



Catching

KYE

FLORIDA EAST UNIVERSITY BOOK THREE
HANNAH GRAY

Catching
KYE

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playlist



Listen to the music that inspired *Catching Kye* on [Spotify](#).

“Numb” by Marshmello and Khalid

“I Like You (A Happier Song)” by Post Malone and Doja Cat

“broken” by lovelytheband

“Whiskey to My Soul” by Roan Ash

“Someone You Loved” by Lewis Capaldi

“Overpass Graffiti” by Ed Sheeran

“Devil Doesn’t Bargain” by Alec Benjamin

“Something in the Orange” by Zach Bryan

“Chasin’ You” by Morgan Wallen

“uh oh” by Tate McRae

“Forget Me” by Lewis Capaldi

“stupid” by Tate McRae

“Over” by Jimmy Eat World

prologue



KYE

AGE NINE

I head into school, walking through the hallway with a smirk on my face.

At the age of nine, life here at Brayton School is pretty good to me. I have my best friends, and I have football.

“Hey, Aidan. Did you ask your mom if you could come stay the night tomorrow?” I jog to catch my friends in the hallway, keeping my backpack slung over my shoulder. “You too, Jake. Did you?”

Jake shrugs his shoulders. “Sorry, man. Mom said no.”

I swing my gaze to Aidan. One friend is better than none. “What about you, A? You coming over or what? We can take our fishing poles out to that creek at the back of my house. I bet my mom would take us to the beach in the morning to catch some waves.” I watch in anticipation. I’ve been looking forward to this sleepover all week.

He looks down at his feet, scuffling them around softly. “My parents said I can’t.” He sounds like he feels bad. But that doesn’t help how it makes me feel. Still sucks. “But good news is, they said you can come over to my place instead.”

“But why can’t you come to my house?” I hold one arm out. “You always have some excuse.”

I’ve been best friends with these two since kindergarten, and they’ve been to my house maybe twice. I haven’t thought about it much—till now. It’s not like their houses aren’t fun. But, heck, so is mine.

“I don’t know, dude. Just can’t.” He hikes his backpack further on his shoulder. “But you coming to my house or what? I’m sure my mom would take us to the beach too.”

I sigh. “No, not this time. I’ll catch you guys later.”

I turn to leave, taking a few steps down the hall. A hall that carries way

too much noise.

“Oh, man. I feel real bad,” Aidan whispers loudly. “My parents just don’t want me going over there. They love Kye and all. But ... something about his house, they don’t like it.”

“Me too,” Jake replies, and I hear the frown in his tone. “I heard my parents talking in the other room. They said Mr. Collins is a junkie. And that they feel bad for Kye but don’t feel safe with me going to his house.”

“What’s a junkie?” Aidan sounds confused. “Is that when someone eats a lot of junk?”

“Heck if I know. It’s gotta be much worse than that. Whatever it is, it can’t be good.”

As I get farther away, my stomach twists into a knot. I have no idea what this name is they are calling my dad. But I’m going to find out.

My dad’s a good guy. And a good dad to my sister, Bria, and me. Tells us he loves us, gives us everything we need, and is good to our mom too. My parents have been together since they were thirteen. If this thing they’re calling him is bad, they must have him mistaken for someone else.

I just know it.

So, why does my stomach feel so bad?



“Kye, you’ve barely touched your food,” my mom says from across the table. “You usually love chicken potpie. Everything all right?”

I continue to poke my fork at the food in front of me, not hungry enough to take a bite. She’s right though; her chicken potpie is the best. And usually, I’d be having seconds by now.

“Where’s Dad?” I say, dropping the utensil on the plate.

It’s not unusual for him to be gone for dinner because he’s always working late. But right now—now more than ever—I can’t help but question his absence.

Her face freezes the slightest, and her smile becomes strained. “He, uh, had to run down to the shop for a bit—that’s all.” She gives my hand a pat.

“I’m sure he’ll be home soon, baby. Just be patient.”

“I miss Dad,” Bria says, sighing. “I haven’t seen him much lately.”

My sister is two years older than me. She’s also a pain in my side because all my friends talk about how hot she is. *Barf*. It’s just plain annoying. Not to mention, rude.

“I know you do, baby.” Mom smiles at her from across the table. “I’m sure he’ll be home soon though.”

My dad and his brother, Chris, run my grandfather’s autobody shop in town. My grandfather passed away last year and left it to them. There’s some tension between my dad and Chris, but I’m not sure what it is. All I know is, we don’t go over to Chris’s house much anymore.

“Mom, what’s a junkie?” I blurt the words out, unable to stop myself. “Is it bad? It sounds bad.”

Her own fork drops onto her ceramic plate. Making a loud ting.

“What—what did you just say?” Her mouth hangs open.

“What is a junkie?” I repeat the words. Unsure of how she didn’t hear me. “It’s bad, isn’t it? That’s why my friends’ moms and dads don’t let them come to my house. Because Dad is one of those things?”

“One of what things?” my dad says, walking through the door and closing it behind him.

He looks tired tonight, but that’s nothing new. He always looks tired. Being as scrawny as he is doesn’t help. I’ve been told my entire life that I look like him. But I’m not going to be built like him. I’ve got to play football.

“A jun—” I start to answer, but my mom stops me with a harsh glare.

“Nothing, hon. How was the shop?” She pushes herself out of her chair, shooting me another look before walking into the kitchen and bringing back an extra plate. “You hungry?” she asks, sitting back down. “You must be.”

“It looks amazing, babe. And you sure look pretty.” He pecks her forehead and reaches over and messes up my hair. “But I’m not hungry. Just going to go shower and get ready for bed.”

His head looks sweaty, so he must have been working, like Mom said.

What else would make him sweaty?

“Dad, just sit down. I’ve barely even seen you today.” My sister sulks. “I wanted to play Yahtzee tonight. Remember, I asked you last night if we could, and you said tomorrow? We haven’t played it in years.”

He kneels down next to her. His hair is messy, and now that I look closer, he doesn’t look like he’s been working. His hands aren’t dirty, and his clothes

aren't either. He looks like he's been running or something.

"Princess, I promise you, we will play Yahtzee tomorrow night. Be prepared to have your butt whooped though." He tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. "You're the best girl, you know that, right? When did you get so dang grown-up and pretty?"

Her lips turn up the smallest bit before he stands.

As he walks away, I realize that this—him missing dinner—happens almost every night. Sometimes, he shows up while we're eating but doesn't eat with us, and sometimes, he comes home long after I've gone to sleep. I never actually know where he is. But today, I learned something ...

It's my dad's fault that my friends aren't allowed to come over.

And it's his fault that I can't go fishing with my friends behind our house this weekend too.

one



WINTER

Plugging my nose, I tear a piece of paper from my notebook and use it to pick up the contents of whatever is in the plastic bag that smells like ass, which was so graciously left in my locker. I can't complain too much. They had gone a few days without bothering me ... so here I thought, maybe they'd forgotten me.

Yeah, right. I couldn't be that lucky.

Tossing it in the trash can behind me, I slam my locker shut, making a mental note to bring a can of Lysol tomorrow to get the stench out.

I rush down the hall, hoping to get to my next class without having any run-ins with Nathan. Or Kalyani. Or really anybody actually.

Lord, why does Sunrise Academy have to have so many assholes in it?

Nathan Buck is Sunrise Academy's most loved jock. Abs of steel. Beautiful smile. Fancy truck. Oh, and star of the football team.

He's also my ex. My lying, cheating douchebag of an ex.

And Kalyani ... well, she's my ex too. *Ex-best friend.*

I should also mention they've dubbed me the school's outcast, like the Island of Misfit Toys. Only what sucks for me is I have to actually still be here. In this shithole. Between them and their minions, my locker gets plenty of attention. Mean notes, condoms galore that fall out onto the floor, rotten food, and even a dead mouse once. You name it, they've done it.

It wasn't always this way. I used to be in with *that* crowd.

After I moved from Alabama to Florida sophomore year, Nathan and I instantly started dating. Jocks had never been my type. Then again, I didn't really have a type at that point. I still don't, I suppose.

He didn't exactly sweep me off my feet, but my dad had just died. My moral compass was shattered, one could say. Making me not really give a shit about what happened or why.

After close to two and a half years of dating, I never thought he would be the type to cheat. And even after he dumped me four months ago, only to come back a few weeks later, I still didn't think he was that way.

I also didn't know his penis had been in my best friend's vagina at this point in time.

But then I found out that not only had he cheated on me, but that he'd also told her—along with others—intimate things about our relationship, and he was holding a sex tape—which I hadn't known he'd made—over my head. I was horrified. Correction: I am horrified. But besides that, I also feel like a major moron. I claim to be this super-smart girl, yet I fell for the worst guy.

Once I found out the truth about him cheating on me, I dumped him. And when I did, he didn't take it so well. Since then, he's made it his life's mission to make my life a living hell during my time here at Sunrise Academy.

My brother, Beau, thinks he simply broke up with me. He thinks I'm upset and moping around because I'm nursing a broken heart. He has no idea that, in reality, Nathan and his posse are making the end of my high school career a walking freaking nightmare.

Not only am I too humiliated to tell Beau the truth, but I also know my brother would go after him—physically. And with Beau playing football at a D1 school and looking at the possibility of playing pro ball one day down the road, I don't need him getting his crazy ass in trouble over that toolbag.

Now, Nathan is dating Kalyani, and truthfully, they deserve each other. A dirtbag and a backstabbing slimeball. I grind my back teeth together, imagining them walking toward me in the hall, like they do almost every day. Hand in hand. Pretending like they are all Ryan Reynolds and Blake Lively. Yeah, right. He's no Ryan, and Kalyani sure as hell ain't no Blake.

He's a flaming bag of dog shit, and she's a ho. I said what I said.

What's worse is the fact that he was sleeping with both of us at the same time. Or that she'd come over to my house and he'd pick us up and take us for ice cream or to the mall. She'd rave about how lucky I was to have a guy like that.

Puke. Seriously, girl needs her eyes clawed out.

Before this all happened, I was far from an outcast. Though I certainly wasn't the cheerleader or most popular girl either. I've always been an introvert and, truthfully, a bit of a nerd. Somehow though, I landed our high school's most wanted guy. No one understood it. Myself included.

But Nathan was sweet and charming. I'd just lost my father, and I craved the attention of someone. Anything to just take my mind off the pain. And in a moment of weakness, the devil slithered his way into my life.

I'm almost to my classroom, closing the gap between the door and myself, when I hear Kalyani's high-pitched laugh getting closer. I pick up the pace, but it's no use because just as I almost reach the door to my classroom, the happy couple rounds the corner, holding hands.

He pulls her closer to him, smirking as he catches sight of me. He thinks I care that they're boning. I couldn't care less. I just wish I could burn his face off with laser eyes or something. That'd wipe that smirk off his face.

Darting my eyes to the floor, I cut in front of them and bolt inside the safety of a class neither of them is in, thankfully. I could start a fight, but what would be the point? I'm just counting down my days until I can get the hell out of here.

Just four more weeks of this place. Four. More. Weeks.

Beau might not know the whole truth, but when he saw me crying, he still wanted to whoop Nathan's ass. Now, I'm wondering why I didn't let him. This guy is the definition of a horse's ass.

All my firsts went to someone who was unworthy of them. A sacred gift, given to a man with a mask on, pretending to be someone he wasn't. Pretending to care, playing the part of loving me. But that was all it was. A part.

And in that moment of feeling so betrayed, so let down and alone, I decided something.

Never again would I date the most popular guy.

Never again would I date a jock.



KYE

My bed feels so good. All warm and cozy and shit. The boys and I agreed on working out a bit later than usual today. All of us needed a rest.

Dane's been mysteriously disappearing. Bama has suddenly gotten back into drag racing and has some weird tension with this chick he races against. I don't get it, but then again ... he's a hard dude to read.

In Bama's downtime, he's been getting tutored by his sister. Which would be fine and dandy, except she's really, *really* fucking hot. And that would also be all right, but he's forbidden me against so much as looking at her when she's around. And she's not exactly a girl you can't look at. She's hands down the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. And according to Bama, she also happens to be nursing a broken heart. Apparently, she's taking the breakup hard, and her ex is a super douchebag. It's clear that Bama is worried about her. And even though I hardly know her, I worry too.

I have something that could help her get over that toolbag. Except that would lead to Bama murdering me.

So, instead, I'll avoid her like the plague when she comes over to tutor him. Because when she's around, I can't help but act like a damn fifteen-year-old horndog, drooling in the corner.

I flip onto my side, burrowing my face further into the pillow. If I had it my way, I'd be in bed till damn near noon. After all, I don't have any classes until one o'clock.

My phone vibrates on my nightstand, and I ignore it. I don't give out my number to everybody. If it rings, that means it's either Dane, Bama, Coach, or ... my family.

As soon as the vibrating stops, I relax until it starts back up again.

"Damn it," I groan, snatching it up.

My sister's name flashes on the screen. She's relentless. No way will she stop calling.

"Bria," I say into the phone. "Could you not take the hint the first time I didn't answer?"

“Oh, I got the hint, little brother,” she tosses back. “I just didn’t care.”

Of course she doesn’t. She’s the most stubborn human being on the planet.

When I don’t respond, I hear her sigh.

“Look, I’m going home for dinner tonight. You should come.” There’s a short pause. “Mom said she’s called and texted, but you won’t answer.”

“And yet here you are, trying to relay the message.” I rest my head against the pillow, raking my hand through my hair. “Why do you want to fix things, Bria? Just leave me be.”

My sister spent her first two years of college in New York City. She loved it—I thought so anyway. Suddenly, she moved back to Florida, getting a place in between our parents’ house and Florida East. Now, she’s at the same campus as me, trying to shit all over my parade.

“Dad is doing good, Kye.” I can hear the frustration in her voice. “Give him a chance.”

“I feel like after, what? Say ... eighty-five chances, you should run out,” I say smugly. “Why do you waste your time? He won’t change. You’ll be left disappointed and crying to me about it when he falls off the wagon ... *again.*”

“He has changed!” she cries. “He’s put on some weight, and he’s much more present. Please, Kye. Come see for yourself. Mom is worried about you. She’s about two ignored phone calls away from showing up at your dorm.”

“Why is she worried about me?” I scowl. “I’m fucking fine. No, I’m actually perfect. For once in my life, I don’t have the baggage of our family pulling me down.” I let out a bitter laugh. “Well, at least I didn’t until you moved back and tried to play Dr. Phil.”

“He’s our dad!”

“And he’s an *addict*. One who can’t stay sober long enough to say so.” I sit up in bed. “I’m tired of this shit. I’m going to hang up now, and I’m really fucking hoping you won’t call me back.”

“Fuck you, you douchebag,” she spews.

“If putting up a boundary makes me a douchebag, so be it.” I throw the covers off, no longer able to relax. “Have a good family dinner, where you all sit and pretend everything is normal.”

“You selfish pri—” she starts to say, but I end the call.

My sister is a firecracker. She also is much more forgiving than I am.

A few months ago, my team lost the game that would have taken us to the

championship. That loss hurt, but it also freed up a lot of time in my schedule. Which isn't necessarily a good thing.

Time is not my friend.

Grabbing my shorts, I pull them on, knowing that without football right now, the only place I can go to clear my head is the beach.

Fuck it, I'm going surfing.

Two



WINTER

I head outside, bypassing my trusty white Jetta and walking toward the truck I drive whenever life gets crappy. It's fifty-fifty if it breaks down. But it smells like my dad, and it brings me back to the good old days when he was alive, so I take my chances of possibly walking home.

I turn the key to my father's truck, and it purrs, coming to life. I close my eyes for a moment, basking in it. He rebuilt this truck from barely a shell. It's gorgeous. And because my brother got all of Dad's racing things, this truck is all mine.

As I shift into drive, I pat the steering wheel. "Don't let me down today, baby. It's already been a shit week."

My little pep talk must work because as I pull out of the driveway, she rides like a million bucks.

"Good girl," I say like a complete nutjob. "Guess I'm not a terrible mechanic after all."

Usually, my brother does all the maintenance on our vehicles. But Dad taught me all the basics as a kid, so when I knew it needed a new fuel pump, I pulled it into our small garage and fixed it.

As I head toward town, I can't wipe the smile off of my face. The truck shows no signs of trouble, and in some weird way, I feel closer to my dad. Almost as if he were riding right next to me.

I drive past the gas station and continue on, turning the music up a little louder and rolling the window down, drawing in a deep breath of fresh air.

All seems well. Heck, if it keeps this up, maybe I can even drive it to school next week instead of the Jetta. And perhaps my dream of driving it to my prom—if I even go to it—might come true.

I clearly thought too soon because, suddenly, smoke starts pouring out from under the hood.

"Damn it," I mutter, pulling onto the side of the road. "And here I thought, you were going to be nice to me today."

Guess not.



KYE

After showering, I stroll back into my room and throw on some clothes.

Running my hands through my hair, I walk into the living room to find Dane sitting on the couch.

He's been in a weird mood the past few days. I think he was seeing some girl, but for some reason, he kept it a secret. And now, I think whatever they had is done. Leaving him grouchy as fuck.

"What's going on today?" I look around. "Where's Bam?"

"Fuck if I know," he mutters. "Probably went to see that chick from the racetrack that he claims to hate. Mila or whatever her name is."

I open a bottle of water and down it. "I've got to run to the store to get a few things. Want to come with me?"

"Nah, man." He waves his hand. "I've got a few things to take care of today. I'll catch you later."

He sounds depressed or some shit.

"You sure?" I narrow my eyes slightly. "Everything all right, brother?"

He nods. "Yeah, all good." Turning his attention back to the TV, he brushes me off completely.

And this right here is why I don't get into relationships. He's bent out of shape over a chick. Bama has been stressed over Mila. No, fucking thanks.

A hookup will wake up in the morning, maybe have a quickie, and then leave. Never planning to speak to you again or cause you to be an emotional, grumpy fucker. And guess what. It's awesome. Plus, one-night stands or fuck buddies don't ask to meet your parents or want to know your deepest, darkest secrets. They just want to get off. And getting chicks off is something I happen to be really, really fucking good at.

Sharing family secrets and details? Not so much.



Driving along, I'm only ten minutes from the store when I see an old Chevy truck on the side of the road with the hood popped and smoke rolling from it. I can't see the chick's face, but her ass looks good in her cutoff shorts as she leans down to inspect it.

I debate on whether I should stop. In today's world, for all I know, this chick could be a serial killer or some shit. She could Tase me, then throw me in her trunk or something too.

Then again, that might be fun.

"Fuck it," I mumble, turning my truck onto the side of the road. "Guess this can be today's good deed. Maybe it'll bring me some good luck."

Pushing the door open, I step out. "Need a hand?"

She jumps, bumping her head on the popped hood with a thud. "Jesus, you scared me!"

As she peeks around the truck, rubbing her head, I can't help but laugh. The universe has put the chick I've been trying to avoid right in my path.

"Kye." Winter smiles, looking flustered. "What are you doing here? I haven't even called Beau yet." She tilts her head and narrows her eyes. "Wait ... does he have a tracker on me or something? You know what? That is so Beau."

She's wearing a Willie Nelson T-shirt that's cut off on the bottom, making it jagged, paired with her Daisy Dukes and tanned legs. My mouth waters at the sight of her.

Her wavy blonde hair is wild in the wind. She's like a fucking fine painting right now.

"No, no." I shake my head, stepping closer. "I was just headed to the store. I actually didn't know it was you. But I'm glad I stopped. Need a hand?" I cringe, watching her continue to rub her head. "Your head okay? Need me to take you to get it looked at? Fuck, I'm sorry I startled you."

She drops her hand suddenly. Almost seeming embarrassed. "No, I'm good." She chuckles. "Also, no offense, but my dad was a mechanic. A really

good one. My brother knows engines like the back of his hand. They both forced me to learn”—she sighs—“even when I didn’t want to. So, my point is, if it were something simple, I could probably fix it. I know cars, and this one needs to be towed back home until I can get my hands on some parts.”

“This thing is sweet though.” I lean over the engine. “What is this, a 1986? Gotta love these square-bodied Chevys.”

“Close.” She raises an eyebrow. “It’s an ’87. It was my dad’s. Can’t seem to let it go.” She rolls her eyes but laughs. “*Even* if it is a pain in my ass and breaks down almost every time I drive it. He loved this truck. It was the first vehicle he ever owned. He didn’t come from much, so it was everything to him.” She looks at the truck. “It looked like a piece of crap when he got it. But he fixed it up little by little.”

“Now, it’s yours. How will you get to school next week?” I take in the shiny black paint job, running my hand over it. “Have you called a tow truck yet?”

“Luckily, I have a Jetta that I can trust not to break down every five seconds.” She shrugs. “And, no, I haven’t called one yet.”

I take my phone out. “I’ll do it. One of my teammate’s uncles owns the garage in town. Seems like a good guy. I’ll give him a call.”

“Thank you.”

She gives me the sweetest smile, and damn if my heart doesn’t do some weird pumping shit in my chest. I’m not used to this bullshit. Usually, I’m the one making a girl’s heart feel this way when I grin at her. I’m not sure I like having the roles reversed.

“I really appreciate this, Kye.” She puts her back against the truck, folding her arms.

The sunshine makes the freckles on her nose and cheeks stand out. And I swear I could get lost inside those honey-brown eyes. The trouble is, I have no business getting lost in any part of her. No business at all.

After I make the arrangements, I hang up.

“Ten minutes or so,” I say, nodding my chin at her. “Luckily, he’s right down the road.”

She continues to lean against the truck, and I notice her fidgeting with her hands.

“Great, thanks.”

“Where’s Bam today anyway?” I ask her. “He was gone when I woke up.”

“No idea where *Beau* is.” She shrugs, using her brother’s real name. “And

with him, it's really hard to say."

"He's a hard one to read." I chuckle. "One of the most interesting dudes I've met in my life though." I grin. "And possibly the craziest."

She nods thoughtfully. "You should have met our dad. Two peas in a pod, those two."

I hear the sadness in her voice, even when she tries to smile. They lost their dad a few years ago in a bad wreck while he was racing. And now, with her brother racing again, that's got to be scary.

"He sounds like he was a hell of a man."

Bama doesn't talk about his father much, but from what he has said, it's obvious he was a good guy.

"Yeah ... he was." Her face looks like she goes somewhere a million miles away before snapping back to the present. "You don't have to wait with me, Kye. I'll be fine."

She's nuts if she thinks I'd leave her on the side of the road with a broken-down car. Besides, I can actually spend some time with her without Bama breathing down my neck, threatening to murder me for looking at her.

I tuck my hand in my pocket. "Trust me, Snowflake ... there's no place I'd rather be."

"Snowflake typically means weak." She narrows her eyes. "Are you implying I'm frail?"

"Hell no," I answer quickly. "Winter just reminds me of snow. And snow means snowflakes."

Maybe calling someone a snowflake usually means they're weak. But not to me. She's not frail. She's delicate, dainty, subtle while still making herself seen. She's like a snowflake. A damn beautiful one too.



WINTER

The tow truck pulls in, and the driver instantly walks up to Kye, shaking his hand as his whole face beams. He raves about how much his nephew talks about him and how lucky they are to have Kye on the football team. He claims Florida East will be unstoppable next season and says it's too bad they didn't make it to the championship this year.

It's interesting, hearing Kye talk about a campus that I'll be attending in the fall. With the school year over in just a little more than a month, the end is near. And truthfully, I'll never look back.

As the mechanic finishes loading the truck on his flatbed, I walk over to him. "Thanks for getting here so fast. With this dang truck, if it's not one thing, it's another. I just changed the fuel pump on it last weekend. Now, this happens." I jerk my thumb toward it. "Do you have a piece of paper? I'll write down the address to my house. My brother and I will fix it if you can just get it there."

The man looks from Kye to me, grinning. "A pretty girl who not only drives one of my favorite pickups, but also knows something about cars. I'm impressed." He elbows Kye's side gently, acting as if they were long-lost friends. "She's a keeper, boy. You're a lucky fella."

Kye awkwardly runs his hand up the back of his neck and shifts uncomfortably. Though that signature grin never leaves his face.

"Oh, we're not ..." I start to say, shaking my head. "He's not my boyfriend. He's my brother's friend. He just happened to be in the right place at the right time and was nice enough to wait with me."

"I see." He eyes us over. "Coulda fooled me." He opens the door of the ramp truck and grabs a notepad and a pen, handing them to me.

I scribble down my home address and hand the pad and pen back. "There you go. Just put it next to the garage in the grassy area."

"You got it," he says, nodding. "You've got a ride home, I take it?"

Kye's head moves up and down. "I'll give her a ride home. Thanks, Larch."

“Sure thing, kid.” He tips his hat at me and walks to the driver’s side of the truck. “Y’all take care now.”

“You too.” I wave good-bye before turning toward Kye. “You know, you really don’t have to give me a ride home. I can call my mom. Or my brother.”

Truthfully, I already did call my mom, but she didn’t answer. She’s working at the hospital, and she likely hasn’t checked her phone. As for Beau, I’m not even sure where he is. I know he’d drop everything to come and get me, but if he isn’t close to here, that wouldn’t work.

He opens the passenger door and jerks his thumb toward the seat. “Nonsense. What are friends for?”

Keeping my eyes on his, I slowly slide into the seat. “We’re hardly friends.”

“Says who?”

“Well, me, I guess.” I bite my lip. “We’ve met, like, three times. And you didn’t talk to me any of those times.”

“I couldn’t exactly talk to you, Snowflake. Need I remind you that your brother is fucking crazy, and honestly, he frightens me just a tad.” He takes the seat belt from behind the seat and pulls it in front of me. His knuckles graze my abdomen, sending shivers through my body. Gently clicking it into place, he looks at me. “But I want to be friends. So, let’s be friends, yeah?”

I watch him with caution. Wondering what in the hell he’s up to.

“Okay,” I hesitantly answer.

I guess Kye Collins just became my new friend.

Beau is going to kill me. No, he’s going to kill us.

three



KYE

I nervously tap my hand on the steering wheel on the way to Winter's house. I know I need to, but a huge part of me isn't ready to drop her off just yet.

Her brother would kill me dead if he saw us right now. Especially if he knew my giving her a ride home wasn't just about being a good guy. I might know my boundaries, but that doesn't mean I don't wish I could cross that line.

I've always been a Florida boy, loving the beach and sunshine. But, hell, I'm becoming a fan of a different season. The season they call winter.

"Your brother's probably going to take a knife to my dick when we get there," I say, only half-joking. "So, if blood makes you squeamish, you should probably run into your room."

"Ew, too graphic," she groans. "And I seriously doubt he'll even be there. He typically doesn't come home more than a few times a week."

I relax in my seat a little. Sure, if he is there, it will be easy enough to play it off as innocent. Right place, right time. Just wanted to be a good guy and give her a lift home. Never even thought of what it would be like to fuck her in the cab of my truck ... and certainly didn't look over and wish I could rip her clothes off.

Me? Nah ... never.

"So, you were tutoring your brother?" I grin. "You must be one hell of a teacher if you could get knowledge through his thick skull."

"Stubborn? Yes. But Beau is smarter than people give him credit for. He just really hated his English class." She rolls her eyes. "And if he hates something, best believe he's barely going to try at it. But trust me when I say, if he tried in anything, he'd be oddly great at it. It's super annoying."

"Yep, take football and drag racing." I relax in my seat. "Either one, he could probably be a fucking professional in."

She giggles. "Yep. Pretty sure you're right. Like I said, super annoying."

"Are you following his footsteps and attending Florida East in the fall?"

She looks out the window, tucking a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. “I am, yes. Not to follow my brother though. But just to stay close to our mom.” Her head turns toward me again. “She’s a strong lady. The strongest I’ve ever known. But she needs us. And we need her too. When Dad died, we banded together. It was the only way we were going to survive it.”

Guilt strikes me, but I push it down. Knowing my mother needs me, too, but I’m too much of a stubborn prick to be there for her. By loving my father, she put me and my sister through hell. She could have chosen us, but she didn’t. She chose him. Over and over again. Even when he was ruining our lives.

I turn down her driveway, pulling up behind her white car. I breathe out a long sigh, thankful as fuck that Bama’s truck is nowhere to be seen. I’ve been here a few times with her brother. Their mom always had some damn good cookies and brownies in the kitchen.

“Well, thanks for the ride, Kye.” She smiles, revealing a damn dimple, just when I thought she couldn’t get cuter. “Enjoy the rest of your day.”

As she reaches for the door, I stop her, touching her shoulder. “Winter, wait.”

Her eyes move to my hand on her shoulder, and I drop it from her.

“Yeah?” She looks at me curiously.

I blow out a breath, running a hand through my hair. I know I shouldn’t ask her what I’m about to, but somehow, I know I’m going to do it anyway. “Can I pick you up tomorrow? Take you somewhere awesome and have a kick-ass day?”

Her face looks like my words physically hurt her. “Why do you want to hang out with me, Kye?” she whispers. “What are you up to?”

“What are you talking about?” I frown. “Why *wouldn’t* I?”

“You could spend the day with anyone you wanted to,” she says matter-of-factly.

“And I want to spend it with you,” I toss back. “So, what do you say? Trust me?”

“Trust you? To do what?” She sounds suspicious.

“To give you one hell of a fun day.”

“Look, I don’t know what you’re hoping to achieve here, but I promise you, you’ll be disappointed.” She folds her tiny arms over her chest. “I don’t date jocks anymore. And I certainly don’t sleep with them.” Her head bobs with attitude, and I have to fight a laugh from coming out of me. “So, if

you're hoping to get another notch in that belt of yours, I suggest you look elsewhere."

"Easy, killer." I hold my hands up in defense. "You're hot. That's obvious."

Her eyes watch me with intent.

"But I'm not looking for anything like that. I just want to be your friend. Can't a dude be a hot chick's friend without wanting to bag her?"

"Fine. I'll humor you and be your *friend*." She inhales, tilting her chin up. "But you'd better not complicate it with sex or feelings. Deal?"

"Cocky, aren't you? Thinking I won't be able to resist having sex with you?" I joke, but her expression only hardens.

"I need you to promise that it's strictly platonic. That nothing weird will come of this." She sighs. "Beau would freak. And like I said, you aren't my type. Not anymore."

"One, I'm everyone's type," I joke. "Two, I promise. No penetration. No D in the V. And absolutely no feelings. Easy enough, Snowflake."

She eyes me over a bit longer before exhaling. "Okay, I guess I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Don't sound so excited."

"Sorry." She shrugs. "I'm just ... I don't know ... surprised, I guess. You're Beau's best friend."

"I can be your friend too, Winter." I wink. "You'll see."

She doesn't smile as she slides out of the seat, waving bye before closing the door and heading to her house, only briefly looking back once.

And I wonder ... *What the fuck did I get myself into?*



WINTER

What could Kye Collins want with me?

I can't stop the thought from invading my brain as I wait for the water in my teapot to boil.

I mean, I'm by no means a dog or anything. I'm confident enough to say I'm a pretty girl. But he's a college guy. A *hot* college guy. One who not only plays football for a D1 school, but who is also a star on the team. I'm a bookworm who enjoys getting ahead on homework and making baked goods for fun. I enjoy nights in, and, oh, I basically have no friends. I'm not awkward, but I am an extreme overthinker who worries the room is laughing at me when I walk into it.

I'm not his type. I can't be.

So, it's not that he's interested in me in a romantic sort of way. It just can't be that. So, maybe he was telling the truth. Maybe he wants to be my friend.

I cringe, realizing that perhaps my brother told him about the breakup. Heck, maybe Beau even put him up to this to try to fix me in some way. That wouldn't make sense though. Beau is much too overprotective for that. There's no way he'd send me a guy like Kye to hang out with. A guy with abs of stone and a smirk that is an automatic panty-dropper.

The teapot screeches, pulling me from my thoughts.

As I push myself up to get it, the front door flies open, and in walks my mother. Even dressed in her scrubs with her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, she's still the most beautiful woman I know.

"Hey, babe." She smiles, kicking off her shoes.

She looks tired. How could she not be after working overnight?

"Want some tea?" I say, sinking the tea bag into the steaming water.

"No, thanks. If I drink that, I'll be up, peeing every hour." A yawn rips through her. "I'm too tired for that shit." Her eyes narrow as she reads the label on the bag. "Chamomile? You only drink that kind when you're worked up over something." She pulls the stool away from the counter and takes a

seat. “Spill it, love. What’s wrong? Is it the truck? You know we’ll get it fixed.”

Grabbing the honey from the cupboard, I pop the lid open and squeeze it into my cup.

“No, no. That truck is immortal—you know that. It might break down a few times a year, but we’ll always bring her back to life.” I shake my head. “It’s nothing,” I say quickly. “I just wanted some tea. What’s wrong with that?”

“If you say so.” She eyes me over before slumping forward slightly, leaning her chest against the counter. “I’m so sorry that I didn’t get your message about the truck breaking down until after you already called a tow truck. Who gave you a ride home, sweetie?”

I messaged her that I was home safe and no longer needed a ride, but I never told her how I’d made it here.

The liquid goes down my throat wrong, causing me to cough. “Kye.” I clear my throat. “Kye Collins.”

She looks surprised. “*Really?* Did Beau send him?”

I shake my head. “No. He just happened to be driving by right after it happened. He called the tow truck and everything too.”

“Well, what do you know? Nice *and* good-looking.” She smiles.

I chew my lip nervously. “Yeah ... he actually asked me to hang out tomorrow.” I quickly wave my hand at her. “Just as friends though. Nothing more,” I stammer pathetically. “I think I’ll cancel. I mean, I don’t have his number. But ... I could look him up on Instagram and call it off.” I nod excessively. “Yes, that’s what I think I’ll do. It was stupid to—”

“Winter, stop self-sabotaging.” She taps her fingers on the counter. “Friends, huh?” She nods before standing up and walking over to me. “Does Beau know about this new friendship of yours, sis?”

My stomach clenches. I somehow feel like I’m doing something dishonest, hanging out with my brother’s best friend. It feels wrong and forbidden. Yet I still want to do it. I know nothing serious will come out of hanging out with Kye. I’ve sworn off his type. But maybe I could find myself an unlikely friend. Something I don’t have a lot of is friends these days.

So, call me crazy, but I’m willing to piss my brother off in this situation.

“Not yet.” I shake my head. “It’s bad, isn’t it? To be friends with his friends?”

“No, I don’t think so,” she says softly. “Just be honest with him—that’s

all.”

I gulp down my tea anxiously at the thought of telling my brother this news. “Where is he anyway? He usually stops in on the weekends.”

“I’m not sure, babe. I haven’t had a chance to call him today.” She winks. “It’ll be okay. Just don’t wait *too* long to tell him. He might be stubborn as a damn bull, but he’s also sensitive too.”

I rear my head back. “Yeah, maybe deep, deep, *deep* down inside.”

“Just like his daddy,” she says, pointing at me. “Love you lots.”

I giggle as she walks into her room. She’s right; he is exactly like my father was. He’s hard to read. Serious a lot of the time. Extremely competitive, always pushing himself harder.

“Night, Mom. Love you more.”

I guess, in a way, I’m like my dad too. When it comes to school, I can’t relax if something isn’t perfect. This idea I have inside my brain to be flawless is damn near agonizing to keep up with. But I do it. I have no idea why. I’d like to say it’s because I want my dad to be proud of the person I am while he’s looking down at me from heaven. But truthfully, I’ve been this way my whole life. But when Dad died, it certainly got worse.

Rinsing my cup out, I head to bed. Knowing I’m going to toss and turn all night. I just agreed to hang out with my brother’s best friend tomorrow. Nothing good can come from this.

So, why am I so excited to see Kye again?

four



KYE

I toss my surfboard in the back of my truck, wishing I had Winter's number. I would have texted her to bring a swimsuit. Preferably a bikini that shows off her body. I take that back. That'd be distracting as hell, and I'd probably drown because my dumbass would forget how to swim. On second thought, hopefully, she has one of those grandma bathing suits that is a one-piece with a skirt, leaving everything to the imagination. That'll be the only way I won't drool all day.

There's something about her. It's inviting and comforting. It makes me want more even if it's only a friendship. I like having her around even if I barely know her. Something about her presence calms me in a way I haven't felt in so long.

Dane's truck pulls in next to mine. "Where you headed, brother? Also, I tried to wake you up to go to the gym, but your lazy ass wouldn't get up."

"My bad." I shrug. Thankful that he seems to be in a better mood today. "I'm skipping today. Bam must be too, seeing as he's not even home. Where is that fucker?"

"Fuck if I know." He shrugs. "Probably with the hot racer girl again. Anyway, I'm going to ask you again, where you headed?"

I cringe, leaning against the fender of my truck. "I'm sort of hanging out with Winter today," I mumble like the little bitch that I am.

His eyes widen at the mention of Winter's name, and he scowls. "You'd better mean the kind of winter like the fucking North Pole, dude." He waves his hand at me. "I know you don't mean Winter fucking Bishop—aka Bam's fucking sister."

"We're friends." I walk to the driver's side and open my door. "The fuck is the problem?"

"You *know* what the problem is." He rolls his eyes. "Bama is going to cut your dick off."

"I'll cross that bridge when I get there."

"Yeah, crossing the bridge without your dick intact." His mouth hangs

open. “That just doesn’t sound like a good time to me. I’m not at all about that life.” He points at me. “Which is why I don’t fuck around with my buddy’s sister. Like to keep my dick intact. You know, so I can do stuff with it, like piss.”

Closing the door, I start the truck and roll my window down. “Nobody’s cutting anyone’s dick off, Wade. Calm your pickle. It’ll be fine.” I say the words, but even I don’t believe them.

I have a sister. I know how protective I am with her.

“She needs a friend. I can be her friend,” I say coolly. “Gotta trust me on this.”

“Yeah, some *friend* you’ll be. One who wants to bone her.” He shakes his head and turns away. “Oh, wait. Soon, you won’t even have one to show off,” he grunts. “Just be good, dumbass. I don’t need to bail Bam out of jail today. Or help you to the bathroom after you get sewn back up once Bama castrates you.”

I cringe, putting my hands in front of my dick, imagining how bad that would hurt. “Peace,” I mutter before pulling out. Unable to stop myself from thinking about what he said.

Bama is a big dude. A scary, intimidating, tattooed ... dude.

I hope he doesn’t cut my dick off. I like my dick.



As I pull off the main road and onto the dirt driveway, my mind is reeling. I don’t know how I ended up here. Asking a girl I shouldn’t be seeing to spend the day with me.

I don’t do that type of shit usually. I’m not the guy girls call because they want to go out to lunch or hang out during the day. They call me to fuck them silly with no strings attached. I’m not a complete man-whore, but I don’t do relationships. Never have.

I pull up in front of the Bishop residence, immediately seeing Winter open the door and step outside. Her blonde hair is still wet, and her frayed shorts hug her legs perfectly.

Pushing the door open, I jump down from my truck just as she heads toward me. “Not so fast, babe. Number one, you need a swimsuit. Number two, it’d be awfully rude for me to pick you up and not say hi to your mama.” I rub my stomach. “If I’m lucky, maybe she even made cookies.”

She arches an eyebrow and watches me carefully. “Cinnamon buns.”

“Fuuuck ... really?” My mouth drools at the thought. “Love me some sweet, sticky buns.”

Winter sucks in a breath, and I know it’s because of my words. Deep down, she’s probably a dirty, dirty girl.

Too bad I’ll never find out.

Even though Julie Bishop works full-time, she still manages to bake some incredible shit. Sometimes, she even brings treats over to us at campus.

She waves me toward the front door. “Come on. You’re lucky Beau isn’t home.” She smiles, revealing her dimple. “If he showed up and found these, he’d devour them pretty dang fast.”

As I follow her into the house, my nostrils are instantly hit with the sweet scent of Julie’s baking.

We walk into the kitchen, where Winter points to a barstool. “Sit. I’ll fix you one.”

I take a seat, unable to stop watching the beautiful creature in front of me as she floats across the kitchen, reaching up to get a plate, showing off her back.

“Well, well, well,” Julie says, walking into the room from out back. “Look what the cat dragged in.”

She smiles, coming over to me and giving me a side hug. “Hi, Kye. Thanks for getting my baby home safe yesterday. Didn’t even check my phone in time. Mom of the Year award right here.”

I nod as she releases me and then takes a seat at the stool at the other end of the bar.

“It’s no big deal, Mrs. Bishop.” My eyes float back to Winter as she takes the cinnamon bun and puts it into the microwave. “Happy to help.”

“Kye, how many times do I have to tell you to call me Julie?” She reaches for the newspaper. “Between you and Dane calling me that, y’all sure do make me feel old.”

“Sorry, *Julie*.” I grin. “Won’t happen again.”

“Uh-huh. Sure it won’t.” She looks up at Winter. “So, what are you two kids up to today? Trouble, I suppose?”

“No trouble here.” I shake my head just as Winter hands me my plate. “Shit, this looks amazing. I’ll have to do two workouts tomorrow to make up for it though.” Wasting no time taking a huge-ass bite, I sigh. “Mrs.—I mean, Julie. You need to open your own bake shop. This is ...” I take another bite. “Wow. This is good.”

“Well, thanks. But I can’t take credit for this.” She smiles at her daughter. “This was all Winter. In fact, lately, most of the baking has been her.”

“I didn’t know you baked too,” I say as she hands me a glass of water. “Why didn’t you say you’d made it?”

“In case it sucked, I wanted to blame her.” She jerks her thumb toward her mother. “Mom’s taught me a few things, but I’m nowhere near as good as her.” She shrugs, downplaying it. “Just something I do that helps me relax, is all.”

“Winter, baby,” her mom says, giving her a pointed look, “you made macarons the other day. I sure as hell have never made those. Never even attempted them. Or what about those crazy jam-filled cupcakes? Most creative thing I’ve ever done with a cupcake is color its frosting. Give yourself some credit, love.”

Winter blushes. No doubt wanting the attention off of her. From the few times I’ve been around her, I can tell she’s a wallflower. Her brother is a star on the field and at the racetrack. He likes it that way too. Her? She seems like she’d be happy with being invisible sometimes.

The Kye Collins everyone thinks they know, well, that guy loves to be seen dominating on the field. He’s got confidence and swagger. The chicks love him, and the guys want to be him. I have no problem with being the center of attention as long as they don’t see the real Kye.

The Kye who is lost, ashamed, embarrassed, and feels less than. No, that guy gets kept under wraps. After all, a popular jock with a tortured soul and a shit-ton of emotional baggage just isn’t cool.

Her mom’s phone rings, and she frowns as she looks at the screen. “It’s the hospital. I’d better take it.” She walks into the other room.

I finish the piece of heaven and push my plate away. “Yep, now, I need a nap. Goddamn.”

Winter giggles and takes the plate, rinsing it off. “I just need to grab my swimsuit, and then we can go.” She blushes. “If you still want to.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” I lean back in the chair slightly. “And I’m here because I want to be.”

She doesn't answer, just pauses for a second to look at me before continuing to her room to get her suit.

Why she doesn't trust the fact that I actually want to spend time with her, I don't know. She's guarded. But I want her to know she can trust me. When it comes to friends, I'm all in.

Oh yeah. All in, you knucklehead. That's why you're hanging out with Bama's sister. Because you're all in.

I push the thoughts away and try to enjoy myself. Waiting patiently for her to make her way back into the kitchen.

She walks in the same time her mother's door reopens as she drops the phone from her ear.

"You two have fun." She winks. "Not *too* much though."

"Thanks, Julie." I smile before looking toward Winter and jerking my chin up. "Ready to get going?"

I take her in, noticing the red swimsuit that's now tied underneath her tank top, hugging her sun-kissed skin.

Fuck. I was attracted to her already. Now, I'm going to see her in a bathing suit. *Christ almighty ...*

"Yep." She nods, grabbing a bag from the counter. "Ready as I'll ever be, I guess."

I chuckle. "That's the spirit, Snowflake."



WINTER

I get out of the truck in a parking lot that overlooks the most beautiful beach I've ever seen, and I spot a small pathway that leads down to it.

Cupping my hand over my eyes, I admire the white sand as the water crashes over it. "Wow, I've been to a lot of beaches in Florida. Never this one though. It's a gem."

My eyes follow him as he flips his tailgate down, taking out a surfboard.

"It's sort of a secret." He grins. "Gotta be in with the right people to know about it."

"Wh-what are we doing?" My eyes widen, and I feel my heart race. "Why do you have a surfboard?"

He shuts the tailgate. "Because, today, you're going to learn to ride the waves, babe."

"How do you know I don't already surf?" I raise an eyebrow in an attempt to look confident and cool. Even if I'm not. "Maybe I'm a pro at it, ripping the shit out of the waves." I shrug.

"Well ... do you?" He looks amused. "I mean, are you? A pro?" He scrunches his nose up. "And do you really *rip the shit* out of the waves?"

My lips go into a flat line, and I sigh. "No. You got me. I don't. Honestly, the ocean terrifies me." I feel my cheeks burn and my skin heat. "I like to tan at the beach. Lie on my towel, perhaps dip my big toe in the water just long enough to cool me off." I shrug. "That's the extent of it."

"What scares you about it?"

As he starts toward the long ramp that leads to the beach, I follow him.

"I mean, where do I start? The creatures. There're so many of them, and they are absolutely horrifying. One could pinch my toes off. Another could swallow me whole, possibly bite off a limb or two for lunch." I grimace. "The strength of it. How unpredictable and unforgivable it is, not caring what's in its path. Or maybe that it's dark and mysterious and frankly downright scary."

The way he holds his surfboard under his arm is hot. But still, I don't want

to learn. Nope, I want nothing to do with it. I don't like to take chances. I don't bask in risks. I'd wrap myself and my loved ones in bubble wrap if I could. Especially Beau because he's a daredevil.

Kye is quiet the rest of the walk. And as we step onto the sand, I pull my sandals off and hold them in my hand. The sand feels hot and massages the bottom of my feet. And the sound of the waves crashing along the shore is almost a lullaby. Even if it chills me to the bone as I imagine getting into that water, it's still peaceful. There's a certain beauty and wonder that comes with the territory of the ocean. I respect it. But I fear it.

He drops his board and sits down next to it. Prompting me to do the same.

As he sits back, resting on his hands, he looks over at me. And for once, aside from my mom, dad, Beau, or the Hardy family ... I feel seen. His attention is solely on me. I don't feel embarrassed or judged. I just feel like me.

"Snowflake, you know I'd never let anything happen to you out there, right?" Blue eyes melt into my own. "Swear it."

I dig my toes further into the sand. My eyes move to the people surfing and swimming in the blue water. "Answer five questions for me, and I'll consider it."

I swing my gaze to his and see his jaw tense.

"Okay." He nods. "Sure."

"Where are you from?"

"About half an hour from here," he says casually.

"Really? That's cool. Not too far from me then." I nod, trying to think of my next question. "Did you choose Florida East because it was close to home?"

"Not at all," he says. Pushing his toes into the sand, he doesn't look at me. "I chose it because it's a D1 school and they offered me a scholarship to come play. Was kind of hard to pass up."

"Fair enough. When did you start surfing?"

"When I was seven." His expression grows serious. "I was hooked after that."

"That young? Wow." I nod, impressed. "What do you love more—football or surfing?"

"It's different. It's like comparing a burger to a steak and cheese sub," he says nonchalantly. "Can't do it."

I giggle at his analogy. We're talking about his future, and he brings up

food. Then again, I know he's a foodie because every time Beau brings cookies Mom or I made to their dorm, he bitches that Kye eats most of them.

"But if you *had* to. As in if you could go pro at either thing." I poke his arm. "Which would you choose?"

"Football is my future." He nods to the water. "This just keeps me sane. This is where I run to when I can't take the shit life throws my way. That includes football. When the pressure of that becomes unbearable ... I can always run here. It will never judge me."

I eye him over for a moment. Observing him for as long as I possibly can without looking like a weirdo. He's a beautiful man. Downright model material. And again, he's hanging out with me.

"So, you would choose football?" I say unsurely. "For your future?"

"I want my name to be remembered for football." His voice is low. "I'll never give up surfing because it's who I am. Football is just what I am."

"And there's a difference?" I raise an eyebrow at him.

"Hell yeah, there is," he says definitely. "Football drives me to constantly be in a competition with myself, and surfing keeps me sane enough to do that."

I suck in a breath, my eyes widening. "You just got a whole lot more interesting, jock," I whisper. "Final question."

"I think you've technically gone over your five but, okay, go on," he says, giving me a slight nod.

"Why did you ask me to hang out? What are you up to?"

His expression changes to almost anger. "Why is it so hard for you to believe I'm here because I want to be?" He tips his head a little closer. "Who made you feel like you aren't worthy of hanging out with someone like me?"

My breath hitches, and I wince. "I don't feel like that—"

"Bullshit, Winter. I know that's exactly how you feel," he says, interrupting me. "But I'm telling you, any man would be a lucky son of a bitch to spend the day with you. And if someone doesn't think that way, to hell with them. Stop letting those thoughts in your head tell you otherwise. You're too good for that."

I sit in awe of the words that came from his beautiful mouth before finally standing up.

Peeling my shirt off, followed by my shorts, I toss them on the ground. "Let's go." I hold my hand out, attempting to pull him up. "Teach me how to surf. Show me how it's done, surfer dude."

I could drive myself crazy, living inside my own head. Not today though. Today, I'm just going to be a doer. Because Kye Collins makes it easy for me to want to try things that scare the hell out of me.



KYE

She peeled her top and shorts off, revealing a tiny red bikini that looks like it was made for her body. Even though I'm sure she doesn't mean to, she's fucking killing me. I groan inwardly at the sight, trying to avert my eyes to anywhere else.

How the fuck can I teach her how to surf in that?

"Damn, Snowflake," I growl. "You make it really fucking hard not to check you out when you wear shit like that. Friends don't check each other out. It just ain't right."

"Please, playboy." She rolls her eyes. "Surely, you've seen many girls in more revealing bikinis than this one." The tone in her voice tells me she's getting more comfortable around me as the day goes on. "Shouldn't be a shocker."

She just doesn't understand how much I'm not joking. I've seen a lot of naked women. But her body in that bikini? No one compares.

"Oh, I have," I agree. "I've seen a lot of women, sure. But you, Snowflake, you're like a fucking work of art."

"Laying it on thick, aren't you, Collins?" She snorts, not taking me seriously. "Are you going to teach me how to surf or not?" She glances out as another wave crashes against the wet sand, shivering slightly. "Before I go and change my mind and run back to the truck like a baby."

Wasting no time in grabbing my board, I jerk my head toward the water and wink. "You know it. Let's go. Snowflake's about to meet the ocean."

She doesn't answer, but the closer we get to the water, the stiffer her body appears. She's fucking terrified.

Terrified of a place that is my sanctuary.

"You're going to have to relax, babe." I nod toward her. "You go out there, all tensed up like that, forget it. That water will eat you alive." When I see fear in her eyes, I rub my forehead. "Not literally. Just ... you know what? Forget I said anything."

Dropping the board right before my feet hit the water, I grab her hand.

“Before you can surf, you need to swim. Get used to the water. Feel comfortable and shit, you know?”

She pulls back slightly. “What if ... a shark eats me?”

“Then, it was nice knowin’ ya.”

She narrows her eyes. “Be serious! What if the undertow pulls me under and I drown? Then, you’ll have to go to my mom’s house. Tell her I died and it was all your fault. Then, it will just be her and Beau. You’ll be dead, too, because he will kill you.” She cringes. “Not a fast kill either. He’ll torture you. It’ll be a long, slow, pain—”

“When I said I wasn’t going to let anything happen to you, I meant it.” I give her hand a soft tug. “Trust me on that. I’ll keep you safe.”

“You keep saying things like that like I know you well enough to trust you!” She laughs but sounds annoyed. “I just met you!”

“Yeah? Well, you’ll know me real well soon, Snowflake.” I toss her a wink. “BFFs for life.”

She blows the breath out of her cheeks. “Fine.” She pulls her hand out of mine and heads toward the water. “Holy mother of balls! That’s cold.” Her face scrunches up. “Jesus Christ, that is like ice water.”

“Eh, you’ll get used to it,” I say and continue walking in. “But, yeah, I probably won’t find my nuts for a week after this, never mind my dick.”

The rush that the salt water gives me, the feeling like it’s slowly washing everything away that I don’t want to carry, I love it. I live for it. When you’re in the ocean and the water feels cold enough to numb your entire body, nothing else really matters. Because in that second, you’re only thinking of the icy water. Sink or swim comes into effect, and it’s no longer about anything else. Any activity when I don’t have to think about life, I’m game.

The ocean’s been a part of me since I was a kid. We lived minutes from a public beach, and that’s where Mom would take us until I got old enough to go there by myself. One day as a kid, I saw a guy giving surf instructions. I begged to do it. My father had surfed as a kid, but when he went down a bad road, he sold his board and never went back. Once I got old enough, Mom caved and signed me up for lessons. Years later, when I was a teenager, giving surf lessons became my summer job, and from then on, if I wasn’t on the football field, I was tearing up the ocean. Never really wanting to go home.

Winter stops as the water reaches her knees, gazing up at me with a sheer look of panic in her eyes, and I watch as her chest rises and falls while she

drags in shaky breaths.

“Call me a baby, Kye. I don’t care. I don’t think I can do this.”

“Oh, sure you can,” I say playfully. But as she starts to turn to walk away, I catch her hand in mine and pull her closer against my body. “I’ve got you, Winter. You can relax. You’re safe with me. Always.”

I want to protect her, like she belongs to me. Even if she doesn’t and never will. A man can still play the part.

Her breasts press against my chest, but I try not to think about it. I can’t imagine pitching a tent right here in front of all the other beachgoers. Especially Winter.

Fuck, what would she think if my dick poked against her?

She loops her hand around my neck, and gently, I lift her up, holding her against me as I walk deeper into the water.

As it reaches my chest, I look down at her. “You good?”

She nods, holding on to me like her life depends on it. “I—I think so.”

I know it’s a real fear for some, the ocean. People are scared of it. And in a lot of ways, I don’t blame them. Winter isn’t trying to be a drama queen or get my attention. She’s just anxious. And if I can help her overcome a fear today, I’ll call that a fucking win.

She might be scared of the ocean, but I’m scared to stop moving for long. Afraid of growing bored and falling into my old man’s habits. I know that isn’t how it starts, but becoming him has always been a fear of mine.

When I hurt my arm senior year, getting sacked, I wouldn’t even take the painkillers they offered. I told my mom not to fill the prescription, instead just taking Tylenol. Drinking though? I’ll admit that’s something I tend to think is okay. Even though it probably isn’t because I have *his* blood.

The waves roll against us, making us rise up with them as they do. Each wave is unpredictable yet steady. There’s a good wake for surfing, but nothing too intense.

Holding her this close in the ocean ... makes for a damn good day.

I stop, deciding we’re out far enough, and we just float with the small swells. “Do you mind putting your legs around my waist and I’ll hold you that way?” When she gives me a suspicious look, I laugh. “I’m not being a dog or anything, babe. But these waves are getting stronger. I don’t want you to go under.”

At the mention of going under, suddenly, she moves, wrapping her legs around my waist, and I hold on to her tightly.

“You’re doing great,” I assure her. “Really.”

“I can’t believe I’m in the ocean.” She looks around us. “Seriously ... I can’t believe I’m doing this. I’ve always been so scared of it. Heck, even the lake, where my family’s camp was when we were growing up, it made me a little nervous.” She tilts her neck to look up at me. “Believe it or not, this was on my bucket list.”

“Oh yeah?” I stare at her honey-brown eyes as the sun hits them. “To float in the ocean with a hunk like myself was on your list? That’s sort of weird, but whatever. If that’s what you’re into, do your thing.”

“No, dipshit.” She rolls her eyes. “To swim in the ocean in general. I’ve always wondered about it. Watched others do it too. But never dared to myself.” She smiles sweetly. “Thanks for ... convincing me.”

“No problem, sweet thing,” I drawl slowly. “What else is on that list?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” she says playfully.

“Yeah, I *would* like to know.”

“In your dreams.” She sticks her tongue out jokingly.

“Tattoo?” I guess.

“Nope.”

“Nipple piercing?”

Her eyes widen. “No, you perv!”

“Oh ...” I dip my mouth closer to her ear. “You want your hoochie pierced instead? Trying to be dirty and daring?”

She slaps my chest, making water hit my face. “You’re literally the worst friend, and I’m already tempted to trade you in.”

“So, is that a no? Because we can make it happen. Just don’t make me get my dick pierced.” I cringe. “The thought of that makes me want to cry.”

“Yeah, it’s a firm no,” she murmurs. “Nothing of *that* nature is on my list, you weirdo.” She pauses. “I’ll tell you one, but you can’t laugh. It’s going to sound really, really lame.”

“Go on.” I nod. “I love lame shit. I mean, I still play Minecraft sometimes when I’m bored. And I actually used to be obsessed with Harry Potter.”

I sense she’s embarrassed to tell me. She shouldn’t be. I’d never judge her.

Well, unless her fantasy is something really fucking whack.

“I want to get a little drunk and dance at a party.” She glances down briefly before her eyes float back to mine. “I know; it’s lame.”

Her words surprise me. Most high school girls I know do that shit every

weekend.

“Have you never been drunk before?”

She shakes her head once. “Nope.”

“Have you ever had, like, a drop of alcohol?”

“No!” Her voice squeaks. “I know; it’s weird and embarrassing!”

“I think it’s sort of cool.” I tell her the truth.

My father is an addict. He’s battled with alcohol and substance abuse for most of his adult life. Someone who’s never drunk the devil’s liquid? That’s impressive to me. I grew up watching the consequences of that shit my whole life, and yet when I was offered my first beer, I drank it. I never even thought twice.

She looks uneasy.

“Honestly, I dig it. I gotta know though, what’s stopped you? I mean, if it’s something you want to do.”

“I just hate the thought of feeling out of control of my own body.” She chews her lip. “Imagining making a fool out of myself or letting loose and making a mistake ... it’s crippling for me. I don’t take chances. And I hate risks.”

“But something inside of you still wants to try it?” I adjust my hold on her, cupping her thighs.

“Yeah ... in a safe space. Where I could just feel what it’s like to let go of all the pressure and crap that weighs on me daily.” She shakes her head the slightest bit. “To just have a few hours to not feel like I have to keep it all together. To not have it figured out.”

I grin. “You’ve picked the right friend, Snowflake. Because I’ve got life about as far from figured out as it gets.”

“I didn’t choose you as a friend. You basically forced me to be yours, remember?” she teases.

“You need me,” I say matter-of-factly. “You just don’t know it.”

As I feel her shiver against me, I start back toward the shore. “You’re getting chilly. Let’s go get you warmed up.”

“No surfing?”

I glance down at her. “You already conquered a big fear today. Let’s just start with that for now.”

She looks relieved. “Oh, thank God.”

“Don’t get too excited. Your ass will be out there, riding waves soon. That’s a promise, sweet cheeks.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She rolls her eyes. “Baby steps.”



WINTER

An hour later, we sit across from each other at a tall table, both stuffed from all the food we just ate.

This has to be one of the coolest restaurants I've ever been to. Old surfboards and seashells cover the walls while nautical-themed decor fills the place. Fishing nets and old recycled lobster traps add the perfect touch. I love it here. It's so ... Kye.

Very deep, deep, deep down, I *am* a little bummed I wasn't able to try surfing. What an accomplishment that would have been—even if I sucked at it. Which I undoubtedly would have. But on the other hand, I'm so proud of myself for actually swimming in the frightening sea. Something I had never dared to do. Who knows? Maybe being friends with Kye will do me some good.

As we wait for the check, Kye strums his fingertips on the shiny wooden table. "Tell me, what was Bama like, growing up? Was he any less serious than he is now?"

"Not in the slightest," I say, taking a sip from my water. "He's always been Mr. Serious. But when our dad died, I do think it got a lot worse." I trace the condensation on my cup. "We all took it hard. But Beau had a lot of anger in him after that night. But he took that anger and he poured it into football." I shrug. "He takes the game seriously. And truthfully, I think people who don't annoy him."

"I take the game seriously," he says. "But that's about all. Everything else, I figure, what the hell's the point to get wound up over it? Can't change a damn thing about this life."

"That's true." Leaning my elbow on the table, I rest my cheek in my palm. "Beau has always been this larger-than-life figure in my eyes. He might act tough, but he's about as kind and caring as they come. He's a genuinely good person, hiding behind tattoos, big muscles, and a grumpy face." I feel a pang of guilt for being here right now without him knowing it. "He'd give someone the shirt off his back even if it was all he had left. That's just how

he is. But when it comes to life and what he expects out of himself ... he's his own biggest critic. Always pushing to do better."

He relaxes his back into the chair. "I mean, I get it. I think it comes with the territory of wanting to go pro. We won't stop until we get there. Blood, sweat, and tears be damned ... we know exactly what we want."

Years from now, Beau will be gone to the NFL, and so will Kye.
And where the heck will that leave me?



We leave the restaurant, walking back down the beach toward where the truck is parked.

I decide that I'm going to tell my brother soon that I've been spending time with Kye, but I'm not ready to do it just yet. He'll be mad. Probably yell. Maybe even drive Kye away from me. I don't want to lose my new friend yet. So, as much as I hate keeping secrets from Beau, right now, I think it's for the best. I'm not usually a selfish person, but something about Kye makes me want to be.

Kye turns toward me. "I'm still a little grossed out that you ordered fried pickles as an appetizer. So nasty."

"Who doesn't like fried pickles?" I raise an eyebrow. "They are only the *best* appetizer ever created."

He pretends to gag. "Nope. A mushy, old pickle, covered in batter. And then you made it worse and doused it in ranch. You might be a serial killer."

"You don't know what you're missing out on, my friend." I shrug just as a group of people begins walking toward us.

"Yo, Collins!" one yells, cupping his hands over his mouth. "You handsome fucker! Get your ass over here!"

I look at Kye to gauge the reaction on his face.

"The one and only Johnny C!" He grins, grasping his hand with the guy's, pulling him against him. "Been far too long, brother!"

A few others step forward, bumping their fists with Kye's, seeming to be old friends.

I fully expect to stand here and feel awkward. Whenever I was out in public with Nathan, he practically ignored me, never introducing me to whoever he was talking to. I blamed it on his inability to focus on two things at once, but then again, he did that just fine with women, so it couldn't have been that.

Kye surprises me when he throws his arm around my shoulders. "Guys, meet Winter. She's pretty awesome, and soon, I'm going to be easing her into catching some waves."

Johnny C holds his hand out and smiles. "You'll love it, I swear." He shakes my hand and releases it as he laughs. "Although not sure about this teacher of yours. You sure you trust this dude?"

Kye hits him lightly. "Fuck off." He laughs.

"Just playin'," Johnny says, still grinning. "If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be half the surfer I am." He looks back at Kye. "Hey, look, we're actually having a beach party in a bit. It'll be in front of my buddy's beach house, just down there." He points, and Kye and I follow his finger and see a large house sitting just off the beach. "Stop down. Have a few beers."

"We'll see, man. You might see us." He holds his fist out. "It was good running into you." Looking at the others, he nods. "All of you."

As they all say good-bye and Johnny yells that he'd better see us later, we walk down the beach slowly. It's comfortable. Even though we're not saying much, it seems like we don't need to.

"You should go to that party," I say, continuing to walk by his side. "I can catch a ride home with someone, I'm sure. Or grab an Uber."

"You must be joking," he says sharply. "Only way I'm going to that party is if you're next to me, Snowflake." He stops, turning toward me. "Do you want to go? Because we can, but only if you want to. And I promise, if you do, I won't let anything bad happen to you."

"I mean, I'll go. But only if you want me there." I dig my feet into the sand bashfully. "You know, as your *friend*."

He chuckles, putting one hand on his side and dipping his head the slightest bit forward. He's adorable. And damn my heart for noticing.

"Friends don't let friends go to parties alone." He holds his pinkie up. "Buddy system?"

Taking his pinkie in mine, I laugh. "Buddy system."

Releasing it, he steps back. "Good, because I'm ready to cross another thing off your list." I hear the humor in his voice. "Swim in the ocean?"

Check. Now, getting tipsy and dirty dancing at a college party? Check, check.”

“Whoa. Who said dirty dancing?”

“Wishful thinking, I guess.” He shrugs and says nonchalantly, “A man can hope, can’t he?”

Well then ...

I gulp. “I suppose.”

five



KYE

I sit with some old friends, never taking my eyes off Winter as she sits around a fire with a few of their girlfriends. Her entire face lights up as she laughs, covering her mouth with her hand and clutching her stomach.

The more time I spend with her, the harder it hits me that Bama is going to literally chop my dick off when he finds out I've been hanging out with his sister. It doesn't matter that we're just friends. He won't listen when I say I'm not trying to get in her pants. Won't make a bit of difference at all. He'll automatically think I'm trying to fuck her, no matter what I say.

Truth is, I know I can't hook up with Winter. It's not that I don't want to because, hell, I'd love to sink inside of her. To steal her moans and bring her to a place she never even realized existed. I guarantee that fuckstick ex of hers never worshipped her body the way it deserves. The way I would. I'd leave her fully and completely satisfied. But I can't. She's forbidden. It makes no difference how badly I want her that way.

I also can't date her or give her that whole *happily ever after* shit that every girl dreams of because that's just nothing I see in my future. She deserves better than the man I could potentially be. I have demons. Shit, my demons have demons. She's sunshine and happiness. I'd be afraid I would ruin her.

But being her friend, pushing her outside of her comfort zone and enjoying her company, well, that I can do. She doesn't need me to keep her safe—she has her brother to do that. But still, I can't help myself for wanting the job.

What she doesn't have is someone to make her feel comfortable enough to be her true self. I can be that guy. I can be that friend. Even if it kills me, letting her go down the road.

She sips the drink I gave her. I instructed her not to take a drink from anyone but me. I know some of the people here, but not every single one.

I can see the red in her cheeks as she giggles at something else that was

said. Girls like her are meant to save guys like me. Too bad our story can't be like that.

Someone turns the music up louder as the song "Numb" by Khalid and Marshmello blares through the air, vibrating the sand we're standing on.

"Catch you guys later," I say, heading toward Winter.

Walking to the back of her chair, I lean down, almost resting my chin on her bare shoulder as she cranes her neck around to look at me.

Smiling, she sighs. "Hi."

"Hey." I grin back. "So, I've got a question. That list of yours, how's it work? Does drinking and dancing only count as one on the list? Or does that qualify as two?" I narrow my eyes slightly. "How many of those fuckers can we get crossed off tonight?"

"It counts as two things," she says surely. "And in order to cross them off, you'd have to know more of them. And I'm so not ready to share that list with you, big fella."

"Big fella? You have no idea," I murmur, fully aware I'm being inappropriate yet unable to stop. "Swimming in the ocean." I point to the drink in her hand. "A little tipsy." Straightening myself out, I walk around to the front of her chair and hold my hand out. "Let's go for a third. Let's go dirty dance."

"Again, never said the dancing needed to be dirty," she deadpans. "That's just your filthy boy brain thinking that."

"My brain is filthy," I answer coolly. "Extra points for dirty?" I raise my eyebrows. "Come on, Snowflake. Let's go make a fool of ourselves. Together."

Her eyes shift between mine until, finally, she takes my hand, and I pull her up.

Tugging her against me, I cup her waist with my hands. "Let's go have some fun."

Directing her to walk on the other side of the fire, I spin her around to face me. Her arms wrap around my neck, and I rest my hands on her hips as she starts to move.

If it wasn't for the liquid courage, I'm not sure she'd be out here with me right now. But as her body moves with mine, our bare feet in the sand, I'm thankful as fuck that she is. That she feels safe enough with me to do this. Secure enough to just relax.

My fingertips dig into her sides. She tosses her head back, laughing at

absolutely nothing other than us and how we probably look, being the only two dancing.

Her blonde hair moves in the breeze, and I realize I don't remember the last time I felt this weightless and carefree. All I want tonight is for the angel in front of me to have a damn good time. For once, it doesn't feel like the weight of the world is resting on my shoulders. I'm just a typical guy, dancing with the most beautiful girl on this entire beach, who, for some reason, agreed to hang out with me.

And I realize right then that I'm not only not hooking up with her out of respect for Bama. I'm also not hooking up with her out of respect for her. She deserves so much better than I could ever offer her. But if I can be a stepping stone for her to realize her worth ... so be it.

The song switches to "broken" by lovelytheband, and I slow, continuing to hold her in my arms.

Her eyes look glassy from the few drinks she's had when she looks up at me. "Thank you, Kye."

"For what?" I say, dipping my head down.

"For being my friend. For making me feel safe and comfortable. You're a good guy. And this friendship? Well, it feels good. I needed it."

She thinks I'm good. Deep down, I'm not. Deep down, I'm a selfish prick who ruins everything I touch.

As long as I don't touch her, I can't ruin her though, right?

I still for a moment. Holding on to someone who probably appears so fragile from the outside, yet I know, deep down, she's a force to be reckoned with. "Thank you for being you, Snowflake. You're a gem."

And when those brown eyes continue to stare up at me, I realize how fucked I truly am.

How am I ever going to just be her friend?



WINTER

I giggle against him, and it's like we've known each other for years. To the outside world, we probably look like best friends. Maybe even lovers. The way his hands hold my body protectively should probably be sending me mixed signals. Instead, I just feel safe.

My hips continue to sway to the music. One song after another plays, and it's like there's nobody else around, just Kye and me. I've never been this comfortable in my own skin before. I'm always painfully aware of my surroundings. After just one full day with Kye Collins, suddenly, I'm more careless, more daring. More confident. Like him.

He was so sweet and patient today. Unlike I'd assumed he would be. I'm starting to actually believe him when he claims he wants to be my friend and has no ulterior motive. Maybe he's just a decent guy. Perhaps he isn't out to hurt me.

"Your dance moves are different than your brother's," he says against my hair. "Bam's are ... yeah, just no. I think the dude turns into a stripper or something. He goes from Grumpy Gus to Magic Mike."

My nose scrunches up. "Luckily, that's a side of my brother I haven't seen." I cringe. "Thank God."

"Think he's going to be cool with this?" he murmurs as the song switches to "Overpass Graffiti" by Ed Sheeran. "Like, actually cool with it?"

"What if he isn't?" I crane my neck to look up at him. "Then, what happens?"

I fully expect him to stammer and stutter over his words. Explaining why he'd choose my brother over me. And I wouldn't fault him for it. After all, he was Beau's friend first, and I would never want my brother to lose a best friend over me.

What I'm not expecting is what comes out of his mouth instead.

"Then, we will deal with it when it comes," he says boldly. "You're going through a tough time. Your ex is a dick, and your best friend is a lying bitch." When I look at him, surprised, he sighs. "Bama told me some stuff. He's

been worried about you.” He gives me a small, reassuring smile. “You need me. And truthfully, Snowflake ... I need you too.” His lips are so close to my neck that I can feel his breath as I try not to shiver. “Your brother is a good man. A *real* good man. But he’s got Dane and that Mila chick—even if he claims to hate her. And he has racing. You and I need each other. And I’m going to be here for you as long as I can. With or without his blessing.”

His words shock me to my core. He barely knows me. Yet he wants to be my knight in shining armor. As long as I can keep my brain and my heart on the same path—that Kye is and always will be only a friend—I’ll be fine.

“Growing up in today’s world is hard.” I sigh. “Trying to fit in, be perfect like the girls on social media, pick out who’s worthy and who isn’t to keep in your circle.” I shake my head. “And the expectations. Don’t even get me started on those.”

“You don’t need to fit in, Winter,” he mumbles. “You’re a badass without trying to mold yourself into someone else that others think you should be.” His hands hold my waist a little tighter. “And as far as who you keep in your circle, it should be only those who make your life better. Fuck the rest.”

I snort. “Then, it would be me, my mother, and Beau. That’s a damn small circle.”

“*And me,*” he says sharply. “Who cares how big the group is? Wouldn’t you rather have a few good ones than a bunch of rotten bastards?”

I nod. I’m not drunk, but the alcohol tonight has made me open up more than I typically would. “Yeah ... I would.” Blowing out a breath, I rest my head against his chest. “I think I’m just a shitty judge of character.”

“We all are sometimes. But don’t keep yourself so guarded that you can’t let go of the past.” I feel him swallow. “One day, Snowflake, someone will give you everything you’ve ever wanted. I promise you that.”

His words make the tears in the backs of my eyes threaten to spill out. I judged him. Assuming he was slimy, like so many other jocks, and just a playboy. He might be the campus playboy, but he’s still my friend. But now, I just need to remind myself not to fall in love with him.

Why does that seem like it might be hard to do?



KYE

The sound of Winter's soft snores fills the truck like a lullaby, making me appreciate the calmness for once. I've spent most of my life running. Running from feelings. Running from problems. Running from the truth. Tonight, I didn't need to run. I didn't want to.

When you're with Winter Bishop, why would you want to run?

As I turn into her driveway and in front of the Bishop family's house, I glance over at her. Her head rests against the window of the truck, her lips slightly parted and her blonde hair a mess all around her angelic face.

She had a good night tonight. At least, I think she did. In just hours of hanging out, we became more than just acquaintances; we're friends. We developed this instant bond between us. A bond I hope won't be shattered by her brother. But at some point, Bama is going to find out because we'll need to tell him. And when that happens, shit is going to get complicated. But I meant what I said. I love Bama; he's like a brother to me. But she needs me. And come hell or high water, I won't walk away.

She looks so serene, and I hate to wake her. But what choice do I have? She can't stay in my truck all night.

Blowing out a breath, I open the door and walk around to her side. "Hey, Snowflake. You're home," I whisper to her. "Time to wake up, sleepyhead."

Tonight was her first time drinking. And even though she was by no means hammered, she got tipsy and is now feeling the aftereffects. She's tired. And I really don't think she's going to wake up.

Reaching around her, I unbuckle her seat belt and slide my hand under her legs. Tucking my other arm behind her back, I pull her against me and head toward the front door.

She's as light as a damn feather, and even though I know she's always been a petite girl, Bama has told me before that he worries she's depressed over everything that's happened lately and that she hasn't been eating much.

She ate a ton with me. Fried pickles and a huge cheeseburger. If I need to spend my days with her just so that she'll eat ... I will.

As long as I'm around, I'm going to take care of her. Because now that I know her, I'm hooked. She's my problem now.

Just before my hand reaches for the door, it opens slowly. Julie stands there in her pajamas, taking in the image of her daughter in my arms.

"Sorry, Mrs. Bishop." I stop. "She fell asleep. I didn't want to wake her." Grinning, I shrug. "Actually, I tried to wake her. Truth is, she sleeps like a damn rock."

She smiles, shaking her head as she opens the door more and waves me in. "That she does."

I follow behind her as she leads me through the kitchen and down a hall.

"Right in there, that's her room," she says, pointing to a door before walking back toward the living room.

Walking into the room, I pull the covers down and gently set her down on her bed.

Pulling the blankets back over her, I kiss her forehead. "Night, Snowflake. Sweet dreams."

"Sweet dreams, Kye," she mumbles sleepily before yawning.

Her mouth makes a smacking noise as she flips to her side. And as I push myself to stand, I glance around her room. Pictures of her and who I know is her and Bama's dad are randomly spread out. There are a few of her dad in his race car. Her desk in the corner is perfectly neat, textbooks stacked on it. I find myself looking around, trying to learn every single thing about this girl that I can by what is on her walls.

Backing out of the room slowly, I halfway close the door behind me.

Julie is sitting on the couch, flipping through the channels on TV. "Did she have fun?" she says softly. "I can tell you, seeing her getting carried in, that was a first. She must have felt pretty comfortable with you to fall asleep."

I lean against the doorframe leading to the living room and nod. "I think she did." I nervously run my hand through my hair. "Hopefully, you don't mind that I ... carried her in."

"Not at all," she says. "But I think her brother would feel different." She gives me a sympathetic smile. "You can't keep this a secret from Beau. My boy might seem tough on the outside, but he's so much softer than meets the eye. This will hurt him."

"But we're just friends," I say quickly. "I'd never go after his sister that way."

“Then, what exactly are you doing?” she says sharply. “Because my girl has been through enough. She’s barely over her last broken heart. She ain’t ready for another.”

Walking across the room, I stop a few feet in front of her. “I like Winter—a lot. And while I can’t be her Prince Charming, I can be her friend. A damn good one too.” I swallow. “She’s a good girl. A good girl who’s having a hard time. I get that. I’ve had a lot of hard times myself. So, please, just let me be there for her. She needs someone now more than ever.”

She arches an eyebrow, narrowing her eyes slightly. “Are you going to hurt my girl, Kye? Because let’s be honest ... I hear things. Campus isn’t far from here. Some of my coworkers have daughters who attend there. And you, my love, well, I hear you are rather *friendly*.”

“Friendly?” I say, confused.

“You get around, Kye,” she deadpans. “That’s what I’m saying.”

“I have relations with women who are also looking for the same type of relations.” I hold my hands up. “No, I don’t date. Yes, I suppose I sleep around a bit. But it’s not like that with Winter. I’m not trying to hook up with her or use her. I just want to be around her—that’s all, Mrs. Bishop.”

Holding two fingers up, she whispers, “Twice, Kye. That’s twice you’ve called me an old-lady name. My name is Julie.”

“Sorry,” I say, stuffing my hands in my pockets. “I should get going, but I promise I’ll talk to Bama soon.” As I start to walk toward the door, I turn toward her. “He doesn’t carry a gun or knife frequently, does he?” I say it as a joke even though I’m slightly concerned.

She keeps her face serious. “Guess you’ll find out, won’t ya?”

Fuck.

six



KYE

I follow Dane into the restaurant, feeling the air conditioner on full blast the minute I walk through the door. Something about Floridians. They like to sweat their balls off outside yet freeze their asses off while they eat. I might be from Florida, but I fucking hate air-conditioning.

The hostess seats us immediately, sticking around once we're seated, playing with her hair and batting her eyelashes, which are way too long. They look like tarantulas, for fuck's sake. Both Dane and I ignore her completely, simply thanking her for the table.

It's been six days since I saw Winter. I texted her a few days ago, asking her how her week was and joking around with her, but texting her isn't the same as hanging out. Truth is, I miss her.

"Bam will be here. He's just running a little late," Dane says from the other side of the booth at the local pizza shop. "Not sure about waiting for him though. I'm so hungry; I could eat the ass right off a rhino."

"Oh, he's coming?" I scratch my neck. "That's ... good, I guess."

The waitress comes over, dropping off a few waters and telling us she'll be back shortly.

I still haven't told Bama that I've been hanging out with his little sister. I've seen him at the dorm and during training, but it seems like a shitty thing to do, telling him without Winter being there. Besides, I'm fucking scared. Motherfucker gets tattoos for fun and doesn't flinch. If you meet a dude like Bama Bishop and you aren't intimidated, you're one dumb son of a bitch.

"Of course he's coming. He's always with us." He tips his chin up at me, taking a drink of the water that was just put in front of him. "But let me guess. You're wondering how much longer you've got your pecker for. You know, before Bam cuts it off?"

"Piss off. I told you, nobody's cutting off my dick." I pretend to scratch my cheek with my middle finger. "What's been up with you anyway? You've had a stick up your ass lately." I fake pout. "Not getting any action?"

"Have not." He scowls. "Just got some shit going on." He looks annoyed.

“I’m getting lots of action. More ass than a fucking toilet seat really.”

“Sure you are, man.” I wave my hand at him. “Who are you, Nate Dogg?”

“Whatever,” he grumbles under his breath.

“Daney Waney, are you sad?” I crumple the paper of my straw and hit him in the face with it. “Girl trouble?”

“Something like that,” he groans, looking at the table. “It’s nothing.”

It’s pretty clear he’s having some girl problems. I can sense it. And with the way he’s been sneaking around the past few months, fucker’s keeping secrets. I’ve never really pushed it because who am I to judge? That’s why relationships are bad—you suck in the negative shit from the other person. It’s not like that with Winter and me. We aren’t dating, nor will we ever be.

“If you need to talk, I’m here.” I take a sip of my water. “I mean it.”

He glares. “I don’t need to talk. Fuck off, you fruitcake.”

“Well, fuck you then.” I lean back, resting my shoulders on the back of the booth. “I’m not all that good at feelings and shit anyway, so probably for the best.”

“Right.” He nods somberly. “I’ve got my shit, and you’ve got yours. And we both know Bama has his. But no need to go all Dr. Phil on me, dude. Makes me uncomfortable as fuck.”

“Some of those episodes are so fucked up, man.” I shake my head and laugh. “When I watch one, I feel like I’m sort of normal.”

He rears his head back. “You actually watch that shit?”

I take my phone out of my pocket and set it on the table, frowning when there are no messages on the screen. “Kind of a fascinating show really.”

“And probably made-up shit,” he points out. “He’s a fucking nutjob. He’s the one who needs help.”

“Still makes more money than we ever will.” I hold my hands up. “So, put that in your pipe and smoke it.”

“I can’t argue with that,” Dane says with a shrug. “Still, Oprah was way better.”

“Obviously,” I deadpan. Knowing damn well this isn’t your average jock conversation and not giving a shit. It’s who we are. Embarrassing as that might be.

Truthfully, I started watching *Dr. Phil* to see families like my own. Maybe even some that were worse. In some fucked up way, it helped me, seeing other people going through the same thing. And as guilty as it made me feel when they relapsed, I felt better that my father wasn’t the only one who

couldn't get his shit together for us. When a kid on the show felt abandoned by a parent, it made me feel less alone.

These are the dark places Winter doesn't know exist. If she did, she'd run.

I know my time is running out to tell Bama the truth. If I don't do it soon, he'll hear it from someone else. And that is not a situation I'm ready to deal with.



WINTER

My fingers hover over the keyboard. I'm trying to write this valedictorian speech, which is proving to be much more difficult than I anticipated. I still have three weeks till graduation, but I like to be prepared.

Maybe it's the fact that I have virtually no friends in school. Or perhaps my vision about the entire class is tainted due to Nathan and Kalyani. Either way, this blows. What I'd much rather do is walk onstage, hold up both middle fingers, and then blow that Popsicle stand.

I take a sip from my half-melted iced coffee and stretch my neck. For hours, I've been in the same chair at this coffee shop. A coffee shop that isn't nearly as popular as the other one in town. Hence why I like it better.

My phone vibrates in my bag. I fully expect it to be my mother, asking me if I'll be home for dinner tonight. She has the night off from the hospital and likes to have dinner together when she's home.

I smile when I see Kye's name instead. When we hung out last weekend, we exchanged phone numbers. And even though part of me always feels like he's hanging out with me with an ulterior motive, my guard is slowly coming down. Even if it is at a snail's pace.

Kye Collins—aka World's Sexiest Man Alive: What's crackalackin' today, Snowflake?

Kye Collins—aka World's Sexiest Man Alive: I know I said this last time, but I need to say it again. You must think I'm super hot to put my name in your phone like that!

I roll my eyes but breathe out a laugh, knowing damn well I didn't put his name in like that. That was all him. We also already had this same conversation the last time we texted.

Me: If it makes you feel better, believing I put it in that way instead of yourself, I'll play along. And not much. At the coffee shop, working on my speech.

Kye Collins—aka World’s Sexiest Man Alive: Speech? Like a public speech? Totally had you pegged wrong.

Me: Valedictorian speech. Although I really, really, really am considering faking an illness the day of graduation to get out of it.

Kye Collins—aka World’s Sexiest Man Alive: Going that good, huh?

Me: You could say that.

Me: Something about standing in front of a bunch of people I can’t stand just doesn’t sound all that appealing. But, hey, could always be worse, I suppose.

Kye Collins—aka World’s Sexiest Man Alive: Say to hell with the speech ... for now. Let’s meet at the gas station just past your house. We’ll find something to take your mind off it.

He quickly writes again.

Kye Collins—aka World’s Sexiest Man Alive: Something not sexual. Or weird. Something where we keep our clothes on. Just to clarify so you don’t panic.

Me: I wasn’t panicking.

I giggle against my hand before closing my laptop and shoving it into my bag.

Me: Be there in ten.

Kye Collins—aka World’s Sexiest Man Alive: It’ll take me twenty. See you soon.



WINTER

I see Kye's jacked-up truck pull into the parking lot and head toward my car. After staring at that blank Word document, I'm happy to see him. It's sad to say he's the closest thing I have to a friend right now. Well ... aside from my mom.

I grab my keys and climb out of the car. When I get inside his truck, that damn grin greets me.

"Looking good, Snowflake. Ready for another fun outing?"

"Am I going to have to swim in the ocean or get drunk? Because ... not so much."

Once I'm buckled, he pulls out of the parking lot, lazily resting one hand on the steering wheel. "Nah, not today. Today, I'll go easy on you, I suppose." He pauses for a moment before his face grows serious. "Is school that bad right now that you really don't want to give your speech? After working *that* hard to be valedictorian?" He shakes his head. "Seems like a shame to let them win."

I know he's referring to Nathan and Kalyani. From what he said, I'm sure my brother's filled him in enough for him to know this year hasn't exactly been easy.

"I'm not letting anyone win," I say. "I'll be there. I'll give the speech. But do I wish circumstances were different? Do I wish that I had a group of friends I was graduating with and that I wasn't a lone wolf, feeling completely isolated from the world around me?" I nod. "Yes, I do. After I moved so suddenly to Florida, even though he wasn't perfect ... Nathan was one of my best friends. He welcomed me with open arms. Helped this place feel sort of like home."

"And then he cheated on you," he practically growls. "With your best friend."

I turn toward him, narrowing my eyes. "I'm aware of that." I blow out a breath. "I wasn't saying he's a good person. Or that I want him back. I was saying that until everything went down, school at Sunrise Academy wasn't

awful.”

He’s quiet for a moment. Seemingly thinking of what to say.

“Just get through graduation. I promise you, once you go to college ... it’ll be better.”

“What will?” I ask.

“All of it.”

“Thanks,” I whisper.

We make small talk for another ten minutes before he turns into the roller rink, and I turn toward him. “Rollerblading? I feel like that’s slightly frowned upon for a football star. What if you hurt yourself?”

“Oh, don’t you worry about that.” He winks. “I’m practically a pro.”

“Cocky, are we?” I raise an eyebrow. “Care for a little friendly competition on who’s better?” I say playfully. “Loser buys ice cream?”

He eyes me over. “You’re on. But guess what, sweet cheeks. This ain’t ice skating.”

“And?” I say, confused.

“It isn’t a *winter* sport.”

“Wow.” I grimace. “That joke was bad. Really, really bad.”

“Plenty more where that came from, babe.” He winks.

As we park and head inside, I realize how much easier breathing seems to feel today than it has in months—no, years.

That empty feeling in the pit of my stomach since my dad died dulls the slightest bit when Kye’s around. The only bad part is, I’m not sure if that’s a good thing.

We’re never going to be together, so I need to remind my heart not to get attached.



KYE

I watch her skate effortlessly next to me. She even goes as far as skating backward and giving me a loser sign.

I'll admit, she's better than me.

A sort of annoying song that kind of has a good beat—"Best Friend" by Saweetie—comes on, and I can't help but embarrass her a little. I do some pelvic thrusts and sing along to it, bobbing my head and scrunching my face up.

Her face turns beet red, and she clutches her stomach with laughter.

"What's so funny?" The chorus starts again, and I point to her and sing it, making her laugh harder.

She's so fucking pretty when she smiles. And it actually makes my soul happy when she does.

This isn't like hanging out with the guys. I love Bama and Dane. As do I my other teammates or surfing buddies. But being around Winter is different. Maybe I do it because, for once, I feel like I'm making a difference in someone's life. I feel like I'm saving her. I *want* to save her.

Once I cut the shit and we start skating normally again, she does some sort of twirly thing and blows me a kiss.

"I'll take a brownie sundae with extra hot fudge *and* rainbow sprinkles." She winks. "You know ... since I clearly won."

Before I can respond, her face falls, and she slows on her skates. Turning around, she glances at me. "Whatever happens next, don't judge me." She whispers the words so quietly, and in her eyes, I can tell she's pleading with me.

"Never," I say, looking over my shoulder at who's behind us.

"Look, it's Winter. And it looks like she has a date," a bitchy voice says snidely. "How do you suppose she convinced him to come here with her?"

"Hard to say really. But lucky him. Might only take her five months to actually put out. Prude," a male voice chimes. "But maybe her pornography skills have improved. So, that'd be a plus."

That's all it takes for me to spin around, heading toward him. Knowing I look damn fucking stupid on these roller skates and not giving a shit.

"What was that?" I say, looking him up and down. "I didn't quite fucking catch you, *bro*."

"Kye," Winter says behind me, pulling on my hand. "Let's just go."

"Ohhh, she speaks." The girl smirks. "You can say hi, *Winter*. That is, unless you aren't over everything."

I'm not sure what comes over her, but when I look over, the battered puppy I've come to know turns into a lioness, and she looks ready to fucking roar.

"Kalyani, I was over everything about two years before you spread your legs for ol' Nathan here," Winter says coolly to the girl. "Oh, and in case you're bad at math—which I know you are because you've failed most of your math tests—that was back when we first started dating."

She smiles proudly at Nathan. "Oh, and by the way, no matter how long it was for me to 'put out,' as you said, it wasn't worth the wait." She glances around, stepping a little closer to him and lowering her voice but still speaking loud enough for me to hear. "When *it* happened ... boy, was it disappointing. For such a tall dude, I expected your dick to match your body." She shakes her head and pulls her lips to the side. "Such a letdown."

I fight the laugh that wants to burst from my mouth. A feeling of pride takes over me for this girl who just stood her ground for probably the first time in her entire life.

He looks shocked for a second, and then he just looks irate. His face reddening and his eyes growing darker. "Is that why you wanted to make that video for me, babe?" He smirks. "That video when I tore that pu—"

My fist flies, connecting with his face before I can stop it. Fucker goes down—hard. His girlfriend screams next to him, sinking to the floor and holding his shoulder.

Grabbing his mouth, he looks at the blood pouring from it. "That was a mistake," he growls.

"No, it was actually the best decision I've made all day. The only one who made a mistake was you when you disrespected Snowflake the way you did." As he stands, I get in his face again, pointing my finger against his nose. "And I promise you, if you do it again, it'll be a helluva lot worse. Next time, you'll be leaving in a fucking ambulance. Best you remember that."

A few of their friends join them, and I hear some of the girls giggling as

they look me up and down.

“That’s Kye Collins. You know, Florida East’s Kye Collins. As in the football god. Campus playboy.” One plays with her hair, trying to be seductive. “He’s so hot. I wonder if she’s bringing him to prom. If she is, I’m totally making my move. I guarantee she can’t satisfy a man like that.” She attempts to whisper, but she’s really fucking loud.

I watch Winter tense beside me.

Kalyani eyes me over, suddenly not looking that mad as her tits thrust up higher. This chick is pure fucking evil. She’d ditch the dude who she ended her friendship with for a quick fuck.

Pathetic.

“Trust me, doll, I’m fully fucking satisfied. Have you seen her ass?” I pull Winter against me. “Isn’t that right, baby? And don’t get me started on her body.” I kiss her neck. “Every fucking inch of it, pure perfection.”

She tries to keep calm, but she wiggles against my touch the slightest bit. “It’s easy to want to satisfy a man when it’s you.”

I pull her tighter against me and cup her face. It’s all for show—at least, I think it is. “You’re so fucking hot, baby.”

Once I’m convinced they believe we’re a couple, I slowly release her before grabbing a fistful of Nathan shirt. “Do we understand each other?”

“Whatever,” he says through gritted teeth. “Stay the fuck away from me and my turf, and we’ll be fine.”

“Oh, brother.” I shake my head. “No can do. See this beautiful lady right here? I’m taking her fine ass to your prom. A prom for *your* class. And guess what you’re going to do about it. Absolutely fucking nothing.” I release his shirt, making him stumble back a few steps. “You’re going to be the good little bitch that you are and stay the fuck away from both of us.”

Taking Winter’s hand in mine, I tip my chin up. “And if you’re not convinced yet, you’d best be. Because you see, Bama’s told me you play ball. That you’re hoping to go pro one day. If you fuck with her again, I promise you, your ass won’t play football *anywhere*.”

“You can’t do that,” he scoffs.

“Wanna make a bet?” I tilt my head to the side. “Fuck with Winter again, and I can guarantee, you will find out.” We turn to walk away. “See you at prom, dickwad,” I toss over my shoulder.

As we head toward a table tucked away in the corner, Winter gets there first and slides into the booth, and I scoot in across from her.

“That was ... yeah.” Leaning toward me, she bites her lip. “I want to yell at you for being violent but—”

“You enjoyed seeing the douchebag get knocked out?” I guess, raising an eyebrow.

Slowly, she smiles, nodding her head. “Totally did. It was strangely satisfying.”

She looks lighter. And part of me believes maybe having me around is the reason. But as much as I love that, it’s also a problem because, deep down, I know I can’t be that guy for her forever. I can’t always be the one who saves her. I’m not cut out for a permanent job.

“How often does shit like that happen?” I look over my shoulder before focusing on her again. “Don’t even think about lying to me.”

She shrinks in her seat. “It’s not a big deal.”

“That’s not what I asked. If they are doing something to hurt you, tell me right fucking now,” I say sharply. “I’ll put an end to it real quick.”

“I don’t need you to do that,” she says, growing frustrated.

“Never said you did,” I answer unemotionally. “You don’t need to.”

She looks at her hands on the table. “When he and I broke up, he sort of turned most of the school against me as well.” Her voice breaks my fucking heart. She looks up at me. “It’s not exactly fun to go to school, but I’m managing. *On my own.*” She shoots me a warning glare. “Please, Kye, don’t try to save me. Just leave me be.”

Running my hand over my face, I blow out a frustrated breath but decide to let it go, changing the subject to something lighter. The last thing I want to do is ruin our night—more than it already is.

“So, I heard that bitchy girl mention *prom*. When is it?” I say, resting my head on the back of the booth. “I need to get a tux and look all spiffy and shit for my hot date. And hopefully, you’re ready for more of my dance moves.” I wink, making a clicking sound with my tongue.

She blushes. “Oh, no ... you don’t have to do that.” She taps her fingertips on the table. Almost as if she’s doing anything to try to make herself feel less uncomfortable. “I honestly don’t plan on going.”

“Why?” I lean forward, looking right into her beautiful brown eyes. “If it’s because of that little bitch ex of yours, I gotta tell you, Snowflake, I’d be disappointed in you. That’s weak.”

She looks pained. And for a moment, I feel bad. Almost. But then I remember that feisty side I saw of her just a few minutes ago. That’s in there,

and I can't wait to see it come out again.

"It isn't that. And I'm not some dumb teenage girl, moping around about a guy. Especially one like him." She lets out a long sigh. "Alabama was never what I saw for my future. I loved my childhood, but I never planned to stay forever." She looks away. "But Alabama was comfortable. It was warm and welcoming."

"It was home," I guess.

She nods. "Yeah. And even though I've been here for two years, I still feel like an outsider." She pulls her lips to the side. "As pathetic as it might sound, I know if I go to prom, I'll basically spend the evening alone. Nathan and Kalyani have made it their mission to make me the school outcast. What would be the point to go and awkwardly stand alone? This place isn't my home. In fact, I hate it."

I reach across the table, taking her chin in my fingers. "Good thing you won't be alone, right? In fact, your date is pretty dang sexy. One might say he's the sexiest man in the world."

She rolls her eyes. "Only you would say that. You and my phone, apparently."

"Welp, I'm taking you. You'll wear something gorgeous, and we'll dance our asses off." I cock my head toward the rink. "And all of those cowards? Well, fuck 'em."

Her lip twitches as she fights a smile.

"Fuck 'em," she says proudly before her eyes widen. "You know, we still need to tell my brother that we're friends now."

Oh ... yeah.

Fuck.



WINTER

Despite our little run-in with He Who I Shall Not Name, it's been a good night. Truth be told, every night with Kye seems to be that way. He's easy to hang out with.

But I'm also aware that we spend most of our time discussing my problems. What about his? He must have some deep, dark crap he keeps tucked behind that carefree grin and twinkling eyes. Everybody has some shit they are so desperately trying to keep hidden. I'm an example of it. After all, I haven't really dealt with my father's death, and it's been over two years. We just packed up, moved to another state, and tried to pretend we were all fine.

We aren't fine.

I'm not fine.

And Beau sure as hell isn't fine. The only feeling he's ever expressed after the wreck is anger. But the other emotions will come. And when they do, yeah, it's going to be bad.

After we left the roller rink, Kye asked if I wanted to go to the pier and get the ice cream he owed me and watch the sunset. Seeing as I had nothing else to do tonight and I was having so much fun, I saw no reason to turn him down. On our way here, we swung by my house to get a sweatshirt, and much to my surprise, he even asked my mom if it was okay if he took me to prom. Her entire face lit up, and even though she threatened that he'd better be on his best behavior, she was thrilled.

We walk to the end of the wharf and stop. Seagulls squawking and the sound of waves crashing along the shoreline are the perfect soundtrack.

"So, you like it at Florida East, huh?" I finish my last bit of ice cream and look out at the water as it rushes beneath the pier. "And football—you love the game? You're a wide receiver, right?"

"Sure am." He grins. "And ... I love it at Florida East. The campus is sick, the football program is top-notch, and I have made some pretty kick-ass friends." He nods. "As for the game, there's just nothing like being in that stadium." He almost mutters the words. "Even the biggest waves and the

saltiest ocean couldn't hold a candle to that place. To that feeling I get when I'm there."

I hear the authenticity in his voice. He loves the game. And while I'm happy for him, I also wish I had that feeling about something too. Something aside from just earning good grades.

"What about the pain? The hits?" I wince. "That can't be easy."

"Pain on that field is nothing compared to the pain of real life, babe." He pauses. "The pain out there? Well, it helps numb the pain out here, in the real world."

"Life can be painful—that's for sure." I sigh, thinking of the losses of the ones we love most. Nobody prepares you for it. They never could. "Are you planning on going pro?"

He rests his elbows on the wooden railing and leans forward, admiring the ocean. "That's the dream. But it isn't a promise. All I can do is put in the work and hope like hell it comes true."

"Y'all are so ambitious." I smile, thinking about how Beau and all of his friends have such big plans for their futures. They know exactly where they want to go. For the most part anyway. "You, my brother, Dane." I frown. "Although, if I'm being honest, I'm not entirely sure my brother's future lies on the grass."

"You think Bam is going to go the racing route?" he asks curiously. "He's damn good at it. Not as good as the chick he claims to hate, Mila. But still fucking great."

My lips turn up. I miss being close to Mila. Before my family moved, she and I were practically inseparable.

"Mila is a racer through and through. Her heart beats to the sound of a revving engine. My brother though?" I sigh. "Sometimes, I think he went back to racing because he feels like he owes it to our dad to leave his name in the drag racing world." I laugh. "Funny thing is, my dad never wanted Beau to be a racer. He wanted him to follow through with football. Less chance of a serious injury." I cringe. "Well, sort of."

"Which do you think he loves more?" he asks curiously.

"Football," I say matter-of-factly. "It's what makes him who he is."

He turns his head toward me. "And what about you? What makes you who you are? What makes your heart beat?"

I freeze, watching the sunset reflect off his notably gorgeous face. "I'm still trying to figure that out," I whisper.

Truthfully, I don't know. But I have this crazy fantasy that I want to tell stories. To write words that will allow people to briefly leave whatever scary or sad reality they are stuck in and travel into a whole new world. I would love to be an author. But that seems like such a pipe dream. One I don't want to share with anyone ... yet.

"You will," he says those two words so surely. "And I can't wait to watch."

The smooth, confident way he said it makes my heart do a flip-flop inside of my chest.

I can't fall for him. For so, so many reasons.

It's just a friendship vibe. That's it.

Guys like Kye are great at being a friend. A boyfriend though? He'd surely be terrible at that.

seven



KYE

“Kye, Bria! I need you to wake up!” my mother screams from downstairs before her loud feet start toward us. She’s upset—that’s pretty clear.

I rub my eyes, sadly knowing what is likely going on before she plows through the door.

“We’re going for a ride! Daddy needs help! Get your shoes on!” she says, sounding completely panicked.

As she nervously runs her hand over the top of her head, I see that her cheeks are tear-streaked.

I’m tired. I had school all day, followed by football practice. When my head hit the pillow tonight, I was spent.

“Bria! Get up!” she yells in my sister’s room. “Get up now and get your shoes on!”

Getting out of bed, I pull on a shirt and shorts and make my way into the hallway.

Bria walks out of her room at the same time. “What is going on?” She squints her eyes, still trying to adjust to the light. “Why does Dad need help?”

“You know why,” I growl. “Same shit, different day. When is this going to end? I’m so over this crap.”

“That is enough, Kye!” my mother sneers. “You are fourteen years old; you don’t need to use words like shit.”

“But this whole thing is shit though.” I shake my head. “All of it.”

She marches toward me, bending down so that her face is in mine. “Get your ass in the car right now, or there will be consequences!”

“Yeah,” I say, laughing bitterly in her face like the asshole that I am. “Because you’re so good at dishing out consequences. Just ask Dad about that when we find the sorry son of a bitch.”

My mother grits her teeth, glaring at me with nothing but pure anger. “One. More. Word.”

I open my mouth to answer, but my sister stops me.

“Kye, stop,” Bria whispers. “I get it. But let’s just go. You aren’t helping.”

“Whatever,” I mutter. Pushing past them and walking out to the car.

I hate that my dad puts us in these situations. I might be a dick to my mom, but what it comes down to is, I know she deserves better than the shit she allows him to do to her. I’d never be as weak as her for someone else. And I’d also never be that selfish to make a woman take care of my ass the way that he does.

My sister climbs in the front seat, and my mother yanks the door open, sliding in behind the driver’s seat. She starts the car and slams it into drive before peeling out of the driveway in a hurry.

She continues to dial Dad’s number on her phone, over and over again. Each time, her body language shows how truly frustrated she is. Hitting her breaking point after at least twenty attempts, she throws the phone at the dashboard.

“God!” she screams, an ear-piercing shriek, before pounding her fist against her steering wheel. “I am so sick of this! I am so tired of what this addiction is doing!” Her breath is shaky as she pushes out more words. “I am so fucking tired of living this way. I can’t ... I can’t do this. I’m s-s-so tired.”

She sobs before pulling over against the curb, trying to catch her breath. “Damn it, Kenny.” She whispers my dad’s name. “Damn you for putting us through this.”

She wipes her sleeve across her face as she continues to sniffle. She utters inaudible things under her breath, crying to the point of hyperventilating.

All the crap my father has put her through has finally become too much, and she’s breaking. Maybe, now, we can be free.

“Shh, Mom,” Bria says, wrapping her arms around her. “It’s okay. I’m sure he’s safe. You’re okay. It’ll all be okay.”

My mother’s breath squeaks as she tries to calm herself, burying her face in Bria’s shoulder.

“None of this is fair,” my mom cries. “Not to me and sure as hell not to you two.” She raises her head and peeks back at me. “I know you’re angry, Kye. And I’m sorry.” Her face is soaked, and her voice is barely a whisper. “I want better for you than this. I just ...” She looks away, shaking her head. “I’m weak when it comes to your dad. He is all I know. I love him.” Her lip

trembles in the moonlight. “And despite all these crappy times, he is a good person. He has a heart of gold. He’s just”—a sob comes from her again —“lost. He’s lost to this awful disease, and we can’t just give up on him. He needs us. And I don’t expect you to understand. I really don’t. But I know, one day, you will. Even if that seems impossible to think right now.”

I look away from her, glancing out the window, wishing I were in my bed. This isn’t the first time we’ve done this in the middle of the night. It sure as hell won’t be the last. Bria is a saint, and I’m a selfish prick. But I am this way because of that man. Each time something like this happens, a piece of myself chips away. What would be left of me if I let this go on for my entire life? I need to keep him away from me. It’s the only way the darkness won’t swallow me whole.

I know she needs to hear me say I understand. Or at least that I’m going to try. I love my mom. Despite her putting us in really shitty situations for the man she loves, she’s a good mother.

She has always made holidays special. Gingerbread houses, sugar cookies, Advent calendars with those gross, waxy chocolates inside. Hell, even matching pajamas. She has always done it all. And despite how tired she is from my dad, she does it all with a smile on her face. What he lacks, she gives one thousand percent. And that’s why she will always be my hero even if I resent her at times.

Looking back at her, I nod drowsily. “I don’t understand. And I can promise you, I never will,” I mutter. “But I love you, Mom. And I’ll be damned if I let you go through this shit alone.” I give her shoulder a pat. “Let’s go get this over with.”

I know she won’t go home until we’ve exhausted every option to find him. I might as well not fight it. The sooner we find him strung out, the sooner I get to go home.

Once she’s calmed down, we pull away from the curb and drive for the next hour. My eyes grow heavy, and my stomach feels queasy from lack of sleep. Mom worked a twelve-hour shift today at the medical center, so I know she’s exhausted too.

We continue to drive, passing by every abandoned parking lot or hidden place. Any unseen crevice that he could have pulled into to get high. Or perhaps where a dealer left him for dead because he owed money.

The older I get, the more I realize how truly dark my father’s addiction is. I can’t call it a disease. A disease is cancer. My father chose to try drugs. He

picked this life.

Finally, after nearly two hours of driving, we turn down a long road. She continues to drive for half of a mile before pulling in front of a crappy-looking trailer.

Dad's old, rusted truck sits off to the side.

My father had a nice truck for a while. He bought it when he had a streak of being clean for nearly eight months. But then he fell off the wagon, and when you don't make your payment, a tow truck comes and gets your vehicle. My mom's busted her ass to make sure we have everything we need. She's had to, seeing as every cent of my dad's money goes to drugs.

Mother looks in the mirror at me before swinging her gaze to my sister. "Stay here. Do you hear me? Stay here with the doors locked." She holds a finger up. "Under no circumstances do you open the door. Do you understand?"

Neither of us answers. Instead, we look at the trailer with the loose garbage in the yard and an old mattress on the lawn. I shiver. This place seems no good.

My mother gives us one more warning glare. Telling us we'd better not disobey her before she reaches for the door handle and starts to get out.

"Mom, I don't think this is a good idea," Bria says, reaching across the seat and grabbing her hand. "Please, Mom. Don't. Just ... call the cops. Something, anything. You can't go in there."

"Baby, it will be fine." She tries to sound calm but fails. "Your daddy went to high school with this man. While I don't exactly support his life choices, I think he's harmless."

"People can change, Mom," I warn her. "Just call the cops. Please, don't go in there."

She gives us a sad, small smile and gets out of the car, ducking her head down. We both know she won't listen. Nina Collins doesn't back down from anything. "I won't be long. Promise me you'll stay here and lock the doors behind me."

When we don't answer, she snaps, "Promise me!"

"Fine!" Bria cries. "Fine."

My mom's eyes move to mine, and I nod, crossing my fingers behind my back. "Promise."

As she shuts the door and walks up the front steps, I get a sick feeling inside my stomach. The type of people my dad hangs out with ... they aren't

good. Even if my mother thinks this guy is harmless, people change when they are on drugs.

My mom is in danger.

I watch as she pushes the door open and walks inside. I can't stop myself; I have to help her. I have to keep her safe.

After all, my dad sure as hell can't. He never has.

My breath catches in my throat as I sit up in bed, coughing.

“Fuck,” I whisper, running my hand over my face.

Those nights, just like so many others, haunt me. And when my sister acts like our father is a saint or I see pictures on her social media of her and our dad on days like Father's Day or his birthday, praising him for the man he is, I don't fucking get it. She was there too. For those nights and all the others. Or the times he robbed shit from his and my uncle's shop just to get high. Or when he sold our mother's jewelry for a quick hit.

She witnessed all of it. And yet she makes me feel like the bad guy for staying away from the man who fucked my head up for life.

The times we found him, thinking he had overdosed with his mouth hanging open and his skin pale, will always be stuck in my brain. Bad memories, like when I was ten and he drove us home from somewhere and dozed off. The day Bria got a broken arm and I had a forehead full of stitches.

I touch the ugly scar on my forehead—a reminder of that awful day—thankful it's faded some. I keep my hair a little longer in the front just to cover it up. Not because I'm ashamed of it, but because I hate when someone asks me how I got it.

I remember that day so well. Our mother was home sick with a terrible stomach flu and had to rely on him to get us. He showed up—an hour late. He could barely talk, and his face was sweating. I was starting to learn the truth about why he was the way he was. And each day, it was making me hate him more.

I was finally seeing him for who he truly was. Or maybe who the drugs made him become. He'd be coming off a high, aggravated at the world, and everything got on his nerves. Mom would simply ask him a question, and he'd go off the deep end. My sister would ask him for help with her homework, and he'd bite her head off. Only to be the nicest man we'd ever seen an hour later. Ups and downs. So many fucking ups and downs.

After age twelve, I didn't ask for a thing from that man. I knew better than to bother.

At my old high school, everyone knew exactly what my dad was. I was still popular. I was still the jock who everyone wanted to be, but I didn't miss the whispers when I walked by. Or the parents' facial expressions, knowing their kid was hanging around me. No mother wanted their daughter within ten feet of me. And no father wanted their son to be influenced by me. It didn't matter that I was no different than their sons. They didn't care that I carried the football team to a championship. No, all they saw was the son of a man who was known as the town junkie. Not that I can blame them. After all, addiction runs in families. And I'm sure everyone wondered if I'd follow that same path.

So, I surfed. And I played ball. And I fucked my way through high school to numb it all. Anything that brought me pleasure, I wanted every ounce of it I could get. But when seconds ran out on the clock, when the daylight disappeared and ended my day at the beach, or when that one-night stand was over and they left my bed ... I was alone again.

And I couldn't fucking bear it.

Now, I have Winter. And when she's not around anymore, it'll be no different.

I won't be able to fucking bear it.



WINTER

Another school day is over. *Thank Jesus*. One step closer to the finish line and starting the next chapter of my life.

I got some nasty glares and a few whispers in the hall, but luckily, nothing fell out of my locker. So, all in all, it was a good day.

I was supposed to stay late today to tutor someone. But after waiting twenty minutes for them to show up, it became clear they weren't going to.

Most of the kids I've tutored don't run in the same group as Nathan, which also makes them outcasts. It works for me because they don't instantly hate me. It was suggested that I work with a few football players, but of course, they wouldn't have it. Even if I am a damn good tutor, accepting my help wasn't worth risking their social life.

Closing my locker, I hike my messenger bag up on my shoulder and head toward the back of the school, where my car is parked. I turn down the long hallway, the one with the entrance to the gymnasium on one side, the locker rooms on the other. At the end is the senior parking lot.

Strong arms pull me against a body as I get tugged into the supply closet, kicking my feet.

"Shh ... it's just me," Nathan whispers. "Don't kick me, babe."

I kick harder.

"Winter, stop," he says against my ear. "Last time I snuck you in here, you liked it."

Remembering some things from a self-defense class I took freshman year, I do a quick move before slamming him right in the junk with my fist.

He cries out, bending down to cup his penis. "Jesus Christ, Winter!" he whimpers. "What the fuck?"

"How fucking dare you pull me in here, you sick fuck!" I spew. "I could have you arrested for this."

"Why are you so mad?" He catches his breath, straightening himself out. "I know you aren't over me. There's no way that douchebag Kye Collins has replaced me. So, why are you freaking out, baby?"

“Don’t *baby* me.” I make a repulsed face. “And that’s what this is all about, huh?” I snarl. “Guess you didn’t take his warning, huh?” I shake my head. “You really are missing a few brain cells, aren’t you?”

“I miss you,” he says, looking at my lips. “I fucked up. I fucked up so badly, baby.”

“You have Kalyani, moron.” I scowl, starting to back up. “Go find her to scratch whatever itch you’ve got going on.” I chuckle. “Actually, she probably gave you the itch to begin with.”

“She’s nothing compared to you.” He reaches out, brushing my cheek with his fingers. “Honest to fucking God, I think about you all the time.”

He leans down, and his lips are on mine before I have time to step back. He tries to slip his tongue inside my mouth, instantly making my stomach turn.

Pulling backward, I shove his chest, forcing him away from me. “Don’t touch me unless you want me to rip your dick off this time,” I growl. “We’re done here.”

“Call it off with Collins, and it’ll all end.” He holds his hands out. “Easy as that.”

“What will end?”

“The entire school hating you. The pranks in your locker.” He takes a step closer. “I’ll even delete that video.”

“You mean, that video you took without my permission?” I narrow my eyes. “I don’t believe you. You’re too much of a lying dirtbag for me to trust.”

“That’s fair,” he says coolly. “But this time, I’m not bluffing. Because seeing you with him”—he looks down—“I can’t fucking do it.”

I eye him over cautiously. The voices in my head scream loud. Reminding me of how nice it would be to not constantly have to worry about that video surfacing. I can take the harmless jokes or being the school outcast. But that video? That haunts me every day.

I turn quickly and run into the hallway. Never checking first if there’s anyone in my way.

My body collides with another, and Kalyani’s mouth hangs open as she snarls.

“Watch it!” she sneers, her cheering uniform hugging her body perfectly as her eyes move to the closet. “Who were you in there with?”

As my eyes follow hers to the closet, Nathan walks out, pretending to

fasten his belt. A smug look on his asshole face.

Kalyani's face turns as red as a tomato, but I don't have it in me to stick around, and my legs start running toward my car.

Fuck this day and fuck those two.



After taking a long, piping hot bubble bath, I climb into bed. Exhausted yet feeling completely restless.

What Nathan offered, it could change my life. Right now, I'm constantly worrying, thinking about this tape he has of us. Had I known he was taking it ... I would never have had sex with him. Actually, I would never have dated him in the first place.

My phone dings, and when I glance at it, I see it's Kye, asking if I want to go attempt this surfing thing again. He promises me he'll buy unlimited "nasty" fried pickles after even if I don't get up on the board.

Tossing my head back on my pillow, I ignore it. It's not lost on me that this video haunts me every day of my life. If Nathan releases it to the school and my family finds out, I'll never be able to face my mom or brother again. My mom thinks I'm a good girl. She'd be heartbroken to learn that I'm not.

I pick up Colleen Hoover's newest book from next to me and open it. When it comes to her work, I'm sort of an addict. She has a way of leading me right into the pages and keeping me there. I feel as though I were there, living and breathing it.

I realize how busy my brain must be because after trying to read the first page at least five times, I still can't concentrate enough to absorb it, and I toss it to the side. I'm completely doomed at this point if I can't even focus enough to read the queen's words.

My phone dings again. This time, I don't even have to look at it to know it's Kye again.

Rolling over, I grab it just as another message comes in.

Kye Collins—aka World's Sexiest Man Alive: Cat got your tongue?

Kye Collins—aka World’s Sexiest Man Alive: Or did you go to the ocean without me? Perhaps a shark got your fingers, and now, you’re unable to text back.

I stare at the screen. Would I really end our short-lived friendship strictly because of this sex tape? *Maybe*. It isn’t like things between Kye and me are going anywhere. When he goes pro, he’ll have a new girl every night. Leaving me in the dust.

I groan out loud, squeezing my eyes shut until I hear my phone start to ring.

When I see Kye’s name flash across the screen, I silence the call. But when another message comes through, I know I need to face him.

Kye Collins—aka World’s Sexiest Man Alive: You can answer me, or I can drive over to your house—your call.

And when my cell rings again, I answer it.

“Hello?” I say quietly into the phone. “Why do you keep calling? You look like a psychopath.”

“Ask me if I care,” he says bluntly. “And why do you keep ignoring me? What the hell is going on, Snowflake?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose with my fingers. “I think ... maybe we shouldn’t hang out anymore.”

“And why the hell not?” Even through the phone, I can tell he’s scowling. “That makes no fucking sense.”

I can’t tell him the truth. That’s embarrassing. No, I need to lie. Because, apparently, these days, that’s what I am. A big, fat liar.

“Beau wouldn’t want us hanging out—you know that,” I offer weakly. “It’s time we cut it off.”

“No, that’s not it,” he says. “I’m actually in the neighborhood, so I’ll be there in a few. Tell me to my face why you have this lame fucking excuse as to why we can’t hang out anymore.”

Before I can answer, he ends the call, and I stare at my phone, completely flabbergasted. That is, until I realize he’s going to be here and I’m in pajamas with dogs and cats all over them.

I shoot up out of my bed to change into leggings, shorts—something, anything to look less dorky. But before I can peel them off, there’s a knock at the door.

“Damn, he moves quick.” I throw a hand in my hair, looking down at my attire. “I really need to get some new pajamas. Christ almighty.”

As I head toward the door, I smooth myself out. I can be in faded pajamas, but I don’t need to look like I just rolled out of bed. That would make it worse.

I swing the door open, and he looks me up and down.

“Wow ...” he says. “Meow and woof. Looking good, Snowflake.”

Holding up my middle finger, I narrow my eyes. “Piss off. You showed up here. At *my* house.” I wave toward my attire. “I wasn’t trying to impress anyone.”

“That’s pretty obvious, babe.” He nods, cupping his chin. “Are those ... grumpy cats and wiener dogs?”

“Shut up,” I groan, completely wanting to die.

He laughs before his face grows serious. “What the fuck is this shit about not hanging out anymore? And don’t blame it on Bam because I know that’s not it.”

Bam, Bama—these nicknames my brother’s friends have for him are so weird to me. Beau is his damn name. I like that much better than Bam or Bama.

“It’s just not going to work.” I lean against the door. “I’m sorry. You should leave.”

“Not going to work?” He dips his head down, narrowing his eyes. “We’re fucking friends, Winter. What isn’t going to work?” He rears his face back, tilting it to the side, as if cross-examining me. “This is about Nath ... I mean, douche, isn’t it? He put you up to this?”

“No,” I say, gazing down. “Look, it’s much more complicated than you could even begin to understand. Trust me on that.” I exhale. “I really, *really* think it’s best you just go.”

As I start to step back, his hand catches the door before it can shut. “Not happening. So, fucking speak. Now.”

“I’m not a dog.” I level him with a glare. “Don’t speak to me like I am.”

“I guess I forgot, you know, with those pajamas,” he says.

My mouth hangs open as he casually moseys on into my damn house.

Apparently, Kye Collins is a man who does what he wants, when he wants.

Jerk.

“Excuse m—”

“Look here, woman, you’re going to talk to me about whatever the fuck happened today.”

“Kye! You can’t just barge in here like this!” I point at him. “This is crazy behavior. *You* are insane.”

He shrugs nonchalantly. “I’ve been called worse.” He tilts his head, an amused look on his stupidly perfect face. “Did you bake anything tonight?”

My eyes roll. “Maybe I did. Maybe I didn’t. You’re being overbearing.”

As he strolls past me and into the kitchen, my jaw hits the ground.

The nerve of this guy.

He holds up a cookies-and-cream cookie, and his eyes widen. “Now, *this* is what I’m talking about.” He takes a bite, closing his eyes as a small moan escapes his plump lips. “Fuck, that’s good.”

“I’m not sure if you realize this, but people who have been friends for, like, five minutes don’t typically barge into each other’s houses and eat their food without asking.” I lean against the bar. “It doesn’t exactly scream well mannered. And one might even go so far as to say it’s psychopathic behavior.”

Even while he’s being a jerk, it’s hard not to admire Kye’s beauty. That blond hair against his tanned skin. His chiseled body from hours of hard work in the gym every day. His piercing blue eyes that glimmer when he’s up to no good.

He gives me a lopsided grin. “I never claimed to be proper. Proper is boring as fuck.” Finishing his cookie, he brushes his hands together. “Now, go on. Tell me what this nonsense is of why we can’t hang out anymore. I’m listening.”

I bite my lip. “I just—”

Holding his hand up, he gives me a pointed look. “Before you begin, no lies, Snowflake. I can read you like a book.”

When I feel my heart start to drop, he must sense my nervousness because his face softens.

“I promise you, whatever it is, it’s safe with me. Always,” he assures me.

And for some crazy reason, I believe him.

Walking around the bar, I take a seat, patting the one beside me for him to sit too. Once he does, I face forward, picking at my nails.

“There’s something that exists in this world that involves me. Something humiliating.” I swallow. “It makes it so I can’t really go against a certain person. If I do ... this thing will be released into the world.” I suck in a breath

before letting it out slowly. “And when it does, it won’t be good for me.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see him watching me.

“I don’t really understand.” His voice stays low.

“A video, Kye.” Tears spring to my eyes as I shake my head lightly. “Nathan has a video of me—of us. And if I continue to be seen with you ...” I sniffle. “The entire school, or even Earth, is going to see it. My mother will know it exists.” I can barely choke out the next words. “Beau will know.”

He pulls my body against his chest, and I lean into him.

“Winter, I’m so sorry.” He pulls back, cupping my cheeks. “Don’t be ashamed though. This isn’t on you. You know that, right? This is on that scumbag.”

“Beau will kill Nathan if this gets out,” I say shakingly. “He’ll go to jail. And I don’t want him getting in trouble for my stupid mistakes. That’s the main reason why this can’t get out.” I look up at him. “I like you, Kye. I really, *really* do. But right now, you aren’t good for me. You’re downright detrimental.”

His eyes look hurt before they widen a little. “I’ll never say I’m good for you. I’m probably not. But, Snowflake, I’m not going anywhere. I’ll take care of this.” His eyes float down to my lips for a split second before finding my eyes again. “One day, you’ll find the guy of your dreams and kick my sorry ass to the curb. But until then, I’m going to be right here.”

And call me crazy, but for some reason, I believe him.



KYE

I finish popping us some popcorn and head to the couch, where Winter is sitting with her legs curled under her. Even in the state she's in, she's absolutely breathtaking.

I pass her a bowl of popcorn and a water, pained when I see her eyes are still red and puffy from crying. I know it took so much courage for her to tell me the truth. But she did, and now, I need to make sure she knows I'm going to be here for her.

For as long as I can anyway.

After she opened up to me, I told her not to worry about it. As long as I'm around, he's not going to fuck with her. But I'm going to make sure he knows he fucked with the wrong person.

Winter told me Florida East was one of his choices to play ball for in college. Well, too bad for him because our coach has kids. A daughter in fact. One he is extremely protective of. He wouldn't be too fond of the shit Nathan's pulled. That isn't the type of man he wants on his team.

"What are we watching, babe?" I nod toward the blank screen of the TV. "Your choice."

"Anything?" she says, popping a piece of popcorn between her lips, giving me the sweetest smile.

I could love her, if I let myself. But I'm not good enough for her. No one truly is.

"Anything at all." I pass her the remote from the stand next to me. "Just as long as it's not *Marley & Me* or something like that. I hate movies where the dog dies. Fuck that shit."

"You mean, like *Turner & Hooch*?" She raises an eyebrow.

"That's exactly what I mean." I pinch her side, making her squeal. "That movie fucking traumatized me as a kid. Once I knew the dog died, I'd fast-forward through that part."

"But he still died," she says, narrowing her eyes. "So ... how did fast-forwarding change the outcome?"

“Well, asshole, if you must know, I’d pretend like he didn’t die. I told myself he was just at work, being the badass doggy agent that he was.” I widen my eyes. “Boom! Problem solved.”

“So, you clearly watched it multiple times then?” She stares at me. “And you’re saying you ... fast-forwarded it every single time?”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” I answer proudly. “I’m a sensitive guy. What can I say?”

She stares at me for a moment before she starts laughing. “Kye Collins, if only the rest of the world knew you were actually a squishy marshmallow inside. What would they think?”

I bring my lips into a straight line and shake my head. “Oh yeah. Laugh it up, dick. I only cried for, like, an hour after I first watched it.”

Everything is so easy with her. Right now, I’m in her house. Yet I feel more at home than I ever have at my own. I’m not going to lie; the day she tells me she’s met someone and she can’t hang out with me anymore out of respect for them, I’m going to be really fucking sad. She’s quickly become my favorite part of my day. I know all good things come to an end, but hell, this time, it’s going to hurt.

“Oh crap. I just remembered you wanted to go surfing.” She cranes her head to look out the window. “It’s nearly dark now.”

“I’ll give you a pass. Just this *once*,” I tell her. “But only because, a few minutes ago, you were all snotty and crying. Didn’t feel right to drag your sad ass out there today.” I wave to her pajamas. “Plus, you’d have had to change out of these bad boys. But tomorrow or the next day? That’s a different story. One day soon, you’ll be out, riding those waves with me.”

She swats my chest. “Jerk, I was *not* snotty. And my pajamas are extremely comfortable. Don’t be jealous just because you aren’t confident enough to sport these things,” she says, bobbing her head with attitude as she continues to scroll through the movies on the screen, stopping at *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*.

She turns to face me again. “Okay, so hear me out. I get that it’s springtime and all that, but my family would always watch this movie weeks or even months before Christmas. It was my dad’s favorite. No matter how many times we’d seen it, we’d all still laugh just as hard.” Her eyes grow glassy, and she tugs a blanket from the back of the couch and pulls it up to her chin. “When I’m missing my dad or having a rough time ... I just put it on. And as corny as it might sound, I instantly feel better.”

I lie back, resting my head on the cushions. “Works for me, Snowflake. Let’s do it.”

“Before we start it, I need to ask you, why are you so sure the tape won’t be leaked?” She chews her lip. “He’s ruthless, Kye, and, as I’m realizing ... downright evil.”

Reaching over, I take her hand in mine. “I need you to trust me on this. Please?” I give it a squeeze. “If I thought I was putting your reputation in jeopardy, I’d back away.” I grimace. “Even as badly as it would suck, I would. But I’m not. I have a plan. And I promise you, once I’m through with him, you won’t have to worry about him anymore.”

I do have a plan. Sort of. And that sort of plan doesn’t include walking away from this girl.

“Word to the wise?” She tries to joke, but it sounds forced. “Don’t be a shitty judge of character, like me.”

“Even the wolves can blend in with dogs sometimes, Snowflake.” I shrug. “Live and learn. That’s all you can do.”

I could sit here and pretend I’m saving her. But the truth is, she’s my lifeline. She just doesn’t know it.



“Kye, no!” Bria screeches. “She told us to wait here! We have to listen to her!”

“You wait here.” I climb out of the car and look at my sister. “Please, promise me you will.”

She blinks, and tears stream down her face. Her head shakes back and forth frantically.

“Promise me!” I yell. “Say it!”

“Fine, I promise.” Her lip quivers. “Please, just come back.”

I nod and hold out my pinkie. Something we haven’t done since we were little kids, but when we did it, it always meant we were telling the truth.

I close the door gently and walk to the doorstep. Leaning over the crappy railing, I peek in the dirty window. I can hear muffled voices, but I can’t

make out what they're saying.

A loud crash startles me, and I feel sweat building up on my forehead. I've been in weird situations like this before. Like his drug deals, where I waited in the truck while he went into a trailer, staying inside for what seemed like forever. Hell, even gas station parking lots with the scariest-looking people were normal places for me and Bria to be.

But this? This seems different. And the feeling in the pit of my stomach tells me this isn't good.

I hear my mother yelp, and I rush into the house without thinking. And as soon as I do, I know without a doubt that my mom made the wrong decision when she loaded her kids up and brought us on this godforsaken adventure.

"Well, well, well. Looky what we have here." A skinny man with straggly hair and not many teeth smiles sickly at me. "What did Kenny do, invite the whole family over?"

He holds my mother by her hair. Her wide, panicked eyes stare at me, and I know she's scared. She's scared for me. She's scared for her.

I don't want to say it out loud, but I'm scared too.

Taking a gun out of his waistband, he holds it to her stomach before slowly dragging it up her abdomen and along her breasts. As he kisses her neck, I have to squeeze my eyes shut, unable to watch.

When I open them again, he has the gun pressed to her temple as she shudders in pure fear. The tears roll down her now-pale face. She looks like she's seen a ghost, and I know she's afraid this is the end for us.

"Jim ... Jimmy," my father stutters as he walks into the room from the trailer's hallway. He looks like he hasn't slept in a week. The dark circles under his eyes are darker than I've ever seen them. And his arms are skinnier than they've ever been. "Let her go. She's just lookin' for me." He slurs the words.

But even while he's high, I can tell he is terrified.

His eyes shift to mine. "Go out to the car, son. I'll take care of your mama."

"No," I say through gritted teeth. "I'm not leaving her."

Jim laughs. A sick, chilling laugh. Getting excitement from someone else's fear. "Who said him leaving was an option, Kenny?"

He smells my mother's hair, and she looks like she's going to be sick. "Kenny's always had his eyes on you, pretty thing." He runs his hands up her body, and now, I have to fight the urge to throw up. "I thought you were

a bit of a prude, to be honest. That nose of yours up in the air so high, like your shit don't stink." He smiles again, revealing what teeth he has left. "Bet your mama and daddy were so proud when you brought Kenny here home." He looks at my dad, shaking his head. "Quite the prize, isn't he?"

"Jim"—my dad steps closer, holding his hands out—"please ... let them go. This doesn't have anything to do with them."

He moves the gun from my mom's head and points it at me. "Lie down on the floor, boy. Show your daddy what his mistakes have led him to." He laughs again, making a rattling noise come from his chest. "Go on. On your stomach." He hits the gun on the wall, making my mom flinch. "Now!"

I do as I was told, my eyes never leaving mom's.

The floor is filthy. Cigarettes, dirt, needles, and trash cover every inch of it. I'm scared. I'm really, really scared. But teenage boys don't cry. I have to hold it together. For my mom. And for Bria.

Oh shit. Bria. What if she comes in after me?

I pray to God she doesn't. I couldn't handle my sister being in harm's way. I'd jump in front of the barrel of that gun before allowing that.

"What do you need, Jim?" My dad's voice drips with fear. "My truck? Take it. More drugs? I'll find them. I'll get you whatever money you want tomorrow. Just please, let my family go."

"I supply you with the drugs, junkie! What could you possibly offer me?" he growls. "You're pathetic, Kenny. Showing up here tonight, offering me any scraps you have just to get a hit. You're weak."

"Take the truck." My dad points outside. "If you let us go right now, I'll leave the truck, and you'll never hear from me again. I swear it, Jimmy. Please. Let my family go. He's just a boy. He shouldn't have to see this shit."

"And whose fault is it that he does, huh?" Jim snarls. "Your life choices led you to this fucking moment, you dumb fuck."

"I know." My dad's face changes into something I've never seen before, and his eyes fill with tears. "This ain't you, Jimmy. Let us go. And if you can't let me go, at least let them go. Please."

I peek up at the man as my heart pounds so hard in my chest that I can hear it in my ears.

He moves the gun back to my mom's head, and I push myself off the ground. And when the gun goes off, I can't stop the bloodcurdling scream from ripping from my throat.

I'll never be the same.

“Kye, wake up!” I feel someone shaking me. “Kye, you’re having a nightmare. Wake up!”

My eyes fly open, and I look around Winter’s living room before my eyes finally land on hers. She looks like she’s been sleeping too. But judging by the panicked look on her face, I was having my nightmare out loud.

Fuck.

“Are you okay?” She kneels down in front of me, her hands on my shoulders. “You were screaming.”

She’s as pale as a ghost as her wide eyes stare at me in horror. Even in my sleep, I could fuck her up.

The sweat covering my body quickly chills me to the core, and I force her backward when I stand. “I’m fine. I should get going.”

As I walk toward the door, she races in front of me, pushing her hands against my chest. “You are not leaving, Kye. It’s the middle of the night. Just stay.” Her lip trembles. “Please. Please stay with me.”

I attempt to go around her, but she just keeps moving to block me.

“Talk to *me*,” she says hastily. “I talked to you. Now, it’s your turn, and look what you’re doing. Running. We’re friends now. And you can’t run from me either. Just like you don’t let me run from you. This is a two-way street whether you like it or not.”

My chest heaves as I try to get my breathing under control. And when Winter’s small arms wrap around my waist and she puts her chin to my chest and looks up at me, I finally come back to reality.

It was just another fucked up dream. I am fine. I don’t need to run.

“Please, let me be here for you.” She rubs her hands up and down my sides. “The way you always are for me.”

“I’m fucked up, Snowflake,” my voice rasps. “The shit that haunts me? It’s real dark and ugly. It’s my past. And probably my future.” I breathe her in, letting her scent calm me. “When I’m with you, I don’t battle those nightmares. I try to make you laugh or bust your ass. But when that’s over ... they come back. They’ll always be with me.”

Pulling back, she looks up at me, wiping her hand across my forehead. “Will you stay? It’s too late to drive. Besides, I don’t love being alone, and Mom’s gone tonight.”

The way her voice pleads, how could I say no?

“Of course I will.” I nod slowly. “I told you, I’m not going anywhere.”

Her hand tugs me back to the couch, and she curls up into my side, pulling the blanket over us. She doesn't ask any questions, and she doesn't try to push for answers.

"The nightmare ... my mom had a gun to her head. I was forced to lie on the floor by my dad's dealer." I pull my hair, making it fall over my forehead. "I thought it was all over. I really thought we were goners." I pause, swallowing back emotions. "At the last second, he aimed the gun at the ceiling and shot the roof. He beat the shit out of my dad and told him never to come back or he'd be as good as dead." I stare straight ahead. "It wasn't just a nightmare, Snowflake. It happened when I was fourteen." I put my chin on top of her head. "My old man ... he's an addict. And that's just one of the many times that haunts me still."

She snuggles against me, getting her body as close as possible. "I'm so sorry, Kye," she whispers. "I can't imagine how much pain you must have felt."

"Could always be worse, right?" I say. "At least I have my mom. She's a saint, but she has put up with his shit for far too long. I don't get it. I really don't."

"Is he ..." She pauses. "Clean now?"

"For now, yeah. But that's always how it goes. He gets clean, stays clean for a while until, one day, he isn't. It never lasts."

"She loves him," she says matter-of-factly, craning her neck to look at me. "Love is supposed to be unconditional, unwavering, no matter what its circumstances." She gives me a sad smile. "She sounds like one hell of a woman to stay strong in the face of all that."

"She is," I mutter. Knowing Winter is right yet still feeling a certain bitterness in my heart from her words.

We sit there in complete silence until we finally manage to doze off to sleep. But just before I do, I realize I've just shared more with Winter than I have with anyone else in my entire life.

eight



KYE

I watch the clock, waiting for the last few minutes of class to slowly tick by. I'll be happy as hell when school ends in two weeks. I'm ready for summer.

What I'm not ready for is to move back home.

I roll my pencil on my desk, remembering I still need to get a tux for prom. Swinging my gaze to the dude next to me, I look at Bama. Realizing I need to tell him the truth before prom happens.

He's been so busy with racing lately that I've barely seen him. And to be honest, that's made it easier to avoid the whole damn thing. But it isn't fair, and I know Winter feels as guilty as I do about keeping it from him.

The professor excuses us, and everyone scurries to gather their shit and get outside in the sunshine. Nothing worse than being cooped up in a stuffy classroom on a hot day.

"Hey, Kye," a sultry tone says from beside me. "You busy after class?"

I look over to see Kendra tapping her pen against her lips seductively, leaning down over my desk to give me a better view of her tits.

"I'm free for a few hours. I really miss you. We always have so much fun together."

Kendra has been a regular since the first week of school. By regular, I mean, we've hooked up three times. Which is two times more than most chicks get. She doesn't try to reach out after. She never hangs around, expecting me to take her to lunch or for a coffee. She's easy. But not in a bad way.

"Sorry, babe." I gather up my crap and stand. "I've got some shit to do."

"Tomorrow?" She rakes her teeth over her bottom lip. "I could really use this."

"Sorry, no can do tomorrow either." Pushing past her, I feel Bama hot on my tracks.

As we get outside, he walks beside me. "Dude, why did you turn her down? She's hot. Not my type, but still hot. And she's not a stage five

clinger.” He looks amused. “She’s like the girl version of you.”

I shrug, keeping my books and laptop under my arm. “I don’t know, man. Not into it today, I suppose.”

“Who’s the girl?” he drawls. “Gotta be one. I haven’t seen you bring a chick home lately.”

His words stop me. He’s right; I haven’t brought anyone home lately. Not since I started hanging out with Winter. But we’re just friends, so why am I not hooking up with other girls?

That fucking worries me. *Am I more into this girl than I’m leading on?* Why else would she be dictating my sex life without actually dictating it?

“Nah, man. Not really,” I lie. “Just not feeling it, I guess.”

I see my sister sitting on a park bench, waving when she spots us.

I nod toward her. “I’ll catch you later,” I tell him. “I need to see what she wants.”

“You’re off the hook for now,” Bama says, narrowing his eyes. “But you wouldn’t leave me alone about Mila, so you can bet your ass I’m going to do the same with you and whoever the fuck your mystery girl is.” He winks. “Count on that, brother.”

Bama waves to Bria before stalking off toward his truck.

“You know I could hear you.” She rolls her eyes. “Why do you assume I want something?”

“Because you always do,” I say, amused, before taking a seat next to her. “Spill it.”

Most times, when I hear from Bria, she has an agenda. That agenda almost always includes trying to pull our family back together with a meal or get-together. In her eyes, I think she believes that’ll magically fix us. It’ll take a hell of a lot more than that though.

“Mom’s birthday is Friday.” She chomps on her bubblegum. “I talked to Dad, and he wants us all to take her to dinner at Anglers. You know, since that’s her favorite place and all.”

Anglers is a restaurant located right on the beach near my parents’ house. It’s good food with a hell of a view. Sort of like the one I took Winter to but much fancier. But as nice as the restaurant is, the thought of sitting at the same table as my father gives me anxiety, but for my mom, I’ll do it.

“I’ll be there,” I say coolly. “What time?”

“Six o’clock.” She sounds relieved. “Thank you for agreeing to come. We all miss you, Kye. And we worry. Mom worries so much. She won’t leave

me alone, asking me if I've seen you."

"I know. She calls me at least three times a day." I nod. "I'm not going to turn out like Dad. I know that's her concern. I'm good. I'm happy."

"That isn't it," she says softly. "You isolate yourself. You never say how you feel, keeping it all in. It isn't good for you, Kye. One day, you're going to blow."

"How do you figure? We went through the same shit, and you hang out with Dad regularly. I just choose to keep my distance. I don't have time for the drama of it all."

"Unlike you, I'm in therapy twice a week," she quips back. "We all heal differently—besides you." She gives me a weird look. "You aren't healing at all."

"I'm fucking fine," I groan. "I'm healed. I'm living my life. Here. At Florida East. *Away* from Dad."

"Whatever," she huffs. "We just worry. And, yes, Mom worries you will start partying too much or experimenting with drugs. I'll admit, it isn't her main concern for you, but she does still worry about it nonetheless."

"I'm not that dumb, Bria," I answer defensively. "I'm looking at going pro. Do you really think I'd put it all on the line for a fucking high of some sort?" I scowl. "Fuck that."

"I know that, doofus. Don't shoot the messenger. Lord"—she smooths her dress out—"no need to bite my head off."

It hits me that my mom is worrying I'm partying too much. And I'll be honest, up until recently, I was. Until Winter started taking up so much of my time—thankfully. Suddenly, that gives me an idea. I'm hanging out with Winter strictly because I want to. But taking her to prom is also doing her a favor socially while keeping her safe.

Maybe she can do me a favor too. A favor that'll hopefully make my mom back off of me a bit.



WINTER

As much as I was dreading going to school today, worried Nathan would pull me into another closet, it ended up not being that bad. I saw him in the hallways a few times. For once, he wasn't with Kalyani; he was just with his friends. I haven't given him an answer as to if I'm willing to ditch Kye for the safety of keeping that dreaded video under wraps. But the truth is, I'm not willing to do it. Not that it hasn't crossed my mind. It has.

I had a quick tutoring session in the library after school, and now, I'm thankful as ever to be out of this place and headed to my car.

As I walk outside to the parking lot, the sun feels so hot on my face, and the humidity is insane.

A group of people catches my eye, and I see Kye's truck next to my car. He's standing in the middle of a huddle of people, talking to Nathan.

Kye's hands are in his pockets, a conceited look on his face that I'm not familiar with. His eyes dance with humor as he lifts his chin up slightly at Nathan as he speaks.

I rush over, trying to stop whatever is about to happen. The last thing Kye needs is to get in trouble over me. College football players are watched closely, never mind those expecting to make it to the NFL. They are under a microscope. He can't throw all of that away just to prove a point.

"Kye, what are you doing?" I push through to the center. "Why are you here?"

"Hey, baby. You sure look pretty today." He pulls me against him, cupping my face.

For a second, I think he might kiss me, but when he doesn't, I feel a pang of disappointment.

"You mind waiting in the truck? Just for a minute, beautiful."

I eye him over before he puts his lips to my ear. "Trust, remember? It's you and me."

Chewing my lip nervously, I back away and get inside his truck. Watching as Kalyani and her posse throw glares my way.

Jealousy is a bigger bitch than you are, Kalyani.

Kye steps closer to Nathan, appearing to puff his chest out the slightest bit as he holds his arms at his sides. He looks cocky. But I'll admit, even arrogant looks hot on him.

He leans closer, whispering God knows what before Nathan's eyes widen, and slowly, he gives him one curt nod before backing away.

Turning away from him, Kye heads toward the driver's door. But before he can get in, Kalyani grabs his hand, and she starts talking a mile a minute. Kye tenses, but after not long of her talking, he brushes her off and gets in. And when he starts the truck, the exhaust rumbles loudly, and we pull away from the crowd.

I look in the rearview mirror. "You realize my car is there, right?"

"Yep. And I'll bring you back to it later on."

"What if they give me a flat tire?" I panic, feeling my neck get hot with anxiousness.

"They won't—" His eyes fly to mine, and he steps on the brakes. "Have they fucking done that before?"

"Let's not go there," I plead. "Please."

"Fine," he grumbles. "How was your day?"

His energy seems off. Almost as if he's annoyed with me or something.

"It was good, but I need to know what you and Nathan were talking about. And why you showed up at my school."

"Why were you in the supply closet with him the other day?" he says sharply, his voice laced with irritation. "And why was his belt unbuckled when he came out?"

Throwing my head back, I huff out an angry laugh. "Wow, that bitch really will say and do anything to mess with my life." I grind my back teeth. "One, his belt might have been unbuckled, but certainly not from my doing. That's gross. He did that all for show. And two ... he pulled me in there. That was it."

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asks, keeping his voice low.

"Because I didn't think it mattered." I shrug. "I mean, why would it?"

I look at him, narrowing my eyes. Waiting for an answer that'll make sense. Instead, he gives me nothing.

He looks away. "Are you sure that was all it was?"

"Why would I lie?" I say bluntly. "Even if he did have his pants down, why the hell would I try to hide it?"

He's quiet, seemingly fuming in his seat as we take off again.

"I just wish you had told me." He turns onto the main drag. "I'd tell you if something like that happened to me."

"You mean, if a girl pulled you into a closet and you shoved her away?" I shake my head, confused. "It just didn't seem important, I guess. Given all the other stuff we've been dealing with lately."

"I guess you have a point." He sighs. "Why did he pull you into the closet?" He drags his free hand over his face and groans. "Really can't believe you didn't tell me this shit."

"You would have acted like my protective big brother," I say, annoyed. "I already have one of them. I don't really need to deal with another."

"Trust me, Snowflake, I'm not pretending to be your brother." He taps his hand on the steering wheel. "I don't want you in the supply closet with him. It might not be my business, but I'll say it anyway; I don't like it."

"Neither do I." I laugh angrily. "Wasn't all that fun of an experience for me either, dick. Thanks for asking."

He looks apologetic. "I'm sorry." His jaw tenses. "Did he ... touch you?"

I cringe. "He kissed me. I didn't kiss him back."

"He kissed you?" Even though he speaks evenly and quietly, his voice is filled with so much rage and depth. "Son of a bitch."

"It's okay. Let bygones be bygones." I pat his shoulder. "Are you going to tell me why you were talking to him though? Did he pull you into a supply closet and ram his tongue down your throat too?"

"You're not helping me calm down here," he growls.

"Sorry." I hold my hands up. "What was it then?"

He takes a few breaths before spinning his hat backward. "I let him know that Florida East was no longer an option for him." He pauses. "He planned to attend there and play ball. I talked to Coach, letting him know the situation, and he is no longer interested in having Nathan on the team."

My mouth hangs open. "Now, he's definitely going to show everyone that video!" I throw my head back, dragging my hands through my hair. "Damn it, Kye. I know you want to help, but this isn't helpful! This is my life! This is my repu—"

"Would you stop for one second?" he says, interrupting my rant. "Snowflake, where is your faith in me?" His eyes dance with amusement. "I broke into his locker while he and his buddies were in the weight room. Deleted every last fucking thing on that phone."

My face must pale because I feel sick. “Did you—”

“No, Winter, I didn’t watch the video,” he says, reading my mind, his face softening. “Never would do that to you. But you don’t have to worry. I told him if he left you alone, Coach wouldn’t make the call to have him blacklisted by every other college.” He smiles proudly. “He agreed. It’s over, Snowflake. You can relax now.”

“Thank you,” I whisper. “Thank you so much.”

“I’ll never let anyone hurt you, I promise you.” He side-glances me. “After all, what are friends for?”

Right. Friends. That’s what we are.

And that’s what I wanted, right? That’s what I pushed so hard to make sure he understood.

So, why does hearing him say the words make my heart sink?

And just when I thought he couldn’t surprise me any more today, he turns into the mall parking lot. “Let’s go find you a dress. Prom is coming up. Time’s a-wasting, babe.”

“Wait, what?” I feel the panic rising in my chest. “You can’t go with me to find a dress. That’s weird. And ... and ... embarrassing.”

“Why? It’s not like I’m your great-grandfather or some shit,” he says, and I fight back a laugh.

He lazily rests his wrist on the steering wheel as he searches for a parking spot. “Trust me, I’ll pick out something that will have every motherfucker in that building drooling. I should tell you now that I hate pink. And purple is gross. Black looks like you’re headed to a funeral. Green ... ew, you aren’t dressing like a booger. And white is just not bold enough.”

“That doesn’t leave many options,” I say slowly. “And I hate the color red. So, that’s a no for me.”

“I never said anything about red, babe.” He grins proudly. “My favorite color just happens to be blue.”



KYE

I try to relay the message to my dick that I'm not supposed to be looking at one of my best friends that way. The way that makes you stir in places you really shouldn't be.

My dick doesn't really get the message though, and I shift around uncomfortably in the fucking chair, trying to make my hard-on less noticeable.

Why did I think this was a good idea? I should never go shopping with the hottest girl on the planet while she tries on dresses that hug her ass just right and show off her cleavage that she usually keeps hidden.

I've handled the punishment of looking and not touching. Technically, I shouldn't even be looking. Watching is bad. She's my friend. She's Bama's sister. Bama, the guy who is going to want to chop my dick off and probably make an example of me.

She goes back in the changing room, and I watch the curtain wiggle around as she shimmies into her fourth dress. The first three were hot. Don't get me wrong; hands down, she will be the most beautiful girl—no, woman—at this prom in anything. But for some reason, they weren't the one.

"Isn't this like that show *Say Yes to the Dress* or whatever the fuck it's called? Shouldn't they be bringing me champagne?" I look around. "Well, actually, I don't drink that shit. I'd take beer instead. But anyway, shouldn't they be bringing me something to sip on while I wait?"

"Shut up," she calls back.

After a few minutes, she pulls the curtain open, and fuck me sideways if my jaw doesn't drop to the damn floor.

The dark navy-blue lace fabric hugs every inch of her soft skin. Leaving very little to the imagination. It flows down, hitting the floor, and a slit up the side shows her bare leg, almost leading to her thigh. I clear my throat, feeling like my head is damn near spinning.

I swallow harshly. "Yeah, that'll, uh ... that'll do it."

She tugs on the fabric, wrinkling her nose. "You think? It's so dang fitted.

I don't think I'd feel comfortable with this on in a crowd."

She looks at the mirror, spinning around to see her back. "Wow, yeah, no. My ass looks like it's the ninth planet. I should probably call NASA and tell them it's been found. I saw on the news not long ago that they were searching for it."

"I thought there were nine planets already," I say, mumbling them under my breath as I count on my fingers.

"Pluto stopped being considered a planet in, like ... 2006." She rolls her eyes. "That leaves eight." Spinning around again, she stares at herself in the mirror, eyes wide. "Well, there was. Like I said, I found the ninth."

"Your ass looks a-fucking-mazing." I raise my eyebrows and tilt my head forward. "Seriously, grade-A ass. Finest ass in Florida."

She gives me an unconvinced look before she continues to examine herself in the mirror.

I stand up quickly, walking behind her. "Winter, look at me."

She looks at my reflection.

"You're fucking gorgeous, Snowflake."

I run my hands over her shoulders and down her arms. I shouldn't, but I can't fight the need to touch her. To feel her skin against my palms.

"The flaws you think you have make you that more beautiful to everyone else. Your body is a masterpiece. Your eyes could make any poor bastard fall in love. That smile? Fucking heartbreaking." I lean closer to her neck, keeping my gaze on her in the mirror. "And don't even get me started again on that ass, babe."

She doesn't answer, just watches me with wide eyes.

"You. Are. Gorgeous," I whisper. "And if someone can't see that, they need their damn head checked."



WINTER

I stand there, speechless from Kye's words as he continues to hold on to me. His eyes pierce into mine in the mirror, holding me captive.

He spins me slowly so that I'm facing him. "You should know how special you are, Snowflake." His lips press into my forehead. "Don't let him take that from you. Don't let *anyone* take that from you."

My heart melts in my chest as every inch of my body warms from his words. I tingle, coming to life in some crazy way. I know he doesn't mean it as anything more than a friend. But it hits differently than a compliment would from anyone else. I always just assumed Kye was shallow. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe he's a decent guy, disguised as a fuckboy.

I also assumed he was a simple man. He's not. He's complex—a downright enigma. One that's blanketed in jokes and humor to throw everyone off his path. I know, deep down, there's something he's hiding from the world. I hope I'm lucky enough for him to trust me to open up about whatever it is.

I judged him wrong. Kye Collins is a good one. Too bad he's not the one for me.

Even so, I still fear I will become dependent on his existence. Worried my heart will cross the line that's so visibly been drawn, keeping us from falling. But if I'm being honest, I'd be honored to be wrecked by a man like Kye Collins.

"This dress is the one." He drops his head down next to my neck and murmurs against my skin, "You might just give someone a heart attack, wearing it. And by someone, I mean, me. But, goddamn it, it's the one. It was made just for you."

His scent calms me, anchoring me and making me feel safe. I inhale, not wanting this feeling to end. It has to end; we both know that. Holding each other this way is crossing into dangerous territory. Still, neither of us seems to care enough to let go.

As he finally releases me, I step back. "I'll go get changed."

He nods, an odd look on his face. He looks pained or uncomfortable in some way. Maybe it was something I did. Or maybe he's worried it's all becoming too much.

I pull the curtain closed, so I don't see Kye anywhere. But I hear him as I change quickly. His smooth voice talks as a girl giggles.

And as I step out of the changing room shortly after, I follow his voice, finding him at the register. The girl behind it is still cracking up, but I can't make out exactly what he's saying.

A damn ray of sexy sunshine. That's what he is.

"What are you doing?" I ask suspiciously.

"Buying a blue dress for myself." He points to the one in my hand before holding up a small tag.

"How did you get that?" I lift my dress up, seeing the price tag is gone. "I'm buying my own dress, Kye. Hand it over."

"Maybe this tag went to another dress." He cocks his head to the side playfully. "Mine looks sort of like that one. Makes my ass look super tight. My eyes dreamy. So my color."

I fight a laugh before smacking him lightly. "You are not buying this dress for me. I won't allow it."

Quickly, he snatches it from me and hands it to the lady behind the cash register. "Good thing I'm not buying it for you, Cinderella. I'm buying it for my own benefit because I'll get to look at you in it." His lips move closer to my ear. "Remember ... that ass."

I swallow hard. His words almost sound flirtatious. Which I suppose shouldn't surprise me because he is a flirt. I'm sure he doesn't mean anything by it.

So, why the hell are there butterflies in my stomach?

I elbow him lightly. "Kye, you really don't have to do this. It's more than even I planned on spending on a stupid prom dress. Especially to go to a prom where I have to bring a fake date." I frown. "Which, by the way, everyone will probably know right away that you aren't actually my date."

"I promise you, Snowflake, you show up, wearing this dress, and nobody is going to think we're fake dating."

"Yeah? And why is that?" I say, waiting for his cheesy response.

"Because I'm going to be staring at you the entire night," he says matter-of-factly. "Gonna be hard not to."

The cashier eyes us over curiously before carefully putting the dress in a

bag and sliding Kye's card through the machine.

As she hands him the receipt, she looks at me and shrugs. "Sorry. He was pushy."

Once Kye moves far enough away from the register to not hear her, she leans across the counter. "Just so you know, before you said fake date ... I never would have guessed it. I think you'll have everyone at this prom of yours fooled."

"Why's that?" I whisper.

"Because the entire time you've been here, his eyes haven't left you." She smiles. "Maybe it's fake to you, but it isn't to him." She nods her chin toward where Kye is turned around, looking at us. "That is one fine-ass specimen of a man. You're a lucky lady."

I stare at her, puzzled, before eventually backing away. "Have a good day. Thanks for your help."

I turn and head toward Kye. Feeling his eyes on me more than ever right now.

"What was that about?" He opens the door for me to walk in front of him. "Looked deep."

"How would you know?" I snort, looking over at him as he walks on the sidewalk next to me.

"Babe, deep's all I know. And I don't mean a deep conversation." He moves his eyebrows up and down.

I punch his shoulder. "You're such a guy!"

"You love it." He winks.

"I'm not entirely sure about that. *But* I do thank you so much for the dress." I nod toward the bag in his hand. "You are a good one, Kye Collins. You really are. Perverted but a good one nevertheless."

His expression turns serious as he sucks in a breath. He usually isn't nervous, but right now, he is. "Well, here's the thing: I sort of need a favor from you. If you're up for it, that is."

As he takes a seat on a bench, I slide down next to him. "What is it?"

"So, as you know, my family is pretty fucked up. Well, not really my family, but my father." He puts his arm on the back of the bench behind me. "I already told you that my dad has issues. And my mom, she worries. She worries about me. She worries about my sister too." He glances down, a look of shame clear on his face. "And she sure as hell worries about my dad."

I watch him, not knowing where he is going with any of this.

“If I had a girlfriend—not just a girlfriend, but someone who was also nice and normal, like you ...” He stops, swallowing hard. “My mom wouldn’t worry so much. She could rest easier. She’d still worry, but at least not about me. It would be one less thing on her plate.”

“I don’t—” I start to say but stop. “I don’t really understand. You want your mom to think we’re dating?”

His eyes float back up to mine, and he looks so vulnerable. “Yeah, I do.”

Gone is the Kye I know who seems to be light and carefree. This Kye looks pained. And completely bare and open to the world, letting his vulnerability show.

“Will you? I promise I’ll be the best fake boyfriend this world has ever seen. I just really need my mom to think I’m okay. If she thinks I’m okay, maybe, just maybe, she’ll stop begging me to come home.”

“You don’t go home?” I whisper, knowing his parents don’t live that far from campus.

“Nah, not really.” He must see the sadness on my face because he pats my shoulder. “It’s okay, Snowflake. It’s not all bad. I mean, I get to attend a campus like Florida East, and my mom and sister love me. It’s just ... complicated. And while I don’t want to dive in to all the details, my house holds a lot of painful shit for me. I find it easier to just run from it.”

“You can’t run forever, Kye.” I touch his knee.

“It’s worked for me this far, babe,” he says lightly. “So, will you do it? Or do I need to go hold auditions and find the next Winter?”

“Of course I will,” I say without hesitating.

I’d never say no to Kye. And something inside of me tells me he wouldn’t say no to me either.

“Thank you, Snowflake.” He stands, pulling me up with him. “My mom’s birthday is Friday. Are you free?”

“A birthday for the first meeting?” My eyes widen, and I feel my heartbeat speed up. “You’re really just throwing me right off into the deep end. Not letting me splash in the kiddie pool first.” I swallow. “That’s intimidating.”

He takes my hand in his as we walk. Like it’s the most normal thing. Like we aren’t just fake dating. Like this is all real.

It isn’t though. I know it’s not.

“You’ll be fine.” He stops, turning me toward him. “Just promise me, no matter what vibe you get from my dad, you won’t judge me for it.”

“I would never do that,” I say sharply before trying to lighten his mood. “After all, you don’t judge me for my brother being Beau, and we both know he can be a grumpy jerk at times.” I make an attempt to lighten the mood.

“Who said I don’t?” His face stays stoic before he tickles my stomach. “Kidding, babe.” He pulls away, this time not holding my hand, but still walking close enough for my shoulder to brush against his arm.

Whether we’re fake dating or not, Beau won’t be happy about it. Right now, my biggest concern is helping Kye. Unfortunately for my brother, that means the truth will have to wait a bit longer to come out.

nine



KYE

“**Y**ou bitches ready or what?” Bama yells from the main living area of our dorm. “I still need to go to my mom’s to load the car in the trailer and get fuel before we get to the track.” He pauses. “In other words, hurry the fuck up before I leave your asses here.”

I grab my phone from my dresser and walk to where he stands. “I’m ready. Calm your grumpy ass down.”

“Easy for you to say. You don’t have to race tonight.” He drags a hand over his face. “Racing, training for football, and school. It’s a fucking lot. I’m tired.”

I pat his shoulder. “That explains why you’ve been a dick today then. I forgive ya, big boy.”

“I’m ready to roll.” Dane walks out of his room. “Let’s go.”

Tonight, we are going to Bama’s drag race with him. And when we stop at his mother’s house to get the car, my ass is staying in the truck. No way am I risking seeing his sister in front of him. He’d know we know each other better than either of us has let on.



WINTER

I get home from school and drop my bag on the bench next to the door before kicking off my sandals. I noticed Beau's truck in the driveway, hooked to the trailer, so I know he's here somewhere, likely headed to a race.

I follow voices out to the patio. Poking my head out the already-open door, I can see my mother's upset. And judging by the fact that she's talking to Beau, it's clearly his fault.

Typical male.

As I listen to what my mom is saying, I know right away it's because Beau is planning to go drag racing tonight. After losing her husband to the sport, I can't blame her for not wanting her son to compete in it.

I eavesdrop long enough to know that, just as I suspected, there's a race tonight. And my brother is on his way there right now.

"Seriously? You're going racing? Tonight?" I finally break my silence, causing both his and my mom's heads to swing toward me. "I'm coming with."

"Wh—no." He points a finger at me. "No fucking way."

"Language," our mom mumbles. Pretending like she doesn't swear on a regular basis. She's not fooling me; I know she has a potty mouth.

"Yes way, asshole. Give me one minute, and I'll be ready." I run back inside, grabbing my phone and toeing my shoes back on as fast as I can, knowing damn well he'll take off before I get back outside if I don't haul ass.

"Ready, loser? Just had to grab this." I run back out through the door and hold my phone up.

He looks at my mom. No doubt hoping she'll tell me I can't go.

"Have fun." She only shrugs. "Be. Safe."

Beau groans before heading toward me. "Put some fucking clothes on. For the love of God, why is your stomach showing and shit?" He points to my shorts. "And, for Christ's sake, your ass cheeks are just about hanging out. We ain't going to a strip club, Winter."

"Racetrack equals hot guys." I wink. "Still trying to get over a breakup

here,” I joke, trying to get under his skin. Judging by the vein popping out of his neck, it’s working.

“If you hadn’t taken him back ... twice ... maybe you’d be over it by now,” he mutters, not knowing how over that dude I actually am, thanks to his best friend. “You need to stay with me the entire time. And when I’m racing, you’re staying with Dane and Kye.”

“No arguments on that.” I smirk, which only earns me a harsh glare.

My whole life, he’s tried to keep me away from his friends. *Clearly, it didn’t work.*

“Let’s go,” he grumbles, heading toward the truck.

Jogging to catch up with him, I hold my hand up. “Bye, Mom. Love ya!”

“Be safe,” she says again. “Love you.”

It won’t be easy to be close to Kye tonight without stepping into our usual routine where we hug and joke nonstop. If we act the way we normally do, Beau will definitely know something is up.



KYE

The door opens, and lo and behold, Winter's beautiful face appears.

"Hey, boys," she says sweetly. "I'll be keeping y'all company tonight."

"Yay," Bama groans, climbing behind the wheel. "So exciting."

"I know you're excited to have me here." She pulls her door shut and clicks her seat belt in. Turning toward me, she winks. "Hey, Kye."

"Hey, Sn—Winter." I swallow, feeling Bama's eyes on me in the mirror.

"What am I, chopped liver?" Dane says from the front, swinging his head back. "Hello to you too, girl."

She laughs before patting him on the shoulder. "Saved the best for last. Hello, Dane."

My jaw tenses as her hand lifts from his shirt. I don't want her touching Dane. I don't want her touching any man.

I turn my attention to look out the window. Wishing it could be different right now if only her brother knew and was cool with us hanging out. He doesn't know though. And if he did, he sure as hell wouldn't be cool with her hanging out with me anyway. Still, he's going to find out soon.

I might not be the definition of bad, but I'm far from good. And her brother is well aware of that.

"So, my favorite brother," she says to her brother, "what happens if you see the Hardys?"

"Same thing that happened at the last race they were at," he says back nonchalantly. "Mila won that whole event that day, *by the way*. And everything was fine between us. I do my thing; she does hers."

"Really? So, Mila might be there tonight?"

I hear the excitement in her voice. I know she'd love to see Mila. I've heard her talk about her before. It's clear she's fond of Mila and her family.

"Oh, I'm sure she will." Bama sounds less than thrilled. Then again, it's hard to read him. "Along with her no-good old man."

I look at her out of the corner of my eye, smelling her sweet vanilla scent. I wish I could pull her closer. It's hell, riding in this truck with her and not

being able to joke like we normally do.

The rest of the drive is quiet. And even though I don't dare gawk at the beauty next to me, I steal as many glances as I can get away with. Knowing that next time we hang out, I'll have her all to myself.



WINTER

Hours later, the races are finally over. And thank the Lord for that because, even years later, this is still so not my scene. First of all, the racetrack is always so loud that I can hardly hear myself think. Second of all, the last memory I have of my father is at a racetrack. That was minutes before he left the earth. Maybe coming here wasn't the smartest thing for me, but still, I'm glad I did to support my brother. Especially since he won the entire event.

Something strange happened. At least, it seemed weird to me anyway. Perhaps I've missed a lot when it comes to Mila and my brother because last I knew, he viewed her as the enemy and wasn't so much as talking to her. Only now, she's headed to a late-night movie with all of us. A movie my brother invited her to.

"I hope this is good. I'm fucking tired." Dane yawns.

Kye's mouth hangs open as we pull into the parking lot. "Of course it's going to be good. It's got The Rock in it. How could anything with Dwayne Johnson in it not be good?"

I fight back my smile, already aware of his love for The Rock. "He was in one of the newer Fast & Furious movies. I thought that movie sucked."

He glares at me lightheartedly. "And to think, I thought you were cool just minutes before your pretty mouth said those words."

"Easy, killer," Beau grunts, pushing the door open once he's parked.

I click my tongue on the roof of my mouth. "Sorry, sparky. Never been a fan of the newer ones of that franchise. They became so unbelievably stupid. Besides, no Paul Walker?" I fan myself. "No, thanks."

Paul Walker was one of my celebrity crushes. Likely my biggest one. My Lord ... he was fine.

As we all make our way toward the entrance of the movie theater, I don't miss the heated glance between Mila and Beau as he holds the door for her to walk through. Those two have been in love since the day Mila was born. Why they fight it, I'll never understand. Though it's not so much them fighting it as it is my stubborn ass of a brother.

We order our food, and when Beau isn't looking, Kye pays for all of mine. I narrow my eyes at him. "You really need to stop doing that!" I whisper angrily.

He gives me a smirk before grabbing my popcorn and carrying it into the theater.

I follow him and Dane toward the front while Mila and Beau sit rows behind us, in the middle of the theater.

"Sno Caps?" Kye points at the box in my hands, keeping his voice low enough for no one else to hear. "Oh no, Snowflake. That's strike three for you. You're out."

"Three strikes?" I rear my head back. "When did I earn the first two?"

"Well, you see, first, you ordered disgusting fried pickles and put ranch on them. Then, you dissed my man, The Rock. Now, you *chose* a nasty thing like that to snack on? Ew."

"Whatever you say." I tear the box open and pop one into my mouth while keeping my eyes on his. "Mmm. Yummy," I coo but then watch as his eyes darken and float down to my lips.

"Careful," he warns lowly, keeping his eyes on my mouth. "You make it damn hard to be on my best behavior when your brother's watching my every move. Especially when you do things like that."

I freeze. He says little playful comments, sure. But nothing that extreme.

As the lights start to dim, I turn my attention away from him.

And during the previews and then the movie ... I try to stop my mind from wondering what would happen if my brother weren't here. Or if anything would even happen at all.

But the reality is, anything physical would ruin our friendship. I would lose Kye. And I'm not ready for that yet.

Ten



WINTER

I open my locker, sighing in silent relief when, once again, nothing falls out or pops in my face, scaring the crap out of me.

Maybe Kye really did get through to Nathan after all.

Maybe, just maybe, I can finish my senior year on a high note. Okay, that's an exaggeration. A neutral note. One where I coexist with these assholes and float my way to graduation day.

I feel the presence of someone standing next to me, and when I look, it's Kalyani.

"Hi," she says calmly. "Got a minute?"

I gaze behind me before giving her a confused look. "Are you talking to me?"

"Don't be annoying." She rolls her eyes. "I'm just going to say it. Did you and Nathan hook up in the closet that day or not?"

"You can't actually be this dense." I close my locker and start to walk away, only to have my hand grabbed. "What?!" I blurt out, turning around. "What could you possibly need now?"

Her eyes are wide. But she doesn't look angry. She looks sad. "I love him, Winter." She blinks, and I swear I see tears in her eyes. "I have loved him since we were in kindergarten. He never saw me though. Not in that way."

I feel something inside me flutter. Sympathy—I know that's what it is. Brushing it aside, I hold my arm out.

"Why are you telling me any of this? What makes you think I care?"

"Because you're one of the good ones." She barely utters the words. "And I'm not. I think I've proven that this year."

I wait for more before I start to turn.

"Winter." Her voice stops me. "I'm sorry. When you moved here, I really, really liked you. But then you got with him, and the spitefulness inside of me grew to a place where I couldn't control it. I lied to him, lied to you. Deceived my best friend." She wipes her hand over her eyes. "I messed up. I took a part in ruining your senior year of high school. And my actions will

haunt me for the rest of my life.” A sad, barely there laugh comes from her lips. “I guess love makes you do crazy things. Lie to the ones you care about. Put it all on the line for that one person.” She draws in a shaky breath. “Even if that person doesn’t care all that much.”

I eye her over, taking in the words she said. “You did me a favor. He’s a piece of shit.” I nod slowly, holding on to my messenger bag on my shoulder. “He’s not worth it, Kalyani.” My eyes connect with hers. “For either of us.”

Giving her the smallest smile, I silently tell her I’m letting it all go before walking away. Like Kye said, what happens after high school is what matters. It’s going to get better.

And then I text Kye and tell him we need to meet up tonight. I need to talk to him.



KYE

I read the message from Winter and instantly get a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Snowflake: We need to talk. Can you meet me tonight?

I want to go to her right now, but I can't. I still have to finish classes for the day and get some training in with Dane. Bama has been in Alabama for a few days, so meeting up with her on campus seems safe.

Me: Sure. I have some training to do after class. Meet at eight in the stadium parking lot?

Me: What's it about?

Snowflake: We'll talk about it later. See you tonight.

I immediately fear she's going to end things between us. Not that it's a relationship, but it's the closest thing I've ever had to one.

I've quickly become dependent on the warmth she brings when we're together. I haven't gone surfing in days because I haven't needed that outlet. She's my outlet. She's my escape.

And now, I'm forced to wait the rest of the day to find out what this is about. Which means enduring hours of crippling fear that I'm about to lose something I never even had.



I walk out of the weight room, searching the parking lot for Winter's car. I spot it right away, next to my truck.

“Wow,” Dane says next to me, shaking his head. “You must want to be a chick because you’re so close to having that dick cut off. I can almost feel the pain.”

“Don’t start,” I warn him. “I’m in no mood to fucking hear it.”

“Touchy, touchy.” Carrying his duffel bag, he shoots me an amused look. “Are you with her? Or what the fuck is the deal?”

“I’m her friend,” I say sharply, gritting my teeth. “Last I checked, I’m allowed to have a friend with a vagina.”

“Pretty soon, you’ll have a vagina too.” He punches my arm. “Then, you can be vagina buddies.”

“Fuck off,” I grunt.

He stops at his truck. “Kye, wait.”

Slowly, I turn. “What?”

“I’m just worried about you, man. Me, you, Bama? We’re brothers. How can you lie to him so easily? Don’t you feel bad at all?”

“Of course I fucking feel bad!” I snap. “But that girl, she’s my fucking lifeline. Yes, I know I can’t cross the line. Yeah, I know I’m walking awfully close to it. But, hell, man, haven’t you ever been so scared to lose something that you’ll lie just to keep it?”

When he doesn’t answer, I start to stalk away, heading toward Winter.

“Kye,” Dane says, “I get it. I do. But, fuck, man, don’t wait so long that you can’t make it right. *He’s* family. He’ll understand.”

I stop, looking back at him, and nod once, letting him know I get it. Because I do. I know what I’m doing is wrong. I know Bama is one of the truest friends I’ll have in this life. But I also know he won’t approve of me spending time with his sister. And if he won’t approve, he won’t allow it.

I can’t lose her yet. I need Winter more than I’ve ever needed anyone. Because she always shows up. She always comes through.

She became my person without me realizing it.



WINTER

I climb into Kye's truck in the parking lot. It's risky, meeting here. But last I checked, my brother was out of town with no mention of when he was coming back.

"Why the urgent message to meet?" The words fly from his mouth before I even get my ass in the seat. "What's going on, Snowflake?"

I close the door and face him. "I don't want to be like Kalyani," I say quickly.

His face scrunches up. "What the fuck are you talking about? Kalyani sleeps with her best friend's man and bullies people at school. Unless you're living a double life or some shit, I think you're good."

I shake my head swiftly. "Don't you get it? She lied and betrayed people close to her just because Nathan had some weird power over her. She couldn't tell right from wrong. Or maybe she could and just didn't care." I sigh. "I've never lied to my brother before this. And now, look at me. I'm keeping the truth from him. Sneaking here when I know he's out of town." I lean back, resting my head on the window. "It has to stop. It isn't right."

"Say it then, Snowflake," his voice rasps, and he looks away from me. "Go on. Tell me I'm not going to see you anymore. Rip my fucking heart out, babe."

His words hit me, and I understand how much this friendship really means to him. How much *I* mean to him. I feel the same way toward him. There's no way I can lose him as a friend. But there's also no reason for Beau to throw a fit. We are friends. And as blurry as the boundaries might get sometimes, I know that's where this begins and ends.

"No, that isn't it." I lean forward, touching his arm. "I want to talk to him. *Before* prom. I want us both to talk to him. We have nothing to hide. We're friends. You're the *best* friend I've ever had. He'll understand. He has to."

"And if he doesn't?" His brow furrows. "I mean, don't get me wrong; I feel the same way. We need to talk to him. But if he isn't happy about it, what then? Where's that leave us?"

“If you’re okay with him being pissy at you, then he will have to get over it,” I say with a shrug of my shoulders. “Mila was my best friend, and he’s been in love with her since the day she was born. So ... I feel like those in glass houses ...”

“Shouldn’t throw stones.” He laughs. “Okay, so we are doing this. When?”

“Tomorrow,” I answer confidently. “Has to be.”

Leaning back in his seat, he runs his hand through his hair and sighs. “Tomorrow. Fuck my life.”

Tomorrow is the day my brother will find out I’ve been sneaking around with his best friend.

And he’ll likely flip out.



Kye and I talk for what could be hours. We listen to music and talk about anything from school to life in general.

I’ve learned more about his father’s struggle with addiction. And the scars left behind from his childhood are deeper than he likes to show. One even being on his forehead.

I run my fingers over it, my heart breaking for everything Kye keeps inside that nobody knows about. I’m honored he feels safe enough with me to show me these scars. Even though it’s painful to think about.

Eventually, we both realize how late it is. I have a tutoring session in the morning, and he has to work out with some teammates before class, so we figure we’d better call it a night.

“So, I’ll pick you up Friday afternoon for my mom’s birthday, and then Saturday is prom, so you’ll be seeing me there.” His eyes twinkle with amusement. “You probably should bring a weapon of some sort.”

“To prom?” I scowl. “Why on earth would I do that?”

“You’ll be beating the ladies off of me.” He nods quickly. “I’m tellin’ ya, I’ll be looking sexy as fuck.”

“You’re obnoxious,” I say, shoving him. “The offer is still on the table to

skip prom,” I joke. “Stay in and watch weird documentaries and eat junk food? I’ll even bake you some cinnamon buns.”

“Cinnamon buns sound tempting and all, but no.” He narrows his eyes. “You *really* don’t want to go to this thing, do you?”

“Nah, I guess it’ll be fine.” I pull my lips to the side. “Right?”

“It’ll be better than fine. It’s going to be really fucking fun. You just wait. I’ll pick you up early, and we’ll go to dinner somewhere fancy and shit.”

“Okay, fine. We will go. But there will be no—and I mean, *no*—punching anyone.” I narrow my eyes and point at him. “Deal?”

“I’ll do my best,” he says, smirking. “Since it’s so late, do you want me to follow you home? You must be tired.”

“It’s only fifteen minutes away. I’m good.” I find my keys in my pocket and smile. “Talk to you tomorrow, Rocky.”

“Tomorrow? Nice try. No, you’d best text me when you make it home,” he says, leaning slightly forward on the steering wheel. “Don’t you dare forget, or I’ll be driving over there.”

Before I can answer, a car pulls in behind us, flashing their high beams.

“Fuck,” he hisses as he pushes his door open and gets out. “It’s your brother.”

Looking in the mirror, I see my brother’s truck as Kye walks up to the window.

“Oh boy,” I mutter. “Guess he made it back from wherever he’s been.”

As I climb out of the truck, Beau shoots me a glare. The look on his face could burn a hole right into someone’s soul.

He’s pissed.

“What?” I hold my arms out. “Why are you acting crazy with your high beams and shit?”

“Kye, mind telling me what in the actual fuck is going on here before I break your teeth on the pavement?” he growls.

“Don’t talk to him like that, B!” I yell. I understand completely why he’s acting this way, but I’m still having a hard time, accepting it.

He stares at Kye, waiting for him to defend himself, I’m sure. “Go on. I’m tired. I’ve been driving for six hours straight. Fucking speak,” he says through gritted teeth. “Explain to me what the fuck is going on here.”

“I’m taking her to her prom next week. We’ve been hanging out as *friends* for a while now,” Kye says before dipping his head closer to Beau’s window.

I can’t hear what Kye is saying now, but whatever it is, it doesn’t seem to

be calming my brother down.

“Don’t talk like you actually know her,” my brother bites back. “Get the fuck out of here with that, Collins.”

“I *do* know her, Bam,” Kye says softly. “And I promise you, I won’t hurt her or do anything to disrespect her.”

Beau eyes him over for a few seconds before his eyes shift to mine. “Winter, go home. *Now*. Kye, I’ll deal with you tomorrow.”

His truck backs out of the parking spot, and he angrily speeds away without another word. I can’t stop the tears from falling from my eyes. My brother has been there for me my entire life. And now, he feels like he’s been lied to by his sister and best friend. The second Kye and I began hanging out, I should have asked Beau if he was okay with it. He deserved that much even if Kye and I are just friends.

As I lean against my car, I wipe my cheeks with my sleeve.

“Snowflake, don’t cry,” Kye rasps. “I can’t fucking take seeing you sad.”

Walking toward me, he wraps his arms around me in a bear hug, fully embracing my body. “He will be okay. I’ll talk to him.” Pressing his lips to my forehead, he kisses my skin softly. “It’ll all be all right, I promise.”

I snifle. “I hope so. My family is all I have.”

“You’ve got me too, Winter.”

“Yeah?” I peer up at him. “For how long?”

“For as long as it takes for your Prince Charming to come and sweep you off your feet and steal you away from me,” he says factually.

“Even if I found someone, I’m never *not* going to be your friend, Kye.” A small laugh escapes my lips. “Besides, I doubt I’ll ever find anyone.”

“Why do you say that?”

I gather some confidence, standing taller. “Because ... I want to be loved with no limits, like the girls in the stories I read. I want to wake up, knowing I’m wanted without actually hearing the words. I need that kind of love that can’t be defined. A love so big that it consumes every ounce of my being.” I look down. “If it’s not that, I don’t want it.”

His thumb touches my chin, forcing it up. “I promise you, Snowflake, one day, you’ll be loved with no limits. I know it.”

“If you say so.” I tilt my head to the side. “But even if by some miniscule chance that does happen ... I’m always going to be in your life.”

He stares at me for a moment. Those damn eyes float to my lips again, making me shiver.

How much longer can I bear this tension between us?

“Beautiful girl, when you finally find all that you’re looking for, I’ll cheer for you from a distance. But no fucking way on earth could I bear to stick around.” His thumb touches my chin. “I might not be it for you, but I’m also too selfish to share.”

My heart stops beating momentarily. And I feel my body sink against his. Strange, unclear feelings have been floating between us for weeks. Maybe, just maybe, he’s feeling it too.

I melt into his touch as he slides his hands down my sides. That is, until he releases me.

“You’d better get going. It’s late.”

And once he backs away from me and I get inside my car, his words run through my mind over and over again.

And those boundaries grow even blurrier, clouding my mind on what we are and what I actually want.

elevan



WINTER

This entire day has moved at a turtle's pace. Earlier, I spent the majority of class looking at the clock, wishing I could speed that shit up and go home. On the other hand, something told me Beau would be there, waiting. And likely still simmering over the events of last night.

I was right because when I pulled into my driveway, his truck was in the yard. Normally, I'd love the sight of it. I love visiting with my brother. But today, well, today feels different.

So, now, I sit in the living room, across from my brother, as he continues to glare at me before making some inaudible caveman noise to show his disapproval of my life choices.

Flipping through the channels, he glances over, narrowing his eyes before another low, obnoxious grumble comes from his direction.

"For the love of all things," I say, throwing my head back. "You've got somethin' to say? Say it. I'm tired of listening to you grunt every three minutes. It's killing my vibe."

He looks at the TV again, continuing to press the buttons. "Nope."

If anyone ever wanted to see what the most stubborn man alive looked like, I'd deliver Beau to them. As sweet as he can be, he can also be a major pain in my ass.

"You're a giant baby. You should be wearing a diaper," I say, settling into the couch. Suddenly, a pillow hits me in the face. "Dick," I mutter. "I really hope you're not planning on spending the summer here."

Beau, here, every single day? Watching my every move? Making sure I don't hang out with Kye?

I hope and pray Beau says he's getting an apartment.

"Of course I am. Where else would I be, sis?" he says smugly. "Besides, someone obviously needs to keep an eye on you. Seems as though you're slipping through the cracks."

I snap my mouth open to defend myself. After all, I have never gotten into a lick of trouble in my life!

How dare he act like he's king shit on turd mountain!

"Please do explain." My mother comes out of nowhere, dressed in her work scrubs. "I'd love to hear your thoughts on parenting a teenage girl," she growls angrily. "Keep an eye on Winter, my ass. She's the closest thing to a goddamn angel. Try parenting yourself, B."

Beau shoots up from his seat, holding his arms out at his sides. "Oh yeah? Is that why she's hanging out with Kye late at night?"

My mom looks like she sees red. For a small, petite lady, Mama don't play. And us kids have known from a young age not to talk back to her.

"Boy, I know you're not talking to me like I don't know what my kid has been up to. Like I don't already know she's been spending time with your friend." She gathers her hair up and ties it in a ponytail. "He asked if it was okay when he was here the other night. I said yes. End of story."

I cringe, knowing my mother just threw me under the bus, saying that Kye has been here. To our house. With me.

"This just keeps getting better and better," he snarls. "So, the whole *friends* thing was obviously a crock of shit."

"No, that is true!" My voice rises. "You know I don't have that many friends. When Nathan dumped me this last time, well, it really, *really* sucked. Kye has helped me get through it."

"I hope you don't mean *hooking up with Kye* has helped you." He walks closer to me, his eyes damn near black. "Because he's like the fucking campus bicycle."

His words feel like a slap, but I try to push the feeling of jealousy from my mind. Kye is supposed to strictly be my friend while also trying to piss off my ex and put his mother's mind at ease, thinking we're dating. I can't be mad about hearing he's the campus bicycle. I have no right to.

So, why does it sting so badly when I imagine him hooking up with other girls?

"Not like that, moron!" Reaching forward, I hit his knee. "God, you're such a dude. You know, a girl and a guy can be friends without the D and the V colliding."

"I'm *right* here," my mom yells. "Literally right here."

I tug his hand so that he'll sit down next to me. He might be a pain in the ass, but he's my brother. And I caused him pain. I need to own that.

"I'm sorry Kye is your friend—one of your best friends. I know that I could have chosen someone else to spend time with, but you know me. I'm

an introvert. I have a hard time meeting people.” I blow out a breath. “Something with Kye, it makes me feel safe. Like I can trust him. I’m comfortable with him.”

I watch his jaw tense. “And you’re really not hooking up? Swear on Dad’s grave?”

“Swear on Dad’s grave,” I say. “One thousand percent no.” I say the words, feeling a sick sensation in my stomach.

If Kye had pushed to take things further, I would have done it in a heartbeat. My body craves him. But that doesn’t matter anymore. Now, I can’t. I swore on my father’s grave.

Either way, Beau will have to get over the fact that I’ll be spending time with Kye. He will have to learn how to share his best friend. Because I’m not giving Kye up.



KYE

I drive with the music up way too fucking loud. It doesn't drown out the thoughts, just makes it so I can't think straight enough to pay attention to them.

My truck still smells like vanilla even though she isn't in it. She makes her presence known in every fucking part of my life. There's no running from her.

I get to the beach and slam my truck into park. Last night with Bama stressed me out. When I'm stressed and football isn't an option, I go to the beach as fast as I can to surf for a few hours.

It's windy today, which means the ocean will be cranking. I welcome it though. I need it.

My phone rings just as I close the door to my truck. And when I pull it out of my pocket, I see *Mom* flashing across the screen.

I debate on not answering it. The last thing I need right now is more shit piled on me. I know she means well, but, *Christ almighty*, she stresses me out.

But her birthday is tomorrow. I know she's just making sure I'm coming home for it.

"Hey, Mom. How's it going?"

"Hey, baby," she says, and I know she's smiling. "It's going good. I miss you. I really, really miss you," she sighs. "Whatcha been up to?"

"Training, class, and surfing when I can," I say truthfully. "Just got to the beach actually. There're so many sweet spots close to campus."

"Could always come to your old stomping grounds," she says, sounding hopeful. "Dad misses you too."

"Yes, I know." I exhale, anxiously raking a hand through my hair. "I'll see you both tomorrow night at your birthday dinner though."

"Bria said you were coming, but I didn't want to get my hopes up." She sounds emotional. "I am so glad you're coming, Kye. Your dad will be too. It ... well, it will be really nice to have us all together. As a family."

“Yeah, so, look, I’m bringing someone.” I change the subject from my father. Knowing he probably doesn’t give a fuck. “Her name is Winter. I’m trusting you when you tell me Dad is doing good. I really don’t want him to make a scene or embarrass me.”

“He is doing good, Kye,” she says, almost as a plea. “I can’t wait to meet her. And I promise you that your dad is better than he’s been in a long time. I wouldn’t put you in a situation to be hurt if he wasn’t, baby.”

But you have so many times, I want to say. But I don’t. She doesn’t need to hear it, and I don’t need to wallow in the past.

“Well, I should get going.” I stare at the surfboard in the bed of the truck, itching to get on it even more after this phone call. “I’ll see you tomorrow though.”

“Oh, okay,” she says softly. “See you tomorrow. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

I end the call and head for the beach. A place that has always been my safe haven from feelings. I run here when I need to escape the reality of real life. But lately, when I need a distraction, I’ve been running to Winter. And I want to see her today.

I wonder how her brother would feel about that.



WINTER

I have this dream where I'm watching my father's car crash, hitting the wall, going way too fast. Well, not a dream, but a nightmare. It happens every few months. I can never stop it, and it always leaves me waking up, covered in sweat.

As I lie here in my bed in the early morning hours, my covers soaked through, I wipe the tears from my eyes. I always feel like I'm having a heart attack. But the thing is, I don't curse this dream or wish it to disappear forever because before he leaves the starting line and hits that wall, he gives me a thumbs-up and winks at me while he waits in the staging lanes. It's just a glimpse of my father and a sequence of events, exactly how they happened the day he died.

It's painful. No matter how many times, it's so damn painful. But I never want to forget the little things about him. His grin. His signature wink. Or how much he loved the thing that took him out of this world. I want to remember him. Even the painful parts.

I drive his truck sometimes instead of my car because it makes me feel closer to him. I rifle through his shirts that Mom still has because when I bury my nose deep inside the fabric, inhaling a long breath as I close my eyes ... I swear I can almost smell him.

In some weird, unhealthy way, I know the only reason why I ever dated Nathan was because I wanted to feel everything on only a surface level and I knew that was as deep as it would go with a guy like him. After feeling the loss of my father and losing him in such a horrific way, I didn't want to feel anything else. I never wanted to hurt again.

I swore to Beau on our dad's grave that I wasn't hooking up with Kye. I didn't lie. We have never hooked up or even kissed. But I can't deny the insane feeling I get in my stomach when Kye's fingers touch my skin or when his voice rasp words that probably walk the line of being inappropriate for a friend to say. I know I'll never cross over that boundary. Neither will he. But still, I'd be lying if I said I didn't let my mind fantasize about it from

time to time.

If I could erase the fact that he's Beau's best friend or that he's been known to be a hound dog, I still wouldn't want to put my heart out there for a guy like him. A man like Kye would ruin me. He'd wreck me, and I would still be incapable of hating him.

I told him I would go with him to his mother's birthday dinner tomorrow. I understand his father is a recovering addict. One who has struggled with sobriety most of his adult life. So, while I know it might be an uncomfortable dinner, I'm happy to sit by Kye and help him get through this meal, all while pretending to be his girlfriend. When Kye asked me for this favor, I said yes without thinking twice.

The trouble is, I'm having a hard time figuring out what is real and what isn't when it comes to Kye Collins. We're in so deep into this arrangement ... I don't even know what's genuine and what's pretend.

When we're alone, his words drip with sweetness. And his touch sets my skin on fire. That's not a fake relationship. It's more ...

I roll to my side and listen to the rain outside my window, letting it soothe me back to sleep like a lullaby. My brain remains on the boy with the sweetest grin and the most intoxicating laugh, blurring our cold, harsh reality even more.

twelve



KYE

Dane, Bama, and I trudge back into the house after our early morning workout, and I head right to my room. Bama's still acting like a fucking weirdo, but, hey, I still have my dick between my legs, and he hasn't murdered me yet, so I call it a win. He'll come around once he sees I'm not trying to get with Winter in the way he thinks.

I think about her. *Hell, do I think about her.* For Christ's sake, I fuck my hand in the shower daily to images of her doing things that I'm sure her sweet, innocent self has never done. I might imagine it, but I haven't acted on it.

I told my mother I'd be at the dinner. Winter too. My hope is that once she sees me happy and meets Winter, she'll back off. I love my mom. Just like I love my dad. But the constant worrying over what I'm going to walk into if I go back home is enough to put me in a fucking nuthouse. If Mom thinks I'm in a relationship, my hope is she won't bug me to come home and visit nearly as often. Plus, she won't worry that I'm going off the deep end.

Tonight is a baby step in my relationship with my father after avoiding him the entire school year. But the reality is, classes end next week, and I'll have to either move home for the summer—in a house with my dad—or find a house or apartment to rent until the one I'll be sharing with Dane and Bama in the fall is ready.

All I know is, realizing Winter is going to be by my side when I see my father tonight somehow makes it seem less awful. I feel stronger, knowing she'll be with me. Knowing she wants to be.

I hear a knock at my door before it pushes open slightly, and Bama stands in my doorway.

“Dude, can't a man get some privacy? What would you have done if my dick was out?” I wave my hand at him. “I could have been changing and bare-assed.”

His eyes widen. “Yeah ... good point. Next time, I'll wait before opening it.”

“I would think so. I wouldn’t want to make you feel bad about your own equipment.” I nod my chin at him. “Some things are just better left unseen.”

“Wow,” he groans, rolling his eyes. “Whatever you say.”

I sit at the edge of my bed, pulling my socks on. “So, what’s up?”

He leans against my dresser, stuffing his hand in his pocket. “My sister has been through a lot this school year.”

I want to say, *You don’t know the fucking half of it.* But I don’t. It’s not his fault he doesn’t know how bad things really were at school until I stepped in. Winter kept it from him because she was worried he’d go off the deep end, which he would have. I know Bama enough to know that you don’t fuck with his family.

“I’m aware of that, Bam.”

“My point is ...” he says before stopping. “If this is just a game to you, back off. Because I know my sister. She might think she’s fooling me, but she isn’t. She’s falling for you. Hell, she might have already fallen. And once you’re done with this game you’re playing, you’re going to fucking ruin her. She doesn’t need that.”

I try to find the words but can’t. I know I can’t give her what she needs. But I also don’t think he’s even giving me permission to try.

“I’d never hurt Winter. You’ve got to trust me on that,” I assure him. “She means everything to me.”

“You’re my boy,” he says, running his free hand over his head. “But she’s blood. And I’ll always have her back.” He shrugs his shoulders, narrowing his eyes. “Don’t fuck with her head, Kye. It won’t end well if you do.”

And then he leaves. And even though I try, I can’t get all the fucking thoughts in my head sorted out.

I wanted to help her. To be her friend. To get her through the shit she was dealing with.

What if she has fallen in love with me and I end up breaking her? Just like her brother thinks I will. The thought of that makes me sick.



WINTER

Kye is quiet on the way to dinner. Maybe it's because his family makes him anxious. Perhaps he's worked up over that. I wonder if his family will pick up on the fact that we aren't really dating. I'm hoping to sell them on it, but I'm not the best actress.

"You all right?" I ask him. "Anything I can do to help?"

He glances at me briefly before turning his attention back to the road. "Nah, I'm good."

He tries to give me that lopsided grin, but I can see through it. He's stressed.

"You don't have to be, you know." I breathe out a laugh and rest my head against the window. "Lord knows I'm not always okay. Us humans are entitled to lose our shit from time to time."

He's quiet. Too quiet. And even his energy feels like he's a million miles away.

"You're always going to be okay, Snowflake," he barely whispers. "You're strong."

I sit there, stunned. Confused as to why he said that. It seemed like it had some hidden message, but I try to push the thought out of my mind and focus on faking it through this dinner.

After driving for twenty more minutes, we pull up to a restaurant called Anglers. It's gorgeous, and it overlooks the entire beach.

"Here we go," he mutters, looking at me. "Are you sure you want to do this? I can say you aren't feeling well."

I put my hand over his. "A wise man once said to me, 'I'm here, aren't I? And I'm here because I want to be.' " I smile. "Well, I'm here. And I'm here because I want to be too."

He stares at me, his eyes floating to my lips, like I've noticed they do every now and then. "All right, let's go. They just pulled in."

And suddenly ... I feel really freaking nervous. I'm going to meet my fake boyfriend's parents. That's a first.



KYE

We all sit down at the table, and even though I'm nervous to look at my father, I can't stop my eyes from floating to his face to see if he actually looks sober. I've played this game before and lost. Plenty of times did I think he was off the junk, and I'd look at him and instantly know he wasn't. I'd hear that tone in his voice, like he was struggling to talk or too exhausted to carry on a conversation. It always made me wonder if it was awful to sit there and sound like that. To have to worry that you sounded and looked high. I would think it was, but then again, I suppose I wouldn't know.

Unlike his usual scruffy self, his face is clean-shaven. He's put on a few pounds since the last time I saw him too, making him look not so frail and sickly.

"So, Winter, did you two meet at Florida East?" my mom says, putting down her menu. "Do you attend school there?"

Winter shifts uncomfortably in her seat. I suppose we should have had a plan on what she'd say if asked certain questions. On the way here, I couldn't get Bama's voice out of my head, telling me not to hurt her. Telling me she's falling for me. I've never minded being the bad guy in life. But I don't want to be the villain in Winter's story.

"Well, I go to high school not too far from the FEU campus. But next year, I will be attending college there."

"So, you're a Floridian as well." My mom smiles. "Born and raised here?"

"Actually, no," Winter answers. "I was born and raised in Alabama. I've only been here for a few years." She smiles. "So, no, not a *true* Floridian. Consider me a transplant."

"Oh, wow. Alabama, how cool." Mom tilts her head, smiling back. "Do you like it here? Must have been quite a change."

"It was," she agrees. "But, yes, I am enjoying it for the most part. Alabama was my home though. But it's nice here in Florida too. Can't beat the weather—that's for sure."

"Do you surf?" Bria cuts in. "Please say yes. I need someone else to rip up

the waves with besides this dude.” She jerks her thumb at me. “He always takes it way too far. Too damn competitive.”

“Oh, yeah, you’re one to talk,” I mutter, making my sister shrug.

She’s one of the most competitive people I’ve ever met.

Winter looks back and forth between Bria and me before she scrunches her face up. “Sorry to let you down, girl. But, no ... I’m afraid not.” She gives me a soft look, nodding her chin at me. “But this guy right here did talk me into swimming in the ocean for the very first time. Before that, I was a scaredy-cat.”

“I can’t say I blame you,” my dad says, looking from Winter before looking at the place mat in front of him, seemingly anxious. It’s as though he wants to be part of the conversation but isn’t sure how to include himself. Or maybe he just feels unwelcome.

“When I was a kid, I was paddling out to find some bigger waves, and my board got flipped over. I knew something had done it, but I wasn’t sure what.” My dad’s face lights up. “All of a sudden, my shorts were being pulled off. I couldn’t even think about fighting for them though because here I thought, I was being attacked by a sea monster. I just started to swim away. Bare-assed and all.”

Winter’s eyes are wide, and her mouth hangs open as she waits for my dad to say what happened next.

“What was it, Mr. Collins?” Winter says quickly.

“A damn dolphin.” Dad laughs. “It took my shorts out a bit farther before dropping them.”

“So, you got them back?” she says, completely entranced by the story. “You didn’t have to swim in naked?”

“Oh, no, I still had to.” His lips turn up a little. “No way was I risking going out to where it had taken them. It was probably a trap.” He shakes his head slightly. “No, I swam in. Made a run for my towel and didn’t return to that particular beach for about two months.”

I’ve heard the story before, but it has been a while since he last told it. He grew up right next to the beach, just like me and Bria. So, the ocean has always been a part of his life too. I just wish he had found an escape in the blue water and not in drugs.

Winter becomes somber. “So, not going to lie, Mr. Collins ... that didn’t really make me want to go jump into the ocean again. Sort of did the opposite. I thought dolphins were supposed to be nice. Magical even.”

“Since you were named after one, you mean.” I nudge her side. “Babe, I’m sure that would make them leave you alone. You are one of them and all.”

She shoots me a glare. “Shut up. You’re a college jock, admitting you know about Winter the dolphin. You can’t make fun of me for my name.”

“Oh, I get it!” Bria finally blurts out. “Winter the dolphin from *Dolphin Tale*. Duh.”

“Yeah”—I lean back, draping my arm over the back of Winter’s chair—“her namesake.”

“I was already born and named when they found her, doofus.” Winter shakes her head at me. “So, no, my mom did not name me after a dolphin. Therefore, I am not one with the dolphins, and they could still pull my bottoms down and make me swim back to shore, naked.”

Noticing my parents talking to each other, I lean closer to her ear. “One could only hope,” I mumble and watch goose bumps appear on her arms.

There’s a pull between us. It’s getting harder and harder to ignore. I want to touch her; I want to hear her moan. Only I can’t, so I guess I’ll have to stick to my imagination.

My sister chats with Winter for a bit, interrogating her, like I knew she would. She’s nice enough, but when it comes to her family, she’s nosy as hell.

I should tell them that Winter is Bama’s sister. My mom loves Bama, even after only meeting him a few times. But I suppose my guilty conscience is keeping me from clarifying that one thing about Winter.

“Ready for football to start back up, Kye?” my dad says. His voice is clear and calm. Not like a lot of the ways I remember it sounding. “Tough loss last season.”

They were at the game we lost that would have led us to the championship. He had only been sober for a few months at best, and I barely spoke to him. He had missed so much of the games we didn’t lose. The ones we dominated. Or if he did show up with my mom, I’m not even sure he knew he was at a football game.

As cool as he is tonight, when I look at him, one feeling overpowers the rest.

Resentment.

“Yeah, I am.” I nod. “Can only surf so much. I need the game back.”

“I bet. Won’t be long now though,” he says, taking a sip of his water.

I make him uncomfortable. I know I do. He was less nervous, talking to my fake girlfriend, than he is with me. It makes me feel like shit. But no matter how hard I try, I can't drop this guard I have up when he's around. It's a guard to keep me from feeling much. Something that was crucial to build when I was a kid.

Vulnerability is for those who want to feel pain. I've had enough pain. So, being heartless it is.

Bria has never faulted him for his addiction. Or if she has, she's done it with much more grace and patience than I ever have. For a long, long time, I expected more. Wanted more. *Believed* he could be more. But then, one day, I'd had enough. And I cut him off like dead weight that was pulling me down.

Even when I catch myself feeling happy at this dinner, those memories creep in. The ones where he was nodding off at school functions in front of all of my friends and their parents. The Christmas concerts where other kids thought it was funny because my dad's eyes were closed the whole time as he slumped in his chair, his mouth hanging open as he slept. I remember those nights of riding around in my mother's car with her, looking for him. Wondering if he was dead or if he really just didn't care enough about my sister and me to come home. I think of the times he traded everything he owned just for some extra cash to get high. Or when he lost his rights to the autobody shop because he was stealing parts from cars that had been brought in.

I remember the shame. The embarrassment.

But mostly, I remember feeling unworthy of having two parents who gave a fuck. I had one. That's more than some people have. I should have been grateful. But I wasn't. I couldn't be.

So, I decided I didn't want to feel any of it anymore. And not long after that, Winter came along. And now, I'm sitting at a dinner table across from the villain in my story, hoping like hell he stays sober.

Winter might only be a friend, but she's making me feel things again. Things I've been trying to escape. And that scares me. It isn't what I signed myself up for either.

For as long as I can remember, I've done everything I can as intensely as I can. Playing ball? I'll give it everything I have until my body falls apart. Surfing? I'll stick it out while the waves beat the shit out of me, telling me I should go home.

Only now ... now, I'm the guy who watches movies with a girl he's not fucking. And takes her to dinner after, not expecting head on the ride home.

I'm changing. And that's not good because I'm changing for someone who is in my life only temporarily.

I try to pull myself from my own thoughts to be present throughout the rest of the dinner, but it's hard. Even so, tonight isn't nearly as bad as I thought it would be. And even though my family can't see it, she reaches under the table and squeezes my hand, no doubt sensing my restlessness. She's quickly becoming a crucial part of my life. Much more than I ever anticipated.

Winter Bishop is the perfect girl. But she'll never be *my* girl. Not really anyway.



We all walk to the parking lot, and my mother hugs all of us good-bye, thanking us for coming, before my dad touches my shoulder.

“Kye, you think we could talk for a minute? Maybe take a walk on the beach?”

Running my hand up the back of my neck, I swing my gaze to Winter. The small, reassuring smile on her lips gives me the assurance I need.

“Yeah, sure,” I say, giving him a nod.

“Be right back.” I pull Winter to my chest and kiss her forehead. Inhaling her to give my mind the calmness it needs before facing my father.

Pulling back, she looks up at me. And even though she doesn't say anything, I know she's telling me that it's okay.

Releasing her, I follow my dad through the path that leads to the sandy beach.

“She is lovely,” Dad says, walking slowly next to me with his hands in his pockets. “Seems like she's got a good head on her shoulders. You did good, Kye. You really did.”

“Thanks,” I murmur. “While I appreciate that, what do you need to talk to me about?”

It takes a moment for him to respond, and when he does, his voice is shaky. Like he's unsure of every word he's trying to say. "We both know I'm not the dad you and Bria deserve. I never have been." He stops walking, prompting me to do the same. "I've been shit. A complete and utter fuckup. You have every single right to hate my guts, Kye." He sucks in a breath. "I don't know why I did the things that I did. I wish I were different—stronger. I wish I had been made better than this person that I am—weak and selfish." He grits his teeth. "I fucking hate this person, Kye. I hate him. I hate what being this person has caused my family." He wipes his eyes. "I'm sorry for who I am. And I'm sorry for the hurt it has caused you."

I try to respond, but I can't. He's muttered sorry here and there, but nothing this deep. As he squeezes my shoulder, I clear my throat.

"Is it going to be different this time?"

"When you can't stand what you see when you look in the mirror, it's probably time to change. And when it finally hits you that you're going to lose every single thing in your life if you don't stop what you're doing ... well, it wakes you up."

"But it didn't wake you up, Dad." I sigh. "You've been doing this since I was born. Why are you now suddenly awake?"

"I don't have the answer to that, Kye. Not one that wouldn't sound like an excuse, I guess. But my mind is clear now. And if you could find it in your heart to give me one more chance, I promise I'll do right by you."

I shift on my feet, not really knowing what to say. "Mom can't take much more. You've got to do better. For her."

"I know," he whispers. "And I will."



WINTER

“Your family is nice,” I say on the ride home from dinner. “Your sister is sort of hilarious. Intimidating but hilarious.”

I got the same protective vibe from Bria that I’m sure Beau puts off to everyone when it comes to his family too. Older siblings take the job of keeping us younger ones safe. Even if we get annoyed by it and want to take the world on alone at times.

He rolls his eyes but laughs. “Oh, she’s sort of something all right.”

“I got the sense that she takes no crap.” I turn my head toward the window. “I bet your friends all tease you about how hot she is.”

“You have no idea,” he mutters.

Bria is gorgeous. Her hair is blonde, like mine but much brighter. Appearing sun-kissed at the ends and around her face. Her skin is tanned from the Florida sun, which isn’t surprising because I learned tonight that she surfs too.

I look out the window as we drive on pavement right next to a long, sandy beach.

“Teach me how to surf, Kye,” I blurt out. “I think I’m ready.”

His eyes fly to mine, and he narrows them. “As in tonight? Christ, it’s going to be dark in an hour.”

“So, we have an hour.” I look out at the ocean again, and for once, I actually admire the beauty of the waves instead of cowering to them. “You faced a fear tonight. It’s time for me to do the same.”

“What fear did I face?” he says, confused.

“Dinner with your dad.” I glance over at him. “I’m proud of you. And you made him and your mother so happy.” I smile. “Bria too.”

“He asked me to give him another chance,” he says, blowing out a breath. “What do I even do with that?”

“What do you want to do with it?”

“Fuck if I know.” His jaw tenses. “He’ll only let me down again.”

“Maybe,” I say honestly. “Or maybe he won’t. If you don’t give him a

chance, you'll never know."

His driving slows slightly. "We don't even have bathing suits."

"I have a bra and panties. And you don't really strike me as a commando sort of guy." I playfully move my shoulders up and down. "I reckon you've seen panties and a bra before, right? Shouldn't be a big deal. A big-dog surfer like you? I'll even bet you know a private beach."

He glances from the road to me, trying to read if I'm bluffing. "You'd better not chicken out when we get there. Or I'm dragging your ass out there, kicking and screaming. I'll even find a dolphin to steal your panties."

"That sounds like a Lifetime movie."

His gaze moves to mine, and his eyes look darker. "I'm okay with that. Those movies are basically soft-core porn."

There my insides go with that damn fluttery feeling.

The tension between us is unbearable at times. I'm not sure if friends are supposed to think about touching each other, but sometimes, I can't help myself.

We drive for a few minutes, the beach disappearing behind trees and rocky ledges before he turns down a long, winding road.

"Is this where you'll kill me?" I look out the window. "I'm getting serial killer vibes from this road."

"If I kill you now, you won't get to see my sweet tux," he says playfully. "Where's the fun in that?"

Suddenly, we pop out onto a small dirt lot. Only big enough to park one, maybe two vehicles.

Shifting the truck into park, he looks at me. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be ..." I swallow, looking down at the surf below.

He's out of the truck in no time, and as I open my door and walk around to where he stands, I swallow hard.

His shirt is peeled off, revealing his insanely stupid abs. As he pulls his jeans off, I see a deep V, which leads right down to his briefs. Even through his underwear, I can see how large his package is.

I ogle him. Fully unable to help myself.

"You gonna stand there and stare at me all day, or are we surfing?" He points to my body. "Your turn, Snowflake. Strip."

"How much time do you spend in the gym?" I complain, pulling my shirt over my head. "That's annoying. I mean, come on ... who actually has abs like that in real life? Are you a Ken doll?"

“Hey now, I work out. *A lot.* Even more after I go to your house and eat your damn cookies and cinnamon buns.” He winks. “You might have to start feeding me something with less calories, but just as sweet.”

My breath hitches, and my face burns.

Is he talking about what I think he’s talking about? He can’t be.

No, I’m being silly.

He grins before grabbing the surfboard from the bed of his truck. “Better get going, babe. Before you change your mind.”



KYE

I smirk as I watch her nipples harden under her baby-blue bra. She got the joke. I was talking about eating her. *Tasting* her. Something I've thought about since the day I first saw her. I shouldn't flirt with her this way. But, fuck, it's hard not to play with her, just to watch her skin as it prickles and a shiver runs down her spine.

I'd worship every inch of her beautiful body if I could.

Fuck, what I would do if I had her to myself for a few hours without the fear of pissing people off.

My smirk slowly dies the more those dirty thoughts invade my brain. I've been a perfect gentleman so far. But the truth is, I'm not all that innocent.

She follows me down to the beach, and when we reach the sand, she walks next to me. I can't stop myself from gazing over at her, watching her tits bounce as she walks. She nibbles her luscious red bottom lip as we get closer to the water.

That pale blue fabric against her beautiful, tanned skin is mesmerizing. She's got to be the Eighth Wonder of the World, and she doesn't have a clue as to just how stunning she is.

Just before our feet touch the water, I set the board down.

"Don't be scared of the ocean, Snowflake. I'll be with you the entire time. And I mean it when I tell you, I'll offer my dick up as shark bait before I let you get hurt." I hold her eyes with mine. "Got it?"

Her head moves up and down as her gaze shifts from me to the water. "Got it."

I point to the water. "This beach is perfect because it's semi-protected in this cove. So, the waves aren't going to be anything wild, yet they'll still be enough for us to be able to get up."

Moving behind her, I position her to stand over the board. Her ass grazes the fabric of my briefs, and I have to silently tell my dick not to get hard.

"We'll practice out of the water first," I say against her neck. "Climb onto the board on your stomach."

Craning her neck, she gazes up at me before slowly stepping forward and lying on the board. “Now what?”

I lean forward, wrapping my arms around her, and I slide her further down the board to exactly where she needs to be. “Right here,” I murmur before kneeling next to the board. “Looking real good, babe.

“Once we’re in the water, you’ll start paddling out until I tell you to stop. For now, I’ll yell to you which wave to ride. But someday, you’ll know how to choose your own wave. You know, once you become a pro.” I wink.

“So, let’s say you’re out there, waiting, and you hear me yell, *This is the one.*” I touch her back. “First, your hands will go to the sides of you, and you’ll lift your chest up.” Moving my hand down her side, I stop at her leg. “Next, you’ll bring this leg forward,” I say, and she does exactly as I said before I move my hand to her other leg, grazing it down to her ankle. “This leg will come back as you stand.”

Slowly, she pops up. It’s far from perfect, but it’s a start.

We do this a few more times before I grab the board from the ground. “You’re ready to try it now, babe.”

She looks out at the water again before slowly taking the board from me. I walk next to her into the water as she paddles out, gazing at the water beneath her with a sheer look of panic on her face.

“Hey, Snowflake,” I say, nodding at her. “You’ve got this.”

“I’m going to look like an idiot.” She frowns. “You’re going to judge me.”

“I will not. And even if you do, that ass looks pretty incredible, so points for that.”

She rolls her eyes and splashes me.

“Keep going. I’ll be right here,” I promise her. “Listen for my call.”

I watch her paddle a bit farther out. Reaching a spot that’ll give her just enough of a wave to attempt getting up on the board for the first time, but not enough to scar her for life.

I cup my hands around my mouth and yell, “Right there, beautiful. Let’s start with that.”

She turns the board around so that she’s facing me. Her entire body language shows how fucking scared she is. Still, she’s out there.

“Remember, the ocean can smell your fear. Let that shit go,” I call. “Make this next wave your bitch, babe. Show it who’s boss.”

She doesn’t look convinced but gives me a small nod.

And moments later, I yell, “Now! Go! Go!”

Her pop up is messy. And within seconds, the board flips over, and she’s underwater. I start toward her as fast as I can swim. And when she comes back up, I’m right there.

“That was a good try, Snowflake!” I pull her toward me, wiping the wet strands of hair from her face.

Her baby-blue bra is now completely see-through. And as I hold her and her tits press against my chest, I consider calling it a night. I’m so close to crossing that line. So fucking close to bringing her lips to mine and wrapping her legs around my waist. I’d rip that soaking wet bra into shreds and pull her pert nipples into my mouth.

Blinking a few times, I tell myself to snap the fuck out of it. I’m here to teach her how to surf. Not fuck her in the ocean the night before prom.

When I come to, her eyes are on my lips, and she sucks in a breath.

“Ready to try again?” my voice all but rasps. “It’s going to be getting dark out soon.”

Slowly, she moves her head up and down and tears her gaze from my mouth. “Ready.”

Releasing her, I help her pull herself up onto the board.

“Go get ’em, babe.”

And as I watch her paddle out, my cock is so painfully hard that even the cold ocean water can’t make it go away.

thirteen



WINTER

I lie in bed that night, my mind completely occupied with thoughts of Kye's hands on my body as he taught me how to surf. How his hands slid down my sides, stopping at my legs. Or how he stood behind me, close enough for me to feel his length graze my ass.

His encouragement and patience allowed me to actually surf for a mere two-point-five seconds, possibly three. But still, I was surfing.

I'm trying to push this feeling aside that keeps brewing. I tell myself that the friendship is real and the dating is not. Therefore, thoughts of having sex with him are inappropriate.

The thing is, they don't seem inappropriate. In fact, the thought of giving my body to him in that way seems like it would be the most natural thing. To experience his fingertips on every inch of my flesh. Leaving nothing untouched.

But then that other voice comes into my head. The voice of reason. Reminding me of the promise I made to my brother. Or the fact that Kye has a big, bright future ahead of him. One filled with fame, fortune, and an endless supply of gorgeous women thrown his way.

I just need a good night's rest, and I'll be back to normal. Where I don't imagine wrestling with Kye Collins in the sand, naked. Or him slipping his fingers inside of me when we're in the ocean. Or even him taking me on the surfboard, on a beach, where we could easily be seen.

Yes ... I need to cleanse my brain of those thoughts.

I can't fall for Kye. I refuse to.



KYE

Pulling in front of the dorm, I shift the truck into park and turn it off. Running a hand over my face, I blow out a breath at the sheer messiness I have created in my life lately. Messiness that stems from the most beautiful girl I've ever known. Inside and out.

Winter.

Slowly, I force myself to get out of the truck even if I don't want to. I drove around a while after dropping her off. Between the things I was feeling for her and the conversation with my father running through my head, I was in no position to go home and go to sleep.

But I can't run forever, so here I am, walking back into the dorm, hoping like hell nobody else is awake.

I sneak in quietly, barely making a sound before the light in the small kitchen turns on, and Bama stands there, only in sweatpants.

"The fuck you doing home so late?" he says, leaning against the counter, holding an opened bottle of water. "Were you with Winter? My mom will be thrilled you brought her home after midnight," he says bitterly, shaking his head. "Jesus Christ, Kye."

"I dropped her off hours ago." I lean against the wall. "I drove around by myself, so calm down. No need to be a dick."

"Easy," he warns. "Why were you driving around alone? Why not just come home?"

I laugh lightly. "You mean, why wouldn't I want to come home to this?" I shake my head, waving a hand at him. "Fuck, Bam. What do you want from me? The second I walked in, you were on my case."

"Answers," he utters. "Just want some fucking answers."

"I have no answers for you." I drag my hand over my face. "I know I'm not good enough for her."

"No, you aren't." He wastes no time in tossing back those words. "You're my best friend. You're like a fucking brother to me. But, no, Kye, you aren't. She is kind. And smart. And going places on her own." He pushes off the

counter. “I can see you care about her. But I sat back and let the last guy she fell for rip her apart. I won’t do it again. Brothers or not.”

I look down for a moment. “Okay, I get it. I’m a piece of shit, and I’m not worthy of her. You’ve covered it at least five times.”

Tonight proves once again how against it he would be if we were ever more than just friends. I mean, hell, we’re just friends right now, and even that has his dick twisted sideways.

I told myself nothing good would come of this. And I was right.

Before he walks away, his lips turn up in the smallest grin. “Even though I don’t approve of you taking her to prom tomorrow, I do need your help with something.”

Well, asking me for help is a step in the right direction at least. One step closer to him being okay with my friendship with his sister.

fourteen



WINTER

I smooth my gown down, looking at myself in my full-length mirror.

Despite the dress being tighter than most clothes I wear and applying heavier makeup than I typically wear, I feel beautiful.

When I walk out to the living room, my mom closes the refrigerator door and puts her hand over her mouth. “Oh my Lord. You are absolutely gorgeous, baby.”

Beau is perched on the couch. Looking up from his phone, he gives me a tight-lipped smile and nods his head. “You look good, Winter. Kye’s a lucky guy.” His face hardens. “To go with you as a friend, that is.”

I hear a loud exhaust and know Kye is coming down the driveway.

Before I can head to the door, Beau stands. “This is so fucking weird.”

I was surprised to see Beau here today. But then I remembered that as tough as he tries to come off, he’s actually a big softie deep, deep inside. He wouldn’t miss seeing his sister off to prom. Especially since he knows our dad isn’t here to see it.

“I’ll get the door. That way, he can take it all in!” my mom gushes, spotting Kye getting out of his truck and heading toward the door.

“Again ... they’re just friends,” Beau grunts. “So, he doesn’t need to take anything in.”

“Oh, hush your face.” My mom wags her finger before pulling the door open. “Any man is going to notice how beautiful she looks tonight. Friend or not.”

And when she opens the door and Kye’s eyes land on me, I’ve never felt more seen in my entire life.

I’ve also never felt so naked.



Mom snaps picture after picture in true motherly tradition. When she has Kye stand behind me, looping his arms around my waist, Beau groans some more inaudible noises as his face turns red. It's clear that this is hard for him—his best friend and sister going to prom.

Even if we are *just* friends.

“Okay, Mama.” I grin, tilting my head to the side and raising my eyebrows in warning. “I think that’s enough. If we’re going to make it to dinner first, we’d better get going.”

I give her a hug before turning toward Kye. “You ready?”

“I am.” He nods but looks at my brother, a knowing expression on his face. “Go on, Bam. Do your thing.”

Confused, I look from Kye to Beau.

My brother nods his head toward the garage. “Come on.”

As I trudge behind him, trying not to get a heel stuck in the mud, I can’t stop the rush of emotions that hits me when he opens up the garage door.

“Beau ...”

My dad’s old truck looks shinier than ever. And the hood is back on it, indicating it’s fixed.

“You fixed it?”

He leans against the truck and smiles. “I actually took the time to really fix it for you. Not just slap a Band-Aid on it and hope for the best.” He gently smacks the hood. “Shouldn’t give you any more trouble now. I tore it apart until I found out what the main issue was. She’s as good as new.”

I try to keep the sobs in, though I’m sure my entire face looks like I’m having convulsions. “Thank you.”

“Dad would be proud of you, Winter. I hope you know that,” Beau says, keeping his voice low. “You done good.”

I throw my arms around him. My brother is a man of few words. He feels his feelings quietly, never showing too much emotion or vulnerability to the world.

“I wish he were here,” I whisper.

He gives me a squeeze. “Me too.”

My mom joins us, throwing her arms around Beau and me. “Your daddy would be proud of both of you,” she sobs before the knock at the door snaps us all out of it, and I realize it’s time to go to prom.

“Y’all are going to make me ruin my makeup.” I step back, gently wiping under my eyes. “Jerks.”

“You own makeup?” Beau raises his eyebrows. “Who knew?”

I hold up my middle finger, laughing. “Asshole. Even though you just earned major brother points for doing this.” I snifle. “Who knew you had a heart?”

Not only do I get to ride to prom with my best friend, but I also get to feel closer to my father while doing it.



“I have the most beautiful date in this place,” Kye mutters against my ear. “Good choice on the dress. Whoever picked it sure knew what they were doing. They probably should go work for that dress show and make bank.”

I giggle against his shoulder. Feeling so calm and comfortable at an event I thought would have me biting my nails off. It’s because of him though. He’s the reason why I’m not nervous being here. He’s becoming like my security blanket.

He met me at my house like a gentleman. Letting my mom take all the pictures she insisted on without ever seeming annoyed or put out. All while dealing with my brother’s passive-aggressive distaste for our friendship. Then, we went to dinner at a swanky restaurant overlooking the ocean. I felt oddly out of place, and yet it was still fun. And the food? To die for.

And now, we’re here at the fancy venue where my prom is being held.

I didn’t miss the stares we got when we walked in through the door. I could just hear my peers talking.

How did social pariah Winter Bishop land a guy like that?

Wow, she must have paid him to show up with her. Or he felt bad enough to bring her.

I don’t care though. My date is the hottest guy here. Hands down.

“You don’t look too bad yourself,” I say, turning my head to look at him. “You clean up nicely.”

“What’d ya think, Snowflake? I was going to show up in board shorts?”

I pull my lips to the side. “You just never know.”

“Falling” by Harry Styles plays. His smooth, heartbreaking voice fills the

room as I lean into Kye, letting my body move with his, like we aren't just friends. Maybe in a perfect world, we wouldn't be. Perhaps in some other universe, we'd be in love or even just lust, and we wouldn't have to hide it.

"So, you knew Beau was fixing the truck?" I smile at my brother's sweet gesture.

"Yep," he says thoughtfully. "Told me last night. That's why I got there a few minutes early. That way, we didn't have to rush out."

"I guess I made the right choice by trusting you, huh?" I gaze up at him. "You ended up being a pretty damn good friend."

"I don't blame you for doubting me, but I wish you hadn't had to."

"I didn't doubt you." I rub my lips together. "I was just trying to protect myself."

"Protect yourself from what?" He keeps his voice low. "Snowflake, I'd cut my own fucking arm off before I ever hurt you." His blue eyes gaze into mine. "You quickly became my best friend. I trust you more than I've ever trusted anyone."

Before I can answer, he tenses for a moment.

"Don't look now," he murmurs against my hair. "But we've got an audience."

Before I can respond, he pulls back slightly and grips the back of my neck softly. "I'm going to kiss you now, Winter." His deep voice rattles against my ear as we hardly move to the music. "I'm going to kiss you and remind him of all he's missing."

His eyes dance between mine for a moment before he brings his mouth closer to mine, and both our eyes flutter shut. And just as our lips touch, I feel my knees weaken and a wave wash over my body. A wave of feeling alive. A wave of feeling ... whole.

I'm slow to respond, not really knowing how far to take it, so instead, I let him lead the way. His hand slides to my cheek while the other is on my waist, digging into the fabric of my dress. It's slow yet deep. I feel my skin erupt in goose bumps, and my nipples harden to the point that it's damn near painful.

His tongue teases mine the slightest bit, and before he pulls back completely, his teeth give my bottom lip the smallest nip.

When my eyes finally open, I have a hard time remembering how to even talk.

"Was that believable enough for you, Snowflake?" his voice rasps.

"Yes." I can barely whisper the word, completely breathless. "It was."

“Good.” He rocks us back and forth to the slow beat of the song. “Because that was one hell of a kiss.”

How will I ever kiss another man and not compare his lips to Kye Collins’s after tonight? Why would I even bother?



KYE

Kissing her was a really stupid idea. Felt good. No, it felt spec-fucking-tacular and also made my point to the asshole staring. Wishing he were the one with his hands on her body, tasting her lips, feeling her melt against him. But still, it was stupid.

The smallest moan escaped those plump lips when my tongue slipped inside of her mouth. And even through the dark navy fabric of her dress, I could see her nipples harden as I was pulling away. She liked that kiss just as much as I did.

But I can't kiss her again. Kissing her wasn't part of this plan.

Part of me did it because I saw all of her classmates watching us. Eyeing us over like they didn't understand why I was here with her. Like she wasn't worthy of me or some shit. Nathan had deemed her something like a sickness to the school, and everyone else soon followed. I wanted to say, *Fuck you*, to all of them without actually speaking.

The other part of me was being a selfish prick. The part that was aching to taste her lips and feel her body give in to me. The part of me that imagined what it would be like to slide my cock inside of her, feeding her inch by inch until she was crying out my name. I couldn't stand having her that close without at least one damn kiss. I needed something, anything of hers to always remember. The trouble with that is, now, I don't want to stop with that one kiss. Even if I know I have to.

She's been quiet since that stunt I pulled. Nothing like how we usually are when we banter and talk about stupid shit. Some days, we even talk about less shallow stuff and why life is so fucking dark sometimes.

I had this whole night planned out after we left the prom. I secretly put blankets and pillows in the bed of her truck to stay up and watch a meteor shower I heard is happening tonight. Now, I'm wondering if she'll even want to do that.

"The night is still young. You have time for one more adventure with me tonight?" I ask, glancing over at her as we drive away from the school.

She looks away from the window, sparing me one quick glance and a nod of her head. "Sure."

I turn down the abandoned road that leads to one of my favorite beaches. There's a huge sand dune that overlooks the water.

We drive in mere silence for the next ten minutes, finally reaching the top. I back the truck into a parking spot.

"Where are we?" She looks out her window.

"Graveyard Beach. Not many people even know it's here." I rest my head against the seat and look at her. "There's a meteor shower tonight. I was hoping you'd want to watch it."

"Um ... okay," she mumbles. "Sounds nice."

She's less enthusiastic than I'd like. But I hope once she sees what I did for her, she'll be more excited. It'll be hard for me to behave, being this close to her. But I know I need to.

I open the door and jerk my head outside. "Come on."

Walking around to the bed of the truck, I open the tailgate.

"Kye," she says, holding a hand over her mouth. "When did you do this? This is beautiful."

"It's nothing too extravagant, but I wanted to make your night special." I smile. "I can't take all the credit though. My sister helped me out a bit."

"It's incredible. Thank you."

Blankets, pillows, and candy are positioned flawlessly. I had Bria help me with it this morning when I knew Winter had gone into town with her mom. I had to sneak over there, but I wanted to make sure it was perfect. I wanted Winter to remember her prom night and smile. Not think back and wonder if she'd wasted it.

I get in first and help her up. Sitting down, I pull her between my legs. Her back rests against my chest, but she doesn't relax.

"Whatcha thinking about, Snowflake?" I glance over at her. "Cat got your tongue?"

"Kye, what are you doing?" she blurts out. "Why did you kiss me the way you did? And why are you holding me the way you are?"

"Because I want to," I answer, not really knowing what she actually wants to hear.

"Bullshit." She turns around to face me. "That's bullshit."

I narrow my eyes. "Fine, Snowflake. I kissed you because it's fucking stupid that people are so worried about fitting in that they don't want to take

the time to see what a badass person you are.” I feel myself getting angry. The fact that she’s borderline bullied at school because of that stupid motherfucking ex of hers pushes me over the edge. “I kissed you because you deserve to be looked at like you’re a fucking queen.” I reach for her, gripping the back of her neck. “I kissed you because for ten fucking seconds of my life, I needed to stop imagining what it would be like to have your mouth on mine and just do it.” My eyes float to her mouth. “Jesus Christ. Is that what you wanted to hear, Winter?”

She looks hurt, and I know I’ve taken it too far. I’m about to lose my friend. My best fucking friend.



WINTER

My entire body freezes, and I'm unsure of what to say or even how to say it. I swallow, fighting back the tears of frustration that want to spill out.

I made a promise to my brother. I swore on our dad's grave that there was nothing going on. I need to keep it that way.

"Kye ... I ..." I whisper. "I'm sorry you got the wrong idea. But I can't—we can't—"

"So, all of it really was just part of the plan? All for show?" he taunts, his eyes growing darker. "Fuck that, Snowflake. I know you want me just as badly as I want you."

His hand is still gripping my nape, daring me to come closer. I want to. The truth is, I'm falling in love with him. I think I already knew it before tonight. But that kiss ... that kiss sealed my heart's fate.

"Way back in the beginning, I asked you why you were hanging out with me," I say, trying to stay strong. "You said you wanted to be friends. You said I could use one. That was it." Tears well in my eyes. "You promised me there wouldn't be feelings. That it wouldn't be for sex. And then you kissed me. Like *that*."

"So then, tell me, Winter. Tell me you didn't feel it," his voice rasps. "Tell me that kiss didn't open your eyes up the way that it did mine. Tell me it didn't leave you wanting more. Wanting me. Go on, Snowflake. Tell me you don't want me. I dare you."

My breathing becomes more labored, and I stare at him with no more fight left in me. I can't fight him; it's useless.

"Kye," I practically whimper.

Moving his hands to my waist, he pulls the fabric of my dress up enough to pull me onto his lap. His mouth is on mine before I have time to think twice, kissing me like he's a starved animal.

I grind myself against him greedily. Wanting him so bad that my body aches. "Kye," I moan against his lips.

His hands are all over my body, gliding from my thighs and up my sides

to my breasts.

“Fuck, you’re something out of this world.” He takes one hand and clutches a fistful of my hair. “So beautiful.”

Before I can stop myself, I start to unbutton his pants, needing more. Needing everything.

His kisses slow before he pushes my hand away. “Snowflake ...” he mutters. “Are you sure? I can’t give you everything you deserve.”

“It doesn’t have to mean anything, Kye. There isn’t a handbook on friendships. Let’s make our own rules.” I press my forehead to his. “I need this.”

We might love each other, but my brother is the invisible obstacle we both face. I shouldn’t do this. But I need Kye in a way I can’t even fathom. I need his touch in a way that doesn’t even make sense.

Unbuttoning his shirt, I press kisses down his chest. “I’m not asking for a fairy tale. I’m asking for an orgasm.”

“Fuck, how could I say no to you?” he says, his eyebrows pulling together as he unzips the back of my dress. “I’d give you the world if I could, Snowflake.”

He peels my dress down, exposing my breasts before pulling them into his mouth, one at a time. “I’m too damaged for you. Too fucking dark and broken deep down. I can’t give you more than this.”

“I don’t need the world. Right now, I just need this.” I kiss him again, twirling my tongue in his mouth. “This is enough.”

His hand moves back to my head, and he grabs a fistful of my hair. “Promise me. Promise me I won’t lose your friendship. I couldn’t fucking bear to lose that.”

“I promise,” I breathe out. “Please ... fuck me. Fuck me like you do every other girl who gets this part of you. Don’t hold back.”

“You’re not like the other girls, Snowflake. So, I could never fuck you the way I did them.”

Pushing me upward, he peels my dress off, leaving me completely bare other than a thong.

Standing me upward, he positions me over his face. “Sit right on my face, baby,” he says gruffly. “Press your tits right against the truck while I eat you.”

I moan, not ever having been this turned on in my life. When I lower myself onto his face, his hands grip my thighs just before his tongue hits me.

Pressing my body to the truck, I rock back and forth on him. Feeling his touch *everywhere*. “Kye,” I moan.

He licks and sucks and tastes me. Shortly after, my body decides it’s had enough and starts to tingle.

I whimper, never before feeling this high. “Oh hell,” I groan.

He takes me through the most intense orgasm I could ever imagine before pulling me down onto him. I don’t know when he had time to get his pants off, but they are off, leaving his length pressing against my leg, proving again how big he is.

Leaning back slightly, I wrap my hand around him, making him suck in a breath.

“Fuck, Snowflake.”

I start stroking him lightly before my hand works faster, making him want more.

“I need you,” I whisper. “Right now.”

“I don’t have a condom.” He cringes. “I wasn’t really expecting this.”

“I’m on the pill. I’m clean.”

“Me too,” he says. “Well, no pill. But I’m clean.”

I giggle briefly until his hands cup my breasts, and I’m brought back to the feeling of pure desperation for this man before me.

I lower myself onto him, whimpering from the sheer size of him. “Give me you, Kye. All of you.”

“Goddamn, you are so perfect.” He runs his hands down my sides. “Absolutely flawless.”

Keeping his hands on my waist, he moves me up and down slowly. “You feel so good, wrapped around my cock.”

He moves one hand to cup my face and brings it toward him. Our lips connect briefly before just hovering over one another as we look into each other’s eyes.

His lips move to my breasts, and he drags his tongue between them, making me ride him harder.

“Such a good girl,” his voice rasps. “Taking me so fucking deep.”

“Yes,” I whimper, throwing my head back.

“Go on, baby. Let go,” he growls. “I know you want to. I’m with you. Can’t hold it much longer when you look and feel this fucking good.”

At his words, another orgasm starts at my toes, working its way through my entire body. Leaving me tingling and breathless. I continue to pant

against him as his nails dig into my sides harder while he comes undone inside of me.

“Fuck,” he mumbles before kissing me again. “That was a long time coming, Snowflake. Next time, I’ll be better.”

I lie down next to him, resting my head on his chest. The sound of his heart beating in my ear makes this all somehow seem even more real.

I don’t regret what just happened between us. I probably should, but I don’t. Because in that moment when he looked up at me, my body completely bare, I felt worthy. I felt seen.

Maybe he can’t love me out in the open, but I think, for now, I’m okay with that.

“Tell me something, Snowflake.” He plays with my hair. “Anything at all.”

I think about it for a second. “I have this crazy idea that I want to write a book,” I say nervously. “Not just write one, but also publish it.”

“Oh yeah?” He sounds genuinely curious. “Has that always been a dream of yours?”

“I’ve loved books for as long as I can remember,” I tell him truthfully. “But the past year or so, I got to thinking of how much I’d love to create stories of my own. Stories with characters that readers can relate to. Not a book where everything is perfect.” I exhale. “Ones where people struggle with self-awareness. Or maybe where they don’t always feel like they belong.”

“That how you feel?” His hand gently rubs circles on my back.

“Growing up, Beau always knew who he was and what he wanted to do. He was sure of himself, always giving his dreams one thousand percent.” I sigh. “I’ve never had a dream. Or even a goal really. Well, besides making the honor roll, I suppose. But even that wasn’t work because, if I’m being honest, good grades come easy for me. I want a challenge. I want to work”—I peek up at him—“while also reaching people at the same time.”

“You can be anything you want, Snowflake.” He says the words so confidently. “Don’t go looking for whatever it is. I promise it’ll come to you. You just need to let it.”

What I want is you ... but I fear you’ll never be mine. Not really.

“Yeah,” I whisper, “I guess you’re right.”

I’m falling in love with the guy who is my fake boyfriend. My best friend. My *brother’s* best friend. So, now, what am I supposed to do?

fifteen



WINTER

I stretch my arms above my head and yawn. Looking out my bedroom window, I smile when I see the sun shining, remembering the events of last night as they replay in my mind.

There had been a tension between us for weeks. A pull. One that was getting harder to ignore every single time we were together. Last night, we threw caution to the wind and did what we wanted. Not what was expected of us.

Graduation will be here next week. And then I'll be onto the next chapter of my life at Florida East. I know Kye says he can't give me anything more than friendship, one where we apparently sometimes have sex, and I'd like to think I'm okay with that.

I need to find myself. Decide what I want to be when I grow up. If I want to write books or if the stress of putting words out into the world would be too crippling. Before Kye, I was never one to take risks. Maybe, now, I could be brave enough though ... possibly.

I was never in love with my ex—that's clear now. Which means Kye is my first love.

First loves are supposed to leave you crying alone in your bed, hurting from the pain when it inevitably comes to an end. I just have to hope that the bliss now will be worth the hurt later.

There's a soft knock before my mom pushes the door open. "Morning, baby." She smiles.

"Good morning, Mom." I scrub my hand over my face. "Work today?"

"No, ma'am." She sits on the edge of my bed. "Did y'all have fun last night? I heard you coming in at nearly four in the morning." She narrows her eyes at me. "Past curfew, missy."

"It was prom night. I assumed a curfew didn't exist," I toss back lightly. "But I am sorry it was so late ... or early, I should say. We watched the meteor shower after and fell asleep. If it wasn't for a loud-ass animal making noise, we would probably still be there."

“Baby girl,” she sighs. “You love that boy. How long are you going to try and pretend that you don’t?”

I put my pillow over my head and groan. “It’s complicated, Mama.”

“Why? Because of your brother? Sis, I promise you, he wants you to be happy.”

“Not if that means I’m with Kye,” I say quickly. “He’d be so angry with me.” I feel a lump form in my throat. “I promised him. I swore on Daddy’s grave that nothing would come of this.” The tears well in my eyes, and there’s no stopping them. So, instead, I just hide them under my pillow. “I betrayed him. I betrayed Beau.”

She puts her hands on my ankles and gives them a squeeze. “Nothing is ever as impossible as it might seem. Love will always trump anger.” She pauses. “And your brother, he loves you so much. He loves both of you.”

Feeling the pillow being pulled from my face, I fight it for a moment before letting it go.

My mom cups my cheek. “It’s okay to be a little selfish sometimes. Tell your brother how you feel. The rest will work itself out, trust me.” She kisses my forehead. “Did you know your grandparents couldn’t stand your daddy when I first met him?” She smiles, her eyes glazing over. “He was wild. And they thought he was no good.”

“What happened?” I ask.

“He proved them wrong.” She laughs. “Well, not that he wasn’t wild because that man was wild till the day he died. But he proved that even in that wildness, he was good. He was good, and he loved me so damn much.” She tilts her head to the side. “That’s all a parent ever wants. For their baby to be loved the way they should be. To be loved so greatly that they never feel lonesome.” She sits for a moment longer before standing. “If you find that, I think you’re doing just fine.”

She’s almost out the door when I call to her, “Mom?”

She turns around. “Yeah, babe?”

“What if he breaks my heart?” I shrug. “What if he ruins me?”

She gives me the smallest smile. “Well, in the famous words of Oscar Wilde, ‘Hearts are made to be broken.’ And taking a gamble on possibly getting it broken beats the hell out of not taking the chance at all, doesn’t it?”

And then she leaves. And I’m even more confused than before.



KYE

Sweat pours from my body as I push through what needs to be my last rep in the gym. I've lost track of how long I've been in here. After not being able to fall asleep when I got home this morning, I came here.

Remembering my hands on Winter's body haunts me. Rendering me useless, unable to think straight. She kissed me like she'd loved me her entire life. She wasn't that shy girl the world knows. She was confident and bold. Taking charge, taking exactly what she wanted from me and nothing less.

I warned her I couldn't give her anything else. I'm not the fairy-tale prince in her story. I'm just the villain who is standing in the way of her finding him.

How the fuck will I tell her brother I've fallen for her? It won't matter. If he ever finds out I slept with her, he'll hate me anyway. Fuck, why did I put myself in this situation?

For a few days, I need to avoid her. Until I can figure out what the hell to do. Right now, I can't eat, sleep, or breathe without seeing her face. I've got to put some space between us to get a clear mind.

I should have never fucked her after prom. But the crazy thing is, that wasn't fucking. It was on a level of sex I'd never had. For once, it mattered. For once, it was about so much more than just getting off.

The door opens, and before I can see who it is, I hear Dane's voice. "Thought you might be here."

He struts over, stopping next to me as I sit on the bench. "What's on your mind, Kye? I heard you leave, and you've been gone for hours since."

I continue to lean forward with my forearms on my thighs. "I don't know, man. I guess ... I should have taken your advice. I should have stayed away from Winter." I look up at him. "I'm fucked."

He leans against the wall, stuffing a hand in his pocket. "What for, man? Can't be that bad."

"Oh, it's bad." I wipe my hand across my forehead. "I can't choose between my best friend and the girl who was made just for keeping me sane."

“Who said you had to?” he says casually. “Why does it have to be one or the other?”

I blow out a breath. “Come on, man. You know he won’t look at me the same if I’m with his sister. And Bam, well, he’s like a brother. You both are.” I shake my head. “My home life hasn’t always been spectacular, but you both became family.”

He’s quiet for a moment.

“Kye, no matter how badly you fuck up, you can’t do any worse than what I did to my brother last year.” His shoulders slump. “If I learned anything from that, it’s that the worst thing you can do is keep secrets to try to save someone from being hurt. Just be honest with Bam. And be honest with Winter. It’s one thing to fuck up. It’s another thing to fuck up and act like a coward about it.” He pushes off the wall, touching my shoulder. “And if you need backup, I’ll be right there, stopping Bam from cutting off your dick.” He laughs lightly. “It’ll all work out. Now, go get showered, and let’s go get Bama and get food. I’m fucking starving.”

I grin, giving him a nod. “All right, brother. All right.”

sixteen



WINTER

Seven days. That's how long it's been since I've seen Kye. I've messaged him, but his responses have been brief, like he doesn't want to answer at all. The last time we were ... us was at prom. Before he kissed me. After that, things shifted. But even then, in the bed of that truck, he was his sweet, charming self. Never indicating he was going to pull away from me after that one blissful night was over.

My graduation was a few days ago. And while I didn't invite Kye due to how strange he had been acting, I did send him a picture of me in my cap and gown. And when I got home that night, there were flowers by the door. With a short note.

CONGRATULATIONS, SNOWFLAKE. ONLY GETS BETTER FROM HERE.

—K

I miss him. I miss his calming presence. And his constant reassurance. I even miss him pushing me past my limits, making me step outside of the box. Mostly, I just miss laughing. It felt so good to laugh again when he came into the picture.

I'm going to give him a few more days, and then I'm going to see him and give him a piece of my mind. If it was about sex all along, then shame on me for letting him fool me. But if that were the case, why would he have sent flowers at all? Why only send me half-ass replies to my messages? I don't understand it.

I also know Kye enough by now to know that he wouldn't do this if he didn't have a reason. Not to me anyway. I know he cares about me. I could see it in his eyes. I felt it in his touch. I could even hear it in the way he spoke patiently while he taught me how to surf. Somehow, I crawled under his skin and made a home there, just like he did to me. And I'm not about to lose him now.

I sit on the couch, scrolling through the movie choices before stopping on *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. "You never let me down," I whisper. "Fix me. Make it better."

Relaxing deeper into the cushions, I pull my fleece blanket over my body, tucking it just under my chin. I'm only a few minutes in when my phone rings, and *Mom* flashes across the screen.

"Hey, Mom. You still at work?"

"Winter," she says, sobbing, "there's been an accident."

My heart immediately stops. I know my brother was racing tonight. I chose not to go because Kye always goes with Beau and helps with the car. He had been acting like such a weirdo, and I knew it would be awkward to see him.

"Beau—" I shoot up from the couch from sheer panic.

"Beau is okay, baby," she cries. "It's Mila. She's ... she's alive, but that's all we know so far. She's in surgery."

"Oh, Mila." A sob rips through my throat. "I'm on my way."

Mila and Beau finally figured their shit out not long ago. After years of fighting it, he gave in and let her love him the way she'd always wanted to. Now, she's hurt. Now, she might not be okay.

Pulling my shoes on, I run out the door.

Mila needs me. My brother needs me.



The night passed, and hours upon hours later, a brand-new day has begun, yet I still feel stuck in the same awful moment.

Mila made it through surgery and is going to be okay. But since she woke up, she hasn't wanted anyone in the room with her. Beau included.

His face is that of a broken man; he's completely at odds with himself on what he can do to make this better. His heart beats for Mila. If he can't be there for her—if she won't allow him—well, I don't know where that leaves him.

I lay my head against the wall, closing my eyes and saying a prayer for Mila. My brother lost our dad. I can't imagine how scared he was, coming that close to losing the love of his life.

I just keep thinking what a waste it was for Beau to push her away for so

long. So many years, he could have been complete and happy, but instead, he fought it because he couldn't set his pride aside.

I don't want to do that. But now, the person I love might not care about me like I thought.

So, now, what am I supposed to do?



KYE

“I’m so glad she’s okay,” Dane whispers as we walk into the hospital. “But holy shit ... that was bad. That was really fucking bad.”

We were both relieved when we got the message in the middle of the night, letting us know Mila had made it through surgery. But we also know that this recovery isn’t going to be easy. She has a long road ahead of her—Bama too, being by her side.

We wanted to come over right after it happened. Dane and I went back and forth on if it was appropriate for us to rush over behind the ambulance, the way Bama did. Ultimately, we wanted to give her family some space. So, we drove around all night, just waiting to get some news. The second we did, we made our way here, not able to wait any longer.

Bama needs us now more than ever. I mean, hell, his girlfriend almost died last night. Now isn’t the time for me to add something else onto his plate.

Now, I just need to break the news to Winter that this can’t go anywhere. Not sexually and sure as hell not romantically.

For days now, I’ve missed her. Fuck, have I missed her. She’s in every song, thought, hell, even around every corner I turn. I can’t escape her. Something tells me I never will.

We get onto the elevator. Dane hits the floor Julie told him they were all on, and the doors close. And when they open not long after, I’m looking directly at my beautiful Snowflake.

She’s curled up in a chair, her neck pressed against the wall, with her eyes closed.

Dane heads right to Bama, but I know Winter and Mila have been friends since they were babies. She needs someone, too, even if I have been trying to avoid her. Right now, I just want to make sure she’s okay.

I walk toward her, stopping right by her chair. Her blonde hair is all around her face, and even in her sleep, she’s frowning.

“Snowflake,” I whisper.

Her eyes open, and she blinks a few times. “Kye,” she says, her voice sleepy. “Hi.”

“Hi,” I say.

I pull her to her feet, and she wraps her arms around me. Even after sleeping in a hospital waiting room, she smells as sweet as ever. Pulling back, I kiss her forehead, and she cries against me, letting go of emotions she’s undoubtedly been trying to fight since the accident.

“Shh. I’m here now,” I whisper, feeling Bama’s eyes on me.

When I look at him, he looks down at the floor. He looks too defeated to even care that my hands are on his sister.

I could hold her hand during the best times, and I could hold all of her in the worst. I could love her through all of it ... if only she wasn’t Bama’s sister.

seventeen



WINTER

Dane and Kye left a few hours ago, but then Kye texts me, offering to pick me up at the hospital and drive me home. My car is here, but as tired as I am, driving home wouldn't be smart. So, I take him up on the offer. It's probably best that we talk anyway.

So, here we are, sitting in his truck in the parking lot of the hospital, awkwardly coexisting like we aren't best friends. I suppose that's what sex does. It ruins friendships. Kye and me? Case in point.

"So... you've been acting weird," I say, stealing a glance of him. "Since we, you know."

His eyes stay on the car-filled parking lot. "Yeah, I suppose I have been."

"That's it?" My mouth hangs open. "That's all you're going to say?"

"What should I say, Winter?" he says harshly. "Should I lie and say I haven't been? We both know I have been."

"Don't be a dick, Kye." The words come out in a growl. "Just explain why we went from talking every day to me texting you and getting back a generic three-worded answer to every message."

He turns his gaze to me briefly before looking away. "I just ... fuck, it's complicated. Your brother, he's got a lot going on. *Especially* now." He smacks his hand against the steering wheel. "I'll never be it for you—I told you that. And now, things are different. I just think we should cool it a bit."

My chest starts to ache as my vision gets blurry with tears. "Take me home," I say, wiping underneath my eyes with my hand. "Now."

"Snow—"

"No, don't you dare *Snowflake* me right now, asshole!" I screech irrationally as the tears continue to flow down my cheeks. "I want to go home."

As if these past twenty-four hours hadn't been crappy enough. Now, this.

"Goddamn it, Winter!" he roars. "Do you think I really wanted to fucking fall in love with you, huh? Do you think I want to look at you the way I do? Or feel like I want to murder any other man who hits on you? Or live with

knowing that you'll never be rightfully mine, and one day, I'll be forced to walk away?" His eyes turn nearly black. Reaching over, he clasps my chin in his fingers. "You were a cool chick. Someone who was fun to hang out with. You needed to be saved. That was supposed to be it—"

The emotions I'm hit with all at once are too much for my brain to understand.

He said he loves me.

But why would I even bother addressing it? It'd only be a waste of both our time. It doesn't matter.

"I did not need to be saved by a guy like you, Kye. I did not need to fall back into the same shit with yet another jock who changes girls like his underwear. Another guy who loves the thrill of the chase, but not the actual catch. But ... oh yeah, once you caught me, that was it. You were through." I feel sick, and my chest heaves. "Take me home. You're no friend to me. You're nobody anymore."

I watch his head fly back, as if I'd hit him.

"A guy like me?" His words drip with pain, his grip still on my chin. "I guess you've got it all figured out, don't you, Snowflake?"

"Come on, Kye. Be real," I spew, pulling away from his touch. "You were never going to be my happily ever after—you made that clear. I kept you company when you were bored. And now? Now, I'm just another notch in your belt." I grimace. "You aren't my Prince Charming, Kye. You were never going to save me." My voice turns to barely a whisper. "You ruined me instead."

"Yep, that's me," he mutters sarcastically before peeling out of the parking lot, speeding in the direction of my house. "You'll wake up one day, Winter. You'll wake up, and you'll realize I did you a favor, pushing you away. That I was looking out for you." He shakes his head. "This is so fucking stupid."

"What is?"

"All of it!" He barks out the words as he punches the dash. "Every last fucking bit of it!"

How dumb we were to actually believe we could be friends. How reckless of us to go into something blind, throwing caution to the wind and letting our guards down.

I knew better. I *knew* better.

In my head, I was sure it wouldn't end well. And look, here I am, with the

world crumbling at my feet.

I fell in love with the one guy I wasn't supposed to. And in losing him, I've lost my best friend too.

And the pain of that is almost immeasurable.

We ride in complete silence the short drive to my house. And as he slams the truck in park, I gather myself up and reach for the door.

His hand grips my leg, and his eyes look completely lost.

"I'll never be the same, Snowflake. Not after that night," his voice rasps. "You think I ruined you? Well, you fucking ruined me too."

I sit there, frozen. My chest rises and falls with every passing second. I can't have him, but I know I need him right now.

"I can't be your friend anymore because I can't bear to be around you without having my hands all over your body." He moves his hand to my cheek, stroking it with his finger. "And I can't touch you like that because we made a promise to your brother."

"That promise doesn't mean shit now, Kye. We already went back on it."

"Okay then, just one last time, Snowflake." He sounds so desperate. "One last fucking time with you, please. I know you need more. You deserve more. But let me show you how much I fucking adore this body again before you go on with your life and forget about me."

As his hand slides to the back of my neck, he pulls me onto him, reclining his seat. Both of us knowing that Beau won't leave the hospital and my mom said she wouldn't be home for a few hours.

He kisses my neck before moving to my lips. He tastes like mint, and he smells like lust.

Unzipping his jeans, he pulls them down just enough to take his cock out before pushing my sundress up over my hips.

Sliding a finger into me, he pushes it in and out a few times before adding another. "You're so tight," he growls. "But so ready for me, aren't you?"

I whimper. Knowing this will never be enough. I'll always leave, wanting more from him, and yet I can't have any more of him after this.

He removes his hand and pumps himself a few times, making me grip my thighs tighter around him. "You like that?" He narrows his eyes, continuing to work himself. "Turn around, baby. Sit on my dick, facing the steering wheel."

Shifting around on his lap, I slowly lower myself down. This angle is new and different for me. And intense as his dick hits me, delving inside.

He pushes between my shoulder blades, and my breasts press against the steering wheel of the truck before he moves both hands to my ass, shifting me up and down. He hits me unbelievably deep, making me whimper, and yet it's the hottest thing I've ever done.

"Fuck, I'll miss this ass." He gives it a slap before gripping it. "This ass should belong to me. No one will ever fuck you the way I do, baby. No one."

I move against him too, adding to the friction just before he grips my hair, pulling it back slightly.

"Say it, Snowflake. Tell me nobody will ever feel this fucking good inside of you."

"No one," I cry out. "Nobody but you."

"That's right." He kisses the back of my neck. "My perfect fucking girl."

As our breathing gets heavier and the moans grow louder, we don't need to tell each other it's time ... we both know. Pulling me against him, he grips my body as our rocking slows.

And minutes later, he kisses me one last time.

"I'm going to miss you so fucking much," he says, resting his forehead on mine. "I don't want to lose my friend."

Being brave, I swallow before pushing the words out. "I am in love with you. And if I can't have all of you, I don't think my heart can handle only having a part of you." I sigh. "From the first time I saw you, I knew you'd be trouble. But still, I chose to trust you. And honestly ... I don't regret it."

"I'm sorry," he whispers. "I wish I were a different man. I wish our story could have been different. Better."

"I love our story even if it was short and painful." Looking in his eyes, I blink away my tears before climbing off of him. "Don't go through your whole life thinking you aren't worthy." I pull my dress down before opening the door. "You might just miss something that could mean everything."

And after I climb out of the truck and close the door, I watch him leave moments later.

Knowing he's never going to look back.



KYE

I told Bama I wouldn't hurt her, and then I did.

I hadn't wanted to. Hurting her was the last thing I'd ever planned on. But her brother's right; I'm not good enough for her. I never will be.

Spending a short time with her opened my eyes. She helped me realize that letting my dad in wouldn't make me weak, but the opposite. She gave me faith that maybe I could try again with him. And that if I wanted an actual relationship with him, I needed to let go of the past. In the short time she was in my life, she made me a better person. For once in forever, I didn't feel alone.

I'd spent my life surrounding myself with friends, so I never had to face the silence. Because in the quiet times was where you were forced to take a hard look at yourself and face your shit. I never wanted to do that. With her, I could. I wasn't scared to.

I'm not sure what I'll tell Bama. Or what she'll tell him. If he's got to pick sides, he'd better take hers. They are blood. I'm just his teammate at the end of the day. And if I was being completely truthful with myself, I'd admit, I knew I couldn't just be her friend.

You'd have to be immortal to not fall in love with a girl like Winter Bishop. And I fell ... hard.

eighteen



WINTER

I pull my clothes on for the day, needing to head into town to get a few things. Mainly a new Kindle because mine crapped out on me, and as much as I love a good paperback, they are more expensive when someone reads as many books as I do.

I'm actually really excited to attend Florida East in the fall. I even met my roommate, and she seemed so nice and very normal. Although I have been known to be a shitty judge of character, I like her so far. Then again, we only met briefly.

Beau finally stopped asking what the deal was with me and Kye—luckily. As badly as I was hurt when Kye told me we needed to spend time apart, I knew he had done it out of love and respect. He couldn't give me what I deserved. And even if he could, it would have gone against my brother's wishes. So, telling Beau that I was hurt didn't seem to be the right thing to do. I simply said we wouldn't be hanging out too much anymore, and fortunately, he dropped it.

My brother doesn't let many people in. His guard is always up, and he takes a long time to trust. But he trusts Kye. The two of them and Dane created something like a brotherhood. I didn't want that to be tainted because of me and my stupid feelings.

I know Kye moved home for the summer, and I'm glad. Even though he has so much pain and anger toward his father and all he's done, this could be a chance for them to start over. It's not that I think Kenny deserves it; I think Kye does.

I miss him. I miss having someone to talk to and joke around with. But I know once I start college, I'll make some new friends. *I hope so anyway.*

Kye wasn't mine to hold. I've learned some things in life are pretty incredible, but they aren't meant for keeping. But when you have them, boy, do they make life better.

When I walk into the kitchen, a familiar shirtless man stands with his head buried in the refrigerator.

I grin, leaning against the counter. “Well, well, well, ladies and gentlemen. If it isn’t the infamous playboy of Brooks University in my kitchen—Mr. Cam Hardy.”

I laugh as he jumps from my voice.

When he turns around, his face lights up. “You scared me, you little shit. You can’t just sneak up on a fine piece of ass like myself that way. It ain’t right.”

“Sorry,” I say with a shrug. “Why are you in my refrigerator?”

Beau and Cam finally made amends after Mila’s accident. With Cam being Mila’s brother and all, it was something they had to do. And now, they finally seem to be back to the way they used to be.

“I was looking for something to eat.” He walks around the counter, pulling me into a hug. “How are you doing? I didn’t get to see you much at the hospital. Things were hectic.” He releases me, messing my hair up with his hand. “You fucking grew up, Winter. Goddamn, bet you have some dudes chasing you.” He grabs his stomach and laughs. “Bet your brother loves that.”

I lift an eyebrow. “You mean like how you love everyone hitting on Mila?”

His grin dies, and he rolls his eyes. “Yeah. Whatever.”

“I can make you something. What about pancakes?” I start to walk to the stove.

Standing in front of me, he spins me around and points to the barstool. “Sit, young grasshopper. I will make you pancakes.”

“You cook?” I scrunch my nose up in disbelief. “Since when?”

“Since ... well, how hard can it be? It’s a fucking pancake. Your brother isn’t up yet, still hungover as hell from last night. So, I will make you a delicious breakfast, and you will tell me all about you and Kye Collins.”

My mouth hangs open, and he winks. “I see everything, *Snowflake*.”

“When did you—”

“At the hospital. He bolted in and went right to you, calling you that adorable but really fucking lame nickname.” He opens the pantry and sees my and my mom’s baking aprons hanging. Looking back at me, he grins before putting one on over his naked abdomen.

Cam is unbelievably sculpted. And with his equally gorgeous face, he’ll melt your heart. And truth be told, as many women as I’m sure chase him, he isn’t the settling-down type. He’s been known for a good time, but it ends

there with him. Luckily for me, I'm immune to his ways after we grew up together as best friends.

He walks around the kitchen, acting like he knows what he's doing. It's clear he doesn't, but it's a breakfast that I don't have to cook, so I'll pretend he's doing good all morning.



“So, I'm not going to lie. Even though it's only a few ingredients, I had no faith in you.” I take a bite and wipe my mouth. “I was actually scared to eat these, to be honest.”

“And then look.” He grins. “Best motherfucking pancakes you've ever eaten.”

He's not wrong. Perhaps he cooks more than I gave him credit for. Because these pancakes are amazing.

We finish eating—still no sign of Beau—and Cam turns his stool to face me.

Putting a hand on my knee, he jerks his chin up. “Did Collins hurt you or something? Break your heart maybe?” His eyes widen. “Because if he did, I can fuck him up if you want.”

I laugh, swatting his chest. “I see you haven't changed.” I look at him. “No, I'm good. It wasn't like that with us. We were friends.”

“Yeah, friends who probably stripped their clothes off and rolled around naked together,” he quips back.

After I look down the hall that leads to Beau's room, I give him wide eyes. “Shh ... do you want him to hear you and go apeshit on me? He barely tolerated us being *friends*. He'd flip out if he thought there was more.”

“There *is* more. And I hate to break it to you, babe ... but your brother knows. He's *got* to know.” He leans back. “Kye's seen you naked. That was pretty clear at the hospital. I can read the dude like a book.”

“Again, shut up! We don't need my brother getting arrested today,” I whisper.

“He knows his sister isn't a nun, Winter,” he says nonchalantly. “Besides,

he probably didn't feel bad when he ... ya know ... with my sister." He grimaces. "Gross."

"It's much more complicated than it might seem." I take our plates and walk to the sink. "He was Beau's friend first. I get it."

"And Beau was my friend first too, asshole!" he utters, an amused look on his face. "That didn't stop him from chasing after my sister."

"True that, I suppose." I shrug my shoulders. "Anyway ... it's over. Whatever *it* was or wasn't."

"Sorry, babe." He comes closer, giving me a smoldering look but I can tell he's not serious. "Buuut you know what they say ... the best way to get over someone is to get under some—"

"Ew, no." I hold my hand up at him. "Never, not in your lifetime."

"Eh, whatevs." He shrugs. "I couldn't do it anyway. You're practically my sister. Just had to see if I still had it."

"Had what?"

"The charm." He sighs. "I'm afraid I'm losing it."

Putting my hand on his shoulder, I try to fight back my laugh. "It's good to have you around, Cam."



KYE

I straddle my surfboard, dangling both legs in the water as I brush my wet hair out of my face. I miss Florida East, but one good thing about living back home for the summer is, I can walk to the beach every day.

“There’s nothing like days out here.” Bria puts her face toward the sun and closes her eyes. “How could I have stayed in New York?”

“You didn’t move home for Dad?” I say as a swell comes, carrying us up. “Or me?”

Her gaze swings in my direction, and she splashes me. “I love ya, little brother. But, no, I came back here because this is *home*,” she sighs. “But I am glad to be home and closer to Mom and Dad. That’s for sure.”

“He’s doing good,” I say, knowing she’ll know I’m talking about Dad without saying it. “The person he’s been lately is a person I never knew existed.” I pull in a breath. “But for how long? How long before he goes back to the old him?”

“We never really know, I suppose,” she answers. “It wasn’t easy, you know, sticking by him. I know you’ve always wondered why I did it.” She looks at me. “I wanted to hate him too.”

“Why didn’t you then?”

“I’m embarrassed to say it out loud.” She cringes. “Look ... if he ever overdosed or if a drug deal went badly and he died, I didn’t want that shame of not standing by his side to haunt me. Even if he didn’t deserve that from me.” She tips her chin up. “I did it for me. Not for him.” She shrugs. “And he’s our dad. I love him. I always will, no matter how low things get.”

I think about her words for a while before saying anything back.

“I’m scared to get close to him. You know how it ends every time we do. With disappointment.” I shake my head softly. “The disappointment when he falls off the wagon doesn’t get easier. Ever. And each time it happens, I feel like I lose a part of myself. Like small chips of me ... chips that seem like nothing.” I look down. “Until they are everything.”

“We are allowed to do what we think is best, Kye. You can’t put someone

else's oxygen mask on before your own. You need to save yourself first." She pulls her board against mine. "But he's our dad. He's family. So, I choose to love him, even when it's hard."

I rest the weight of my upper body on my hands. "Winter opened my eyes up to that."

"What happened to her?" she asks. "She seemed sweet. And real. Like an actual genuine person. That's not easy to find these days."

"We weren't really dating, Bria." I try to act like I don't care even if it's shit. "It was all fake. I wanted Mom to think I was happy. And I wanted Winter's ex and his asshole friends to leave her alone."

She doesn't speak, just watches me with an amused look on her face.

"What?" I blurt out.

"Nothing." She pulls her lips to the side. "I've seen some make-believe things, brother. The way that girl looks at you? Well, even the world's most famous actress couldn't pull that off."

I wave my hand. "Doesn't matter now, does it? That ship has sailed."

"Just remember that in the darkest moments, that's when we need our people. Make sure, in those moments, you have yours, and they have you." She pats my leg before paddling to the shore.

nineteen



KYE

Even though we all moved home for the summer, Bama and I don't live that far from campus. Making meeting and training together easy.

We finish up, and I sit down on the weight bench as he leans against the mirror.

"We on for tomorrow too?" I smirk, nodding at him. "Between your sister and your mother, you've probably been eating way too many sweets. You can use all the workouts you can get."

"Har-har, so funny, asshole." He holds up his middle finger. "And, no, I can't tomorrow. I'm traveling to Alabama for my dad's memorial."

"Shit. I didn't realize that was this weekend." I take a drink from my water bottle. "You going to be all right?"

He looks down, stuffing one hand in his hoodie pocket. "Gotta be, I suppose. My mom ... I'm worried about her though. The memories of the track"—he flinches—"they aren't all good. That's where we lost him, you know."

I nod. "I know, man. Anything I can do?"

"Nah," he says, giving me a reassuring grin. "It'll be all right. It always is."

I want to ask him about Winter. If she'll be okay too. But I lost my right to ask when I pushed her away, making her feel like she wasn't wanted. Or worthy. So, instead, I don't say anything. Even if it fucking kills me.



I get back from my workout with Bama and collapse on the living room couch. During the actual football season is hard, but at least there's the added

benefit of playing games. The off-season—when we work our asses off to stay in shape, training day in and day out—well, it can get old. I’m ready for games. I’m ready to be back at Florida East, where I belong.

I see my dad pull into the driveway, and I feel myself tense. No matter how many times he walks through the door, I can’t stop myself from looking for any reason to believe he’s using again. I was trained to do it for years. Anytime he gets sober, I doubt him. Well, that’s not true. The first ten times he got clean, I believed him. After that, it was hard to take him seriously. I gave up on believing he could stick with it.

When he comes through the door, looking completely sober today, I let out a breath.

He’s still doing good.

“What’s going on today, Kye?” He takes a seat next to me on the couch. “Going surfing?”

“Not much.” I shrug. “Worked out with Bama earlier. Wasn’t planning on going to find any waves.” I glance over at him to see his shoulders drop. “Why? Do you want to go?”

He perks up. “It’s been years since I’ve been on a board.” He runs his hand over the back of his head. “I’d love to give it a try again though.” His face grows grim. “I don’t have my board anymore though.”

Yeah, because you sold it.

I’m quiet for a moment, trying to allow myself to be the bigger person. To be the guy Winter truly believed I was deep down even if I’m not sure it’s true.

“I have an extra one you can use.” I stand up. “Be ready in ten.”

“Be ready for what?” Bria says, walking out of her room. “Where we going?”

“Who said *we*?” I joke before waving my hand toward Dad. “Dad wants to go rip.”

“No way.” My sister’s eyes widen. “I’ve gotta see this! I’ll go get my suit on.”

After she runs into her room, I hear her pulling drawers out and shutting them. For the first time, we’re going surfing with our dad.

And truthfully, I’m excited.



“Okay, so ... he’s surprisingly good at this,” my sister says in awe, watching our dad tear up the waves like he’s been doing it his whole life. In reality, he’s barely surfed since he was a kid. “Like, he might even be better than us.”

“Speak for yourself, dickwad.” I scowl. “Maybe better than you. Me? Pfft. Nope.”

The smile on my father’s face is something I’ve never seen before. He looks so happy. And free. Like his demons have finally released him, letting him rest. For once in my life, he looks comfortable in his own skin. I guess I never realized the weight he always seemed to be carrying. In this moment, that weight has been lifted.

I know it’s temporary; he’ll always have to carry the weight of being an addict. He’ll always have the temptation of relapsing and the voice in his head telling him he’s nothing more than a druggie. But right now, he gets to just be himself.

He’s no longer the scrawny dude he was at this time last year. His hair isn’t messy, and his face isn’t scruffy from weeks of not shaving. He’s been going to the gym in the mornings—a few times, he’s even gone with me. He runs in the afternoon at the same time every day. My uncle even offered him a job at the shop, working on cars.

“Just showing you kids how it’s done.” He paddles over to us, grinning from ear to ear. “Your old man’s still got it.”

“I’ll admit, I’m impressed.” Bria bobs her head up and down. “I truly thought you were going to come out here and completely eat it.”

“Same.” I laugh. “I figured we’d be playing lifeguard.”

“No faith in my old-ass abilities,” he says playfully, pretending to be hurt. “Days like this, man, do I wish I could bottle them up. Hold on to them forever.”

“We’ll have a lot more days like this, Dad.” Bria tries to keep her voice strong, but I can tell it’s not easy. “We’re proud of you.”

She glances at me, wanting me to say something. Normally, I wouldn’t. In

the past, I'd have frozen up and run to escape the rawness of this moment, not being able to stand it.

I gather myself up. "She's right. We are." I look at my dad, tipping my chin. "It's good to have you back."

He stares at me, his eyes growing misty. "I'm going to do right by you guys—you'll see." He nods toward the wake. "Now, let's go. I'm about to kick your ass on those monsters."

He and Bria race off, both laughing, and just for a few seconds, I sit back and watch.

A day like this takes me back to a similar day when I was thirteen. A day when all was okay in the world and my dad was fresh from rehab and clean. His smile was much like it is today. Out of all the shitty moments of my childhood, that one wasn't one of them. And for a day, everything was perfect. Just like today.

But days end. They always do. And all good things can't last forever. Even if you wish like hell they would.

twenty



WINTER

Today has been hard. I knew it would be, but I never anticipated the amount of emotions this place would bring me. I stare at the drag strip in front of me. Vivid memories of the sounds of that day assault my brain, pulling me back into the darkness that was that night. I see the smoke, the flames, and the pieces of metal that flew into the air as my dad hit this very wall the day he left this world. Leaving Beau, me, and my mother to figure it out for ourselves.

I pull my thoughts from the painful memories and try to plaster on a happy face, thankful that this track put on something in honor of my dad.

Once the racing and other events are over with, it's time for the street dance that's being held in the parking lot. And when the first song comes on and it's Luke Combs's "Even Though I'm Leaving," I lose it. Tears openly fall from my eyes, and I don't try to stop them.

I've got to get out of here. I can't breathe.

I turn to make my way away from the crowd, to bolt into the darkness under the bleachers—somewhere, anywhere but here. But before I can, something—no, someone—stops me.

Kye stands in the center of everyone, a sorrowful smile on his face and his hands tucked in his pockets. Lifting one up, he waves.

Without thinking twice, I run toward him, jumping into his arms.

"You're here," I cry against him. "You're really here."

"I'm here, Snowflake," he says, holding me close. "I should have been here sooner, but I'm here now." Gently, he sets me down on my feet and cups my cheek. "I figured you could use a friend today."

"I can." I weep. "Thank you for coming."

"Anything for you." His voice is low as he starts to rock me to the music. "I've missed you so fucking much, beautiful."

"I missed you too." I tuck my head against his chest as we sway slowly. "I hope your summer's been good though."

I don't want to come out and ask him how his father is doing. And even

though Beau hasn't mentioned anything about it, I also know he wouldn't because he doesn't know about Kenny's addiction. The only person Kye has ever told is me. And I'll take this secret to the grave, if that's what he wants.

"It's been surprisingly good." His deep voice vibrates against my ear, lulling me into a deep relaxation. "Guess it's sometimes good to let go of the past, huh?"

I nod against him.

I know he's referring to his dad. But a part of me wonders if he's referring to me. To us. I don't know what this means for us. I don't know if this means we're friends again or if he remotely feels the same way as me.

I'm in love with him. I think I always knew it. But when his lips touched mine at prom, that sealed my heart's fate. There was no going back after that. And every event after that ... only made it clearer.

The song changes to something more upbeat and much less depressing, and Kye looks down at me. "Let's go for a walk? Talk a bit?"

Slowly, I nod as he takes my hand, leading us away from the body of dancing people and toward the bleachers.

He continues to walk, pulling me along by my hand until we reach the farthest set of bleachers. Walking up the aisle, he goes to the very top. In the darkest part of the entire place.

He sits down, yanking me onto his lap to face him. "I meant what I said in that hospital parking lot," he murmurs against my neck. "I'm in love with you. I always have been." He pulls back, sliding his hand into my hair and cupping my head to look at him. "Bama isn't just my best friend; he's become like family, and I need to do right by him."

I feel my heart break inside my chest from his words.

"But I can't deny that you were made for me. You make me better, Winter. And if I can't have you completely, I can't bear to be your friend."

Once again, he's come to let me down.

"And that's why I'm going to talk to your brother," he says.

I still, hanging on to his every word. Not wanting to miss a single one.

"Not tonight and probably not tomorrow because I want him to enjoy his time in Alabama. But when he gets back to Florida, I'm going to tell him how I feel about you."

"And what if he doesn't understand?" I rest my chin against his forehead as he holds me. "What if he forbids it?"

"I've thought a lot about that, and here's what I know. Bama might come

off as a hard-ass, but we both know when he considers people family, he'd do anything for them." He sounds so confident. "He wants to see us both happy. And if being together is what makes us happy, he'll allow it. I know it."

I sigh. "I'm not so sure. My brother is overprotective. And can be a bit of an overbearing ass at times."

"He can be a bit of a grump ass, sure. But that dude has a heart of gold. And since your dad passed away, he's felt a certain responsibility to keep you safe." He laughs lightly. "Might have failed at it when it came to your ex, but we won't tell Bam that." He exhales. "I know I haven't given you much of a reason to trust me, but please ... trust me on this."

I continue to lean against him, breathing him in. Until, eventually, I bob my head up and down. "Okay," I say softly. "I trust you."

He pulls back, his thumb runs along my bottom lip. "You've crawled so far inside of me, Snowflake. Since the last time we saw each other, I haven't been able to sleep, eat, or breathe without thinking about you." His hand pushes my face closer to his. "I'm done running from life. I'm done running from how I feel about you."

His mouth presses against mine, and our lips work together like we've been waiting for this moment our whole lives. I know he needs to talk to my brother still, but I'd wait forever if it meant I got a real shot at loving Kye Collins. Because before him, I don't think I was even alive.

"Nobody can see us," I murmur. "Please, I need you."

Pulling away, he looks around before pointing to the tower where the announcers usually sit. Tonight, it's completely empty and dark.

"There," he says before lifting me up.

My legs wrap around his waist, and I feel his hardness press into my stomach as he carries us down the steps and in front of the tower. Finding the staircase, he all but runs up them.

His hand turns the doorknob, and the door opens.

"Thank fuck," he mutters against my hair.

Walking inside, he locks it behind him. The only light in the room comes from the moon through the large front windows.

Setting me down briefly, he unbuttons my jeans and pulls them down. Kneeling down to peel them from my feet, he kisses my thighs, stopping between my legs before kissing me there too. "Fuck, I've missed you."

He pushes himself to stand before pulling his own jeans down. As his dick springs free, he palms it, pumping a few times.

Gripping my ass, he lifts me up around him and pushes me up against the wall. His length slowly works inside of me, stretching me to my limits.

He kisses my neck before dragging his tongue down to my breasts. “These tits, fucking hell.” He takes a nipple into his mouth. “Christ, you’re perfect.”

“Kye ...” I grind against him. “Please.”

Holding on to my ass, he presses his forehead to mine before moving me up and down, thrashing me against the wall.

I moan, feeling his presence in every inch of my body.

He continues to fuck me, but with the way his eyes look into mine, I know it’s so much more than just that.

“I love you, Snowflake,” he barely mutters. “Say you’re mine.”



KYE

“I’m yours,” she whimpers, looking so beautiful as I bury myself inside of her. “I love you.”

I kiss her, catching her lips with mine, swallowing her moans of pleasure.

Untangling her legs from my waist, I pull out and set her down on her feet. Spinning her toward the wall, I bend her over and drive myself into her again.

Plowing into her over and over, I fist her hair gently.

“Kye,” she cries out, planting her hands on the wall to steady herself. “I’m ___”

I reach around, cupping her neck. “Come for me, gorgeous. I’m with you.” My balls tingle, and I close my eyes. “I’m right fucking there.”

Her ass pushes against me as she breathes out my name. Taking every ounce of me that she can get, milking every last drop as she squeezes around me.

“I love you,” I pant again, coming back down from whatever fucking planet she just took me to.

Collapsing back against me, she breathes heavily. “I love you.”

Everything seems right in the world. I might finally have everything I didn’t know I needed.

But nothing is ever that easy, is it?



An hour later, we’re back down on the dance floor, and she’s holding on to me like her life depends on it. Almost as though if she lets go, I’ll disappear. I know the feeling because I feel the same way about her.

We don’t kiss. And I don’t have my hands on her body the way I want to.

Beau is watching my every move, and even though I'm done fighting this, tonight isn't the night to tell him that.

"Don't run again," Winter warns me. "Promise me."

"I promise. Just be patient." I look down at her. "And then I'll be able to love you in the open. Just like you deserve."

She rests her head against my chest and nods. "That sounds nice. That sounds perfect."

Yeah ... it really does.

Twenty-one



KYE

Three weeks. That's how long it's been since I've seen Winter. That was also the night I told her I would talk to Bama and we'd figure it out. Only I never got a chance because Bama had a shit-ton of stuff to deal with and it never seemed like the right time. And since I'm trying to be a better man, I don't trust myself to be around her until I get his blessing. I've already messed up too many times, and Bama deserves better from me. Since I know I won't be able to keep my hands off of her, I need to stay away until I talk to him.

It doesn't make it any easier that Dane, Bama, and I moved into our apartment last week. Hell, if he loses his shit, I have to live with the motherfucker. But I need to find my balls and just do it. So, I plan to talk to him when I get home later tonight. I've got to do it before she loses her patience and moves on.

Making the drive to my parents', I turn off the highway and onto the main drag of the town I grew up in. I try to come home once a week now. Much different than this time last year when I first moved to Florida East for my freshmen year and never wanted to look back.

I felt almost sad when I headed back to campus for school this year. I worried that without my sister and me home with my dad, it would derail his sobriety. For once, I felt guilty, like I was leaving him.

But then I talked to Winter on the phone. She explained that it wasn't my job to keep him sober; it was his. And that loving him was more than enough. I felt a little better, but still, I had this weird feeling in my gut that didn't seem to want to leave.

I drive past the town and reach the outskirts. Fields with freshly cut grass line the road on both sides. Just then, I notice a familiar truck in a small dirt parking lot. I squint my eyes, and there's no denying it's my father's.

"What's he up to?" I mutter, that familiar feeling of dread settling into my stomach, digging its way up to my chest and reaching every limb.

He's been doing so good, but I don't understand why he'd be parked in an

empty parking lot.

As I pull my truck behind his, I push my door open.

Please don't be high. Please don't be high. I repeat the words over and over.

I feel guilty that I still question him, even after he's had so many months of sobriety. Maybe I will always worry that he's fallen off the wagon. Perhaps that's all part of this beast they call addiction.

When I reach his window, I expect him to roll it down. Or open the door and meet me with that grin of his. Everyone who knows my father, good or bad, talks about his grin and how it can light up any room. He might have a rocky past, but he's a good guy.

He doesn't roll the window down. And he doesn't open his door.

And as I peer in the window, I see his lips are blue and his body is lifeless.

Yanking the door open, I check for a pulse. Nothing.

"Dad!" I can't stop the screech that comes from my body. "Dad, wake up!"

I shake him, but he doesn't respond.

My knees give out as I pull my phone out and dial 911 even though I know I'm too late.

My father is dead. And I didn't get here in time to save him.

Twenty-two



WINTER

ONE WEEK LATER

I lie on my bed, folding my hands on my chest and gazing up at the ceiling.
Why does life have to be so goddamn painful? What's the point? In anything really?

I've reached out to Kye since hearing his father passed away of an apparent overdose last week, but my calls and texts have gone unanswered. His silence screams louder than any words could.

I encouraged him to let his father in. To stop pushing him away. He listened, and then he found his father dead.

I roll to my side, curling my legs under me. Everything hurts. And nothing can make it better. I know the pain Kye is feeling. I'm well aware of how it hits you, making you wish you were dead yourself at times. Nothing can prepare you for what it feels like to lose a parent. Nothing at all.

I ache for Kye, wishing I could somehow take his pain away. Knowing that I can't.

I hear a knock on my bedroom door, but I can't gather the energy to get up and open it.

"Winter, it's me," I hear Beau's voice say against the door. "I'm coming in."

I don't respond, and within seconds, the door creaks open.

I feel my bed shift with Beau's weight as he sits on the edge of the mattress, leaning forward.

"Winter," he sighs. "You've got to talk to him. He's ..." He pauses. "He's really hurting. He's been going to bars and drinking until he blacks out and then getting into fights with random people." My brother sounds devastated. "I've tried to get through to him, but it's no use. He won't even come to the

apartment. He's been staying at his mom's house and avoiding Dane and me."

"He doesn't want to see me, B," I mutter. "He blames me."

"Why would he blame you? His father is the one who chose to use drugs."

"Before me, he barely even had a relationship with his dad. He had iced him out to avoid being hurt anymore." I wipe the tear as it rolls from my eye. "I would have given anything to see our dad again, and his dad was alive. I just thought—" My voice breaks. "I just wanted him to give his dad a chance. He got his hopes up, and Kenny let him down."

"Winter, I promise you, none of this is your fault," he assures me, keeping his voice soft. "You had no way to know this would happen. But now is your chance to make it better. He needs you more than he ever has. Right now." He pauses. "I've known that he's been in love with you for weeks. I just didn't want to accept it. Kye is one of my best friends. You're my sister. It's fucked up."

I wait for him to speak again, and he does.

"But he's hurting. He's blowing off practice and trainings. Coach is being as patient as he can, but Kye isn't making it easy." He sighs. "It's time for me to get over it. He needs you, Winter. You're the only one who can get through to him."

I stare at the wall. "What would I even say? Nothing will make this hurt less." I lean my head up to look at my brother. "We both know that. We've felt that. When Dad died—" I swallow as the tears gather in my eyes. "When he died, I thought I might too."

He tenses. Beau has never been one to allow his emotions to creep out. "Yeah, but you know one thing I did when Dad died that I regret every single day?"

"What?"

"I pushed Mila and Cam away. Two of the most important people in the world to me, and I shut them out." His eyes glaze over. "If I had just put my anger aside and grieved with them instead of blaming them, well, it wouldn't have been nearly as painful as it was to go through it alone. Now's the time to show your cards, Winter. Even if he hates you for a while."

After a few moments, he pats my foot and stands up before stopping at the door. "If you could save him, would you?"

"Without question," I squeak.

"Then, prove it," he says before leaving my room.

How can I heal Kye when it's my fault he's hurting?



After Beau left my room, I cried for ten minutes before getting up, throwing my hair in the world's messiest bun, trading my sweats for yoga pants and an oversize sweatshirt.

I look how I feel today. Which isn't a good thing.

Luckily, Beau hadn't left yet to go back to his apartment and was sitting in the kitchen. I told him I'd go to Kye, but he was coming with me as backup. Without question, he agreed and led us to his truck.

So, now, we're minutes away from Kye's house, and I have no idea what I'm even going to say once I see him. I want to pull him in for a hug and tell him how sorry I am. I wish he could transfer all of that sadness and pain to me even if only for a minute. Somehow, I don't think it's going to go that smoothly.

"Stop chewing your nails," Beau's deep voice says. "It's fucking gross."

"Don't be a dick right now," I growl. "You got me here. Now, leave me alone."

"It's going to be okay." His voice softens. "Just remember, it's only the grief talking. Don't take it to heart."

I turn toward him. "Great. So, you obviously think it's going to go horribly."

He cringes. "I mean, I sure as hell don't think it's going to go great. But y'all care about each other, so you'll get through it." The smallest grin takes over his lips. "Look at me. I was a dick to Mila for the longest time. We're dudes. We take our shit out on the ones we love."

"Mila is a stronger woman than I am." I barely whisper the words. "I'm weak."

"Cut that shit out, Winter," my brother growls. "You're right; Mila is strong. But so are you. You held our family together after Dad died. You got through school this year even though I know it wasn't easy. You are much stronger than you think you are. Only thing that makes you weak is how you

see yourself.” He looks over at me. “I promise you, the rest of the world doesn’t view you like that. You are a lot of things, but you ain’t weak.”

My brother isn’t one who gets in deep conversations often. But everything going on right now with his best friend clearly has him worked up.

I lean my head against the window and am quiet until we pull into Kye’s driveway.

“Here goes nothing,” I mumble before looking at Beau. “For Kye.”

He tips his chin down. “For Kye.”

We get out and walk to the door, and my brother knocks lightly.

We wait for a minute.

“Maybe they aren’t home,” I say when the door doesn’t open.

“All their cars are here.” He gives me a pointed look. “We’ll knock again. They’re here.”

He knocks again, and not long after, the door slowly opens, and Bria stands in the doorway.

Her face is free of any makeup. And her hair is piled up on top of her head. She looks like she hasn’t slept in days.

“Winter, Bama.” She attempts to smile. “Hi.”

I pull her against me, hoping it’s okay that I didn’t ask if I could hug her, that I just did it. Within seconds, she holds me back, her small frame shaking as she starts to cry.

“It’s okay,” I whisper. “You’re going to get through this, I promise.”

After I hold her for a bit longer, she slowly pulls back, wiping her eyes with the sleeve of her hoodie. “If you guys are looking for Kye, I’m afraid he’s not here.” She looks down, sadness filling her face. “He’s across the road at a beach party. Where he’s basically been for the past week.” As she looks up, her eyebrows pull together. “He’s taking it really hard. I’m just so scared his sadness will take him down the path that killed our father.” She clenches her stomach with one arm. “I can’t lose him too. And Mom ... she won’t survive it.”

“You won’t lose him, Bria.” I take her hand in mine. “I promise, he is going to come out of this.” Looking across the road, I nudge my brother. “Let’s go find him.”



It doesn't take us long to find the huge-ass beach party Kye is at. The smell of weed and alcohol lingers in the air as the music bumps so loud that I can barely hear myself think. I don't recognize any of the people here from the beach party we went to weeks ago. No, this crowd looks much rougher.

"There he is," my brother yells, pointing. "With those two sketchy-looking dudes."

My eyes follow his finger, and my hands curl into fists as I watch a girl in a tiny bikini—which is much too small for her large breasts—take a seat beside him, wedging herself between him and the other man. She whispers something in Kye's ear, but he doesn't respond.

"Let's go." I jerk my chin toward him. "Now or never."

I follow my brother through the crowd, and we walk past the bonfire and head toward Kye. A group of girls looks my brother up and down, licking their lips and nudging each other. Poor things think they have a shot at getting the attention of Beau Bishop.

Dream on, ladies. He's too obsessed with a badass girl named Mila to even see you.

We stop in front of Kye. His eyes move up my body and to my face. They look black and soulless as he continues to glare at me. I don't recognize this man. On the surface, he isn't the Kye I know and love.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" He doesn't try to hide the disgust on his face as he looks at me. His eyes shift to my brother. "Why'd you bring her here, Bam? This isn't her scene." He looks irate. "Then again, isn't yours either."

"Can we talk?" I step closer. "Please?"

I'm greeted by a cruel smirk, and the girl next to him leans closer, her breasts pressing against his side.

"I've got nothing to say to you," he taunts me. "Go home. Go read a book or some shit."

He turns his attention to her, running his hand down her thigh before

gazing back at me. “As you can see, I’m busy here.”

The other two guys laugh before Beau moves closer.

“Go take a fucking walk, assholes,” he growls. And when they stare at him, he lifts one up by the shirt collar, shoving him backward on the sand. “Don’t make me ask again.”

They scurry away, but the chick remains.

“You too, sweetheart.” I wave my hand at her to go. “This doesn’t involve you. Kye doesn’t want you here.”

“Before your prude-looking ass showed up, I was about to make his day a lot better.” She licks his neck before nibbling his ear. “He sure likes it when I suck his dick. Isn’t that right, baby?”

My stomach turns at the image of him and this girl. He doesn’t say yes, but he also doesn’t push her away.

“Leave, Winter. Nobody wants you here.” He keeps his voice monotone. “I don’t want you here.”

“This isn’t going to help you, Kye.” I shake my head softly. “I know it feels good now. It feels better than facing reality. But it won’t help.”

I attempt to reach for his hand, but he pulls back.

“Fucking leave!” he roars, and the girl next to him flinches.

Beau lifts him up by his neck, pulling him away from her. “You’re mad, brother,” he growls as he releases Kye. “That’s fine. I fucking get it. But you will not speak to my fucking sister like that. You feel me? You disrespect her, you’re going to deal with me. Boys or not.” Beau’s nostrils flare, and his chest heaves. “We came here to fucking talk, and you will listen to us.”

Kye bumps his chest against Beau’s. “Fuck off. We’re done here,” he says through gritted teeth. “I’ll get my shit out of the apartment too.”

“You don’t mean—” my brother starts to say, but Kye turns quickly, ramming his shoulder into Beau’s chest before storming away.

Once he gets closer to the water, he looks over his shoulder. “It was all fucking fake, Winter. Go back to your life, where you date guys like Nathan and they record more fucking pornos of you.”

And if I ever thought I knew what it felt like to have a broken heart, I was wrong. Because Kye Collins just shattered my heart so badly that it will never be the same.

And he felt nothing while doing it.



KYE

What was she trying to prove, showing up here? What fucking right does she have to come to my happy place and taint it with her fucking beauty?

I was cruel, and I don't care. Best she gets it now that this thing between us is done. It was doomed all along—a girl like that with a fuckup like me. Today was just the icing on the cake.

I stare out at the water, sitting on the beach with my knees up. The same beach where I went surfing weeks ago with my dad. When I thought for once that he was going to stay clean. For us. I thought he'd do it for us.

If I hadn't let my father in again, if I hadn't gotten my hopes up ... none of this would hurt this badly. I wouldn't feel this fucking shitty. I wouldn't be sitting here, wondering what the fucking point was in this whole thing they called life.

If *she* hadn't convinced me it was okay to let my guard down, I never would have believed in my old man. I would have remained thinking he was just a piece of shit. I wouldn't be burning every bridge I have left. If only I had left Winter Bishop alone, I wouldn't be dealing with the shitstorm of emotions hitting me.

I thought he wanted to be the father he had never been. I believed him when he said he was done being a burden to our family. I guess, now, he really is.

The funeral is in a few days, and I don't even want to go. Ever since losing him, I've been too drunk to form a thought.

"Whatcha thinking about, handsome?" Hallie says, running her hands down my back and to my abdomen before sitting down next to me. "I'm sure whatever it is, I can make it better." When I don't answer, she lets out an annoyed sigh. "Don't tell me you're thinking about *her*. She's not even special."

"Don't talk about her," I say sharply. "Ever."

"Fiiiine." She presses her overly plump lips on my arm. "What can I do, Kye? You know I can make you feel better." Her hand slides down my

abdomen before grazing my crotch. “Let me help you.”

Hallie went to high school with me. She knows my father died, but she also knows I don't want to talk about it with her. Years ago, she'd come around parties and offer her body to me for an hour or two in a random room, and I'd fuck her. That was the extent of it.

And once, in high school, she pulled me into a supply closet and dropped to her knees. Giving me head before wiping her mouth and smirking at me.

She's never wanted anything serious with anyone. So, keeping her as a fuck buddy has never been a bad idea.

The night before I left for Florida East last summer, at a party much similar to this one, we hooked up in my truck. That was the last time I had any relations with her though.

I knew what Winter thought when Hallie mentioned sucking my dick. I could have corrected her, set the record straight. I could have, but I didn't want to. Winter is the type of person who forgives mistakes. She sees the best in people, even when there isn't a whole lot there. I knew if I let her believe I'd been with Hallie, giving up on me would be easier for her.

Removing her hand, I stand up. “No, Hallie, you can't.” I shake my head before walking away.

Even in the darkness of hating Winter, the thought of being with anyone else makes me physically sick.



WINTER

We ride home in complete silence. Both of us unsure of what to even say. I never expected Kye to greet me with open arms. But what I didn't expect was to be greeted by the cruel monster that had taken over Kye's body.

That sweet, cocky grin. Gone. The warm, comfortable feeling of being in his presence. Vanished. His eyes were darker than the pits of hell. In some ways, I think that's where his soul is right now.

Tortured by the rush of emotions he won't allow himself to feel.

I know my brother is going to ask me what Kye meant by the pornos comment. But I also know my brother enough to know that when someone is already down, he doesn't kick them. He'll wait for the right time. Although there never really will be one when it comes to something like that.

As we pull up in front of our house, he puts the truck in park and rests his head back on the headrest.

"That didn't go like I'd hoped." He can barely muster the energy to say the words. "He's not himself right now. The way he looked at us ..." He pauses. "He looked like he fucking hated me, Winter."

"It's the grief talking, not him." I try to sound confident. "We'll keep trying until he's ready to let us in again. And, one day, he will be. I just know it."

I chew my bottom lip nervously. The Kye I had grown to love would be so pissed at whoever that monster was that just exposed my biggest secret.

"Are you okay though?" Craning his neck, he looks at me. "What he said, the girl, his anger—it was all really fucking rough."

"The girl, if anything, is a Band-Aid. A numbing agent to help him cope." I try to keep myself together, but it's not easy. "He's just lost, but I'm not giving up on him." I turn my body toward him, leaning my head on the window. "I love him, Beau. And he loves me. I know he does." I nervously pick at my nails. "He was going to talk to you about us. He wanted your blessing. For weeks, he wanted to, but you were dealing with your own stuff, and he didn't want to pile on."

“Talk to me about what?” My brother sighs.

“Us being only friends was no longer bearable. We wanted more. Needed more.” I look out the windshield as our mom looks out the window at us. Probably wondering what we’re doing. “We had been far from innocent. But before it went any further, he needed your blessing. Somehow, he knew you would give it to us even if you were mad at first, He said you’d want to see us happy.”

“He’s right.” He blinks. “I might be a douche about it. But you deserve happiness. So does he.”

“Beau,” I squeak, “what he said? The pornos comment? I know you’re wondering what he was referring to. I’m sure you’re thinking the worst, and I don’t blame you. But I really, *really* need you to trust me when I say it’s better left in the past.” I look at him, pleading. “Please. It’s something dark and ugly. But Kye saved me from it. I really don’t want to revisit that part of my life.”

He eyes me over curiously before eventually giving me a curt nod. “Okay, we don’t have to talk about it.”

“Thank you,” I whisper. “I love him, Beau.” I look down at my hands. “I really, really love him.”

“I know that,” his gruff voice says softly. “I think I knew the night he picked you up for prom that it went much deeper than a friendship. I’ve never seen Kye like that with any other girl.”

“I’ve never felt this way about any other man,” I say sadly. “That’s why I won’t give up.”

Kye fixed me at one of the lowest points in my life. It’s time for me to do the same.

twenty-three



KYE

As light floods through my bedroom, forcing me to shield my eyes from the stupid fucking sun, I groan before running a hand over my face.

My head feels like I was hit with an axe. Hell, the piercing pain that pulsates over and over might indicate the axe is still in there.

As my eyes adjust, I see my mother take a seat in the chair in the corner of my room. She takes a tissue and wipes under her eyes before her face forms a scowl.

“It’s nearly four in the afternoon. You’ve missed football practice *again*. Coach called. I had to lie and say you were helping me plan the funeral.” She throws a hand up. “Are you determined to kill me? Your father didn’t, so now, you want to have a go at it?” Her voice grows angrier. “How much do you think I can take? Huh, Kye? Is this punishment for everything your dad put us through? My penalty for always sticking by his side?”

I roll onto my back. “What are you talking about?”

I stare at the ceiling, looking at the remains of stickers that once held glow-in-the-dark stars when I was a kid. I was always scared of the dark, hated turning the light out. It’s funny; it was my father who brought them home and stuck them to the painted ceiling.

“Where were you last night?” I hear her stand before she comes to the side of the bed. “Or do you even remember? I mean, Jesus Christ, Kye, you’re lucky you even made it home.”

“I was at the beach,” is all I say because, truthfully, that’s the last thing I remember.

I remember Bama and Winter showing up. I said anything and everything I could to get them to leave. And when they did, I drowned myself in a bottle of Jack.

“Yeah, I suppose you were,” she growls. “And then, after that, you came home. You threw a bunch of my plates at the walls, breaking them.”

I look at her and watch her wipe her eyes.

“You broke the china my great-grandmother had left me. You even ruined some things you and your sister had made at school when you were kids.” She breaks into sobs. “You just kept screaming like some sort of monster.”

“I’m sorry, Mom,” I tell her truly before turning toward her. “I don’t remember any of that.”

“Your dad just died of drugs after fighting addiction for twenty years. Why would you want to go down that road?” She weeps. “Why would you want to put me and Bria through more pain?”

“I’m not doing drugs!” I snap at her. “I’m not that fucking dumb. I am *not* my loser fucking father. I will never be him.”

“Your dad battled alcoholism too, damn it!” she screams, slapping me across the face—hard. “Wake the hell up, Kye! It’s in your blood! It’s in your DNA!” She stands, screeching through gritted teeth, “You keep it up, and you’ll end up just like the man you claim to have hated for so many years.”

Picking up the wooden chair that sits at my desk, she throws it at the wall before taking her arm and pushing everything on the desk onto the floor.

A scream comes from her throat before she crumples to the ground, rocking back and forth softly as she stares at the wall.

“I hate him for everything he did too, Kye.” She barely gets the words out. “But I love him more than I hate him. I always will.”

After a few minutes, she pushes her body up and walks toward the door. “Please get it together enough for the funeral. I understand you are angry. And Lord knows you blame me for a lot of your pain. But please, put your anger aside for that. If you can’t do it for me, do it for Bria.”

Her words don’t sink in. I don’t let them. She doesn’t get it. She didn’t have to be the one to find him fucking dead. She isn’t going to be the one to carry that around with her either.

So, once she’s gone, I throw my clothes on and head to the bar across town that I know won’t card me. Ready to do anything—anything at all—to numb this fucking pain in my chest.

Maybe I am like him. Maybe I always have been.



WINTER

The town Kye's family lives in isn't that big, yet finding one person in it can be quite a job. I decided not to bring my brother this time. He tends to get angry before he feels other emotions, and I think, right now, Kye doesn't need that. Beau is easily provoked, and I can't deal with two alphaholes today.

When I showed up at his house a few hours ago, his mother broke the news that, once again, he'd fled. She admitted she had gotten angry and let her emotions get the best of her. I hugged her and told her I was going to do my best to find him. He can't run from his feelings forever. I hope not anyway.

I pull over at a gas station, suddenly noticing my gas light has been on for Lord knows how long. I've been so wrapped up in finding Kye; I guess I wasn't paying attention to something as simple as that.

Every part of my body aches. I feel sick, wondering if he's in some alleyway, hurt. Or worse, I'm scared he's hurt himself.

The pain he's feeling, I'm all too familiar with it. But in his case, I'm sure he's also feeling guilt. Guilt for pushing his dad away for so long. And likely resentment, for the continuous pain his father brought on the family. His death being the ultimate hit on them.

It's getting dark now, and I know it's only going to get harder and harder to find him from here on out. But I can't give up. I just can't.

I've almost finished pumping gas when my eyes wander across the street to a dive bar. The paint on the sign is chipped and faded, but I can read it well enough to see it says *Palm's Pub*.

Hanging the nozzle up, I close my gas cap and head across the road. And when I drive around to the back of the building, I find Kye's truck parked there.

"Found you," I mutter, parking next to it as I cringe at the thought of him driving home later.

I pray he wouldn't be careless enough to drive after drinking. The thought

of it makes me sick.

Opening the car door, I get out and wander toward the entrance. Inhaling and exhaling a few times to calm my nerves. Which does absolutely nothing to help.

What if he's with that girl? What if he's with another girl? What if he screams at me in front of everyone? All of these thoughts flood my brain as my hand lingers on the dented doorknob.

Pushing forward, I open the door and walk inside the dingy room that smells like stale cigarettes and liquor. A pool table sits awkwardly in the middle of the small room. Faded wallpaper and dirty rugs aren't exactly inviting.

I gaze around, looking for his head of blond hair anywhere. It doesn't take long for my eyes to find him, landing on the figure in the corner as he slouches over on the stool, his head against the wall.

Marching toward him, I take a seat on the empty stool next to him. "When is enough enough?" I growl, keeping my eyes forward.

I tried to be nice the other day. What he needs is clearly some good old-fashioned tough love.

"When will you realize this isn't where you're going to find acceptance? You'll find a grave next to your dad's instead." I grit my teeth. "Is that what you want? To throw away your life?"

"Heeere she is once agaaain," he slurs. "Snowflake Bissshop, trying to saaave the day." He laughs, pounding his fist on the bar. "Fuck right off, Winter."

"No," I say boldly. "Your mom is at home, crying. She's already grieving the love of her life. Now, she has to wonder if her son is stupid enough to drive home drunk. Likely killing himself and, God forbid, an innocent person!"

"Get the hell out of here, Snowflake." His eyes are dark and haunting, making me almost turn and run.

I can't run though. It's not always going to be easy. That doesn't mean I can give up.

"No," I say, holding my ground. "You want to get drunk every day and put your mother through the wringer like your dad did?" My chest heaves. "Fuck that, Kye. I don't believe it."

"You don't know shit." He tips another shot back that the dumbass bartender slid in front of him. "Leave."

Leaning on the counter, I put my face closer to his. “Make me.” I grind my back teeth. “I dare you. Insult me. Push me away. Act like the asshole that you are. Whatever makes you feel better, tough guy, do it.”

His eyes narrow as they snap to my lips. Standing quickly, he grabs my wrist, pulling me out the door.

It’s nighttime now, and the streets have quieted down.

Once we’re outside, he pulls me into the alley, shoving me against the building.

“Get out of my fucking life, Winter. We’re done. Hell, we never really fucking started.”

“Why?” I tilt my head, glaring at him. “Because you’re scared to show me how truly ugly you can be?” My body tenses. “Worried you might ruin me with your wickedness?” I narrow my eyes. “Do your worst, Kye. Do your fucking worst.”

He slaps his hand against the concrete beside my head, angry eyes boring into mine. “If it wasn’t for you, I would have stayed away from my father. If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t feel this way.”

He’s so angry. But it’s okay. I’ll take it.

“I fucking *hate* you.”

Reaching up, I cup his cheek, and he flinches as he drags in a shaky breath.

“Don’t touch me.” His nostrils flare.

“I love you,” I whisper, moving my mouth closer to his. “I love you,” I repeat, kissing him. “I fucking love you,” I cry, tears streaming down my face as I grab his shirt and fist it in my hands. “I love you!” I weep. “You love me too. I know you do.”

“No,” he whispers, his lips trembling. “I hate you.”

“Maybe right now, in this minute, you hate me,” I breathe out.

Reaching between us, I slide my hand under his shirt. His skin is hot to the touch, and he tenses.

“But in the grand scheme of things, you love me.”

“No,” he says again as his body shudders.

“Show me your darkest places, Kye. I won’t run.” I drag my hand down, stopping at his waistband. “I’m yours to destroy. If that’s what will fix you.”

“You can’t handle the darkness,” he says, emotionless. “The darkness will ruin you.”

I glide my hand downward, making him drag in a breath as I tug his jeans

down.

“Then, ruin me.” I graze the head of his cock, wrapping my fingers around it once it springs free. “If that’s what you need to do, do it.”

“No.” He tries to pull away but fails. “I’m no good for you. Not anymore.”

“I don’t care,” I cry. “You’re what I want.”

“I might be what you want, Snowflake. But I’m sure as hell not what you need.” He grips my cheeks. “I will never be what you need. I’ll never be enough.”

“I’m what you need.” I lick my lips. “So, take me. Use me. Break me, if you must. I can handle it all. I love you.”

“Winter—”

“Kye, I love you. Darkness and all.”

His hands are on my thighs, lifting me up just before his mouth captures mine. Our lips work so hard together, and mine feel instantly bruised. He grips my neck as he hikes my skirt up higher. Pushing my panties to the side, he drives his hard cock inside of me.

He’s not gentle or caring. No, this is rough and forceful. He buries his face in my neck as he continues to fuck me against the brick building. My spine screams as my back grinds against the rough surface, but I don’t mind. If I can help bring him back to earth for even a few minutes, so be it. Throw any pain at me.

He’s drunk. I know he is. But even in his drunkenness, his hands grip my body with need as he continues to take me.

“I love you,” I whisper again.

He doesn’t answer. He doesn’t need to. I know he loves me—even in times like this, when he hates me.

His movements get faster as his breathing gets heavier. Just knowing he’s close sends my body into a tailspin, and I start to lose all control, succumbing to a place he brings me to so easily.

His rocking slows until he eventually stops.

“How do you do that?” he rasps.

“Do what?”

“How do you make the world seem almost normal for a second?” he says sadly before resting his forehead against mine. “I’m hurting, Snowflake.” I feel his tears on my own flesh. “I’m really fucking hurting.”

“I know,” is all I can muster to say. “I know you are.”



Not long after, I bring Kye back to my house, where he passes out cold in my bed. I didn't want his mom to have to see him drunk, but I knew she was probably worried sick about her son, so I texted her from his phone, letting her know he was safe.

His body feels like it's on fire, and I wipe his forehead with a cool washcloth as he sleeps.

Curling up next to him, I watch his pained expression as he tries to rest. His forehead creases, and his eyebrows pull together. Even while he's resting, he can't find any peace.

I try to doze off myself, but it's useless. And by the time two a.m. rolls around, he finally starts to stir.

"Snowflake," he whispers, touching my side.

I snuggle closer. "I'm right here."

"You just won't give up on me." He drags a hand down his face. "Why won't you?"

"When you love someone, you love them through the darkness." I kiss his side. "And I love you."

He's quiet for a while as he looks at the ceiling. Finally, his mouth opens.

"When I was thirteen, my dad went to a rehab all the way in New Hampshire." His voice is raspy as he keeps it low. "My mom was told it was one of the best in the country. He spent sixty days there, and truthfully, I didn't mind him being gone. Mom didn't have to worry. She was so much more ... relaxed." He closes his eyes. "But the last few days he was there, we got to travel to New Hampshire to see him."

I rest my palm on his chest, stroking his skin lightly.

"It was February, and it was really fucking cold." The smallest, saddest smile comes onto his lips. "We stayed at a house nearby—a log cabin. It sat on a huge hill that overlooked this beautiful, snow-covered lake. It was like something from a picture."

My heart breaks from the agony in his voice.

“The last day there, Dad got to come over to our cabin. We all stayed the night. Together.” He swallows, and a tear rolls from his eye and down his cheek. “At some point in the middle of the night, it started snowing. Quickly piling up outside. The next morning, big white snowflakes fell from the sky for hours, almost like time stopped everywhere and we were paused in that moment. Forced to slow down and spend time together, even when I didn’t want to.

“Our flight home was canceled, and we couldn’t go anywhere—the roads were too slippery. My mom found some board games in the closet and cooked popcorn and made hot chocolate. We watched the snow through the windows, in complete awe of its beauty. It was nothing like anything we’d seen before.” He stares at the ceiling as more tears slide down his face.

“After a while, we all got our jackets on. Dad too. One by one, we trudged outside into the snow. It was heavier than I’d thought it would be. And so much colder.” He shivers as he recollects the memory. “But as we started throwing snowballs at one another and making snow angels ... I felt so happy. Dad threw me and Bria in the snowbanks and kissed Mom when he thought we weren’t looking. He looked so content. So ... fulfilled. And Bria laughed so hard that she cried, and my mom looked ten years younger. It had been years since I had seen my mom with a smile that also lit up her eyes.” He sighs.

“Until I met you, that snowy day was the best day of my life. I felt a peace I’d never felt before.” His arm pulls me closer to him. “And then my own Snowflake fell into my life. And that same sense of serenity? I finally had it again when you were close.”

He looks down at me as his hand plays with my hair. “I call you Snowflake because you are my peace. You chase away the darkness, bringing me back to the light.”

“Oh, Kye,” I cry. Putting my head on his chest.

“I don’t think I deserve you. And the last thing I want to do is hurt you again.” He flinches, his eyes filling with tears. “But I’m fucked up. And I can’t promise you anything other than my love. I love you. And I always will. And I’ll never leave you.”

“That’s enough for me,” I say. “You’re enough for me.”

I stroke his hair softly as we lie there together until, eventually, he falls back asleep.

I doze off and on for the next few hours, only to wake up and finally give

up altogether. Making sure he's still sleeping peacefully, I drag myself to the bathroom to take a much-needed shower.



KYE

I wake up, and the bed next to me is cold. The irrational fear that she's gone rips through my stomach until I hear the shower in her bathroom is on.

Getting out of the bed, I peel my clothes off and push the bathroom door open.

Slowly, I pull the curtain back just as her eyes find me.

"Kye," she says, covering her chest briefly before her eyes float to my dick that's already swelling from the sight of her.

She licks her lips as her eyes grow darker when I step in.

Letting the water run over my body, I grip her waist before spinning her around.

My dick presses against her ass as she cranes her neck to look at me. She bites her plump bottom lip as I reach my hands around and cup her tits.

"Kye," she squeaks as I slide one hand down her abdomen, cupping between her legs.

Sinking my finger in, I pump in and out and watch her eyes glaze over and feel her knees weaken.

I continue to fuck her with my hand until she can no longer stand it. But when I try to spin her around to face me, she drops to her knees.

Opening her mouth, she brings herself closer to my body until my cock slides between her lips. As she rolls her tongue over my head, her eyes stay fixated on me.

The water runs down her face and through her already-soaked hair.

"Fuck, you're so hot." I jerk my hips forward, pushing myself further into her mouth.

Taking me inch by inch, she bobs her head back and forth, dragging me in deeper, damn near gagging herself.

I grip her hair as she continues to fuck me with her perfect lips.

As she pulls back, her tongue grazes the entire length of my cock before swirling around my head again.

I squeeze my eyes shut. "Fuck, I'm going to come in your mouth if you

keep that up.”

I pull her onto her feet and lift her, pressing her back against the glass wall.

As I raise her hips up and down, she fucks my dick like she was made to. And when I start to feel her squeezing around me as she comes, I fucking lose it.

Gripping her hips, I dig my nails into her skin as I come undone inside of her. Owning every fucking inch of her being. Knowing every part of me belongs to her too.

twenty-four



KYE

Once I'm not buried inside of Winter, the pain returns. But this time, it's different. It's not gnawing anymore, as if burning a hole into my soul. It's just there. It's still vile, consuming every inch of my body, inside and out, but with her in my arms, I can endure it a little bit more. I can breathe. Which is something I haven't been able to do since finding my father that day.

After our shower, we came back to bed with the curtains drawn and went to sleep. But now, we're awake and facing reality. And the reality is, her mom is going to be home in a few hours.

"I keep wondering if the shame of all the things he did drove him back to the drugs," I say, stroking her hair. "For so many years, I kept him at a distance. Openly hating him from the time I was a teenager. Or at least, I pretended to hate him. Seemed easier than letting him hurt me."

She's quiet for a moment before her sweet, soft voice speaks. "Kye, your father was an addict. You were a child; you had every right to be angry." She stops. "He knew you forgave him before he died. He knew you loved him. I promise you, he did."

She presses a kiss to my chest. "You couldn't fix him. That wasn't your job. He had demons he had to live with every single day of his life. When he was using, life was hell, and when he was clean, I'm sure a lot of days still felt like hell for him. But now, you can rest, knowing that he has found peace. He's not fighting that battle anymore."

"When he was really heavily using, he stopped coming to my games," I whisper. "Looking back now, I think he was ashamed to walk into the stadium more than anything. I always thought it was me. Like I wasn't as important as the drugs. Or maybe I wasn't good enough." I shake my head. "Now, I think of how bad he must have felt to walk into places like that and have all those judging eyes on him." I swallow the lump in my throat. "He must have felt like such a failure and so fucking alone."

"I'm sure it took a lot of strength the times he did show up," she says

sadly. “But he did it for you. And Bria. I only met him once, but it was easy to see he loved you guys so much.”

“I wish I had talked to him about this sooner.” That gnawing feeling grows. “I would have told him it was okay. And that I wasn’t ashamed. I would have told him I knew he didn’t wake up every morning and choose to be the way that he was. Who would choose that? How fucking exhausting must it have been to live a life like that?” My eyes are blurry with tears. “Instead, we didn’t talk about it. It was the elephant in the room that everyone felt too uncomfortable to mention. What if talking about it could have saved his life?”

“It’s okay, Kye. It’s all right to have any of these feelings. This is an incredibly hard thing.”

“Why is it easy for me to have compassion for him now that he’s dead when I didn’t have an ounce of it when he was alive?” I feel sick.

“I wish I had the answer,” she says softly. “But I don’t have any words that will make you feel better. Trust me on that.”

As she hugs me tighter, telling me it’s all going to be okay, I know she’s right. But I also know it’s going to be really fucking painful for a while too.

I thought loving my dad made my mom weak, but I was wrong. She’s the strongest woman alive. Because walking away would have been easier than what she did. For love, she never gave up. Not even when she should have.

And I’m realizing, Winter has that same strength when it comes to me.

Twenty-five



WINTER

I sit next to Kye in the front row at his father's service. His mom sobs, a heartbreaking sound, even as she tries to calm herself down.

On one side of Nina is Bria. The other Kye. He keeps one arm around his mother while his free hand holds mine tightly.

This morning, his mom told them she wasn't strong enough to give a speech but that they were welcome to if they wanted, but no pressure. She didn't want this day to be any harder for them than it already was.

Bria gave a beautiful speech, followed by a slide show she had made for her dad. No matter his demons, she always chose to see the best. It takes a person with the kindest, most patient soul to do just that.

When it's Kye's turn to give a speech, he puts his head on mine. "I don't know if I can do this, Snowflake." He sucks in a breath.

I put my other hand over his and give it a gentle squeeze. "No matter what you decide, it's okay, I promise." I kiss his cheek. "You did your part—you loved him. He knew that."

After a few moments, he wipes his eyes before standing up. The sight of him has more sobs coming from the back, as he looks so much like his father.

Walking to the podium, he rests his hands on its sides.

"I wish we were all gathered here for a different reason. I wish my dad were sitting right next to my mom, holding her hand." He pauses, his eyebrows pulling together with emotion. "But we aren't. So, the least I can do is send my dad home the right way."

He looks around the room before his eyes land on mine. I give him a nod, silently letting him know it's okay.

"My father was a man of many gifts. He could make any busted-up car look as good as new. He could weld any piece of steel that was brought to him. He could build a house with his two hands." He smiles. "He could even rip waves up with the best of 'em.

"He loved my mom more than anything in the world. No matter what happened or how far he fell from grace, she was there to catch him. Because

she loved him with no limits. No exceptions. No rules.” He frowns. “But even with that love, he had his demons. He fought a silent battle every single day of his life. One I couldn’t comprehend. One his family couldn’t understand. It was heartbreaking. It was agonizing. It was the most painful thing I’ve gone through.” He pauses. “And I was just a bystander. I was just someone watching it all unfold. I didn’t live it; it didn’t control my every move, my every decision. But he ... he had to live with that.”

I wonder where he’s going with this. His father’s addiction is no secret to the people who live in their community. Even so, people like Dane and Beau had no idea until they heard the news that his father had overdosed. Kye didn’t want the burden of telling people. And I can’t say I blame him. There’s a stigma around addiction that paints it in a way that just isn’t fair. Yes, people decide to do drugs. But there’s a whole other picture behind it. There are parents who are wondering day in and day out if their son or daughter is dead. There are children who feel like they aren’t enough or worthy. There’s shame because the addict feels so horrible for their actions yet can’t stop.

I look at Kye, and I don’t see a broken man. I see someone who has been through more than anyone should have to, but he will persevere. He will come out on the other side and take this dark time and turn it into something beautiful.

“Even at his lowest, he loved his family. He told us. He showed us—as best he could.” He shrugs sadly. “He stayed true to who he was, even when the demons tried to take over. Because my dad was a good man deep down. He just had his struggles, like we all do.”

He wipes his eyes. “But he isn’t struggling now. He’s at peace. And I hope he’s looking down on us today, feeling loved.”

He looks at the urn with his father’s picture next to it. “I can take it from here, Dad. Go catch some waves.”

And I don’t think there’s a dry eye in that church. And when he sits down next to me again, pulling me against him like my presence somehow helps, I thank God I took him up on the offer to be his friend. If I hadn’t, we wouldn’t have been able to save each other through the darkness. We would never have had a chance to.



KYE

The funeral is over, and now, everyone filters through our house, looking at old pictures of my dad. They mean well—really, they do. But I wish everyone would leave. I'm exhausted.

I see my mom on the back porch by herself.

Opening the door, I slide out, trying not to be noticed.

"Hiding outside, huh?" I walk next to her, leaning against the railing. "Can't say I blame you. It's stuffier than a toddler's boogery nose in there."

She attempts to laugh but instead cries. "Your speech was lovely, Kye. It really was."

Reaching up, she brushes her hand across my forehead. "I think back to some of the things I did as a mother. Taking you guys to find your dad, barging into drug dealers' homes, the fighting, the constant up and downs. I really, *really* messed up." Her eyebrows pull together. "So many things I wish I could change."

"It's okay, Mom." I give her a small smile. "You did the best you could."

"No, I didn't," she answers with a shake of her head. "I didn't, but I promise, from this day forward, I will. Count on that."

Maybe the resentment died when my father did. Or maybe I know in my heart that my mother has been through enough. Either way, I know she's telling the truth. We can't bring my dad back, but we can make the rest of our days as good as possible.

Twenty-six



WINTER

TWO MONTHS LATER

My roommate, Wren, and I follow Mila and her best friend, Harlow, up the bleachers to our seats.

“Damn, it’s hot out,” Wren complains as she sits down. “I miss fall. How can you even get into the pumpkin spice mood when it’s eighty-five degrees outside?”

“Pumpkin spice is gross.” Mila scrunches her nose up. “Tastes like soap.”

“I dare you to shit all over my pumpkin spice again, bitch.” I widen my eyes and hold up my Starbucks coffee cup. “Pumpkin spice is life.”

“You said that same thing about peppermint mocha in high school.” Harlow laughs. “So, if you had to choose, which one?”

“I could never.” I rear my head back. “Does one choose between Ryan Gosling and Ryan Reynolds? I think not.”

Harlow grew up with Mila and me in Alabama before I moved. She and Mila stayed really close, so close that they are sharing a dorm this year. Though I’m not sure how much time Mila is actually in the dorm. Wren moved to Florida from Maine and hasn’t quite gotten used to the never-ending summer here, apparently.

Wren fans herself when the guys run out onto the field. “Well, hot damn. If it wasn’t already smoking hot ... now, it really is.”

“You know, when we first started texting before we met, you complained about how Maine was too damn cold and said you were ready to get the hell out of there. Now, you’re complaining about the heat.” I nudge her side. “Wishy-washy, aren’t ya?”

She shrugs. “I’m a Mainer. We bitch when it’s hot, and we bitch when it’s cold.” She smiles. “You’ll get used to it.”

“Oh, joy,” I say sarcastically just as I see my man strutting across the

field, smacking my brother on the back.

Before long, Dane joins them, and they put their helmets together.

“What do you suppose they are saying?” Mila sips her frozen hot chocolate. “Oh, to be a bug in that grass.”

I giggle, putting my head on her shoulder. “With those three ... it’s really, *really* hard to say. Could be food. Perhaps football. Or maybe even us.”

“I’m going with food,” Mila deadpans. “Yep. Definitely food.”



KYE

“You guys, we *have* to go grocery shopping tomorrow. We have no fucking food. I literally cooked rice and ate it plain because it was all I could find in our cupboards.” Dane points at us, seeing we aren’t taking him seriously. “I’m not fucking kidding. Just because you guys have girlfriends you can’t pull yourself away from long enough to leave your beds doesn’t mean you can let me starve to death.”

“Watch it, Wade,” Bama grumps. “Need I remind you who Kye is dating? Shut the fuck up about it, or I’ll never step foot in a grocery store with your ass.”

“My lips are sealed.” Dane hits his arm. “Don’t be such a dick.”

“Yeah, brother.” I hit Bama’s helmet. “Speaking of, now, we’re like *really* brothers. Sort of.”

“Not even a little.” Bama shoves me backward and laughs. “Not even the slightest bit.”

I point to him. “One day, Bam. One day.”

“Fuck off,” he groans. “Quit talking about being my brother. Let’s go win this game.”



“One step closer to that championship, motherfuckers.” Dane throws his arm around Bama. “This fucking tank shut their asses down all night.”

“They thought they were coming to play football and instead ran into this beast.” Richie, another teammate, laughs, nodding toward Bam. “Poor bastards.”

“And this guy,” Dane says, pointing to me. “That hit you just took for me ... I owe you, brother.”

“Aw-shucks. You’re gonna make me blush.” I punch him lightly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get interviews done, so I can go see my hot girlfriend.”

“Right here, dickwad,” Bama barks.

“Sorry. Would you prefer I called your sister a dog?”

“Sort of.” He shrugs. “I don’t really know actually,” he mumbles before walking off.

Looking up in the stands, I spot my girl. It’s corny as hell, but I make a heart shape with my hands and wink.

So what if I look like a giant vagina? I’m going home with her tonight.

She smiles, shaking her head. I can almost hear her voice telling me I’m a cheeseball. I know I am, and I don’t give a shit.

My mom couldn’t make it tonight, but she’s been to almost every home game. She sits with Winter or Bria, and even though her eyes don’t shine quite like they used to, she’s doing okay.

The toll my father’s addiction took on my mother likely took years off her life, just from worrying. But she’d do it all over again if it meant she got to see my dad. The thing they don’t tell you about loving a drug addict is, when they die, the anger dies. And left behind is the feeling of missing them. That’s what happened in my case anyway. Maybe not everyone is the same.

After he died, I spent a lot of time wishing I hadn’t moved out so soon. I thought, maybe if I hadn’t, he wouldn’t have gone back to the drugs. Perhaps I could have saved him. Maybe he’d have known that he was worthy of living a good, clean life. But I’ve had to push those feelings down and remind myself that it was out of my hands. And when even that doesn’t work, Winter is there to tell me too.

Something I never understood is how my mom didn’t leave my father years ago. But then I look at Winter. And I know I’d love her through hell and back. I wouldn’t think twice.



WINTER

Hours after Kye's game, we lie in his bed.

"You played so good," I say, resting my chin against his chest. "You all did."

His hands graze along the bare skin of my back. "Feels good to be out there again. I have this feeling like maybe, just maybe, the championship could be ours." The corners of his mouth turn up the tiniest bit. "Who knows? Maybe I have an angel rooting for us up there. Bama too."

I smile. "Maybe our dads will be watching the game from heaven together. A mechanic and an autobody expert? Perfect match right there."

He holds me tighter. "Yeah. Yeah ... maybe they will be."

"How is it today?" I drape my arm around his side, stroking his skin gently.

It's a question I ask him some days when I can tell he's hurting. Something my mom did for me when my dad passed away. For some reason, it helped. It helped to admit out loud that I was not okay. It helped to say the words *I miss my dad*.

"It's all right." He swallows. "It could be better. But it could be a whole lot worse." He tilts his head to look at me for a moment before relaxing back again. "Does this feeling ever subside? The one where it feels like I have a hollow spot in my chest?"

A lump starts to form in my throat. Kye joining me in the club of those who have lost their fathers isn't something I ever wanted for him. "I think it's different for everyone. For me, the really bad times come and go. Some days, I feel so frustrated that I can't see him or talk to him that I just want to throw things. Other times, I can go about my day-to-day life. I can feel happiness. But the entire time, I'm still missing him." I inhale before letting it out. "I don't think we will ever get better. How could we? We lost one of the people who brought us into the world." I wrap my arms around him. "But we'll get through it."

"Together," he whispers.

“Together.” I nod.

Twenty-seven



KYE

SIX WEEKS LATER

My mother, Bria, and Winter run toward me on the field. Every one of them is smiling so hard that it looks like it might actually hurt. I'd know because the cheesy-ass smile on my face right now sure as fuck is starting to make my cheeks ache. But I can't stop it.

"You did it!" Winter leaps into my arms, cupping my face. "You won! I knew you would. I knew it!"

I press my lips to hers. "My good-luck charm," I murmur against her lips. "Haven't lost a single game since you."

"Ew, barf-fest." Bria pretends to gag.

Setting Winter down, I roll my eyes. "Always so polite, sis."

"I'm going to go congratulate Beau." Winter winks. "Love you."

"Love you the most." I run my hand down the back of my neck, unable to wipe the stupid-ass grin from my face.

"Again, gross." Bria groans. "But ... I am so proud of you, little brother." She throws her arms around me. "Dad is too. I know it."

"Thanks." I look at our mom. "I think he's probably proud of all of us."

As Bria releases me, Mom wastes no time in pulling me against her and kissing my cheek. "What an achievement, my boy. You've always been one determined little shit." Tears well in her eyes, and she inhales. "Your sister is right. He was always so proud of his boy. Even those times when he wasn't best at showing it. I promise you, despite his demons, you and your sister were the apples of his eye."

Stepping back, she wipes her cheeks. "I love you. And I can't tell you how happy I am that you have Winter to share moments like this with. That's what life is all about. Making memories with the ones you hold closest to your heart." She nods her head toward where Winter and Bama stand with a group

of our friends. “Go. Go celebrate.”

Kissing her forehead, I nod and jog toward my friends. This group has gotten me through the darkest days. Because every single one of them has had their own dark days too. And I hope that’s how we’ll always go through life. Celebrating the highest highs and getting through the lowest lows ... together.

Dane’s and Bama’s faces beam. This day will be one for the books—that’s for sure.

We went into this season with a goal. We wanted a championship. After coming so close last year, that wasn’t good enough for us. We needed to take it all the way. And we did. And it feels pretty great.

twenty-eight



WINTER

APRIL, JUNIOR YEAR

“How?” I hold the phone out in front of me in the bathroom. “I mean, literally ... how?”

I stare at the ranking of a book I released just a few days ago. Unable to comprehend how it’s number six in the entire Kindle store. Or the fact that it’s on the *USA Today* best-seller list, leaving me in a bathroom at the draft party, talking to myself.

We’re gathered to celebrate not only Kye, but also my brother and Dane. There’s a ton of food, and even Dane’s twin brother, Weston, and his girlfriend, Henley, came too.

A sudden knock at the door has me almost dropping my phone in the sink.

“Just a second,” I blurt out, sliding it into my pocket.

“You in there, Snowflake?” Kye’s deep voice says through the wooden door. “Let me in.”

I unlock the door and pull it open, letting him in.

“Whatcha hiding in here for, sweet thing?” His eyebrows wiggle. “Although ... I could totally go for a quickie.”

I slap his chest. “Oh, shut up. No. There’s, like, a hundred sets of parents out there. No, thanks.” I push down the excitement of seeing my book’s ratings. Today is Kye’s day. “Let’s go back out to the party. I gotta get some of that buffalo chicken dip before it’s gone.”

Stopping me, he pulls out his phone. On the screen shows the exact thing I was just looking at.

“Were you going to tell me about this?” He looks from me to the screen.

“That’s a pretty big deal, W.A. Bishop.”

Before I can answer, he pulls me against him, lifting me from the ground. “I’m so fucking proud of you, baby. You have no idea.”

“You were looking on your phone too?” I sob. “I didn’t want to make it about me. This is your day. And Dane’s and Beau’s.” I press my cheek to his. “I just wanted to check how it was doing.”

“It’s not my day. It’s *our* day. And of course I was looking. I have been since you released it.” He pulls his head back, grinning down at me. “How does it feel? To be a junior in college and already a *USA Today* best-selling author? Not to mention, with a *debut* novel.”

“It feels ... absolutely surreal,” I admit as my head spins from the news. “My boyfriend is about to become an NFL player, and I’m a *USA Today* best-selling author.” I drag in a long breath. “What even is this life?”

“Ours, Snowflake.” He kisses me once more before setting me down. “It’s ours.”

He is my biggest cheerleader. My most dedicated fan. Without him, I’m not sure I would have even started writing the damn book seven months ago. I likely would have chickened out. But being with him gives me a confidence I’ve never had before. It’s almost like I’ve finally found my place in this world. And in finding my place ... I’ve found myself.



KYE

Dane and Bama already got their phone calls. So, after giving them, oh ... eleven minutes, give or take, of celebrating, I can't hold back on Winter's news. I know she doesn't want to make this day about her, but fuck that. This is her day as much as it is anyone's.

"Hey, everyone," I call out. "Can I have your attention?"

"Kye, don't," she warns, doing that thing with her eyes when she attempts to intimidate me. I don't find it scary, just really damn cute.

She quickly shakes her head from side to side. *No*, she mouths.

Pulling her under my arm, I hold my beer up. "While today is about football for a lot of us, it's about other things too." I look around as our friends and family stare at me like I've lost my mind. "Not only is Miss W.A. Bishop's book in the top ten on Amazon's *entire* store, but it also made its way to the *USA Today* best-sellers list."

The room erupts in cheers as Winter's face turns bright red. She hates having a lot of attention on her. I suppose that means opposites really do attract.

"Thank you," she says, smiling as she looks at everyone before turning toward me.

Standing on her tiptoes, she presses her lips to mine. "Thank you even though I'm slightly mortified."

"I'll make it up to you later," I murmur.

She opens her mouth to answer just when my phone begins to vibrate in my pocket. The room becomes eerily quiet as I pull it out, my eyes growing wide.

"Your turn, brother." Bama nods, knowing who's on the other end. We all know.

"Pick it up, man." Dane walks past me, slapping my shoulder. "Let's go to fucking Cali."

Dane knows the San Francisco 49ers are calling because they've been in contact with both our agents. And since Dane got his call from them a bit

ago, that will make us teammates.

My eyes find Winter's as she gives me a reassuring smile.

"Go on." She nods toward my phone. "Here's your moment."

I swallow harshly before answering it. "H-hello?"

"Kye Collins, that you?" The voice sounds amused.

"Yeah, it's me." I turn away from everyone.

I know where I'm getting drafted. But what if they changed their minds? What if all these motherfuckers are looking at me when I get the news that I didn't actually make it?

Fuck, that would be awful.

"It's Coach Shanahan." He chuckles. "But I think you already knew that, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir." I run my free hand over the top of my head. "I guess I did."

"So, how would you feel about being the 49ers newest wide receiver?" He pauses. "That is, if you want it."

"Damn straight I do," I blurt out.

"Oh, good. I thought you'd say that." He laughs. "Can't wait to see what you and Dane Wade do together this season. But I hope you're prepared to work because this isn't college ball. Be ready."

"I am," I say quickly. "I'm ready."

"Good. Good," he says smoothly. "You go on back to celebrating. I'll be in touch."

"Yes, sir," I say, feeling like my body is floating. "Talk to you soon."

He ends the call, and I can hardly form a thought, let alone a sentence, when I turn to face my friends and family.

We prepare for this day for most of our lives. We train for it. Everything we do is to get us to this point. And yet it doesn't make it seem any more real.

I look down at my phone in disbelief. "I'm in the NFL." Looking up at everyone, I pound my fist down toward the ground. "I'm in the NFL!" I yell as everyone cheers.

Winter runs to me, covering my face in kisses. "My boyfriend is in the NFL!" She leaps into my arms, smothering my body in the best way. "Happy draft day, baby! You did it!"

Gripping the back of her neck, I kiss her—hard. Not giving a fuck who's around to watch.

"All right," Bama groans. "I feel like you had your moment. Now, get

your tongue out of my sister's mouth before I throw up and then punch you in the face."

Winter's lips smile against my own before she hops down. "He's so dramatic."

"I can hear you," Bama grunts. "Still my day too. And on my day, I don't want to watch you trade saliva with my best friend."

Everyone laughs, and Mila pats his shoulder before kissing his cheek. He's happy for us—we know that. But seeing us together still strikes a nerve at times.

"This day is the best day of my life." I sigh. "I'm a 49er, and you're killing it in the book world. It couldn't get any better than this."

We celebrate. Dane, Bama, and I drink too much beer and act like fools. We cheers to a journey we started together, coming to an end after four years. We cheers to Dane and me continuing on, but with new teammates. And we cheers to all of us having our girls, who put up with our shit, making it look easy, loving guys like us.

This life has been painful. But it's incredible too. And even though I've lost some I love along the way, I've gained some great people too.

Life has taken from me, but it has also been pretty giving. Because it sent me salvation, who goes by the name of Winter.

Twenty-nine



WINTER

TWO YEARS LATER

“**T**his is based on me, isn’t it?” Kye looks at me over the top of my latest book release. His eyes smile hard. “You dirty, dirty girl.”
“Where did you get that? You weren’t supposed to read that one!” I squeal.

Jumping up, I pull it from his hands. But not before he pulls me into the hammock with him, flipping both of us over into a pile of tangled limbs on the ground.

He kisses the tip of my nose. “Glad to be of assistance, babe. You know, for all your dirty material. I know I’m the inspiration behind it.”

“Ew ... gross.” Mila lies on the dock, sunning herself. Propping herself up on her elbows, she doesn’t try to hide the disgust on her face. “And to think, that *was* my favorite she’d written so far.” Shrugging, she lies back down. “Screw it. That was some hot and heavy shit. Good for you, Kye. Do your thing, man.”

My brother finishes reeling in his line. Turning, he shoots us a glare. “For fuck’s sake, Winter, I’ve been promoting that shit to all the wives of our teammates. You’re telling me it’s based on you and dipshit’s s—” He stops, grimacing. “I can’t even say it. Gross. Nasty. That is fucked up on so many levels.”

Looking down at Kye, I widen my eyes before swatting his chest. “Good job, asshole. Now, we have to deal with my brother pouting all afternoon.” Standing up, I brush my hands together. “And if you must know, it is *not* based on Kye. Or me and Kye. Or our sex life.” I watch Beau cringe. “It’s a romance book. It has some steam. Yes, wieners and vaginas. Sometimes, they even collide with one another.” I hold my arms up. “Sex sells, Beau!”

He stares at me a moment before he starts walking inside. “I need a beer,”

he grumbles.

“To be honest,” Kye says, still holding the book in his hand, “I didn’t read much of it. Other than the chick describing the dude.” He tries to make a smoldering look. “Tanned, toned, and a panty-dropper grin.” He nods his head slowly. “Oh, yeah, totally me.”

I blow out a breath. “You’re too damn much sometimes, Kye Collins.”

“Yeah ... I bet the guy in this book is too.” He smirks, tapping the book against his other hand. “Probably in more areas than one. Am I right?”

“What’s all the commotion out here?” Cam drawls. “Y’all sound like a bunch of drunk old bitties.”

“We were just talking about Winter’s newest book,” Mila says to her brother, sitting up again. “And all the spicy scenes in it.”

“Yeah, so ... I didn’t know Winter was a dirty girl,” Cam says, slinging his arm around my shoulders. “And I sort of gave one of your books to Addison’s great-aunt Florence a few weeks ago.”

“Cam!” I shriek. “She’s, like ... ninety!”

“Ninety-one,” he corrects me. “After I delivered it, Addy told me it was basically fucking porn. But get this: Auntie Florence called me a few days later ... and said she fucking loved it. Wants every book by the famous W.A. Bishop.”

“That’s the best shit I’ve heard all day,” Kye chimes in. “I want to be her when I grow up.”

“Oh gawd.” I cover my burning face with my hands. “Doesn’t she go to church every Sunday?”

“Christian folks can like the saucy shit too, babe.” Cam grins before releasing me. “So, I’mma need signed copies of all your book porn to take with me back home.”

“It isn’t porn!” I scowl. “Y’all act like you are saints or something.”

“Oh, we all know I’m no saint.” Cam wiggles his eyebrows. “Ain’t nothin’ in those books that could surprise me.”

Kye pushes the book against him. “Don’t be so sure, brother. They don’t call her the queen of steam for nothing.”

“One review out of thousands called me that, Kye.” I hold a finger up. “One.”

“One is good enough for me to call you it.” He shrugs playfully. “Come on, Snowflake. I want to go lake surfing behind the boat.” Looking at Mila, he cocks his head toward the boat. “You game to drive?”

Quickly standing, she pulls her cover-up over her bikini and nods. “Hell yes.” Looking at the house, she cups her hands around her mouth. “Babe! We’re going out in the boat. You can come, but your grumpy attitude has to stay here!”

Slowly, Beau steps outside with a handful of chips. “Fine. But no talking about my sister and her slutty books.”

“No promises, babe.” Mila winks. “Get your fine ass over here. I’m driving.”

We all pile into my family’s ski boat, and just as Kye starts to untie it from the dock, Dane runs out, pulling Layla behind him.

“Hey, fuckers! Were you going to wait for us or just leave us here, stranded?”

“Dude, there’re, like, five cars in the driveway,” Beau deadpans.

“Well ... yeah, but that’s beside the point.” Dane scowls.

“It’s not our fault you disappeared to go hide in the guest bedroom.” I untie the last bit of rope and stand on the dock, holding the boat. “We didn’t want to, you know, disturb you.”

Layla bites her lip but laughs. Pushing past Dane, she hops into the boat and sits next to me. “I’m not going to even defend myself. My man’s been busy with ball. I’m a needy bitch.”

“Word.” Mila nods.

“Gross,” Beau grunts.

“Come on, babe,” Layla says to Dane. “I’ll even let you sit on my lap.”

Eventually, he gets in. Scooping Layla up, he holds her on his lap.

We go out through the narrow channel, passing by all the no-wake zones. And when we finally reach the opening of the lake, Mila stops the boat, letting Kye jump into the water and get his gear ready.

In true Kye form, he gets up right away. Making surfing behind a boat look like the easiest damn thing in the world.

He looks so happy and carefree. As he should be this weekend for our combined bachelor/bachelorette party.

But I know the wedding in a few weeks will be every bit as tough as it is amazing. Just like me, he’ll have that longing in his gut for his father. Nobody tells you that the soul-crushing feeling that happens at every big event never really subsides. Maybe it isn’t meant to. Perhaps we fill it with love and happiness to make it a little more tolerable.

At the end of the day, all we can depend on really is ourselves. But if you

surround yourself with the right people, you can lean on them, too, when you need it.

The day I graduated college is the day Kye asked me to be his wife. I was elated. I'm not going to say I wasn't alive before he came into my life. Because let's face it; I had a damn good upbringing. And my family is such a big part of my life. But do I think my true inner self came to life when he first touched me? Yes, I do.

In the short time I've been writing, I have published seven books. My newest hit number one on the Amazon store the day it was released. If I didn't have Kye's constant support and borderline pushiness to go outside of my comfort zone, I probably wouldn't have typed that first word. Let alone written seven full-length novels.

The truth is, I've come to love ... love. And every heroine in my book gets to experience that *completely wild and crazy, through thick and thin, all in, no limits, no exceptions* kind of love that I get every single day from my soon-to-be husband.

It takes a lot to love someone the way they deserve. But I believe it takes even more to let someone love you the way they see fit. To not sabotage it when it becomes too much. All love stories are going to have some dark pages. But it's what happens after the darkest chapter that matters most.

I have my life and my own successes, and Kye has his. But I'm going to cheer for him forever, just like I know he will do the same for me. And that makes it all worth it. To have someone be as proud of you as you are of them.

His body glistens with cool lake water. And I sigh.

Two more weeks. Two weeks, and I get to be that man's wife. All because, one day, he declared we were friends. He demanded I trust him. Thank God he's persuasive.

thirty



KYE

TWO WEEKS LATER

I'm sweating. I have no idea why the fuck I'm sweating. It's not terribly hot out. There's a nice breeze. And I shouldn't be nervous. I'm not the nervous sort of guy typically. And Winter is my calming force. Someone who eases my nerves ... normally.

So, why the fuck do I feel like I'm going to puke?

"Brother, you need a shot of Fireball or something? Hell, maybe even some shine. You're all sorts of wound up." Cam appears next to me, pulling a small flask from his jacket. "You afraid she's going to be the runaway bride? She is way out of your league. I'd probably be worried, too, if I were you."

"What?" I glower. "No, asshole. I'm not worried she's going to run. Jesus Christ, Cam." I pull at my shirt collar. "You ... you did see her up there, right?"

"Nah, bad luck to see the bride on the wedding day," he says seriously. "I closed my eyes when I heard she was going to walk by."

"Bad luck for *me*, the groom." I rear my head back. "What the fuck are you talking about? Bad luck? You aren't marrying my girl. The hell is wrong with you?"

"We did have a mock wedding when we were kids." He sighs. "For a second there, seemed like potential. And one day, when I was in eighth grade and we were on vacation, I was checking her out—hard—by the pool. That was, until Beau punched me directly in the face." He shrugs. "That was the end of the potential love story of Winter and Cam."

"Piss off." I laugh, shoving at him. "You never stood a chance."

"You're right," he agrees. "She knows far too much bad shit about me." He looks me up and down. "But for real, man, you look like you're about to piss yourself. Not a good look. Girls want confidence." He holds the flask up

again. “One sippy, sippy could take the edge right off.”

I shove him away. “Get outta here.” I look around. “Where’s your date anyway?”

“Up with the girls.” He looks toward the beach house we rented for today. “Looking like a fucking snack, I’m sure.”

I nod toward the flask. “She probably doesn’t appreciate you getting drunk this early.”

“Yeah, right. She knows what’s up.” He winks. “Hot, drunk wedding sex later. Messy. Wild. The best kind.” Grasping my shoulder, he backs away. “I gotta go find her.”

“Do your thing, bro.” I blow out a breath and laugh. “Make sure my girl hasn’t run away when you’re up there, would ya?”

He tucks the flask away before clapping his hands together. “It’s Winter, my friend. She loves you. Ain’t nothing going to change that.” He nods. “So, just fucking relax, would ya?”

“Easy for you to say. You aren’t the one who’s about to read your vows in front of a bunch of people.”

He points his finger. “True that.”



WINTER

I look at myself in the mirror in my white gown with its fitted bodice and tulle skirt. I turn, looking at the back. The back is truly what made me love the dress more than the others. Beautiful, silk-covered buttons go up my spine, stopping halfway, leaving the rest of my back exposed.

Today is the day I become one with Kye. Even though I feel like we've been one since the day we met. There was some sort of silent agreement, telling each other we'd get one another through whatever was thrown our way. And we have.

"Knock, knock," my mother says, peeking her head in the door.

Her eyes immediately fill with tears as I turn toward her.

"Oh, baby." She tries to fight a sob. "You are absolutely stunning. Kye is going to lose his mind when you walk onto that beach."

I hold my arms out to hug her. "Thank you, Mama. I hope so."

Reaching in her purse, she pulls out a little box. "I wore this the day I married your dad. He had given them to me the night before." My mom clips a gorgeous string of pearls around my wrist and smiles through the tears. "Something borrowed." She looks at me in the mirror for a moment before going back to her purse. "And this right here is a piece of the tie he wore to our prom."

She takes a small blue square cloth out along with a needle and thread. Pulling my dress up slightly, she sews it underneath. "Something blue." She stands, wiping underneath her eyes.

Walking to the corner of the room, she opens the dresser, taking out a velvet box. "Something new." She hands the box to me. "From Kye."

My fingers run over the velvet box before I slowly push the top open. "Oh, wow," I whisper.

Taking out the small, stunning locket necklace, I carefully open it. Tears spring in my eyes as I look at the tiny image of my father and me. I'm in my mom's wedding dress at age seven, playing dress-up. He holds me against him. His signature smile instantly warms me.

My mom wraps her arms around me. “You found a good one. Dad would love him.”

“Thank you, Mom.” I nod, trying to stop my tears. “I think so too.”

I can still hear my father’s voice when I walked into the living room in that dress. He scooped me up, telling me I was a true princess. The fact that Kye went to my mom and found this picture ... it means everything to me.

A creak in the wooden floor has me swinging my gaze to the door.

Beau stands there, his hands clasped in front of him. “You look ... beautiful, Winter. You really do.”

As he walks closer, his eyes fill with tears, and he pulls me against him. “I’m happy for you and Kye. I’m sorry if I ever stood in the way of you two and also for busting his balls about being engaged to my sister.” He pulls back, looking at me. “Truthfully, I couldn’t have found anyone better. He loves you exactly how I’ve always wanted you to be loved. Dad would be happy. He’d be damn proud.”

My mom passes me a tissue, and I dab underneath my eyes. Swallowing the ball of emotions residing in my throat.

“Thanks, Beau,” I squeak. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” He holds his arm out. “I know you wish Dad were here to walk you down the aisle. I wish he were too. But I’d love to do the honors, if that’s okay with you.”

“Duh, of course ...” I try to joke but snifle instead.

My mom sobs, no longer caring if her makeup smudges.

Taking his arm, I rest my head against his shoulder. Completely and utterly unable to speak. Because if I did, I’d end up having black streaks of mascara down my entire face. And even though Kye would love me just the same, I really, *really* don’t want to look back at pictures and cringe.



KYE

The music starts, briefly hushing the crashing waves on the beach. Nobody has to be asked to stand because everyone already is. We wanted modest and small. So, we chose the beach where I taught her how to surf. Or attempted to anyway. Truth be told, some people just don't have it, and she's one of them. No matter how many hours we've worked, she struggles to get up on the board. And honestly, I find it fucking adorable.

Mila walks between the group of people first, followed by Addison, Layla, and Wren. And then I know it's time for my girl to walk toward me next.

When she and Bama walk around the corner, she looks at me and smiles, and I fucking lose it.

I don't care if I look like a bitch; I cry like one anyway.

She'd give anything for her dad to be by her side, but I'm so thankful she has her brother to be with her in his place.

Her eyes never leave mine as a few tears roll down her cheeks too.

And as Bama takes her hand and places it in mine, he nods. "I know you'll take care of her," he says quietly before walking to stand next to Dane and Cam.

Hand in hand, we walk to the small table, where there are two candles, side by side. One has a picture of my father next to it, and the other one is of hers. We both lost our dads too soon. We wanted to do something special in their memory.

Together, we light each candle before walking in front of everyone.

When the pastor starts the ceremony, I look at my soon-to-be wife. Unsure of how I ever convinced a woman like her to agree to marry a guy like me.

Soon, it's time for our vows. And just as she promised, she goes first, clearing her throat.

"Kye," her voice squeaks, and she clears her throat. "I wasn't looking for anything when you came crashing into my life. I was simply keeping my head down, walking around, lost, trying to figure out what the hell my next

step was. But the last thing I wanted to do was fall for another arrogant jock.” She chuckles, looking up at me from her paper for just a second.

“You opened my eyes to a world I’d never known. Loving you somehow made me have a greater love for myself. You took me out of my comfort zone, testing my limits to make me realize I was capable of so much more than I had always let myself believe.” She pauses.

“I told you once that I wanted to be loved with no limits. The sort of love I’d read in books, but never really thought was possible. I think I was setting myself up to fail or ... at least I thought I was.”

She looks away from the paper again, this time not returning her eyes to it. “Your love has no limits. There’s no place it won’t go when it comes to me. Even if you didn’t tell me with words every single day how much you love me, I’d still feel it. You taught me how to really, *really* love. You make me brave. You make me strong. You make me want to be a person good enough to stand by your side. *I love you* is just three words. It couldn’t possibly describe what you mean to me. So, I promise you this: In the darkest hours, I’ll be there to hold on to you. In the best times, I’ll be there, cheering you on. I promise that you’ll never be lonesome or feel unworthy. And I vow that, on our worst days, I’ll still be on your side. Loving you through whatever life throws our way.”

I wipe my eyes even though it’s no use. I’m never this much of a pansy. This girl—no, this woman—can bring out the best and the worst in me, I swear. She holds more power than she could ever believe.

Taking my paper out, I have to blink a few times to be able to see the damn words.

“My sweet Snowflake. I can’t believe after having to convince you to be my friend, I somehow conned you into being my wife. I’m one lucky son of a bitch.”

I stop, looking at the pastor, and mouth, *Sorry*.

He simply shrugs, encouraging me to carry on.

“I don’t think anything happens by mistake. Losses, victories, pain, hardships, and accomplishments—nothing is by chance.” I swallow another lump of emotion down, wishing I had taken Cam up on his damn Fireball.

“God, or someone above, put you in my life at just the right time. In teaching you how to love and trust yourself, I became a better man than I’d ever been before you. I found forgiveness in an unlikely place. I became patient when I normally wasn’t. And I learned to love in a way I hadn’t

thought I ever would. You were my redemption. And when the worst time of my life came knocking at the door, you pulled me out of the darkness, refusing to let me succumb to the demons that so badly wanted to pull me down.”

I feel her hand clasp my free hand.

“You never gave up, even when it probably would have been easy to. You fought for me. You loved the parts of me that probably weren’t all that lovable. I guess that’s the job when you find your soul mate.

“For better or worse, Winter, I promise you, I’ll be by your side. I vow to make you smile and laugh. I’ll try not to make you too angry. And I’ll do my damndest to never make you cry, but no promises because I’m a dude. And I know I’m a pain in the ass at times.”

I tuck the paper in my pocket and look down at her. “I promise you, no matter what, you’ve got me by your side. Forever.”

Her eyes fill with tears, and I give her hand a gentle squeeze. The pastor says a few more words, and finally, we’re officially husband and wife. And when he says I can kiss the bride, I barely let the old guy get the words out of his mouth before my lips are on hers.

I kiss her, cupping her face with my palms.

Never did I think this day would be in my future. Now that it has happened, I’m realizing I didn’t know shit.

epilogue



WINTER

EIGHT YEARS LATER

“Who in the actual fuck thought we should come here?” my brother complains, shivering dramatically. “And also, who in the actual fuck would want to live here?”

“Not me,” Layla says, tucking herself under Dane’s arm. “No way in hell.”

“I don’t know.” Kye shrugs. “The snowboarding here is fucking sweet.” He holds his board up. “Whatcha think, baby? Trade Cali sun for some New England snow to match your name?”

“Absolutely not.” I rub my hands over my arms. “When we get back to the lodge, I’m so going in the hot tub.”

“Ditto.” Henley, Layla’s sister-in-law, nods, following me. “This shit is for the birds.”

“I’ll warm you up, babe.” Her husband, Weston, winks.

Knox Carter—a retired NFL player who is best friends with Dane’s twin brother, Weston—invited all of us on a group trip to do some skiing, snowboarding, and snowmobiling.

Cole Storms pulls his wife, Ally, against him. “Warm me up, Al. I’m turning into an icicle.”

She rolls her eyes. “You’ll live, boy.” Dragging in a deep breath, she smiles. “I sort of like it. It’s cold, like my soul.”

“Thank you, Ally,” Knox’s wife, Sloane, says, rubbing her mittens together. “I’m glad *someone* is enjoying themselves.”

“Um ... I also said I was having fun.” Kye pouts. “Just FYI.”

“Ah, yes. Yes, you did.” Sloane bobs her head up and down. “My bad.”

“Hey, babe, check me out!” we hear and turn our heads.

Knox comes down the mountain, posing for Sloane.

“He’s going to hurt himself.” She shakes her head. “He’s not all that great at this.”

“Then, why’d he bring us here on vacation?” Beau looks at her in disbelief. “Most of us are a bunch of Southerners. We ain’t used to this shit!”

Before anyone can answer, Knox falls down, rolling a bunch of times before finally stopping at Sloane’s feet.

He looks up at her with a cheesy smile. “Hey, babe. Lookin’ good.”

“Yeah ... you too.” She covers a laugh with her mitten. “Let’s go back to the lodge. Everyone is sick of your winter wonderland.”

“I miss my kids,” Kye says, trudging forward. “Well ... sort of. The little one is a devil.”

“The babysitter is probably in tears by now,” Knox says before looking around. “Ah hell. We’d better hurry. That’s a lot of those little fuckers with only one babysitter.”

We all rush toward the parking lot to head to the lodge.

Vacations are always a blast with this group. Even if we do all bitch and complain. The truth is, I’ve found my people, and it feels pretty darn good.

Between everyone’s hectic schedules, we don’t see each other nearly as much as we’d like. But we make sure to book a huge house and go on a trip every now and then. Even if it’s to somewhere like this Antarctic wannabe part of the country.

Kye gave me three beautiful daughters. Avie is nine. She’s responsible, sweet, and levelheaded. In all of her years on earth, I think she’s had one, maybe two time-outs. She’s most likely helping the poor babysitter wrangle the kids right about now. Autumn is seven. She’s feisty and brutally honest, and she already plans to take over the world one day. If her mouth doesn’t tell you how she feels, her face will. Truthfully, she scares her father a bit. And then there’s Ayla, who is three. She’s as wild as they come. She never stops moving and certainly gives us a run for our money. With her curly blonde hair and blue eyes, she’s going to break some hearts, I’m sure. She was a bit of a surprise, but the best surprise of our lives.

I’m still writing books, and Kye’s still playing football for the 49ers. But he’s also found a passion in helping those battling addiction to stay on the path of recovery by providing jobs and holding them accountable. The foundation he opened a few years ago in his father’s memory has helped thousands of addicts find redemption. One thing he has always told me is that he wishes it hadn’t taken his father dying for him to have compassion. But

now, his eyes are open, and he wants to help.

The one you love is supposed to make you a better person. Kye continues to do that for me every day of my life.

It isn't always pretty, and it sure as hell isn't perfect. But I got my fairy tale, just like in the books. And I wouldn't trade our story for the world.

THE END

Have you missed Brooks University? Me too! That's why I'm taking you back there.

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Playing Dane

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acknowledgments

When I started my writing journey just before the pandemic struck, I had no idea if I'd ever write a second book, let alone an entire series. A few years later, and now, that one series has turned to three, and that first book is now the ninth. Nine books! And while I'll admit I've worked my butt off to get here, there's also so many people who have stood by me the entire journey.

To my husband. Thank you for being the thoughtful, loving, aggravating at times person that you are. You love every version of me—even the crazy one. I wake up every day, knowing I'm loved and being told I'm beautiful, even when that stubborn baby weight makes me feel otherwise. Thank you for helping me feel good in my own skin.

My girls. Everything I do is for you. I want you to be proud of your mom. I want you to see that you can choose the road less traveled. I want you to not be afraid of not being perfect because that's what makes us who we are. I love you the most, my babies. Thank you for making me the best version of myself.

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about the author

Hannah Gray spends her days in vacationland, living in a small, quaint town on the coast of Maine. She is an avid reader of contemporary romance and is always in competition with herself to read more books every year.

During the day, she loves on her three perfect-to-her daughters and tries to be the best mom she can be. But once she tucks them in at night—okay, scratch that. Once they fall asleep next to her in her bed—because their bedrooms apparently have monsters in them—she dives into her own fantasy world, staying awake well into the late-night hours, typing away stories about her characters. As much as she loves being a wife and mom—and she certainly does love it—reading and writing are her outlet, giving her a place to travel far away while still physically being with her family.

She married her better half in 2013, and he's been putting up with her craziness every day since. As her anchor, he's her one constant in this insane, forever-changing world.