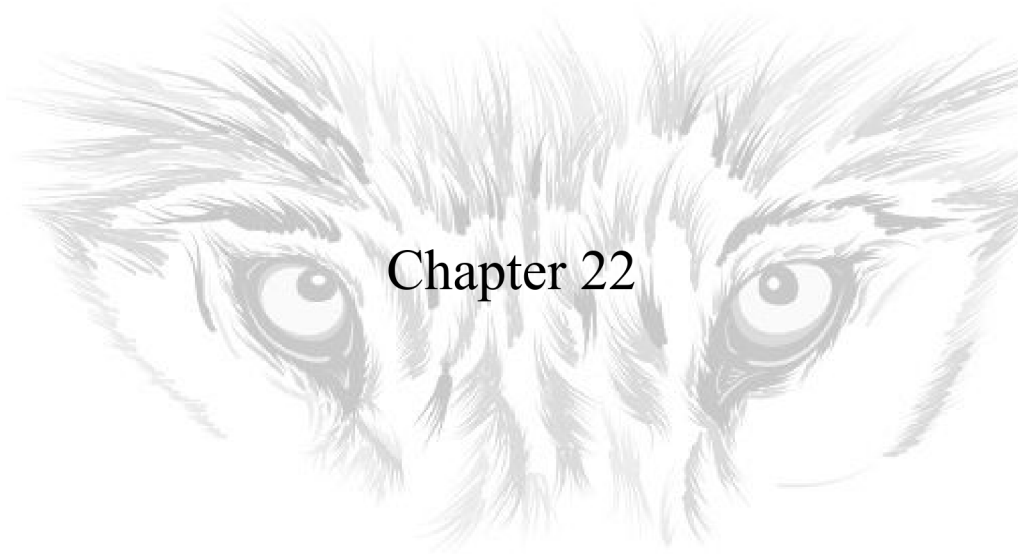
“Well, that’s not fair. You know I’d never go against what you say, but I don’t think you actually want me to let you go. You’re putting me in a weird position and your brother’s silently judging me right now. Do you really want me to let you go?”

Instead of answering him, I fold my arms over my chest and lean back against him. Connor’s chest shakes with laughter and Brian snorts from his chair.

“I have to say, you treat my sister well. I was a little worried when I got my memories back.” Brian ducks his head, looking a little embarrassed.

“I’m not that man anymore. I’m well aware of who I once was, but I’ll never be him again... unless someone tries to hurt London. Then the old me will seem like an innocent little puppy.”

“I think I like him.” Brian grins.



Chapter 22



Connor

Two Months Later

“I can’t believe we’re graduating today!” Hadley bounces on her toes and claps her hands.

“This year has felt like the longest year of my life.” Grayson runs a hand through his hair, messing up the strands Piper just tamed.

“Excuse me?” Piper plants her hands on her hips and glares at him.

“Oh, stop it, baby. I’m not saying it’s because of you.” Grayson rolls his eyes. “So much has happened. I feel like our lives were flipped upside down time and time again.”

“It feels like we’re almost free.” Mac sighs and wraps his arm around Hadley’s waist. There’s a big sparkly ring on her left ring finger.

Mac proposed to her last weekend and she jumped at the chance to say yes. I’m a little surprised at how happy Mr. Young was. Apparently, he has a big soft spot for Mac.

Mac and Grayson have been offered full ride scholarships to almost every division one school. They all want them on their football teams. The two of them refused to separate and they'd never go without their girls. I'm fairly certain the girls are picking which school they prefer, then Mac and Grayson are following them.

Grayson's planning on proposing to Piper this weekend. He showed me the ring he picked out and Piper's going to love it. Lauren started sobbing when Grayson asked for her permission. She's loved him like a son since she found out what he was doing to protect Piper from me.

"You're awfully quiet, sweetheart. Are you ok?" Mac eyes London.

"Yeah, I'm going to miss all of you next year. I've gotten so used to you being around." London gives them a watery smile.

I grin, knowing exactly what Hadley's going to say. They've been waiting to break the news and London's going to be so happy.

"Well, we decided on a college," Piper begins.

"We're going to Southern Cal!" Hadley bounces on her toes and claps her hands.

Ever since Cherie went after London in the girl's locker room, she's been closer to Hadley and Piper. The three of them are practically joined at the hip now.

"Really?" London's wide eyes sweep over our group.

“We knew you didn’t want to go too far away from Brian and we didn’t want to split up.” Piper wraps London in a hug.

“Are you guys sure you want to go to Southern Cal?” London peeks over Piper’s shoulder at Grayson and Mac.

“We want our girls to be happy.” Grayson shrugs.

“Plus, someone needs to make sure Connor doesn’t become a prick again.” Mac grins at me.

“Oh, fuck off.” I flip him the middle finger and he chuckles.

“You need people in your corner. Both of you. We’re those people. We can’t leave you behind... Though when we get drafted, you’re going to have to follow us.” Mac clamps a hand down on my shoulder.

“Yeah, we’ll follow you to college, you follow us through the pros.” Grayson drapes his arm over my shoulder from the other side.

“Oh my gosh! The three of you look so cute right now!” Piper squeals. “Stay still so I can get a picture.”

She snaps two dozen pictures before we’re allowed to move away from each other. That turns into everyone taking pictures together and my phone vibrating with dozens of new messages as they share all of the images.

“So, what’s going to happen if you get drafted to different teams?” I arch a brow.

I know we all like to believe our dreams are going to come true, but the chances of Grayson and Mac making it onto the

same team are slim.

“Oh, trust me, we’ll get on the same team. We’re making it clear from the beginning. I’ll call every team in the United States and warn them we’re a package deal. I can’t ask my wife to choose between me and Grayson. It would hurt Grayson’s feelings when she wears my jersey instead of his.”

“Who says she won’t pick me?” Grayson folds his arms across his chest and glares at Mac.

“C’mon, Gray. I’m the one keeping her happy, loved, and satisfied.” He wiggles his brows, making Grayson’s jaw clench.

“I swear I’m going to beat the shit out of you.”

“You keep saying that, yet my handsome face hasn’t seen your fist yet.” Mac pats him on the back as Grayson clenches his fists at his sides.

“Gray, don’t do it! I’ll cry if you punch my fiancé right before we graduate!” Hadley places herself between the two of them.

“How are you doing?” I turn my attention away from the idiots I consider my friends and to the woman who holds my heart in the palm of her hands.

“I’m good.” She grins up at me. “I’m excited to see what the future has in store for us.”

“In a few weeks, we’ll be moving into our apartment.” I loop my arms around her waist and rest them right below her ass.

“We will be.” She grips the back of my neck and plays with my short hair.

“We’ll get to sleep in the same bed and walk around naked whenever we want.”

“Hmm, I like the sound of that.”

“Someday soon, I’m going to drop down on one knee and beg you to marry me.” I kiss the tip of her nose.

“How soon? Tomorrow sounds good,” she murmurs.

“Brian would kill me. He already warned me we have to be together for a year before I propose or he’s going to take a bat to my knee.” I roll my eyes. Brian and I have grown really close over the past few months. He’s like the older brother I’ve always wanted. “He’s so dramatic.”

“Seven more months?”

“Six and a half more months, baby.”

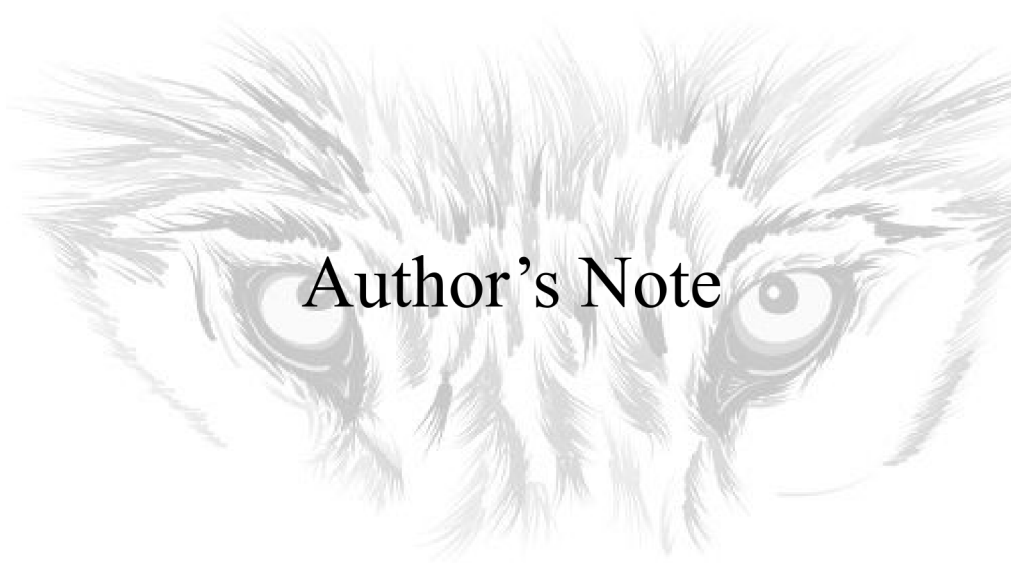
“Alright, ladies and gentlemen! It’s time to take your seats so graduation can begin.” Mr. Bell stands in front of the whole class and tries his hardest to get our attention. “Now, people!” He claps his hands even louder.

“Are you ready to get this over with so we can begin the rest of our lives?” I hold out my arm to London.

“I can’t wait.” She grins as she wraps her hand around my bicep and lets me escort her to her seat.

We’re closing the chapter on this portion of our lives, but I can’t wait to see what the next one holds. I know with London

on my arm and our friends and family by our sides, it's going to be amazing.



Author's Note

Thank you so much for reading If I Stumble. Connor was another one of those characters that I never planned on giving a story to. If I Surrender was supposed to be a standalone, but I fell in love with Mac. Then in Mac's book, I knew Connor could redeem himself and I couldn't stand the thought of not giving him that opportunity.

While Prescott high is over, you're going to see the characters later on in other series. After all, you're never really finished hearing from a Kristin MacQueen character. They'll pop up again somewhere!

~Kristin

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