



A DARK COLLEGE BULLY ROMANCE

CRUEL

INTENTIONS

A BLACKMORE UNIVERSITY NOVEL

CORA KENT

Cruel Intentions

A Dark College Bully Romance

Blackmore University

Book 1

Cora Kent



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Cora Kent
www.corakent.com

*First and foremost,
to my friends and family,*

*This book is not for you.
It won't be good for our relationship.
Turn back now; it's for the best.
But if you must proceed...
You've been warned.*



To everyone else,

*You know why you're here.
Turn the page, ya filthy animal.*

Content Warning



Cruel Intentions is a dark romance novel containing morally ambiguous characters and plot lines that include sexual content, violence, and questionable behavior. This book contains subject matter with the following themes:

Sexual Content: dubious consent, knife play, choking, somnophilia, primal play, breeding

Behavior: stalking, blackmail, some violence

Abuse: references to spousal and child abuse as a backstory, references to rape - abusive content is not depicted or detailed, only mentioned

This list may not be a complete picture of triggering content. Please remember that even though this book contains a happily ever after, you can put it down any time the storyline, characters, themes, or sexual content exceeds your expectations.

These warnings can also be found on my website:

www.corakent.com/cruel

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Chapter 1

Kaye

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A streak of lightning touches down on a nearby block, basking homes and trees in its eerie glow. For a split second, I can see the rain falling in thick sheets. The water level rises to the edge of the curb, threatening to spill over and begin flooding lawns.

“We’re on a hill,” I mumble to myself. This is the safest place for me.

Thunder shakes the heavens, a beautiful accompaniment to a swooning Frank Sinatra. He sings about love, and the skies weep with loneliness. It’s a fitting end to my time on Snob Hill. I’ve never felt comfortable in this home; tonight is no different.

Malcolm and Mom are out celebrating a big win. Another million-dollar divorce case that he can hang on his trophy case. Mom said they would spend my last night at home with me, but here I am, alone in the middle of the worst summer thunderstorm in a decade.

As if on cue, I catch a strike of lightning out of the corner of my eye and turn to look out the window—a tree snaps in two, and the top half lands in the street.

Taylor Swift starts singing on the opposite side of the room, her dulcet tone slamming me into reality. My phone is ringing, interrupting Sinatra with Fifteen. I step away from the window and sweep my fingers across the screen to answer. “Hey, Chris.”

“How’s packing?” She asks. In the background, I can hear a woman screaming on television and the faint sound of a chainsaw.

“How’s the horror movie marathon?” I return. I’ve never been a horror movie kind of girl. Christine says she watches them to prepare herself for the worst, but there’s no preparing for the real evils that exist.

Christine stuffs a handful of popcorn into her mouth, and I’m inundated by the sound of her chewing. The chainsaw murderer must reach his victim because she’s begging him not to kill her. “Kaye, baby girl, this weather is perfect for horror movies. I think I’m going to rewatch the Saw series after this.”

I wrinkle my nose in disgust. I never put Saw on the horror spectrum. It embraced torture to convey fear instead of traditional methods like suspense and the paranormal. “Aren’t there, like, five movies in that series?”

“Nine,” she corrects with an air of superiority.

A few years ago, she tried to make me watch all the Saw movies at a sleepover. We got to the needle scene in the second movie, and I called it quits. “That’s a lot of blood and gore for one night,” I muse.

“Better than packing.” Christine’s been packed for three days. I waited until the last minute because I was sure something terrible would happen. “Mr. Money Bags and your mom back yet?”

I shake my head no before realizing that she can’t see me. “No. Thank God, though. I’m tired of Malcolm leering at me. And I’m tired of being stuck in my room to avoid him leering at me.” It’s been a long summer, to say the least. I’ve been stuck indoors while my pervert of a step-father tried every trick in the book to get me to come outside and lounge by the pool. His attempts have become increasingly aggressive, and I’ve been counting down the days until I leave for college.

Christine makes a noise of disapproval before shifting positions. She pulls the

phone away from her ear to make herself comfortable. The receiver rubs against her hair, creating static on my end. “Good thing you’re getting out of there. You’re pretty much in the free and clear after tonight.”

I can’t stop my unladylike snort. Malcolm has been trouble since I turned sixteen, but his son has been trouble since the first time we locked eyes.

“Okay,” Christine sighs, “Fine, you have to worry about Xavier. But really, what’s he going to do? There are, like, 25,000 students at Blackmore. You won’t even cross paths.”

As she says that, the night sky lights up again, and I see a familiar figure standing beneath the tree outside my bedroom window. A shudder runs down my spine, and my heart skips a beat. “Chris, I think he’s outside.”

Before she can respond, thunder ripples through the air, so loud and so close that the house quakes. The line goes dead, and the power follows. “Hello?” I pull the phone away from my ear, and the screen shows *‘call disconnected’*. When the power doesn’t return after a few minutes, I resign myself to lighting candles.

But I can’t find a lighter in my room. Or in the bathroom. Or in the hallway bathroom, where three candles neatly decorate the sink and are often lit for the sake of propriety.

I’m forced to go downstairs, guided by the light from my phone. I can’t believe there’s always a candle burning in this house, but I can’t find a match the one time I need it.

I could feel my way around the mansion in the dark if I had to, but with the shades drawn and no glow from the baseboard nightlights my mother had installed, I bump into things here and there. My hip catches the corner of a table, and my toe finds a barstool in the kitchen. I grip the marble countertop in pain and grit my teeth to keep from crying out. “Stupid storm,” I grumble. The lightning probably took out a transformer.

I feel around the kitchen island until I collide with the corner of a drawer pull. The hard metal catches the webbing between my thumb and forefinger, and a shock of pain travels up my wrist. I wouldn’t have handled life before electricity well.

As I shine the light from my phone over the contents in the drawers, I mess up my mother's perfect organization by shoving utensils aside to look for a lighter—nothing, not even a book of matches.

I repeat the process across the fifteen-foot island. Everything is a mess by the time I'm finished, but nary a lighter has been found. "What the fuck." I slam the last drawer closed to emphasize my anger.

I feel his presence before I see him. A flame flickers a few feet away, and Xavier's features are highlighted by the spark. A shadow stretches across his face, half of him lit up in orange and the other half disappearing into the blackness. "Looking for this, little love?"

My phone clatters to the floor, and the light goes out. When I saw him outside the window, I should have known that he would come in.

He always comes in.

Chapter 2

Xavier

I don't need light to find Kaye; her body sings to me like a siren. We could be in a crowded room, and I would know exactly where she was. My obsession with her has no boundaries.

I cross the space between us in two steps, dropping the lighter on the countertop and exchanging it for her lips. I drag her body to mine, her back to my front. "Don't scream," I whisper, covering her mouth until I can feel her fear coating my fingers like a second skin.

I watch her chest rise and fall in rapid succession; she's on the edge of hyperventilating with fright. The panic on her face is unmistakable. "You could have worn something a bit more form-fitting," I tease as I remove my hand from her mouth and dip it into my pocket to finger the knife I have waiting for her.

"What do you want?" Kaye tries to sound tough, but her voice trembles. It's her most attractive feature.

"What I've always wanted." I drag the knife out of my pocket and press the cold steel to her wrist. I wish I could see her pale skin beneath the blade, her veins twinkling with the threat of being split open beneath the pressure.

Kaye shakes like a leaf, her breaths shallow and ragged as her lips part ever so slightly. I can smell her fear; it's an intoxicating mix of sweat and adrenaline. A scent that trumps all others: the smell of home. She's on the verge of a sob when she calls my name. "Xavier."

“Xave,” I correct and follow it with the caress of my tongue along the soft landing of her earlobe.

Her muscles tighten under my touch. I drag my fingers down the length of her throat as she swallows her frustrations. “Aren’t you tired of this game?” Kaye attempts to taunt me. “Aren’t you sick of me yet?”

She doesn’t know how easy it would be for me to press my fingers against her trachea, to cut off her ability to breathe, think, or be. I’ve dreamt about it; I’ve yearned for it. My feelings for Kaye are muddled with resentment for her mother’s sins against my family.

“I’m sick of not claiming what’s rightfully mine.” I bring the knife to her stomach. She takes a deep breath and sucks in her abdomen as far as it’ll compress. Her body reverses into mine to escape the sharp edge of the blade, and my cock tightens the front of my jeans.

“I’m not yours, Xavier.”

Bullshit. She’s been mine since I stared up at her from the floor of that decrepit house she used to live in. She’s been mine since I claimed her lips with my own. She’s been mine since she kneed me in the groin and hid behind a laminated wood door that I could have busted down with a single kick. “Funny, this hand collar says differently.”

Kaye reaches up to grab the fingers wrapped around her throat. She tries to pull my hand away, but I only tighten my grasp. “Be careful, little love. You might force me to do something we’ll both regret.”

In the stillness of the night, the storm still raging outside the windows of the immaculate home my father purchased for Kaye’s whore of a mother, I delight in the thunderous applause of her heart in response to me. “You’re an animal,” she says in disgust.

She makes me chuckle. “What kind of animal?”

“A pig.”

“Pigs rut around in the soil looking for something to eat,” I educate her. “I’m going to do the same thing; I’m going to rut in your bushes until I find something worth devouring.” I slide the knife down the curve of her stomach

until the tip is centimeters away from her clit. “Do you think I’ll find something tasty?”

Speak, even if your voice shakes. Isn’t that what they say? “You’re disgusting,” Kaye snuffles. “And I hate you.”

I spin her around until she’s forced to look at me. Even in the dark, I can make out a flicker of desire in her eyes mixed with deep-seated terror. “You should try saying it like you mean it.”

When her lips part, I take full advantage and kiss her. Kaye may hate me, but her body feels differently. She softens as my tongue massages hers; her nipples harden beneath her old t-shirt and press against my chest. I am loathe to pull away when I have her so close to where I want her, but destruction does not happen overnight. Destruction is a process.

I break the kiss and leave only inches between our lips. Her breath comes in quick, short gasps, and her knees shake with ill-hidden desire. Kaye's mouth stays open, a mirror of the longing that I feel for her. “When you get the candles lit, I recommend a new pair of panties.” I step back and survey her from head to toe—dark, innocent beauty just waiting to be defiled. “You wouldn’t want Mom and Dad to smell your wet pussy all over the kitchen when they return.”

I pocket the knife and leave the way I came, locking the door behind me on my way out. It’s finally time to claim what’s rightfully mine.

Kaye will arrive at Blackmore a virgin, but she’ll leave my pretty little whore.

Chapter 3

Kaye

The drive from Manhattan to Rosedale is more treacherous than I anticipate. The previous night's storm brought down trees and power lines all over town. I feel like Frogger as I'm traveling down the interstate, bounding from one lane to another to avoid fallen debris.

Christine sits in the front seat with her feet up on the dashboard. If she had it her way, her seat would be reclined, and she wouldn't wear a seatbelt. Lucky for her, my father was killed in a car accident when I was five, and I've followed every single road rule since.

"That's creepy," Christine announces as I recount what happened after the phone lines cut out. Her side of town never lost power, and she stayed up until 3:00 am watching Saw. "I tried to call you back, but I kept getting an error message. After you said he was outside, I seriously thought about driving over to make sure you were okay, but our streets were flooded, and Professor Asshole wouldn't let me leave."

A few years ago, Christine's mom married a much younger man, but she didn't get to enjoy marriage for long before she fell victim to cancer. After her mother's passing, Christine passed into the care of her new stepfather, Niccolo Terlizzi. He is a professor at Blackmore University and a perpetual thorn in Christine's side. "Aren't you in his class this semester?" I ask nervously.

She sighs and drapes an arm over her face, tension forming in the sharp lines around her mouth. "Yes. I need to ask my advisor if I can switch to another

Psych class. It should be illegal to have your kids in your class.”

I bite my bottom lip and swerve to avoid a fallen speed limit sign. I don't want to tell Christine that, technically, she isn't related to Niccolo, and therefore a law like that wouldn't apply to her. “I thought Nic was the only Psych 101 professor at Blackmore.”

Christine's gaze bores into the side of my head, threatening to make holes in my skull. “I've lived with him for five years. I think I know that. I also think I'm beyond Psych 101, frankly, and I shouldn't have to take it.”

She likes to brag about her access to Niccolo's library and how she's read all of his books. She thinks that it makes her an amateur psychologist. “Maybe they'll let you take the final or whatever to prove you're ready for 102.” Or whatever class comes next for someone trying to become a child psychologist when they're finished at university.

With a hefty dose of frustration in her tone, Christine changes the subject back to Xavier's late-night visit. “So he just left after giving you the lighter?”

“Basically.” I left out copious details from my version of last night's events. For instance, she doesn't know about the knife he dragged along my skin, and I didn't think I needed to tell her that his fingers were itching to close around my throat if I made one wrong move. I definitely didn't mention the kiss or the way he reveled in the scent of sex in the air after touching me. We're best friends, but some things you have to keep secret, even from your bestie.

Christine gives me a look of disbelief. “Are you sure that was it?”

I know why she's asking. Over the years, Xavier has been less than friendly. Our interactions have been loaded with hateful invective and sexual tension unbecoming of our relationship with one another. Frankly, the story I told her sounds dull and unimaginative, which is very unlike Xavier. “He might have made more threats,” I admit. “About my virginity.”

“What?” Christine's tone sharpens to a point. “What did you mumble?”

She's been with me through everything. She was there when I needed someone to vent to about my mother's revolving door of boyfriends. She was there when I fled from home on the nights Owen hurt my mother. Christine has been my rock, and I owe her the truth. “He didn't say anything explicitly.

He's good at insinuating what's going to happen between us now that I'm eighteen."

He used to tell me to my face in harsh, colorful words that he would rip off my panties and stuff them in my mouth to muffle my screams as he fucked the innocence out of me. Age hasn't tempered his language; it's made him more creative.

Christine shakes her head and starts making sounds of disapproval. "Nope," she begins, "no, sir. No, thank you." Withdrawing her feet from the dashboard, she does her best to tuck them under her as we pull off the interstate into Rosedale. "That man isn't touching you, Kaye. I don't care if I have to take Taekwondo classes and carry a taser everywhere. I'm not letting him near you."

She's the big sister I never had. We both grew up without siblings and became dependent on one another in times of need. But where I am driven to educate myself and succeed academically, Christine has a backbone and is willing to fight for what she wants.

"Do you think he'll try something?" I gnaw on my bottom lip, ripping the skin into tender strips of anxiety. Xavier is unpredictable, but maybe Christine's overreaction is warranted. "He's been waiting for me to turn eighteen since we met."

She assures me everything will be alright, but I can tell she's just trying to calm me down. She knows as well as I do that Xavier McCade isn't someone to be taken lightly.

Christine soothes me with a lie. As I navigate Rosedale searching for the university, she navigates half-truths and fantasies. "He talks a big game, babe, but he's too busy to back it up. He's one of the starting linebackers on the football team, and he has practice, like, every day. He's in a frat, and they have bonding shit, or whatever it is they do. And he's working part-time for Malcolm, right?" I nod, and she continues. "He doesn't have time to harass you anymore, Kaye. This weekend was his last chance, and he did it. Good for him. But it's over now. You might be on his turf, but you are never going to see one another."

I breathe a sigh of relief and comfort myself with her words. He's too busy.

He has practice every day. He's working part-time. "Never going to see him," I repeat under my breath.

She leans back and makes herself comfortable one last time as we pull onto the Blackmore campus. We're immediately taken aback by the beauty of the ivory buildings sprawled out before us like majestic, stalwart pillars. Hallowed names are engraved in the stone above the entrances, telling tales of those who walked these halls before us. It's as if each building has its own life and story to tell—that of the triumphs, tragedies, and moments of sheer brilliance that happened behind closed doors.

We've seen the Blackmore campus before, but never quite like this. The air is thick with anticipation and promise as students, new and old, hurry from one prestigious building to another.

It takes Christine a few moments to catch her breath, but when she does, she repeats herself. "He had a fun few years bullying you, but he lives off campus, and his social calendar is packed. I figure you're in the clear."

But as we drive up to our dorm, I see his smiling face in the parking lot. Dark, cropped hair. Sparkling, bright blue eyes. A crisp polo tucked into a pair of midnight black slacks. "Oh, god," I groan. "He's everywhere."

Christine purses her lips. "Okay, yeah," she admits, "I guess I didn't see that one coming."

No one ever sees Xavier coming; that's why he's so dangerous.

Chapter 4

Xavier

Kaye's the dangerous one. She comes from a bloodline of women willing to wreck homes and break up marriages to get what they want. She's a tease; she's been a tease since she was fifteen. She's the kind of girl that'll lift her skirt to get a man's attention before slapping him away.

I've watched my mother sink into an irreparable depression since my father left her. I can't allow Kaye to become the type of woman that would hurt someone as sweet and kind as Victoria McCade. Now that Kaye's at Blackmore, away from her trappy mom, I will transform her from harlot to housewife. When I finish with her, she'll be a better woman than Carrie Pennington ever was.



I stand on the sidewalk outside Calvert Hall and wait for Kaye to arrive. I chipped her phone ages ago, giving me the chance to watch her blue location dot leave home and head to Christine's. She's there for less than ten minutes before the app dings to tell me she's on the move again. With every passing minute, she gets closer to Rosedale and, therefore, closer to me. Excitement pools in my chest, and I'm quivering with anticipation when I see her Model 3 cherry red Tesla pull into the parking lot.

I can't believe my father bought her the same car for her high school graduation that he bought me for mine. It makes me sick.

But when she pulls into the parking space before me, my frustration is dappled with desire. She has her long, dark locks swept into a messy bun. Her eyes are tinted with fear and anger, darkening the hue of her emerald gaze.

Christine is the first one out of the car. She's tall, with curves like the long limbs of a willow tree. Her wavy red hair contrasts beautifully with her creamy skin. "What do you want?" The color in her cheeks burns away any signs of weakness. Her pretty pink lips are expressive, pursed together to indicate her irritation.

In another life, I might have liked Christine. She has just enough heat to keep me on the edge of my seat. But I met Kaye first, and any future we may have had went down in the flames of my new obsession. "Lovely to see you again, Christine. You're looking particularly homely today."

Her eyes narrow as she balls her hands into fists at her sides. "It's her first day of school, Xavier. Leave her alone." She lowers her voice so that Kaye can't hear her, and it's almost endearing. But their codependent relationship grates on my last nerve.

Kaye warily climbs out of the driver's seat but fails to look at me. She's so innocent in that pretty white peplum top with its watercolor sunflowers blooming across the fabric. It's an innocence that I want to destroy. "Xave," she mumbles as she walks to the backseat to unload her bags.

"Kaye," My lips curl into a sincere grin as my eyes crinkle with delight. "It's a pleasure to see you this morning."

Christine steps in front of me and crosses her arms over her chest. She is a wall between me and my prize. "Don't you have someone else you could be bothering? Maybe some frat boy douche or a cheerleader that wants to put out because you're on the football team."

I've enforced celibacy on Kaye, but we don't share the same rules. "You jealous, Chris?" I ask with a wink. "Because if you want, I'll sneak into your dorm later tonight and give it to you good and hard. Just say the word."

She scoffs in disgust and steps back. "You're gross," Christine swears. "I don't know how anyone puts up with you."

I breeze past her with a smile. "I often say the same thing about you." I reach

the Tesla's passenger door and stand behind Kaye. "Can I help you with your bags, miss?"

She's bent over a box in the interior of the car. While I imagine pulling down her shorts and fucking her in the parking lot, Kaye attempts to stand up and hits her head on the metal door frame. "Fuck!" She roars, quickly emerging from the vehicle and slamming into me. "Christ, Xavier, can you just go away?" She rubs the sore spot on her crown.

"I was just hoping we could chat for a minute. We haven't gotten to talk much this summer," I tell her with a pout.

"You need me?" Christine is a few feet away and looks like she's ready to throw hands. I bet if Kaye said yes, she'd hop on my back and start punching me in the head.

Luckily, she shakes her head and tells Christine to find the RA so they can get the keys to their dorm room. When Kaye turns her attention back to me, it's with an edge of annoyance in her tone. "What do you want?" She repeats her best friend's question.

"Only to welcome my sister to Blackmore."

With a snort of derision, Kaye makes it clear that she doesn't believe me. "What do you really want, Xave? Let's get it out of the way now. You showed up at my house last night. You took advantage of me." Her cheeks flush bright red, and she lowers her voice. "So why don't you tell me what you want, and we'll clear the air? We're not in Manhattan anymore. We're not around Mom or Malcolm. It's just us."

I clamp my hands around Kaye's wrists, fingers digging into her skin like claws. She hisses in pain as I pull her arms tight, wrenching them with a savage strength that forces her onto her toes to relieve the pressure. "It's always been just us, little love." If 'us' is a ménage à trois between her, me, and my twisted desire for revenge.

Kaye tries to yank out of my grasp, and when she can't, she looks around for help. Dozens of students litter the parking lot pushing luggage carriers and talking to their friends and parents, but not a single person seems to see us. "Chris will be back in a minute." She thinks that will intimidate me, but if I

could snap the neck of a woman I'm obsessed with, what makes her think I wouldn't do worse to someone I don't care about?

"You can end this all now, Kaye. Submit to me. Give me what I want." I clench her wrists tighter, and the bones threaten to snap under the applied force. She looks away, averting her beautiful green eyes. They haunt my dreams and follow me when I'm awake. "Look. At. Me."

"I can't give you what you want," Kaye hisses. "I don't like you, and I *don't* want to have sex with you."

Anger crackles in my chest cavity like a lightning bolt straight to the heart. It takes all of my self-restraint to keep from hurting her. "Keep telling yourself that, sweetheart. But you wear your lust like a heavy perfume, and I know that beneath your denial is a woman waiting to be deflowered. You want me, Kaye, and you can't refuse me forever."

She seethes with rage, her eyes glinting like steel as she spits in my face. Her voice rises to a screeching crescendo as she calls me a bastard. It's an act of war.

I roar as I shove her away from me, and Kaye slams into the side of the car like a rag doll. She cries out in agony, cradling her wrist and sinking to the ground with gritted teeth. "If you don't give yourself to me willingly, I'll have to take you by force. See you around, little love."

I thought something like this would happen, and I prepared for it. Now that Kaye's at Blackmore, I can finally move to phase two of my plan.

Chapter 5

Kaye

“I’ll wrap it in the dorm.” It’s one of my many suggestions to avoid Everton Health Center, along with cutting off my hand and pretending it didn’t happen. Those seem contradictory, but I think they would have helped if Christine had agreed. “It doesn’t even really hurt. See?” I fling my wrist back and forth, crushing my teeth together as shocks of pain ricochet through the bone and down my wrist. “Barely even felt that.”

Christine grabs the door to the health center and ushers me inside. “Yeah?” She deadpans. “Do a push-up, and we can go home.”

I contemplate it. My wrist is sprained, not broken. There’s some slight swelling and pain but no bruising, and I still have mobility. I’m fine. “I can do a push-up,” I grumble begrudgingly.

“Stop,” Christine chastises. “That was a joke. You’re being seen by a doctor.”

The waiting room is warm from the bright sunlight filtering through the windows. A couple sits in the corner—the man's feet propped up on a coffee table and the woman's fingers furiously flying over her phone’s keyboard. An antiseptic smell pervades my nostrils and turns my stomach.

“Look at this place,” I gesture toward the room. “It’s packed.” The couple doesn't even look up to acknowledge us.

Christine walks up to the receptionist’s window and asks how long it’ll be before we can see a doctor for a sprained wrist.

“Ten minutes, probably,” the girl says with a shrug. “I don’t know. They just took a guy back for heat exhaustion.” She hands a clipboard to Christine and tells her to fill it out.

“We should go,” I inform my best friend as she finds an unoccupied seat on the far side of the room from the waiting couple and the receptionist. She sits with her back straight, eyes scanning the intake paperwork as I continue to complain. “It’s clear they do not value HIPAA here.”

She ignores me and starts writing down my information in her thick, blocky handwriting. “Yeah, we don’t want it getting out that you sprained your wrist on the first day of school.” She rolls her eyes. “What’s your social?”

I go to snatch the clipboard out of her hands, but she is faster than me. “Hey!” She glares. “You’re getting seen by the doctor. You need a paper trail for when you sue Xavier’s ass for domestic abuse.”

I wrinkle my nose, put off by the implication that our spat was domestic. “I’m not suing him, Chris.” Reluctantly, I take a seat beside her. If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em, right?

“I don’t know why not.” She stops scratching the cheap pen against the intake paperwork to look at me. Her gaze is exhausted. “What if he punched you? Or what if you were left-handed and now you have to figure out how to take first week of school notes with your non-dominant hand?”

Except he didn’t punch me. And I’m right-handed, so my sprained left-hand changes almost nothing. But the whole situation is frustrating. I know she’s right, but my back is against the wall when it comes to Xavier. “Fine. I’ll let the doctor wrap it,” I stipulate, “but I’m not telling them what happened.” I say quietly, averting my gaze.

Christine is not impressed. She finishes filling out the form to the best of her ability and leaves a handful of boxes for me to fill in. Social. Insurance number. Reason for visit. “You gonna say you fell?” She taunts.

My wrist throbs, a constant reminder of why we’re here. I look at the unblemished skin, not a single mark to show for what I claimed happened. “No one’s going to believe the truth.” I grit my teeth and swallow past the hard pill of honesty. “Xave is a legacy on campus. His great-grandfather was

among the first graduating class at Blackmore, and coming here has been a family legacy ever since.” The McCade Library is a testament to the family’s influence on campus. “They’ve all joined the same fraternity. They’ve all worked for the same law firm. They’re all known for their professionalism and fairness.” Which is a surprising concept considering how dirty Malcolm plays in the courtroom.

“I can tell the doctor that Xavier snapped my wrist in half, and no one would bat an eyelash. They might be concerned at first, but once they find out who he is, it won’t matter anymore.” The McCade name is famous throughout the state. They’ve donated to public schools, raised money for orphans, and attended black tie galas where the entrance fee cost more than a person’s mortgage.

The McCades have ruined people far more important than me. Xavier wouldn’t have to lift a finger to crush me like a bug. And who would stop him?

“Maybe I should run away.”

Christine places a comforting hand on my knee. “Or maybe you should fight back.”

Chapter 6

Xavier

When I was seven years old, my parents took me to Disneyland Paris as a reward for acing my French lessons that summer. I graduated from novice to advanced speaker, and my tutor said that if I were ever lost in France, I would have no trouble navigating the country with my newfound linguistic skills.

I loved Disneyland. My parents walked hand-in-hand through the park while I rode every ride I was tall enough to get on. They told me that it was the happiest place on Earth, which is what makes going home so disappointing.



My childhood home is just as I left it. Large, beautiful, and a mausoleum--a tribute frozen in time to my parents' forgotten love. High ceilings give the illusion of touching the sky. Pristine furniture carefully arranged by the interior decorator my father hired. Wedding pictures still hanging on the walls like a reminder of what once was. My father's old guitar sitting in an untouched corner of the living room.

When I walk through the front door and announce my presence, I'm met by the sterile sound of silence. My mother is in one of three places: drinking by the pool, drinking in bed, or drinking in my father's office. Even if she heard me say that I was home, she wouldn't come running.

The kitchen is empty, but someone opened the curtains to let in the natural

light. Something is stifling about the sleek, dark wood cabinets and stainless steel appliances. With all the light shining through the windows, I want to find comfort and warmth, but instead, it is cold and heavy.

Judging by the wine bottle lying empty on the counter, my mother started drinking early today. It's only 2:14, but she probably started at noon.

The sound of distant laughter echoes through the empty mansion, leading me to the backyard. I see my mother's breasts on display as I make my way to the pool, where she's lounging with two boys that look to be my age. One stands above her with his dick in his hand. He pumps himself hard and fast, ready to let his come rain down on the waiting pair below.

"Unless you want me to rip your dick off and shove it down your throat, you should find your pants," I threaten as I walk up.

My mother does nothing to cover herself; she's never been ashamed of her body. But the two boys grab their towels while yelling at me to get out. "You want me to get out of my own house?"

Up close, the two boys appear smaller than I expected. They seemed to match my height and build from far away, but now I can tell they're missing a few inches and at least half the muscle mass. "Tell your little boy toys to leave, Mother."

Victoria sighs heavily before flicking her fingers at the two of them. "Come back later, Alex. You, too, Luke."

I watch them scamper toward the pool house, looking back and glaring. They mumble to one another, but I can't hear what they're saying. "I don't know why you entertain riff-raff like that." I plop down beside my mother and take in the summer sun. August is beautiful in the city. Stifling heat and excessive humidity, but beautiful.

"How was your first day of school, baby?" She leans her head back against the pool lounge and closes her eyes.

"It's syllabus week," I reply with a shrug. "I'm not reading through that shit."

Victoria chuckles before casually asking, "And how was Kaye?" For all her depression, alcoholism, and general lack of consideration since Malcolm left

her, she still has unique insight into my character.

“I sprained her wrist. Christine took her to the health center.” I am always honest with my mother; she’s always been honest with me. Our kinship has been skewed by her growing self-hatred, but our relationship has transformed since my father left. We are partners, equal in all that we do.

My mother sighs again, and I see her shake her head out of the corner of my eye. “Good. Next time, break it,” she insists with a smile.

Victoria has an awareness of my obsession with Kaye. She thinks it’s driven by my hatred for the whore he married, and I think, in some ways, she’s right. But my attraction to Kaye is so animalistic that some days I can’t make heads or tails of how I feel about her. Is it contentious? Is it love? Is it twisted lust that could be satisfied with a single fuck?

“I’m not going to break her wrist, Mother,” I sigh in exasperation. “She would tell Carrie, and then Father would get involved.” The last thing I want is Malcolm sitting me down and telling me that I can’t be mean to my step-sister because it hurts my step-mom’s feelings. Boo-fucking-hoo.

“Tell your father that his spousal support is late again.” Victoria changes the subject. “If he’s going to canoodle with that trashy bitch for the rest of his life, I’m staying single until I bleed him dry.”

I snort. “You better tell Adam and Steve you’re only interested in being a sugar mama, then. I don’t want either of those two pricks to call themselves my father.”

“It’s Alex and Luke,” she corrects. “And they know the score. I’m looking for entertainment, honey, not happily ever after.”

My father took that from her. She had her fairytale wedding with Prince Charming. Now she’s letting pool boys come on her tits while she downs her second bottle of wine. “Do you ever miss him?”

In a rare moment of seriousness, my mother sobers and sits up in her chair. She looks at me with a careful, scrutinizing gaze, and a wealth of pain is built up in her eyes, highlighted by the afternoon rays. “I miss him every day, Xave. But I’d bury that fucker alive if he came crawling back to me. I was weak before; I let him walk all over me. I bowed down to him. I did

everything he asked me to do.” Her jaw ticks as she clenches her teeth to subvert the emotional pain. “And he rewarded my loyalty by leaving me for a young, pretty little thing that deserves to have her eyes clawed out. I loved your father and always will, but if he ever remembers that he belongs by my side, I’ll have the Castiglione family castrate him. I’m never letting that man back into my life.”

There are days I think I get my personality from my father, and others when I know it comes from my mother. I have the same mixed feelings about Kaye. I want to destroy her so that it destroys her mother. I want to fuck the pout out of her pretty pink lips. I love her and hate her. She brings out the best and worst in me. “I’m going to get revenge for what he did to you. You know that, right?”

She reverts to the woman she’s become in my father’s absence, lying back in her pool chair and closing her eyes again. “I know,” Victoria quietly responds. “You’re a good son.”

Will she still say that when she knows what I’ve done?

Will she still love me when she knows I’ve fallen for a Pennington, too?

Chapter 7

Kaye

“It’s Shark Week.” Christine bounces gleefully on her bed. “We have to go out, Kaye.”

I scrunch my nose, nostrils flaring in revulsion at the suggestion. I am not impressed by the idea of leaving the comfort of my dorm room to be hit on by a drunk college boy. “What if, instead, you went out, and I kept working on my paper?” I have no interest in the first weekend tradition where frat boys troll the incoming class for fresh meat to defile.

This serves to annoy my best friend, who hops off her bed and flings herself onto mine. “It’s a tradition, Kaye Pennington. You have to come.”

I swivel my chair around to face her. “Did you just break my bed?” I heard an audible pop when she threw her body onto the narrow mattress of my college-issued twin bed. The old frame rocked slightly from the impact and creaked as if to protest the sudden shift in weight. “Who do I talk to about this? The RA?” If I ignore her pleas, she’ll give up.

“Kaye, you can’t make me go to the bars alone.” Or not. “What if something bad happens to me?” Her lips quiver as she smooths the newly formed wrinkles in her hot pink mini-dress.

I turn back to face the desk where my laptop sits before me. “Nothing is going to happen to you,” I scoff. My tall, gorgeous best friend is the kind of girl that makes jaws drop. When men aren’t drooling over her, they’re trying to take her home to meet their mom. She’s trophy wife beautiful with a huge philanthropic heart; she’s going to make a rich man very happy one day. “But

if you're that concerned, then don't go out. Don't you have homework or something?" I already have a paper due for my Lit class.

"No, Nosy Nellie." I can hear her rolling her eyes. "I'm only taking ten hours this semester because, unlike you, I want to enjoy my college experience." Christine drags her arms across my bed like an ethereal snow angel, her red locks splayed out on my pillow in exaggerated ringlets. "Kaye, this is the only time in our lives that we get to go to frat parties and meet boys, and no one will judge us for having wild orgies or experimenting with drugs. I want to get drunk and make wild, crazy memories that will freak my kids out one day." She sits up on her elbows and bores holes into the back of my head. "I want to have lots of sex, Kaye."

I cringe, eyes glazing over as I attempt to make sense of the words on the screen. Christine suddenly rises and adjusts her position, her stilettos poking holes in my comforter as she crosses her legs to make herself more comfortable. "You aren't skipping out on Shark Week because you're a—"

"Stop," I cut her off with a twist of my neck and a glare. "I have stuff to do, Chris. I already have two papers due and a chapter outline that I need to work on." They technically aren't due until the Monday after next, but I'm making a point, God damn it.

But even if the paper was due at midnight and I only had a paragraph to go, Christine wouldn't care. When she has it in her head that she's going to do something, she wants to do it right now. "Alright, so, new plan. We go out, we find you a man, and you get dicked down. One, because that'll stop Xavier's fucked up obsession with you," she says with a shiver of disgust. "And two, because sex is great, babe."

As she starts listing off qualities the man we're looking for needs to have, I try to focus my attention on the notes I took during my history class. I was typing as if my life depended on it, and now I can't make sense of what I was trying to say. If the professor had told us at the beginning of class that she'd post the PowerPoint presentations on the Blackmore University online forum at the end of each week, I would have paid more attention to what she was elaborating on instead of furiously typing each word from the slides on the screen.

“And frankly, he has to be expendable.” Christine talks over the little voices in my head trying to recall facts about the European historical timeline. “That way, you can lose your virginity and move on to someone that doesn’t know you’re terrible in bed.”

“Christine,” I whirl around in my chair, jaw hinged open in shock. “We said we weren’t going to talk about my v-word after high school anymore.”

She has the nerve to scoff as if *I’m* the one being dramatic. “It’s your *virginity*, Kaye, not Voldemort. And honestly, I don’t even know what you’re saving it for. Unless you want Xavier to be the one to take it after all. The sick fuck,” she grumbles.

My best friend has been advocating for me to have sex since the day I turned sixteen. She thought that was the perfect age to have one’s first time and begin a whirlwind summer romance I’d fondly recall when I was too old to get down and dirty anymore. That’s what she did, after all.

I cross my arms over my chest and raise an eyebrow in disapproval as I scrutinize the situation. “You know that isn’t what I want. And I don’t want to have sex with some random guy I meet in a bar, either.” I’m not having sex until I’m ready.

As if reading my mind, Christine huffs and says, “But you’re never going to be ready, Kaye.” She scoots to the edge of the bed and plops her heels down on the floor. “Just do me this one favor and come out tonight. We don’t even have to talk to boys if you don’t want to.” I can see that it physically hurts her to add that part. “We’ll just dance the night away and see if we can convince the bartender to slip us a drink or two.”

Liquor is not the answer to our problems, but I don’t have to drink if I don’t want to. I might be letting her peer pressure me into going out, but I am a strong, independent woman who can say no to an alcoholic beverage. “Fine, but I have nothing to wear,” I reluctantly agree.

Christine pops off the bed and heads to our shared closet. “I got you, babe. Save your shit and start doing your makeup.”

I sigh and do as I’m told. I save my notes in the cloud and power down my laptop before fussing with a light layer of foundation and blush. I’ve never

been good at doing my eye makeup, so unless Christine does it for me, I'm going out with bags under my eyes. It isn't the most attractive look, but I'm not trying to attract anyone.

As she rifles through my closet, Christine scoffs at my clothing selection. "Are you going to the bars or church?" She teases as she pulls out a floral dress with a high neckline. "You're going to have to wear something of mine." She grabs a red dress from her side of the closet and flings it at me. "Put that on," she orders.

I shimmy into what I swear is the tiniest dress known to man. "There's no way you've worn this." It fits me like a second skin. The red silk glides against my curves with a strategic cut-out showing off my midriff. It is the softest fabric I've ever felt and the most revealing dress I've ever worn. "My ass is out, Chris. I feel a distinct breeze on my ass."

She snorts. "Wait until you feel someone's tongue down there."

I pretend not to hear her, but my cheeks flush bright red anyway. I'm not a prude. But when it comes to men, I'm a little shy. Christine says it'll go away after I've had sex for the first time, but I still blush whenever someone talks about oral or taking it in the ass. Or when Xavier puts his hands on me. "Maybe I should get drunk and find a man," I mumble more to myself than my bestie.

Christine claps her hands together enthusiastically. "Yes, Queen!" She starts bouncing up and down, and I swear she's going to twist an ankle at any minute. "Once your first time is out of the way, you'll spend the next four years having the time of your life. I promise."

"Yeah, yeah. Let's go to the bars then." I need loud music and a Truly to drown out the worried little voice in my head that says I'm making a mistake.

Chapter 8

Xavier

My phone pings when Kaye leaves her dorm. I watch her little blue dot head down Prairie Avenue toward the bar district and slip into Leather & Lager, a known biker bar in Rosedale. It's a bunker of sandbags, wood, and exposed brick—a variety of styles that the owners can't agree on. It smells like stale cigarettes and beer; I don't know why she stays. The clock ticks past 10:00 pm, and her dot remains still.

LOGAN

Yooo we're at Stingray. Come thru.

I swipe away the notification from one of my fraternity brothers in irritation. I don't want to party tonight, but Stingray is in the bar district. It's a block and a half from Leather & Lager.

On my way.

If Kaye is out drinking and talking to boys, she better fucking stop. She knows she belongs to me. And if she's forgotten, I'll refresh her memory. I'll wrench her back to reality with a reminder of who truly holds her fate.

I tug on a pair of black jeans and a long sleeve white button-up. I pull the hemline up to my hips, torso exposed, and my tattoos ripple with each movement before disappearing beneath my waistband. I leave the top three buttons of my shirt undone, and a patch of chest hair peeks out from the opening. Then a spritz of cologne before running my fingers haphazardly through my hair. The whole process takes less than ten minutes, and I'm out

the door.

I practice my meditative breathing on the drive in preparation for seeing Kaye. I bet she's wearing one of her cute floral dresses with an exaggerated hemline. Her outfits are so conservative that it hurts me to look at her. I've imagined her naked body a thousand times, and her dresses taunt me by covering the parts I am desperate to see.

I park near Stingray and check on Kaye's location. While I was driving to the bar district, she made her way to Red Dawg. "Fuck," I swear at the blue dot, "I hate that place."

Red Dawg tries to have big city dance club energy, but half of its clients are underage. So while the lights are dim and colorful strobes beam across the crowded dance floor, bartenders ignore half the patrons asking for whiskey cokes because they can't tell who's underage and who isn't. The music is always loud. The place is always packed. And it's always freezing because they keep the air at a crisp sixty degrees to ward off the scent of bodies elbow-to-elbow on the dance floor.

She's making me work for it.

I push through the crowd waiting in line at Red Dawg and flash the bouncer a fifty. He shakes my hand, takes the bill, and lets me pass without checking my ID. Where the street lights were illuminating every inch of the bar district, it's a cloudy haze inside the club. "Move," I yell as I shove my way through. Groups of people are huddled together, laughing—I don't know how they hear one another over the music. The bar is backed up from one end of the room to the other. It's a nightmare; I don't know why people come here.

I don't see Kaye, and I check my phone once more. Her location dot is still here, which means she must be on the dance floor. I stare at the elevated, crowded platform and will myself not to set anyone on fire in my search.

A chill snakes down my spine as I climb the stairs. I tower over half the people dancing, and it only takes a quick pass to find her. She's in a corner in a tight red dress with another man's hands on her hips. Rage boils through my veins as I watch Kaye grind against her partner. God, he looks young; he hasn't even sprouted facial hair yet. My stomach twists into knots when I think about what would have happened if I hadn't shown up tonight. He

might have taken her home; he might have taken her virginity...

His presence is a personal affront, an infuriating reminder that he's touching a woman I've spent three years waiting to deflower. Kaye is mine, and that twelve-year-old prick hanging onto her is about to face the consequences of his actions.

I push through the throngs of dancers and couples, making a steady beeline toward her. Someone spills their drink on my shoe, and it's a testament to my tunnel vision that I don't turn around and knock them the fuck out. Instead, I focus on my anger on the man touching my woman.

I spin him around violently, my grip like a vice around his throat—so tight I can feel every muscle in his neck against my fingers. I yank him away from Kaye with an iron strength, barely leaving her time to breathe before he is out of reach. I could choke the life out of this man if I wanted to. "You think you can touch my girl?"

Kaye looks at me, horrified. She screams over the music, "Xavier! Stop! I'm not yours!" Her dance floor lover starts babbling. I can't hear half the shit he says over the music, but I string together words like 'didn't know' and 'sorry'. Kaye's trying to pull me off him, and he's scrambling to get my hands off his neck.

I'm dizzy with lust and murderous intent, shoving the man away from me until he disappears into the crowd. I turn my attention to Kaye and grab her hips to erase the man's hands from her body. "You are mine, little love. You've always been mine."

"Stop it." But her voice falters, hesitation injected into her words.

"Let another man lay his hands on you again, and I will burn him alive right in front of you. His screams will be seared into your memory so you never forget you belong to me, princess." Then I crush my lips against hers, desperate to taste her innocence and strawberry chapstick.

Kaye beats against my chest with her tiny, ineffectual fists for only a moment. But as my tongue glides across her bottom lip, she opens her mouth, and her protestations slow. I have her right where I want her.

Chapter 9

Kaye

I'm two Truly margaritas in, courtesy of Christine flirting with a bartender at Leather & Lager. Then we switch locations because the bikers start to get predatory, and I have enough predator problems already.

Red Dawg is loud and packed, and the bouncer lets us in because Christine's tits are on display, and my ass is hanging out. I'm tipsy, but we make our way through the crowd until we're on the dance floor together. Sweat trickles between my breasts despite the cold air blasting at us.

"I'm going to get us another round!" Christine yells as the song changes. I give her a thumbs up and hold our place on the dance floor. We fought fair and square for our corner of the room; we aren't giving it up now.

Except someone takes her place. His eyes are hazel and framed by long, dark lashes. His plaid shirt is a brilliant red and so crisp that the fabric cracks like saddle leather when he moves. I can tell he's in a fraternity, probably some new pledge looking to score on his first night out, but I let him grab my hips and move me around anyway. As he holds me against him, I can feel his dick pressing into my ass. If he unzipped and pulled it out, he could stick it in and end this virginity nonsense right now. But he never gets the chance.

Xavier shows up out of nowhere, ripping away the stranger that could have been my first. I can't find Christine. I can't get Xavier to leave. I can't do anything but watch my lifelong predator threatens to kill the next man to touch me. And when he ends his argument with a kiss, I can't find my

faculties because they disappear in a blur of passion.

The bass beats to the rhythm of my heart, filling my chest with lyrics I'll never forget. Xavier expertly maneuvers me against him until we're in the same position he found me in with another man. When his dick presses against the curve of my ass, it's more impressive than the frat boy before him. It stirs something deep within me that I can't ignore.

His large, warm hands glide over my body with practiced ease, setting every nerve ending on fire. He leans closer, his breath tickling my neck, and I shiver with strange anticipation. Everything feels like it's happening in slow motion. His fingers tease and trace patterns on the skin beneath my dress, leaving me breathless. The little voice in my head says to push him away and start screaming, wave my arms around, anything. Just a few days ago, he sprained my wrist. I'm still wearing a tightly wrapped ACE bandage. What am I doing?

But then Xavier's fingers slip past the border of my panties, and I lose my ability to think straight. His velvety tongue circles my earlobe, igniting a fire deep within me. His hot breath whispers against my skin, sending delightful tremors through my body. I grab onto him as my heart leaps into my throat. The voice in my head is telling me to make him stop, but I'm powerless. He makes me weak in the knees.

He growls with lust as he slides his calloused finger across my delicate clit. His touch is like a match, igniting a fire inside me. With an authoritative voice, he claims me as his own; "Your body, your pleasure, your future. Mine, little love. All. Mine." His possessive touch forces me to surrender to him in the most carnal of ways.

I feel like I can't breathe. Energy wells up in the center of my chest as he skates his digits over my erect nub. I can't tell if the vibration in my body comes from the music beating through the floorboards or the way Xavier encircles my clit until I feel like I'm going to explode.

No one stops him; it's as if they're blind to what we're doing. I stare at the back of someone else's head as a man that's tormented me for the past three years brings me to orgasm. I try to stop it—try to think about the dead raccoon I saw last week or the lit paper I have to write over the weekend—

but it doesn't work. He infects me like a disease, swirling around my brain and forcing me to come on his fingers.

"What a good girl," he chuckles, withdrawing his hand from my panties and wrapping his arm around my neck. He deeply inhales, savoring the scent of my juices, before his tongue darts out to lap up any remaining traces off his fingers. I shudder with pleasure at the sound of his satisfied purr. "You taste divine," he chuckles, "by far the most exquisite thing I've had all year."

My stomach hurts. "Get away from me." Panic replaces the energy in my chest as I try to break free of him. "Let me go, Xavier. You're disgusting."

"And you like it. Your pussy is soaked, baby girl."

I hate him like the girl from 10 Things I Hate About You hated Patrick—not even close, not even a little bit, not even at all. "Go fuck yourself."

"I will; don't you worry. And I'll think about you every second." Xavier's laugh is the last thing I hear before he lets go. As quickly as he arrived, he's gone. I'm left standing in the middle of the dance floor with my heart buzzing and my head spinning.

When Christine returns with drinks a few minutes later, I grab her by the wrist and drag her off the dance floor. I need to tell her what happened. I need her to make it make sense.

How could someone I hate so much make me feel so good?

Chapter 10

Xavier

The McCade & Manchester law office is on the top floor of a chic building in downtown Manhattan. It has a bright, sun-drenched lobby with elegant but utilitarian interior design. The firm only handles prenuptial agreements and divorce proceedings for the rich and famous. It sounds like a dream come true to work here, but in truth, it's a lot of email and paperwork. And I'm bored.

Malcolm has been carefully reading through the documentation from his latest case. The original signed and sealed paperwork is on the table for me to peruse while he highlights a copy and jots down notes in the margins. Sometimes when I watch him work, I wonder if I'm cut out for this. I have no interest in reading through someone else's messy divorce when I'm still living out my parents'.

"Mother wants you to know that your spousal support is late again." I break the silence by detonating a bomb.

My father slowly looks up from the paperwork, a prominent glare on his features. He has done his best to keep Victoria's name out of his mouth since he left her; Malcolm never brings her up intentionally. I'm always the one to remind him of the life he left behind. "Do you have a point, Xave?"

I shrug. "Not really. She wanted me to mention it, though."

He lays the chunky yellow highlighter on the polished boardroom table and slides off his thick-framed reading glasses, leaving them on the table between us. "And when did you see your mother?"

I love to see him uncomfortable, especially when it comes to Victoria. “A few days ago,” I respond vaguely. “I think she mentioned something about having you castrated.”

Malcolm rolls his eyes before tapping his fingers on the crook of his glasses. “I’m sure she did. How’s Victoria doing? Any new playthings?”

“I don’t know why it would matter to you.” I tap my fingernails on the table with a Cheshire Cat grin on my face. “You shacked up and married your little plaything.”

His sigh is full of frustration and resentment. “It’s been three years, Xave. Enough.”

I know exactly how long it’s been, down to the precise minute. I was on a high from my summer trip when my father ruthlessly ripped the rug from under my feet. That’s why I taunt him; that’s why I start a fight. “When Carrie hits her forties, are you going to replace her, too? Not that I would mind,” I wrinkle my nose, “she looks like an overinflated fuck doll.”

Malcolm slams his fist down on the table with a thunderous roar that sends shockwaves across the table, his glasses shaking under the force of his blow. “Do not talk about your stepmother like that.” He’s so angry that he’s on the verge of snarling.

“She’s not my stepmother just because you bought her an expensive ring, an expensive wedding, and an expensive house. She’s a gutter rat you turned into Cinderella.” If the day ever comes that I like Carrie Pennington, I hope someone shoots me.

My father has unmatched patience in the courtroom. No matter how hostile the opposition, Malcolm remains calm and kind, using leniency to disorient his opponents. But when it comes to me, he can barely control his seething rage. “Do you say that because there’s something you don’t like about her or because you can’t fuck her daughter while I’m married to her mom?”

The blood in my veins turns to ice. “If I wanted to fuck Kaye, I would.”

“You think you’re going to get there before me?” Malcolm laughs. “Yeah, that’s right,” he says with a taunt, “I’ve snuck a peek at my little stepdaughter before. She’s got some great tits, doesn’t she? Like her mom’s. Not quite as

big, but big enough for me to stick my dick between them and shoot a load on her face.”

“Shut the fuck up.” I curl my fingers inward, balling my hands into fists. “She’s your stepdaughter. You wouldn’t dream of laying a finger on her.”

Malcolm is a professional at finding a person’s weakness and then needling it until they explode, and I just handed him mine on a silver platter. “I’ve salivated over the thought of it ever since her sixteenth birthday. I watched as she and her girlfriend slipped into the pool, their bare bodies illuminated by the moonlight, laughing and giggling with one another without a care in the world. Then I watched them race across the lawn, their curves bouncing with each step, water glistening off their taut skin as they raced back inside.” His tongue darts out from his mouth in a perverse simulation of arousal. “I would have traded my fortune to be between them in bed that night.”

When you realize you aren’t the only sick fuck in the room, it makes you sit up a little straighter. “Have you touched Kaye?”

“Would it bother you if I had?” One side of his mouth tilts upward into a smirk.

I’ve been willing to kill men for less, but Malcolm is my father. As much as I despise him for what he did to our family, he is the one that taught me how to ride a bike and play pool. He taught me manners. He allowed me to shoot my first gun at twelve years old. He confided in me and then made me swear I wouldn’t tell my mother what he’d said. How do you shut off the kind of loyalty and love you feel for someone like that?

Malcolm kicks his feet up on the table and leans back in his swivel chair. “Never show your hand, son. It makes you an easy target.”

Fury boils inside of me, scalding and viscous, coursing through my veins and making me dizzy with resentment. I close my eyes, and a scene plays out where I launch myself across the table and strangle him. I have to swallow past the lump of anger in my throat to avoid doing just that. “She’s barely eighteen.”

“Doesn’t mean a man can’t dream. And trust me, there’s a lot to dream about when it comes to Kaye. She has all the innocence of a thirteen-year-old girl

and the body of a porn star.” Malcolm relaxes into a smile. “I’d pay big money to pop her cherry.”

I knew that college would bring more competition. Just a couple of nights ago, I found Kaye on the dance floor with a fresh-faced eighteen-year-old boy who thought he could put his hands on what’s rightfully mine. But I didn’t know my competition would come from my father. “Stay away from her,” I warn him.

“No promises,” Malcolm says with a shrug. “If she wants me, I’m not going to turn her down. And if she doesn’t?” A long pause stretches across the boardroom table, filling the space between us. “Well, I don’t mind when they scream a little bit in the beginning. Eventually, they all stop.”

I used to think I was the worst thing that would ever happen to Kaye, but I was wrong. I might follow her and touch her and watch shivers of fear race down her spine, but she lives with a man more monstrous than me.

A wave of nausea threatens to bowl me over, and I grip the edge of the table to hoist myself to my feet. “I quit.” I never wanted to be a lawyer anyway.

“Good.” Malcolm makes a shooping motion with his hand. “Carrie was just telling me the other day that Kaye needed a job. She’s interested in becoming a lawyer if you can believe it,” he smiles. “Not divorce law or anything, but the principles are the same across the industry. Now that there’s an opening, I’ll give her a call. Carrie won’t even suspect anything when I tell her that Kaye and I have to stay late for a client.”

All along, I thought I was playing Chess with my step-sister, but she’s just a pawn; my real opponent is much closer to home and a great deal more dangerous. Suddenly I realize that I have not been as diligent as I thought. My father waited for my guard to go down, and now he is ready to attack.

Chapter 11

Kaye

“It’s been four days and eleven hours since I last saw Xavier.” I haven’t been able to focus on my homework or classes since.

Christine lies on the grass beside me, scrolling through TikTok. “You’re a junkie,” she mumbles. “You’re anxious for your next fix.”

I blanch. “I am not! I don’t want to see him ever again. He’s a sick, disgusting pervert.”

“Whose fingers you danced on like a puppet until you were screaming his name.” To Christine’s credit, when I told her what happened on Friday night, she was just as horrified as I was. But after complaining nonstop for the last four days and eleven hours, she’s grown tired of hearing about it.

“I did not scream his name,” I respond indignantly. In fact, I didn’t say anything at all; I could barely think. You could have asked me what two plus two was, and I wouldn’t have known.

Christine presses pause on her video and gives me a knowing look. “Well, I didn’t!” I tell her with an exasperated sigh.

With a harrumph, she returns to her scrolling. “You should report him to campus police.” This isn’t the first time she’s suggested it. “You already failed to tell the doctor at Everton that he was the one that pushed you down during move-in. You have to start the paper trail somewhere.”

I open my mouth to say something, but my response dies on the tip of my tongue, throat constricting with uncertainty. I don’t know how to explain to

my best friend or even to myself why I can't seem to stand up for myself when it comes to Xavier. I've let him taunt and torment me since the day we met. I've been cold and unfeeling, I've even tattled on him a time or two, but it's never gone further than a grumbled complaint to my mom.

As if reading my thoughts, Christine rolls onto her side to look at me. "Unless you like the attention."

I don't know what to say to that. My mouth hangs open like a fish gasping for water, rejecting every response as quickly as it comes to mind. I find myself frowning down at my best friend in humbled confusion. "Do I like the attention?"

Christine purses her lips for a long moment as if she's thinking about how to let me down gently. In the end, all she can say is, "Maybe. It is difficult to say for sure. Carrie had an ever-changing roster of men during your preteen years, and she didn't really show you the same attention as she did them. Then when she settled down with Owen, it wasn't a good example of a good relationship. Perhaps on some subconscious level, you enjoy Xavier's obsession with you because it implies that someone is finally providing you with the validation that you so desperately crave."

"Wow," I whisper. "You learned a lot from Niccolo's psychology textbooks."

She snorts and rolls back over. "Don't let him hear you say that. He already takes credit for my genius. He told my uncles this past weekend that I'm the smartest person in his Psych 101 class and have a bright future ahead of me." Christine rolls her eyes and makes a sound of disgust. "He only says it to flatter me."

"Maybe you like the attention," I repeat her words back to her with a grin.

Christine grabs a handful of grass and yanks it out of the Blackmore lawn, showering me in the blades a second later. "Shut up," she says with a reluctant smile, "I don't like Nic any more than you like Xavier."

I bite my lip to keep from saying what I'm really thinking: *if that's the case, then you must secretly wonder what your step-father looks like naked.* Instead, I replace it with, "Stepfamilies are the worst."

"Amen, sister."

Chapter 12

Xavier

When I see Kaye lying on the front lawn of Blackmore, I have to double-check my tracking app to make sure it's her. She has her hair spread out behind her like a fan, and her eyes are closed like she's asleep. Half a dozen people walk past her, and she doesn't move.

Every step toward her prostrate frame makes my heart pitter-patter like a lovesick rabbit. The closer I get, the more details I memorize. Like the shades of auburn streaking through her mahogany locks. And the pale shade of pink dusting her freshly manicured toes. And the way her shirt rides up a few inches, showing off her belly button. Kaye looks like Hollywood's manic pixie dream girl, and I hate how it makes me feel.

"I hope you put on sunscreen, little love. I'd hate for you to burn."

Kaye doesn't open her eyes. She groans as she tosses her arm over her face and says, "This is all a bad dream. This is all a bad dream. This is *All. A. Bad. Dream.*" When she slowly peeks out from under her arm, I give her a little wave. "I should have left when Christine went to class," she says with a groan.

I plop down uninvited on her picnic blanket, a welcome barrier between my well-kept clothes and the ground. I spend my fall and winter months playing football in conditions hotter, sweatier, and dirtier than this. It's nice to be on the grass without seeing its stains smeared on my white pants. "But you didn't. Now the Big Bad Wolf has shown up, and he's going to eat out Little Red Riding Hood."

She gives me a disgusted look as she sits up, her face only inches from mine. “He doesn’t do that in the version my father used to read to me at bedtime.”

“This is Xavier’s version. It’s like when Taylor Swift re-recorded *Speak Now*.” A piece of information that I only know because I heard Kaye discussing it with Christine, and curiosity got the better of me.

“You like Taylor Swift?” She arches an eyebrow in disbelief.

“Yeah. The whole ten-minute scarf song is great. All Too Sad or whatever,” I wave my hand around to make my point.

Kaye sighs as if she knew I was pulling her leg the entire time. “It’s All Too Well,” she corrects. “What do you want?”

“Why must I always want something?” *Because I do*. “Do you think so little of me that it seems inconceivable that I just want to enjoy your company?” *She does*—think so little of me, that is.

Tension erodes the silence between us, and Kaye shifts away from me. “What seems inconceivable is that *I* would want to enjoy *your* company, Xavier. You sprained my wrist,” she waves her bandaged arm at me, “and you touched me inappropriately at Red Dawg the other night.”

“You’re big on holding grudges. Has anyone ever told you that it’ll make you feel better if you forgive and forget?”

Kaye slaps me in the face and the echo of her skin on mine dances across the courtyard. A few eyes turn in our direction, and people begin whispering to one another. This will be campus gossip by this evening.

In retrospect, I probably should have expected it. I’ve done a lot of fucked up shit to her over the years. All deserved, of course, at least in my mind. “That’s for the time you pinned me up against the wall when I was coming out of the hall bathroom in nothing but a towel. You wanna know what I’ll give you for that time you spilled soda all over my white dress at Malcolm’s company picnic?”

I answer with a wink. “You gave me one hell of a show that day, along with everyone else. We should do that again sometime.” Her hand curls into a fist, and I lean away from her in case she starts swinging. “Calm down, Kaye. I’m

not here to ruin your day.”

“Then what are you here for?”

I suppose it’s my fault that she doesn’t trust me. After you’ve tortured someone long enough, they have a good reason to stay far away from you. “Has Malcolm called you lately?”

It’s 85 degrees out, but a thick layer of goosebumps crop up on her arms. “No. Why?”

“Your mother,” I grit my teeth to keep from blurting out how I feel about Carrie Pennington-McCade, “told him you were looking for a job. We parted ways on Monday, and he mentioned reaching out to you.”

Kaye perks up, her previous anger draining from her features. “Really? I mean, he knows I want to be a family law attorney, right?”

I don’t know what Malcolm knows. Frankly, I’ve been underestimating him for years, and I’m still kicking myself for that. “He knows you don’t want to strictly be a divorce attorney. But you know that family law is pretty much the same thing, right?”

“No,” she contradicts, frustration returning to her gaze. “Malcolm does the easy stuff. If a divorce is contentious or requires a custody battle, he wants no part of it, regardless of how much money his client has. He’ll fight for assets, but he won’t fight for children.”

“You want to fight for children?” I keep my face passive.

Kaye’s face, on the other hand, is guarded but expressive. “Yes,” she responds firmly. “There are a lot of subspecialties in family law. Divorce and separation are one of them, but there is also the adoption process, estate planning, custody agreements, and so much more. It’s the field where abused wives and children seek legal guidance on separating themselves from their abusers.”

I found out early on in my father’s relationship with Carrie that her ex-husband beat her and put his hands on Kaye a few times, too. I tracked Owen down a year later and found him in a small town fifty miles away. He was married to someone new, someone who wasn’t familiar with his hidden

domestic abuse reports. Though I had no love for my stepmother, I made sure that Owen's new wife got a copy of the prior arrest record his police department was hiding and the divorce paperwork between him and his ex-wife. It was my charity for the year. I hear he's divorced again. What a shame.

If I were a different sort of man, I would comfort Kaye. I would wrap my arms around her and praise her for having big dreams. I would stand by her side as she fought for the kids that feared making a parent angry would result in not getting dinner.

But I can't change who I am at the core. I want to be a good man, but my definition isn't the same as everyone else's. So I tell her what I can, what I'm programmed deep inside to say. "Your intentions are admirable, but don't work with my father."

"Why?" Kaye returns quickly.

I can't tell her the truth. A good man would, but maybe I'm not a good man after all. "You don't belong in that office."

I know how it sounds, and Kaye takes my words at face value. She sits up straighter, holds her head a little higher, and looks down the brim of her nose at me. "I don't care what you think about me, Xavier. I don't care that you think my mother and me are trash. We are good, hardworking people, and if Malcolm wants to give me a job in his office, I'm going to take it."

"Then I'm going to tell everyone what happened between us." I tried to be the nice guy. I tried to do the right thing. "If you go to work for my father, I'm going to plaster your picture all over campus and let everyone know that you came all over your stepbrother's fingers last weekend, and you loved it."

Kaye pales before turning a sickly shade of green. "You can't intimidate me, Xavier."

I reach forward to brush my thumb along the length of her jaw, and she shudders beneath my touch, pulling away. "But I can, little love. It's called blackmail, and it's very effective."

"You're only tarnishing your reputation in the process." She holds strong for another minute; her chin tilted up as a show of strength.

But I've been playing games of manipulation and deception since preschool. The rich and famous don't get to where they are without making backroom deals and shaking a few dirty hands. "I'll survive," I tell her. "I am a McCade. People will pat me on the back when they find out what I did. But you're a girl that no one knows. They'll shame you, little love, and you'll be ruined. Is that what you want?"

I know I'm a monster, and I hate myself for causing tears to well up in Kaye's eyes. Conversely, I want to see her punished for the sins of her mother. I want to get my revenge for the time we first met. I want to see her shine like a diamond, a lump of coal pressured into becoming beauty. But I didn't mean to hurt her—not like this.

Kaye scrambles to her feet and walks away, leaving her picnic blanket behind. I wish I could have told her the truth, but that's not how I'm programmed. I hope she realizes one day that I'm just trying to protect her from a beast more savage than me.

Chapter 13

Kaye

Driving to Manhattan, I listen to an affirmation podcast and repeat after the host. “I choose to have a positive mindset about what’s to come. I am the ideal candidate for this position. I am happy to learn new things, and I acquire new skills with ease.” I’m in my happy place as I chug along. “I am accomplished and resilient and ready to take on new challenges. I am a reliable and friendly coworker; others enjoy working with me.”

I’ve been working since I was twelve years old. It started with date night babysitting gigs in my old neighborhood. I didn’t need the money for anything specific, but it was always nice to order pizza on a Friday night or treat my mom to a Chinese buffet. She used to tell me that the money I earned was for me to spend however I wanted, but I wanted what other people had. I wanted name-brand chips and clothes that weren’t from Goodwill. I wanted to go out for dinner at nice restaurants. We weren’t struggling to make ends meet, but there was never enough money for me to be like the other kids. Making a few bucks every weekend brought me closer to my dreams.

I became a certified lifeguard at sixteen years old, and I’ve worked for the city every summer since. It wasn’t life-changing money, but by the time I started lifeguarding, my mom had already married into life-changing money, anyway. It soon became money I spent on the sly, like when I wanted to hide a purchase from Malcolm and Mom. They gave me a family debit card connected to their account, but did I really want them to know that Christine and I went to a sex shop after I turned eighteen and bought vibrators?

If it were up to Malcolm, I'd be just like my mother. Once he married Carrie, he retired her from the workforce. Now she volunteers at the soup kitchen, does free event planning for the city, is on every social committee she has time for, and comes home early every night to make Malcolm dinner and hear about his day. She juggles her wifely duties with McCade responsibilities; she's a younger version of what I suspect Victoria McCade used to be. And if it were up to Malcolm, he'd find some equally rich douchebag to marry me off to so I could live the same unfulfilling existence.

But this isn't medieval Europe, and I am not a chattel to be traded for political advancement. I am an independent woman living in the twenty-first century. I have dreams and aspirations. And though I am loathe to rely on Malcolm's handouts to get to where I want to be, I have to admit that McCade & Manchester will look great on my resume.

Pulling up to their office downtown, I realize I've never been here before. The McCade & Manchester office is just off the main drag in a newly renovated building constructed at the turn of the twentieth century. It is a marvel of classical design that has been restored with painstaking attention to detail so that its original charm shines through the modern touches. Working here a few hours a week would make me feel like the main character in my own life, from dressing in expensive pantsuits to walking through the red, glossy front door and being bathed in the natural light. It would be like living out a modern-day fairytale.

A knock on my driver's side window jars me from my reverie. My heart leaps into my throat as I turn quickly to find Malcolm standing there with a confused look on his face. "Kaye?"

I roll down the window and smile weakly. "Hey. I was just coming to see you."

His frown deepens. "Is everything okay? Are you adjusting to university alright?"

"Yes, everything is fine! Blackmore is great." Now that I think about it, this was not how I pictured this going. "I just, well, I saw Xavier the other day, and he said you had a job opening. I was wondering if I could interview for it."

Malcolm checks his watch, a line of frustration furrowing his brow. “Right now?” His irritation echoes through the question. “I just got back from court.”

I am mortified by my lack of common sense and that I didn’t call ahead to schedule an appointment. “N-no, of course not!” I stutter, shaking my head. “I, sorry,” I start to apologize, “I didn’t mean—”

Malcolm raises his hand to cut me off. The look on his face softens as he gives me a kind smile. “It’s okay, Kaye. How about you come over for dinner tonight? We’ll talk about it then.”

“Yes!” I breathe a sigh of relief. “Of course. I can do that. Absolutely.”

He rechecks his watch as if the past thirty seconds have made a monumental difference, and his foot impatiently taps on the roadway. “It’s been a while since we had a family dinner; I’ll give Xavier a call.” He’s too distracted to notice that my shoulders tighten with tension. “Anyway, wear something nice,” Malcolm insists as he makes eye contact. “I don’t think that’s really appropriate for family dinner.”

I look down at the silky, soft peach blouse and dark wash denim jeans I wore to class today; I don’t see anything wrong with my attire. I thought I looked nice when I left my dorm room this morning. “Yes, um, sure,” I concede.

“Get yourself a new dress or something. Use the family card. I have to run, but I’ll see you at dinner.” He takes off quickly, entering through the lacquered red door of the ivory brick building; he doesn’t look back.

Perhaps it’s a good sign that he isn’t making me come in for an interview, but I dread shopping for a new dress and spending my evening with the McCade men. I had plans with a study group that formed in my European history class this morning, and now I have to cancel.

But working at Malcolm’s law firm would be a step up from my lifeguarding job. It would open the door to summer internships at prestigious firms in New York and California. McCade & Manchester is a stepping stone on the path of the rest of my life. And if I have to put up with a little leering from my stepfather and his bad attitude when a case isn’t going his way, I’ll put on my big girl panties and do just that.

First, though, I need to get a new dress; Malcolm has always been a stickler for formal attire. While I'm at it, I might as well buy some new clothes for my future gig as Malcolm McCade's Legal Secretary. I will manifest my way into this job even if it kills me.

Chapter 14

Xavier

I have no interest in Malcolm's family dinner proposition until he mentions that Kaye will be there. "I want to thank you for doing my work for me," he insists over the phone with a chuckle. "I didn't even have to call her about the opening. She showed up at my door."

I tell my father I'll be there and hang up in frustration. I miss the days when you could slam the phone down on the receiver to show your displeasure. Clicking the 'end call' button just doesn't have the same effect.

It's a squeeze to fit family dinner into my busy schedule. I have football practice from 3:00 to 6:00; then I need to shower, change, and drive thirty minutes back to Manhattan in hopes of making it by 7:00 when they sit down to eat. But I'll make it work if it means I get to see Kaye.

"Wonderful of you to join us," Carrie greets me when I enter the kitchen. I have to admit that she's a better cook than my mother. Victoria hired people for that; Carrie does it herself.

"It smells delicious," I compliment.

Kaye is leaning against the counter, studiously examining her fingernails. I notice that they are buffed and shiny from a fresh manicure. She wears a sparkling, silver floor-length dress with a black satin bodice and crystal beading along the hemline. The back slopes, accentuating the dip of her spine

before curving away from the swell of her hips. She twists away from me, and I admire the lines that make up her body; she is irresistible.

“Aren’t you going to say hello to your stepbrother?” Carrie nudges her daughter. “Be polite, Kaye.”

Her eyes flash with irritation, and her lips purse into a thin line. Her chest rises as she takes a deep, frustrated breath before slowly exhaling and reluctantly muttering, “Hello.”

Carrie's voice is firm as she nudges her daughter in the side and gives her a pointed look. She tries to smile, but the effort falls flat. "Don't forget to ask him how his day was, sweetie," she insists, though her mouth is tight with tension.

I’m forced to stifle a grin as Kaye turns from her mother and flips me off when Carrie isn’t looking. “How was your day, Xavier?”

“It was great. Thanks for asking.” I hate my father’s wife, but her insistence that we come together as a family provides me with endless amusement.

Malcolm sweeps into the kitchen like a tornado, ruffling everyone’s feathers as he moves. He stops first at Kaye and brings his lips to her cheek to brush her with a friendly kiss, but he makes eye contact with me while he does it. “That’s a lovely dress, Kaye. Thank you for changing.” Then he turns his attention to his wife and plants a deep, stomach-turning kiss on her lips. “You look gorgeous,” Malcolm whispers, “I can’t wait to take this off you later.”

“Who’s ready to eat?” Kaye interrupts loudly, pushing off the counter and grabbing the salad Carrie prepared earlier. “Xavier, could you grab the mashed potatoes?” She gives me a wide berth as if touching me would soil her fancy new dress.

I follow her lead and take the bowl of mashed potatoes to the dining room, leaving the rest of the dishes for Malcolm and Carrie. I pick the chair opposite Kaye and smile as I sit down. “You look good enough to eat.”

“There’s pot roast if you’re hungry,” she says dismissively.

Before I can respond, Carrie and Malcolm push a cart into the dining room with the remaining dishes. They set everything out, and I’m treated to a

delicious home-cooked spread that rivals what I would have made myself for dinner if I had stayed home. My stomach growls, and I wait for them to sit down and begin before I dive in.

I help myself to a hearty portion of everything—pot roast, mashed potatoes, roasted vegetables—and slather it in a thick layer of rich, homemade gravy. There’s wine on the table—Cabernet, my father’s favorite—and it enhances the meal with every sip. I’m in heaven. The beef is tender and smoky and flavored with herbs and spices.

But my enjoyment is marred by the endless chatter between Malcolm and Kaye. Carrie watches like it’s a tennis match as they discuss the available position in his office. She is polite and never interrupts—my father has trained her well.

“When you get your Associate’s, if you’re still working for me, we can look into a raise and elevated position, but with no educational background yet, you’ll just do secretarial tasks.” I was a paralegal with duties and responsibilities vital to the organization’s success; Kaye is a glorified personal assistant.

“I’m grateful that you’re offering me the position. I hope you won’t mind if I take time off during the summer to intern at other firms.” She fidgets with the spoon sitting untouched on the right side of her plate. “I want to get a well-rounded experience before I start law school.”

Malcolm smiles at her and cuts a piece of pot roast into a smaller bite. “That’s fine by me. I understand that you have parallel ambitions to McCade & Manchester, and who knows, maybe you’ll go into criminal law or something else entirely one day. But you’ll learn many of the basics of practice by working for me, and those skills will translate to whichever specialty you choose.”

Kaye makes eye contact with me when she asks, “So you’re officially hiring me?” She must not have taken my threat seriously; her gaze is taunting me.

“If you’re going to be serious about it, sure. I don’t see why not. Xavier and I had some creative differences,” he smiles, “but I am always happy to help out family.”

She brings a piece of pot roast to her lips and says ‘*thank you*’ before devouring it.

The fury in my veins builds to an uncontrollable level, and the world around me becomes a hue of red. I am torn between wanting to kill my father and wanting to punish Kaye for her disobedience. But a plan forms the longer I stew, and by the time we’re finished with dinner, I know exactly how to get back at both of them.

Chapter 15

Kaye

The night is almost over. The clock ticks closer to 9:00 as we finish dinner, clean up, and chat in the sitting room. I am nearly bouncing on the edge of my seat in excitement; I can't wait to tell Christine that I got the job.

She's been texting me nonstop for the last hour. Since I was unforeseeably detained, she was forced to make new friends in the dining hall. The last text message I saw was when I glimpsed at my phone while using the bathroom. Christine said she scored a date with a senior football player. My phone's been vibrating in my purse every few minutes since.

"Malcolm, honey," Carrie interrupts the prolonged silence following her husband's retelling of the day's riveting court-side drama, "I'm sure the kids want to get back to the dorm. Kaye, at least." Her cheeks flush as she avoids eye contact with Xavier. "It's getting dark out."

The sky-blue hue of daylight started to fade a couple of hours ago, replaced with a smoky purple haze that overtakes the final rays of the sun. The last golden light filters through a thicket of trees in the distance.

"Yes," I rush to affirm her.

At the same time, Xavier says, "We were thinking of staying the night."

I stare at him in a mix of confusion and horror. "What?" I was thinking no such thing.

Malcolm's face is a cruel match of my own as his gaze lingers on his son.

Apprehension surges through me as they stare at one another. “Would someone like to explain?” He asks.

I’m at a loss for words but get to my feet regardless. “No, I was—“

“—going to go on a walk with me,” Xavier finishes smoothly as he follows my lead. “We haven’t had a chance to talk about your first week at university.”

Malcolm’s eyebrow stretches to meet his hairline. “I thought you two saw each other a couple of days ago. Didn’t Xave tell you about the open position?”

“I did.” Xavier holds a hand out for me, and I stare as if accepting it means being dragged to hell. “But it was mentioned in passing when I saw her sleeping on the front lawn.”

Malcolm and Carrie both look to Xavier in disbelief. Their eyes convey a turbulent mix of worry and surprise as they speak over each other, echoing the other's concerns.

“It wasn’t like that,” I try to explain, but they can’t hear me over their uneasiness from Xavier's admission.

“Did you feel unsafe in the dorm?” Carrie asks in a horrified whisper.

“Did that Christine girl bring a boy back to your room?” Malcolm wrinkles his nose. “I knew she was trouble.”

"It wasn't Chris," my mother chastises her husband. "Was it? Do we need to speak to the Student Life office about getting you a new dorm mate?"

Xavier causes the disturbance, but he ends it, too. I don’t grab his hand, so he takes a few steps forward and envelopes mine. He wears a charming, disarming smile that puts my mother at ease. “She just fell asleep while studying. Your first year at university can be difficult. It’s probably for the best that she stays the night,” he says as he looks down at me, “she could use a good night’s rest.”

I don’t know what he’s up to, but he places my hand firmly in the crook of his elbow and covers it with his so I can’t pull away. “A nice evening walk

will help her relax."

The air between Malcolm and Xavier grows thick and oppressive like a heavy fog threatening to smother me in its embrace. An invisible force passes between them, an unspoken understanding that weighs heavily on my shoulders. "Interesting," Malcolm muses with a pained smile. "Don't stay out too long."

And just like that, Malcolm mimics his son's body language and grabs my mother by the hand. He leads her out of the sitting room, and we're treated to the sound of her heels clicking against the marble tile as they retire to their bedroom on the second floor.

"What the devil do you think you're doing?" I try to rip my hand out of Xavier's grasp, but he is frighteningly strong.

With little more than a tug, he forces me to follow him in the opposite direction of our parents. "Do you know that when my father and mother built their home, they had a maze of roses artfully planted by their Landscape Architect?"

"That doesn't sound like a real job," I grumble. I would dig my heels into the floor, but that would only serve to scrape my mother's handpicked tile.

Xavier breezes past my grumbling. "He hired the same Landscape Architect when they purchased this home. Malcolm said he wanted something similar to the maze he once had, but better. John refused to design the same maze twice and asked for creative license to expand past roses and floral arrangements."

I am forced to listen to him ramble on as he leads me to the living room, where large, floor-to-ceiling glass doors open to the patio. Xavier escorts me through, shutting them quietly behind us. "This time, he wanted to outdo himself. Six different entrances, hedges detailing the walking paths, floral landscape, trees, water fountains, the whole nine yards. John's design was so complex that he had to install miniature maps etched in stone in various parts of the garden maze for those that got lost."

As the maze comes into view, little balls of white illuminate the creeping honeysuckle and uniform hedges. "I've seen the maze before," I snap at

Xavier. "Why are we out here?"

"Have you, though?" Xavier stops before one of the many entrances. His gaze stretches across the twists and turns before us, partially obstructed by taller hedges and weeping willows. "Have you seen every inch of it? Are you familiar with the hidden paths and secret exits?"

I tear my hand away from him, and this time, Xavier lets me go. "I'm exhausted. I have textbooks to outline and papers to write. I don't have time for games, Xavier."

"Game," he corrects, "just one."

The intensity in his eyes draws me in. Color me intrigued. "What game?"

"Hide and seek. I'm going to give you a sixty-second head start. You're going to run and hide, and I'm going to find you."

His voice is gentle, but there's an underlying tone that makes me feel uneasy. "No," I hesitate, "I don't want to play."

Xavier grabs me by the wrist and brings my hand to his mouth. The brush of his warm lips contrasts sharply against my cool skin. "You don't have a choice, Kaye. I told you not to take the job with my father."

"You can't force me to play games with you because I didn't listen to your silly threat," I glare.

"No," Xavier allows, "but if you don't play, you'll wake up tomorrow to find your name on the front page of the Blackmore Gazette. *McCade McIncest*," he teases with a smirk. "I'll live it down, but will you?"

A jagged lump, as cold and heavy as a stone, forms in my throat at the onset of fear. It feels like I'm being held underwater, unable to move but thrashing wildly just the same. The world around me vibrates with an intensity that threatens to pull me apart at the seams. Each sound, each sensation, heightens to an unbearable degree. "We aren't related." The words sound like they're coming from someone else, but it's my own hollow voice that echoes in my ears.

"But who's going to care?" He shrugs. "People love scandal. They'll skip

over the ‘*step*’ sibling part and just read it as a brother and sister getting it on.”

My gut twists with nausea and something else. Excitement, maybe, but it feels misplaced. “What if you don’t find me?” I don’t sound like me; I don’t know who says those words. But I’ll play his stupid little game, and I’ll win.

“If you can find an exit and get back to the house before I find you, you’re free to go.” I feel Xavier’s breath dance across my knuckles as he speaks, scalding me with his words. “But if I find you, you’re mine to do whatever I want with.”

He relies on our shared history to say what he really means: *if he finds me, he’ll deflower me among the flowers*. “You’re sick.” I can barely summon a voice.

“Perhaps,” he says with a bemused smile, “but you have options. Return to the house now and wake up to your life in ruins. Or play and maybe earn a shot at freedom.”

If I don’t earn my freedom, it’s because he’ll have found me. And if he finds me, he’s going to follow through with the threats he’s made for the last three years. “Alright. I’ll play.”

Xavier releases my hand, and it falls to my side. “The clock is ticking, little love. Start running.”

I grab my dress and hoist it high, darting into the maze and taking turn after turn. My heels threaten to topple me at any misplaced footstep. I am surrounded by twinkling lights and the scent of blooming flowers. Every time I look back, I am a little further from Xavier.

He will not find me, not tonight. Not if I have anything to say about it.

Chapter 16

Xavier

The game has begun.

Her pheromones fill the air like a thick fog, an aroma of fear and sweat that sends my senses into overdrive. I take deep breaths of the intoxicating scent, imprinting her essence into every molecule of oxygen, savoring the taste of her terror even after she has gone.

I count to sixty, and adrenaline builds in my veins as I wait. As I get to the last ten seconds, I consider taking off before I finish. She'll never know she was cheated out of time, *but I'll know*. So I spend the countdown dancing on the balls of my feet.

As I jet off into the maze, a cool summer breeze alights my senses. Kaye went left, I go right. I anticipate her actions based on the information I told her.

There are six entrances. She'll stick to the side as long as she can, but eventually, the maze will curve her toward the center. She'll lose her sense of direction; that is where I'll be waiting.

The garden is beautiful, bathed in the light of the rising moon. Dark buds jut out from luscious flower beds, and I make a mental note to remind John to trim them back.

I do not mistake my time in the maze for anything more than fulfilling my father's fantasies. He built the labyrinth to satisfy his selfish whims; now I do the same. I could tell from the look on his face when I mentioned going for a

walk that he knew what I was going to do.

When I was young, I watched from the kitchen as Malcolm hunted my mother through the roses. They laughed and screamed their delight, and when the sounds faded, it was because he had my mother pinned beneath the bushes. It took me years to realize what they were doing in the maze, a primal version of hide and seek that ended in mating.

When my father asked John to reconstruct the maze at his new home, his desires had grown darker. Carrie might have thought it was a fun game to play with her husband, but Malcolm is not a loyal man. If these hedges could talk, they'd have a hundred stories to tell. Kaye is not the first to race through the hedges searching for an exit; she won't be the last, either.

Off in the distance, I hear a screech. It is short-lived, and I suspect that Kaye fell. I turn toward the sound and pad along the walkway in search of my prize.

The hedge height varies. In some places, it's only knee-high and forces you to stay on the path. In other areas, it is seven feet tall, obscuring your view of what's just around the bend. I cannot see Kaye in the hills or valleys of dimly lit green, but I can hear her.

Her heels make a distinct click on the cement path. She walks on her toes, and the sound disappears for a while, then I hear it again. Each time I am closer.

The world consists of two types of people: predator and prey. If you are not hunting, you are being hunted. And right now, Kaye's heels tapping against cobblestone makes her the latter.

Chapter 17

Kaye

Christine and I used to play in the maze. We would spend hours after school crouching in the dark corners and racing through dead ends, memorizing paths so that we might find our way out in record time.

Turn right at the bank of white roses.

Take the third spoke of the garden roundabout.

Go back if you run into Cupid's statue.

We had a cheat sheet on our phones that we added to all summer long. Then one day, it stopped being fun. We ran into Malcolm and Carrie making out on a secluded bench and never returned.

I don't remember all the rules we came up with, but I know when I come across Cupid's statue that I'm two turns away from hitting a dead end.

Trembling, I reluctantly pivot and shuffle my feet back the way I came. My throat tightens as I realize I've taken a wrong turn and I need to correct it. Like algorithms to figure out how to solve a Rubik's cube, Christine and I had patterns to get ourselves out. Right, right, left, right, left, straight. Or was it right, left, left, right, left, straight?

How do you prepare for the terror of a high-risk situation, where rational thought leaves your brain, and all that remains are fragmented flashes of what you *should* do? How do you train your body to flee from paralyzing fear and adrenaline-fueled excitement? How do you condition yourself to be an elusive mouse scurrying away from a hungry, relentless cat?

“I can hear you, little love.” Xavier sounds like he’s right behind me, and I nearly trip over my feet. “Make it a little harder, why don’t you? Take off the shoes. You aren’t Cinderella; ditch the glass slippers.”

I stare down at the heels I’ve been toting through the maze all along; this is another reason why I’m not cut out for games of adrenaline. If I weren’t afraid for my life, I’d have gotten rid of these heels ages ago. “Stupid Xavier,” I mumble under my breath. “I’m not afraid of you.”

He’s close by; he hears me. “You should be. I’m going to enjoy deflowering you.”

I turn in circles, trying to find him, but I never see his blue eyes staring back at me. The little voice in my head coaches me through the next steps.

I slip out of the heels that cost \$295 at Dillard’s earlier in the day. They are made from black crushed velvet, and the height makes my calves look great. The silver soles were sewn with a shimmering thread that catches the light every time I move my feet. But regrettably, Xavier is right. I leave the expensive shoes behind and tip-toe away from the dead end.

Cupid’s statue is near an exit. My brain summons long-forgotten facts about the garden maze as I keep walking. When I turn around a corner and come face-to-face with a fountain, I almost leap out of my dress in fright. “It’s not Xave,” I whisper to myself, “it’s not Xave.”

“Or is it?” He’s so close that his breath tickles the hair on the back of my neck.

This time, I leap nearly three feet in the air. Out of pure instinct, I thrust my arm out to protect myself, catching Xavier in the chest with a fist. His body lurches backward, and he grunts, pausing long enough for me to get my bearings and take off running.

A cool sweat forms between my breasts, and my foot screams out in agony ache when I step on a rock. Where I couldn’t hear Xavier before, now all I can hear is heavy breathing and footsteps closing in on me. I can’t remember the cheat codes Christine and I came up with because there’s no time. I’m twisting and turning, jumping over short hedges and scraping past rose bushes—anything and everything to avoid being caught. There has to be an

exit around here somewhere.

I spot it too late: the exit, a gaping abyss that shimmers in the moonlight as if illuminated by the divine. My heart gallops against my chest wall as I desperately force my feet into action. But I can't reach the edge in time.

An arm wraps around my waist, and I find myself staring at the grass as we fall head-first to the ground. I'm disoriented for a few moments—long enough for Xavier to flip me onto my back and look deep into my eyes. “Hello, little love. Did you miss me?”

Chapter 18

Xavier

“Get off of me, Xavier,” Kaye frantically demands, pounding on my chest with her fists. Each blow sends a hot burst of desire through my veins.

I grapple with her, pinning her wrists to the ground as she shudders beneath me. Her breath catches, and her eyes flare with passionate heat. I trace my fingertips over her lips, savoring the electricity that sparks in the air between us. “We had a deal, little love. You agreed that if I caught you, I could do whatever I wanted with you.”

She pushes against me, trying to displace 250 pounds of rock-hard muscle. “I didn’t think you were serious.”

I am not my father. If Kaye truly says no, I’ll stop. I am not the same breed of monster as Malcolm McCade.

“You knew I was serious, Kaye.” I press down on her body, trying to keep the fire raging inside me at bay. Every movement she makes stokes it higher until my dick is hard and pressing against the zipper of my jeans. “You bet you could find your way out before I found you. And you lost that bet. It’s time to pay the piper.”

The moonlight strikes Kaye's face like an arrow, illuminating her fear-filled expression and the crackling energy between us. I see it in her eyes—a chaotic blend of want and hate that I have observed all too often over the years. Even though she attempts to conceal her desire, I am intimately familiar with the heat in her gaze.

“I-I can’t,” she whispers. “You can’t.”

My fingertips delicately trace her jawline, sending a shiver through her body. I let my touch linger, stirring the deepest depths of her passion as her cheeks become a blazing crimson. “I can, little love, and I will. You don't have to pretend to be scared. Give in.” I grab her dress and start to inch it up until I can slip my hand under the soft fabric. “Give yourself to me.”

The expensive dress she purchased to satisfy my father’s demands rips apart like tissue paper, a single tear in the fabric exposing the curve of her hip. She cries out in anguish, and I am frozen in place, paralyzed by the intensity of her beauty and the fear that she might say no. Her skin beckons me to touch it, but I dare not move.

“You’re beautiful; you know that?” The veil between my two identities slowly fades away. I've worked so long and hard to reach this point—not out of anger or malice, but because three years ago, I fell in love with a woman I had no right to even know. On the one hand, I feel guilty for betraying myself, yet on the other, it seems like destiny has brought me here.

The first time I saw Kaye Pennington, her face beamed with innocence, and my heart nearly stopped. A wild, primal part of me screamed that she was mine. I knew at that moment that I would do anything and everything to make sure no harm ever came to her.

But at this moment, where she lies beneath me looking half-afraid and half-aroused, I can't shake the feeling that maybe she isn't meant for me. That destiny brought me here only to rip her away at the last minute.

I can't allow that to happen.

I press my lips to her collarbone, and the veil is back. I am driven by my desire.

Kaye moans in delight as I explore her form. Dragging my fingers over her curves, I pry apart her thighs with my knee. She gasps and quivers beneath me, her body instinctively writhing towards mine. I pause to give her one last chance to say no, but the word never comes.

Our bodies move in perfect synchrony, each motion intensifying the pleasure radiating between us. Her eyes close as she bites her bottom lip, digging her

nails into the lush grass to steady herself. I watch with delight as her knuckles turn white against the night sky, lost in ecstasy. She clings to the Earth for solace and support, and I revel in how I make her feel.

The rest of the fabric rips with ease. The beautiful dress that accented her curves just an hour ago now reveals the most perfect body I've ever seen. She lies before me in lacy pink lingerie that begs to be removed.

My heart pounds with anticipation as I gaze down at her. Her delicate frame is covered in only a thin layer of lace, exposing more skin than it hides. I feel an overwhelming sense of power and control, knowing she can not resist me—she is completely under my command. The thrill of dominance courses through me as I prepare to take what's rightfully mine.

Kaye gasps as I tear open my shirt, the fabric fluttering to the ground like a whisper. Her eyes linger on my torso, tracing the intricate designs I've adorned myself with. Then her fingertips grace my skin, a featherlight touch that provokes an inferno of need. Each caress and brush of her fingers slip another shackle from my inner restraint—until I can't hold myself back any longer.

My desperate craving for Kaye engulfs me, and I pin her with my hips. I lose all sense of self-control and devour her with wild abandon, my hands and lips exploring every inch of the body I've longed to touch. Every sensation becomes an explosion of pleasure, fueling a relentless urge that drives me deeper into oblivion.

I savor the moment her panties are torn away. I recall my hands exploring the contours of her curves only a few days ago, tasting her sweetness on my fingertips when I was finished. I went home that night, overwhelmed by the scent of her desire, and indulged in a pleasure all my own. But now, here lay the source of all my worship, the apex of sensuality and beauty. Awe-struck, I bow my head in a moment of reverential admiration.

When Kaye starts to squirm, that's my sign that the moment is over. I ditch her panties like I discarded my shirt and dive face-first into her waiting center. The scent of her arousal is like a drug. Her folds are silky smooth as I run my tongue through her slit, lapping her sweet nectar. She grabs my shoulders and digs her fingernails into the skin, marking me in half-moon

imprints. The pain is sharp, but the delicious pressure of her grip sends me into a frenzy.

Three years of anger and resentment disappear. I think nothing of ruining her. I can only think about what the rest of my life will be like if I can't do this every day. Kaye writhes against my tongue as I contemplate how to make her mine forever.

Chapter 19

Kaye

I wish I had the strength to resist him, but I can't deny the desire that builds inside me whenever he's near. He is my stepbrother, and he has a terrifying reputation. But something twisted about his obsession with me draws me closer. He has threatened this moment a dozen times; it should scare me, but it only makes me want him more.

I always thought when he finally tried, I'd knee him in the groin and call the cops. But Xavier's touch sparks an inferno in my body, and all I can do is lean into the pleasure that he gives me.

His fingers are strong and sure as they glide across my body, leaving a searing trail on my skin. I feel alive with desire, my breath coming in desperate gasps as I feel him ascend further up my thigh. A shuddering thrill radiates through me, and my heart thunders in anticipation.

In truth, it's a beautiful night. The stars twinkle brightly in the sky as the crickets chirp a lullaby. And even though Xavier is a predator, though he's aggressive in how he touches me, my fear slips away, and I lose myself in the moment.

His hands caress my body, awakening a passionate hunger deep within me. His breath is hot on my skin, making me quiver with anticipation. My body moves in harmony with his, like waves in the ocean crashing against the shore.

When Xavier rips through my dress, leaving it in tatters beneath me, I am left vulnerable before him. He tears off his shirt, buttons popping in every

direction as he reveals more of the canvas beneath. He has worked hard to craft his body into something spectacular, and it shows. A red rose blooms atop his left pectoral. A sinuous serpent licks at his bicep. Under the Statue of Liberty's raised torch arm, dark ink marches across his skin like a map of undiscovered land. Every piece of art tells its own story.

I reach up to touch the tattooed angel on his shoulder. The faded ink feels like ordinary skin, but my fingers cause Xavier to lose his mind.

The last vestige of dignity is torn off and thrown into the darkness just seconds before his lips descend on my opening. My legs are forced apart, and I succumb to my baser instincts. He drags his tongue through my center until my body is slick with sweat.

Xavier is relentless, licking and sucking me until I'm reduced to a pile of quivering need. I moan loudly as he traces circles around my clit, driving me wild with pleasure. His hands grip my hips firmly, keeping me in place as he brings me closer and closer to the brink of orgasm.

I pant desperately, trying to catch my breath under his masterful touch. I bite my lip to keep from screaming his name, but it's no use. I beg for more.

“Sweet, sweet love,” he mumbles against my thigh, “you’re so wet for Daddy.”

I remember when Christine told me about her first time. It was a sweet, beautiful moment, whereas mine is raw and primal. She was in his bed surrounded by a mixture of Axe body spray and soft music, and I am here on the ground with a man that looks like he is intent on consuming me. My stomach churns as I try to reconcile these two diametrically opposed experiences.

Then Xavier's silky tongue trails across my clit again, and I lose my ability to think. All I can do is surrender to him. His soft lips explore my skin as he works his way up. The heat of his breath against my navel. The way he lingers on my nipples, his gentle bite pressing me closer to the edge of pleasure until I'm soaring with bliss.

“Spread your legs for me, little love,” he whispers in my ear.

I feel his cock against my thigh, and I know that we’ve reached the point of

no return. I need to tell him that I'm not on birth control, that he needs to put on a condom, but the words die in my throat before I can give them a voice.

Xavier presses his head against my opening and pauses just a fraction longer than necessary as if giving me one last chance to say no. But I never do, and he enters me without hesitation, breaking past my virginity with a forceful stroke. My body tenses from the intrusion, and I squeeze my eyes shut.

But then Xavier starts to move, his thrusts short and fast, and the intensity takes my breath away. I surrender to the pleasure as my body curves around his by instinct.

I slide my leg over his hip, and he holds me tight, pouring into me over and over again. His cock wrings every last drop of satisfaction from my body. I am breathless and exhausted, but Xavier keeps pumping. The entire time, he whispers sweet, filthy nothings into my ear that send shivers up and down my spine.

"My cock fits so perfectly inside you."

"You're going to forget your name when I'm done with you."

"I want you to come all over my dick."

"You're my new addiction, baby."

"I own every inch of your body, little love."

I cling to him like his body is an extension of my own, matching his rhythm thrust for thrust. Xavier showers me with kisses and love bites, sucking on the skin at the base of my throat until I'm sure he's left a mark.

The pleasure builds until I feel like I'm going to explode. It's like the orgasm he gave me on the dance floor last week, but blinding. Xavier enters me with one final, hard thrust, and my entire body begins to rip apart at the seams. I feel his warmth flood my center, and I want to scream in frustration, but I moan with pleasure instead. Because he makes me feel good, and that trumps my anger.

"You filthy angel," Xavier presses his forehead to mine. It's a sweet moment—an outsider might even call it touching. But then he adds with a smirk,

“You just fucked your stepbrother.”

And the moment is lost. All of a sudden, I feel dirty. And very, *very* naked. “I can’t believe I let this happen.”

He rolls off of me, and I feel strangely bereft. “Believe it, little love. And believe it’s going to happen again. I’ll never get enough of you, Kaye.”

I sit up and glare at him, disgusted by what I let myself do. “Don’t ever come near me again.”

Xavier matches my body language. “Yeah, okay,” he says with a snort, “as if you can stop me.”

I hate that he’s right, but I hate even more that deep inside, I don’t want to stop him.

Chapter 20

Kaye

My feet move of their own accord, inching ever closer to the exit of the maze. I count each step as a reprieve from this prison, but my heart feels heavy. I was twenty-two steps from freedom. It was so close and yet so far out of reach.

“Take my shirt,” Xavier offers, trotting up beside me. He holds out the flimsy white long sleeve, his jaw taut with apprehension.

“No, thanks.” I grab the shirt from him and toss it behind me. It flutters in the breeze as it falls to the ground, forgotten.

“You’re naked.” He zips the fly on his jeans; his clothes weren’t torn to shreds in the garden.

“Thank you, Einstein, I noticed.” I can still feel him inside me. His come drips down my thighs, a warm reminder of what we shared in the garden.

“If Carrie sees you, she’ll—”

“What?” I stop to glare at him. “She’ll, what? Assume we fooled around in the garden? Realize I gave in to my sick fantasies? Chastise us for playing hide and seek where she and your father have no doubt done the same thing?”

Xavier’s jaw muscles bulge as he clenches his teeth together. His temples throb with tension, and his eyes go wild in a desperate attempt to contain the rage boiling within him. “Your fantasies aren’t sick, Kaye.”

“Aren’t they?” I cross my arms over my naked body and realize that it only

serves to push my breasts up and together. Out of frustration, I drop my hands to my side with an exasperated sigh. “You said so yourself just now. I fucked my stepbrother, Xavier.”

“The ‘*step*’ part is crucial,” he mumbles under his breath. “Our parents are married. If they got divorced tomorrow, this would be perfectly acceptable.”

“But they aren’t getting divorced tomorrow. So you’re my stepbrother. And what just happened was sick and twisted, and I can’t believe I let it happen.” I gave my virginity to a heinous man that didn’t deserve it. My story won’t be R&B on the radio while candles burned on the desk like Christine’s; my story will need little white lies to make it less offensive to anyone I tell.

When I try to walk away, Xavier grabs my arm in his iron grip, fingers digging into my skin until I feel the tears prickling in my eyes. He pulls me back with a force so strong I fear he may rip my arm right off my body. “You have nothing to be ashamed of, little love.”

“I let a disgusting pig *finger* fuck me on a dance floor. Then I let the same pig *actually* fuck me as a reward for some primal game of hide and seek.” I tear my arm out of his grasp. “I’m not ashamed, Xavier; I’m disappointed. I thought that I knew better. I thought that I *was* better. But you made me realize that I am just as fucked up as you are.”

“I’m fucked up?” He steps toward me, his large, muscular body looming over mine.

“If you’re trying to intimidate me, it won’t work. You already got what you wanted,” I spit at him. “What else is there to be afraid of?”

Xavier grabs me around the waist and roughly draws me into him. His jeans are rough and coarse against my bare skin, sending a painful spark of electricity down my spine. I can feel his icy breath on my neck as I’m held captive in his embrace. “You think that’s all I wanted?” He laughs sardonically as he tightens his grip. “That was just the beginning, little love. I want everything from you. Your past, your present, and your future—I want it all.”

“Well, you can’t have it.”

He wrenches my chin upward, forcing me to stare at him. “I can, and I will.

Don't act like you didn't enjoy what happened back there. It was like fucking a waterfall; that's how wet you were. You can call it sick and twisted all you want, but you fucking loved it. Don't you dare say otherwise."

We stare at one another for a long, silent moment, cicadas singing in the background. Then Xavier lets me go, withdrawing his hands but still watching me intensely.

I turn on my heel and march toward the house. In a window high above the backyard, I see a light flicker. If it were my mother, she would be racing down the stairs and screaming my name. That means it was Malcolm. He saw Xavier and me together. He saw me naked. He can surmise what happened.

I swear to God, if I lose my job at McCade & Manchester over this, I'll kill Xavier.

Chapter 21

Xavier

One Month Later

“**W**hat the fuck, McCade!” Theodore punches me in the shoulder. “It’s a fucking practice game. Jesus Christ. Get off me.”

I look down to find the team's quarterback under me, confusion swirling in my brain. “Theo?” When did I get to football practice?

He shoves me this time, catching me off guard and throwing me off him. “I get it; you gotta stay sharp. But we aren’t even in pads.”

My eyes dart from him back to myself in disbelief. Not a single item of protective gear on either of us? Did Coach approve this? This can't be right.

A few seconds later, the other guys huddle around us, helping Theodore and me to our feet. Someone brushes dirt off my back and asks if I’m okay.

“What time is it?” Someone mumbles 3:57. “Did I go to class today?”

A hush falls over the men. “Hey, Xavier,” my buddy, Logan, claps me on the shoulder. “What happened? Did you hit your head or something?” His worried eyes search mine for an answer.

“Not that I can remember.” I scan the football field and see that the bleachers are dotted with students. Some are studying; others are chatting with their friends. The cheerleaders are huddled together, discussing their routines.

Then I see *her*, an ethereal vision of beauty. She marches across the football field with a glare, her hair streaking behind her in the wind. “Kaye,” I

mumble, a half-smile curving my lips.

“What’s your sister doing here, dude?” Asks another player, Noah.

I shrug my shoulders as I watch her approach. She wears a yellow sundress with cap sleeves and a wildflower pattern. “She’s pretty, though,” I grin stupidly. But when she stands before me with her hands on her hips, it all comes rushing back to me.

“Xave,” Kaye snaps, “we have to go now.” I can’t remember what she said before this. “Your father is in the hospital.”

Suddenly, I remember everything.

And I’m pretty pissed off that my father is in the hospital and not the morgue.

Chapter 22

Kaye

Three Weeks Ago

I see him every day. If not in person, then in my dreams. Or in the way his father laughs when he's trying to explain something to me. Xavier is everywhere and nowhere all at once.

But I don't see him in the mischievous twinkle of his father's eye when he corners me in the office kitchen one afternoon.

Malcolm told me to come into the office three days a week: Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday. He said he didn't want me to get burned out before I'd even had a chance to learn anything.

Monday was fine. He showed me around the office and gave me a desk across from one of his legal assistants. Malcolm ignored me for the rest of the day, leaving me to learn from his assistant instead.

Wednesday was better. I got to sit in on a deposition regarding a man's soon-to-be ex-wife sneaking into his house late at night to steal door handles, left shoes, shower knobs, and a dozen other little trinkets that inconvenienced her husband.

Thursday crossed a line.



I stand in the small kitchenette and wait for the microwave to beep. My cup of ramen swirls round and round for three excruciatingly long minutes. My stomach is already grumbling, and I chastise myself for not having a bagel earlier when someone offered it to me.

It's my late night at McCade & Manchester. Malcolm warned me when I began that Thursdays are when the lawyers stay late to finish paperwork before the weekend. He told me to expect a lot of strange requests like coffee runs, DoorDash orders, *'get me a file folder'*, *'find me a stapler'*, and more. So it's 6:30 pm, and I'm taking a break, ready to slurp a cup of ramen before the next ridiculous request is made.

Malcolm enters the kitchen with a mixture of rage and frustration contorting his features. He strides toward the table before throwing the file in his hand against the wall. I watch as it hits with a thud, sending papers scattering in all directions. He looks at the mess in disinterest, as if trying to decide whether to clean it up or leave it.

"Let me help," I offer quickly, racing over to gather the paperwork.

He looks surprised to see me. "Kaye, I didn't realize you were in here." Malcolm kneels on the ground, looking frazzled; I've never seen him like this before.

"Is-is, well," I stutter, "m-maybe it's none of my business. B-but is everything okay?"

Malcolm meets my gaze, and I see Xavier's blue eyes staring back at me. My gut churns, and I have to force myself to crawl around on my hands and knees to avoid the memories it brings up. "It's been a tough day, Kaye. But thanks for helping."

He starts to scoot forward to help but then stumbles on his knees and falls on top of me. "Oh, shit," he whispers, trapping me beneath him. I start to apologize and tell him that it's my fault for being underfoot, but he cuts me off before I can speak. "Wow," Malcolm pauses, and a smile curves his lips upward, "you're gorgeous."

"Um, Ma-Malcolm." My stutter works in overdrive, and I stumble over words I've never had a problem with before. "I don't-I think-I d-don't," I

can't get a sentence out.

Malcolm reaches up to push a few strands of hair out of my face. Though his smile softens, there's a mischievous glint in his eye that puts me on edge. "I can see why Xavier wanted you so badly."

Fear clutches my vocal cords as I lie there, trapped. Malcolm runs his fingertips down my cheek, and just as he's about to dip his hand down the front of my shirt, the door to the kitchen opens, and the microwave goes off.

He rolls off me and gets to his feet, brushing himself off as he greets my savior. "Douglas," Malcolm says smoothly, "it's good to see you."

Douglas Manchester ignores me but shakes Malcolm's hand before walking to the fridge to grab a drink. "Long day, eh, Mal?"

I stay there until the two of them leave. I scramble to my feet the second they're gone, suddenly feeling nauseous. The microwave beeps again to remind me that my cup of noodles is finished, but I don't want it anymore.

I walk back to my desk and text Xavier. My fingers hesitate over every letter, but eventually, I press send.

What did you tell your father about us?

XAVIER

Probably the same thing you told Carrie. Nothing.

He responds quickly, but crafting a response takes me an eternity. My heart won't stop racing, and it makes my hands shake.

He just told me he knows why you wanted me so badly.

XAVIER

He did what?

When did he say this?

Are you okay?

Kaye, I swear to God, if you don't respond, I'm coming to the office.

Nothing. Forget I said anything.

I haven't spoken to Xavier since I left him on the lawn a week ago. I've seen

him across the courtyard at Blackmore and in the same building, but I haven't dared to say anything to him. I keep telling myself that if I ignore him, this will all go away. Having sex in the garden maze was a mistake, and so was texting him.

XAVIER

I'm coming to the office.

Do whatever you want. I won't be here when you arrive.

As if to prove my point, I grab my things and tell one of the legal assistants to let Malcolm know that I forgot I needed to finish a paper. I breeze out of the office, race down three flights of stairs, and haul ass to my car just seconds before the dam breaks.

I held it together inside, but with no one watching, I sob uncontrollably in the front seat of the Tesla bought for me by Malcolm McCade. I can't seem to get away from him.

Chapter 23

Xavier

I don't know what my father said or did to Kaye, but I'll kill him. Kaye never texts me; she doesn't even respond when I text her. So that means whatever that fucker did, it's worth a punch in the mouth. Minimum.

It takes three long seconds to open the location app and determine that Kaye is still at McCade & Manchester. I start looking for my keys when I notice her blue dot moving on the map, but it stops in the parking lot.

I watch for a while, wondering... waiting. When she doesn't move after fifteen minutes, I text her.

Are you still at the office?

Tell me what happened with Malcolm.

God damn it, Kaye. Respond to me.

KAYE

Leave me alone. 🖐️🚫

"Rude," I grumble, but at least she's okay. Her car leaves the McCade & Manchester parking lot sixty seconds later, and I watch as she gets on the highway to head back to Rosedale. When she's safely ensconced back in her dorm on campus, I call my father.

Malcolm answers on the fourth ring, just before it takes me to his voicemail. "What?" His tone is bored but sharp.

"Just calling to check-in. How's your week going with my replacement? She break anything yet?" Maybe he'll fire her. Fingers crossed.

“You’re asking the wrong question,” Malcolm sighs. “You should be asking if *I’ve* broken *her*.”

Stress tightens the line of my jaw until it induces a headache. “Leave her alone.”

Malcolm snorts into the receiver. “Yeah, as if. You fucked her the other night. Now it’s my turn. Learn to share, son.”

Note to self: look up how much time someone would get for a homicidal crime of passion. “What if I told you we didn’t have sex?”

“Then you’re a pussy. She was naked when she walked out of the maze, and you were fumbling with your fly.” Malcolm laughs into the phone. “If you didn’t fuck that girl, it’s because you didn’t have the balls.”

“Fuck you.”

“No,” Malcolm grows serious, “this is about fucking the innocence out of my stepdaughter.”

I’ve already done that. But the last person I’m going to tell is my father. “I’ll tell Carrie. I have no loyalty to her. And I’m sure she’ll take your ass to court for all you’ve got.” My inheritance would go with it, but that’s a small price to pay for justice.

“Three words, son: iron-clad prenup. Or maybe it’s two. I don’t know. I don’t care. The point is, if she leaves me, she’ll go back to her penniless existence, and I’ll stop paying Kaye’s college tuition. She might be pissed if she finds out I slept with her daughter,” Malcolm says with a snort, “but she loves Kaye too much to divorce me over it. You can bet your ass she’d rather live with an unfaithful husband than cost Kaye her future.”

God damn it. Malcolm is right. I hate when that happens.

Chapter 24

Kaye

Two Weeks Ago

I still haven't told Christine what transpired between Xavier and me in the garden maze. The first few days, I didn't tell her because I was still trying to understand how it happened. But then a few more days passed, and I didn't tell her because I was ashamed. I had finally figured out *how* it happened; now, I'm stuck trying to figure out *why*. And the glaringly obvious answer—that I was attracted to my stepbrother on some disturbed level—is one that I don't want to think about.

To make myself feel better about hiding the Xavier situation from my best friend, I tell Christine about every interaction with Malcolm. Including the innocuous moments that mean nothing, like when Malcolm tells me there are donuts in the kitchen, but they might be a little stale.

"He said that to you?" Christine whispers dramatically. "The nerve."

I swat at the first part of her I can touch, which winds up being her thigh. We lie together on her neatly made bed and ruffle the comforter. "Shut up," I roll my eyes with a grin. "After the week I've had, I don't know how much longer I can do this. He's so weird, Chris." He didn't say or do anything that could be construed as inappropriate, but I still felt uncomfortable with how he stared at me. Malcolm didn't leer or make an advance, but every time his gaze met mine, my stomach twisted into a knot of anxiety.

Christine rolls onto her side to face me, hands folded in prayer beneath her cheek. "Why don't you just quit? If his son can quit, you can quit."

"I don't even want to hear about Xavier," I groan. "I swear I'm going to have

to block his number. All of a sudden, he wants to be texting pals. ‘How’s your 8:00 am Lit class?’ ‘How’s the office?’ ‘Has Malcolm tried anything?’ ‘Do you need me to say something?’” I scoff as if his concern infuriates me, but secretly, I’m moved by his thoughtfulness. “I can handle his father by myself.”

Christine immediately frowns. “Did you tell him about what his dad did? Is he concerned?”

I realize that while venting, I forgot that I was keeping a secret from her. “Yes. He asked about my first week at M&M, and I mentioned that his father was a little predatory.” I should have expected it. A few days after I turned sixteen, he started making questionable comments in the kitchen before school. My mother laughed them off, but some of the things he said stuck in the back of my mind to replay over and over again when I was trying to go to sleep at night. He also kept trying to get me in a bikini all summer. I’ve known about his questionable behavior; I just thought he would hide it in the workplace.

“Well, can Xavier do anything about Malcolm?” Christine presses. “I know asking for his help means you’d basically be exchanging one evil for another, but at least Xavier isn’t married to your mother.” That last part makes her shiver. “Can you imagine that, though?” She asks after a quick pause. “Having sex with someone that’s had sex with your *mom*?”

I can barely imagine having sex. One night with Xavier has hardly made a dent in my shyness around intimacy. “I mean, maybe if that person looked like Niccolo,” I joke uneasily.

This time, Christine hits me. Her fingers lash against my shoulder in playful admonishment. “That’s not funny, Kaye,” she says with a heavy sigh. “You know that Niccolo is…” Christine pauses, looking for the word that’s on the tip of her tongue.

“Protective?” I offer.

“Yes!” Her tone is half excitement, half forlorn. “Sometimes it feels like he’s this way because my mother had no choice but to leave me with him. But other times, I don’t know.” Christine’s eyebrows form a line curved downward toward the bridge of her nose. “It almost feels like he’s doing it to,

well,” she blushes, “court me.”

I burst into laughter and roll onto my side to face Christine. She looks like she’s trying to hold back a smile. “Court you? Chris, that’s such an old-fashioned term.”

“I know,” she says with a groan, “but his family is old-fashioned. You know that. All Italian families are.”

Christine’s mom wasn’t as steeped in the Italian culture as her daughter tries to portray. She stole her first husband from her sister the night before their wedding, and then he left by the time Christine was ten. Marrying Niccolo was less out of duty to the family name and more because she thought a hot young Italian stud would fill the hole her runaway husband had left.

“Anyway, it’s crazy,” Christine goes on. “And probably not what he’s doing, anyway.” Her cheeks start filling with a blush.

Christine and I have been best friends for as long as I can remember. We used to share snacks on the playground and discuss which boys we’d like if they didn’t have cooties. I can’t remember a time when we’ve had to tiptoe around one another, but something about this conversation feels tense—like we’re both trying to keep secrets we desperately want to share.

“Do you want him to be?” I tell myself that if she says yes, if she admits that the longing in her voice for Niccolo means something, I’ll tell her all about Xavier. We’re best friends; we don’t keep secrets.

Christine rolls onto her back, her eyes darting around the room as she nervously taps her fingers together. Every few seconds, I catch her gaze, and I feel like she is about to speak, but then she quickly looks away. Finally, after several long moments, she says, “He’s my stepdad, Kaye.” And her tone implies that my question is crazy.

But sometimes trusting someone, even someone you’ve trusted your entire life, means taking a leap of faith. We all have secrets, dark thoughts, and moments we swear we’ll never tell anyone about. “I had sex with Xavier.” But sometimes, you have to give a voice to the shadows—it’s the only way to let the light in.

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I wish I could take them back. I feel

nauseous when I see Christine's eyes widen and her mouth fall open in shock. I can see her mind racing, trying to process what I said.

"Kaye," she finally says, her voice barely above a whisper. "Are you serious?"

I nod, feeling embarrassed and exposed. And like I shouldn't have told her because who admits to anyone, ever, that they had sex with their stepbrother? "It was a mistake," I say quickly. "I didn't mean for it to happen."

Christine looks at me for a long moment before asking, "Do you regret it?"

I think about it before answering honestly. "No." I regret a lot of things, like letting Xavier steam-roll my plans that evening and trick me into playing his stupid game of hide and seek, but I don't regret how it ended. It shouldn't have happened, but I don't regret that it did.

Christine nods, seeming to understand. She bites her bottom lip, and I can tell that she wants to tell me something about Niccolo to make me feel better, but she swallows the words before she can taste them and says instead, "I won't tell anyone. It's your business. I don't judge you."

"If you ever want me to not judge you about something, I'm always here."

She reaches out to grab my hand, squeezing it tightly. Christine doesn't say anything, but she doesn't have to.

We're best friends; we don't keep secrets. But sometimes, we ruminate on the dark parts until they make enough sense to share.

Chapter 25

Xavier

I am a prisoner, and this beautiful ivory campus is my prison cell.

I march from class to class, studying subjects I'm no longer interested in. Empirical Business Applications. Economic Growth & Stability. Statistical Analysis For Business Decisions. Among other exhausting courses that I decided to take to get my Bachelor of Arts in Economics. Malcolm insisted it was the only way to succeed in McCade & Manchester. Now I reap the benefits of his path for my career: soul-crushing boredom and a touch of burnout.

When I'm not holed up in a classroom or the library, I'm at football practice. My evenings are filled with fraternity activities I no longer want to participate in. I catch a few moments here and there to ask Kaye about my father's embarrassing sexual advances, but she doesn't respond. And when she does, it's to tell me to fuck off.

"Eh, McCade," Theodore claps a hand on my shoulder as he approaches me in the middle of Harris Hall, "you coming to the Tri-Delt party tonight?"

I shrug him off. I'm hot and sweaty. It might be the middle of September, but nobody told Mother Nature that fall starts in a week. It's 90 degrees in the sun, higher when you factor in the humidity. And Harris Hall is old enough that the AC can't keep up. "I got shit to do tonight."

Theodore rolls his eyes. "You gonna ditch your frat to do homework?" He teases with a laugh. "It ain't like you're gonna fail, X. Your dad owns the school."

A dull hum of frustration circles my skull. “He doesn’t own the school, Theo.”

“His name’s on the library,” he points out. “That’s got to mean something.”

It means my father has more money than sense. It means my father likes to see his name in lights, newsprint, engraved in stone, and any other medium that serves his vanity. “Alright. Yeah. Whatever. I’ll come to the Delta party.”

Theo will no doubt go back to the guys and tell them he convinced me to party with the fraternity tonight. He took me under his wing when I first started at Blackmore. He’s a year older than me, but he was scouted to play football at the university, and he thought it made him some kind of king. “That really tall, sexy blonde Tri-Delt, Heather, has been asking about you.”

I couldn’t pick Heather out of a lineup; even her name doesn’t ring any bells. “She can keep asking. I’m not interested.”

Theodore punches me in the shoulder. It’s meant to be brotherly, but it only heightens my annoyance. “I don’t know what crawled up your ass and died, but you need to suck it up. Your attitude this semester is weird. You used to attend parties every night with your brothers. I watched you crush puss twice a day, every day. You went through girls faster than I change underwear.”

“That’s not saying much. You smell like you haven’t showered in a week.” I attempt humor, but it falls flat because my heart isn’t in it.

He smiles as if to reward my effort. “I’m just saying, you’re different, man. It’s like you went home for the summer and got a lobotomy.”

It wasn’t my brain that changed; it was the circumstances. Before Kaye turned eighteen and showed up at Blackmore, I gave myself permission to fuck, party, and fool around as often as I could. It was fun, but it was a distraction.

Joining a frat distracted me from my obsession with Kaye. Being on the football team distracted me from my rage with my family. Fucking random women every night, sometimes two at a time, distracted me from racing back to Manhattan and fucking the one person that mattered.

I am not a hopeless romantic; I am a man possessed. The woman that I want... the woman that changed the course of my life... she's the lobotomy that Theo mentions.

"Come tonight," he says after a few moments. "Get drunk. Dance with some girls. See if you can't find your spark again, McCade."

I nod, but the party isn't going to change anything. The only woman I've thought about for the last two weeks is Kaye and she won't be at the Tri-Delt party. The only thing waiting for me at the Tri-Delta sorority is more of the same: distractions.

Chapter 26

Kaye

One Week Ago

They say when it rains, it pours. And on a Wednesday in mid-September, it storms.

It starts with my alarm not going off. I swear I set it the night before, but as I roll over to see bright beams of sun streaming through the bedroom window, I realize I'm late. My phone says 9:02 am, which makes me 42 minutes late for my first class. Even if I left Calvert Hall in what I wore to bed, I'd never make it. Class gets out in eight minutes. I think we had a test today. Fuck.

I barely drag myself to history on time. My hair wouldn't cooperate with the humidity this morning, and I look like a poodle. I'm not the only one who notices because the girl beside me asks if I went out last night. "On a Tuesday?" My eyes widen in visible disgust.

She looks taken aback as she scoots away from me. "Sorry I asked," she mumbles.

I should apologize, but I can't force myself to say the words. I face forward and try not to fall asleep while the professor drones on.

Lunch is on a whole new level. I head to the dining hall to grab something and find myself bent over a toilet, throwing up. I don't know if something didn't agree with me or if I've been poisoned by undercooked chicken, but within twenty minutes of finishing my lunch, I'm well on my way to missing my last class of the day because I can't drag myself away from the bathroom.

Malcolm calls me as I'm schlepping across campus at a snail's pace. I look like I'm homeless, and I sound irritable. I barely see the caller ID and only catch the McCade name before I answer by barking into the phone, "What?" Assuming it's Xavier.

"Hello to you, too, Kaye," Malcolm deadpans on the other end of the line. "Where are you?"

I could dropkick my phone across campus at this point; it would have less of an impact on my day. "I'm so sorry, Malcolm, I was going to call you when ___"

"You didn't." He finishes for me. "You were supposed to be here fifteen minutes ago. It's a half-hour drive from campus. You didn't know at any point in the last forty-five minutes that you weren't going to be here on time?" If the Earth would open up and swallow me whole, I think I'd say thank you.

Instead of telling Malcolm I don't feel well, I decide to gird my loins and make the trip. I promise my stepfather I'll stay late if I have to, whatever it takes to get the job done. Because I need McCade & Manchester on my resume, and I need Malcolm as a reference.

"I don't need your apologies, Kaye. I need you here to do your job. If you can't be here, let me know so I can find someone else." He abruptly hangs up before I can respond.

Every minute of the drive to Manhattan, I think about calling Malcolm back and telling him I can't make it. I'm so distracted by my churning stomach and racing thoughts that I accidentally run a red light. I don't realize it until a cop car flashes me with their sirens on. I pull over and wait patiently for the police officer to write me a ticket and send me on my way. My first ticket, and the entire time I kept thinking that I should turn around and call it a day. I should have known when I slept through my alarm that I needed to go back to bed and try again tomorrow.

But I'm a glutton for punishment, so I proceed to the law office. The bright, beautiful building from the day I came by to interview now looks like a prison. Gone are the rays of golden light filtering through the windows; now, I'm too exhausted to care about being the main character.

Malcolm is speaking to the receptionist when I exit the elevator. He takes one look at me and sneers. "It's about time," he says gruffly, "there's a stack of files on your desk that need to be organized."

Is there a term for when someone *under*-exaggerates something? The stack on my desk looks like it's three files from toppling over.

As mind-numbing as it is to organize them, it's the reprieve I need from my daily routine. I zone out and file, placing manilla folder after manilla folder into the appropriate drawer. They should digitalize everything, but who am I to criticize? I'm a lowly secretary, good for doing bitch work and bringing people coffee.

But I have to admit that there's almost no way for me to mess this up, making it the best part of my day so far. Everyone leaves me alone, and I take frequent breaks to sit on the floor and text Christine about how awful today was. She sympathizes with my plight. We've all had days where the sky falls and you may never get out from under it.

"Kaye!" Malcolm cuts through my silent time with a chastising tone. "I thought I sent you in here to do a job. Why are you on your phone?"

It feels like the storm will never let up. Just as there's about to be a break, thunder cracks, and the rain comes down harder. "I'm sorry, Malcolm. I was taking a break and—"

"My office," he glares. "Now." There is no room to argue. I hang my head and follow him like a kicked puppy. The legal assistants at their desks give me sympathetic looks. Everyone's been here a time or two, and they empathize with me.

Malcolm points toward the chair in front of his desk when we enter, and I sweep past him to take a seat. He shuts the door with a slam before walking around to his side of the desk. "Do I need to fire you?" He asks, point blank.

I shake my head. "It's been a bad day, Malcolm, I'm sorry, I—"

"I don't want to hear it. When I have bad days, I still have to see clients and do my job. When you're an adult, you either call in sick or go to work and sweep it all under the rug until 5:00 pm." He crosses his arms over his chest and looks at me like I'm an errant five-year-old that just broke an expensive

vase.

I stare at my glossy black ballet flats and study the ridges formed from months of use. I try to count them, giving Malcolm an appropriate moment of silence so he knows that his words of wisdom have sunk in. “I’m sorry,” I repeat after a few moments.

“Do you know what you’re acting like right now?” Malcolm snaps his fingers, drawing my attention. “Look at me, Kaye. Do you know that you’re acting like a child?”

My face feels hot with shame. “I just want to explain. It isn’t—”

“If you want to act like a child, maybe I should discipline you like one.” Malcolm leans forward and places his arms on the desk. There’s a twinkle in his eye that makes my stomach do backflips—and not the good kind. A long silence stretches between us, tension heightening with each passing second. I’m afraid to say anything, worried I’ll incur Malcolm’s wrath. Or worse.

“When Xavier got in trouble as a little boy, Victoria never let me spank him. She said she was never spanked, so her son wouldn’t be, either. She would make him go to his room, pick weeds with the gardener, or something equally boring.” The corners of his mouth twitch with delight. “My home life was the exact opposite, though. My brothers and I got our asses beat when we messed up. I remember once, after a storm, our parents sent us outside to play, and we found a huge mud pit. We made mud balls and slung them at the far side of the house. When Dad found out, he made us line up for an ass-whooping. He tanned our hides one after the other until we swore we’d never even look at mud again.”

An uneasy feeling rises in my chest; I think I know where this is going. My stomach starts to hurt again, but I’m too afraid to move.

“I reckon you grew up pretty similarly to Xavier. Your mom seems like a *‘spare the rod, spoil the child’* type. But maybe she shouldn’t have been. A good spanking may teach you how to act appropriately in the workplace.”

I open my mouth to respond, and the only that comes out is another round of vomit. Malcolm’s smile transforms into a grimace of horror as I spit up stomach acid and water all over his expensive, mahogany-finished executive

desk. It's like a scene out of the exorcist.

"I'm sorry," I groan, burying my face in my hands. "I should have called to tell you that I'm sick."

Whatever he hoped would come from his little speech fails to materialize as he helps me to my feet and calls one of his legal assistants to walk me to my car. "Don't, uh, don't come in tomorrow if you don't feel well."

If I had known that my allure would be shattered by throwing up, I would have done it ages ago.

Chapter 27

Xavier

KAYE
SOS

My stomach churns uneasily as my heart pounds in my chest. Fear creeps through me like a chill, but I force myself to stay calm. Taking a deep breath, I press the *'call'* button and wait anxiously for Kaye to pick up.

“I can’t talk right now,” she hisses into the phone when she answers. I ask her what happened, but I’m speaking to a dial tone because she hangs up on me.

“Son of a bitch,” I swear. I stop in the middle of the Blackmore campus and look up her location. Her blue dot is in Manhattan, leaving the McCade & Manchester building. What did my father do this time?

Call me.

It takes her eleven minutes to finally return my call. I watch her blue dot drive away from the office and get on the highway to Rosedale. I consider calling her a thousand times, but I try to give her the benefit of the doubt. When my phone vibrates, I answer before the first ring finishes. “What happened? Are you okay? Did Malcolm do something?”

She’s calmer than I expected, considering she sent me an SOS text. “I freaked out earlier. I was just being overdramatic,” Kaye says breezily. “It’s nothing.”

“Bullshit, it’s nothing,” I growl into the receiver. “You don’t send texts like that when they’re nothing, Kaye. What did he do?”

“How do you know it was something your father did?” She sounds as impatient as I feel.

Deep breaths, I tell myself. Don’t lose your head. Don’t tell her you’re tracking her location because she’ll think you’re crazy. “Isn’t this the time that you work for him?” Good call, X.

Kaye sighs. “That’s not important. I already spoke to Chris, and we’re going to evaluate—”

“What did he do?” I cut her off. My stomach churns with anger. “Just tell me. It was important enough fifteen minutes ago to call in an SOS. So what happened?” There’s a long pause, long enough that I have to check my phone screen to make sure she didn’t hang up on me again. “Kaye,” I break the silence, feeling the energy in my chest spoil like sour milk. “Just tell me what happened.”

It takes a few minutes, but she spills the beans. Her sentences come in fragmented bursts, each new explosion rocking my foundation. I grow increasingly horrified as Kaye tells me about the events of the last week. When she admits what happened today, my heart sinks with dread.

Malcolm wields fear like a knife, slicing through the people around him and leaving them powerless. His desires and ambitions blur his vision, drowning out any notion of morality or consequence. People crumble under his iron grip, unable to fight against his manipulation as they are forced into submission. My father is dangerous, and I don't think Kaye realizes the vulnerable position he's putting her in.

She continues, “But Chris and I are coming up with a plan. I *need* this job, Xavier.” Her tone is desperate, and it begs me not to do anything.

“You don’t need this job, Kaye.” I will burn down the McCade & Manchester law offices tonight if she insists on staying there. I’ll leave ashes in its place, whatever it takes to keep her safe.

Kaye anticipates my overreaction and has her response locked and loaded. “I’m not rich, Xavier. If I leave M&M, I’m sure I’ll find another job. But the

McCade name opens doors. You know that just as well as I do. I just have to figure out how to make this work without your father forcing me to trade sexual favors for a job.”

“Did he say that?” I clench my free hand into a fist.

She sighs in frustration on the other end of the phone. “No, but I think it’s only a matter of time before it comes up. I’m powerless at McCade & Manchester; Chris and I are going to figure out how to get some power.”

I bite back a curse. They’re stupid if they think they can pull off something as outrageous as blackmailing Malcolm McCade. His power and connections run far too deep for them to make this work. “Let me help.”

“No. I’m making mistake after mistake this year, almost all of them regarding you. I need to figure this out myself.” No, she doesn’t. She could ask me for help. I know Malcolm better than almost anyone. “Forget that I called, Xavier. Forget that I texted you. Forget everything. I’ve got this.”

She doesn’t. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but she is not in control.

The horrifying truth about the rich is that they believe their money gives them the right to trample over other people's boundaries and personal autonomy. When challenged on their behavior, they think they can purchase their freedom from consequences with deep pockets, underhanded payments, and bribes.

Malcolm McCade may not be a billionaire, but his wealth still gives him the power to do whatever he wants, regardless of the pain he causes. I'm done letting his reckless behavior go unchecked; I won't stand idle anymore.

This time, I'm taking action.

Chapter 28

Xavier

When Kaye is in trouble, she turns to Christine. The two of them are connected at the hip like conjoined twins. I admire their respect and loyalty to one another.

When I am in trouble, I turn to my mother. She is conjoined at the hand with a glass of wine, but drunkenness does not diminish her intelligence; it only makes her sharper.

“No,” Victoria shoots down the idea. “That’ll never work.”

I crumple the piece of paper into a ball and toss it at the garbage can. “Something has to work, Mother. He has a weakness.”

She looks up from her phone with a perfectly manicured eyebrow arched in disdain. “His weakness is in his pants. If you want to fuck up Malcolm McCade, throw a pretty little girl at him. The younger, the better,” Victoria says dryly.

“We’re trying to avoid him putting his hands on Kaye, not give her to him on a silver platter.” I shouldn’t have to explain this.

Victoria rolls her eyes before returning her gaze to the phone. Her finger flicks up every few seconds, flitting through photos and status updates. “I don’t know why you care about that raggedy girl anyway. She would be the perfect bait for Malcolm. I would pay good money to see Carrie’s face when she finds out that her husband fucked her daughter. Payback’s a bitch.”

“No, *you’re* a bitch.” I cradle my head in my hands and try to rub away the throbbing in my temples. I knew I should have come up with a plan on my own, but I turned to Victoria for help and now I regret it. Lesson learned.

“Sticks and stones, love,” she waves her fingers dismissively in my direction. “I’m all for destroying your father, but if you aren’t going to take any of my ideas seriously, then why did you come here?”

I wish I knew. I think the headache is my body's way of punishing me for making a mistake. “I don’t want to destroy him, per se, I just want him to leave Kaye alone.”

Victoria accents her displeasure with a dramatic sigh. “Just tell me. Was the sex *that good* that you’re willing to throw your relationship with your father to the wind to protect her?” She wrinkles her nose in disgust. “Because that’s exactly how your father fucked me over. He had sex with a Pennington and then decided to burn the world down to have her. Which is insane because he could have kept her as a mistress for far less than it cost him to divorce me.”

I realize now where I went wrong. I assumed that my mother would help me because I’m her son. I had forgotten that her hatred for Malcolm would make her too selfish to care about anything other than the pain she dulls with a high percentage ABV. That was my fault.

To my mother’s credit, she realizes that I am frustrated and changes tact. She is still bored by my intrusion on her day, but she offers me the first helpful advice. “If you want your father to do something for you, you have to do something for him. Figure out what he wants more than a used Kleenex of a girl and give it to him.” She pauses for a second to make brief eye contact. “He always wants something, Xave, and it’s never just a girl.”

“What did he want when it came to you and Carrie then?” I always assumed he traded Victoria in for a newer model with fewer miles just because he could.

“Control,” Victoria answers with a shrug. “He always wants control.”

Chapter 29

Kaye

One Day Before

Christine and I couldn't come up with a foolproof solution to my Malcolm problem. We spent all weekend thinking about it, and in the end, my best friend advised me to quit. "Or tell Xavier to handle it," she suggested.

I wasn't getting my stepbrother involved. For starters, I'd already crossed a dozen boundaries with him that I couldn't *uncross*. He spent the weekend blowing up my phone and threatening to show up at my dorm. I would have blocked him, but something told me not to. If I have to choose my own monster, I'll take Xavier's brand of evil over Malcolm's any day.

I return to McCade & Manchester on Monday afternoon without a plan. Surprisingly, Malcolm avoids me like the plague. He doesn't talk to me, look at me, or breathe in my direction. I am invisible, and it feels like Christmas.

I spend my time transcribing notes that Malcolm recorded while I was gone. It is a tedious job, and sometimes I have to replay parts of the tape when Malcolm's voice slurs or he talks too fast for me to catch everything in one pass. The audio quality worsens as he gets more tired, and at certain points, I can only make out clipped phrases.

Then, in the middle of dictating what happened at court last Thursday when I didn't come in, the door opens. Not to the McCade & Manchester office, but on the tape. The door squeaks, and there's a brief pause before Malcolm

sounds surprised when he says, “Xave?”

Pause the tape, the little voice in my head says. *This was a private moment; you shouldn't listen to it.* But the recorder was on my desk when I arrived with a hand-scrawled note from Malcolm saying he needed it transcribed immediately. *He knows what's on the tape*, I reason. *That means he wants me to hear it.*

I could justify serving someone a butter and garlic sandwich by calling it deconstructed garlic bread. The brain works overtime when you want something and need a valid excuse to make it happen. I turn the volume up on my headphones and press *play*.

“What did you say to Kaye?” Xavier slams the door behind him, heavy footsteps padding across the office floor.

“You her knight in shining armor now?” Malcolm asks with a snort.

“I’m whatever she needs, including protection from you.”

Malcolm pauses for a minute before erupting in an unbridled, angry rant. “That bitch isn’t worth it, son. She’s a damn cock tease, and she knows it. She wears high-neck shirts and stupid flower dresses to assert her innocence. But I know beneath all that fabric and frill is a sex kitten that needs a good dicking.”

I press *pause* on the recorder, feeling green around the gills again. Maybe Malcolm didn’t know that he recorded his conversation with Xavier. What if he gave me this recorder without realizing what was on it?

It doesn't matter, the voice in my head says, *you deserve to hear the rest.*

Morbid curiosity makes me finish.

“What do you really want?” Xavier asks. “I know it isn’t Kaye.”

“Do you, though?” His father taunts. It’s like listening to a game of chess over the radio. I can’t visualize the pieces, but I know they’re moving around one another with calculated precision. “What if *all this* is just about is getting my dick wet?”

“Then you aren’t the man I thought you were. But I guess I should have

known you weren't the man I thought you were when you left Mother for a blonde blow-up doll."

I know that Xavier doesn't like my mother; he's made that crystal clear. In his wedding speech, he spitefully remarked that when Malcolm came out of his narcissistic midlife crisis and divorced Carrie, she should use the million-dollar payout to get a breast reduction because her oversized tits were too much for anyone to bear. He is never creative; he's just mean. And I tell myself, probably for the thousandth time, that I shouldn't be attracted to a man like that.

"Yeah, yeah, you despise your stepmother. Predictable. Shut up about it." Malcolm slams his hands down on the desk, the reverberation echoing through the recorder. "I'm beginning to think you don't even want Kaye. I think you want Carrie. If you wanna bury your dick in stepmom's tits and come on her face, that's fine. Just tell me when and where, and I'll make sure she's there. She doesn't even have to know it's you. If I blindfold her, she'll just think it's some hot sex game."

There's a short pause, and Malcolm starts laughing cruelly. "You think she matters, Xave? You think Kaye matters? You think *any* of these women matter to me?" The hairs on the back of my neck bristle. "Your grandfather spent his entire life married to the same woman, but you catch him at the country club on a Tuesday afternoon, and he'll be telling stories about bev cart girl that blew him on hole 7. Women are expendable, Xavier. Your mother thought she had some kind of power over me because we'd been together for twenty years, but I showed her. And if Carrie ever puts herself on a pedestal thinking she isn't replaceable, I'll do the same to her."

I hear rustling, but I can't figure out what's happening. Then, a few seconds later, Malcolm continues. "Stop trying to protect Kaye, and I'll leave her alone."

"That doesn't make any sense," Xavier growls.

"You're right. It doesn't. Because I'm going to keep pursuing her until she can't fend me off anymore. And when you don't show up in my office or call me to check in, I'll know it's because you've given up on being a one-pussy man. And I'll leave her alone. The chase is the best part, anyway."

Xavier snorts. “So I’ve got to let you fuck your *stepdaughter* in order to keep you away from her?”

His father’s laugh is deep, almost maniacal. “You think reminding me of our relationship will keep me from wanting to see her lipstick stained on my cock? Did that stop you?”

This time, there’s a long pause, and I have to check the recorder to make sure that it’s still playing. My heart pounds in my chest, and my Fitbit says it’s going strong at 120 beats per minute.

“You are a McCade, son; start acting like one.”

The recorder whirs to a stop, the final words on the tape echoing in my head. I tug at my cardigan, trying to will some warmth into my body. Even though I should feel safe inside this office, a chill creeps up my spine. A feeling of dread lingers in the air, and I can't shake it.

“Kaye?” Sarah, one of Malcolm's legal assistants, waves a hand in front of my face, jolting me from my supposed work.

I tug the headphones from my ears and smile wanly. “Hey. Yes, sorry, Sarah. Did you need something?”

She shakes her head. “Not me. Malcolm. He wants to see you.”

My body feels heavy and numb. I try to move, but my limbs refuse to obey my commands. Every inch of me wants to remain seated.

Sarah raises a confused eyebrow. “Er, I think he means *now*, Kaye.”

“Yes, of course,” I reply, only to be met with an unfamiliar, hollow voice. I stand up, and the walls pulsate around me briefly before settling. “I’ll see him now.” My throat is dry and tight with the acrid taste of rising bile. *Keep it together, Kaye*, I tell myself.

All sense of hope evaporates; I feel like I’m walking to my execution.

Chapter 30

Kaye

I knock three times on Malcolm's door, and he gruffly tells me to come inside. There are a dozen employees in the office today. Lawyers, legal assistants, and other secretaries are scattered across the third floor. I count each of them as future witnesses as I shuffle inside.

"Shut the door." Malcolm doesn't look up from the paperwork as he growls out a command.

The curtains on Malcolm's windows are drawn. With the door closed, we are shut off from the men and women just beyond the walls. "Sarah said you wanted to see me," I smile nervously.

He looks up from his work and taps his pen against the desk. He must have cleaned it since I was here on Wednesday because it's sparkling and notably vomit-free. "Are you feeling better today?" I nod quickly. "How are my Thursday notes coming along?"

"Pretty good," I mumble. "I just got to the end of the first tape. I should have everything proofed shortly."

The pen clatters as he drops it on the desk. Malcolm gets to his feet and looms above me. He strikes an impressive figure, as intimidating as his son's. "If you got to the end of the first tape, then you know Xavier showed up on Thursday afternoon on your behalf," he says with a shark-like smile—too much teeth and very predatory.

I stopped throwing up by Wednesday night, but I feel a sudden recurrence

sneaking up on me. Malcolm knew what was on the tape; he knew what I was going to hear. "I didn't ask him to do that, I swear."

Malcolm's expression hardens as he crosses his arms over his chest. "Then why was he here?" he demands, his voice turning steely. He scrutinizes me with his penetrating eyes, awaiting an answer.

"I don't know. I told him there was nothing wrong. I told him I could handle it." My lungs strain to draw in a breath, and it feels like an invisible hand tightens around my chest with a vice-like grip.

My stepfather walks around the desk, and I take an involuntary step back. The doorknob jams into my kidney, and I respond with a hiss of pain.

"I'll tell you what, Kaye. I'm getting tired of Xavier's phone calls and drop-ins and constant concern for you. So you've got a choice."

Oh, god, it's happening. My fear. The one thing that Christine and I wanted to avoid. She was right; I should have quit when I had the chance. I should have called in today and said I needed to focus on schoolwork. Hindsight is 20/20, but I should have had the foresight to know how to keep from putting myself in a dangerous situation. I'm the girl in the horror movie who goes into the basement when the power goes out, and she hears a loud sound.

"Tell him to stand down." Malcolm reaches up to brush my face in a way that is eerily similar to Xavier; it curdles my stomach. "Take one for the team."

"I'll tell my mother," I announce quickly, cutting him off. "I'll tell my mom what you're doing."

He doesn't flinch. "Then I'll fire you. And I'll speak to every firm in town and tell them what a bad employee you were. I'll blackball you in every law office in a hundred-mile radius. And one day, when you graduate from Blackmore and apply for law school, I'll be sure to contact the Dean and let him know what transpired. I'm sure the memories will be a little foggy by then, but I'm a creative man. I'll think up some really juicy stuff to fill in the blanks."

Malcolm's hand shifts further down until his fingers are wrapped around my neck. His thumb massages my jugular, and I subconsciously tighten the muscles in my throat.

“Now, back to what I was saying.” Malcolm flexes his fingers. Not enough to cut off oxygen, but enough to make me worry. “Tell my son to back off. Tell him to leave you alone. Tell him to go to hell. I don’t care. But I don’t want to hear from him anymore, not about you.”

“I-I can do that,” I whisper.

His grip lingers. “Excellent. Now, get on your knees. I want to see what you can do.” My eyes widen with fear, and Malcolm makes a shushing sound. “Kaye,” he admonishes gently, “this isn’t going to be pleasant for you if you’re constantly looking at me like an innocent, doe-eyed virgin. I know you had sex with my son. I’m sure you’ve choked on his cock once or twice, so just close your eyes and pretend that I’m Xavier.”

He pauses for a minute and then chuckles. “You know how fucked up this is? You’re about to blow your stepfather while thinking about blowing your stepbrother. You’re a filthy girl; I like it. If you do a good job, I promise I’ll only fuck you once, and then we can go back to being stepdad and stepdaughter. How’s that sound?”

I’ve allowed fear to run my life before. In many situations with Xavier, I’ve let it freeze me in place and fill my veins with ice. But for once, my fight-or-flight instincts kick into high gear. I bring a knee up to Malcolm’s groin, and he falls like a sack of potatoes. I have a brief sensation of *déjà vu* as I’m fleeing from the office. I nearly forget my bag and have to double back. Each of the twelve witnesses look on in confusion. I knock a cup of pens off my desk, yanking my bag across it. Sarah tries to stop me to ask what happened, but I push past her and keep running. I don’t stop until I’m in my car and I’ve driven halfway across town.

I have to pull into the Target parking lot because I’m hyperventilating so hard that I’m starting to get dizzy. I grab my phone and call the only person that can help me. It isn’t my mother; she is powerless. It isn’t Christine; neither of us could come up with a solution. It’s Xavier.

He answers the phone with a gruff *‘hello’* that sounds so much like his father that I nearly hang up. “Kaye?” When he injects concern into his tone, it calms me down. I breathe heavily into the receiver for a long minute before Xavier finally asks, “Where are you?”

“Target,” I whisper.

“I’ll be right there.”

It’s 3:14. Xavier should be at football practice. But I cling to the phone and wait in the parking lot. Thirty minutes later, he arrives, just like he said he would. And when he sees my panic-stricken face and tear-stained cheeks, he pulls me into his arms and asks, “Who touched you, little love? Tell me who I have to hurt.”

We both know before I say it. “Your dad.”

Chapter 31

Xavier

The first time I met Kaye, I knew I wanted to ruin her. I wanted to break her apart like a piñata just to see what her insides looked like. I wanted to destroy her until nothing remained, not even a memory. *But that was then.*

“I don’t want to go back in there. This was a bad idea. Take me back to my car.” Kaye curls up in the front seat with the seatbelt safely fastened around her waist. She treats it like a security blanket, but I will rip her out of that seat if she doesn’t come inside with me.

I want her face to be the last image that Malcolm's terrified, pleading eyes see before he dies. I want him on the floor of his office, begging her to get help while I stab him to death. I want him to know that the one person who could have saved him chose to deliver him to me instead. “This doesn’t work without you, Kaye.”

She peers at me from her side of the car, peeking at me from under her eyelashes. “I can just quit. I’ll call him tomorrow and quit.”

“That won’t stop him.” Kaye told me what he said he’d do if she tried to tell Carrie about his threats. If she quits, he’ll do it anyway. And while he’s at it, he’ll show up at her dorm and force himself on her. He’ll stop at nothing to get what he wants. Malcolm McCade needs to be stopped, and I’m the only one that can do it.

“What are you going to say to him?” Kaye untucks her chin after a second, seemingly warming up to the idea.

I haven't told her that I plan to beat my father senseless, that I have a knife in my back pocket if things get hairy, or that I have a gun in the glove compartment if I need it. She would try to talk me out of it, or she wouldn't want to be a part of it—I can't have either of those things happen. "I'm just going to tell him you're under my protection."

She gnaws on her bottom lip, and a strip of skin comes undone. Tiny droplets of blood bubble to the surface, and Kaye licks them away. "I heard what he said the other day. He said you have to stop trying to protect me."

I wrap my fingers around the steering wheel and squeeze so tightly that my knuckles turn white. "I don't care what you heard. I'm telling you what's going to happen." I turn my body to face hers, hoping that my language comes off more friendly than I'm feeling. "We're going to march into Malcolm's office and tell him he doesn't get to bully you anymore."

"What would you have said?" She asks, catching me off guard.

I frown. "What do you mean?"

"You've been bullying me since we met. What if I marched into your room and said you didn't get to do that anymore?"

She's genuinely asking, and I don't know how to tell her that it wouldn't have worked because of fate, or destiny, or whatever it is people believe in. I would never have stopped. Correction: I *won't* ever stop. I've known since the moment we locked eyes that I would never let Kaye go.

"Malcolm wants you because he thinks prestige and wealth mean he can do whatever he wants. And he wants to humiliate you and force you to have sex with him because he thinks *you think* you have some power over him. It's a battle of wills, and he wants to dominate you."

"I don't," Kaye swears. "I don't have any power over anyone."

I purse my lips and try to let her down gently. "It isn't about real power; it's about *perceived* power. He thinks you taunt and tease him, and he isn't a man that likes to be taunted or teased."

She slams her head into the back of the leather seat and lets out a frustrated scream. "I've never done anything to give him that idea. I don't even look at

him, Xavier. I can't; I'm afraid to."

I wish I could explain this to her in a way that makes sense. I understand why Malcolm feels entitled to her body; I carry the same hunger inside me. Some days, I'm my mother's son; some days, I'm my father's. When it comes to Kaye, I am every ounce a McCade man. I know what I want, and I'll stop at nothing to take it.

"Trust me." I reach out to take Kaye's hand. For the first time, I touch her without malice, violence, or anger. Her fingers shiver in my grasp, and her eyes waver with unshed tears. It is a calming touch, diametrically opposed to the slaughter I'm planning in my head. "I'm going to get you out of this, Kaye."

She has no reason to trust me after all I've done to her, but she does. And I vow to do whatever it takes to be worthy of her trust one day.

Chapter 32

Kaye

Some of the lawyers and legal assistants have left since my abrupt departure an hour ago. Where a dozen souls once milled about as witnesses, only three remain. Sarah is gone, leaving Malcolm's office unmanned.

"You should knock," I warn Xavier as we approach.

He all but kicks the door down. It draws the attention of the remaining three witnesses, who hide behind laptops and cubicle walls to feign disinterest. I smile wanly, trying to look less guilty.

"Shut the door, Kaye," Xavier instructs when we enter his father's office.

I feel sick being in here. The last few times I've been called to Malcolm's office have been less than favorable. "Are you sure?" I hold the door open enough for my frame to fill the space. I could run if I wanted to.

"Yes," Malcolm and Xavier say at the same time.

I remind myself that I'm here with Xavier, and he'll protect me. My last exit to freedom disappears behind the thick, wood door as I quietly shut it.

"Did you bring her here so we could spit roast her like a pig?" Malcolm asks. My stepfather's delivery makes me second guess myself. "I've never considered having a threesome with my son, but it could be a fun bonding experience. We've been through the wringer these past few days, but this could be just what we need to fix the rift."

His tone makes me bristle from the unwelcome advance. “Xavier,” I mumble, “I don’t feel comfortable.”

My stepfather gets up from his place behind the desk and cracks his knuckles. The sound reverberates through the room, sending a shiver down my spine. “You shouldn’t. This is *my* domain, Kaye; *I’m* the master here.”

Xavier lets him spout his hateful rhetoric for a few moments longer. I zone out, wondering if I should run away, change my name, and start a new life in Argentina. Unfortunately, planning will have to wait. I barely notice Xavier approaching his father until I’m stirred back to reality by the sickening sound of skin-on-skin contact. I refocus my eyes, and it feels like I’ve stepped into an action movie.

Xavier and Malcolm are on the floor, rolling around like children. My jaw hangs open like an invitation for every fly in the vicinity. “Guys,” it comes out in a whisper. I clear my throat and try to speak louder. “Xavier!” He doesn’t even flinch.

“You motherfucker,” Xavier roars at his father. “You’re never going to lay your hands on Kaye again.”

It’s like a fever dream. Malcolm pops his son in the mouth with a well-placed fist, and Xavier breaks his father’s nose. Blood spurts on the carpet, and I stupidly stop to think, ‘*Who’s going to clean that up?*’ Then Malcolm shoves Xavier off him, and the room echoes with the sound of his head slamming into the wooden desk. He falls onto his back, dazed from the impact.

I breathe in sharply, bringing a hand up to cover my mouth. For a minute, Malcolm beats on his son at a slow, rhythmic pace. The thud of flesh-on-flesh echoes through the room like the beating of a drum. “You might not be able to see me fuck your girl when I’m done with you, but you’ll be able to hear it,” Malcolm promises.

“Come on, Xave,” I whisper under my breath, “get up.” I cling to the doorknob, ready to run if I have to. I don’t want to leave Xavier behind, but I will not be collateral damage in the war between them.

But whether Malcolm knocked the wind out of Xavier or hitting his head stupefied him for a minute, he gets back in the fight only a little worse for the

wear. His eyes are glassy and wild, and it's like hitting his head brought out the animal inside him. He flips Malcolm on his back in the time it takes me to blink.

“Don't. You. Ever. Touch. Kaye.” Each word is punctuated with a violent punch that brings another round of blood from Malcolm's face. He tries to fight back, but he can't match the power of Xavier's rage. Where Malcolm was methodical and intentional with each hit, Xavier is chaotic. Eventually, his father stops moving. His face is a mess of black, blue, and bright red blood; a dislodged tooth lies on the floor next to him.

“Xavier.” He barely hears me. “Xave!” I call a little louder, piercing through his intensity.

He looks at me, and I barely recognize him. His face is swelling to match his father's, but there is significantly less blood and far more bruising. “We have to go,” I tell him gently. “We have to call the cops.”

Xavier looks down at his father, the man appearing lifeless beneath him. He releases his grip on Malcolm's shirt and slowly climbs to his feet. “Go,” he repeats.

I nod slowly. “And call the cops.”

But he shakes his head in disagreement. “No cops,” he glares. “Promise me.”

I'm afraid that Malcolm is dead. There's a slow trickle of blood coming from his mouth, and he is unrecognizable. If he's alive and we don't call the cops, I'm afraid he'll succumb to his injuries. But the deranged look in Xavier's eyes tells me that now isn't the time to argue. “Okay. No cops, but we have to go, Xave. *Now.*”

He walks over to me and drapes an arm around my shoulder. “Kaye,” Xavier's words slur as he speaks, “take me to my mother's.”

I struggle to hold his weight as we shuffle through the McCade & Manchester office. One person sees us, but they don't say anything. I don't know what I'm supposed to do, but I know I can never come back here.

Chapter 33

Xavier

Kaye glances at me across the car, worried. I avoid her gaze and stare at my phone. It takes a great deal of energy to force my fingers to work, but I type ‘*concussion symptoms*’ into Google and make a checklist of the ones I’m exhibiting.

Moves clumsily? Check. Thank God there was an elevator at McCade & Manchester because I don’t think Kaye could have gotten me to the car without it.

Appears dazed? Loses consciousness? Check and check. Something happened when Malcolm slammed me into his desk. Pain echoed through my chest like a runaway truck, knocking the breath out of me and turning the world temporarily black. But I’m better now... I think.

Headache? Absolutely check. My head throbs with sharp, intense pain. The light searing through the car window makes my eyes hurt, and every sound, even the dull din of the radio, is amplified tenfold and makes my skull pulsate with irritation.

Feeling sluggish, hazy, or groggy? Triple check.

I put my phone away and wait for it to pass; it doesn't.

A few minutes later, I hear, “We’re here.” As Kaye pulls into the driveway of my childhood home, she asks, “What can I do?”

I stare at the door handle and will myself to reach for it, but my brain isn’t connecting to my body parts. “Get Victoria. The door code is 20931.”

I don't know how long she's gone. She races out of the car, and I press my face against the cool air coming from the vents. I try to cement the day's events into my memory, but it's becoming increasingly difficult. "Office," I mumble, my eyelids feeling heavy. "Dad's office. Dad. Desk." I went to his office. I saw his desk.

Wait, that doesn't sound right.

I went to his office and sat at his desk.

No, that's not right, either.

Dad hit me with his desk in the office.

It still sounds wrong.

My door swings open, and I see Kaye standing with my mother. Victoria looks unusually put together. Her lips are shaded in coral pink, and she wears a painful smile. "Thank you for bringing my son home." She reaches into the car to grab my hand, but it takes both of them to help me out. My feet don't seem to want to do their job, and neither woman is strong enough to carry 250 pounds of man across the driveway.

"What should I do?" Kaye asks as the two of them help me into the house.

Victoria escorts me to the nearest couch, and they set me down gently. The room is spinning. If this is a Merry-Go-Round, I want off this ride.

"Call an Uber and go back to campus. I'll handle it," she says tersely.

Kaye takes a step back, but her eyes never leave me. "What about Malcolm?"

Her eyes flare with rage. "What about him?" Victoria takes a seat beside me and grabs her phone. "Go back to campus, Kaye. Don't call the police. Don't tell your mother. Go. Back. To. Blackmore."

"Xave, let me know if you need anything," she says.

"He has *me* if he needs anything," Victoria responds with a glare. "Now leave before the neighbors notice you're here. We can't spin this story in our favor if there are too many witnesses to the contrary."

I watch as Kaye retreats. She disappears behind a wall, and the front door

closes a few moments later. “Mom,” I mumble.

“Shh,” Victoria whispers. “I’ve got you, honey.”

I lean against a pillow and close my eyes. I can hear everything around me, from the rush of blood flowing through my veins to my mother’s numerous phone calls.

The first is to Dr. Harris. “I need you at the house. Urgently. Xavier is hurt.” There’s chatter on the other end of the line before Victoria says, “I can’t bring him in. He’s bloody and bruised, possible concussion. There was a fight. He might have broken bones in his hands.”

My eyes pop open, and I look down at my fists. There it is, my battered knuckles, skin swollen and tight. I can still move my fingers. Is that a good sign? Doesn’t that mean they aren’t broken?

Victoria’s second call is to a Castiglione family fixer. “Something’s happened to Malcolm. I need someone to go to his office. Report back immediately.” More words are spoken that I can’t hear, but I get the gist. “No. If he’s alive, leave him.”

Her last call goes to an unexpected third party. Before she dials the number, she swears a handful of times. Then Victoria takes a deep breath, smiles, and brings the phone to her ear. “Carrie, it’s Victoria McCade.” My mother refused to change her name after the divorce. “We need to talk. Can you be here in an hour?”

I’m so stunned that my mouth remains open long after Victoria hangs up. I didn’t know my mother was in contact with her replacement.

“Once we know the extent of Malcolm’s injuries, we’ll have a clearer picture of what we’re dealing with.” Her lips form a tight, thin line. “It was good of the girl to bring you here. I should write her a *thank you* note.”

The irony isn’t lost on me—with a charge of manslaughter hanging over my head—and I can’t help but find it absurdly funny that my mother is going to write a *thank you* note to Kaye.

Victoria grabs my hand and brings it to her lips. Despite the blood on my knuckles, she kisses me gently. “Thank you, son. This was a beautiful gift.”

I don't have it in me to tell her that it was for Kaye. If she wants to believe that my motivation was revenge for what Malcolm did to her, then so be it. What she doesn't know won't hurt her.

Chapter 34

Kaye

Present Day

I escort Xavier from the football field to my car. He lumbers behind me, unsteady on his feet, but with a happy smile on his face. “You okay?” I ask him as we cross the parking lot.

He frowns at me before reaching forward to grab the hem of my dress. My immediate reflex is to smack his hand away. “Sassy,” Xavier says with a grin.

I roll my eyes and usher him toward the vehicle. “What happened yesterday? After I left,” I add.

Xavier furrows his brow as he watches me start the car, a mix of confusion and anxiety in his eyes. “My head hurts,” he mumbles. When I look over, he has his face buried in his hands.

I can tell that I’m not going to get a clear answer from Xavier. His face is mottled with bruises, and the dazed expression on his face does nothing to assuage my confusion. “Give me your phone,” I sigh. “I need to call your mom.”

He peeks through his fingers, and it’s almost charming. He doesn’t look quite so intimidating when he’s hunched over like this. “I have to tell you a secret,” Xavier whisper-yells. He looks back and forth quickly as if trying to make sure no one is around. When he deems it safe, he lowers his voice even more and says, “My mother fixed everything yesterday.”

“Right,” I extend the word while nodding slowly. “What *exactly* did Victoria

fix yesterday?”

Xavier leans onto the center console and gestures for me to come closer. “She got a doctor,” he says in a low, conspiratorial voice. “I got some medicine for my head problem. My head hurts, Kaye.”

I think he has a concussion. Or he did. I don’t know. I’m not familiar with the way concussions work. My mom said I got one once when I was six years old. I barely remember it, but I remember being at the hospital for a few hours. I was ice skating at the city rink when I fell. Mom likes to tell people that everyone in the building could hear my head colliding with the sidewall when I went down.

“She called her family,” Xavier goes on. “They sent someone to check on Dad.”

“Family?” I cut him off. “Victoria called a family member to check on Malcolm?” I assumed that he’d been found by one of his employees.

Xavier nods, eyes growing wider as he explains. “A cousin in the family. *The* family, Kaye,” Xavier emphasizes.

“Xave,” a lump forms in my throat, “do you mean she called the Castigliones?” The Castiglione family is legendary in Manhattan; their reach expands across the entire Midwest. I had no idea that Victoria was involved with them.

“Yeah, her cousin,” Xavier reiterates.

If Victoria called her cousin, and her cousin is a member of the Castiglione family, then we’ve got bigger problems than Malcolm being in the ICU. I turn down the AC and leave the football stadium parking lot.

“I saw your mom yesterday.” He makes himself comfortable in the passenger seat. “I think she’s hiding something from my dad. When he finds out, he’ll kill her.”

I slam on the brakes, and my car comes to a dramatic stop in the middle of the road. “What?”

He rests his head on the window and closes his eyes. “This feels cool. It’s

nice on my head.”

Jesus Christ. I have half a mind to call Victoria and ask her what she was thinking when she allowed Xavier to return to Blackmore today. He shouldn't have been at football practice; he should have been in the hospital.

“I feel sick, Kaye,” Xavier moans after a few seconds.

This is not what I signed up for. When my mom called a couple of hours ago and told me to come to St. Francis, I didn't realize it would turn into such a shitshow.

Chapter 35

Xavier

Yesterday's events are fragmented memories, my mind struggling to piece together everything that happened and all the people I saw. It's all starting to blur together, all the faces muddling into one Franken-face. Except for Kaye's, her bright eyes flashing like a lighthouse amidst a tumultuous sea. She keeps me buoyant as I tread the waters of uncertainty; she keeps me anchored when my head feels like it's about to fly off.

When we arrive at St. Francis Hospital, Kaye diligently parks in the visitor's area before leading me inside. The white walls of the hospital feel sterile and uncomfortable. A faint chemical smell hangs in the air from the disinfectant used to scrub away contaminants and any hint of illness. Kaye guides me to the elevator and gives me a quick rundown of what to expect.

"My mom didn't tell me much, just that Malcolm was found badly beaten and bruised in his office last night. It was touch and go at first," she drones on, and I tune her out.

My father's face looms in my mind, pale and swollen from the relentless onslaught of blows I delivered. His eyes are closed, his body limp and heavy with the weight of defeat. The elevator dings and drops us onto the ICU floor. I can hardly believe I'm here and I ask, "Is he dead?" I hope she says yes; I pray she says no.

Kaye grabs my hand and pulls me into an empty hallway. The lights are dimmed, suggesting that no one is using this corridor. "Xave, please," she begs, "keep your voice down."

I steel myself against her, against everything. What am I supposed to do if my father is dead? Do I turn myself in? Do I make a pretty speech at his funeral? Do I pretend I have no idea how any of this happened? “Answer me, Kaye.” I need to know what to prepare myself for. The stark realization that I might have killed my father is the first thing to straighten me up and get my mind right.

Kaye huffs in frustration and releases my hand. “No. He’s alive. I don’t know the details. Like I said, my mom didn’t say much over the phone.”

Carrie. I saw her yesterday. I remember her looking frazzled when she arrived, before Victoria told her what happened. Her energy was nervous and chaotic, an energy I’d witnessed in Kaye before. “Your mom is hiding something from my father,” I frown.

“Yes,” she responds patiently, “you said that in the car. What are you talking about?”

Did I? “She looked suspicious when she came over yesterday.”

Now Kaye looks just as confused as I feel. “What do you mean ‘*when she came over*’?” She pauses for a second, “Wait. Did my mom come to your place yesterday?”

Suddenly, I remember an awkward conversation on the ride home. Carrie was driving. Why was she driving? “Your mom’s never driven a Tesla,” I tell Kaye as if she can follow the conversation I’m having with myself in my head.

“No, she hasn’t. I think she said that Malcolm offered to get her one, but she didn’t feel comfortable during the test drive.” Kaye shifts her weight from one foot to the other. “What’s going on, Xavier?”

My ears start ringing, and I close my eyes, squinting my lids together to try and disperse the pain it sends shooting through my face. “The doctor said I have a concussion. I-I,” I struggle to admit my weakness, “I can’t remember everything clearly.”

Kaye looks up at me, frustration melting from her gaze. “I figured as much. Let’s go see your dad.” She turns on her heel and leaves me standing there, trying to figure out how I feel.

I remember going into my father's office, intent on killing him. If he's alive, that means I failed.

So, what are we about to walk into?

Chapter 36

Xavier

It's surreal to see my father this way, every muscle that made up his imposing frame now a shadow of its former self. He's tethered to a web of wires and machines whose beeping is the only reminder that he's still alive. We have the same eyes, the same build, the same menacing proportions. But lying in a hospital bed diminishes his stature.

Carrie and Kaye stand in the corner, holding one another. They both look like they're hiding something. I know what Kaye's secret is, but what about her mother's?

Why did I ever hate Carrie? Because my mother did? Because she's a homewrecker? She never did anything to me.

My frazzled consciousness tries to unravel the mystery of what Carrie Pennington ever did to deserve my ire, but there isn't an answer. "Did you know?" My voice echoes through the room.

The two of them jump, startled by the sudden line of questioning. "Did I know about what?" Kaye asks.

I shake my head. "No, not you. Her," I point at my stepmother. "Did you know about Victoria?"

Carrie nervously chews on her bottom lip, and I remember Kaye expressing the same uncertain behavior. Even though their personalities differ, I'm starting to recognize what makes them similar. It makes me second-guess myself, and I don't like that feeling.

“I knew Malcolm was married when he was working on my case. There were pictures of you and Victoria in his office. But day after day, they started to disappear. By the time we got together, he'd been feeding me all the usual lines. He had a bad home life. He'd fallen out of love with Victoria. He was getting a divorce. I just-I fell for them because I was in a desperate place.”

I want to shake her and tell her she's stupid, but she already knows.

“My ex-husband and I didn't have a good marriage. So when your father came around, I would have believed anything. He was nice and handsome, and he treated me right. He never looked at Kaye like she was a piece of meat. He was a good man, Xavier.” She pauses for a second before pursing her lips. “I'm sorry I didn't try harder to make sure he was telling the truth. I would never have intentionally broken up your family if I'd known.”

“You don't owe him an apology,” Kaye glares at me. “You could have asked her this when you first met, but instead, you decided to hate her because of what your father did. You blamed her; you still do.”

I wish I could tell Kaye she's wrong, but she isn't. Carrie might not have known the whole truth, but she isn't innocent. She knew that Malcolm had a wife. Even if he was divorcing Victoria a week after they met, Carrie should have backed off and waited until he was single. “I'm allowed to blame her,” I respond matter-of-factly. “Do you know what it's like to find out that your parents, who—for all intents and purposes—love one another, are suddenly getting a divorce because your father fell for one of his clients?”

Kaye gives her mother's hand a tight, determined embrace as if trying to squeeze out a drop of courage. “No, actually, I don't know what that's like because my father died when I was five. And the next man to call himself my dad was an abuser. And the man after that,” she looks toward Malcolm's bed, “you and I both know that he isn't any better.”

Carrie suddenly looks confused. “Kaye, honey, what are you talking about?”

“You haven't told her?” I'm stunned. Kaye told her best friend what was happening with Malcolm but she didn't tell her mother.

“Told me what?” Carrie looks from me to Kaye and back again. “What's going on?”

I roll my eyes because she's doing it again. She's being stupid. She believed all of Malcolm's lies when they were dating, and I bet she'll believe them again now that they're married. "Don't play dumb, Carrie."

"Don't call my mother dumb!" Kaye interrupts.

The soft beep of my father's life-saving machines is a reminder of why we're here. The air is thick with tension and hostility; Kaye dares me with her eyes to make a move. "You know, the *dumb* apple doesn't fall far from the *dumb* tree," I point to Carrie and then her daughter. "You thought you'd figure out how to make Malcolm stop what he was doing when you should have known all along that your efforts were futile. He's a wealthy piece of shit."

Kaye huffs in frustration. "And you're his son. What does that make you?"

"Smarter than you," I narrow my eyes. "Because I knew what needed to be done, and I was willing to do it."

"What did you do?" Carrie asks.

My head is throbbing; it feels like someone jammed a knife through my frontal lobe. "Come off it, Carrie. You think he just wound up like this by accident?" I point at my father's bruised and beaten body. "You're looking at him and me, and you're telling me you can't surmise what happened?"

Her cheeks turn bright red as she summons the courage to respond. "I know what happened between *you two*," she states, gesturing toward Malcolm and me. "But what does that have to do with my daughter?"

Kaye makes eye contact and silently pleads with me to keep my mouth shut. I can practically hear her yelling across time and space, but I don't care. She put herself in harm's way and forced me to make a hard decision; she can pay the price for it. "Malcolm has been trying to force himself on Kaye since she started working at McCade & Manchester a month ago."

"I thought that was you," Carrie frowns. "She's told me in the past that you were the one harassing her. I thought it was sibling bickering." Her flush turns a few shades darker. "I didn't think it was that serious."

"So you tattle on *me* but not *him*?" I scoff.

It's Kaye's turn to roll her eyes. "That was a long time ago. I stopped telling her when she stopped taking it seriously. I decided to handle it on my own."

I throw my hands in the air in exasperation. "That's it. Right there. That attitude is the problem." I start pacing the hospital room like a caged animal. "You thought you could handle me, and look what happened. Maze," I remind her with a pointed look. "Then you thought you could handle Malcolm, and you put yourself in the *same* position. Tell me. If I hadn't stepped in, how long would it have taken for you to bow to his demands?"

"You're an asshole." Kaye crosses her arms over her chest.

"And you're stupid," I match her body language.

She snorts. "If the *dumb* apple doesn't fall far from the *dumb* tree, then the *bully* apple doesn't fall far from the *bully* tree. You think you're so smart because you solved a problem I couldn't. Now your dad is in the hospital, and you've got to deal with the fallout. Congratulations."

I start to respond, but Kaye flips me off and blows past me. "Also, go fuck yourself." The door to the room opens and then slams shut behind her, startling Malcolm from his sleep.

His eyes shoot open, and he quickly surveys his environment, coldly locking onto me with a glare that could cut through steel. His throat constricts as he gathers enough strength to croak out one word; the malice in his voice is unmistakable. "You," Malcolm spits, the disdain raising the hairs on my neck.

"Good, you're awake," I deadpan. "Now you can explain to your wife why you wanted to fuck her daughter." I lob the accusation like a grenade and watch as it explodes with shards of spite. *Talk your way out of that one, Malcolm McCade.*

Chapter 37

Kaye

“He’s so damn infuriating. I hate him.” The sun set an hour ago. I watched the golden hues disappear behind the entrance of Falcone Memorial, washing the sky in a broken palette of purples, reds, and blues. I’ve been here since I left the hospital.

Okay, *correction*. I briefly left to get McDonald’s. Maybe it’s blasphemous to eat a McChicken and drink a Powerade beside your father’s headstone, but nobody is here to see me.

“After the maze thing, I tried to ignore him. I was so embarrassed. I mean, I had an orgasm. I liked what he did to me. And I was ashamed of that because he reverted to his old self so quickly. It made me feel stupid, just like he says I am.” I pour my heart out to my father, telling him things in explicit terms that I don’t even feel comfortable telling Christine.

“But I knew when it came to Malcolm that he was the only one that could help me. I didn’t want his help,” I explain as if my father’s going to judge me, “but I didn’t have any other options.”

Over the years, I’ve spent countless hours at my father’s tombstone. It’s a place to be myself—to laugh and cry and lay down my burdens. I’ve told my dad about my hopes and dreams. I’ve confided in him about the boys I’ve liked and the girls I’ve hated. The residents of Falcone Memorial know me better than anyone. Where Christine analyzes and solves, they just listen—sometimes that’s all you need.

I miss my father. Sometimes, I can't remember what he looks like. I used to have his picture on my bedside table, and every night before I went to sleep, I'd look at it and try to memorize the details of his smiling face framed in wood. But when it came time to leave for college, I decided not to bring it with me. It felt too much like clinging to something that had been lost long ago. Now he has faded from my memory, the twinkle in his kind eyes the only recollection I have.

"I don't understand how I feel about Xavier. Because, in a sick, twisted sort of way, I like him. Maybe it's because he's so good-looking," I groan. "But then he does something stupid or threatens me, and I swear I'd rather lick a toad than ever feel his lips on mine again."

I hate being conflicted about my feelings. I know from an outsider's perspective that I should hate Xavier. He makes me uncomfortable, and he threatens my physical safety. He's attractive, but the Devil is never ugly. The Devil comes dressed as everything you've ever wanted and that fits Xavier to a T.

I hear Christine's advice in the back of my head. *'Maybe you like the attention.'* It makes me question my sanity.

Am I slowly succumbing to some form of Stockholm Syndrome? All the stalking, unwarranted touching, and inappropriate threats feel normal to me. Did I twist it in my head? Did I make it more acceptable because it was the only attention I received?

A car pulls up to the entrance of Falcone Memorial and flashes its bright lights through the graveyard. I shield my eyes and curse the driver for interrupting my therapy session.

Then Xavier gets out of the car. His headlights temporarily blind me, but I can still make out the breadth of his shoulders. My heart sinks and soars simultaneously, wanting to run away while also longing for him to come closer. "Did you tell him I was here?" I hiss at my father's tombstone. It's a silly question to ask a dead man, but maybe I'm going crazy.

He leaves his car on, his lights illuminating my shame. I'm surrounded by McDonald's wrappers and dead people; this can't be a very alluring picture. "What do you want now?" I groan. "How did you find me?"

Xavier cracks his knuckles as he gets closer. “I keep tabs on you.”

“Stalker,” I mumble under my breath. “Go away. I’m tired of you complicating my life.”

He keeps walking down the path until he’s right in front of me. I watch his eyes scan my father’s tombstone in the dark; he squints to make out the words etched in stone. “You come here a lot,” he comments after a while.

“How do you know? Are you following me or something?”

“Yes,” he admits with a shrug. “I installed a tracking device on your phone. I know where you are at all times.”

My brow furrows, and at first, I’m confused by his admission. “Is this a joke? Because it isn’t funny.”

Xavier shakes his head. He crouches down a couple of feet away and grabs a used napkin from my fast-food feast. “You know how bad for you this shit is?” He brings it to his nostrils and takes a deep breath. “I haven’t had McDonald’s since I was a kid.”

“You’re missing out. Nothing like drowning your sorrows in grease and carbohydrates.” Or by talking to dead people, but maybe that’s just a *me* thing.

He drops the napkin, and it flutters to the ground. “No, thanks. I don’t have sorrows; I have frustrations. And I take them to the gym.”

God, he’s so annoying. There’s no reason for me to like him; he isn’t very interesting. We don’t have anything in common except our parents. *Opposites attract*, the little voice in my head says; I swat it away. *Go bother someone else*.

“I got to witness Malcolm try to explain himself to your mother.” He extends an olive branch. “She wasn’t having it.”

That explains all the calls and texts. She’s been trying to get in touch with me for hours. I thought she just wanted to make sure I was okay. “Is she going to leave him?”

Xavier purses his lips. “I don’t know. She told him she needed to think about

things, then she left.”

“Is he pressing charges against you?”

With a snort, he rises to his feet. “No. He wouldn’t put the McCade name in the newspaper like that. He’s threatened to disinherit me, though.” Xavier doesn’t seem phased. “And he said he would blackball you anyway. I’m sorry about that one.” A hint of penitence appears on his features, the downward slope of his mouth softening the previously threatening lines of his face.

“I didn’t want a career in law anyway,” I say with a laugh. I think everything is starting to sink in. A few months ago, my biggest concern was whether or not I could avoid my stepfamily. Now, my biggest concern is whether or not I can salvage the mess my life’s become.

“Get up,” Xavier orders, cutting my laughter short.

I roll my eyes and get to my feet. I need to leave. I need to return to the dorm and tell Christine everything that’s happened. Last night, I went to bed early and told her I didn’t feel well. I didn’t think I could confide in her without losing it; it was a half-truth.

As soon as I’m standing, Xavier grabs my arm and pulls me into him. The warmth of his body makes my heart flutter. “I won’t let him ruin your life, Kaye, not on my account.”

“It’s not on your account,” I giggle. It’s happening; I’m losing my mind. “It’s because I wouldn’t have sex with him like I had sex with you. This is all my fault. I let my conflicted feelings about you ruin my life. I could have stopped you, but I didn’t. Chris was right.” I sound unhinged as an uncontrollable cackle erupts from my mouth. “It’s the attention I like.”

I feel his cock pressing against my stomach through his jeans. His lip twitches upward into a depraved half smile. “You want my attention? Because you have it, little love.”

He doesn’t understand. How could he? I think I’m having a psychotic break; all he thinks about is sex. We’re from two different worlds; we’re two different people.

But I give in to him one last time because his hand slips under my dress, and his touch is warm. My senses come alive as he strokes my stomach and stares at me like I'm the only woman in the world.

I can afford one last wild night before I have to face the consequences of my actions. In fact, I need it. Because when I get up tomorrow, I have to do damage control. I have to start fixing what I've broken. I need to put myself back together so I can support my mom. She and Malcolm are happy together; I can't be the reason they get divorced. He might have done some despicable things, but if she loves him, I can't stand in the way.

Tomorrow, I have to make amends, so tonight, I make mistakes.

Chapter 38

Xavier

One day, we might have sex in a bed or a room with four walls and a roof. I'll slowly peel off her clothes and watch her body come to life beneath my touch as she's draped in silk and surrounded by pillows.

But tonight, I kiss her beneath the moon and stars. Soft at first, until my tongue slips past her lips. She tastes like salt and sugar, savory and sweet. I claim her mouth and tighten my grip on her waist.

Kaye's breath quickens as she leans into me. In the maze, I could barely contain myself. Tonight, I take my time, entwining my fingers in her hair and gently tugging her head back until her neck is exposed. The movement breaks the kiss, and she shivers as I drag my tongue down her moonlit skin. She gasps as I travel south, trailing kisses from her throat to the swell of her breasts.

"You don't know what you do to me, Kaye," I whisper, the heat of my words against her body causing goosebumps to crop up on her arms. My fingertips graze her silken skin, and it feels like a thousand volts of electricity coursing through me; it's a sensation that I can't resist, one that beckons me closer to sweet danger and bliss.

Kaye trembles as my rough hands feverishly trace every contour of her body. I feel her relax into my touch, and I hunger for more. My lips eagerly find their way to the silky slopes of her curves, savoring each forbidden part with a fervor that only intensifies as the seconds pass.

My hands glide beneath her dress. The thin barrier of her panties offers little

resistance as I push them aside. She moans as my fingertips meet the heat radiating from her wet core, and I tease her entrance with feather-light caresses. Desire surges through me at the sound, spurring me on.

I get lost in the passion, reveling in her softness and the sensations she awakens inside me. We fit together like we were made for one another. Each new touch magnifies her sighs as I strum my thumb across her clit. Her breathing is harsh and shallow at the same time, changing pace as her pleasure draws near. I watch in fascination as she closes her eyes and tosses her head back, biting her bottom lip to keep from crying out.

I move my hand in circles, faster and faster, coaxing her body to match the rhythm of my touch until it's too much for her to bear. Her mouth opens, and she screams my name at the height of her orgasm. I hold her tightly, steadying her so she doesn't fall.

Franklin Pennington and a hundred souls watch as we desecrate the sacred cemetery grounds. The dead could rise around us, and I wouldn't be able to stop myself; I am not deterred by the ghosts of men and women who died long ago.

I twist Kaye in my grasp and force her forward. She topples at the waist, bent over her father's tombstone. Her hair cascades over the granite, covering her father's name.

I unzip my jeans and pull out my cock, palming my hardness. Precum beads on the tip, every ounce of me desperate to be inside her.

Kaye struggles to say something, but the words sound like gibberish. I flip up the edge of her dress and pull her panties aside. Whatever objections she wants to raise are swallowed by the void as I thrust inside her. I seize her hips and still as I sink deep into her core.

Kaye reaches out for support, grasping for something, anything, and finds herself clutching the granite headstone. "Oh, God," she groans.

"There is no God here." Only me and her dead father's memory. "I'm your daddy now." I pour into her, rocking back and forth beneath the trees and moonlight. The act is blasphemous, but I never believed in God anyway.

Chapter 39

Kaye

My heart pulsates with fear and anger as my hips slam against the tombstone. I squeeze out a tear, a bitter blend of pain, shame, and pleasure. What I'm doing is wrong, but it feels so right. His thrusts invigorate me, my muscles clenching in anticipation.

Xavier's length is impressive. I have nothing to compare it to, but he stretches me out when he fills me up. I breathe through my mouth to settle my nerves as he moves inside me. He pulls my hips toward him with urgency, pressing into me with unforgiving force. His assault demands I surrender to the pleasure as he drives into me over and over again, stoking a fire that threatens to consume us both.

"I'm your daddy now," he says to the darkness. And I succumb to the sensations.

He squeezes my ass, and I arch my back to take him deeper. Beads of sweat pool on my forehead despite the evening breeze. A vice grip of pleasure tightens around my body, my limbs trembling from the position he has me in. Each thrust is deeper than the last, bringing me closer and closer to release until I reach a dizzying climax. His power over my body is absolute, and I am left shaking from the intensity of our union.

Xavier's body shudders against me as he clutches the tombstone. He grunts and swears with every thrust, his movements becoming more frenzied as he nears his end. My walls tremble around him, intensifying the pleasure as my muscles contract involuntarily. I scream out with a primal roar that sets him

off. Xavier's grip tightens for a single, fleeting moment before he releases inside me, filling me with his seed.

I hate him for what he does to me; I despise myself for enjoying it.

Xavier pulls out after catching his breath and allows me to stand. When he sees the grimace on my face as I straighten my back, he asks, "Are you sore, little love?"

I flush hot with shame and embarrassment. My body hurts from being bent over and fucked up against my father's tombstone, but he's talking about one part of me in particular. "Yes," I mumble because I ache between my legs, too.

"Good," Xavier growls, a feral smile crossing his lips. "This is how I want you every day for the rest of our lives." His voice carries a command that reverberates through my body like thunder; there's no denying his claim on me. He speaks with conviction, leaving no room for doubt: I will be his.

I adjust my panties, still feeling his warmth inside me. I brush my hands down the front of my dress, smoothing out the skirt until I look no worse for the wear.

As I start to gather my things, he bends down to help. "Come back to my place," he insists.

I smile pleasantly and gesture toward the car. "Lead the way."

Xavier is pleased with himself. He looks as confident as ever as he walks to the Tesla, and I can see why I'm attracted to him. His strong jaw is clenched in a grin, his eyes alert and sparkling. He looks as though life is an adventure, ready to be explored and conquered. He looks strong; he looks like a protector.

But I don't need protection anymore.

When we reach Rosedale, I wait for a stoplight to come between us before turning toward the university. Xavier stomps on his brakes up ahead, and I drive faster, eager to put distance between us.

He was right to call me stupid. I've let fear define my life, and it's held me

back from what I know is right. I've made mistakes in the name of fear; I've made bad decisions because I let it control me. But here I am, finally an adult and in charge of my destiny. I can keep living in the safety of my old ways, waiting for a savior to come save me. Or I can stand up for myself and become the white knight I've always needed.

I choose me.

I choose to be done with my leering stepfather. I choose to be done with my threatening stepbrother. I choose to be done being afraid of intimacy. I choose to be done running away from the things that scare me.

Fear doesn't own me anymore.

Chapter 40

Kaye

“What are you doing awake?” Christine groans as she rolls over. “It’s like 5 am.”

I glance down at my watch and dismiss her with a wave. “Don’t be dramatic. It’s seven.”

She grabs a pillow and pulls it over her head. “There’s no way I got eight hours of sleep. I’m so tired, Kaye,” she says, her voice muffled by the pillow.

I, on the other hand, haven’t slept at all. When I came home last night, Christine was already in bed. I crept around the room, quietly grabbing my things so I could take a shower. The hot water soothed my aching body; it washed away my sins, guilt, and the dirt from the graveyard, but not the memories or the regret. I had planned to go to sleep and piece my life together in the morning, but my eyes never closed. “I need your help, Chris.”

The pillow flies to the floor, and Christine shoots up in bed. “What? Why? What happened?”

I don’t know where to start; that’s the problem with keeping secrets. I’ve been hiding stuff from Christine for so long that I can’t remember what I’ve told her and what I haven’t. “It’s complicated, and I’ll tell you everything, I swear.” My eyelids are finally starting to feel heavy, but the day is just beginning. “I need to reset everything.”

Christine yawns and tosses the covers back, revealing her bare legs. Without arguing or complaining, she says, “Cool. Let’s get coffee first.”

I don't know why I hid everything from my best friend for so long. After everything we've shared over the years, I can't remember why I thought bottling everything up was a good idea.

Campus is bustling by the time we're dressed and heading to the coffee shop. We stroll down Prairie Avenue, skirting the university. The chilly autumn morning forces me to pull my cardigan tighter. Christine rambles on about her classes, filling the silence. One of these days, I'll have to thank her for all she's done for me.

"I guess I took a page from your book or whatever," she rolls her eyes. "I finished my homework for next week's class already. You weren't around last night, and Theo wasn't responding to my texts. Probably partying or something."

I haven't been a good friend lately. I barely remember Theo. For a week or so, we only called him Football Guy. Christine met him in the dining hall a few weeks back, and they've been talking ever since. I'm sure she's told me about him, but I'm embarrassed to admit that I was so wrapped up in my own drama that I've forgotten everything.

"You want me to show up at football practice and give him a piece of my mind?" I ask with a half-hearted smile. "Because I'll yell at him in front of all his friends." I don't *want* to because Xavier will be there, but if that's what she needs from me, I'll do it. I'm determined to be a better friend now that I've given up entertaining the McCade stepfamily drama.

Christine shakes her head. "Nah. It isn't like he and I were going to get married or anything. It just feels like he used me for sex, and he's now backing off because he got what he wanted, and he isn't interested in more."

"You had sex with him?" God, I'm so out of the loop.

She lowers her head and smiles. "Yeah, like, Thursday night?" Christine frowns as she tries to remember the exact date. "Maybe Friday. I don't remember. He invited me to a frat party. Actually," she snaps her fingers in recollection, "Xavier was there."

"Speaking of Xavier, we had sex at the cemetery last night," I mumble. A blush heats my skin, and I bite my lip to hold back a smile. I'm embarrassed,

but it makes me giggle thinking about it.

Christine bursts into laughter. “Oh, my God, Kaye. At the beginning of the school year, it was like pulling teeth just to get you to say the word ‘sex’. Now, here you are, doing it in a cemetery. You bad, bad girl.”

My blush intensifies. “It wasn’t like that,” I try to explain. “It was a goodbye, I think. Things with Xavier have gotten out of hand.”

“I could have told you that,” she says with a snort. “Things with Xave have been out of hand since you met. Do you remember kneeing him in the balls when you guys first met?”

I should have known better than to think Xavier was anything more than trouble. When he had me pinned against the wall in my mom’s old home, I should have screamed my head off, but something held me back. Maybe if Carrie and Malcolm would have witnessed what happened, things would never have escalated this far. “Hindsight’s 20/20 and all,” I shrug. “It’s over now, though. If he comes around again, I’m calling the cops.”

Christine glances at me with a sly, knowing look. “You sure that’s what you want to do, Kaye? I mean, God forbid I stop you from doing something you want to do, but you’ve been relying on Xavier a lot lately. Do you think that maybe you have feelings for him?”

I brush off Christine's words with a dismissive wave, but I feel a pang of annoyance at the insinuation. She's been telling me for weeks to start a paper trail about Xavier’s abuse. How could she think that I like him?

"I don't have feelings for him," I tell her. "He was useful when it came to Malcolm, but that use ran its course." My stepfather lies in a hospital bed, trying to recover from the '*course*' Xavier ran on him. That reminds me to call my mom and see how she's doing.

"Suit yourself," Christine shrugs. "But if you realize one day that you like him or want to be with him or whatever, I'd understand. I mean, I *don't* understand because he's a psycho stalker, but if he makes you happy, I will try to accept him as a person."

I find myself frustrated by my own stubbornness. Despite all the times Christine has proven to be a supportive friend, I still kept her in the dark

about all my troubles. Maybe I was scared of what she would think of me, or perhaps I was afraid to burden her with my problems. Whatever it was, it was stupid. I should have known that my best friend was the only person I could trust. Even if she does think I could like a deranged lunatic like my stepbrother.

I find myself admitting, “I guess I should tell you that he put Malcolm in the hospital, then.” Her jaw drops open, but I’m not finished. “Because Malcolm was trying to force me to have sex with him, or else he said he was going to tank my career.”

Each new confession lifts a weight off my shoulders. By the time we get our coffee and head back to campus, I’m a hundred pounds lighter.

“I-I don’t even know how to process this,” Christine stutters.

“You’re telling me.” I’ve been trying to process everything that’s been happening for weeks, and I still can’t make heads or tails of how I got here. “But that’s why it’s got to be over with Xavier. I think if I end contact with him, block him, ignore him, all that, I’ll finally be able to live a normal life. And I really, *really* want to live a normal life, Chris.”

She wraps an arm around my shoulder and pulls me close. Christine is the sister that destiny meant for me to have. The universe brought two only children together because it knew we needed one another. “It’ll be you and me against the world, gorgeous.” She swipes her coffee cup across the space in front of us as if painting a picture of what our lives are going to look like. “Tuesdays in the library studying for our future high-profile careers. Thursday night frat parties. Weekends at Red Dawg,” she grins. “Just you, me, and all the bad boys and bad decisions we can stomach.”

“You were right all along,” I admit reluctantly.

“I know.” Christine leans her head against mine. “About which part, though?”

I grin and wrap an arm around my best friend's waist. “The first week of school, you said this is the only time in our lives that we’ll get to party and experiment, and no one will judge us. I should have listened to you instead of arguing.”

She squeals with excitement and starts jumping up and down, just like she did that first weekend when she convinced me to go to the bars. “We’re going to be unstoppable this semester, Kaye. Just you wait and see.”

Chapter 41

Xavier

I stand outside Brewer Hall and wait for Kaye to leave Calc I. She's been avoiding me for the last three days. At first, I showed restraint. But as the hours ticked by, my patience started wearing thin.

Kaye blocked me the morning after the graveyard incident. I sent her a text, and it never said '*delivered*'. Then, the GPS tracker in her phone stopped moving. It says she's in her dorm right now, but I find that hard to believe since I've been following her around campus all day.

I don't know what she thinks she's doing. Cutting off all contact with me is almost as bad as going home with her tail tucked between her legs and apologizing to Malcolm. Which I also heard she's done. Kaye's made every mistake in the book since we left the cemetery, and I need to set her straight.

A few more minutes pass before the doors to Brewer Hall open, and a flood of students walk through. I scan the crowd for Kaye, eyes glazing over all the faces that aren't hers. When I finally find her, I feel sick. She dyed her hair.

I march across the lawn and push my way through the dispersing students. Kaye is talking to one of her classmates, and he has his hand on the small of her back. When she sees me, the smile on her face falls. Her joy turns to ire, and I can feel the atmosphere grow heavy with tension as I close in on the two of them.

"I'll see you in the library later, right?" She asks the guy.

He starts to nod in agreement, his lips curving into a smile, but then he sees

me standing behind Kaye and stops to point. “Hey! You’re Xavier McCade!”

I pause just seconds before I’m about to reach out and snatch Kaye off her feet. “Yeah?” I glare at him. “What about it?”

The kid throws his hands up defensively. “Nothing, man,” he responds with a nervous laugh. “I just wanted to say your performance at the game last weekend was legendary. You’re the best defensive player BU has had in a decade.”

The compliment stops me in my tracks. I’m used to the other students telling me ‘*good game*’ and ‘*great call*’ after a tough win, but this man’s admiration catches me off guard. “Thanks, man. You a longtime fan?”

As he steps toward me, the tension melts from his face. “Lived in Rosedale my whole life. Go Cougars,” he says with a grin. “Kaye, why didn’t you tell me you knew Xavier McCade? You know I’ve been talking about last Saturday’s game all week.”

Kaye can’t even muster a smile. “Sorry, Roman. Guess it didn’t cross my mind.”

Roman reaches out to shake my hand in admiration. “I work at the Career Center part-time. If you ever need anything, let me know. You’re a legend, dude. And hey,” he turns to Kaye, “we should hit up Xavier’s game next weekend. Maybe grab a bite afterward?” He asks suggestively while nudging her arm.

Is he asking her out right in front of me? I know I’m not seeing this right. I’ve already had this conversation with Kaye; she knows better than to date other men.

She flashes him a quick smile before saying, “We can discuss it at the library later, but it sounds like a plan!”

Roman walks off, and I count to three before losing my shit. He seems like a nice guy; I don’t want to alienate him because Kaye can’t follow instructions. Once he’s out of earshot, I ask her, “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

She meets my eyes briefly before walking around me. I reach out to grab her arm and stop her, but Kaye’s expecting it. She takes a few more steps away,

and I swing at the air. “Kaye, I’m talking to you.”

“And I’m not listening to you,” she responds in a singsong voice. “I thought you’d figure that out when I blocked your number and got a new phone.”

That explains why her tracker keeps pinging back to the dorm. “You dyed your hair.” I follow her as she briskly walks away from Brewer Hall.

“It’s a work in progress. You can’t go from brunette to blonde overnight. Come back in a week, and you won’t even recognize me.” Kaye reaches up to grab a lock of hair, running her fingers through the ends.

I hate that she’s a light, honey-brown instead of rich mahogany. “So this is your plan? Ignore me, dye your hair, and pretend you’re getting over a bad breakup?”

Kaye sighs heavily and stops in the middle of the grass. Her abrupt stop draws the attention of nearby students. “We didn’t break up, Xavier, because we were never together. And we were never together because all you wanted from me was sex. Don’t get me wrong,” she pauses briefly, “the sex was great.” Her face turns a light shade of pink. “But it’s over now. I’m getting my life together and getting the hell away from you.”

This time, when I reach out to grab her, she isn’t expecting it and doesn’t have time to dodge me. “Is it that Roman kid?” I squeeze her wrist. “Because I told you weeks ago that I better never catch another man putting his hands on you.”

She tries to shake me free, clenching her teeth together as she rips her arm out of my clutches. “Maybe this is hard for you to understand because no one has ever said ‘no’ to you, but I don’t want you anymore, Xavier. Thanks for your help with Malcolm, but I’m pretty sure I was only in that mess because of you in the first place. So go find some other girl to torture and torment for the next three years because it won’t be me.”

Before I can respond, Kaye turns on her heel and storms off. I watch her newly lightened locks flutter behind her as she heads for the dorms.

Fuck the meditation and mantras. Fuck anger management and playing it cool. Kaye can’t turn her back on me. I know what I want, and I’m going to get it. If she thinks for one minute that she can deny me the pleasure of her

existence because it's an inconvenience, she better think again.

Chapter 42

Kaye

“Mom, seriously,” I switch the phone from one ear to the other, “it’s fine. The whole Malcolm thing was a mistake. I took what he said the wrong way, and instead of talking to you or him about it, I got Xavier involved. We both overreacted; it was nothing.”

I’ve been lying through my teeth for a few days now. My mom didn’t want to take Malcolm back. She loved the beautiful home and the life he provided for the two of us, but she swore she’d give it all up if what Xavier said was true.

Unfortunately, I walked out of Malcolm’s hospital room before I got to hear what my darling stepbrother had to say, but I’m doing the best damage control I can.

“Honey, please,” Carrie begs, “you don’t have to cover it up. If he touched you, if Malcolm hurt you, I’ll never forgive myself if I go back to him.”

A few days ago, I wouldn’t have forgiven her either, but Christine is helping me turn over a new leaf. My best friend sits on her bed with her laptop, shaking her head as I try to soothe my mother’s concerns.

“He didn’t, mom. Believe me.” I may never get Malcolm’s disgusting words out of my head, but we made a deal. I visited him at the hospital a couple of days ago, and we struck a tentative settlement to help both of us. I’d save him from public embarrassment, and he wouldn’t ruin my chances of getting into law school one day. It was the least I could do to keep him from pressing charges against me and ruining my life.

“I don’t know,” my mother hesitates. “Maybe we need some time apart, anyway.” Something in her voice tells me that this isn’t entirely about me. I’ve never heard her say a single disparaging word about Malcolm in the entire three years they’ve been together. She’s been happier with him than I’ve ever seen her with anyone else.

“Is everything alright between the two of you?” I make eye contact with Christine, and we share a confused look. “Did Malcolm say something to make you feel this way?” I put her on speakerphone so the two of us can listen together.

Carrie sighs heavily on her end of the receiver. “No, baby, everything is fine. I just... I’ve been feeling a little off lately. I don’t know if it’s because of Malcolm or me or what.”

I recall Xavier’s cryptic warning from a few days ago, *‘Your mom is hiding something from my father.’* He never explained what that was, either because he didn’t remember or because I never asked him again. “Is everything okay at home? Because if it’s not, we can figure something out.”

“No, no,” Carrie reassures me quickly. “It’s nothing like that. But, well, maybe this isn’t a conversation I should be having with you.”

I’ve spent a decade consoling my mother after breakups, heartbreaks, beatings, and, most recently, a divorce. If there was a conversation she shouldn’t have had with me, it was every interaction we had before I became an adult. “Just tell me, mom.”

There’s a long pause, and I watch the seconds tick by on my phone screen. I can hear her breathing, silently fussing with whatever she’s afraid to admit. I almost think that she’s not going to tell me, but she always confides in me in the end—today is no different. “I think I’m having a midlife crisis, Kaye.” She’s turning thirty-three in a few weeks. Not necessarily midlife, but she’s no spring chicken, either.

Carrie goes on to apologize for the choices she’s made over the years. “I know that some of the men I’ve dated in the past haven’t been the best. And I guess before Malcolm, I didn’t have a career. I hopped from job to job, trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. But I’m in my thirties, baby, and I feel like I haven’t accomplished anything. And sometimes, it makes me

wonder if I made a mistake marrying Malcolm.”

Christine clamps a hand over her mouth in shock, eyes widening to the size of silver dollars. I gesture for her to keep it down and try to figure out how to best respond.

I’ve had crises before, but they weren’t serious. Not fitting into your prom dress because you stress ate a box of donuts the night before doesn’t constitute as crisis experience.

“You don’t have to say anything,” Carrie rushes to add when I don’t have a response waiting. “It’s my life, and I’m ultimately the only person responsible for it. I just think that having these thoughts, second guessing myself, and then dealing with all this Malcolm drama is a sign.”

If she could have figured this out six months ago, none of this would have happened. If she had divorced Malcolm *six months ago*, Xavier would have left me alone, and I’d still have my virginity intact.

“Mom, I don’t pretend to know what you’re going through, but if you need a break from your marriage, you should talk to Malcolm.” I bet he wouldn’t even notice that she wasn’t around. “Maybe a little time apart is what the two of you need to figure things out.”

I doubt that time apart will do anything for my stepfather. His devotion to my mother will evaporate in her absence. Regardless of how long she’s gone, he’ll find someone else to fill the void.

“Maybe you’re right.” She sounds lighter. “You know, Victoria said something similar. Not that I trusted her,” Carrie sighs, “she’s a spiteful shrew. But if you’re saying the same, you two may be onto something.”

I hate that I have anything in common with Victoria McCade. I’ve only met her a couple of times, and neither were pleasant experiences. “There’s that possibility. If you need a break, I think you should take one. Figure things out. Do what makes you happy.”

If that means leaving Malcolm, then so be it. After all, I followed through on my end of the deal. I told Mom that nothing happened between him and me. I swore that I was just being over dramatic. If she chooses to leave Malcolm of her own volition, he can’t hold me responsible.

Chapter 43

Xavier

I'll admit, I thought Roman Scott was going to be useless. I head home and start digging into his past; nothing beneficial pops up. His father is a financial advisor, and his mother is an elementary school teacher. They paid in full for his tuition, but Roman works at the Career Center so he can pad his retirement fund—no doubt at the behest of his father. He has no record of wrongdoing, not even a detention in high school.

But I swing by a few days later to ask him how he's doing and if he and Kaye are coming to the game this weekend.

"Maybe?" Roman shakes his head in despair. "Don't get me wrong, Kaye's a nice girl, but I'm not sure we're a good match. She doesn't even like football, and when I tried to talk to her about the game, she clammed up."

Good. I wouldn't mind her being in the stands at one of my games, but I don't want her to be there on a date with another man. "That sucks. You can still go without her, though. In fact, I got a couple of comp tickets. What do you say you ditch her and bring someone who actually *likes* football?"

He acts like I gave him the keys to the kingdom. "You're the coolest guy I know, McCade. Thanks!"

I tell him how to access the tickets, and we chat for a few more minutes about tailgating before the game, and the team BU is playing on Saturday. He has a lot of insight for a fan, and I genuinely enjoy discussing strategy with him.

Just as I'm about to leave, Roman snaps his fingers and smacks himself in the

forehead. "Shoot. I should have asked sooner. Is there something I can help you with? I mean, I'm sure you didn't come down here just to give me tickets to the game."

He falls for my trap hook, line, and sinker. I've learned a lot of lessons from my parents, including the old adage that you catch more flies with honey. If you do someone a favor, they're more likely to do one for you. "Well, now that you mention it, I was wondering if you knew anyone who might have access to the dorms." Always look a little embarrassed to need help; it makes people feel sorry for you.

Roman grabs his phone, and a few swipes later, he shows me the contact information for someone named Mike. "This is my buddy that works in janitorial. He could probably help you out. I think he does maintenance for the rec, but he probably knows someone that can get you the keys to whatever dorm you want."

I pull out my phone and input Mike's number. "Thanks, man. You've been a big help!"

He smiles as he pockets his phone. "Of course. Why do you need to get into the dorms, anyway?"

"I'm trying to impress this girl," I tell him with an indulgent smile. Always prepare your story in advance; it sounds more realistic if you aren't fumbling over the details. "Her birthday is this weekend, but obviously, I've got the game. She hangs out at the library on Thursday nights, so I want to decorate her room while she's out."

Roman nods in excitement. "Damn, dude. You're a hopeless romantic. I like it. I hope it works out for ya. Tell Mike I sent you. It wouldn't hurt if you mentioned that you're a football player. People at this school will do anything for football players."

That's what I'm banking on. "You're a good guy, Roman. Glad I met you. I hope things work out with Kaye."

He gives me a dismissive shrug. "It's cool. She's cute and all, but you're right. I should find someone that likes what I like. Plenty of girls at Blackmore like football, right?"

I exit the Career Center with a sense of satisfaction. Roman Scott turned out to be a more valuable asset than I originally planned.

As I make my way towards the parking lot, the gears start turning in my head. I call Mike and tell him that Roman gave me his info, and then I reiterate the same birthday bullshit sob story to him. I emphasize that I can't take the girl out on Saturday because I'm on the football team, and we have a game; this immediately changes Mike's demeanor.

Football players are celebrities at Blackmore University. More than that, we're royalty. I make a mental note to toss a couple of tickets Mike's way for the next game as a thank you. He says he can get me keys by the end of the day, but I have to return them on Monday. That leaves me plenty of time to make copies.

Kaye's every move is an invitation to chase her, a temptation I'm powerless to resist. I've been stalking her relentlessly for three years, and I can feel that the end is near. There will be no turning back when our game of cat and mouse reaches its ultimate climax.

Chapter 44

Xavier

Calvert Hall is a coed dorm. During the day, it's bustling with activity, but at night, it's a ghost town. The overhead lights have been dimmed for convenience, and it's eerily quiet. It's the perfect setting to tiptoe your way to someone's room. Not that I tiptoe at 6'5" and 250 lbs, but in theory.

Kaye and Christine live on the second floor in room 216. There's a whiteboard affixed to their door with a dry-erase marker dangling from a string. Should I write a note and let Kaye know that I was here?

My heart races as I reach for the handle, a strange sense of dread flooding my veins when I realize it's unlocked. Despite all that's happened, Kaye fails to take the proper precautions for her safety. *Note to self: Talk to her about the dangers of neglecting self-preservation.*

I notice immediately that their shared room looks nothing like Kaye's room at home. A nightlight plugged into the wall near the door throws a faint glow across the floor, providing enough illumination for them to find their way to the bathroom if they wake in the middle of the night. A small side table rests beneath the window between their beds. On top is a diffuser that distributes a citrus-scented essential oil mix into the air. I can hear hints of thunder and rain coming from a sound machine, but I don't know where it's located.

How much of this came from the way Christine sleeps at night? Because this room doesn't remind me of Kaye in the slightest.

She's asleep under the thinnest of blankets. It's the end of September, and the

days are still warm, but the nights are getting into the 40s. I wore a light jacket for the walk from my car to Calvert Hall, and Kaye somehow stays warm under what equates to a sheet.

The orange glow from the nightlight reflects off her face. In repose, her features are soft, and she looks peaceful. As I cast a glance lower, I catch sight of the outline of her body. My breath catches in my throat, and my heart races as I step closer. A jolt of arousal courses through me as I reach down to touch her, warmth radiating from her body.

She's a luscious goddess, an overwhelming temptation that threatens to destroy my self-control. My eyes devour her curves, desperate to taste and savor her body on my tongue. I cannot fight my urges, and as I watch her chest rise and fall under the weight of exhaustion, I allow myself to sink into pleasure.

Thunder cracks on the sound machine, disguising the hum of my zipper coming undone. The deep bass drum rolls like waves against a rocky shore as I reach into my pants and pull out my cock. It rises like the sun, standing at attention for Kaye.

At any moment, she could wake up and find me standing here. The thought of being caught makes my cock throb with anticipation. I start to stroke myself, eyes fixed on my sleeping beauty. She moves once, fingers clutching the sheet to move it away from her. Her soft, creamy thighs come into view, and I almost lose myself completely. I'm afraid to disturb her, but at the same time, I want her to wake up, see me hovering above her, and invite me into her bed.

When she doesn't, I start to masturbate, gliding my hand back and forth over my length, pretending that it's Kaye. My body quivers, and the storm from the sound machine serves as a final percussion for the symphony of my gratification.

As my pleasure grows, I know that I should stop. If I don't, the peak of my arousal will wake her up. But she moans in her sleep, and it causes me to tip over the edge. I have just enough time to make a quarter twist before releasing my load onto her sheets. I bring my fist to my mouth and bite down on the flesh to keep from calling out her name.

I savor the sight of her in the afterglow, my seed staining her blankets. She remains perfectly still, her breathing deep and regular. Kaye isn't phased by my nocturnal adventure. She'll never even know I was here. Which makes me wonder: what else can I do?

Carefully, with every muscle tightened and tense, I move toward her and allow the tip of my cock to rest against her lips. The sensation of her skin on mine makes me hard again. I drag myself gently across her mouth, allowing her sleeping form to clean the last remnants of cum off the tip. She moves once, twisting her head, and I see her tongue pop out to wet her bottom lip.

For one single, pregnant pause, I am content. I sigh deeply as I watch her sleep, wishing I could curl up beside her and hold her until morning. She has my essence waiting for her; she tastes it in her sleep.

I loathe to tuck myself back in and leave, but I have no other choice. I go back the way I came, longing to stay.

I leave everything as I found it except for the doorknob, which I lock behind me. The quietest click reassures me that the object of my twisted affections is safe from predators. Then I make my way back to the car, stopping once to bask in the moonlight and catch my breath.

Kaye will never know that I was here. All I wanted to do was watch her sleep—admire her beauty, and imagine what it would be like to feel her in my arms. I thank the heavens for Kaye and her unknowing indulgence of my desires.

Chapter 45

Kaye

I keep having the same dirty dreams over and over again, each one becoming more vivid.

There I lay, my body trapped in a warm cocoon of blankets, when suddenly, Xavier stands above me. His skin is illuminated by the moonlight, and I watch his calloused hands tantalizingly move down his body as he strokes himself to the brink of pleasure.

I dream that his hands are beneath the covers. Instinctively, I clutch the blankets, desperate to keep quiet but also desperate for more. His fingers move expertly across the fabric of my panties, rubbing small circles around my clit. I seize the sheets as he brings me to orgasm, biting my lip to keep from waking Christine. I don't know why she's in my dreams, but when I wake up the next morning, she has no idea what happened the night before.

I dream that he growls in my ear, "I'm going to impregnate you, little love. I'm going to fill your womb with my seed over and over again until there's a baby inside of you." I hide my moans of pleasure when his fingers tease my nipples before sliding between my legs and penetrating me. He speaks utter filth in my ear as he ravages me with one hand and caresses me with the other.

"What a good little girl," he says when I come. "You were born for my pleasure." A sickening swell of heat rises from my skin whenever I remember that I'm dreaming about my stepbrother.

The dreams are so real that sometimes I wake up panting and my panties are

soaked, my core hot and ready for his cock. One night I find myself so horny that I have to take a shower because my body is damp with sweat and arousal. The hot beads of water release the knots in my shoulders as I cling to the shower walls, masturbating to his memory. I am depraved, just like Xavier.

When I tell Christine I can't stop having sex dreams about my stepbrother, she asks for details.

"What?" She says in self-defense, her voice a mix of shock and indignation. "I'm not getting any in real life *or* my dreams. If you're going to be having hot sex, even if it isn't real, I want to hear about it."

I burn with shame as I admit to liking the more degrading things he says to me in my dreams.

"I'm going to fuck you bare, little love."

"Just wait until I ram my cock into your wet little cunt."

"Your pussy's so beautiful when it's dripping with my cum."

One night, it's almost too much. I dream that his dick is in my mouth like a pacifier. "That's it, little girl," he whispers into the darkness, "get daddy's cock nice and warm. You're making me hard." He comes in my mouth, and when I wake up a few hours later, I swear that I taste him on my lips.

"You sleep like the dead," Christine says with a shake of her head. "I bet Xavier could walk in here and do any number of those things to you, and you wouldn't wake up. But God, at least you'd get your fix. You're like an addict dreaming of the sweet drug that'll satisfy your desires."

I'm obsessed with a dick I don't need, attached to a man I shouldn't want. "This is the worst thing that's ever happened to me, Chris, I swear to God. At least before, with Malcolm, I could run away. But I can't run away from my dreams."

She rolls her eyes. "Tell it to someone who cares. I want dream-dick as good as Xavier's. Send him my way if you're bored."

"Chris!" I chastise.

She throws her hands up in the air. “It’s just a dream, Kaye. Calm down. At least you aren’t being cock-blocked by your God damn stepfather.”

Whatever’s happening between Christine and Niccolo has been going on almost as long as my sex dreams. I don’t know what set it off, but they’ve been locked in a battle of wills for weeks now. And frankly, I don’t know if anyone is winning because every time Chris tells me about it, it sounds like they’re both miserable.

“You know what, you’re right,” I decide after a few moments. “At least I’m getting off in my sleep. Better than the alternative.”

I’m not ready to have sex with someone else yet. Even though Xavier has been unusually low-key since the incident outside Brewer Hall, I welcome his presence in my dreams. Until I’m ready to move on, I’ll happily let him dream-fuck me every night.

Chapter 46

Xavier

I sneak into Kaye's room almost every night to watch her sleep. I should let it go at that, but her body invites me to do more. And I'll never turn down an invitation to become familiar with the woman I love.

Kaye teeters the line between dream and reality. Sometimes, when I touch her, her eyes flutter open, and I am paralyzed with fear, thinking I've been caught. Then she bites her bottom lip and gives me a look that beckons me to keep going. She thinks she's dreaming when, in reality, I am getting everything I've always wanted.

During the day, I am forced to avoid her. I pretend she doesn't exist, so she thinks I've given up. But at night, I come to her bedside and make her mine.

The thrill of sneaking into her room undetected, the rush of touching her while she's most vulnerable—it's an all-consuming feeling, and I never want it to end.

This started as revenge. I wanted my father to pay for what he'd done. I wanted Carrie to regret walking into McCade & Manchester to seek my father's help. I wanted Kaye to apologize for ever daring to deny me a kiss in exchange for a blow to the groin. But now it's more than that.

It's an obsession, an addiction that I can't shake. I don't claim to understand it; I don't presume to fathom why I do it. I'm sure a therapist somewhere would cream his pants if he got his hands on me.

I realize I am willing to do whatever it takes to keep Kaye by my side, even if

it means hurting the people who stand in my way. Even if the person that stands in my way is her. If anyone dares to challenge my claim to Kaye, I'll kill them: my father, Carrie, her best friend—anyone and everyone.

Deep inside, a small part of me wonders if what I feel for Kaye is truly love or a form of mania. Do I want her forever, or is she just a means to an end? Is she everything to me or a way to escape the darkness that threatens to consume me?

Kaye stirs in her sleep, rolling over onto her side. The blanket clings to her in the cool autumn breeze, contouring to the curve of her waist. A shiver worms down her spine, and she pulls the covers up to her ears.

It's a small gesture, indiscernible when you think about it, something hardly worth noting. But I reach out to tuck the edge of the blanket under her back, and she sighs in contentment. And I know at that moment that I could love her with all the passion and intensity that I'm capable of.

"We'll be together soon, little love," I whisper.

The day is coming when she'll wake up and realize we were always meant to be.

Chapter 47

Kaye

The fall semester flies by.

Christine and I are living our best lives, courtesy of her sage advice —‘*bad boys, bad decisions*’—constantly ringing in my ears. “We’re young and fun, babes; we can do whatever and whoever we want.” Neither of us is having sex, but it’s the principle of the matter. We could if we wanted to.

Halloween arrives in record time. Despite the early snow on the ground, Christine says we have to go out. She invites Sienna, a girl from her Psychology class, to dress up with us. Our group costume is a tequila shot.

I’m the salt, dressed in a skimpy white dress that doesn’t leave anything to the imagination. Christine sews an enlarged letter S to the front of the silky fabric and says I look perfect.

Sienna is the lime. She wears a strategically designed bright green crop top that looks like a lime wedge. She says the cold doesn’t bother her because she’s from Minnesota. When she pulls on a matching mini-skirt, I know she has to be telling the truth.

Christine is the tequila, and she adorns a gold mini dress. It took her hours to painstakingly apply the words Jose Cuervo across the front, but when we stand side-by-side, it makes all worthwhile.

We have the time of our lives going from bar to bar, getting men to buy us tequila shots. I take the first one offered to me, and it sours my stomach.

Every shot after that, I make the buyer take it himself. Christine and Sienna take a couple more before they start doing the same. There's only so many shots a girl can do before she's ass up in the snow.

At the end of the night, we lie on the floor at Sienna's and talk about what our lives are going to look like when we're all grown up. Christine brings us back to reality and reminds us that we're only young once. "Yolo, or whatever it is the kids say now. We have plenty of time to worry about the future when we get there. Let's drink happy thoughts."

Christine is the glue that bonds Sienna and me. Or maybe that's what happens a few minutes later when she's holding Chris' hair back over the toilet, and I'm searching through Sienna's cabinets for a glass. We drunkenly giggle about our first real night out and how it was so much fun because we weren't tied down.

As the days pass and Thanksgiving draws near, the campus starts to empty. Students head home, and professors cancel classes due to lack of attendance. Christine is tired of studying for Finals in December; she'd rather focus on partying.

"I don't even want to think about the holidays," she groans. "I'm tired of spending time with family." She doesn't quite feel the same way about my family, of course. When I tell her Mom asked me to come to dinner tonight, she almost loses it. "I thought we were going to the foam party at Red Dawg!"

"We will," I say hesitantly. "But it's been a few weeks since Mom asked Malcolm to move out. She said she was feeling lonely and wanted some company. I'm sure if I asked, you could come, too!"

Her position on spending the holidays with family changes immediately. "I'm in. You think she'll make those snickerdoodle cookies I like so much?"

I snort and roll my eyes. "Do you want to admit that it isn't *family* you want to avoid?"

Christine turns her back to me, shoving her nose up in an air of superiority. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on, Chris," I coax. "Just admit that you're trying to avoid Niccolo. No

one is going to hold it against you.”

She spins back around to look at me, her face a mask of frustration and despair. “It’s complicated, Kaye. It’s like all the sex dreams you’re having about Xavier. Except it’s my reality.”

My face contorts into a frown before I fully register what she’s saying. “Are you having sex with Niccolo?”

“No!” But her face turns the same shade of red as her shirt. “Are *you* having sex with *Xavier*?”

It’s my turn to blush as I realize I haven’t given her a proper update on the progression of my sexual dream relationship with my stepbrother. “Yes.”

Christine’s jaw drops, and she shakes her head. “I’m not doing that with Nic.”

“But you’re doing other things.”

She claps her hands over her face and throws herself on the bed. “You can’t tell anyone, Kaye. This is disrespectful to my mother, not to mention the rest of the family. You have no idea what the Terlizzis are going to do when they find out. Or, God forbid, my uncles.”

Far be it for me to judge her for having a few make-out sessions with her stepfather. I’m no angel. We’re in the same situation, except she’s a few weeks behind me. In no time at all, she’ll be swearing off Niccolo, and we’ll be recommitting ourselves to bad boys, bad decisions 2024.

Christine is visibly distressed, so I change the subject for her sake. I grab my phone and call Mom. She answers with a cheerful *'hello'*. “Hey, is it alright if Chris comes to dinner tonight?”

My best friend removes her hands from her face and watches me hopefully. Tears well up in her eyes, but Christine blinks repeatedly to keep them from falling.

“Oh, sure, honey,” my mother responds, sounding unsure. “I was going to talk to you about something, but it can wait.”

I don’t want Christine to think she’s not welcome, but I also don’t want my

mom to worry about clamming up because my best friend is there. “How about we chat after dinner while Chris goes through my closet? I think I’m putting on the Freshman Fifteen, and I’m going to need to bring some more clothes over.”

Carrie audibly sighs in relief. “Yes, that’s good. Great. We can do that. Maybe my friend can help.”

It’s my turn to sound unsure because I thought dinner was a quiet affair between my mother and me. “What, um, what friend, mom?”

“I’m shopping right now, honey. We’ll talk at dinner, okay?” Carrie hangs up before I have a chance to ask any more questions.

I reluctantly toss my phone on the desk and tell Chris that there will be a guest at dinner. “It’s weird, though, because my mom wouldn’t tell me who it is.”

Christine shrugs. “Who cares about that? I get to pick out your clothes?!” She asks excitedly.

That part wasn’t a lie. I haven’t been putting on weight around my middle yet, but my boobs and ass are growing. “I guess. But I don’t have anything crazy in my closet. You know that,” I warn her.

She couldn’t care less; Christine is happy to be put in charge of my makeover. It dries up her tears and has her bouncing on the edge of her bed like an excited puppy. “Girl, we’re getting you out of those floral dresses and into some leather!”

“I don’t own any leather.”

“No, but Carrie does,” Christine declares with a smirk. “She and Malcolm were kinky. I bet she’s got something in her closet that’ll fit you.”

Oh, god. The last image I need is my mother trussed up in leather and getting plowed by Malcolm. No, thank you. “I could have lived my entire life without that image.”

Christine pops off the bed and heads for the closet to find something to wear to dinner and the foam party later. She throws a mischievous smile over her

shoulder and says, “But now you don’t have to!”

“I miss Sienna,” I groan. “She never talked about my mom’s sex life.”

My best friend rolls her eyes as she surveys her rack of clothes. “Yeah, whatever. She’ll be back after she spends the holidays with her family. You know, I bet she has a normal home life. Not like you and me,” Christine explains. “I bet she isn’t fucking her stepbrother or getting fingered by her stepfather.”

I try to pry more information out of Christine. “Is the fingering any good, at least?”

“I cannot even begin to explain how skilled he is with his fingers. It’s all that piano playing, I swear to God,” Christine says with a moan.

She’s right. Our home lives are not normal.

Chapter 48

Kaye

We pull up to the mansion Malcolm bought for my mother and see a truck in the driveway. “That’s not Malcolm,” I mumble under my breath.

“Malcolm is *not* a Chevrolet guy,” Christine agrees.

We climb out of the car and go inside. When I open the front door, a heavenly aroma of garlic bread and pasta hits me over the head. “Please, God, let her have made tiramisu for dessert.”

“No!” Christine smacks me in the arm fervently. “I want my snickerdoodles!”

“Fuck your cookies, Chris. This is about the greater good.”

Our whispered argument is interrupted when a young man steps out of the kitchen to greet us. He looks oddly familiar, but I can’t put my finger on it. His eyes are a beautiful shade of azure blue, and his dark hair is styled perfectly. “Hey. Kaye and Christine, right?”

Christine walks up to him and offers her hand. “You know my name, but I don’t know yours. Handsome, maybe? Gorgeous?”

I bite my bottom lip to keep from laughing at Christine’s attempt to flirt with the stranger. He smiles at the two of us, a charming grin that once again reminds me of someone. “I’m Jackson, a friend of Carrie’s.” He carries himself with agile grace, almost like a dancer.

My mom's friend escorts us to the kitchen. When we arrive, my mother is bent over in front of the oven. It takes her a second to check the contents before she closes the door and stands up straight. "Kaye! Chris!" She smiles. "I see you've met Jackson."

"We've only made introductions," Jackson nods courteously to my mother. Their eyes lock for a moment, and I feel tension rising. They communicate with their gaze, but I can't understand what is being said. I look away, feeling out of place and confused.

Christine tiptoes to the counter and plucks a carrot from the crudite tray Carrie has set out. The only sound for a long moment is my best friend masticating the crunchy vegetable.

"So, Jackson," I clear my throat, "how do you know my mother?"

He and Carrie break eye contact, and his mouth curls into an irresistible smirk, deepening his dimples. I don't think I like him. He seems very manipulative, like Xavier, or worse, Malcolm.

"We met at a charity event a couple of months ago. It was for education in underserved communities and disadvantaged children in need."

Despite the dilapidated pick-up truck in the driveway, Jackson looks like he knows nothing about living in an underserved community or being a child in need. "Really?" I narrow my eyes at him. "And what is it that you do?"

"I work in Acquisitions at the McCade Library. I think you're familiar with it?" He asks cheerfully. "Your mom mentioned you're a student at Blackmore."

Familiarity prickles the back of my neck; perhaps that's where I recognize him from. I've spent a lot of time at the library this semester. Have I seen him skulking around the stacks or helping people check out books? Though, if he works in Acquisitions, he might not have anything to do with the students using the facilities. "Interesting. And how does that correlate to the education of children in need?"

"Kaye," my mom chastises, "don't harass the poor man." She laughs nervously and gives Jackson an apologetic look.

He kindly smiles and winks at her. “Be nice, Carrie. She’s just curious.” When he turns back to look at me, his gaze penetrates a layer of my confidence. “The McCade Library has a lot of programs that support the local youth. Including career planning, traditional and digital literacy, STEM workshops, and even a program for BU students to earn internship experience by working at secondary education facilities.”

Christine lets out a low whistle. “He sounds really impressive, Kaye,” she says in a stage whisper.

I don’t care if he’s the King of England. Who said he could be friends with my mother? And why would someone his age *want* to be friends with a woman in her thirties?

Carrie claps her hands together and disrupts the tension. “Well, dinner is almost ready. I just need to pull the lasagna out and get it on the table. Kaye, honey, why don’t you grab water for everyone?”

I pout through dinner, trying to figure out what is happening here. If my mother is about to tell me that she’s leaving Malcolm for a younger man, I’ll lose it.

Christine keeps up the flow of conversation among the group. I’m glad I brought her because I can’t think of anything nice to say to or about Jackson. On the other hand, she flirts and bats her eyelashes as if she’s trying to secure her next boyfriend.

When dinner is over, Jackson leans toward Christine and conspiratorially whispers, “I’m sure you’ve been in the garden outside, but how about you give me a tour?”

My best friend gets to her feet and holds out a hand for the handsome stranger to take. “I’d love to. I’ll show you all the hiding spots in the maze.” They leave Mom and I to clean up the dinner dishes.

“Honey, do you want to grab the salad?” My mom gets up from her end of the table and polishes off the glass of wine in front of her. She’s been quiet this evening, allowing Jackson to hold his own at the dinner table.

As I follow her into the kitchen, I ask her what she’s doing. “Who is that kid, and why is he here?”

Carrie laughs as though I just asked the funniest question in the world. It must be the alcohol talking. “Honey, please, he isn’t a kid. He’s older than you.”

“And he's *younger* than you,” I quip.

She bows her head as a gesture of acceptance. “Yes, true. He’s twenty-five.” There’s a seven-year age gap between the two of them. I guess I should be glad that she’s seeing someone closer to her age, given that Malcolm is fourteen years older than her.

“Is he trying to get more money out of the McCades?” I ask, suddenly feeling protective over my stepfamily. “Because I’ll tell him to leave, Mom. Just say the word, and Christine and I will make sure he never bothers you again.”

Carrie starts putting the leftover lasagna into takeaway containers. She hums while she works as if she's a fairytale princess doling out treats to the forest animals. “Do you and Chris want any garlic bread? I don’t know if it’ll reheat in a microwave well, but if you want it, I’ll pack some up.”

“Mom, you invited me to dinner to talk. Then you didn’t tell me you were going to have a guest until I asked if I could bring Christine. What’s going on?”

Her spatula stops midair, heavy with a piece of lasagna. Carrie lowers it back into the tray before turning around. “I’m leaving Malcolm.”

There’s nothing wrong with that; I’ve been waiting for it to happen since they got together. I thought *he* would be the one to leave *her*, but this works, too. “Are you leaving him for Jackson?”

Carrie quickly shakes her head. “No. Jackson and I met at the fundraiser, and then I ran into him several times after. It was a coincidence, really, but the more we talked, the more I realized that I wasn’t happy. He’s become one of my closest friends, Kaye.”

But for some reason, I don't believe her. “And you don’t think it’s weird that he works at the McCade Library? You don’t think he’s trying to use you for money?” I never thought I'd say those words to my mother, but I also thought she'd never marry a rich man and have access to the kind of funds that would make her a target.

Carrie nervously laughs, sounding unsure when she tells me more about Jackson. "Yes, we talked about the McCades a lot when we first became friends. He seemed to have an interest in Malcolm and Xavier, and I thought the same thing, that maybe he was just interested in the family's money. But Malcolm isn't involved with the library; he doesn't even sit on the Board. There's no money to be gained by being my friend, Kaye. Jackson is a good man, and he's helping me through a tough situation. That's all."

Good man, my ass. I've met a lot of Carrie's boyfriends in the past, and I've known all three of her husbands. She is most vulnerable when she's unhappy. If Jackson knew she was questioning her marriage to Malcolm, then maybe he's after her prenup money. It isn't a fortune, but a million dollars goes a long way.

"I just think you should be careful around him," I warn. "Men can be gold diggers, too."

"True," Carrie says with a complacent smile. "Now, about that garlic bread."

I let the subject go, and we finish cleaning up in silence while we wait for Jackson and Christine to return. As we leave, I offer him a forced '*good night*' on my way out the door.

"Jackson is *definitely* interested in your mom," Chris announces as we return to the car. "I tried my damndest to flirt with him, and nothing. I swear he only has eyes for Carrie."

I slam my hands down on the steering wheel in anger. "Damn it. I knew it. She kept telling me there was nothing between them, and he's *just* a good guy."

She shrugs, unsure and uncaring. This isn't her mom contemplating divorce to marry a younger man. "I don't know. Maybe he is a good guy, and she doesn't like him back."

My mother's need for love is as desperate and relentless as an addict's craving for a fix. It's not something she can help; it's a result of her life experience. If Jackson shows any sign of being attracted to her, her emotions will mirror his. "I can't take it anymore," I grumble, "I need a drink."

Christine turns up the volume on the radio and shouts with excitement.

“Great. Because the foam party starts at 10:00 and we still need to get ready.
It's time to get down with our bad selves!”

Chapter 49

Xavier

Logan, Noah, and Theo convince me to go out. Noah says that with half the students gone for Thanksgiving break, we'll find some hot MILFs to hit on at the bars.

I'm not interested in older women; I'm interested in one woman in particular. However, it's exhausting not knowing what to do to make her mine. So, I force myself to get dressed and go to the bars with my buddies because I need a break from wallowing.

Half the bar district is dead. We stay away from Leather & Lager when we see the number of motorcycles out front. The Moose Malt Brewery closed up early because they had no customers. Stingray is packed, but not with women, and none of the guys want to hit up a sausage fest. Azul's is having Latin night, but attendance is low. Against my wishes, we wind up at Red Dawg.

"Oh, shit," Logan high-fives Theo when we walk through the door, "it's a fucking foam party." The smell of Dawn dish soap and sweat fills the air. The dance floor looks like an orgy of slippery bodies colliding into one another. It doesn't look appealing in the slightest.

"I think I'm gonna go home!" I yell over the music, but they can't hear me, or they're pretending to ignore me.

Theo orders a round of beers from the bar, and I reluctantly accept one. I'll finish this up, head to the bathroom, and then tell them in the morning that I can't remember how I got home. That should be enough of a lie that they stop

badgering me for the rest of the break.

Red Dawg is surprisingly low-key, considering there's a foam party happening. While people are still ass to elbow on the dance floor, it isn't a clusterfuck at the bar. The guys and I can sit and nod our heads along with the music without anyone bumping into us or asking us to move.

I'm not actively searching for anyone, but my reticular activating system forces me to search the face of every dirty blonde in the room. I've been slowly watching Kaye's hair get lighter and lighter. She was too dark to go platinum, but now I see her shade everywhere I go. I'm shocked when I pass by the face of a woman standing in line for the bathroom, and it's hers. Kaye's beauty stops me in my tracks, snapping me out of my dark thoughts.

"I have to go." I stand up, eyes focused on Kaye like a dog zeroed in on his prey. I walk in her direction, pushing soapy, foamy bodies out of my way.

Kaye makes it to the bathroom before I reach her, and I'm forced to wait outside for the duration of a song. When she emerges, I see the glassy look in her eyes that indicates she's drunk. I try to get her attention by calling her name, but she doesn't notice me. It isn't until I grab her by the arm and pull her out of the crowd that she looks up and sees me. "Xave!" Kaye announces with a watery smile. "What are you doing here?"

I swear to God, if I find out which bartender over-served her, I'll kill him. "Where's Christine?" I yell.

Kaye frantically scans the bar, her eyes widening with shock. "Oh, my God. Did I lose Christine?"

Being around drunk people isn't as fun when you aren't drunk, but I'm protective of Kaye, and I won't leave her alone. "Come with me," I order, pulling her behind me. I shove anyone that gets in front of us out of the way. Someone yells at me when they fall down due to the slippery floors, but I keep walking. The putrid smell of alcohol, body odor, and soap disappears as we reach the exit.

We walk outside, and a strong gust of wind slices through me like an icy sword. There's been a cold snap this fall. The warm temperature of the bar evaporates, replaced by an uncomfortable shiver that makes me wish I was

wearing thicker clothing.

Unfortunately, Kaye does not look dressed to be galavanting in the streets. My car is parked a few blocks away, but I remove my jacket and wrap it around her shoulders for the walk. She needs it more than I do.

“Oh, I don’t need this,” she slurs. “I’m warm.” Kaye tries to shrug off the jacket, but I put it right back around her shoulders.

“You’re not warm, Kaye. The alcohol makes you think you are, but you’re just as cold as I am.” In all my years, I never predicted that I’d be taking care of a drunk girl. I’ve been less than kind to women in the past. I’ve allowed my desires to rule over me, and when girls didn’t live up to my expectations, I tossed them out like yesterday’s newspaper. Kaye makes me a kinder man; some would even say softer.

I make her stop at a sandwich stop along the way that’s still open despite the lateness of the evening. Kaye says she doesn’t want anything to eat, but I know she needs something to soak up the alcohol. I order a sandwich for myself and casually offer her half as we walk the rest of the way to my car. She takes and devours it before we even reach the Tesla.

“You and Christine go out tonight?” I ask when she’s safely strapped in.

Kaye over-exaggeratively nods her head. “She got lost, though. Then I got a sandwich.”

There are a lot of missing details, but she’s safe now. My heart pounds in my ears like a sledgehammer, threatening to drown out the little voice in my head that screams at me to demand answers from Kaye, but I force myself to remain calm. “I’m going to take you to my place, okay? Get you sobered up.”

“I don’t want to have sex with you,” she slurs.

I give her an indulgent smile. “The thought didn’t even cross my mind.” And in truth, it didn’t. I’ll admit that I’ve had sex with drunk girls before, always when I was drunk, too, but Kaye is different. When I thought about peeling off her clothes, it was so she could be comfortable when she fell asleep.

Kaye tells me about someone named Jackson on the brief ride to my place, but none of it makes sense. “He doesn’t belong in my home, Xave. I don’t

know what he wants, but it's not good."

I don't understand what she's saying, but I mentally note what she tells me. Whoever this Jackson kid is needs to stay away from Kaye. I've let too much come between the two of us already, including myself.

"How about I make you a cup of coffee?" I offer when we arrive at my place a few minutes later. "To help sober you up."

Kaye smacks my hand when I try to help her inside. "I'm not drunk, Xavier."

Calmly, I take a deep breath and tell myself not to get angry. "Of course not. What about coffee for me, then? You can have a cup if you'd like."

She finds the offer sufficient and mumbles something about the bathroom before I can say anything else. When I turn back around, she's gone, and the clunk of her thick-soled boots echoes through the house.

I go to the kitchen to put on a pot of coffee, and the scent of freshly roasted beans fills the air, rousing me from my daze. I wait for the pot to finish brewing and watch the entrance, anxiously awaiting her return.

"You got a nice-looking family," Kaye yells from the hallway moments later.

I pour her a cup of coffee and add a dash of sugar and cream. When I find her, she has her face pressed against my family photos.

"Coffee?" I offer.

She takes it with two hands and shivers from the warmth of the cup. A drunken smile pops up on her face. "You're not all bad," she decides.

It's the nicest thing she could say to me after everything that's happened. She doesn't know about my nighttime ventures into her bedroom or that I've been taking advantage of how deep she sleeps. If Kaye were to find out about that, she might feel differently. "How'd you get away with drinking so much, anyway?"

Kaye walks away from me and enters the open bedroom in the hallway. "Is this room for me?" She finds a bed and instantly makes a beeline for it.

"If that's where you want to sleep. Yeah." I'd prefer her next to me, but I'll

take what I can get. I'll sleep on the floor next to her if I have to.

She takes a large gulp of coffee before setting the mug on the side table. Tossing back the comforter, she kicks off her shoes and makes herself comfortable.

"Do you want to get undressed first? You're kind of wet," I scrunch my nose in disgust. "And you smell like dish soap."

Kaye looks down at herself and agrees. Without getting out of bed, she slips the light blouse over her head and drops it on the floor. Then she kicks off her skirt, and it falls to the ground with a soft swoosh. Kaye stretches like a sleepy cat and makes herself comfortable, nestling into the blankets. With a yawn, she admits, "I think I'm drunk, Xave."

I sit on the edge of the bed and stroke a few pieces of blonde hair out of her face. Her eyelids flutter for a few seconds before closing all the way. "I think you are, too, Kaye, but I'm taking care of you. I'll always take care of you."

Her chest moves up and down as she breathes, her features softening and her face relaxing. She's asleep before I finish speaking.

I wonder if she knows how much I love her; I wonder if it matters. We were thrown together by chance and bound by revenge. She was never meant to be anything more than a way to get back at my father for what he did to our family.

But here I am, watching Kaye sleep in my bed, and I can't help but think of what our future might look like one day. I don't know how long I sit there watching her peacefully sleep. Despite everything that's happened between us, we share an undeniable connection. I have transformed from the man who wanted to ruin Kaye into a man who wants to protect her and keep her safe.

Chapter 50

Kaye

My eyelids feel heavy, but I force them open. My head throbs as though it's going to split open. "That's not my drop ceiling," I groan. The light streaming in through the window is making me nauseous. "Where am I?" No one answers.

Off in the distance, I can hear the musical stylings of Frank Sinatra. I conjure a faded memory of my father cooking breakfast on Sunday morning while singing Fly Me To The Moon.

"I'm dead," I croak as I force myself to sit up. "I'm dead, and this is heaven."

But if this is heaven, why is a team picture of the Blackmore University football squad on the wall?

Someone bangs around in the kitchen, pots, and pans crashing into one another before a familiar voice echoes through the house. "Shit!" Followed by the sound of glass shattering.

"Dad, I swear to God if that's Xavier." My prayer is a muffled moan. I beg my father to keep my stepbrother out of this, but he doesn't deliver. The longer I'm awake, the more I recognize the stumbling movements of Xavier's oversized body.

I toss the blankets back to find I slept in my bra and panties. I don't feel sore between my legs, so I'm inclined to believe that I didn't mess up my newfound celibacy by sleeping with Xavier. "I only messed up by going home with him," I muse to myself. It isn't funny, but I laugh anyway. If you

can't laugh at yourself, who *can* you laugh at?

The clothes I wore yesterday are strewn across the floor in soiled disarray, but Xavier has helpfully laid out a t-shirt on the foot of the bed. I don't want to wear his clothes, but the alternative is my own. I begrudgingly put on the shirt, and it fits me like a dress.

Opening the bedroom door, I'm met with the enticing scent of pancakes and bacon. The aroma drags me down the hall and leads me to the kitchen.

Xavier is standing in front of the stove wearing boxers and an apron around his waist. I couldn't hear it before, but he sings along to Frank's Come Fly With Me as he cracks eggs into a bowl.

"I didn't know you could cook." I cross the threshold into the galley kitchen.

He startles, jumping in surprise. "Kaye. I didn't know you were awake." He grabs the bowl of eggs and starts beating them with a fork. "Can I get you anything? Coffee? Orange juice? Milk?"

I subconsciously shrink away at the last offering. "Milk?" My nose wrinkles. "Who drinks milk after the age of five?"

Xavier frowns defensively. "I do. I'm a growing boy, and it promotes bone strength."

"I think if I drink a cup of milk, I'll hurl. What happened last night?" I lean up against the counter next to Xavier. He's still whisking the eggs into submission, but he nods his head at the plate of bacon.

"Have some. I'm not making all this just for me."

If I were at the dorms right now, Christine and I would walk to the dining hall for breakfast. I'd have a lot more options, but none would smell this good. I grab a piece of bacon and shove half of it in my mouth.

"As for last night," Xavier goes on, "I'm not really sure. I found you at Red Dawg before midnight, and you were alone."

"Where was Chris?" I interrupt him.

Xavier shrugs. "No idea. You were pretty drunk when I found you in line for

the bathroom. I was going to take you home, but it seemed like you could use someone to keep an eye on you.”

I eat the other half of the strip of bacon. “A babysitter,” I correct.

“Potato, tomato.” He grabs a pan and starts heating it on the stove. I watch as he takes a spoonful of butter and slathers it on the surface.

“That’s not even the saying.”

Xavier flashes me a heart-stopping grin that transforms his usually threatening features into boyish charm. “Do you like your eggs scrambled? That’s the only kind I know how to make.”

Even though my mom made me a home-cooked meal last night, my stomach rumbles with excitement over this new offering. “Scrambled is great. Thank you.”

He pours the egg mixture into the pan. It makes a soft sizzling sound, and he grabs a spatula to keep moving it around. I watch the well-mixed yolks and whites firm up under his constant strokes. Xavier adds salt and pepper to the mix and the smell of cooked eggs wafts into the air.

Though my stomach was grumbling with hunger a minute ago, now I feel nauseous. The contents shift as the smell of the scrambled eggs hits me, and I know I’m going to throw up.

Muscle memory leads me to the bathroom. I pass by the happy pictures of Xavier’s smiling family on the wall and recall looking at them last night. I barely reach the toilet bowl before vomiting the last of my undigested dinner and stomach acid. The room feels hot and noisy; Xavier yells at me from the kitchen.

This is what I get for drinking; alcohol is *not* your friend. I flush the toilet and lean against the bathtub, wondering if it would be too forward for me to ask Xavier if I can take a shower. The cool sensation of porcelain on my back brings down my core body temperature.

My stepbrother appears a few moments later, the apron still tied around his waist. “Are you okay, Kaye?” Worry stains his face.

I shake my head, admitting defeat to my worst enemy. "No. I need a shower and my bed," I moan. "I feel disgusting."

Xavier sits in front of the sink with concern in his eyes. "You can shower and sleep here if you'd like."

It's a nice offer, but I can't take it. "It was kind of you to save me from myself last night." My throat aches with each word. "I wasn't feeling the best when I went out, and I thought drinking would make me feel better." Spoiler alert: it didn't. With a wan smile, I explain, "Mom introduced me to some guy named Jackson at dinner, and he rubbed me the wrong way."

He nods. "You mentioned Jackson last night on the drive here. You said he didn't belong in your home. I thought maybe he was a student who was hitting on you and wouldn't take *no* for an answer."

"No," I snort. "More like hitting on my mom. She's leaving your dad, you know." I shouldn't be the one telling him this, but it isn't like Carrie is going to break the news to Xavier. And I doubt he's tried to repair his relationship with his father since the incident at McCade & Manchester. If I don't tell him what's going on, who knows when he'll find out?

Xavier stares at the wall for a few moments, digesting the news. "I knew he wouldn't leave Victoria for something that wouldn't last, but I thought he'd be married to Carrie longer than this."

We both know this is Malcolm's fault. We might not know the dirty details of his marriage to Carrie, but what we do know is enough to be the nail in his coffin.

"I don't know what I thought," I reluctantly admit, "but I didn't think their marriage would last forever. Your father was nice enough when they were dating and when they first got married, but it was too good to be true."

"That's what happens when you're a McCade," he admits in an apathetic tone. "Everyone wants you, but no one trusts you."

I bite my tongue to keep from saying what we both know: I don't trust Xavier, and he gave me a long list of reasons why I shouldn't. I didn't wake up one morning and decide that my stepbrother was deceitful and underhanded; he did that all on his own.

“I think Jackson might be partially responsible for what happened between Carrie and Malcolm. He was very kind and respectful last night, but there is something about him that’s eerily familiar. It actually reminds me of you.”

Xavier sharply twists his neck to look at me, his eyes narrowing in disbelief. “Do you like him?”

I can’t help but laugh. “I don’t even like *you*, Xave. What makes you think I’m going to like him?”

“That’s a shame,” he says with a grin. “Because I’m a delight.”

Xavier is a walking paradox. He frustrates me to no end, yet somehow, I still find myself smiling when he’s around. There’s no one quite like him, a strange mix of chaos and charm that leaves me struggling to decide how I feel. Every time I think I know how to react to Xavier, he throws another curveball my way. “It’s different when you aren’t pinning me to walls and threatening me.”

My stepbrother shrugs nonchalantly before shooting me a wink. “I do what I can, gorgeous.”

I nervously bite my bottom lip. The last time I got Xavier involved in something, it ended with his father winding up in the hospital. But I want to ask him if he can find out more information about Jackson. He has more resources than I do, and he can get the job done.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” I begin, “but could you look into Jackson for me? I know that he works at the McCade Library. I don’t know his last name, though.” I should have asked. “He was at some fundraiser with my mom a few months ago. I don’t know much about this guy, but I want to make sure he isn’t a gold digger or anything. I know Mom isn’t loaded, but she’ll get some money from the prenup. I don’t want him to take advantage of her.”

“Yeah, sure,” Xavier says with a nod. “I’ll see what I can find out.”

I might be asking for trouble by asking for Xavier’s help, but that’s a risk I’m willing to take.

Chapter 51

Xavier

After I take Kaye back to Calvert Hall, I call the library and pretend to be Malcolm. I run up the chain as far as I can go. With half the staff out for the holidays, I find myself talking to someone who manages the foreign translation section. It takes her several minutes to find an active staff roster.

“We have a Jackson Webber and a Jackson Reid working for the library, but neither are here today. Can I transfer you to their voicemail, Mr. McCade?”

I write down both names and hang up. It takes less than five minutes to figure out which one I’m looking for. Webber is a fifty-year-old man who restores first editions for the library; I doubt he’s the person Kaye’s worried about.

Reid, on the other, is in his mid-twenties. One look at his social media profiles shows a handsome, smiling face that makes me sick. I don’t like him, and I don’t even know him. I can’t quite put my finger on why, but the familiarity of his features fills me with dread. I don’t know this stranger, yet he stirs something deep inside me, something dark, heavy, and unwelcome.

To help with my search, I give Jackson’s information to a private investigator. He says it’ll take a few days to dig into Jackson’s background, but I pay extra for expedited services. “I want this information ASAP. Got it?”

In the meantime, I search every social media account I can find. Facebook. Instagram. YouTube. TikTok. LinkedIn. Flickr. The internet is his blossoming garden of personal growth and achievement. He isn’t particularly

interesting, but I devour everything I can find about him. Page after page of search results appear before me, including an old LiveJournal account that's nothing more than a picture of him at fourteen and his name.

I studiously take notes for Kaye while subconsciously making a plan to use this to cement our potential new relationship. We'll bond over coffee while discussing his high school transcripts. Jackson was a journalism student in high school and pursued a degree in Library Sciences at Blackmore University.

I don't find anything worth worrying about until the PI gets back to me four days later. He calls on Thanksgiving, but I'm with Victoria and don't recognize the number. When I don't immediately return his voicemail, the private investigator emails me a report and says to let him know if I need anything else.

Jackson Reid's online presence is bland and lifeless, but the PI's investigation unearths a treasure trove of secrets that reads like a thriller. Every twist and turn presents an unexpected surprise, unveiling details hidden in plain sight.

He's been involved with the McCades longer than I realized. The private investigator found out about a brief stint of transcription work he did at McCade & Manchester in his sophomore year at Blackmore. My father's partner, Douglas, hired him, but he quit shortly thereafter.

Strangely enough, Jackson's last two years at the university were then funded by a scholarship exclusively paid for with a generous donation from the law office. After his graduation a couple of years ago, the scholarship fund mysteriously disappeared.

The report includes pages and pages of internet history that the PI found on Jackson's laptop. The searches line up with dates my father won big cases for the firm. In recent history, Jackson was looking into Malcolm and Carrie's marriage. He's been keeping tabs on Malcolm, Victoria, and even me. But lately, his search results have all been about Carrie.

Carrie Pennington. Carrie Ross—her maiden name. Her career. The fundraisers and charity groups she was a part of. Her net worth. Her family.

It devolves into a few brief searches about Kaye, but he must have grown

disinterested in her quickly because his searches return to Carrie after that.

The last document is cell records. The private investigator highlighted a number that Jackson kept calling and receiving calls from. At the bottom of the page, he noted, '*Malcolm McCade*'.

Is it possible that my father is responsible for all this? Did Malcolm stoop so low as to hire someone to seduce and betray his own wife? The sickening realization hits me like a ton of bricks: if he found someone else, he would know he needed good press for another divorce, especially with it being so soon after the last. What better way than to make it seem like the separation was Carrie's fault?

I can't call Jackson and ask him myself, but I've got the next best thing. I can go to Malcolm; I can figure out what the hell is happening straight from the source.

Chapter 52

Xavier

“Mr. McCade is busy right now,” the legal secretary says with a bland smile. “If you’d like, you can schedule an appointment with me. Are you free next Tuesday?”

I’m sure she is a nice girl and means no trouble, but I’m not waiting until next Tuesday to speak to my father. I push past her and open the door to his office.

Malcolm is sitting behind the desk with his feet propped up on the mahogany and his eyes on the newspaper. “Gee, you’re so busy.”

“Sir, you can’t come in here. Mr. McCade,” the secretary begs, “I told him that he couldn’t come in here.”

Malcolm holds up a hand to calm the fretting secretary. “It’s okay, Sarah. I’ll entertain the interruption.”

I haven’t spoken to my father since I left him at the hospital to fend for himself against Carrie’s outrage. He hasn’t made an effort to reach out to me, either. This should be interesting.

Sarah closes the door behind her quietly, leaving the two of us alone. “I hear a congratulations is in order. You’re getting divorced again.”

Malcolm rolls his eyes as he sets down the newspaper. “I’m not surprised. Carrie’s been pulling away lately. Not that I mind,” he shrugs, “but I wish she would have waited until after the Christmas parties before making such a rash decision. She’s lucky I was able to find someone else to take her place.”

I'm not surprised that my father has a new girlfriend already. He's never been the type to linger at home and wait around for a woman to call him.

"Tell me," Malcolm asks with a yawn as he takes his feet off the desk. "Now that Kaye is no longer going to be your stepsister, do you think you'll still be interested in her? Or was it the taboo that drew you in? Because frankly, *I'm* less interested in her now that her mother is filing divorce papers."

Keep your cool, I tell myself. I was lucky to get away with beating the shit out of my father once. It won't happen again.

I change the subject before he can goad me into assault charges. "Who's Jackson Reid?"

The insidious smile on Malcolm's face slowly fades. He gets out of his seat and walks over to the Mad Men-style bar cart on the far side of the room. "How do you know Jackson?" His body blocks my view, but I hear him uncork a bottle of bourbon and pour. When he turns back around, the glass in his hand is filled to the brim.

"How about you answer my question first?" I puff up my chest and cross my arms to show him I'm serious.

Malcolm isn't inherently afraid of me; he never has been. I'm bigger than him—height and weight—but it's a toss-up who'd win in a fair fight. Since Malcolm always fights dirty, it's a miracle I walked out of our previous fight with only a concussion and some fingers that had to be buddy taped.

"Just tell me how you know about Jackson, and I'll answer whatever you want."

I watch as my father downs half the glass without flinching, and it occurs to me that this might be more serious than initially thought. I let my arms fall to my side, deflated. "He's getting close to Carrie. She introduced him to Kaye, and Kaye is concerned."

"So you're still talking to the bitch that started this all." Malcolm takes another sip, smaller this time, and then crosses the room back to his desk. If asking about Jackson hadn't aged him ten years, I'd be more upset about the insult. But he looks like someone just told him that his dog was going to die.

Reluctantly, I sit in front of him and put myself at eye level. The haggard lines on Malcolm's face tell a thousand stories. "You and I haven't always seen eye to eye. It's gotten worse since you left mom, but you're still my father. If this Jackson kid is blackmailing you or threatening you, you can tell me."

Malcolm laughs bitterly in my face while downing the last half of the bourbon. "Where was this loyalty a few weeks ago?"

He's talking about Kaye, and it sets me on edge. I ball my hands into fists, reminding myself to breathe. "I answered your question; now answer mine. What do you know about Jackson?"

He fingers the empty glass, looking into it as though wishing for it to magically refill. "Jackson Reid is your brother," Malcolm admits after a few minutes.

My stomach twists into knots as my heartbeat accelerates. A chill runs through my veins, numbing my skin and producing a hundred tiny goosebumps on my forearms. "What did you say?"

Malcolm takes a deep breath, summoning courage before he lifts his gaze to meet mine. Behind his bloodshot eyes lurk ghosts that only he can see. He pauses for a long time before conceding, "I was seeing another woman after your mother and I got married. It ended when she told me she was pregnant and threatened to tell Victoria. So I paid her off, and she disappeared. I figured that was the end of it."

The air feels heavy and thick with warning, and I sense it—there's a *'but'* coming.

"A few years ago, Jackson got curious about who his father was. At first, his mom wouldn't tell him, but he begged until she gave in. When she told him the whole story, he decided to come find me."

That's why he got hired at McCade & Manchester. That's why his college tuition was magically paid a few months later. Everything adds up.

"Why does he work at the McCade Library?"

Malcolm rolls his eyes while making a sound of disgust. "He wasn't ready

for that job. He didn't have the experience or the training, but he came by and threatened to disclose our relationship to the press if I didn't help him."

"You got him the job," I finish for him.

"Yeah. I thought that was the end of it. But lately, he's been calling to ask how things are going. I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop, and I guess this is it."

Carrie is the other shoe, but there's still a missing piece of the puzzle. "What does Jackson want with your wife?"

He snorts in derision and gets up to refill his rocks glass. "Hell if I know, but he can have her. I'm done with that dumb slut and her daughter."

I get up and storm out of the room. Malcolm yells at me to come back, but I ignore him.

He might be done with Carrie and Kaye, but I'm not. He isn't the only one in this town with answers. If he had a secret family, no one is more likely to know about it than Victoria McCade.

Once a daughter of the most powerful mob family in the Midwest, always a daughter of the most powerful mob family in the Midwest.

Chapter 53

Kaye

After the incident with Xavier on the first day of school, I swore that I wouldn't come back to Everton Health Center. I'm not very accident-prone, and I'm pretty healthy. Even when I'm sick, it isn't enough to warrant a trip to the doctor's office. But Christine is not convinced.

"I don't know what kind of infectious disease you have, but either you see the doctor, or I'm quarantining our room." She strolls alongside me as we make our way to Everton, knowing full well that she's already won the argument.

"Chill out, Chris. It isn't that serious." Yes, during my last Final for the semester, I threw up in my mouth a little bit and had to swallow it. And sure, I'm nauseous all the time. "I'm pretty sure this is just stress. I did a lot of research on Dr. Google, and I'm perfectly fine. I'm just exhausted, and my cortisol levels are through the roof. Or low. I don't remember exactly, but it's whichever is bad."

Christine does not look convinced. She opens the door to the student health clinic and ushers me inside. "Right. If that's the case, that's great, but I want confirmation from a real doctor that you aren't suffering from malaria or something."

"Don't be so dramatic." But I have to admit that she would have a good reason to be. Before going to the doctor, her mom's only symptom was chronic stomachaches. One day, her mother was healthy and vibrant; the next, she was fighting for her life, a macabre puppet hooked up to a bunch of machines pumping chemo into her veins. Not too long afterward, she died.

There's no one at the receptionist's window when we walk up, and we stand there for several minutes whispering to one another before someone approaches. The receptionist laughs loudly into his phone, oblivious to our presence. When he finally notices us, his eyes widen in embarrassment.

"Oh, shit," he swears under his breath, "call you back in a minute." He slides the phone into his pocket while flashing us a charming smile. "Hello. Do you guys have an appointment?"

The waiting room is empty. Finals were the first week of December, and half the students left campus for the rest of the year when they found out the following week wasn't mandatory.

Christine taps her foot impatiently on the speckled tile floor, the rhythmic click echoing through the empty room. Her brows are furrowed, lips pressed in a tight line. "Do we need one?" She glares.

The receptionist shakes his head. "Nope. It could probably get you in faster, but um, no one's really here right now anyway," the guy says with a nervous laugh. "What's the problem?"

Christine shifts her weight from one foot to the other. "Why? Are you a nurse? A doctor? Can you help my friend in any way besides taking her name down and informing the *medical professionals* that she's waiting?"

"Jesus, Chris," I mumble. "Go easy on the poor guy."

He flicks his wrist a few times to gesture that it's okay. "What's your name, miss? If you haven't been here before, you'll need to fill out some paperwork."

Christine jumps in without hesitation, her voice ringing sharply as she answers for me. "It's Kaye Pennington, and she's been here before. Run along now."

I'm almost embarrassed to be with her. When the receptionist goes off to tell a nurse that we're here, I pull Christine to a chair and ask her what the hell her problem is.

"Guys like *that* are my problem," she thumbs back at the empty space left by the receptionist. "He's laidback and chill even though people need help. It's

ridiculous. Men always change their attitudes right when you've finally figured them out."

I have a feeling that this has nothing to do with the guy behind the window, and I quickly change the topic. "You know who's been real laidback lately? Xavier."

"I'm still super sorry about that night." She winces. "I don't know what happened."

We've hashed this out already. Nothing bad happened to either of us; we can let it go. "Christine," I begin patiently.

She waves me off. "Yes, yes, I know. It's fine. But I'm still sorry." She wears an apologetic look as she swivels her head toward me. "Tell me about Xavier. What's he up to?"

"That's the problem; I don't know." I can't remember my life being this at peace. Not only has Xavier given me space, but it's so much space that I've stopped seeing him in my dreams. It's like he's been erased from my life. "He's looking into Jackson for me, and I'm grateful, but I thought he'd use this to worm his way back into my life."

Christine nods wistfully, stroking an imaginary beard. "Yes, he has been particularly quiet. That's very un-Xavier."

She doesn't have to tell me. I expected him to be all over me after that night during Thanksgiving break. It gave him an excuse to text me, call me, and show up at my dorm unannounced. I unblocked his number so he could tell me what he found out about Jackson and I've heard next to nothing.

For so long, I felt trapped, suffocated under his constant attention and refusal to let me go.

So why does his recent distance leave me feeling so...abandoned? Forgotten? I should feel relieved, but doubt clouds my judgment. The ghost of his obsession haunts me.

"It just doesn't make any sense. It's like he isn't interested anymore." Christine's face curves into a knowing smile, and I cut her off before she says what I think she's going to say. "No, Chris," I shoot her down.

She says it anyway. “So you *want* him to be interested!”

I bury my face in my hands and let out a yell of frustration. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Now, I’m no professional,” Christine begins.

“Then don’t give me any advice,” I respond with a groan.

She is not phased and carries on. “But I think you have feelings for Mr. McCade. Big ol’, take me in a graveyard, *do me, daddy*, feelings.”

“It makes me cringe inside to hear you say that.”

Christine clucks her tongue. “Does it, though?” She leans in to bump my shoulder with hers. “Does it *really*?”

I don’t need this psychobabble bullshit. What I need is everything to be right with the world. I need my body to stop acting weird and my best friend to stop disappearing at random times. I need Xavier to return to some semblance of normalcy, and I need my mother to stop calling me to ask how I’m handling the divorce. I need to turn back the clock to six months ago when everything was predictable, and I knew how to handle it.

The door to the back rooms creaks open, and a nurse steps through, holding a chart. Her soft-soled shoes make no sound as she approaches. “Kaye?” she calls gently. Her voice is kind, but my pulse spikes with unease.

I stand on shaky legs, smoothing my sweaty palms over my jeans. Christine gives my hand a quick, bracing squeeze as I follow the nurse. “Let’s get this over with,” I whisper to her. “Before I throw up again.”

The nurse overhears me and frowns. “Do you need to use the bathroom, ma’am?”

I shake my head. “Not right now, but ask me again in a few minutes.” The sterile doctor’s office smell is making me queasy, but so far, the contents of my stomach remain intact.

Chapter 54

Xavier

My mother collects secrets like trophies, locking them away to examine later in the dark. When I confronted her about Jackson, she feigned ignorance, waving me off with the excuse of work. But I knew better.

Behind her dismissive facade, her mind was already analyzing this new information, determining how she might use it to her advantage. Though she claimed not to know about my father's indiscretion, I clung to a shred of hope that she knew more than she let on.

I thought it would only take a few days for Victoria to gather the information she needed to unravel this mystery, but she burned through the weeks at a leisurely pace. She ignored my phone calls and didn't respond to my texts. When I showed up at her door, she turned me away.

I was growing frustrated with my mother's lack of interest, but she went dark because her search was more thorough than mine and required a deeper dive. I took a few days, and I had half-assed information about Jackson. Victoria took three weeks before she called me to meet up, and she showed up with Jackson's life story and more.

Victoria approaches the kitchen table with a weary look on her face, the sharp click of her heels punctuating the silence. She tosses three folders at me, and they slap against the wood surface. "Your father is

a monster.”

Dark circles ring her bloodshot eyes, deep purple stains marring her usually pristine complexion. She collapses into the chair across from me with a listless sigh, not even trying to disguise the heavy fatigue weighing her down.

“What’s this?” I grab the dark blue folder and start flipping through the pages. It’s full of pictures of young women.

“A dossier on every slut that Malcolm pursued over the years. You’ll see your little girlfriend’s picture toward the end,” she gestures tiredly with her hand. “I need a drink.”

I ignore her invective and search for Kaye’s profile. Nothing in the dossier about her surprises me.

The cabinet doors slam shut as Victoria gets up to rummage through them. She grabs a large wine glass, the bowl foggy with fingerprints, and sets it on the granite counter with a sharp crack. Reaching beneath the sink, she extracts a half-empty bottle of chardonnay and twists off the cap to generously pour herself a glass.

“Have you considered rehab, mother?”

Victoria shoots me a sharp look. “I knew your father sought the attention of young women from time to time. But I didn’t know that it was *every* young woman in the tri-county area. I think I deserve more than a *glass* of wine, Xavier.”

Try as I might, I cannot comprehend the pull of alcoholism. I grasp blindly for comparisons to things I know—my fixation with Kaye, perhaps. But the fire she ignites in me leaves my mind clear. Not like the haze my mother descends into after each drink. But who am I to judge when I have never felt the claustrophobic walls of addiction close around me?

I wonder if I should be tougher on Victoria, if I should try to get her some help. Am I even allowed to cast stones when I am standing in the shadow of my own obsession?

“Are you still dating the pool boys?” I change the subject.

Victoria gives me a scathing look in reply. “I was never *dating* them,” she says as she returns to the kitchen table. “We had an *arrangement*.”

My father had an arrangement with the woman he knocked up. If she never called him or asked for child support, he would write her a check for a million dollars and never bother her again. It was enough for her to keep her mouth shut for nearly twenty years.

“Does any of this,” I wave toward the stack of files, “tell me if Malcolm ever went after Jackson’s mother for telling him the truth?”

“From what I know, they had a conversation five years ago, and that was the last time they talked. When I showed up at her front door a few days ago, she seemed to know exactly who I was. She apologized for what happened and said she was a different person back then.” Victoria huffs in disgust.

I toss the first folder back and grab the one draped in dark green. Flipping it open reveals sheets of white printer paper packed with tiny black text. Jackson's birth certificate sits atop the first page. What follows is an exhaustive account of his life, reduced to sterile facts and timelines.

Academic accomplishments, noted in brief bulleted lines. No flavor of late nights spent studying or the stress of exams endured. Just credentials stripped of context.

His employment history is listed by company, position, and duration. Nothing on workplace friendships, office jokes, or the taste of celebratory drinks after a big win.

Medical charts and graphs delineating his health and fitness over the decades, no doubt taken by breaking HIPAA guidelines.

No hint of Jackson's thoughts, passions, or regrets. Only concrete, measurable data.

This record holds no emotion. And still, I search for traces of my older brother's personality between the lines of fact.

“Have you read everything?” I ask after a while.

Victoria glances at the paperwork strewn across the table. “It reads like a

Stephen King novel,” she responds dryly. “It’s all horrifying, but once you start, you have to find out how it ends. It seems your half-brother is doing well for himself, courtesy of his long-lost daddy’s connections.”

It occurs to me that all along, my father was the one I should have blamed for the way things turned out. He's the person I should have held responsible. The shock of this revelation hits me like a hammer.

“Kaye never did anything wrong.” My face grows heavy with a frown as the world around me slows and blurs. I'm having an out-of-body experience.

Victoria makes a questioning sound. “What?” She asks when I don’t say anything. “What are you talking about?”

For three years, I've been consumed with an obsession for revenge towards a girl who had done nothing wrong. I made her pay for sins that weren’t hers. I crushed her spirit for my own amusement, relishing in the pleasure of her pain. “It wasn’t even Carrie’s fault. Not really.”

“That bitch should have known,” my mother says with a glare. “A woman *always* knows.”

Carrie said she saw photos in my father’s office when she was his client. She watched them slowly disappear, and she listened to his sob story about how he had a bad home life. She had her reasoning for doing what she did, but I don’t think she knew she was hurting my family in the process.

It was never anyone’s fault but Malcolm’s. He's caused untold pain and suffering.

“I have to go, mother. Can I take these with me?” I gesture toward the files and scattered papers.

She shrugs as she takes a sip from her glass. “Go ahead. I have copies. I wouldn’t read them if I were you, though,” Victoria warns.

As I collect everything into a neat stack, I ask, “Why not?”

"Xavier, look at me." My mother's manicured nails dig into my arm as she reaches out and forces my eyes to meet hers. "You're a better man than Malcolm. Kinder. But if you're not careful, your father's poison will infect

you until there's nothing good left." Her grip tightens, polished tips nearly piercing my skin to emphasize her point. "I've seen the rot festering inside Malcolm. The things he did..." She shudders. "Vile, twisted things. They haunt me, Xavier. I don't want his sickness to pass to you."

I want to heed her warning, but I know me. I'll take these papers and lock them away for a rainy day. But like the telltale heart, they'll beat through the walls of my safe until I'm driven to read them. "You know I won't be able to stop myself," I concede.

Victoria sighs, understanding the weight of what she's done and how it will rest on my shoulders until justice is served. "I have allowed Malcolm's choices to rule my life for the better part of three decades. And all I have to show for it is a drinking problem and a home haunted by his memory. Don't be like me, Xave. Don't let him run your life, too."

I hate to admit she's right.

I leave the folders on the table and walk away. Away from papers that will assuredly turn me against my father. Away from bios that will make me hate people I've never met. Away from the folders threatening to change who I am at my core.

Every one of my limbs feels numb and tingly, but my first breath of fresh air feels like relief. There is one more person I need to speak to before I wash my hands of this mess.

But after that, I'm done.

Chapter 55

Kaye

The nurse checks my vitals. A blood pressure cuff squeezes my upper arm as she holds it in place and pumps it full of air. The pulse oximeter is slid onto my finger, measuring the amount of oxygen in my blood cells. She swipes a thermometer across my forehead and proclaims, “98.2,” then enters the information on the computer. “What are you here for, Ms. Pennington?”

“I’ve been sick for a few weeks. Nothing major,” I explain with a shrug. “I’ve been nauseous all the time, and sometimes I vomit. I’m tired, but we’ve been studying nonstop for Finals. I figure it’s fatigue and stress, but my roommate,” I wave at Christine, “wanted me to see a doctor in case it’s something more serious.”

Her fingers fly over the keyboard, logging everything that I say. When I have nothing else to add, she smiles politely and says the doctor will be in shortly. “If you need to use the restroom, it’s the first door on the right when you round the corner,” she adds on her way out.

The door barely shuts behind her before Christine says, “She doesn’t want you to vomit in here.”

I would prefer not to vomit in here, either. I like to vomit in the comfort of my own home, which hasn’t been the case lately. I’ve puked in building bathrooms between classes, in the dorm bathroom while someone showered a few feet away, and once at Xavier’s place while he was making breakfast. It hasn’t been a private affair, much to my chagrin.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have come. A little throw-up never killed anyone.” It only happens once, maybe twice a day, then I’m back to normal until a smell shifts the contents of my stomach again. I’m hydrated, and I’m not losing any weight. I’m perfectly fine.

The doctor walks in before Christine has the chance to respond. It’s probably for the best because she looks like she’s about to tell me I’m crazy for not coming in sooner.

“Hello. Ms. Pennington?” She asks with a smile. “I’m Dr. Lauren.”

She asks about preexisting conditions, medications I’m taking, recent illnesses, lifestyle and diet changes, and more. Every answer is registered with a keystroke, emblazoned on my medical chart for eternity. When Dr. Lauren asks me to lie on the exam table, she pokes and prods my belly to see if anything hurts.

With her physical exam finished, she allows me to go back to my chair and finishes updating the file.

“There is nothing wrong that I can physically see, so we’re going to run a couple of tests. Just your standard flu and COVID tests to ensure the symptoms you’re having aren’t because you’re sick, along with some blood work. I’m sure this might be a redundant question,” the doctor pauses, “but is it possible that you might be pregnant?”

My first instinct is to say *no*, and the word is out of my mouth before I can stop it. We all know as soon as it lands that I have to take it back.

“Sorry,” I apologize quickly, “it’s complicated. The last time I had sex was in September, I think? It wasn’t recent. If I were pregnant, I’d know by now, right?”

The doctor logs a few more keystrokes into my file. “*Usually, yes,*” she concedes with a gentle intonation, “but some women respond differently to pregnancy. If you had gotten pregnant in September, you would be a minimum of three months along, perhaps even four, which would put you in your second trimester. Generally, women know before that, but stories come out every year about women not knowing they were pregnant until they were in labor.”

The nausea returns in full force, but this time, I'm certain it's caused by the doctor. "I think I'm going to be sick."

Dr. Lauren gets up from her chair and directs me to the bathroom. "When you come back, we'll grab some blood and do the other tests. We should have some answers by the end of the day!"

Christine follows me into the bathroom, closing and locking the door behind her. "Holy shit, Kaye," she whispers.

I don't need a reminder. I sit at the base of the toilet and wait for the nausea to pass. "Chris, I can't be pregnant."

She sits beside me on the grimy bathroom floor, rubbing my back and shoulders as I lay my head on her lap. "You're not, Kaye. You're not pregnant." But we both know that until the pregnancy test results come back, we won't know for sure.

"It's Xavier's," I tell her. "It can't be anyone else's. I've never-I haven't had sex with anyone else."

She digs her hands into my knotted muscles with practiced ease. The pressure is firm yet gentle enough to make my stress melt away like butter. "I know," Christine reassures me. "And if you *are* pregnant, you'll always be taken care of. Xavier wouldn't leave his child unprotected."

That's what I'm afraid of. If I'm pregnant with Xavier's baby, he'll never leave me alone. I'll never be free. I will always be his.

Chapter 56

Xavier

I punch Jackson's address into the GPS and follow Siri's voice as she leads me to his apartment in Rosedale. He lives in a decent neighborhood, but the siding along the three-story building looks like it's been painted once or twice to hide the weathering. There is a garden in front of the first-floor apartments, but it's full of dried, dead flowers that could use some pruning.

I march to the second floor and search for the faded silver numbers that announce where he lives. The walkways are well-kept, with doormats in front of each apartment and beautiful plants growing in hanging pots.

Jackson's apartment has a wreath on the door. I tear it off and fling it behind me. A few seconds later, it crashes to the ground with a thud, and the decorations scatter.

I knock on the door and stand with my fists clenched at my sides, anger and tension rolling off me in waves. I remind myself to be level-headed; none of this is Jackson's fault. As always, it's Malcolm's, and I need to place blame where it's deserved.

But when Jackson opens the door and sees me, he pulls on a cocksure smile. "Well, well, if it isn't Xavier McCade finally *gracing* me with his presence." He has the guts to laugh. "It's about damn time. Given what Carrie told me about you, I expected you to be here weeks ago. I was starting to think you'd never work up the nerve to confront me."

Fuck level-headed. I raise a fist and swing, my knuckles connecting with

Jackson's jaw. The force of the punch sends him reeling backward out of the entryway.

Jackson catches himself on the couch a few feet back. He reaches up to probe his sore mouth and pulls away fingers dotted with blood. "You son of a bitch," he swears.

I can see the resemblance now. We share many of the same characteristics, but it isn't until anger is etched on his features that it feels like I'm looking in a mirror.

"Stay the hell away from Carrie and Kaye," I warn him. "I don't know what you think you're doing, but it stops now—seeing Carrie, worming your way into her life, pretending to be the caring best friend. Blah, blah, blah. Stop." I crack my knuckles by my side, preparing to strike again. "You leave them both alone or next time, a little tap on the jaw won't be the only thing you'll have to worry about."

Jackson lets out a bellowing laugh. "That's rich, coming from you." His laughter turns into a cough as he struggles to catch his breath, straightening his spine to stand toe-to-toe with me.

"How long have you been stalking your *stepsister*, Xavier?" He runs his tongue across the front of his teeth. "Don't worry. I don't want Kaye. She's cute, but pursuing her is a waste of my time. Carrie, on the other hand," Jackson chuckles, "Carrie's been lonely for a long time. Her husband was more interested in her *daughter* than her. That hurts, you know. It's enough to make a woman seek out the attention of another man."

It's always Malcolm's fault. Everything. All the time. And the realization blinds me with rage. "If you want to blackmail our father, you go right ahead. I don't give a shit what you do to Malcolm. But leave the Penningtons alone." I never thought there'd come a day when I stood up for Carrie.

"Malcolm abandoned his wife for greener pastures, and he did it because of *you*. If anyone should stay away from Carrie, I think we both know who it is. So, how about *you* worry about *your* love life and let *me* worry about *mine*?"

"Fuck you, Jackson," I growl.

"I'm only interested in fucking Carrie, but thanks." He rubs his jaw and

shakes his head. "It's only a matter of time before the divorce is finalized. Then I can have Carrie all to myself. She's half in love with me already," Jackson says with a grin, "I make her feel like she can do anything."

I should be kinder to Jackson because his childhood wasn't as good as mine. He wasn't poor; his mom had Malcolm's money, but he didn't grow up with two loving parents like I did. I know that I should take pity on him because we share the same father; we both know what it's like to be scorned by Malcolm's love.

But I hate him.

I hate Jackson for showing up just as I was beginning to fix things between Kaye and me. I hate him for growing up in a healthy environment. I hate him for getting the revenge I always wanted.

But most of all, I hate him because I hate my father. I asked my parents for a sibling for years, and they denied me. All along, my father knew that I had a brother, and he kept it from me.

"Face it, Xavier," Jackson spits after a long, silent moment, "Carrie trusts me. She *confides* in me; she tells me her hopes and dreams. She leans on me when she's having a bad day. Actually," he takes pleasure in my pain, "she was with me the day you fucked up Malcolm. Which, by the way," he pauses to chuckle, "I just want to say that I'm glad you didn't kill him. Since half the fun will be watching Malcolm accept that his *wife* left him for his *son*, I'm glad he isn't dead. That would ruin all the hard work I put into this plan."

Jackson's been playing the long game. I remember thinking that Carrie looked a little frazzled when she showed up to talk to Victoria that day. I vaguely recall her saying something to me on the drive back to Rosedale. She said that she loved my father, but there were extenuating circumstances.

"You're a sick man, Jackson."

"No," he pins me with a glare, "*you're* a sick man. Who obsesses over their stepsister?"

"Who obsesses over their father's wife?" I retort.

With a maniacal laugh, he steps forward to grab the edge of the door. "Guess

we're more alike than you thought, *eh, brother?*”

Chapter 57

Xavier

I feel a different kind of lost. The kind of lost that steals the breath out of your lungs and makes the world feel like it's racing by while you're standing still. A kind of lost I never thought would happen to me.

I follow my feet to the car, hardly realizing I'm walking. I was talking to Jackson, but now I'm sitting in the front seat.

It's been a semester of profound change, and the only person I want to share this newfound revelation with is Kaye. I grab my phone and call her, praying that she picks up.

She answers on the second ring, her voice sounding haggard and drained. "Hey, Xave. What's up?"

"Can I come over?" I blurt out.

For a second, I think she's going to say no. Kaye pauses for a long moment before replying. "I don't feel well. I think I'm coming down with something."

My heart sinks into my stomach, and the life drains out of me quicker than the air from a punctured balloon. I realize I've allowed her to become my source of joy and comfort. Her presence has been my lifeline for unending desires and vengeful inclinations. She is—and was—everything to me, even if I didn't want to admit it to myself.

"I'll bring you some soup," I decide hastily. I can't go back to my empty home. What was once a tranquil sanctuary from the chaos outside has transformed into an inescapable void of loneliness. "I'll be there in half an

hour.”

“Xave, no,” she begins, but I hang up before she can talk me out of it.

I stare at my phone for nearly a minute, waiting for her to call back and tell me not to come. But no such thing happens, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

Presto's Deli, nestled in the heart of Rosedale, emanates a welcoming aroma of freshly baked bread and simmering spices. The owner brought over recipes from his village in Italy, and everyone knows his Italian Chicken soup with pastina can cure anything. It is a staple in the community. So I grab a *to go* container for Kaye.

Despite feeling like I'm doing a good deed, it is bitterly cold outside, and I curse Kaye for choosing to live on campus when I'm forced to park almost a block away from her dorm. With the student population in short supply, the university is filling holes in the parking lot. There are a select number of spots near Calvert Hall, but all of them are taken.

I shiver as a blast of icy air slaps me in the face. My teeth threaten to chatter, but I find warmth in the building a few moments later. Thank God because my fingers are already numb from the cold. I spend the entire walk to the second floor flexing my digits until I have feeling in them again.

Someone drew a Christmas tree on the whiteboard on their door, and I smile as I knock. One day, I'd like to put up a tree in my house. I haven't had the time or inclination since coming to Blackmore, but I bet if Kaye moved in, we would put one up together.

She opens the door a few moments later, looking as dreadful as she sounded over the phone. Her eyes are glassy and underscored by bruised shadows. Strands of limp hair cling to her forehead.

“I brought soup,” I announce as I hold up the styrofoam cup.

Kaye perks up when she sees the Presto logo emblazoned across the front. “Come in,” she ushers me inside. “You should have said you were getting pastina soup!”

No one can resist the Italian Chicken.

The small dorm room looks different bathed in daylight. It splits almost perfectly down the middle, with Kaye and Christine's living space reflecting their personalities perfectly.

The left side of the room is an explosion of color and chaos; it's where Christine sleeps. Her bed is haphazardly made and covered in a beautiful bohemian throw blanket. There are at least half a dozen accent pillows in various patterns and colors. She has posters and photos covering her side of the wall in a collage style; a vision board that tells me all of Christine's hopes, dreams, and ambitions.

Kaye's side of the room is tidy, with her bed neatly made and a simple white comforter pulled taut over each side. Her desk is a few feet away, with textbooks, notebooks, and pens perfectly aligned next to her laptop. Her walls are bare except for a calendar highlighted in every color of the rainbow, echoing her class schedule and commitments.

"You know, this is giving me *deja vu*," Kaye announces as she plops down on her bed with the cup of soup. She gestures at the edge of the bed and the chair in front of her desk. "Please, sit wherever you'd like." We've never been this cordial to one another; I could get used to it.

I sit in front of the desk and watch her pull the top off the soup and inhale the delicious, savory scent. "About what?" I ask.

She pauses in her ministrations and frowns. "About what, what?" Kaye asks, confused.

"You said this was giving you *deja vu*."

Kaye snaps her fingers at me, pointing in delight. "Yes, that!" She exclaims with a smile. "I was having some strange dreams about you a few weeks ago."

I keep my features impartial. "Oh, really?"

She searches through the takeout bag for the plastic spoon and stuffs a heaping portion of the *pastina* into her mouth when she finds it. "Yeah. Actually," Kaye blushes, "they were, um, sex dreams."

I feel a twitch at the corner of my mouth as an involuntary smile buds in response to Kaye's admission. Despite my intentions to remain stoic, my traitorous lips betray amusement at her predicament. "You were having sex dreams about me? When?"

"Before Thanksgiving. They sort of stopped after that, but they always took place here in my dorm. Crazy, right?"

Crazy, indeed. All that time, I thought she was a heavy sleeper. In a way, she was. Kaye believed that everything that happened was happening to her while she slept. "Were they good sex dreams?"

A fiery blush engulfs Kaye's face, creeping from her neck to the tips of her ears. She averts her gaze quickly, eyes darting around as if searching for an escape. Desperate to avoid further discussion, Kaye shovels several large spoonfuls of soup into her mouth. "Thanks for bringing this, by the way. I went to the doctor this morning, and they did a flu test. I should be hearing back soon."

"It would suck to have the flu over Christmas."

With a derisive snort, Kaye turns away from me. "That's not the worst that could happen," she says with a mumble.

It's been nearly a month since I saw her last. When I brought her back after the night at my house, I swore I'd leave her alone. I promised myself that I'd stop sneaking into her dorm in the wee hours of the morning. I told myself I'd be a better man.

But each night apart from her grated against my instincts, howling at me to reclaim what was rightfully mine. I could have slipped within these walls and lost myself inside her. But I refused. I told myself that I had to stop. If she ever found out that the intimate moments and pleasure we shared were more than a dream, she would never forgive me.

"This is so good," Kaye moans with delight. "I should have thought of this. I've been lying here feeling miserable all day."

"What's wrong?" I ask, readily changing the subject. "You said they did a flu test?"

She nods her assent. “Yup. And a COVID test, just in case. I’ve just been sick,” Kaye says quickly and evasively. “I figure they’ll just give me some antibiotics, and I’ll be better in no time.”

I don’t think doctors give out antibiotics for the flu or COVID, but I keep my mouth shut because it looks like she’s comfortable lying to herself. “I don’t think I’ve had the flu since junior high.”

“I’m generally immune to it,” she beams. “I get a cold occasionally, but never anything more serious.”

“I had pneumonia once,” I perk up. “Senior year of high school. I missed a week of class, actually.”

It started with a scratchy irritation in my throat over winter break, nothing more than a mild annoyance. Within days, a deep, wet cough had taken up residence in my chest. I spent the first week of the new semester bedridden and coughing. My mother spared no expense to get me better and had a doctor sleeping in the room next door to mine until she was sure I would be okay.

Kaye laughs when she hears the story. “Rich people problems, am I right?”

It happened before I met Kaye, before I realized that money could be used for good and evil. I survived, and I thought that it made me stronger, but I’ve learned recently that strength is a balancing act and money can’t fix everything.

Before I can respond, Kaye’s phone rings, and she leans over to set the soup on the side table. She answers as she’s finished swallowing the pasta. “Hello? Kaye speaking.”

I hear a woman’s voice on the other end of the line, but her words are muffled from this far away.

Kaye affirms her birth date with the woman, and I suspect that it’s the doctor’s office calling with the results of her flu test. But a few moments later, her face turns sheet white, and she drops the phone. The woman can be heard asking if Kaye is still there, but she doesn’t answer. After a couple of beats, the nurse hangs up.

“Kaye?” I lean forward in my chair, reaching out to touch her. “Is everything alright?”

She turns to look at me with a vacant expression. “I-I-I’m pregnant.”

Chapter 58

Kaye

In the middle of our conversation, my phone rings. Usually, I wouldn't answer a call from an unknown number, but I've been waiting on my test results all day. I set my soup on the side table and quickly swallow the pastina in my mouth.

"Hello?" I answer. "Kaye speaking."

"Good afternoon, Kaye. I am Jacqueline Colt, the nurse at Everton Health Center. I have your test results from your appointment earlier today. Can you confirm your birth date, please?"

Butterflies start forming in my stomach. "July 1st, 2005," I answer.

"Great, thank you." Every word she speaks is formal and professional. "Your flu and COVID test came back negative. However, the pregnancy test came back positive. You'll need to speak to an OBGYN to find out how far along you are and-"

I drop the phone in my lap. The nurse is still talking, but she sounds like she's underwater.

"Kaye?" Xavier leans forward, reaching out to touch the edge of the bed. "Is everything alright?"

Nothing is ever going to be alright again.

I turn to look at him, but my vision blurs, and his features become distorted. "I-I-I'm pregnant," I stutter. My lips barely form around the words. Panic

rises inside me like a tidal wave, my body reacting before my mind can catch up. "I'm going to be sick."

I shoot off the bed and scramble toward the door on unsteady feet. As I fling it open, Christine stands on the other side, reaching for the knob.

My stomach tosses and turns, threatening violence if I don't find a bathroom *right now*. I shoulder past my best friend, ignoring her call as a fresh wave of nausea hits me.

Bile rises in my throat, and I clap a hand over my mouth as I sprint toward the end of the hall where the bathroom is. Behind me, Christine shouts, but I can't register her words over the roaring in my ears.

I slam through the bathroom door, sliding on the tile before crashing to my knees in front of the first open stall. My stomach tightens, and I heave, pasta and broth exploding from my mouth in a projectile mess. Tears spring to my eyes in equal parts relief and misery.

It's quiet for one long moment, and the only sound is my heavy breathing echoing off the tile walls. I'm pregnant; I can't believe it.

"What did you do to her?" Christine's voice pierces the silence as she heads for the bathroom, followed by the sound of leaden footsteps.

"Why do you always blame everything on me?" Xavier snarls.

Christine huffs in frustration. "Because you're usually at fault. Why don't you take some responsibility for your actions?"

They enter the bathroom bickering like siblings. It's enough to make me groan, "Stop. Both of you. You're making my head hurt."

"She probably threw up because she's sick of your face," Christine whisper-yells at him. "Are you happy now?"

"You know what would make me happy? If Kaye knew about Niccolo. How about we tell her-"

"Shut up," she hisses, cutting him off and giving me a side glance to see if I was listening. When I don't react, she vehemently responds, "Nothing is going on between Niccolo and me."

I hate both of them. It's my time of need, and they're arguing about God knows what instead of comforting me. They both suck.

"Hello?" I lament from my prone position on the bathroom floor. "Could either of you two tell me where to get new friends? Ones that will commiserate with their pregnant friend instead of ignoring her?"

Christine gasps dramatically, covering her mouth with her hand. "Stop," she whispers. "You are not."

Xavier smiles at her like the cat that ate the canary. "She sure is. I told you it wasn't my fault."

"You," she rounds on him, "shut up. It is your fault. How do you think she got this way?"

He opens his mouth to respond but realizes that she's right; he's the only man I've had sex with. Xavier narrows his eyes and crosses his arms over his chest in defiance. "Yeah, well, it's not the same," he grumbles angrily.

Christine whips around to look at me, her nose wrinkling in disgust when she notices I'm lying on the ground. "Just say the word, Kaye."

"What word?" Xavier takes a step forward, confused. "What is she talking about?"

"We've talked about this," she goes on. "If you don't want Mr. Crazy's kid, I'll drive you wherever you want to go."

Xavier catches on immediately. "You want to abort my child?" He roars. "Over my dead body."

"Don't tempt me, McCade," Christine glares. "If that's what she wants, I'll find a knife."

"Just try it," he steps toward her and cracks his knuckles, making himself seem more menacing. "Bigger men than you have tried to take me out, and I'm still standing."

"I hope you both die in a fire," I mumble. Neither of them notice or hear me over the sound of their arguing.

Christine shoves her finger into Xavier's chest and tells him to back off if he knows what's good for him. "I won't let you bully Kaye into keeping your demon spawn."

"You stay the hell away from my baby." Xavier slaps her hand away, and I can tell he's trying his best to restrain himself. If she were a man, he would have started throwing punches. "I worked too damn hard to get her pregnant for you to ruin it."

Christine snorts in his face. "Yeah. Fucking her in a graveyard is hard work. I hope you didn't strain a muscle."

Xavier's face turns a bright shade of red, and he opens his mouth to respond. Whatever he is going to say is quickly forgotten. He looks from Christine to me and back again before threatening her. "If you kill my child, I'll kill you."

"Yeah, yeah," she yawns, "I'm doing whatever Kaye wants. And if she wants a doctor to suck out your evil seed with a vacuum, I support her."

He storms out of the room before he loses his cool. The bathroom door slamming shut behind him, causing the tiles to echo with the memory of his anger.

"I'm not aborting his baby, Chris."

With a weary sigh, she lowers herself to the ground beside me. She rubs my arm, her hand gliding in a soothing rhythm across my skin. "I know, but it's fun to rile him up."

Chapter 59

Kaye

When Christine is on a mission, nothing gets in her way. And since I can't drink, she goes to the store and brings back five pints of Ben & Jerry's.

"I didn't know which one you'd want in a crisis," she proclaims as she pours the bag on my bed.

I look at the array of ice cream choices and start digging in. If you can't beat'em, join'em. I want to wallow in misery while stuffing myself full of empty calories. "You know that anything we don't eat will probably melt," I warn her.

"Or worse," Christine adds in a sinister tone. "We'll put it in the communal freezer, and someone else will eat it."

I don't know what I'd do without her. Christine is my best friend, my safe harbor from life's temperamental tides. She makes it easier for me to make it through each day. Because despite all the silly mantras and fake it 'til you make it confidence, I'm not very outgoing. Christine helps me to become my best self. Her unwavering support has allowed me to bloom a little more each day, leaning into my strengths instead of shrinking away from imagined flaws. When we're together, I feel like I can do anything.

Christine wakes up before me the next morning. I hear her rustling around for a few minutes before our dorm door opens, and she slips out.

When I'm finally ready to get up and face the day, she barges through the door with a shout on her lips. "I've got it all taken care of!"

"What?" I ask with a yawn, suddenly feeling like I should get back in bed and sleep for a week. "What did you get taken care of?"

Christine can barely contain her energy. "I called the OBGYN's office. They can get you in this afternoon. Surprise cancellation," she says with a shrug. "And there's a Lamaze class in Manhattan every Wednesday night, and I signed us up."

I don't know what she's going on about, but I'm sure that I will *not* be going to Lamaze. "I thought that was a breathing thing."

"It is," she says excitedly. "It's learning to labor with breathing and relaxation methods."

That's got to be a joke. I've never had a baby before, but I've seen movies. There's a lot of screaming, a shit ton of pain, and someone's water always breaks during a dramatic moment. "I'm not taking a Lamaze class."

Christine laughs breezily as she drops onto her bed. "Yes, you are. It's on Wednesdays at 7 pm. We start next week."

I'm not relying on a few breathing exercises to get me through labor. I want an epidural as soon as they'll give me one. I'm not a wimp when it comes to pain, but I don't want to be the person screaming bloody murder and threatening to kill everyone in the room. I haven't had much time to think about it, and maybe I'll change my mind later, but I've heard a lot of good things about my mom getting an epidural when she was in labor with me.

I don't have time to rattle off these facts because Christine has a whole list of plans for our day, including, but not limited to, ignoring every one of Xavier's attempts to get in touch with me.

"No," she says after his fourth missed call and twelfth text message. "You're

done with fuck boy shit. At least for today." Christine grabs my phone and pockets it so I won't be tempted to respond. "If he's calling to tell you that you have to keep his evil child and become his teenage bride, it can wait twenty-four hours."

I bite my lip to keep from blurting out that she can't run my life any more than Xavier can. But since she bought me anti-nausea meds and a cup of hot chocolate because I can't have too much caffeine, I'll forgive her this one time. And because I know that she's trying to process this the same way I am.

Christine insists on driving me to the OBGYN's office. She swears she's trying to limit the discomfort in the early stages of my pregnancy, but I think she's trying to get a handle on her emotions. She hasn't freaked out once, but I can see the fear bubbling beneath the surface. We are both terrified of what comes next.

When we were in high school, Christine and I spent hours discussing what we'd do if we got pregnant before we graduated.

As a fourteen-year-old, I was sure that if I ever became pregnant, I would choose to have an abortion. My mother was the same age when she had me, and even with my grandparents and father's help, she still struggled to finish high school.

Christine always said she would carry to term and then give the baby up for adoption. Her mother would have encouraged her to keep it, but Chris knew her limitations. She felt she would be strong enough to bring a child into the world but not strong enough to provide the love and care it deserved. Not at fourteen, at least.

It's been four years since we made those plans. How I would handle things has changed, but they haven't for Christine. She still feels like that unsure, scared teenager that doesn't want to have a baby. And though she isn't the one who's pregnant, she's worried about me and what will happen next.

“It’s going to be okay, you know,” I tell her as we pull into the parking lot at the doctor's office.

She whips around to look at me, and I notice that her big brown eyes are not only wide but dotted with tears. I think the car ride got us both thinking about how our lives are going to change. “What’s going to be okay?”

“All of this. You. Me. Us. This baby.” I place a hand over my relatively flat stomach. I see moms do it in the movies, but I haven't started showing yet. “I know this isn’t how we envisioned our college experience, but we’ll figure it out, Chris. We aren’t fourteen anymore,” I remind her.

“Thank God,” she replies weakly. “You couldn’t pay me to be fourteen again.”

Some days, we both forget that we’re adults. The limitations we had in high school ended when we graduated. We aren’t the same girls anymore. We’ve been through immeasurable struggle and duress and came out stronger on the other side. But we still have each other.

“Xavier is going to want to be involved in this baby’s life; that’s his right,” I warn her. “But no matter what he becomes to me or how things change when this kid is born, I want you to know that you’re the most important person in my life.” I reach across the car to grab her hand and squeeze it tight. “I couldn’t have made it this far without you, Chris. We’re in this together, now and forever.”

Some people marry their greatest love. Others let them slip away. But my best friend is my soulmate and the love of my life in a way that no man could ever hope to be. And if that's all that life ever gives me, then that's enough for me.

Chapter 60

Kaye

In the office, the doctor asks, “Is this your partner?” There is no judgment in her tone; she asks to make conversation.

Christine and I have been holding hands since we got out of the car. I thought the front desk person looked at us suspiciously, but now it makes sense why. “No, ma’am,” I respond, “this is my best friend.”

“It’s good to have friends during pregnancy. Some women find it to be a lonely experience, but I’m glad you have support.” The doctor jots down a few notes before asking, “When did you find out you were pregnant? And was it a urine or blood test?”

“I found out yesterday via blood test at Everton Health Center.” It doesn’t hurt to give her all the details. “I went in thinking I might be sick or something. Guess all that vomiting was pregnancy-related,” I nervously laugh.

Dr. Haigh offers a polite smile. “There are a lot of women that think their pregnancy symptoms align with a cold at first. How long have you been symptomatic? And what symptoms have you been having?”

Earlier today, Christine and I looked up all the symptoms of early pregnancy. I blush when I admit that I didn’t notice I’d missed my period last month. “The nausea and vomiting started around Thanksgiving. I’ve also been gaining weight, but that could be related to spending more time snacking and studying. Some breast tenderness. Maybe fatigue, but that could also be related to studying for finals last week.”

She takes notes about everything. “It’s good to have a history of what you’re experiencing, regardless of whether it’s related to your pregnancy. This gives us a baseline that helps us know if something is wrong in the future.”

Her gentle demeanor makes me feel more at ease. I take a deep breath and settle into the seat beside Christine.

“When was your last period?”

I have that information on the calendar back in my room. Unfortunately, I don’t have it memorized. “October, maybe?” Oh god, has it been almost two months since I last had a period? I’ve been vomiting for a month, and I thought it was unrelated. “Actually, I think it was September,” I correct myself. “Because that’s the last time I had sex. Early September, I think.”

Dr. Haigh nods her head. “If we calculate your last period at September 1st, the furthest along you’d be is 15 weeks. That would put you in the second trimester. If we calculate it at the 15th, you’d be 13 weeks along, which would also put you in the second trimester. So, the odds are good that we should be able to detect a heartbeat and see your baby on the ultrasound. Do you mind getting on the table?”

“Not at all. I think I’m due in June, but I’d love to find out for sure.” Christine and I started planning this morning for a summer baby. School gets out in May, and I’ll have a few weeks to work on setting up a nursery. I don’t know where I’ll stay, but I have time to figure it out. Once the baby is born, I’ll still have four to six weeks before the new school year starts, and that’s plenty of time to look into daycares.

I hop up on the table, and Dr. Haigh lifts my shirt to apply the ultrasound goo to my stomach. It isn’t as cold as the movies suggest. A few moments later, she places the wand on my stomach and starts moving it around.

Her forehead wrinkles as she searches for the baby on the monitor. I can tell she’s trying to keep her face objective, but she’s struggling. “Is everything alright?” I ask after a few moments.

Dr. Haigh forces herself to smile. “Everything looks good, but I don’t think you are as far along as you think you are.”

Suddenly, I understand the wrinkled forehead and confusion. If I’m not

thirteen or fifteen weeks along, then when would this baby have been conceived? "What do you mean?" I ask nervously. "I'm like, 12 weeks along or something?"

She hovers over my stomach and points to the screen. "This is your baby."

There's barely a blip to differentiate the baby from the rest of my womb. "That... that black dot is my baby?"

She nods her head. "It would seem you are about eight weeks along, Ms. Pennington. Based on the size of the fetus, your due date is early August. Which would mean you conceived in early November."

That's impossible. I wasn't having sex in November. In fact, I haven't had sex in months. "Are you sure you're reading the screen right? That doesn't even look like a baby." I sound like a bitch, but I don't know what else to say. She has to be reading the ultrasound wrong because there's no way that I'm only eight weeks along.

The doctor pulls the wand off my belly and starts cleaning up. "In the first weeks of pregnancy, the baby is still forming. I promise that he or she will look a lot cuter in a couple of months. You'll be able to see its head, shoulders, fingers, and even its toes!"

I can't move, even when Dr. Haigh says I can return to my chair if I'd like.

"Since you're so early on in your pregnancy, we'll schedule you to return in four weeks. I can make a note to do another ultrasound if that helps. We should be able to hear the baby's heartbeat by then, too. We can usually hear the heartbeat on Doppler around eight weeks, but since we aren't sure of the conception date, we'll wait until your next appointment to check. I wouldn't want to worry you if we can't hear it right now. Do you have any questions?"

I have a lot of questions. For starters, is she pranking me? How can I only be eight weeks pregnant when I haven't had sex since September? Can I sue the doctor for trying to pull a fast one?

"The dreams," Christine snaps her fingers. "Holy shit, Kaye. The dreams."

The doctor looks at her in confusion. "Excuse me?"

My jaw drops as I realize what Christine is insinuating.

For weeks, I dreamt about having sex with Xavier. For some reason, those dreams always took place in my dorm room.

“Because they weren’t dreams,” I mumble. “They *weren’t* dreams, Chris.”

I feel lightheaded and a little dizzy. It doesn't make any sense. How did Xavier get in? How did he do all that stuff to me without waking me up? How did I sleep through the conception of our child?

I feel like I'm going crazy. Nothing seems real anymore; nothing makes sense.

But it dawns on me that I know one thing for sure: when I find Xavier McCade, I'm going to kill him.

Chapter 61

Xavier

I've been trying to get ahold of Kaye all day, but she hasn't responded. My calls go unanswered; I hear crickets in response to my texts. I go as far as to show up at her dorm and knock on her door; no one answers. Eventually, the RA comes out to tell me that I need to leave. I scribble a note on the whiteboard before storming off.

Who tells someone that they're pregnant and then falls off the face of the Earth? The audacity.

The little voice in my head reminds me to be gentle with Kaye. After all, she's going to be pissed when she finds out what I did.

In frustration, I angrily clean my house. Rock music bumps through the speakers as I wash the dishes by hand. I could put them in the dishwasher and save time, but for what? It isn't like I have anything to do when I'm finished cleaning.

I dust everything, even the tops of my ceiling fans.

I pile up all my bedding in the laundry room and throw sheets and pillowcases into the washer. Everything feels dramatic. From throwing a Tide pod into the drum to slamming the lid closed.

"The nerve of some people," I mumble under my breath. "Going around ignoring the father of their child."

I'm so upset that I nearly miss the doorbell repeatedly ringing. Between the cranked-up music and inner monologue, I'm in my own little universe. But

the ringing breaks through my reverie, followed by someone pounding on the door.

“Jesus Christ,” I swear, “hold the fuck up.” I search for the speaker remote, but it’s nowhere to be found. “Fuck it,” I decide. I open the front door, and Simple Plan blares through the opening.

“You came into my fucking room when I was asleep?!” Kaye explodes in a fit of rage, her voice slicing through the air like a blade. Her face is contorted with fury as she unleashes an onslaught of slaps aimed at my face.

“Calm. *Down!*” I snarl, my hands reaching for her wrists in a desperate attempt to stay her movements. But Kaye is too agile, and I wasn't expecting the fight. She forces me backward, and I stumble into the living room.

“I can’t fucking believe you!” She screams as she follows me. “I told you I never wanted to see you again. How dare you come into my room. How dare you *fuck* me while I slept!”

It doesn’t take a genius to discover that Kaye has figured out what I’ve done. There are a few missing pieces of the puzzle—for starters, who told her?—but she has a good grasp of the details.

“Kaye,” I warn her, “stop this. You’re pregnant.”

She grits her teeth in determination and starts swinging fists instead of open-handed slaps. “I know I’m pregnant! I’m eight fucking weeks pregnant, you piece of shit! Which shouldn’t be possible since I haven’t had sex with you since *September!*”

The missing pieces slip into place. “You went to a doctor?”

We’re screaming over Good Charlotte now. God, whose idea was it to blast the music so damn loudly?

“Shut the hell up,” Kaye swears. She stops throwing punches and pins me with a gaze that could cut through steel. “How dare you. How *fucking* dare you.” Kaye is running out of steam. The anger that drove her here, that forced her through my front door, that urged her to hit me over and over again, slowly dissipates.

“I’m sorry.” I’m not sorry that I knocked her up; I’m sorry that finding out has hurt her. “Kaye, I-shit.” I can’t apologize appropriately when Good Charlotte is screaming that girls don’t like boys.

I march to the stereo and yank the power cord out of the wall socket. Instantly, the music cuts off into silence. “I didn’t mean for you to find out about that.”

Kaye crosses her arms over her chest defensively. “You didn’t mean for me to find out you were coming into my room every night and finger fucking me? *Or* you didn’t mean for me to find out that when you said you wanted to fill my womb with your children, you were being fucking serious?”

A little of both. I didn’t mean for her to find out about it at all.

“All of it,” I admit. “But I stopped after Thanksgiving. After that night you slept at my place.”

“I was already knocked up by Thanksgiving, asshat.”

I don’t know what she wants me to say; I can’t take it back. I already did the fucked up thing, and now I have to deal with the consequences. “I’m sorry,” I repeat.

“No,” she cuts me off before I can continue. “You’re sorry you got caught. You aren’t sorry about what you did.”

“Potato, tomato.” Kaye is right. I’m not going to apologize for my actions. In the moment, they seemed like the right thing to do.

She shoves her finger at me. “Don’t get cute with me, Xavier. What the fuck am I supposed to do now?”

I have an idea, but I don’t know if it’s going to resonate with her. “We could get married, have our baby, and live happily ever after.”

“Are you crazy?” Kaye’s jaw drops open in shock and anger. “You must be delusional if you think I’m ever going to let you near my child. You fucking *psycho*.”

Okay, that one hurts a little bit. I know she’s angry, but she doesn’t have to be cruel. “That’s my child, too, Kaye.”

“No,” she shakes her head, “nope. Not anymore. I never want to see you again. I want you to stay the hell away from me, my mother, my child, my dorm, everything.” Kaye starts walking backward, slowly, one step after the other. “Stay away, Xavier.”

Do something, the voice in my head screams. Stop her!

Kaye whirls around and hurries away, urgency carrying her toward her parked car.

“Jackson is my brother!” I blurt out. “I think he’s targeting your mother as revenge for what Malcolm did to him.”

It’s the only card I have, and thank God I waited for the perfect time to play it because it stops Kaye in her tracks.

Chapter 62

Kaye

I know that I shouldn't give Xavier the time of day after what he did to me, but curiosity forces me to sit through an elaborate explanation of what's occurred over the last few weeks. By the time he finishes telling his tale, my head is spinning from all the new information.

At first, I thought he was just saying that Jackson was his brother so I'd stay. It would have been a scummy thing to do, but Xavier doesn't have a track record of being the most stand-up guy. Unfortunately, all the details line up.

"I can show you the intel my guy found out about Jackson, but it isn't nearly as comprehensive as what my mom dug up on him." Xavier grabs his laptop to show me the email from his private investigator.

I skim through pages and pages of information until my eyes start to blur, and the font becomes unreadable. I feel sick to my stomach as I wade through a carefully crafted story of lies and deceit. "You think he's scamming my mother?"

Xavier lets out a deep, exhausted sigh as he pushes away from the table. "That's the thing. I don't think he's trying to scam her. I think he's trying to get revenge for what Malcolm did to his mother all those years ago."

That is a familiar story. A heartbroken young boy watches as his family is destroyed and then uses an innocent woman to take his revenge. "I should warn my mother. I've been through this; I'm the only one that can help her."

A frown appears on Xavier's brow. "What? When have you ever been

through something like this?”

I give him a questioning look, hoping he is joking but realizing he's serious. “You and me, Xave,” I point out. “Your father hurt your mother, and you pursued me to get back at him and Carrie. Jackson discovered that your father hurt his mother, and now he's using Carrie to get back at Malcolm.”

Opening his mouth to respond, Xavier seems as if he is about to challenge my assessment, but the moment passes, and his posture softens. “Yeah, we might have some similar traits,” he mumbles.

“You two are practically twins.” I smile indulgently, enjoying the defeated look on his face.

I can understand why Jackson and Xavier would resent their father for the way he treated their mothers. Their fierce loyalty is an admirable trait. But it's unfortunate that my mother and I have become collateral damage in the process.

Suddenly, an unpleasant sensation wells up in my gut, and I'm overcome with nausea. “Do you have some water and crackers that I can borrow?” My cheeks flush hot and red as I stammer out my question. “Nobody ever tells you that morning sickness is a misnomer. It should really just be called all-day sickness.”

Xavier springs to his feet and tells me to wait here. “I'll be right back!”

“No worries,” I reassure him. “The only place I ever go anymore is the bathroom.”

Moments later, he appears with a cold bottle of water and a plate stacked with three types of crackers. “I wasn't sure what would make you feel better.” Xavier dumps the offerings on the table. He cares so deeply for me, and I am blessed to have him in my life—despite his explosive temperaments and unpredictable behavior.

I grab a couple of Ritz crackers and pop one in my mouth. Xavier helpfully loosens the cap on the water bottle I'm cradling in my lap, and I take a few slow, metered sips. I still feel nauseous, but the crackers and water help to ease my nausea. “Thanks,” I blush.

An uncomfortable quiet fills the room, only disturbed by the sound of me chewing.

“Do you think you’ll ever forgive me?” Xavier asks after a while.

I had a feeling this question would come up. After all, unforgivable anger drove me to his place.

“I don’t know, Xave. I think I’ll have to in order to break the McCade family curse.” I crack a smile at him, but he doesn’t return it. “But I’m going to need time,” I tell him honestly.

Xavier solemnly nods. “I understand.” And once more, the tense silence fills the space where words should go.

If I’m being honest with myself, I know Xavier will be a good dad. Maybe not at first because we’re still so young, but he’ll grow into it. I can see him getting up for middle-of-the-night feedings and endlessly rocking our baby on nights when sleep doesn’t come easily. I know he’ll be the type of man who cooks dinner with the baby in one hand and a wooden spoon in the other while I shower after a long day.

Xavier has become the kind of guy who would rather see me happy than suffer, which isn’t who he was six months ago. This side of Xavier is new. I’ve known the vicious, bloodthirsty side of him. The side that bullied me throughout my high school years. The side that made him do crazy things like finger me on the dance floor and fuck me in a graveyard. The side that drove him to come into my room night after night to have sex with me while I slept.

I know Xavier will make a fantastic dad someday, but I have to get past the atrocities that make up our history first.

“I need you to apologize. Earnestly,” I add. “I need to know that you aren’t just saying it because I’m pregnant. I need to know that you mean it.”

His face contorts into a frown as he reaches out to clasp my hand. “I’ve always meant it, little love.” Xavier interlaces his fingers with mine. “I’ve been angry for years. When I came home from France, saw my father’s packed bags, and heard my mother’s depressed wails, I was devastated. I never should have gone to your mom’s house that day. I should have taken the time to process my feelings instead of acting on them.”

He shifts in his seat, leaning in close to me. There is a softness in the twist of his body but a sincerity in his eyes that I've never seen before. "When I saw you for the first time, I was at my lowest point. My father had just left my mother, and I had no idea why. When I came to knock some sense into him, he knocked me down instead. I was embarrassed and humiliated and *literally* on the floor. Instead of recognizing that my anger was for my father, I took it out on you."

Xavier makes a show of swallowing as if he has a lump in his throat that he can't seem to get down. "All of the emotion I felt in that moment, I poured into you: my anger, jealousy, revenge, frustration, all of it. And because you were young and beautiful and innocent, what I felt toward my father became warped and twisted with what I felt for you. Which, I think, was some crazy form of love at first sight."

"I meant to hurt you; I thought it would make me feel better. I thought it would teach you, your mom, and Malcolm a lesson. Instead, in the process of destroying you, I nearly destroyed myself. You can't possibly know how livid I was today knowing that you were pregnant and cutting me off. I was ready to burn down every building and cut down every person that got in my way to you. All I wanted was to say I was sorry for what I'd done because I couldn't imagine going on without you and our baby."

Xavier hastily brushes his hand across his face, wiping away a tear before I notice. "Kaye, I know it will take me years to undo the damage I've done, but if you forgive me, I promise I'll never hurt you again. If you let me love you, I swear to God you'll never regret it."

I reach up to rub the irritation out of my eyes, but it turns out I'm tearing up, too. I've dreamt of an apology from Xavier for years; I never expected it to mean so much.

"Forgive me, little love," he whispers. "Forgive me, and I vow to spend every day of the rest of my life making it up to you."

My chest constricts with emotion, and I nod. "I will," I muster, "give me some time. And I promise I will."

If I weren't pregnant, I'd never forgive Xavier for what he did, but this is the way things were supposed to happen. This is our destiny.

I've known since I was fifteen years old that at the core of Xavier's twisted appetite for revenge was the need for love. I have to find a way to set aside my hurts to become what we've always been meant to be.

Chapter 63

Kaye

My mother has always made an effort to make Christmas special. Even before she had money, she would scrounge and save for those after-Christmas sales. When decorations were 50-70% off, she'd hunt down a bargain for the following year. That way, when I woke up on Christmas morning, I would see the house decked out in garland and strung popcorn and know that the thought and love someone put into the holiday was what made Christmas special.

After marrying Malcolm, Carrie had all the disposable income at her fingertips that she could want. Still, she decorated with the old stuff. Malcolm never noticed or cared; decorating was a woman's job, and he didn't want any input. Malcolm is out of the picture now, and still, nothing changes.

White Christmas lights twinkle along the eaves of the roof. Wreaths with big red bows hang on all the doors and windows. A large illuminated reindeer and sled are on display in the front yard. Multi-colored string lights line the path to the front door and wrap around trees and bushes dotting the lawn.

"Mom, I'm home!" Christmas music plays from every corner of the house. As I drift from room to room, I hear Mariah Carey's *All I Want For Christmas* everywhere.

"I'm in the dining room!" She yells back.

I follow the aroma of roasted turkey. "It smells amazing." The place settings and food look even better.

The table is dressed in a pristine white linen cloth gleaming with a dozen candles. A centerpiece of holly branches, ivy, and berries runs down the middle, interspersed with sparkling silver ornaments.

My mother has prepared a feast—the platters and bowls lining the table overflow with food. A turkey sits in the center, golden and crisp, surrounded by mashed potatoes topped with savory brown gravy. There’s a green bean casserole under a crust of fried onions, steaming dinner rolls, cranberry sauce studded with orange slices, and candied sweet potatoes swimming in butter and brown sugar.

“Mom, this is incredible.” And far too much for just the two of us. “It looks and smells delicious.”

She comes around the table to wrap an arm around my waist. “Merry Christmas, honey,” she says while affectionately laying her head on my shoulder.

“Merry Christmas.”

Today, she’s dressed more comfortably than the previous holiday dinners we shared with Malcolm. She wears khaki slacks paired with a peplum white top decorated with Christmas trees. She looks like my mother again but in more stylish attire. “I hope you don’t mind, but Jackson will be coming over in a bit. He’s having Christmas cocktails with his family, then dinner here afterward. I told him we might eat before he arrived, and he said that was fine. He just wants to spend Christmas with me.”

Carrie is beaming, and I hate having to be the one to rain on her Christmas parade, but she needs to know the truth about her new boyfriend.

“We can wait a bit if you’d like,” I offer. “I want to talk to you anyway.”

Her eyebrows stretch to her hairline in concern. “Is everything okay?”

I almost chicken out. It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her that I’m pregnant instead of telling her that her boyfriend is also her former stepson. But before I can articulate the lie, I remind myself this is for her own good. “Mom, it’s about Jackson.”

She bristles with tension. “What about him?”

I grab the edge of the table to steel my nerves. I've never wanted to hurt my mother, but I'm afraid that finding out Jackson's secret will do more harm than good. Unfortunately, I don't have the luxury of staying silent. "Jackson is Malcolm's son from an affair he had when he was married to Victoria."

Carrie stares at me without blinking, a storm of emotions dancing through her gaze. The smile on her lips grows tight before she whirls around and says she forgot something in the kitchen. "Take a seat!" She insists while she darts through the doorway.

I hear her moving around, picking up pots and pans and setting them down again. I don't think she forgot anything, but Carrie makes a big enough fuss that I know not to question her. When she returns a few minutes later, her cheeks are rosy, and her voice sounds too bright. "Shall we eat?"

I wisely say nothing as we dish up the meal. Even with a mountain of food on our plates, we haven't even put a dent in what she made. "This is a lot, mom."

"Most of the leftovers will be donated to the homeless shelter." Carrie smiles at me, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes. Though she explains in a light, airy tone that we need to give back to the community now that we're well-off, her words have an edge to them.

I should have picked a better time to share the news, like when I left Xavier's the other day. Or yesterday. Or tomorrow. Any day would have been better than Christmas. "Mom," I start.

She hears the concern in my tone, and the look on her face grows taut. "Kaye, please," Carrie begs, "this is a conversation I need to have with Jackson, not you. Let's talk about something else."

I have so much to tell her, but she isn't ready to hear it. With a heavy sigh, I share the other news with her. "I'm pregnant."

The stainless steel fork slips from her fingers and collides noisily with the fine China plate below, the metal clanging sharply against the porcelain. Her lips part slightly as her eyes widen from the impact of my announcement.

"It's Xavier's baby," I add quickly.

It's better that she finds out all the damning information at once. She can work through her shock without having to be re-traumatized later.

Without a word, Carrie abruptly pushes her chair back and strides away from the dining room. When she returns, she's holding a bottle of wine. She pulls out the cork and fills her glass before sitting back down to stare at me with an unreadable expression. "Say that again."

I surreptitiously cut my turkey into bite-sized pieces and repeat myself. "I'm pregnant with Xavier McCade's baby."

She grabs the glass of wine and brings it to her lips to drain it. Carrie smacks her lips together, and it's like we're back in the ghetto of Manhattan where nobody cares if we have table manners.

"Your father and I didn't mean to get pregnant in high school. You know that, right?"

I nod slowly, confused by the change of topic. "It was an accident," I reiterate the words she's told me a hundred times.

"A *happy* accident," Carrie clarifies. "Because we had you. And you were the most beautiful baby girl with the sweetest demeanor. You never cried, you slept well, you ate well, you were perfect."

I hope my baby is as easygoing as I was.

"But," my mother punctuates the silence, "it made it extremely difficult to finish high school. Your father graduated a semester behind his class. When you were a baby, I had to take online classes, and I graduated a year after I was supposed to. I also knew I couldn't go to college. I couldn't afford the classes, and I couldn't afford to put you in daycare or hire someone to take care of you. It was tough, Kaye."

"I'm not giving up my baby," I stand my ground. I don't know where my mom is going with this, but I don't like how she looks at me—apologetic, as if she's failed me somehow.

Carrie shakes her head after a few seconds and says she isn't insinuating that I give up my child. "Your father should have been around to see your tenth birthday. He should have been there when you had your first period and when

you turned sixteen. He should have celebrated your middle school and high school graduation. He should have been there through first loves, heartbreaks, school dances, crushes, and everything in between. But he wasn't. He was taken from us by a drunk driver, and that made your life and mine that much harder. It wasn't his fault, but it's the reason we're having this conversation."

She brushes her palm against the stem of her wine glass, a mere habit, but it does not calm her anxiety. "If he never died, I never would have met and married Owen. Which means I never would have sought out Malcolm's services as a divorce attorney. I never would have gone on a date with him, and you never would have met Xavier."

It's the domino effect. Or the butterfly effect. I can't remember which. But if one variable had changed, we wouldn't be here right now. We wouldn't be having this conversation. I wouldn't be pregnant with Xavier's child.

"Sometimes I think about this when I'm going to sleep at night," Carrie goes on. "Especially lately, as I've gotten to know Jackson better. He makes me feel like no other man ever has. And I realize that in order to have met Jackson, I needed all the bad, terrible, ugly, hard things to happen to me."

I've never thought about it like that before. Xavier wouldn't have had to apologize if we'd never met. I might have lost my virginity to a frat boy who didn't love me instead of my stepbrother. I might have had a boyfriend in high school that broke my heart beyond repair. Every step I take backward in the history of me, I could have done something different. It would have caused me less pain and suffering, but I wouldn't be where I am now. I wouldn't be *who* I am now.

"Do you love him, Kaye?" Carrie asks after a long stretch of silence. "Does he make you happy?"

Our relationship has been complicated by all the hard roads we had to take to get here. Our journey has been filled with twists and turns, conflict and challenges.

"I think we could be good for one another," I admit. "Things haven't always been good between us, but Xave and I are figuring it out. I think we could be happy. We just need time." I reiterate the same words to her that I told Xavier, but where he let me off the hook, my mother does not.

“Time is not a luxury you have,” Carrie smiles gently. “When are you due?”

“August.” Right when school is about to start back up, but I’m trying not to think about that. I need to get through one thing at a time, and if I start thinking about the new school year, I might go crazy.

Carrie looks down at her plate in contemplative silence, then grabs her fork and starts picking at what's left. “You can always leave a bad relationship, honey. I’ve proven that time and time again. But creating a good relationship is harder. If you think you and Xavier have what it takes to be happy, then pursue it with all your heart because I would trade everything I have now if I could go back and change what happened to your father. You deserved to have him there on the best and worst days of your life. Give that gift to your child if you can. You will never regret it.”

I’ve been hard on my mom over the years; I’ve seen her relationships progress through a child’s eyes. I thought it was selfish of her to want to be happy and find love, but that’s a universal experience. We all want to find someone that fills the empty spaces in our hearts.

“I’ll try, Mom, I really will. But there’s a lot that we need to overcome first.”

“It’s Christmas time, honey. Anything is possible.” With a mischievous twinkle in her eye, she returns to her dinner.

Chapter 64

Xavier

My pocket vibrates as I lie in bed, the noise jarring me from my trance. I fish around for it and find it in time to see my mother's name flash across the screen.

“Didn’t we just have Christmas dinner together two days ago?” I ask upon answering.

With a breezy laugh, she ignores the question and tells me to meet her at the coffee shop on Pine Street in thirty minutes. No explanation, just a request.

“It’s 2:00 pm.”

“And it’s a Wednesday. Do you have any other non-sequiturs you’d like to add?” A beat passes in silence, and Victoria adds, “Good. See you in thirty.” Then the line goes dead.

Kaye left my house a week ago, telling me she needed time to think. I figured she'd call the next day, and things would return to normal, but Christmas passed without a word from her. We seem to have different interpretations of how much time is needed.

I grab a jacket and my keys on the way out the door. The mid-afternoon sun hangs low, glistening with the promise of warmth. It’s a balmy 38 degrees outside, but warm enough that the Christmas Eve snow has melted. I make my way to the cafe and find a parking spot right in front of the entrance.

When I enter, I scan the room, searching for my mother. She sits in the back corner at a small table, clutching her designer handbag in her lap. To my

surprise, Carrie sits next to her. They're all smiles, which strikes me as odd, considering they hate one another.

"Mother," I nod deferentially toward her as I approach. "Carrie. Interesting to see you here."

She smiles politely before gesturing toward the empty chair. "Nice to see you, Xavier. Do you mind taking a seat?" Carrie asks. "We need to talk about Kaye."

My throat constricts with concern. "Is she okay?" I take the proffered seat. "Is the baby okay?"

"The baby is fine," Victoria reassures me. "This is about the two of you."

The fear in my chest deflates. I was afraid that they had banded together to tell me that Kaye had a miscarriage or she made the decision to abort my child. "What's going on between us is no one's business."

Carrie leans forward, her expression earnest when she says, "But it *is*, Xavier, because it involves our grandchild. I know you and I have never been close..."

That's the understatement of the year. She had an affair with my father that broke up our family.

"But Kaye needs you. I don't know what your relationship is like. I thought for years that you bickered like brother and sister, so it was a shock for me to find out that she was pregnant with your child." Carrie pauses to sip her coffee, stress prematurely lining her face.

Victoria finishes for her. "Your relationship with Kaye is complicated, but it seems you both want to be together."

My jaw ticks with frustration. They make it sound like we aren't together because I'm too stubborn to step up and be the man Kaye needs. "I tried to make amends for what I did, and she said she needed time. I'm giving her time, mother."

"Try a grand gesture," Carrie suggests. "Kaye didn't grow up with a healthy view of relationships or romance. She needs you to go out of your way to

prove that you aren't like all the men she's seen me with before."

I want to add, '*Men like Jackson?*' But I force myself to stay silent because their relationship is none of my business. What she does and who she does it with doesn't affect me anymore. She's divorcing my father, and the only reason she'll still be in my life is because she's the mother of the woman I love.

"Why are you two even together?" I change the subject. "Don't you hate one another?" I understood why my mother called her after the incident with Malcolm, but this doesn't make sense.

Victoria makes a few motions with her head that indicate disinterest. "I harbored resentment towards Carrie in the past, but Kaye is blameless in all of this. I may never be good friends with Carrie," her smile tightens, "but she explained that Kaye's ambivalence comes from a place of wanting to overcome what the two of you have been through. We are taking responsibility for our part in what happened."

Carrie nods in agreement. "If it weren't for our choices, you and Kaye never would have met."

"There have been times when I encouraged you to do things to Kaye that were less than polite." Victoria averts her gaze.

"And times when I ignored Kaye's pleas that you were being mean to her and picking on her. We know that we hold some responsibility for the way things turned out, and we want to do our part to ease the tensions between the two of you."

It's hard to be angry at her when she sounds like she wants to make things right. "And what sort of '*grand gesture*' do you suggest?"

Carrie tosses a glance at Victoria. My mother opens her purse and pulls out a small velvet box. She places it on the table before her and slides it toward me. "This was my mother's engagement ring from my father. When Malcolm asked for my father's permission to marry me, my father approved on the condition that it be with this ring."

I grab the box and open it, revealing an antique, round, brilliant-cut diamond ring in a minimalist platinum solitaire setting. It glitters in the low light of the

cafe, causing a lump to rise in my throat. “You want me to marry her?”

“I want you to promise you’ll never hurt her again. I want you to be a man she can depend on,” Carrie says. “I want you to be better than all the men that came before you because I can’t change what I did or the men I introduced her to. But *you* can show her that that doesn’t have to be her life. You can be the man she needs.”

I finger the box in my hand, eyes caught on the diamond and its promise. The ring is a symbol of forever. It’s a pledge to build a life together. It’s a vow of faithfulness and loyalty.

“I love her, you know. I always have.” Everything I’ve done, I’ve done out of love.

“I don’t claim to understand your relationship with my daughter, but if she wants to be with you and you will treat her right, then you have my blessing.”

“Thank you, Mom, Carrie,” I nod at them respectively. “This has given me a lot to think about.”

Kaye asked for time, but every day we’re apart tears me up inside. The guys on the football team will give me shit for getting engaged in college. My frat brothers will disown me. But if I have to choose between them and Kaye, I will *always* pick Kaye.

Chapter 65

Kaye

The clock tick, tick, ticks on the wall, inching closer to midnight. Despite it being New Year's Eve, the dorm is eerily quiet. Most of the remaining students are out celebrating, including Christine.

Sienna returned early from her Christmas trip to Minnesota, and the two of them dressed up in sparkling mini-dresses and hit the bars. They invited me to go with them, but I politely declined. Going out isn't the same when you're pregnant.

"We're in this together, little bean," I announce as I rub my stomach. "Happy New Year to us." My unborn child is a reminder that I'm not alone, even though I feel like the only person left on campus.

I flip through the channels on the television in the communal living room, looking for something to watch. A dozen couches and oversized chairs are scattered around me. "What does everyone want to watch?" I ask the empty seats and laugh when no one responds.

I settle for a show on HGTV. While a pair of brothers renovate different properties, I scroll through Snapchat stories and see what everyone is doing. Christine and Sienna are posting like madwomen, sharing video after video of the two of them packed like sardines on the Red Dawg dance floor. I'm glad I didn't go because watching them gives me secondhand claustrophobia.

I don't know where the time goes or when I fall asleep, but I wake up a while later to the fire alarm piercing the silence, relentlessly screeching at me to get out of Calvert Hall. I inhale deeply but can't smell smoke; my half-asleep

brain forces me to my feet. *I've got to get out of here before the dorm burns down*, I think to myself.

I grab the blanket from the couch and wrap myself in it as I make my way to the exit. There's no time to go upstairs and get a jacket. A few stragglers in the dorm are doing the same, each of them asking if anyone knows what's happening. I shrug my shoulders and follow the group.

The second I step on the cold concrete outside the dorm door, my naked toes turn into icicles. It's a bitter winter night, and panic swells inside me. What if we're out here all night, and I get frostbite? What if I have to get my toes amputated?

Just as I'm about to turn back and sprint through the halls in search of a pair of sneakers, people start saying that there are lights up ahead. Curiosity drives me a few feet forward, and sure enough, just around the corner, the entire parking lot is lit up with Christmas lights.

In the center of it all stands Xavier. I recognize his broad shoulders and commanding frame. My heart stutters in my chest, and my cold toes are forgotten as I draw closer.

"Xave?" I frown. The scene he created looks like something out of a movie, with soft lights strung from light poles and draped on the remaining cars. "What are you doing here?" I pull the blanket tighter around my shoulders as a chill races down my spine.

He rakes a hand through his hair and approaches me. "I'm sorry, Kaye. I need you to know that."

"You're sorry?" I thought we already hashed this out. He apologized a few days ago for everything he'd done. I told him I needed time, and that was true. I was going to give it until the New Year. On January 1st, I was going to turn over a new leaf.

"I'm sorry for what happened when you were fifteen. I never should have threatened or promised to hurt you for my own twisted gain." Xavier reaches into his pocket and pulls out a square, black box. My mouth parts as he drops to one knee in front of me.

"But I have loved you from the moment we met, even when I did things that

indicated the opposite. And I will love you every day for the rest of my life, even if you say no. But please, don't say no," he begs.

Xavier reaches out to grab my hand, and I nearly pull away because it's so cold, but his touch is warm, and it draws me nearer to him. "These last few months have been a wake-up call. I thought that once I destroyed you, I'd finally get over you. But every time we touched, every time you called me for help, every time I resolved to choose you over everyone else, I was cementing how I felt for you. And now I know that I will never be able to love anyone else. As long as you live and breathe, you are the only woman I want to be with."

My heart leaps into my throat as he pulls the ring out of the box and poises it at the tip of my finger. "Kaye Pennington, little love, will you marry me?"

Chapter 66

Xavier

Three Months Later

I hate to admit that I like my half-brother's company, but he isn't all that bad. However, if anyone tells my mother, I'll lie through my teeth.

"I don't like blue grotto, Kensington blue, rich navy, or French blue." Jackson looks away from the wall with a furrowed brow, blinking several times as if to reset his vision. "Lulworth is good, though."

I cock my head to stare at the lighter shades of blue. With Lulworth, Memorybook, and blue mist beside one another, it makes me dizzy. "I don't like the pastels."

Jackson rolls his eyes at my dismissive statement. "Then why did you swatch pastel blues?"

"Because he's a baby?" I shrug. "I don't know. Kaye said she liked blueberry muffin and wanted other shades like it, and then it just got out of control." Correction: *I* got out of control. She left the paint colors up to me, and I might have gone a little overboard.

"If she liked blueberry muffin, then why do you have all these dark shades?" Turning to me, Jackson crosses his arms and clucks his tongue disapprovingly. "Rookie mistake."

"You're right, I guess," I grumble. "Let's do Lulworth."

A wide grin splits Jackson's face in two. "Now you're talking. I'm gonna grab a beer. Need another?"

I shake the can in my hand; it's almost empty. "Yeah. Sure." Then I watch as my half-brother leaves the room to get another round of drinks.

Our friendship is tentative, to say the least. The first dinner I had with Kaye, Carrie, and Jackson, I thought I would launch myself across the table and strangle him. But Kaye grabbed my hand and smiled, whispering a *'thank you'* when no one was looking. I fought back the tidal wave of violence that threatened to consume me. For her, I would have done anything.

"I know it's weird for my mom to be dating your brother," she whispered.

"Half-brother," I corrected her.

Kaye indulged my petulance with a smile. "But we're all going to need to learn to get along."

Carrie must have had a similar conversation with Jackson because he showed up on my doorstep a week later to ask if I wanted to go to Top Golf. I didn't, but out of respect for Kaye, I said yes.

The two-hour drive was unpleasant, to say the least. I tried to make small talk about the library. Jackson tried to discuss football. We both felt awkward and out of place.

To temper our discomfort, we started drinking the minute we got to Top Golf. There are a handful of things half a dozen beers can't fix. Fortunately for us, starting a dialogue isn't one of them.

It was the worst game of golf I ever played, but we got so trashed we didn't care. After the game, we had to Uber to a hotel for the night. There was no way either of us were in a fit state to drive back to Rosedale. A night in the same room changed the way we interacted with one another.

“Here you go,” Jackson announces as he returns with another beer. He hands me a can with the top already popped. “We’re gonna have to paint over all those swatches, aren’t we?”

The guy working the paint counter called the manager over when I asked for eighteen different paint samples. He said they couldn’t give me that many samples; it would take forever to mix them all. But money greases palms, and two hours later, my cart was full of sample containers.

“In retrospect, I probably didn’t need to swatch this many colors.” Kaye told me that when we were in the store, but I pretended not to hear her.

“No shit.” Jackson snorts as he walks over to the wall. “But you’re excited, and you have the right to be. You’re having a boy.”

Two days ago, Kaye and I found out the sex of the baby. My heart couldn’t have grown anymore without bursting out of my chest. “It seems so surreal. I made the ultrasound tech check twice, just to be sure.”

He chuckles. “I think I would have, too.”

We set down our cans and get to work priming the swatches—eighteen shades of blue from pastel to nearly black. “Is, uh, is that something you and Carrie have talked about? Having kids, I mean.” I hope I haven’t crossed a line.

Jackson pauses in his ministrations before shrugging his shoulders. “Yes and no. Carrie said Malcolm didn’t want any more kids when they got married, which was fine because she was afraid it was all too good to be true, anyway.”

Carrie and Kaye didn’t grow up rich like Jackson and me. Jackson’s mother had Malcolm’s money. It wasn’t *‘buy a mansion in the rich part of town’* money, but it kept them comfortable. I grew up with Malcolm, knowing that money could solve all my problems and having enough of it to do anything I wanted.

“She thinks it’s different for me because I’m younger and haven’t started a family yet. She said she could understand if I wanted kids of my own one day, and she’d be willing to try, but I don’t want her to. It’s fun to practice,”

Jackson says with a sly grin, “but I’m not a baby person.”

“So we won’t be asking you to babysit.” I shake my head. “That’s one option out the window.”

Jackson rolls his eyes at me. “I don’t mind watching your kid, X. Babysitting is different. At the end of the day, I get to return the thing, ya know?”

“Good, our baby is a thing now.”

“God, you’re annoying.” Jackson grabs the Lulworth and heads to a wall that’s already been primed. “I can’t believe I’m going to have to put up with you for the rest of my life.”

I feel the same way about him sometimes. Jackson reminds me of myself in so many ways, and it’s infuriating. But the worst part is that he’s still somehow a better man than me.

He didn’t want to hurt Carrie to hurt Malcolm; he wanted to treat her better than her husband did so she’d leave him. It was the complete opposite of what I did with Kaye.

“Well, with any luck, Carrie will figure out you’re not very good-looking, you’re bad in bed, and then I’ll never have to see you again,” I joke.

“As if,” Jackson retorts. “I’m incredibly handsome and very generous with my tongue. Trust me. Carrie isn’t going anywhere.”

I could have lived the rest of my life without knowing about my brother’s oral skills.

“When are you and Kaye getting married, anyway?” He subtly changes the subject. I wonder if Carrie asked him to check in on us.

I go back to priming the swatch wall. “Whenever she says yes.”

Chapter 67

Kaye

T onight's the night.

"You're kidding." Christine narrows her eyes. "Tell me you're kidding, Kaye."

I spin my fork round and round in the center of my plate of alfredo. "It's time, Chris."

She slams her hands on the tabletop with an emphatic thud, grabbing the attention of everyone nearby. "No, it's not. You said you were going to stay with me in the dorms."

"*Until* I made a decision," I remind her gently. "They won't let me bring a baby to the dorms, anyway. Eventually, I was going to have to move out."

Christine frantically tries to dissuade me. "That's not true. You can bring a baby into the dorm if we just don't *tell* the RA you have a baby."

Unfortunately for her, I've already informed the residential advisor that I'll be moving out. "Forget it, Chris; I've already decided."

She wails in despair, like a child throwing a fit. People are starting to whisper behind their hands, making me uncomfortable. "I thought we'd have more time together. You, me, and little Chris." Ever since Xavier and I found out the gender, she's been convinced that we're going to name our child after her.

"It's been three months. Xave has more than proven himself. He deserves an answer."

Christine whines, “And that answer can’t be *no*?”

There was a time when it would have been. A year ago, if Xavier had asked me to marry him, I would have laughed myself dead. But everything has changed.

“I’m going to tell him yes.” Reflexively, my fingers move toward the ring hanging on the delicate chain around my neck. As I meet the cold metal, a rush of feelings swell within me.

It feels like it was just yesterday when Xavier strung the engagement ring through the necklace, saying he would wait until I was ready. I’ve spent the last three months memorizing every ridge and contour, a rocky landscape that echoes the tumultuous nature of our relationship.

“I’m telling him tonight, Chris.”

Three months ago, the clock tolled midnight with Xavier kneeling before me. I wore an old t-shirt, and I was wrapped in a blanket; it was hardly the picture of romance. But he asked me to marry him and wanted an answer I wasn’t ready to give. So I asked for time.

Not time apart. Not time to think. I needed time to say yes. The answer was right on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn’t force it past my lips.

Xavier went out the next day and bought a beautiful chain for the engagement ring. “I want you to wear it, even if you won’t *wear it*.” He fixed the clasp around my neck, and the diamond has been hanging between my breasts ever since.

The other day, when we found out the gender, he swept me into a hug and said we needed to start getting the nursery ready. We went to every store in town looking for paint colors. In the end, I told Xavier to pick what he liked. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so happy. We walked out of Home Depot with a cart full of paint samples, primer, brushes, rollers, and a dozen other items I’d never seen before.

I’ve been thinking about our future ever since, and I’m ready for it to begin.

“Why now?” Christine asks. “Why not in another couple of months? Maybe after the semester ends I won't have to finish the year living alone,” she suggests.

“Why didn't I say yes that night?”

“Because you needed him to prove himself,” she reiterates my reasoning.

“But I knew all along that I'd say yes. It was just a matter of time.” Three months have gone by. Xavier has done anything and everything to be the perfect father and fiancé. He's gone with me to birthing classes and done hours of research on the perfect car seat to bring our newborn home from the hospital. He's become the man I want to say 'yes' to. Waiting another couple of weeks or months isn't going to change anything.

Christine reaches across the table to take my hand, sighing heavily. She's happy for me, but at the same time, she's sad for herself. We thought we'd room together for the next four years. We'd get our first apartment together next year and furnish it with what we could afford. We'd get super wasted on our 21st birthdays and party until dawn. We'd have memories to last a lifetime.

But everything has changed whether we wanted it to or not. She has Niccolo; I have Xavier.

“If this is what you want, I support you. But tell Xave he needs to prepare a room for me, too, because I'm going to be at your place pretty much all the time.”

“I wouldn't have it any other way.”

Epilogue

Kaye

Christine drops me off at Xavier's after dinner. "If you're not sure about this, I can drive us back to the dorm." She places a hand on my shoulder, "You don't have to say yes tonight, Kaye. You can wait until-"

I cut her off before she can finish. "Chris, it's going to be tonight. I love you, but-

"Don't say you love him more!" She glares. "Because I'll never speak to you again."

With a chuckle, I shake my head at her. "I would never say that I loved him more than you. How I feel about Xavier differs from how I feel about you, but I think it's time I focus my energy on the relationship I'm building with him."

With a dramatic gesture of her eyes, she motions for me to exit the car. "It's fine," Christine says with a sigh meant to incite guilt, "I can see where I stand with you. Go. Have your happily ever after."

"Don't be like that. You aren't hard up for romance either," I remind her with a pointed look. "Do you want to talk about Niccolo *now* or later?"

Christine playfully turns up the volume on the radio. "What? I can't hear you!"

I roll my eyes and climb out of her car. "I'll see you later, Chris!"

As she drives off, Xavier steps out onto the porch. He must have been waiting for me. I texted him while we were at the restaurant to let him know I'd be coming over in a bit.

“Perfect timing!” He announces with a grin. “Jackson just left.”

I'm happy that the two of them are starting to get along. My mom and I were worried when Xavier and Jackson told us their version of events about their first meeting. We thought the two of them would never come around, but we've been pleasantly surprised with how close they're getting.

“Oh?” I stroll up the walkway. “And what were you and Jackson doing?”

Xavier extends a hand to help me up the stairs to the porch. I'm not so pregnant that I can't see my feet anymore, but at 21 weeks along, there's no hiding my baby bump anymore. The bigger I grow, the more overprotective he becomes. “It's a surprise,” he whispers in my ear. “Close your eyes.”

In contrary response, I raise my eyebrows. “I don't like surprises, Xave.”

He leans down to press his lips to mine in a sweet, unassuming kiss. It's a welcome contrast from the passion that we used to share in heated, angry exchanges. “It's a small surprise. Just close your eyes.”

I give in to his enthusiasm and do as he says. Xavier grabs my hand and guides me through the front door. “How was your dinner with Christine?”

“I think it's safe to say she still doesn't like you.” I keep thinking that the two of them will become friends, but so far, they're even more at odds since I announced my pregnancy. They have differing ideas about everything from my birth plan to how I should be planning for the fall semester. I love both of them, but it would make my life infinitely easier if they could get along.

“I don't know why not,” Xavier huffs. “I'm nothing but kind to her.”

That's stretching the truth a bit. He snipes at Christine as often as she ridicules him. “Perhaps, and this is just an idea, you two should accept that you aren't going to be close friends.” Or maybe I'm the one that needs to accept that.

“We're going to be BFFs in no time,” Xavier contradicts.

Who am I to argue? If it means they might be nicer to each other in the future, I'll let him think what he wants.

Xavier stops walking as we enter a room, and a new, unsettling smell assaults my senses. "We can't stay here long because I don't know how good these fumes are for the baby," he hesitates, "but I just wanted you to see what Jackson and I worked on all day. Open your eyes."

I do as I'm told, and I'm treated to a new sight. This was a guest room a few days ago, but now the walls are a shade of pale blue that plucks the strings of my heart. It's the nursery.

"Jackson and I were also looking at wallpaper on Amazon during dinner. I ordered this forest print that wraps around the baseboards. It's got monkeys peeking around trees and playing with lions and zebras. I think it'll be great for our son's nursery." Xavier looks around at the empty space, his face the picture of excitement. "What do you think?"

"I think the universe knows what it's doing."

Xavier turns back to frown at me, confused. "What?" His eyes drift a little lower, and the tension lines on his face deepen. "Wait. Where's your ring? What's going on, Kaye?"

I came here tonight to tell him I am finally ready to accept his proposal. I could have accepted it three months ago when he asked, but I needed Xavier to prove himself. I wanted to make sure that the man I was committing to for the rest of my life had really, *truly* changed.

He has attended doctor's appointments with me, asking thought-provoking and insightful questions that I hadn't even thought to raise with my OBGYN. He has waited on me hand and foot, offering to get any pregnancy craving I might have no matter what time of day I have it. He quit his fraternity and changed his major. He said both were in an effort to provide a better life for his child.

I've seen Xavier almost every day for the last three months, and I can barely remember the man he was before. The darkness of our past looms like a menacing cloud, igniting memories that burn indelibly into my soul. But his love for me and our baby has added moments to our story that shine brighter

than the brightest stars, illuminating even the deepest shadows of our history.

Like the first time he made love to me in a bed, kissing away all the bruises he left the last time we were together. His lips were soft and warm against my skin, leaving behind a trail of his affection. Every kiss felt like a promise, a vow that he would never hurt me again. He left marks of love in his wake to remind me of his feelings every time I looked in the mirror.

On our first date, he didn't make me dress up in expensive clothes like his father would have; he didn't even make me leave the house. Instead, he transformed the living room into a personal theater, complete with popcorn, candy, and a private viewing of my favorite movie: *The Notebook*. Xavier didn't make fun of me for crying at the end. He pulled me closer and whispered in my ear, "I hope that's us one day."

We'll never have a picture-perfect love story. Based on the people around me, I'm beginning to think Hallmark romance isn't real. Christine fell in love with the man that used to be her stepfather. My mom is contemplating her fourth marriage to someone who makes her feel like she can do anything. Sienna is dating an older man that Jackson introduced her to, and their relationship is as scandalous as the rest of ours.

It turns out you don't have to have the perfect love story to have a happily ever after. We are all proof that it occurs when the time is right.

"Yes, Xave."

He doesn't understand. "Yes, what?" Xavier steps toward me, closing the gap between us.

I hold up my left hand, showing off the sparkling engagement ring that's been hanging around my neck for the last three months. On the way over from the restaurant, I took it off the chain and placed it on my finger. "Yes, Xave."

It takes him a second, but when he realizes what I'm showing him, he picks me up and swings me around. "Are you serious?" Xavier peppers my face with kisses.

I'm lost in laughter, trying to say yes while he spins me around. "It's time we start our lives together."

When he places me back on my feet, I'm met with a smile I've never seen before. He beams like he's never been happier. "You're saying you want to be mine, little love?"

Six months ago, that would have meant something else altogether. But now, its meaning is less predatory.

"I'm yours, Xavier. Now and forever."



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Marry once for duty; marry twice for obsession.

I was meant for more than teaching Psychology at Blackmore University. I am the *second son* of the Family's consigliere. They married me to a widow who quickly passed. *My inheritance—her daughter.*

I admit that I have looked *favorably* upon her over the years. I admit that *intentions* have been *less than noble*.

But now she's at Blackmore.

Away from the Family's watchful eyes...
Away from *her uncles* who see right through me...
Away from everything that *keeps us apart*...

They call our love *forbidden*. I call it *endgame*.

[Dark Obsession](#)

About the Author



Cora Kent's first love was Scar, and she was devastated when he didn't get a happily ever after. That's why all her books feature villains, dark romance, and a hint of the forbidden.

Ever since she was a kid, Cora has rooted for the bad guy. If the Big Bad Wolf ate out Little Red Riding Hood, it would have made for a better story—which is why all her books have a happily ever after for the morally grey anti-hero who will move heaven and earth for his woman.

When Cora isn't living out her fantasies through writing, she's hanging out with her cat, drinking margaritas, and reminding her husband that the trash goes out on Sunday nights.

www.corakent.com



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