



Total

COMPLICATED PARIS TRILOGY BOOK ONE

ASHLEY JADE

FOLD - BOOK ONE OF THE
COMPLICATED PARTS SERIES

ASHLEY JADE

Contents

[Dear Reader](#)

[Warning](#)

[Fold](#)

[Three years earlier...](#)

[I](#)

[II](#)

[III](#)

[Three months later...](#)

[IV](#)

[V](#)

[VI](#)

[VII](#)

[VIII](#)

[IX](#)

[X](#)

[XI](#)

[XII](#)

[XIII](#)

[XIV](#)

[XV](#)

[XVI](#)

[XVII](#)

[Three years later...](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Gamblers Anonymous](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Ashley Jade](#)

*To those who are forced to live in silence.
To all the Prestons in the world who deserve second chances.
To all the Kits in this world who deserve love and acceptance.
And to all those who knocked this story before it was published, because it
broke all the rules in romance.
This one's for you.*

First published in USA, May 2018
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Fold - Book One of the Complicated Parts Series

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Dear Reader

Dear Reader,

This is a three-book series previously titled: Complicated Parts, Book 1, 2, and 3.

Have no fear, Preston and Kit are still very much, “complicated.” I just wanted to make the titles more appealing and not have any confusion with the Complicated Hearts duet.

I hope you love Preston and Kit just as much as I do. I call these my “soul characters” for a reason and I’m so excited for you to meet them.

Hang in there, I promise they’re worth it.

XOXO

Ashley Jade

Warning

Complicated- *adjective:*

Consisting of many interconnecting parts or elements.
Difficult to analyze, understand, or explain.

Part -*plural noun:* parts:

A piece or segment of something such as an object, activity, or period of time, which combined with other pieces makes up the whole.

Otherwise known as Preston Holden and Kit Bishop.

Please be warned that their story is one of a kind and unlike any other out there. It may contain elements that make you uncomfortable.

If you've already read the Complicated Hearts duet (Breslin, Asher, and Landon's story—you'll be very familiar with the first book of the duet, and the characters Preston and Kit.)

If you haven't, it's **okay**. You *can* read this duet without having to have read the Complicated Hearts duet. This is Preston and Kit's book and it's **their** story.

That said: Both Preston and Kit are flawed and unconventional characters.

In order to understand them, you'll need to leave your expectations and everything you thought you knew about romance books behind before you turn that first page.

Their story isn't a traditional love story by any means...but it IS a love story.

Fold

BOOK ONE OF THE COMPLICATED PARTS SERIES

“*E*VERYTHING'S A GAMBLE, LOVE MOST OF ALL.” —TESS
GERRITSEN

Three years earlier...

Preston

"HUMAN BEINGS ARE FLAWED AND COMPLICATED AND MESSY." – BRIT
MARLING

If they were giving out trophies for the worst forty-eight hours, I'm positive I would win first place right about now.

Gripping the steering wheel, I mentally go down the checklist.

Caught my girlfriend cheating on me—check.

With. A. Chick—okay, maybe that one's not so bad. Hell, it's kind of hot.

Except for the fact that my cheating girlfriend is apparently engaged to said chick—check.

My cheating, lesbian girlfriend then decides to drop an atomic bomb and informs me she's pregnant—check.

My cheating, lesbian, pregnant girlfriend *then* tells me it's mine—check.

I quickly come to the horrific realization that my cheating, lesbian, pregnant girlfriend is right, because she's...wait for it...cheating on me with a chick. And last time I checked, chicks don't make sperm—fucking checkity, check, check.

And if all that shit isn't bad enough—there's also the fun fact that my older brother had to come to my rescue earlier today and drag me out of a casino—only for me to be right back at it again tonight.

That is until I was on a winning streak of epic proportions and the casino sent one of their goons over to investigate. And by *investigate*—I mean take me out back and go through my pockets to see if I was cheating.

In the end, the goon didn't find anything to incriminate me. He did, however, find my real I.D.

I was promptly kicked the fuck out without so much as a 'have a nice

night' or my substantial winnings.

Blowing out a breath, I turn the radio down and look out the window.

Yup, I'm officially lost somewhere in West Bumblefuck. *Awesome*.

To add insult to all the injuries of the last two days, the casino I spent my night at was in an area I'm not even remotely familiar with, and thanks to all the hours spent gambling, my cell phone died.

It wouldn't have been a problem, but my cheating, lesbian, pregnant girlfriend borrowed my car charger last week and never fucking gave it back.

I remember the exact day, too...because it was the same day the GPS in my car broke.

Something I'm currently regretting not getting fixed because it's close to two a.m. and I have no idea where the hell I'm going in this godforsaken rundown town that seems to go on forever.

I'd hand in my man card and stop at a gas station to ask for directions at this point, but the only one I passed was about three miles back and it was closed. Other than that, I haven't seen any sign of civilization.

Not until I pull up to a bridge and honk my horn at the car blocking me from crossing.

Who the fuck parks their car in the middle of a single lane bridge? A BMW no less.

I honk my horn three more times, and when the car still doesn't move and I realize there's no one sitting in it, I throw open my door and get out.

With a frustrated sigh, I start walking and take a look around. It's dark out, but the full moon illuminates what looks like a large river below me. And aside from the sound of water rippling off the rocks, it's eerily quiet.

Intuition strikes me and the hairs on my neck prickle—maybe I've stumbled upon a dump spot for the mafia or some shit.

Crossing over to one side of the bridge, I rest my elbows on the poor excuse of a steel barrier and peer down. *Yup, this place would be perfect for dumping bodies*. It's so far off the beaten path no one would ever find the victim.

Deciding I want no part in being at the wrong place at the wrong time, because God knows I already have my hands full with my ties to the mob, I start walking back to my car. I mutter a curse when I press the wrong button on my key fob and my horn goes off.

“All right, you impatient jerk. I'm moving it,” a raspy female voice shouts.

Curiosity has me spinning around and I'm greeted by a petite and slender blonde. Or rather, partial blonde because the tips of her hair are a very noticeable bright pink. My eyes quickly scan over a few visible tattoos before they settle on the angry scowl plastered across her mascara-streaked face.

And that's when I realize who she is.

Makeup smeared eyes combined with pink hair is what I remember most about the chick I caught my girlfriend cheating on me with.

Okay, maybe not the *only* thing. The sight of her swapping spit with my girlfriend in the middle of a college cafeteria is firmly reserved in my brain's database.

Fuck, out of all the people in the world who could be standing on this bridge with me it has to be *her*.

The look she shoots me tells me she's thinking the same exact thing. "What the hell are you doing here?" Her hazel eyes turn hard. "Did Becca tell you about this place?"

I shake my head. "No."

She puts her hands on her hips. "Then what the shit are you doing on my bridge, douchebag?"

"Christ, what is this, *Three Billy Goats Gruff*?"

She blinks. "What?"

"*Three Billy Goats Gruff*," I repeat with more emphasis. "You know, the story about the troll on a bridge that won't let the goats pass."

"Did you just call me a troll?"

More like inferred it.

It's on the tip of my tongue to comment on her pink hair, but I think better of it. My issues with her aside, she's the only one around who can give me directions out of here.

We stare at one another for a beat and her angry scowl deepens...and then her lower lip trembles.

I have no idea what to say to this girl, but it's clear she's extremely distraught. I'm about to tell her she's not a troll, but that's when it dawns on me.

She's alone. In the middle of the night. Standing on a bridge.

A mere two days after finding out the girl she thought was her fiancée...cheated on her.

Every cell in my body is telling me this situation isn't my problem and to get the hell out of here. I don't do well with emotional basket cases and I

don't owe the girl standing in front of me crying a damn thing.

But the fact of the matter is...someone was hurt in this ordeal. And Lord knows it wasn't Becca and it sure as shit wasn't me.

It's the angry girl with the sad eyes glaring at me like she wants to toss me right off this bridge.

"I'll move my car," she says sharply.

Before I can stop myself, I utter, "Look, I know I'm the last person in the world you want to—"

"Got that right." The small hand holding her keys forms a fist. "I hate you."

"You don't even know me," I tell her. "Not that you wouldn't hate me if you did. I'm not exactly saint material." I lean against the hood of my car. "For what it's worth, I had no idea she was with you. I know that won't change your perception of me, but you're obviously upset. Maybe talking to me for a little while will help." I raise my hands. "Or make it worse. I make no guarantees, but it's worth a shot. After, we can go back to being mortal enemies and pretend tonight never happened."

She worries her plump lower lip between her teeth, studying me.

I take the opportunity to do the same to her. I notice a small piercing in her nostril and another one on the right side of her upper lip.

My teeth clash as I continue my appraisal. I know I shouldn't make any judgments, but if this girl doesn't like dick, too—the male population took a serious hit.

Mascara streaks or not, she's gorgeous. A straight up twenty on a ten scale—and I'm not even into the whole tattooed and pierced look.

When I see nothing but that mixture of despair and rage still swirling in those hazel orbs as she finishes sizing me up and down, instead of a flicker of attraction or appreciation, I realize my earlier suspicion is right because she's clearly immune to my appearance.

Not that I'm expecting a heartbroken girl to fall at my feet, but as far as looks go—I'm on the extremely fortunate side.

Turns out Holden genes are good for something.

After what feels like hours, she finally speaks. "Is it true?"

When I give her a look she says, "The baby. Is she pregnant?"

Dread fills my stomach as three positive pregnancy tests flash before my eyes. "Looks that way. She has a doctor's appointment in a few days to confirm."

She nods slowly as if taking in my sentence bit by bit because she can't bear the entire structure of it.

“Are you happy?” she asks, and I'd be lying if I said her question didn't throw me.

When I don't answer, she walks over to her car and sits down on the hood Indian style, awaiting my response.

The irony that our vehicles look like they're facing off isn't lost on me.

Figuring I don't have much to lose in this weird conversation, I hit her with the truth. “Not particularly. No.”

Then again, that's never what our relationship was about.

My mind flits back to a few months ago when I made a bet—actually a string of them—with the Dragonis—who happen to be Becca's family—and ended up losing a shit-ton of money.

My older brother Asher has no idea, and considering it's something I'll take to my grave; he'll never know. But I lost a major bet with the Dragonis on purpose.

Vincent Dragoni is the brother of Dominic Dragoni—who happens to be the head of the mob. But Vincent's also the assistant football coach at Woodside University and is a well-known underground bookie.

Confused yet? Well, hang on—things are going to get a lot more complicated.

My brother Asher—thanks to a nutcase, his bitch of a high school girlfriend Breslin, and her no-good father—was set up with a sex tape featuring another guy blowing him.

He was headed for the NFL, but after that tape went viral, he was promptly kicked out of Duke's Heart University for bullshit reasons and lost his scholarship. And my father being the asshole he is, one who's all about public image—disowned him and cut him off financially.

Asher's dreams were tarnished, all because some trailer park junkie and some mentally unhinged psycho teammate of his wanted to make a quick buck by setting him up.

Well that, and Duke, along with society; couldn't handle the thought of one of the greatest up-and-coming quarterbacks of all time being gay.

My brother might be out of the closet as bisexual now, but back when that video was taken, he was still dating his high school girlfriend Breslin and presumed to be straight as an arrow. But everything changed one night when his teammate turned stalker, Kyle Sinclair, blackmailed him with a video of a

blowjob he gave him while he was sleeping.

In exchange for Kyle not releasing the video, Asher had to do all sorts of things for him, like securing Kyle a spot on Duke's football team. Although now we know that was all just a ruse to be closer to Asher because he was obsessed with him.

The last three years have been hell for my brother and he thinks it was all Kyle's doing. However, I found out a few months ago that Breslin and her dad were the co-conspirators behind the whole operation when I ran into her father at a bar and he spilled the beans about releasing the video; otherwise, I never would have believed it.

The one positive thing about the video getting out was that it provided Asher freedom from Kyle and freedom to be himself. Things are finally looking up for my brother again—thanks in part to me.

After I made an agreement with Vincent Dragoni that Asher would take the Wolverines to the championship—something the football team at Woodside hasn't seen since the seventies—in exchange for forgiving my massive gambling debt, Asher's playing football again.

It's just a matter of time before he wins the championship and the NFL realizes that into dudes or not, he's a damn good athlete and deserves to be out on that field.

People might not agree with what I did if they ever found out, but I have no regrets. I'm glad Asher now has the chance to prove he can make it on his own merits.

Annoyance crawls along my skin as my thoughts come back to my cheating girlfriend.

Bottom line, I started dating Becca Dragoni, who was sent to spy on me as a lackey for her family, because it was beneficial for me to do so. It was a benefit that became a convenience over the last few months though, because we were a good fit together.

She didn't bitch about my gambling because she grew up around it, and she never asked me where I went or why I came home late. Not to mention, she was nice to look at and the sex between us was decent.

As a thank you for her contributions to the relationship, I never strayed or treated her bad. And as long as I gave her some cash and took her out to a few fancy places...she was content.

In fact, things were going so well; I ended up renting an apartment for us.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not in love with her or anything, but who needs

love when we have a mutual understanding?

At least we *did*...before she cheated on me and trapped me.

Christ, I'm only nineteen and in my sophomore year at *Yale*, I'm not ready for marriage and a baby. Truth be told, I don't think I'll ever be. Putting another person before myself has never been my strong suit.

The girl's features screw up, bringing me back to the present. I don't know if she looks more surprised or offended at my previous response to her question. "How long have you been...you know...with her?"

I look up at the night sky as I think. "Four months or so." I lift a shoulder in a shrug. "Maybe more, maybe less. Never really kept track. You?"

"Since the last day of our junior year," she answers with no hesitation. "May 25th to be exact. Met her at an end of the year party some fraternity was throwing. The rest, as they say, is history. We've been together ever since." She closes her eyes in pain. "Or rather, we were."

"And Europe—" I start to say, recalling the summer vacation with friends Becca told me she was going on.

"Is where I proposed to her. Right in front of the fucking Eiffel Tower." The tears start falling down her face again and she turns her head toward the water. "With my mom's engagement ring."

"Well, at least you can give it back to her now."

She flinches, and I realize I've somehow managed to offend her.

Usually, I'm on top of my game. Being a gambler, I analyze every detail and subtle expression on a person's face—all the things their body gives away without words—which in turn allows me to read them like a book. Thus, enabling me to see the proverbial cards they're holding.

But with this girl? I don't even need to decode anything; she's as candid as it gets. Her emotions are all laid out for the world to see and I can't decide if I find it refreshing or baneful.

"That would be kind of hard," she whispers. "Not only because Becca probably pawned it by now, but both my mom and dad died in this river when I was eight."

Talk about a punch to the gut. "Shit—"

"Spare me," she says, but there's no bitterness in her tone. Only sorrow. "Your apology won't bring them back."

"I wasn't going to apologize. Their death wasn't my fault." I follow her gaze to the water. "I was going to say that it sucks."

For the first time since we've been talking, she gives me a look I can't

decipher. “Yeah, it does.”

Deciding to get more comfortable, I sit on the hood of my own car. “Mind if I ask how they died?”

“Something tells me that even if I said I did mind, you wouldn't give a shit and you'd ask anyway.”

I shrug. Her assessment isn't wrong.

Her eyes drift back to the water. “They were celebrating their ten-year wedding anniversary by going to the Caribbean. The weather was bad, but the new pilot they hired assured them there would only be a bit of turbulence and the rest of the flight would be smooth. A couple of minutes after takeoff, however, their plane crashed into this river.” Heartache floods her features. “My parents were killed, but the verdict's still out regarding the pilot.”

Now I do feel sorry; I'd have to be a complete sociopath not to. That said, something about her statement doesn't sit right with me. “Not to be morbid, but how is that possible? I thought you said the plane crashed into the river?”

She exhales a ragged breath. “It did, but he wasn't in the crash...not exactly. There's no one to verify it for sure given the only two passengers on the plane didn't make it out alive, but according to the investigators, the plane went idle shortly after takeoff. They also found a parachute along with a life preserver in the water, and when they found the plane at the bottom of the river, the door was open. Based on that, they thought there was a possibility he jumped out of the plane before it crashed.”

My chest tightens. “You mean to tell me—”

“That my parents' last moments on earth were spent watching the pilot they hired jump to safety while leaving them to crash to their deaths? Yeah, pretty much.”

My stomach sours. “Fuck, this is so wrong. It doesn't take a genius to figure out there's something ridiculously disturbing about what happened to them.”

Agony slashes across her face. “I know. But seeing as they never recovered the pilot's body, they had no choice but to assume he died too.” Her nostrils flare. “The investigation went on for years, but nothing ever came of it.”

“Do you think the pilot's still alive?”

Her face collapses. “I do. To be completely honest, nothing about my parents' death ever sat right with me.”

I can't blame her for feeling that way. “Not to go all conspiracy theorist

on you, but were your parents' dangerous people? Spies? Mobsters? Inside traders? Did they have information about something they shouldn't? They obviously had money, given they were taking private planes to the Caribbean." I pause when I realize I'm not only crossing boundaries with my questions, I'm leaping over them. "I'm just trying to figure out what happened is all."

She visibly swallows. "Save yourself the trouble. I'm pretty sure I've already figured out the truth and there's not a damn thing I can do about it. No one believes me because I don't have a scrap of evidence to prove it. It's a dead end."

"You can tell me the truth."

She pins me with a cold stare. "Not only do I not even know you, but you're one of my least favorite people on the planet at the moment. Why should I trust you?"

"It's not about trusting me," I tell her. "Earning your trust isn't something I care enough about to put effort into." When her mouth falls open, I add, "I wasn't trying to insult you, I just don't waste my energy on people who serve no purpose for me. And you've already made it clear you hate my guts. This is nothing more than giving you an opportunity to speak the truth to someone who will believe you."

She snorts. "And you'll believe me?"

"Of course, I have no reason not to."

Because I know what it's like to think no one will.

I rest my elbows on my knees, focusing on her. "Besides, I've got a few more hours to kill. Mostly because I'm lost, but that's neither here nor there."

She gives her head a slight shake. "You're the strangest person I've ever met."

I wink. "I've been called worse. Now spill it, angry girl."

She looks positively irritated. "Angry girl? Christ, did you really just give me a nickname?"

"If I say yes, will you start talking?"

"No."

"Good, because I didn't." I have to bite back a smile as her annoyance grows. "Although as far as nicknames go, that one suits you."

"I can think of a few choice ones that would suit *you*," she mutters under her breath.

I tap my watch. "I think we both know listing those will take you entirely

too long. You'll save yourself both time and effort by telling me who you think is behind your parents' death instead.”

She draws her knees up to her chest. “Fine, but only because my night can't get any worse, not because we're friends or anything.”

“Duly noted.”

“Have you ever heard of Kit-Bit?”

“Yeah,” I say, recalling one of the world's largest personal-computer software companies out there. “I think everyone uses Kit-Bit.”

A ghost of a grin touches her lips. “My dad was the computer programmer.”

My mouth nearly hits the ground. “No shit.”

Her eyes gleam with pride. “Shit.” She waggles her eyebrows. “Go ahead...ask me what my name is.”

I eye her suspiciously. “What's your name?”

“Kit.” She folds her arms around her knees, locking them in place. “Most people think it's short for Katherine, but it's not. It's my actual name. Although my parents usually called me little-bit.”

There's so much anguish in her eyes I have to suck in a breath. “I take it you were close?”

She nods. “They were the best parents anyone could ever ask for. My dad worked a lot, but he always made time for his family. Neither he nor my mom treated hanging out with me like a chore or obligation. We would always have so much fun together.”

“Sounds like you had a nice life,” I say, tamping down my jealousy.

On the surface, my life was one that dreams were made of, but anyone living in the Holden household knew the reality was more like a nightmare.

“I did. Eight short years wasn't nearly enough.”

Our eyes connect. “No, I can't imagine it was.”

She clutches her knees so tight her knuckles turn white. “When my dad developed Kit-Bit, he became wealthy and successful really fast.”

“The American dream.”

“Basically,” she scoffs. “Anyway, shortly after Kit-Bit skyrocketed, my dad's brother, my uncle Garrison, tried to claim that he was the co-founder.” A crease forms between her brows. “Things got really ugly for a while. At one point, he even threatened to sue him.”

“Damn,” I say, and she nods.

“In the end, my dad settled out of court. Not because my uncle's claims

were right, but because it was tearing my grandmother apart to see them fight.” She casts her eyes down. “The woman is evil, but she loved both her sons more than life itself.”

She hitches a shoulder up. “They didn't talk for a few years after that. Then one Christmas day when I was seven, he randomly showed up at our house hysterically crying.” Her jaw sets. “He said he was diagnosed with cancer and his doctors didn't give him long to live so he wanted to make amends. Of course, my dad accepted him back with open arms. He was family after all.”

A hunch burrows deep in my gut. “Let me guess, shortly after there was a delayed Christmas miracle and he was in remission.”

She grimaces. “Less than three weeks later. And mysteriously his doctor's office burned down, ruining any trace of his medical records...not that it mattered. My dad and uncle were then closer than ever.”

She folds her hands in her lap. “You see, my father was a computer genius and a great businessman...but he wore his heart on his sleeve, which led to people taking advantage of him. Cut-throat he was not.” She laughs. “My parents were kind of hippies in a way because they were all about peace, love, and happiness. They just loved to love and would help anyone in need.”

She wipes a tear from the corner of her eye. “Anyhow, a few months before my father's passing, my uncle invested in a brand new private airline for the rich and famous.”

I feel my heart drop a little with those words and I silently urge her to continue.

“I know it sounds crazy, but I think my uncle Garrison had something to do with my parents' murder. The pilot my dad hired privately also worked for the airline my uncle invested in, and I—” Her eyes pierce mine. “I feel it in my bones, you know? There's this overwhelming awareness that sits like a boulder in the center of my chest. But no one believes me.”

Her mouth flattens and that angry scowl returns. “Around six years ago, I reached out to the police about my suspicions. They listened but ultimately said there was nothing they could do. They had no proof to charge him and they told me that not only was my uncle very cooperative when they spoke to him, but him investing in the same airline that happened to hire a pilot who ended up crashing the plane that killed my parents was more of a bad coincidence than a motive. Then they told me if I wanted to talk to them again, I needed to come back with my guardian.”

She inhales a breath. “Later when I brought it up to my nanna, she became so livid she locked me in the basement until I apologized for even thinking such a thing.”

“What?” I growl, startling myself.

“Relax, I survived. I even learned to get used to it; given it was a common occurrence after that. Although for a different reason entirely.”

I massage the tension building like a skyscraper in my neck. This entire situation is awful. “It's none of my business, and you don't have to answer, but who did your father's money go to?”

“It's super complicated.” She chews on her bottom lip. “My mom was estranged from her family, so my parents appointed my Nanna Bishop, my dad's mom, as my guardian in the event of their deaths and created a trust. Right now, my nanna oversees it, since she's power of attorney, the beneficiary of their will, and my guardian, with the understanding that when I'm twenty-five whatever's left gets turned over to me.”

When I make a choked sound and shoot her a look of horror, she quickly says, “I know how it sounds, but I promise it's not as bad as you think. My father has written instructions pertaining to me that my Nanna has to abide by.” She starts ticking things off with her fingers. “Necessities like food, shelter, and clothing are paid for out of the trust, and my college education is covered. I also receive huge gifts for my birthdays and holidays.”

She motions to her BMW. “Like this sweet ride.” She leans against the windshield. “In addition to all those things, I also get an allowance every month. A nice one, given my parents were billionaires and all. Unfortunately, there are some issues with that thanks to my Nanna and her *contingencies*—” She pauses and shame shadows her face. “God, I shouldn't even be complaining. My parents made sure I didn't have to want for anything, and although I'd give it all up in a heartbeat to have one more day with them, I'm extremely fortunate for what they left me.”

“No judgments here,” I tell her, feeling relieved. At least she's being taken care of on some level. Not that I should give a rat's ass, but the business major in me is glad to hear it.

I watch as a star zooms across the night sky. “Just think, in another three years it will be all yours and you won't have to deal with your grandmother anymore.”

“Four years,” she corrects and I do the calculations again.

“Sorry, guess I assumed from what you said before that you started your

senior year of college and would be turning twenty-two this year.”

She twists her hair on top of her head and pulls out some kind of clip, securing it in place. “Nope, I’m a December baby. My parents enrolled me in school early, so I was a year younger than all my classmates. I’ll be twenty-one on December 13th.”

I inwardly wince. “Lucky number thirteen, huh? I’ll be twenty in February.”

“February what?” she asks and I immediately regret saying anything.

I mumble my reply and her lips twitch. “You’re a Valentine’s day baby?”

I glare at her. “Do you have any idea how annoying that is to hear?”

“Oh, please,” she says. “I was born on Friday the thirteenth at exactly 1:13 a.m. weighing in at six pounds and thirteen ounces. Do you have any idea how annoying it is to hear from *Triskaidekaphobic* assholes that I’m some kind of bad luck charm?”

I try not to cringe, I really do, but she catches me anyway. “Seriously? You too?”

I study the paint on my car. “I like to gamble. It goes without saying that gamblers tend to avoid the number thirteen at all costs.” When she huffs out a breath, I say, “Don’t worry, I’m not gonna run away screaming or anything.”

“Not even if I ask nicely?” she counters.

I grin. “Not even if you ask nicely.”

An uncomfortable feeling swoops in my stomach as I recall her words from earlier. “You said before that your grandmother locking you in the basement was a common occurrence growing up...why? Other than the fact that she’s evil of course.”

She blanches. “You know, I’ve been telling you a lot of personal stuff and I hardly know anything about you.”

“That’s not true,” I defend. “I just told you my birth date and that I like to gamble. That’s more than most girls find out by the third date.”

Her eyes flicker with rage again and I remember we’re supposed to be enemies.

For some reason I can’t pinpoint, disappointment fills my chest.

Maybe it’s because the whole Becca and baby situation doesn’t feel so suffocating when I talk to her.

It’s been kind of...nice.

I’m not ready to let go of that yet, so I clear my throat and say, “My name is Preston.”

She looks me up and down. “Yeah, I know. It makes sense. You have that whole snobby and entitled thing going for you.”

She ignores my dirty look and swings her legs over the hood. I try not to chuckle as I watch her short limbs dangle a few inches above the ground. “So, Preston. Why the fuck are you wearing a suit?”

At that, I do laugh. “I’m a business major at *Yale*.”

Her gaze is calculating. “I’m a business major myself, but that still doesn’t explain anything. Not unless you were at an internship, and considering it’s the weekend—”

“I went to a casino tonight. I like to wear suits when I gamble.”

She cocks her head to the side. “Awe, does it make you feel all grown up and important?”

I flash her some teeth and dimple. “Nah, baby. What’s *under* the suit makes me feel grown up and important.”

Her expression twists in disgust. “Ugh, did you really just call me baby and refer to your” —she sweeps a hand up and down— “male anatomy in the same sentence?”

“Wasn’t aware my male anatomy was so offensive. Never had any complaints before.”

I want to kick myself when pain flickers across her face again. I don’t know why it bothers me to see her upset, just that it does. “I’m sorry.”

When she looks down at her shoes, I say, “My favorite color is green because it’s the color of money. I have a five-inch scar on the back of my head that’s covered by my hair. And I can add, multiply, and divide a set of numbers in my head quicker than it takes most people to process a solitary sentence.”

She freezes. “What’s 5,528 times 6,623?”

I blink. “36,611,944.”

She pulls out her phone. “Divide that number by 26,500.”

“1,381.” I hold up a finger. “.58279245283.”

She looks down. “Holy shit, you’re like *Rain Man*.”

I straighten my spine, feeling a weird combination of vulnerable and defensive. “Contrary to what some of my doctors first thought when my teachers insisted that my parents have me checked out, I’m not mentally challenged and I’m not on the Autism spectrum.”

I look away, hating how candid I’m being. This entire conversation is stupid and I detest that I can’t seem to keep my mouth shut around her. “No

one knows why I have Hypercalculia, just that I do.”

I keep the fact that one doctor suspected a brain injury from some kind of childhood trauma to myself. Besides, my father covered his ass when he said that I might have taken a few *accidental* hits to the head because I grew up playing football with him and my older brother. Hence the scar.

His declaration couldn't have been further from the truth though. I hate the sport and the only time I don't is when I'm making money off it.

Chalk it up to just one more reason I'm a disappointment to Mr. Spencer Holden, former NFL quarterback turned powerful investor and NFL football team owner.

Also known as the man who abused me for years.

My own personal monster under the bed.

“It's really not a big deal. Aside from it being useful in math class and when I play a game of blackjack, it serves no purpose.”

“I think it's kind of cool,” she interjects. “Heck, I'd be charging people to ask me math problems.”

“I'm not a freak show,” I bark, harsher than I intended.

Her eyes widen. “Whoa, I never said you were.” When I don't respond, she shifts uncomfortably. “Why do you have a scar?”

“Why did your grandmother lock you up in a basement?”

Her lips purse. “Maybe we should rock—paper—scissor it.”

“Not gonna lie,” I tell her. “I'm trying really hard not to make an inappropriate remark. It's almost painful.”

To my sheer surprise, she laughs. “Well, just so you know, I'm choosing scissors. Given I'm a lesbian and all.”

I rear back slightly, too enthralled to be crestfallen at her confession. “Tou-fucking-ché, angry girl. I was going to make some lame joke about being harder than a rock, but bravo.”

“Thank you,” she says, taking a mock bow. “Now in exchange for me one-upping your perverted ass, tell me something you've never told anyone else before.”

“My—” I stall, considering my next statement carefully. I had no intention of telling her, but now I find myself wanting to. And technically I've never *told* anyone about it, so I suppose it qualifies. “My father is the reason for my scar.”

She frowns. “What happened?”

“One day when my older brother Asher was nine and I was seven—” Her

face scrunches at the mention of his name, but I continue. “Asher said he was too tired to go to football practice, and my dad went postal. He grabbed his head and kept ramming it into the coffee table. Asher's eye was inching closer to the corner of it with every hit and I knew I had to do something, so I moved it away. Unfortunately, I wasn't strong enough to move it entirely and it still ended up hurting him, but fortunately, it missed his eye.”

A lump fills my throat. “Later that night after Asher was all stitched up and everyone went to sleep...my father dragged me out of bed and did the same thing to me. Only he slammed the back of my head into the corner of the table repeatedly, even after I started bleeding all over the carpet. He told me he would stop if I apologized for getting involved, but I refused. He was hurting my brother and I wanted to protect him. To this day, I still remember the way the wood pounded my skull over and over while I cried. I'd never felt something so painful before.”

Except what came after.

Affliction crosses over her pretty face and she trembles. “Oh my God, Preston. That's horrible. No one ever suspected anything? Not that it's your fault, but you never told anyone? A teacher? School nurse?”

I shake my head. “I couldn't.”

“Why?”

I look at her and our gazes clash. “Probably for the same reasons you never told anyone about your grandmother locking you in a basement.”

There's a moment between us then, and even though no words are exchanged, I don't think I've ever seen someone as clearly as I see her.

“My father is an ex NFL quarterback turned sports team owner and investor. He has the money to get away with just about anything.”

She breaks eye contact. “There's nothing worse than when a person makes you feel powerless and you can't tell a soul about it.”

“No, there isn't.”

She brushes a strand of hair away from her face. “I—uh. I've fallen in love with approximately forty-nine people since I was fifteen.”

My brain rapidly concludes it's almost ten people a year, but I ignore that because I'm a little taken back by her confession. Or rather, *why* she's telling me this. “I don't—”

“All of them were women.” Her expression shuts down. “It's why she punished me...she hates that I'm gay.”

Those hazel eyes bore into me and I feel the impact right down to my

marrow. "I'm gay, Preston," she says, her voice cracking.

And just like that, I get the reason behind her confession now. I told her earlier that I didn't care enough to earn her trust, but she's given it anyway.

It doesn't matter that I already presumed she was a lesbian because of the Becca situation and the joke she made. She's still giving me her truth in the rawest sense of the word.

She's coming out to me...and silently asking for my acceptance.

She has it.

My brother Asher once told me there's a world of difference between people assuming or even knowing that he's bisexual...and actually confiding in someone that he is.

I don't think I ever really got that until now.

Tears are streaming down her cheeks and I have to restrain myself from walking over and wiping them away.

"I want so badly to be what she wants me to be, but I can't." She wipes her tears with the back of her hand. "I keep thinking that maybe if I was, then I'd—"

She gives her head a slight shake as if dismissing the thought entirely, but I press on. "Then you'd what?"

She wraps her arms around herself. "Then I'd know what it feels like to be loved by someone again...because I'm starting to forget."

The distance between us tightens and something deep inside my chest dislodges. I have every reason not to like her, and yet, seeing her so upset like this is the equivalent of someone turning down the sun. The world feels a little colder and a lot less bright when she cries.

"You don't want to be loved by someone like her." I wait for her to look at me and then I continue. "You deserve more than a love based on contingencies. You, Kit Bishop, deserve the real fucking deal. The best kind of love. The constant, unwavering, selfless, for better or worse, never goes away and they'd do anything to see you smile kind of love. And one day, someone is going to come along and give it to you in spades. They're gonna crash right into you and never let go."

She smiles through a new batch of tears. "You think so?"

"I know so."

Because there's someone on this earth who was born to love this girl like she deserves. And I hope like hell she finds them.

"That might be the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me."

“I have my moments.” I rub my palms on my knees. “So, when did you first realize you were gay? Did you always know, or was there some kind of experience that led to the discovery?”

She ponders the question for a moment before she says, “I’m pretty sure I always knew. But I think something started to click and I realized I was different from other girls when my mom walked in on me making my two dolls kiss while Ken was tossed across the room somewhere.”

I place my hand on my chest. “Ouch, poor Ken.”

She waves a hand. “Don’t feel too bad. I gave him to a friend who had hundreds of dolls, so I’m pretty sure he made his rounds.”

“How did your mom react after she walked in?”

She inhales deeply. “She was amazing. I thought she would be upset or tell me I was doing something wrong because my girl dolls shouldn’t kiss each other...but she didn’t. She sat down next to me, wrapped me in her arms, and told me she loved me.”

She turns so she’s facing the water. “Whenever I come out to someone...I usually hear the same stupid shit. If it’s a guy, he’ll make a joke about how I’m a wet dream come to life. Then when he realizes I’m serious and not interested, he’ll tell me that I’m—” She holds up her fingers and makes air quotes. “Too pretty to be a lesbian and I just haven’t found the right guy yet.”

She rubs her temples. “If it’s another girl, they’re usually supportive at first...but then it happens. They slowly distance themselves, making excuses not to hang out or be alone with me. Like they’re afraid I’m going to be overcome with the uncontrollable urge to yank down their pants and shove my face between their legs.”

She shrugs a shoulder. “It’s why I only have one best friend. She never treated me like I was a leper. When I came out to her, she said it was no big deal and ordered us a pizza. She never once distanced herself from me or treated me like I was different.”

“I get it.” When she gives me a look, I say, “My brother is gay. Bisexual, actually. When people found out, most weren’t too accepting of it.”

She snorts. “That probably has more to do with the fact that he’s an asshole.”

When I narrow my eyes she says, “Yeah, I know all about your brother Asher. And had he not cheated and lied to my best friend Breslin back in high school...he would have had at least one person in his corner.”

The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I ran into Breslin—

literally ran into her—in the courtyard moments after I found Becca and Kit in the cafeteria. I had no idea that she attended Woodside before then though, or that she's Kit's best friend.

“You mean to tell me the friend you just described, the girl who never judged you for being gay is *Breslin*?” I stand up. “I hate to tell you this, but that girl is a two-faced bitch. She might not be judging you, but it's only so she can bide her time until she fucks you over.”

Kit lurches to her feet and the angry scowl is back with a vengeance. “Excuse me?” She balls her fists. “Don't you dare talk about—”

“Talk about who? The girl who bailed and skipped town after her boyfriend told her he was gay? The girl who slammed the door in his face and said she never wanted to see him again...leaving him there with tears in his goddamn eyes and his heart on the floor? Yeah, she's a fucking peach. Real supportive, that one. So supportive she—” I bite my tongue because if I share the information I have about Breslin...Kit will tell her.

And if Breslin finds out that I know all about her little set up before Asher does, she'll find a way to twist the truth and sink her hooks into him again.

I can see it now. The bitch will wait for the perfect opportunity...probably when he's a successful NFL player...and then she'll plunge that knife right through his heart all over again and take him to the cleaners.

Fuck that. I'm keeping this shit to myself. At least until Asher and his new boyfriend, Landon, are together long enough that he forgets all about her and can move on from both her and her betrayal.

Kit gets close to my face, or rather, my chest, given she's so tiny. “Don't call my best friend a bitch.”

“Don't call my brother an asshole,” I counter, and she shoves me.

When my 6'3” frame doesn't budge, she tries again.

“Get the hell off my bridge,” she screams.

“Believe me I would, but I don't know my way out of here,” I scream back. “Why the fuck do you think I've been sitting here talking to you for hours?”

She looks at me like I slapped her, and I immediately wish I could take the words back. “Dammit, Kit. I—”

“Shut up.” She digs around in her purse for a pen and paper and rapidly scribbles something on it before she slaps it on my chest. “Here. Now go.”

“I—”

She starts walking to her car. “Leave me alone, Preston.”

“Kit.”

She holds up a hand. “You said we could pretend tonight never happened and we could go back to being enemies, remember?”

I open my car door. “Yeah, I remember.”

Her eyes become tiny slits. “Have fun enjoying the life that I'm supposed to be living with her. Enjoy having everything I ever wanted.”

When she gives me her back, I slide into the driver's seat and turn the key.

The engine roars to life and the headlights illuminate her form as I shift my car into reverse and pull away. It's only then that I notice two large angel wing tattoos on opposite sides of her shoulder blades.

A moment later, her small body starts shaking with sobs.

Check.

Kit

II

"WOMEN ARE MEANT TO BE LOVED, NOT TO BE UNDERSTOOD." — OSCAR
WILDE

*I*t's all I can do not to walk over and bash their heads together as I watch them from across the cafeteria.

Both Landon and Asher, my best friend's exes, or whatever they are at this point, are practically salivating—sitting with their chests puffed out, like two dogs fighting over a bone as their eyes lock on Breslin.

Not that I can't understand why. Despite speculations around campus over the years, I've never been sexually attracted to her. Probably because I consider her more of a sister than a friend. That said, the girl is gorgeous. She's all curves for days, huge boobs, and fierce red hair with a fiery personality to match.

My gaze rests on Asher and I freeze. There's no refuting that he and his brother bear a strong resemblance to one another, deep dimples included. But while Asher is all light blue eyes and blond hair—giving him that golden boy vibe, Preston's features are darker...*sharper*—giving his appearance an intensity his older brother lacks.

And even though I prefer pussy to penis seven days a week and twice on Sundays, I can't deny—objectively speaking, of course—that both Holdens are good looking.

Good looking jerks.

Sighing, I focus back on my friend. "They're still staring at you."

She stabs a piece of lettuce with her fork, and I wonder which one of them she imagines it is, seeing as they both did quite a number on her. "I know."

I take a long sip of my soda, silently pondering if I should ask my next

question, given it's none of my business. On the other hand, Breslin getting hurt again is my business and if what's happening between the three of them is what I'm *thinking*—Mamma Mia, things are going to get complicated.

“Okay, that's it,” I say because I'd rather focus on her drama instead of mine. “The suspense is killing me. What is going on? You haven't slept at the dorm the past two nights, and no offense, but you look exhausted.”

“I'm not exactly sure,” she says. “But I don't want to talk about it right now.”

Concern punches me in the gut, but when I open my mouth to tell her I'm here for her, I make the awful mistake of looking up.

Just like that, my concern for her rapidly turns to concern for Preston Holden...because he has the balls, and evidently the *stupidity*, to start walking toward me.

I have nothing to say to him—nothing good anyway—after what happened the other night.

My heart spasms when he sits down in front of us, his eyes solely glued on me.

Breslin makes to stand, but I reach for her hand under the table, silently urging her to stay because I don't want to be alone with him again.

Preston grips the back of his neck, and before I can ask him what the hell he's doing here... he pulls something out of his pocket and slides it across the table.

My breath freezes in my chest because I would recognize that jewelry box with my eyes closed.

It's my mother's engagement ring.

He looks at me then and I honestly don't know how it's possible to hate someone, and yet, want to hug them with everything you're barely hanging on to.

“Give this to someone who deserves it next time.”

His words are like a fist to the face. Not only because it brings me back to our conversation on the bridge...but it's a reminder of the situation we're in and why we can never be friends.

“How's the baby?” I ask when he stands up. The words feel like sandpaper in my throat, but I know no matter how much I hate him and Becca, I could never find it in my heart to hate or wish ill on an innocent baby.

A baby Becca and I once talked about having after we got married.

He looks around the room and lets out a sigh. “Baby’s good. We had our first sonogram today.”

There’s something significant in his eyes when he says that, almost like he’s finally accepted this baby is happening...whether he likes it or not.

A bolt of pain shoots through me with my own acceptance. There’s no way back from this. Becca is having a baby...with *him*.

The girl I love is going to have everything we were supposed to...with someone else.

I draw in a breath and nod, trying like hell to push through the ache. I can feel myself crumbling like cheap plasterboard with every beat of my broken heart.

“I’m sorry,” Preston says solemnly in my direction before he backs away, his tall frame becoming blurry.

The second he’s out those doors, the fragile dam inside me breaks and I lose it.

I hate the idea of people witnessing my meltdown, especially since I gave them all quite a show last week, but I can’t help myself.

I’ve never been good at controlling my emotions, and when I feel something, good or bad, I feel it with all my heart and soul.

Breslin stands up and wraps me in her arms before she ushers me into a bathroom.

“I’m so sorry, honey,” she whispers. “I wish I could take it all away.”

“Me too.” My fingers wrap around the jewelry box. “This was my mom’s.”

It’s my feeble attempt at trying to get her to understand how serious I was about Becca. I know Breslin had her reservations about her, and in the end, she was right, but I thought Becca was the one.

Our relationship wasn’t perfect, and deep down I always felt like there was something about her I couldn’t quite figure out, but I told myself it didn’t matter. Because when I was with her, I was happy.

And it’s been such a long time since I’ve truly felt that.

Almost nine long years.

But as it turns out, every laugh and smile between us was a lie—because she was a liar, a cheater—and all she did was take advantage of me.

The girl truly deserves an Oscar for her performance...because I fell for it. Fell for *her*.

Actually, that’s not quite right—I didn’t fall—because falling for someone

implies they'll catch you.

Becca didn't. She let me hit the ground.

She let me crash.

And now, I have to muster the strength it takes to pick myself up again, but I don't know how to even begin to do that, because I'm still lying in the debris of the mess she left behind.

Choking back another sob, I walk over to the sink and wash my face, trying my best to find the will to breathe again. "I have to get to class."

I don't mention that I have to do something I dread even more *after* class.

I catch my reflection in the mirror and cringe. It's that time of the month I freaking hate, and it has nothing to do with aunt flow coming to town.

I have to go on a date with a guy tonight. All so I can receive my monthly allowance.

Unfortunately, there's an *incentive clause* in my parents' will stating that I can only receive my monthly allotment on the basis that I'm leading a healthy and productive life. That caveat is what gives my Nanna—who is basically the gatekeeper—grounds to make her unfair stipulations.

I know the clause, as well as the reason for the trust not being turned over to me until I'm twenty-five, was their way of protecting me and trying to be good parents. It's a lot of money to hand over to a young person, and in the wrong hands, it could have disastrous effects.

That said, the clause has made my life a living hell.

Even the family lawyer tried telling my Nanna the clause alluded to drugs and overall reckless behavior—not their child's sexuality—but she argued that because my parents never specified that, it was within her right to take it as she saw fit since she's not only my guardian, but the trust is in her name until I'm twenty-five.

Apparently, me being a lesbian is her definition of not living a healthy or productive life. Therefore, she thinks it's okay to bully and punish me into being straight.

And because that money is the only thing I have left of my parents...I let her.

I'd like to think my parents would be ashamed of her actions, but unfortunately, I'll never know.

Thankfully, I only have four more years of this shit, and once the money is mine, revenge will be too—because Nanna Bishop is going to get the shock of her life when I find the hottest chick around and partake in one hell

of a dining experience right on her precious million dollar, antique kitchen table.

I can feel Breslin's eyes on me, but I'm completely unprepared for the next words out of her mouth. "Is there something going on between you and Preston?"

My eyebrows shoot up to the ceiling. Here I thought my best friend actually *knew* me. "What? No. What the hell is the matter with you?" I point to myself. "Strictly pussy over here."

Good grief, she can't be serious. My mind floats back to the night at the river and a weird feeling zips up my spine. I suddenly realize she's not exactly wrong about her suspicion, she's just way off base about the underlying part of it.

But still, the fact that she can pick up on it at all is alarming. She's more perceptive than I give her credit for.

Then again, we've always been able to read one another like a book.

Kind of like how I know that she slept with both Landon and Asher recently, even though she won't tell me.

That said, just because I had a conversation with Preston and told him things I've never told anyone else, including my best friend, it doesn't mean I have feelings for him.

Feelings other than strong hate that is.

I mean...he's having a baby with my fiancée. Correction—*Ex-fiancée*.

He's also an asshole who comes equipped with a certain appendage that I want absolutely nothing to do with.

I snatch some paper towels from the dispenser, disgust rippling through me. "I can't believe you'd even think such a thing. Let's put it this way—if an asteroid hit the earth, leaving only me and him to repopulate the planet or face my untimely demise via being eaten and probed by aliens...I'd gladly skip toward the aliens and thank them."

She blinks. "Look, I'm sorry—"

Heat rises to my cheeks and I glare at her. I don't know if I'm more pissed at Breslin for thinking what she did, or at myself, because in some way that makes no sense...I didn't hate Preston for those few hours we talked on the bridge.

And the thought of talking to him again? Isn't the worst thing in the world.

"I don't want to talk about it right now."

Before she can say another word, I bolt out the bathroom door.

Preston

III



"THE BETTER THE GAMBLER, THE WORSE THE MAN." — PUBLILIUS SYRUS

I'm halfway through the courtyard when I hear it. "Preston?"
I stop in my tracks, grimacing at the sound of her voice.
She's carrying your child—I remind myself. A child I saw for the first time today.

My brother is convinced it's not mine, considering Becca is a cheater and all—and logically I know he might be right.

But the second I saw that image on the screen, something inside me shifted, and I realized there was no *might* about the baby I couldn't take my eyes off of. *I felt it.*

Poor kid isn't even born yet and already it has the worst luck in the world. Slowly, I turn around to face her. "Hey."

Becca's face scrunches in confusion. "What are you still doing here? You dropped me off an hour ago."

She's right. I had every intention of going back to *Yale* after the appointment, but I felt like I had the weight of the world sitting in my pocket. And even though I knew I was the last person Kit wanted to see, I needed to do the right thing and give her mom's engagement ring back to her.

It was the least I could do, considering the girl has lost so much already, and I'm ripping everything she ever wanted right out from under her.

Even though *I* don't want it.

Or rather, I didn't...because that sonogram is seriously fucking with me.

She takes a step closer and I force myself to stay put. Becca's pretty, beautiful even. Her bleach-blonde hair and blue eyes, combined with her expensive and impressive rack would have most guys giving their right nut to

have a shot with her. But unfortunately, she's also the reason they say beauty is only skin deep.

Deciding to be honest with her, I say, "I stayed so I could talk to Kit."

Instantly, her posture turns rigid and it strikes me that it's the most emotion I've seen from the girl since I've known her. "Why?"

I stick my hand in my pocket and fumble for my keys. "Because you never gave her back the engagement ring and you should have."

Her eyes narrow. "You had no right—"

"Bullshit, Becca, we both know you shouldn't have it anymore. She didn't deserve what you did to her."

I want to add that I didn't, either. But unlike Kit, Becca's infidelity makes me feel annoyed rather than heartbroken.

I glance down at her still flat belly, recalling the doctor said she was almost twelve weeks along already. "It was the right thing to do. I figure I should start setting a good example for my kid."

Her eyes widen. "This is the first time you called the baby yours."

Shit. I sit down on a nearby bench because my head is starting to whirl.

She stands directly in front of me. "You're right. We should be setting a good example for the baby."

Before I can stop her, she places my hands on her belly. My heart does a little skitter when I feel the slight bump and I can't bring myself to tear away from the contact.

"I know you're angry with me," she says. "I know this isn't what you want, and I'm sorry for what I did. But I'm not sorry for creating this miracle with you."

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly as she places her hand on top of mine. "I know you don't believe me, but I swear you're the only guy I've been with. This is our baby, Preston. Don't punish it for my mistake."

I swallow the lump forming in my throat because she's right. This baby didn't ask to be born, but we created it. And as much as I wish I could take care of my responsibility without dealing with Becca—I can't, because we're in this together.

No matter how I feel about her right now, I owe this kid the best life possible...and that means doing right by its mother too.

I rest my forehead against her stomach. "I can't believe I'm gonna be a father."

Her fingertips graze my scalp. "For what it's worth, I think you'll be a

great one.”

“I hope so.” *I don't want to be the father mine was.*

I place a kiss on her belly, silently vowing to be the best dad I can be.

“Are we really doing this?” Becca whispers, her voice cracking. “Are we really gonna be a family?”

“Yeah, we are.” The second the words leave my mouth, something in my peripheral vision catches my eye.

For the briefest of moments, Kit's tear-stained eyes meet mine. She looks utterly devastated, but there's nothing I can do about it. I can't fix this situation, and I can't make it better for her.

The only thing I can do is make it better for my family, because nothing else matters from this point on.

I pull my gaze away and stand up, my attention back on Becca like it should be. “When is your next class?”

She checks her watch. “In a half hour, but I really don't want to go. I'm so tired and hungry, all I want to do is eat and sleep.”

I take in the bags under her eyes and steer her toward the exit.

“Where are we going?” she questions.

I loop my arm around her, tucking her to my side. “Home. This way I can take care of you and the peanut.”

Neither of us looks at Kit as we stride past her.

Three months later...

Preston

"YOU AND ME AND NEVER US: A COMPLICATED SERIES OF ALMOST INTERACTIONS." —WILLIAM BOLITHO

“Oh, God, baby face. You're gonna make me come.”

Words can't express how much I hate it when she calls me that. Especially during sex.

She throws her head back and I grab her hips and slide into her again.

On instinct, my eyes drift from her ginormous tits down to her now visible belly.

I look away quickly, though. Last time we had sex and she caught me staring at it, she went crazy, and not in a good way.

Instead of enjoying myself, I spent the next ten minutes explaining that I wasn't staring because she had gained weight, but that the sight of her carrying my child, although still overwhelming, was beautiful.

It's like she didn't even hear me, because she went on and on, blaming the baby for making her look like a whale. My only option was to stick my head between her legs and get her off, because at least then she was too distracted to keep bitching.

I watch as she rides out the rest of her climax, and right when I'm preparing to take over—she arches her back and starts fucking me into oblivion, screaming a slew of dirty things that would make a porn star blush.

Usually, I'd be into it, but this performance of hers reeks of disingenuity.

I rest my head on the couch, letting the waves of pleasure take over as I try like hell to ignore the little nagging voice in the back of my mind.

She's only fucking you so good because you get the paternity results next week.

When she first told me she was pregnant, I demanded the test, but I

dropped it after she said that having an amniocentesis would be harmful to the baby.

But the more time that passed, and the more attached I became, the more the need to know the truth gnawed at me.

Even though she swears up and down that it's mine, I just want to know for sure.

My head has been so fucked up over this lately; I started placing bets with underground bookies that I know better than to ever mess with.

I tried to stop, but I can't.

I need the distraction. I need the rush.

But most of all? I need something to make me feel invincible and level me out—because whenever I stop and think about how much it will crush my entire world if the little boy I've spent the last few months loving and calling my son turns out *not* to be mine...the deeper into the spiral I go.

It's gotten to the point where I'm starting to lose bets. It's nothing major and nothing I don't recoup with my next bet...but still.

I'm starting to *lose*. And if this baby isn't mine...I'll lose that too.

If all that wasn't stressful enough, things with Becca and me have gone from tolerable to horrible.

A few days ago she brought up getting married for the millionth time, and everything came to a head between us. I flat out told her that was off the table until after our son was born and I had a guarantee he was mine.

Of course, she argued and tried to convince me getting married after she gave birth was the wrong thing to do, but I was relentless.

No paternity test. No marriage.

She yelled and threw things, begged and pleaded. And when none of it worked—she reminded me once again I was a shitty person and a bad father for even considering the dangerous procedure. But unbeknownst to her, I've been doing research and there's a non-invasive paternity test that won't harm the baby.

When I told her, she tried to deflect it again, which only made the boulder of anxiety sitting in the pit of my stomach grow bigger, but I knew how to convince her.

I put a ring on her finger and promised once I got the results we would get hitched.

The next day we had an appointment for the blood test.

I shift as she continues to ride me, acid rising in my stomach like a

volcano.

I have to believe she's telling the truth at this point. Becca knows how much I love this kid already. She knows how much it would fucking kill me if it weren't mine.

However, what she doesn't know? Is how much I'd be risking by coming clean to my father about her being pregnant.

If things don't go as planned, the roles will be reversed once more and he'll have the ultimate leverage against me.

Because then everyone will know.

But I have no choice—I'll do whatever it takes to make sure my son is taken care of and protected.

“Harder,” I demand because these thoughts are enough to turn my dick limp and if I don't get my release soon, I'll end up puking my goddamn guts out all over her and this couch.

When she doesn't alter her pace, I motion for her to change positions.

As soon as she's lying on her back, I pump inside her again, focusing on the way her pussy grips me and the way her tits bounce, drowning everything else out.

I reach between us and play with her clit, bringing her closer to the brink.

“Becca,” I say, my voice strangled as I take the bud between my fingers. “I'm gonna need you to come for me again.”

She loves it when I beg her to come, and I know she gets off on it...but then again, she doesn't realize it has nothing to do with her pleasure and everything to do with mine.

I need to hear her moans. I need to watch her body lose control as it writhes underneath me.

I need all those things to remind myself that I'm in this moment...and this moment only.

She bucks her hips but remains silent with a smug smile on her face.

I thrust harder, trying not to go to that place, but I'm slipping, falling, and if I'm not careful...pretty soon I'll be there.

I pinch her clit and slam into her. “Either stop the bullshit and cream my dick like a good girl, or I'll never fuck this cunt again.”

“Oh, God,” she gasps. Seconds later, her eyes roll back and she convulses as her moans fill the living room of our apartment.

I focus on the sounds, the scent of sex in the air, and the sight of her heavy breasts jiggling.

My balls draw tight and I slip out of her. “I want to come all over your tits.”

Her gaze turns smoky and I rip the condom off and quickly stroke out my release, watching as she swirls it around her nipples.

When the last drop hits her skin, she sighs and looks at her engagement ring. “Just think how much hotter our sex life will be once we're married.”

The calm state my body was easing into is long gone with those words.

Thankfully, she's not expecting a response because she shoves me away and rises from the couch. “I'm gonna go clean up. But when I get back, you better be ready for round two.” Her gaze travels to my cock and she licks her lips suggestively before she skips off.

Yeah, she's pulling out all the stops this weekend.

With a curse, I yank up my sweatpants.

A moment later there's a knock on the front door. I wasn't expecting company, but I answer it anyway.

Only to come face to face with the last person I ever expected to see.

“Sorry,” Kit starts before I can get a word in. “I know this is weird...me coming here and all. I—um.” She motions to the small box she's holding. “My lease is up on my apartment soon and when I was packing, I came across some of Becca's stuff.”

She looks down. “Actually, that's not right. A few months ago I packed up her stuff, but I've only recently mustered the guts to give it to her. I mean, I suppose I could have just waited until after winter recess is over and the new semester starts, but I have no clue what her new schedule is, so I figured this would be easier and—”

I lean against the doorframe and cross my arms. “You're babbling.”

She stops for air and her eyes land on my bare chest before she averts her gaze. “You're not wearing a shirt.”

“I was working out.”

It's not exactly a lie.

The pink of her cheeks matches the ends of her hair. “I knew this was a bad idea. I should have just mailed it.” She shoves the box in my direction. “Sorry for bothering you.”

“Kit.” I put the box down on the floor. “You didn't bother me.”

Her eyes dart around the hallway, looking anywhere but in my vicinity. “I should go.”

“You look tan.”

I fight the urge to kick myself. Not only because of the strange look she gives me, but because it's not even close to what I really want to tell the girl standing in front of me.

Instead, I swallow the words that are slowly burrowing a hole in the center of my chest whenever I think about her.

Which is far too often for a man in my situation.

"It's January," I mumble. "Most people aren't so tan in the winter."

"I just got back from the Caribbean." She frowns. "My Nanna insists that we go every year for the holidays. She thinks it's honoring my parents' memory to take the trip they never got to go on."

"That's—"

"A bit morbid? Yeah, I know." She shakes her head. "I hate going."

"So why do you?"

"I don't have a choice. At least not until I'm twenty-five." She lifts a shoulder in a shrug. "I only turned twenty-one last month."

I know. "Lucky thirteen."

"Right." She worries her bottom lip between her teeth. "Look, I doubt it will happen, but if you run into Breslin would you mind keeping the fact that you saw me tonight to yourself?"

I raise a brow. "Why? Is she controlling who you can talk to now?"

She shoots me that angry scowl. "No, not at all. It's just...I was supposed to come back from my vacation tomorrow. And if she finds out I came back early, she's going to want to know why, but she has her own stuff going on and I don't want to—"

"Why did you come back early?" I interject because I don't give a shit about Breslin's issues.

She looks like a deer caught in headlights. "It doesn't matter. I'd just really appreciate you not saying anything to her, or your brother."

"Kit." I hold her gaze, refusing to let this go. "What happened?"

A mixture of sadness and animosity crosses over her face. "My Nanna and I got into an argument. I—" Something behind me catches her attention and she freezes.

Since the door is open, there's only one person it could be. *Shit.*

When I turn around, it's even worse than I anticipated.

Because there's Becca...standing there in some red lingerie getup.

I look back at Kit, but she's solely focused on Becca. "I came here to drop off some of your stuff."

Becca's face twists. "You could have mailed it, you know."

I open my mouth to tell Becca to cut the attitude and remind her that *she's* the one who hurt Kit, but Becca snarls and says, "Now if you don't mind, my fiancé and I were in the middle of something."

That's when Kit's gaze drops to her belly and the diamond ring on her hand.

"Sorry. Have a nice night," Kit mumbles as she turns around, stopping to give me a look of disdain before she's gone in a flash.

Something tugs inside my chest and I can't help but feel like I betrayed her in some way. Which makes absolutely no sense, but nothing I feel makes sense when it comes to her.

"I can't believe she showed up here," Becca says, but I ignore her because my feet are moving quicker than it takes to process the action or tell myself not to.

I run down the staircase and out the lobby doors, hoping to catch her before she makes it out to her car.

When I see a flash of pink running toward the parking lot, I surge forward and reach for her arm. "Becca was a bitch to you."

She twists out of my grasp. "What the hell are you doing?"

I ignore the bone-chilling winter wind as I stand there barefoot and shirtless. "I wanted to see if you were okay."

She balls her hands into fists. "I *knew* I shouldn't have come here. I don't even know why I did."

"Do you still think about that night on the bridge?"

Her jaw nearly hits the ground. "What?"

"The night on the bridge," I repeat. "Do you still think about it?"

My heartbeat drums in my ears as I wait for her answer.

It's an answer I don't receive because she says, "I think you should go back up to your apartment."

I disregard that statement. "I've never talked to anyone the way I talked to you that night. In fact, I hate most people and think they're shit. But that—"

"God, just stop." She gestures between us, her gaze turning hard. "We aren't friends, Preston."

"We could be."

"No, we can't."

She starts walking to her car again, but I grab her wrist where I can feel her own heart beating a mile a minute. "You could have mailed the box, but

you didn't. You could have given it to her when you saw her on campus, but you didn't. Hell, you could have given it to Breslin to give to Asher to give to me, but you didn't. You didn't choose any of those options. Instead, you chose the one that led directly to me.”

She tries to wrench out of my grasp. “You're certifiable, you know that?”

I tighten my hold. “Maybe, but you're a liar because we both know the reason you came here.”

She shoves me with her free arm. “Let me go.”

“Give me one good reason and I will.”

“Aside from the glaringly *obvious* one? Fine, how about three?” She gets close to my face and it's all I can do not to close the distance. “Reason one—the girl you should be worried about is upstairs. Reason two—she has your ring on her finger.” Her lower lip trembles. “And reason three—she's pregnant with your goddamn baby.”

The truth punctures me and I release her, only for her to shove me again. “You're chasing the wrong girl.”

I'm silent as she gets into her car and speeds off, waiting until she's nothing but a tiny dot in the distance to trek my way back to Becca.

“What the hell is going on?” Becca screeches when I open the front door.

Closing it behind me, I side-step her. “Nothing.”

She follows me as I enter the kitchen. “Did you fuck her?”

I reach for a bottle of whiskey, but the sting from her hand across my cheek directs my attention back to her. “I'm not exactly her type.”

My response makes her seethe. “How could you do this to me?”

I open a cabinet and take out a glass. “I didn't do anything.” Ripping a page out of her favorite playbook of deflection I add, “I'm not you, remember?”

She looks sheepish. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to accuse you of cheating. I'm just trying to figure out why you ran after her.”

“Because I wanted to,” I tell her honestly.

Turns out I don't care enough about Becca's feelings to conjure up a lie and pacify her after all.

“That doesn't make any sense. Not unless—” She gasps. “Oh my God. Are you in love with *Kit*?”

“I'm not in love with anyone.”

My words hang in the air between us like a terrible secret that was just brought to light.

Her hand flies over her face. “You're such an asshole.”

I bring the glass to my mouth, letting the amber liquid coat my throat before I speak. “Come on, Becca. It's not like you're in love with me, either. Don't act like you were burned when you were the one who lit the match.”

She sucks in a breath. “What if I told you I did love you?”

I down my glass and slam it on the counter. “I'd ask you why.”

She takes my hand and places it on her belly. “Because of this. Don't you think you owe it to our son to make this work? To try and love the mother of your child and give him a real family?”

It's like she's swimming in my subconscious and adding more weight to the bricks that have been slowly sinking me over the last three months.

I step back, stopping when my spine hits the wall behind me and there's nowhere else to go. I'm starting to feel like I'm in prison and Becca's the warden.

But I have no choice but to do my time and serve my sentence, because my son deserves that. “You're right. I'm sorry.”

Relief flashes across her face...and then her lips are on mine and she's kissing me frantically.

Part of me wants to tell her to stop, and yet I can't because I know I need to be doing everything I can to make this work.

Tentacles wrap around my lungs; their grip is so tight I'm certain I'm being suffocated.

Oblivious to my body locking up, Becca continues her ambush and wraps her fingers around my dick through my sweatpants.

I tell myself to keep my head in the game and go with it, but it's like telling a deaf person to enjoy a song that's playing on the radio.

When she starts to drop to her knees, I halt her. “You don't...I don't...” I stall, trying to get the words out. I've never turned down sex from her before and that alone is cause for alarm. “This isn't a good idea.”

Her face scrunches. “Why?”

Because nothing feels right between us anymore.

Because you're not the girl I can't get out of my system—the one my thoughts have relentlessly drifted to for the last three months.

But I don't tell her any of that. Instead, I say, “You're over six months pregnant. Letting you kneel down on a cold kitchen floor to give me head isn't great for my conscience.”

Her jaw works as she stands back up. “Since when do you give a shit

about that?”

She's right, I rarely do. I don't go out of my way to hurt others, but I don't go out of my way to comfort or help them either.

Apart from my older brother Asher on occasion, I generally don't give a shit about anyone or anything unless it impacts me directly.

I'm well aware of who I inherited that particular quality from.

I open my mouth, but a familiar hunger hits me full force, a compulsion so strong it's almost instinctual.

Cutting the conversation short, I barge past her and head for the bedroom to get dressed.

I didn't intend on placing any bets tonight, but then again, it's never really something that I plan.

It's more like a craving I can't ignore.

I hear her footsteps coming down the hall before she enters the bedroom, looking beyond pissed. “You're wasting your time pining over her, Preston. I highly doubt Kit will ever give you the time of day...let alone know how to please you.”

I reach for my suit jacket and she takes a step forward. “I know you're smart enough to realize anything she does with you, will only be to get back at me, given she's clearly still obsessed with my mere existence. The girl has issues. She's a train-wreck waiting to happen. Trust me on this.”

I stop mid-button and glare at her. “I'm not going to see her.”

When she visibly relaxes I say, “But if I were you, I'd watch your step.”

“Why is that?”

“Because it's one hell of a fall from your ivory tower.”

Her mouth drops open and I elbow past her. “I'll be home later.”

I'm halfway to the door when a ceramic figurine flies by my head before shattering against the wall.

“You know, I've tried to be patient with you, Preston. But now, you give me no choice.”

I turn and face her. “I beg your pardon?”

“This isn't working.”

Relief hits me and I'm glad she realizes it. Until she says, “And so help me God, you're going to regret not trying.”

The hairs on the back of my neck raise. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

She doesn't answer me. Instead, she opens the closet and starts tossing

clothes into a suitcase. “What it means, is that you won't be allowed to see him.”

My stomach drops, and I can feel the color drain from my face. “Look, you're angry and hormonal—”

She slams the top of her suitcase down. “You don't want to marry me and have a family? Well, congratulations...you no longer have one.”

I knew Becca was manipulative but threatening me with not seeing the baby unless I marry her is a whole other level of fucked up.

She played her cards right though, because she has me right where she wants me. My balls are officially clamped by her metaphorical vise.

I punch the wall out of frustration. “Why are you doing this?”

Her mouth tightens. “You've never looked at me the way you looked at her tonight.” She points to her stomach. “Here I am pregnant and wearing your ring...but you looked at her like *she* was your entire world.”

My teeth clench. “So because you're jealous of the way I looked at the girl who you cheated on *me* with...you think it's okay to threaten me with not seeing the baby? Children aren't bartering tools.”

Her lip turns up in a snarl. “Don't you dare make me out to be the bad guy. I've done everything to try and make this relationship work.”

If by *everything* she means using my credit card and distracting me with sex, then sure, I'll give her that.

“Becca—”

“You won't even tell your parents that I'm pregnant.”

“I'll tell them when I'm ready.”

She zips up her suitcase. “Not good enough. This baby deserves a father who will take care of him. One who will never hurt him.”

The knife she's driven into my chest twists. “You know I'd never hurt him.”

She straightens her spine. “Then prove it. Prove it by believing me when I tell you he's yours. Prove it by marrying me and becoming a family, because that's what our son needs.”

I close my eyes, fighting the panic lodging in my throat, because once I do this, that's it. There's no coming back. “We'll go to the courthouse this week.”

Her entire face lights up. “Really?”

When I nod, she wraps her arms around me and I exhale heavily. “No more bullshit, okay? No more threatening to take him away from me.”

“No more bullshit,” she agrees. “Promise.”

I drop a kiss to her forehead. “You should get some rest.”

“Are you still leaving?”

The impact of what I'm about to do feels like a cinder block on my chest.

“No, not anymore.”

Because I'm about to make the ultimate gamble all on my own.



Clutching my third glass of whiskey, I inhale deeply and glance at the clock on the wall.

It's a futile attempt at procrastination, because I know that just like me, the man hardly sleeps.

Demons will do that to a person.

With a heavy heart and just enough liquid courage to see this shit through, I get off the couch and make my way to the balcony out back. It's cold as hell outside, and I remember the weatherman saying something about an impending snow storm as I bring the phone to my ear.

He answers on the third ring. “What?”

My jaw locks as the bitter wind ripples, numbing me just like I wanted. “Is that any way to greet your son?”

“It is when he's a vile, no-good, parasite.”

A laugh escapes me, and it sounds every bit as menacing as I feel. “Well, you know what they say. The apple doesn't fall far, now does it?”

There's a long sigh on the other line and I revel in his annoyance. “Let's cut to the chase, Preston. How much is this phone call going to cost me this time?”

About as much as you cost me, you piece of shit.

My heart thumps against my chest like a drum. *This is it.* The moment that's been building like a volcano for as long as I can remember. “How about every fucking dime you have, for starters.”

“Very funny,” he says, unfazed by my request.

Ice flows through my veins. “Do you hear me laughing, old man?”

He clears his throat. “What the hell is going on with you?”

My head spins and I close my eyes, trying my hardest to keep the

monsters at bay. “That's really none of your concern. The only thing you should be worried about is making sure that I get what I'm asking for.”

The football game he was listening to in the background mutes. “Is that supposed to scare me?”

The familiar feeling of being weak and defenseless makes my stomach knot and I nearly choke on the bile crawling up my throat.

Gripping the railing until my knuckles turn white, I remind myself that the only way to win against a demon...is to be crueler than they are. “Damn right you should be scared.”

“Son, you're either drunk, high, or just plain fucking stupid. I don't know who you think you're trying to blackmail, or what kind of stunt you think you're pulling, but you've got nothing on me, you teenage punk.”

“That's where you're wrong.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about.”

It's no longer bile choking me; it's the deep dark secret laced with so much shame and fear that I've never been able to tell another soul. The one swept so far under the rug—it's easier to pretend it never happened, just like he does.

“I'll tell everyone the truth about you. I'll tell the world exactly who and what you are.”

Because I've never forgotten. Even though you have.

He's quiet for what feels like an eternity before he whispers, “This is extortion.”

I snort. “Bravo. Nothing gets by you.”

His breathing becomes shaky and I smile. There's a sick satisfaction in being able to rip the control right out from under him.

For as long as I can remember, the unspoken event of that night has been my key to getting whatever I wanted out of him. And while that pretty much qualifies me as a warped individual, because any normal child would have told someone instead of turning to blackmail—he's used it to his own advantage by enabling me into silence via feeding my gambling issues.

This whole charade has been going on for so long, I barely remember life before it. And every time I tried to tell my brother the truth about that night...I couldn't.

It used to be the shame that held me back. The horror of what Asher would think about me. Of what *others* would think if they knew.

But somewhere down the road, it became the shame of what I was doing

—blackmailing my father instead of turning him in—that prevented me from uttering the truth.

In other words, the stone-cold reality that I'm not a good person, and odds are I'll never be.

But having a child changes everything because I have someone other than myself to think about and protect. Which means it's game over.

Before I cut ties with the bastard altogether, though, I'm taking every penny of his. This way *he* knows what it's like to feel powerless, if only for a short while.

“You have no proof. What you're insinuating is nothing more than an unsubstantiated allegation,” he croaks. “No one will believe you.”

No one will believe you. Even now that statement causes a visceral reaction in me because they're the very same words that kept me silent all these years.

But I'm not a little kid anymore, and that means *I* get to do the threatening.

“You really want to take that chance? Because I'm pretty sure the media will have a field day with this *allegation*.” I pause because what I'm going to say next is completely fucked up. However, it will put the final nail in the coffin and make him realize just how serious I am about this. “And let's not forget about the recent scandal regarding your other son. Because I'm willing to bet that once the truth is out, people will speculate if it was your doing. Everyone will wonder if your perversions are responsible for Asher's—as you like to call it—*sickness*. You fucking hypocrite.”

“Goddammit, I made a mistake. Is that what you need to hear?” he shouts before his voice drops. “It was so long ago. I was angry and drunk. I didn't know what I was doing. I—”

“I'm not interested in your bullshit excuses,” I say sharply. “I don't think anyone else will be either.”

“Preston, please. I'm not some kind of monster, son. I know deep down you know that. It was a one-time transgression, one that I hardly remember because I was so impaired. One that I've done *everything* to make up for since it happened. I thought assisting you financially over the years and aiding your gambling pastime was helping you cope and you had forgiven me, but evidently not. I see how much I hurt you now, and I'm willing to sincerely apologize so you can move on from this for good. I'll even pay for therapy if that's what you want. But I can't—”

We're far past the point of therapy and apologies. “You can, and you will. You have forty-eight hours, or I go public.”

“How about we work out a new arrangement? A payment plan that will be very lucrative for you.”

He doesn't get it. It's not about the money; it's about me having the upper hand. Me calling the shots.

Me flipping the script and taking back my life...by taking everything from him.

“I'm not interested in anything other than what I asked for.”

I look up at the night sky and the bilious feeling in the pit of my gut intensifies when he remains silent. “Okay then, have fun in jail. I'm sure they're really going to love you in there.”

He makes a strangled sound and I know he's about to crumble like a house of cards. “I can't transfer millions to you in a mere two days. I'm going to need more time.”

He has a point. “You have seven days.”

Now seven can be your unlucky number too, motherfucker.

“Fine.”

I stop him right before he hangs up. “One more thing.”

“What?”

Whatever composure I was clinging to snaps. “If you *ever* go near my son, you sick son of a bitch. I *will* fucking kill you.”

A moment later the line goes dead and I empty the contents of my stomach over the balcony, wishing I could expel every despicable memory of him along with it.

Preston

"A GAMBLER IS NOTHING BUT A MAN WHO MAKES HIS LIVING OUT OF HOPE.
" —WILLIAM BOLITHO

It's a fact—most gamblers do it because they like the high.
A true gambler knows there's nothing like the rush that comes from pressing the maximum bet button on a slot machine when you're down to your last five dollars. The exhilaration you feel when you beat the dealer during a game of blackjack. Or the pride that follows from bluffing your way through the last round of poker to end up the victor when you only had a pair of tens.

The euphoria that comes from winning is guaranteed to make us come back for more.

But it's not what brought us there in the first place.

We're there because we crave the escape.

We're there because nothing else matters once you roll the figurative dice.

Your job, your partner, your family, and your past—it all ceases to exist the second you set your stakes and place your bet.

And the time that spans between your wager and the result...is the ultimate illusion of control.

That's the high we're really after.

The notion that our destiny can change in the blink of an eye and we had a hand in it.

Which is why I'm currently here at the promised land—even though I told Becca I was staying home—breaking one of my cardinal rules of gambling.

The very first one to be exact. *Never gamble when you're drunk.*

And right now? The amount of alcohol I've consumed makes my nines look like jacks and I'm about to break my second rule.

Know when to fold.

Or at the very least, don't be an idiot and raise the bet to *all in* when you only have a pair of nines.

I'm so hammered I can't even effectively bluff my way out of this, something the two other players at the table and the dealer know, but what's done is done.

I take another sip of my whiskey, between earlier and now I've lost count how many I've had tonight. But it's enough that when—shocker—the man across the table reveals a pair of kings and all my chips go to him, it doesn't sting so much.

And why would it? I've got a fuck-ton of money coming in. But even if I didn't, I'll make it up in the next round anyway.

I always do.

At least that was the plan...but when the two men here at the casino for a business conference get up from the table and call it a night, a surge of irritation hits me.

“Oh, come on. Play a few more rounds,” I slur, slapping the table. “Tell you what? I'll be nice and buy you both a drink before I take my money back.”

They look at me like I'm crazy—which is a fairly accurate assessment, given the thirty grand I just lost—before they shake their heads and walk off.

“Pussies,” I call out in their direction, causing the dealer to sigh.

“I think it's time for you to go home, buddy. I'll have someone at the service desk call you a cab.”

“I don't need a cab,” I bark. “I just need—”

To escape my fucked-up life. To not be a failure.

To stop feeling like a casualty.

I wave the dealer off mid-sentence and fish out my phone. This shitty casino isn't cutting it tonight and I'm too drunk to drive to the next one that's over an hour away.

I order another whiskey at the bar, press the call button, and wait for Buster to pick up.

Buster—a bookie for the notorious mobster, Rocco Rossi—has been my go-to guy for the last two months.

At first, I was hesitant, not only because betting on sports isn't my favorite way to gamble, but the Rossi crime family make the Dragonis look like preschoolers.

Buster's phone cuts off after the fourth ring and I realize I'm left with one of two choices.

I can gamble some more until this feeling caused by the events of tonight dulls. Or, I can go home to my pregnant and soon-to-be wife.

I slam the rest of my drink down and stumble out the door, the feeling in my chest growing heavier with every unsteady step I take to my car.

Before I can stop myself, I stick my key in the ignition and press a button on my dashboard, connecting the Bluetooth on my phone to the speakers.

I have no idea what I'm doing—actually, that's bullshit—I'm aware of my actions, I'm just inebriated enough not to care about the consequences of them.

All I know is that I want to talk to her again.

She picks up on the third ring, her raspy voice filling the small space around me. “Who is this?”

“I think of you every time I see the color pink.”

There's a sharp intake of breath. “How did you get my number? And why in the world are you calling me at three in the morning?”

I ignore her questions. “You wouldn't believe how common the color is. So many things in the world are pink.”

“Jesus, are you drunk?”

I lean back in my seat, the density in my chest easing a little. “Drunk is a fairly relative term, don't you think?”

“Answer the question, Preston.”

“Hey, that rhymes.”

She groans. “Where are you?”

“That's four questions now. Although you figured the first one out, so technically it's three.”

“Preston,” she repeats and the irritation in her tone has me smiling.

“There's my angry girl,” I muse. “I bet you're scowling right now, aren't you?”

“You're seriously testing my patience, Holden.”

I decide to throw her a bone. “I stole your number out of Becca's phone a few months ago.”

“Figured as much. But why?”

I evade that question and answer a different one. “I might have had some whiskey tonight.” I turn a knob and blast the heat. “Currently, I'm sitting in my car, parked outside a casino that I just lost thirty grand at.”

And it's taking everything in me to do the right thing and not go back in.

“I—shit. I don't even know what to say. That's—”

“Relax,” I tell her. “I didn't call you for a pep talk or financial advice. I actually have a shit load of money coming in soon. But even if I didn't, I always make up the difference with my next bet.”

“That doesn't seem like a very reliable system.”

“It's fine,” I bite out. “I've just been on a bit of a losing streak lately, but I've got it all under control.”

“Do you? Because it doesn't sound like it.”

On some level, I know she has a point. The fact that I'm sitting in a car outside a casino, drunk dialing a girl I need to stay away from, should be enough of a red flag for me to evaluate my life choices.

Then again, I've never been one to be concerned about red flags. If anything, I prefer to charge right through them going full speed ahead.

Except with her. I have absolutely no desire to bring her into my mess. This phone call was a mistake.

“I think I'm gonna go.”

“Hold on,” she says. “I don't want you driving drunk. Now that I'm up, I can come get you.”

My response is automatic. “No. You can't.”

“Why not?”

I grip the steering wheel, ignoring the tiny voice inside me that's protesting because I know what I have to do. “I'm getting married this week.”

Her breathing becomes patchy and I continue. “We're having a boy. I figure after Becca graduates we'll move out to the suburbs and—”

“Why are you telling me this?” Her voice cracks on the last word and it's like a punch to the gut.

Because I destroy everything good in my life.

Because I still can't look at my reflection in the mirror or close my eyes without seeing him.

I drag in a low, slow breath. If I don't say this now, if I don't give her this bit of truth before I cut the cord, I know I'll regret it forever. “I wish things were different. I wish we met one another before Becca happened and we had the chance to be friends.”

“Pre—”

“I'm gonna go back home to my fiancée and baby and forget you ever existed. I won't bother you again, Kit Bishop.”

Her voice is barely above a whisper. “Thank you.”

I'm about to end the call when she says, “Wait. Please don't drive home. Call an Uber, okay?”

As if on cue, everything around me starts to tilt. “I will.”

“Goodbye, Preston.”

“Goodbye, Kit.”

The moment we disconnect, the mass in my chest expands and divides, spreading throughout me like a cancer that I'll never be able to get rid of. An illness there's no cure for.

I swipe the screen on my phone, intending to pull up the Uber app, but a number flashes across the screen.

Buster.

And just like that, the device I'm holding now has the potential to become one of two things. A bomb that will make the damage worse, or a balm that will soothe the pain.

I'm frozen as I stare down at the world's most fucked up homophone in the palm of my hand, unable to press the button that will either end the torture or give me another hit of it.

Perspiration dots my forehead and my body thrums with need. I want nothing more than to respond to the impulse snaking through my bloodstream.

To roll the dice and escape.

But then I think about my future kid...and I realize that maybe the universe is offering me an option to get out of this black hole that spirals on repeat.

Maybe this is my chance at a new life. A reincarnation of sorts.

A way to fix my mistakes, or at the very least, not fuck up and make more.

Maybe I should pay attention to those red flags because they'll impact more than just me now.

For the very first time, I make the right decision.

I ignore Buster and arrange for a cab to pick me up so I can head home to my son, because he's the most important thing in my life from this day on.



Ever wake up with the feeling that the day ahead of you was going to be a great one? A morning so good you'd swear the stars must have aligned just for you at some point while you were sleeping?

Me either.

However, this morning? I don't have a massive hangover. I'm not calling any bookies or getting ready to jet to the nearest casino. And for once, Becca's need to hover over me until I get out of bed doesn't have me contemplating peeing in her organic oatmeal or thousand-dollar face cream.

So all in all, the day is off to a better start than most.

I watch as Becca gets dressed, my gaze falling to her belly. It's both fascinating and scary as hell that a tiny human who is half of me is growing in there.

Warmth fills the space around my heart as I walk over and place my hand on her stomach. I might be a royal fuck up, but one thing I know without a doubt is that I've loved this baby ever since he was a little peanut on a sonogram screen.

I'm pretty sure he's the only thing I've ever loved.

Becca clears her throat. "Do you mind? I need to put pants on."

I back up. "Right. Sorry."

I run a hand down my jaw, mulling over my next words. I'm not exactly thrilled with the thought of spending an entire day with her, but I know I need to make an effort. Bonding over the baby seems like a good place to start.

"Do you have any plans today?"

She shrugs. "Not really. Given classes start again at Woodside tomorrow, I was going to take it easy. Maybe catch up on sleep."

"Oh. Yeah, that's probably a good idea."

She must detect the hint of disappointment in my tone because she quirks an eyebrow at me. "What's up?"

I shuffle my feet, feeling uncomfortable. "I don't remember you mentioning having one of those parties for pregnant women."

"You mean a baby shower?"

I snap my fingers. "Yeah, one of those."

She looks down. "I don't think that's happening. My mom is living across the country with her sixth husband currently, and my uncles aren't going to put their mob life on hold to throw me one."

I dig my hands in my pockets. "I think we should go shopping and get some things for him. The nursery only has a crib in it right now, and granted I

don't know much about babies, but I'm guessing he's going to need more than that.”

She laughs. “He's going to need a lot more than a crib.” Her forehead wrinkles. “It's a little overwhelming, to be honest.”

I give her hand a small squeeze. I don't want her to feel like she's alone in this, because she's not. “We'll get through it together, okay?”

She looks around the room. “Do you want to go now?”

“Sure—” I start to say until I remember. “I left my car at a casino last night.”

She grabs her jacket. “I can take you to get it after we're done.”

I shake my head because the thought of my kid going anywhere near a casino disgusts me. “No. This is my mess.”

“It's really not a big deal.”

To her, it's not, but it's the biggest deal to me. I made a promise last night to be better and put my kid first and I intend to keep it.

“I'm going to call a cab, you stay here and make a list of things we need.” I glance at my watch. “I'll be home in an hour.”

I start walking to the door but stop abruptly. “Are you hungry? Want me to pick you up anything on my way back?”

She pats her tummy. “A little. I suppose I could go for something from the new organic place that just opened up, if you don't mind.”

“You got it.”

I start walking again, but her next statement stops me in my tracks. “By the way, I called the county earlier. It turns out there's no waiting period for a marriage license. So, I was thinking we could go tomorrow after classes get out.”

The air in my lungs suspends, making it impossible to breathe, but she continues without missing a beat. “Or, we could do something crazy and fly to Vegas. I know how much you love to gamble and all. I think it could be fun.”

My palms start to itch with that insatiable need, and I have to mentally count to five. When that's not enough, I dig my nails into my flesh until I feel the skin tear, concentrating on the sting it provides.

Me going to Vegas right now would be like sending a drug addict to a rehab surrounded by poppy fields.

The temptation is far too strong.

“The courthouse will be fine.” I rub the back of my neck. “Like you said,

classes start tomorrow. I don't think either of us should miss any unless it's an emergency.”

I go to leave again, but to my absolute horror, she throws her arms around me. “You used to like me, Preston.”

My body goes rigid. I hate physical affection as it is, but I hate it even more when it comes with a side of emotional crap.

That said, she's not exactly wrong in her assessment. There was a time when I did like her. Or rather, tolerated her a lot more.

When she snuffles, a surge of guilt hits me. Becca may not be the girl I can't get out of my head, but she is the mother of my child.

“I'll do better,” I tell her.

“I hope so,” she whispers. “I wasn't lying when I told you I loved you, and I think if we tried, *really* tried. We'd be so good together.”

My throat bobs on a swallow and a breath saws out of me, rendering me speechless.

We both take my silence as my agreement, though—and a moment later she seals it with a kiss.

And I try not to pretend it's someone else's mouth on mine.



“*Y*our order will be ready in fifteen minutes,” the brunette at the counter informs me.

I pay for Becca's food and walk around the takeout section of the restaurant, fighting off thoughts of going back to the casino.

After perusing various pictures of healthy dishes on the wall, and hearing yet another *Enya* song start to play, I've had about all I can take.

My phone rings as I step outside and when I see it's Asher calling for the third time, I press the *ignore* button. There are only two reasons he'd be calling me this morning and I don't need to hear him lecture me about how I should leave Breslin's friends alone, or about how I shouldn't be getting drunk at casinos.

I pocket my phone and have a look around. The restaurant is located on a strip of one of the many overpriced and quaint little shops here in

Connecticut, so I decide to check out a few. I'm not looking to buy anything, I just need the distraction.

I'm browsing a random shelf in a Mom and Pop shop when something stops me in my tracks.

The elderly woman standing nearby gives me a strange look as I study the stuffed animal, but I don't care. Evidently, she never got the memo that dragons are badass. Not only because they look scary, but they attack anyone who tries to hurt them.

The thought makes my stomach clench as memories zip through me.

Back when I was a kid, the only way I could fall asleep was to pretend I had a dragon in my room looking out for me.

It's completely asinine, and I'd die before ever admitting it to anyone, but it was the only thing that helped me feel safe.

This dragon doesn't look mean like the one I used to imagine, but he is colorful and cool looking. I can't help but wonder if my son might like him too.

Something tells me he would.

Whenever he's scared, I can assure him he has nothing to worry about because both me and this dragon will keep him safe.

A smile touches my lips. Maybe I won't be so bad at this parenting thing after all.

"Are you okay, young man?"

The clerk's voice snaps me out of my haze. "Yeah." I grab the dragon and walk over to the counter. "I think I am now."

At that, he raises an eyebrow, but I pay him no mind because nothing can dwindle my spirits. I'm practically drunk on sheer optimism.

After I swipe my card, I take my dragon and start walking back to the restaurant, my smile growing wider.

Everything is going to be okay.

The sound of my phone ringing again interrupts my happy thoughts, and I bring it to my ear. "Let me guess, brother. Kit told Breslin I called her last night, and Breslin's pissed." Annoyance has my temper rising as I continue, "Well, you can tell your little fire-crotch I don't give a fuck—"

"I'm sorry. Is this Preston Holden?"

The unrecognizable voice catches me off guard. "Who wants to know?"

"I'm calling from DGL. This is the number we have on file to call with the paternity results. However, I need you to confirm you are Preston Holden

before I can disclose them.”

“Yeah,” I whisper, surprised they're calling today instead of Tuesday like they said they would. “I'm him.”

The man clears his throat before delivering the news that will change my life forever. “The sample we collected from you is not a genetic match.”

I feel like someone just tore the entire ground right out from under me, and I have to brace myself against the nearest storefront.

“I'm sorry, I think there's been a mistake.” I swallow and it feels like glass going down. “What exactly was the percentage? I know it's supposed to be 99.9% or better, but I'm a numbers guy. So if it was, let's say, 98.9% or something—”

“I'm sorry, sir. That's not how the paternity test works. There's a percentage only if the genetic markers are a match and none of yours were. You're welcome to have another test done, but—”

I hang up because the more he speaks, the worse it all becomes.

Becca swore I was the father repeatedly.

I looked right into her eyes each time she did—her lying, manipulating, whore eyes.

Pain radiates through my ribcage and my heart pounds a mile a minute. The ache from this blow is like nothing I've ever experienced. It's the cruel torment that comes with the sobering awareness of not realizing just how much I wanted this baby to be mine until now.

Now that he's gone. Now that I have nothing.

Now that I'm back to being Preston Holden—the fuck-up, the gambler—instead of a dad.

My body trembles with rage, the force of it is so intense, I almost drop right there on the sidewalk.

It's a good thing Becca isn't near me because every bit of it would be directed at her. Despite the small part of me that hates myself for insisting on the paternity test in the first place now.

The sound of my phone ringing once more makes me contemplate throwing the fucking thing into traffic.

But I don't, because I'm hoping it's the lab calling back to tell me they've made a grave mistake. “Hello?”

My hopes are dashed at the sound of my brother's voice. “I've been trying to call you for hours.”

“This isn't a good time, Asher.”

I'm about to hang up, but then he says, "He's in the hospital."

I have no idea who *he* is until Asher's breathing becomes uneven and he grinds out, "He hit a patch of black ice and crashed his new Mercedes into a tree. The hospital tried getting in touch with Mom, but she's on a cruise. They called me because I'm listed as his emergency contact."

My first thought is that karma must be catching up to him.

But my next thought, the one regarding our last conversation, has my insides twisting. "I'm on my way."

Kit

"LOVE ISN'T COMPLICATED, PEOPLE ARE." –UNKNOWN

“*I* was supposed to pick up the early morning shift at the coffee house tomorrow before classes start but—”

“I’ll cover it,” I cut in. “My classes don’t begin until the afternoon anyway.”

“Are you sure?”

If Breslin wasn’t sitting in a hospital with Asher right now, I’d tell her off for being so damn stubborn.

“B, I’ve got you. But, if you want to make it up to me, meet me in the cafeteria before classes start, this way we can grab a late lunch and catch up. It feels like forever since we last talked.”

And there’s so much I want to tell you.

“It’s a date,” she says, and I have to bite my tongue to stop myself from asking her the questions that are currently burning a hole through my stomach lining.

Is Preston there? Did he make it home okay? How is he handling the news about his father’s accident?

A frustrated sigh passes my lips and I plop down on one of the many boxes that I still need to unpack. *God, this is so stupid.* I have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. I’m being a concerned citizen here, dammit.

Which means I have every right to ask how my ex-girlfriend’s fiancé and baby daddy is doing...right?

Right.

“Bre—” My mouth clamps shut when I realize she hung up over a minute ago.

Without thinking, I scroll through my phone log, pausing when I see the incoming call I received at 3:05 a.m.

Boom, there it is, glaring at me like a big ugly zit on porcelain skin...begging to be either popped or camouflaged.

My finger dances over the call button before I make the sound decision to press *delete* and be done with this tango for good.

We're not friends.

Which in foresight is probably a good thing, because he's self-destructive at best and self-serving at worst.

My chest pangs with some emotion I don't dare identify, but I brush it off and start unpacking.

I'm unloading the contents of my second box when I hear a knock.

"Go away," I grumble.

When they ignore my warning and knock again, I place my box cutter down and stomp to the front door.

If I'm lucky, it's some idiot stoner asking if he can borrow a lighter. But if I'm not? It's some overzealous idiot who suddenly wants to be friends before we graduate, all because some bullshit click-bait article on social media told her it would make her a better person.

Kelly, the annoying girl in my economics class last semester who yapped incessantly about her dog named Rooster—when she wasn't calling me a *dyke freak* under her breath, that is—comes to mind and I groan.

When I turn the knob, I realize that Kelly would be a godsend right about now. Because a fresh hell greets me in the form of my ex-girlfriend.

I'm regretting leaving that box cutter behind.

"Hi," she starts. "I would have called you, but I couldn't get through."

"I blocked your number over Christmas break," I inform her curtly, keeping my face expressionless.

"Oh." She frowns. "I suppose I deserve that after everything I put you through."

"No argument here."

I cast my eyes down and notice the dress she's wearing is red, which is awfully fitting, because as far as I'm concerned, she's the devil.

Unfortunately, I'm so distracted by her presence that I don't realize she's crossed the threshold and is inside my dorm until the door clicks closed behind her.

I have to look away, not because of the anger, but because I don't trust

myself to do the right thing when it comes to Becca.

Because I still love her.

Becca must sense this because she uses the opportunity to inch even closer, causing my heart to do a little flip of protest. Almost like the organ knows there's danger up ahead and wants to abandon ship.

"I was a bitch to you yesterday," she whispers, and that flowery scent of hers that I remember like only a lover can invades my nostrils.

I take a step back, attempting to put some distance between us but she reaches for my hand. "I'm so sorry I hurt you, Kit."

The contact zips through my body like a double shot of *Bacardi 151* on an empty stomach. And just like the intoxicating agent, it weakens my defenses and causes my armor to crumble until all I can remember is how much I loved her...instead of how she ripped my soul to pieces.

She tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "I miss you. There's not a second that goes by that I don't think about you."

When a tear falls down her cheek and I know there's truth behind her words, the force field surrounding my heart explodes into a thousand smithereens.

"Then why did you cheat on me?" I choke back a sob, but that only makes the next one break free. "I thought we...I thought you were happy."

"I was." She cups my face, her thumbs catching my tears. "I was so happy with you."

"Then why would you hurt me?"

It's the question I've asked myself minute after minute and night after night since the second my heart broke in that cafeteria.

"I would have done anything for you, Becca. *Anything.*"

It's true, this girl could have asked for the damn moon and I would have found a way to lasso it down for her.

The thought is like a boomerang reopening the wound. I remove her hands from my face and take several more steps back.

Her eyes dart around the room before they lock on mine. "You want the truth?"

I give her a small nod. No matter how much it may hurt, maybe it will help me get some closure.

"You scared me." She holds up a hand. "Well, not you. But the intensity of your love...our love...scared me. Everything about us scared me."

What she says makes no sense to me. Love is supposed to be intense.

Hell, it's the most intense thing there is. Otherwise it's not love.

“I don't understand.”

She walks over to me. “What I mean is, I've never felt anything like what I feel for you. It was confusing, not only because I've never fallen for another girl this hard, but because I was afraid I was going to fuck it up, you know? That I'd do something stupid and end up losing you.”

I raise a brow. “So instead of talking to me about your fears you—”

“Did something stupid and ended up losing you anyway.” She sniffs. “Self-fulfilling prophecy, I guess.”

She rests her forehead against mine and I ignore the next warning my heart issues.

“That's not the only thing you want me to tell you, though. Is it?”

Her voice takes on a husky tone and my own vocal chords jam in my throat. The dynamic of this conversation has shifted and I don't know how to get it back on topic. Not when she's looking at me the way she is now.

Like she wants to devour every inch of my body.

She presses her hand to my chest and smiles slyly when she feels my heart beat rapidly against her palm. Like she knows it's still hers for the taking.

Too bad there's not much left of it to take this time around.

“You want to know about him.” The hand covering my heart drops to my breast. The touch is so light, one could easily mistake it for an accident.

But I know better, because with Becca...everything is intentional.

“You want to know if sex with him was better than sex with you, don't you? What it was like when he fucked me.”

My pulse skyrockets and I honestly hate myself for being a little curious, despite the fresh dose of pain her words bring.

Her hand falls. “Well, stop wondering. Because it doesn't matter. He doesn't matter.”

She grabs my chin and my heart clanks out a desperate plea, wanting her to mend the damage she caused it.

“He *never* mattered. He was just something I thought I wanted because I feared what people would think about me marrying a girl.”

She strokes my cheek and I lean into her touch. Becca's never talked to me about these feelings before and I can't help but empathize.

“But I'm not scared anymore, Kit. And I know you won't believe me when I say this, but I was planning on ending it with him once I realized that

no future was worth having unless it was with you.”

I want to ask her if that was before or after she put a knife straight through my ticker and watched me bleed out from the trauma, but she looks down and says, “Unfortunately, fate had other plans. And I know now just how badly I fucked up.”

I look down at her belly, the bump a glaring reminder of why she shouldn't be here right now and why I need her to leave.

“I wanted to tell you,” she continues. “I mean, obviously I had to.”

She's seeping in again. *I can feel it.* “Why didn't you?”

“Because I wanted to keep you just a little longer.” The corners of her mouth turn down. “I'll always be sorry for what I did to you. There are so many things I wish I could take back.”

“I don't know what you want from me, Becca.” The fog lifts a little and I steel myself. “We can't change the past. What's done is done.”

We stare at each other for several beats before I say what I should have said the moment I opened the door to my past. “I think you should go.”

Her face twists in pain. “Are you sure that's what you want?”

No. “Yes.”

She inclines her head, narrowing the space between our mouths. “Fine. If you're really sure, then I'll go.”

I'm relieved because I'm a razor's edge away from caving.

“But not before I do this.”

“What—”

I don't get a chance to finish that statement because her lips are on mine and everything starts to whirl inside me like a twister.

The hurt, the pain...the feelings I still have for her.

Logically, I know this is wrong and I should push her away instead of kissing her back, but there's still a small part of me that can't untangle myself from her.

Love is an addiction. A dependency. A craving.

It's why we allow the poison to enter our system in the first place.

It's what makes us accept far less than we deserve.

The stove is hot. We all know this. We've all been warned.

Yet we all touch it at least once in our lifetime.

Some of us even chase the burn.

Because at the end of the day, it's better to delude yourself into thinking that someone loves you, even a toxic person...rather than face the stone-cold

reality that they don't.

The bubble of deception we create is our protection.

No one wants to be unloved.

Preston.

His name flashing through my head is the equivalent of being waterboarded with ice water and I break the kiss.

“We can't do this.” I wipe my lips with the back of my hand as if it will erase the mistake I've just made.

“What? Why?”

“You have a fiancé,” I remind her. “I know your moral code isn't exactly fine-tuned, but this is wrong.”

“I can't marry him.” Her lips caress my ear. “I'm in love with you.”

I want to point out all the monumental things that are wrong with that statement, starting with the fact that you're not supposed to break the people you love, but all I can think about is Preston.

Not only is his father in the hospital currently, his fiancée is cheating on him. “He asked you to marry him and you said yes. And you're having his baby. He loves you, Becca. He doesn't deserve to be hurt like—”

Like you hurt me.

She gives a shake of her head. “Trust me. He doesn't love me or this baby.”

I open my mouth to protest, but she collapses on the floor in a fit of tears and my heart jumps to my throat.

“If he did, he wouldn't be out all the time gambling. Or getting drunk and calling different girls to meet up night after night.”

My mind flits back to the phone call again and I wince. Shit, he's even more of an asshole than I thought.

She lifts a finger. “I know, I deserve it because of what I did to you.”

I sit down beside her. “No, you don't.”

She gives me a half-smile. “You really believe that?”

I grab a box of tissues off the nightstand and hand her one. “I don't know.”

She wipes her eyes. “Truth is, I'm not even upset about it. I don't love him, I never did. I was only trying to do the right thing for the baby.” She sniffs. “It's been over between us for a while.”

I tell my heart not to listen, but it's a glutton for punishment. “I don't—”

She puts her finger to my lips. “I know you have every right to hate me.

But if you give me one more chance, you won't regret it.”

“Becca—”

She clasps my face in her hands. “I know it's hard for you to trust me again, but I'm willing to do whatever it takes.”

Her lips find my neck and my eyes flutter closed. God, I want to believe her. More than that, I want to be able to forgive her.

Like a cold shower in sub-zero temperature, my nemesis permeates my brain. “What about him?”

“I told you, we're over. All I want is you, Kit.”

She doesn't give me a chance to object because she claims me with her mouth again. I want to protest and tell her this is happening way too fast and I need to think, but her fingers start working their way down my body, sending the typhoon into another spiral.

“Now lay back and let me show you just how much I've missed you.”

The stove is hot, I remind myself as she slips my yoga pants off my hips.

But some of us chase the burn.

Because we want so badly to be loved.

Preston

"AT THE GAMBLING TABLE, THERE ARE NO FATHERS AND SONS." —CHINESE
PROVERB

*M*y fingers curl around the edges of the chair I'm sitting on, almost as if my grip alone can stop the last shred of my composure from unraveling.

I mentally go down the checklist of everything that's happened over the last few hours. Sometimes it's easier for me to break things down in timeline form before I can process it all and act accordingly.

I found out the baby isn't mine—check.

I was informed by the medical staff that my father is nothing more than a vegetable—check.

I finally confronted my brother's girlfriend about setting up Asher, along with her good-for-nothing father and crazy Kyle, only to be proven wrong about her involvement—check.

Then, moments later, I watched that very same obsessed psychopath, Kyle Sinclair, run down the hospital hallway with a gun, in an attempt to kill Breslin, before being dragged away in handcuffs—check.

My brain pulsates as I recall the cherry on this fucked-up cake.

When I overheard Asher tell the police during his questioning that my father and Kyle had a relationship. One that began when Kyle was just a teenager—check.

Acid churns my stomach and another wave of nausea hits me.

Guess I'm not his only victim.

Granted sixteen is far from a child...but it's still wrong, right?

Then again, at fourteen I was receiving blow jobs from the girls in my brother's fan-club under the school bleachers during his football games. And

by fifteen, I was having sex with them, so what the fuck do I know.

I drag a hand through my hair and look around the waiting room. It's only then I realize Breslin never came back from the restroom.

I'm getting ready to check on her because Asher will blow a gasket if I don't, when he appears.

“Have you seen her?”

I'm pretty sure my expression has *busted* written all over it. “She told me she was going to the bathroom.” I check my watch and stand. “About twenty minutes ago.”

Annoyance lines his features. “You didn't think to check on her?”

I want to argue that I technically did...approximately one minute ago.

He starts walking and I decide to come clean. He's already mad at me, so I might as well get it all out in the open.

“I told her about Kyle blackmailing you, but in my defense, I thought she already knew.”

He looks at me like I've committed treachery.

On second thought, maybe I have. Seeing as Breslin didn't know about Kyle blackmailing Asher when I confronted her...it means he never told her.

Shit. *I'm pretty sure that's another checkmark.*

Thing is, I don't understand *why* he never told her. Then again, I don't understand much of anything pertaining to his relationship with Breslin or Landon.

“I also thought she had something to do with it up until an hour ago.”

“What?” The vein in his forehead bulges. “Breslin would never—”

I cut him off, even though I was wrong, I don't want to hear him defend her like she's some biblical figure. I just want him to understand where I was coming from. “Yeah, I know that now. I just figured with her piece of shit father behind it maybe—”

“How do you know about that?”

I could ask him the exact same thing.

Suffice it to say, this is not the reaction I expected from him upon hearing the news that Breslin's dad was the co-conspirator.

However, the look on his face makes it clear this little cross-examination is a one-way street.

“To make a long story short,” I begin, giving him the CliffNotes version of what I told Breslin earlier. “I ended up running into him at a bar a few hours before the video went viral. I gave him all the money I had on me in

order to get him to spill the truth. Once he did, I tried to talk him out of releasing the video, but it obviously didn't work. Old drunk had a bridge to burn.”

I run a hand down my face. “I tried to warn you that night but you didn't pick up your phone. And I didn't tell you it was Breslin's dad behind it, because the last time we talked about Breslin was before you left for college and you lost your shit. I didn't want you contacting her. I was trying to protect you and do what I thought was right. Turns out I was wrong.”

“Yeah, no shit.”

I want to reiterate that I thought I was doing the right thing, but he charges for the exit. “I need a lift.”

I follow him out to the parking lot that's now coated with a good seven inches of snow. “Where are we going?”

Obviously, I assume it's to find Breslin, but fuck if I know where she is. I'm also not too keen on driving through a blizzard to find out.

He opens the car door and gets inside. “Seeing as Breslin knows that Kyle blackmailed me, and her dad leaked the tape, there's only one place she could be.”



The snowy wind whips around as I pull up to the trailer park where Breslin's dad lives.

Asher's been silent during the drive, which means he's either lost in deep thought or thinking of creative ways to kill me and get away with it.

Given the events of the night, I'd go with the latter.

His gaze is scrutinizing. “Sure you're not keeping anything else from me?”

I grip the steering wheel so hard my knuckles turn white.

Asher has a right to be angry with me, I'll give him that. But he's not the only one who has things going on in his life.

I'd be more than happy to trade my problems for his.

“Nope. Sorry to disappoint, big brother, but I've been preoccupied with my own shit lately.”

“Right,” he seethes. “Guess that means I better get my shovel ready so I can clean it all up for you again.”

I slam the brakes so hard the car slides to a stop. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“You know, you could have at least said thank you to me for winning the championship.”

I snort, I find it downright amusing how arrogant he can be. “I should have said thank you? Funny, because last time I checked, me losing that bet and getting involved with Dragoni is what's making your NFL dream come true.”

He fixes me with a glare. “You really don't get it, do you? What if I lost? What if things didn't turn out for the best? What then?”

“I don't know.” I inhale deeply, hating the trace of concern in his voice. “I would have figured out another way to settle the score. I always do.”

“How? By placing another bet? One that you might lose. Christ, when does the bullshit stop? Where do you draw the line, Preston? When someone you love gets hurt, or when they've taken your life?”

I'm about to tell him he's making mountains out of molehills, because I intentionally lost the bet with the Dragonis in order to get him to play football again, but he swings open the car door and says, “You're going to be a dad soon, brother. It's time to grow the hell up before you end up fucking an innocent life up right along with yours.”

His words punch through me like a physical blow. “No, I'm not.”

I close my eyes as the finality of it sets in. “There's a reason I didn't answer my phone when you called me about dad earlier today. I was getting the results back from the paternity test.”

It's not exactly accurate, seeing as I ignored his calls before I got the results, but I'm not in the mood to argue with him about it.

He exhales sharply. “You dodged a bullet.”

“I wanted the baby to be mine.”

I'm not sure why I'm telling him this, but I do know talking about a baby that's not mine seems easier than talking about my father, or what I overheard him tell the police about Kyle.

Someone on the outside looking in would assume Asher and I are close. But the truth is, although I do care about him, I'll always keep him at an arm's length.

Because I keep everyone at a distance.

“Prest—”

“Part of me regrets having the test done now, but I couldn't take it, Asher. I needed to know.”

Emotions, the kind that can bring a man to tears, threaten to spill over, but I stuff them down.

I haven't cried, not once since I was seven, and I don't intend to now.

“I started talking to the baby every night when Becca went to sleep. Telling it stories. Promising him or her that I was going to be a better father than mine ever was.”

I blow out a breath as I recall all those late nights I spent making promises to a kid that wasn't mine.

Maybe this is my karma for doubting that he was in the first place. The universe's way of saying, *fuck you*.

He gives my shoulder a squeeze. “You will. When the time is right.”

I lean against the headrest. “I thought that time was going to be now.” I look out the window and notice another two inches have fallen since we left the hospital. “Maybe I just wanted something to give me the push I needed to clean my life up and get my act together.”

I don't realize I've said that aloud until he says, “Well, you know what they say. Admitting you have a problem is the first step.” He gives me a pointed look. “You'll get through this.”

I'm about to tell him there's nothing for me to get through because I'm fine, but pink hair and my favorite angry scowl flash through my mind. Swear that girl invades my thoughts at the most random times.

However, it dawns on me that I have a valid reason to see her again.

I could drive back right now and see her.

A sharp gust of snowy wind blows as Asher steps out of the car. “Looks like the weather is getting worse.”

Annoyance skitters up my spine. A three-hour drive will easily turn to eight hours in this weather.

“I know. I was thinking about heading to Woodside tonight, but I think I'll wait for tomorrow.”

He laughs. “I can't wait to see the look on Becca's face when she sees her shit all over campus.”

My brother's more warped than I give him credit for. “What the hell is wrong with you? I might be an asshole, but I'm not tossing a pregnant chick out on the street in the middle of winter. No matter how much I can't stand

her.”

She might deserve that, but the baby doesn't.

He raises an eyebrow. “Then why are you going to Woodside tomorrow?”

A long pause stretches between us before I finally utter, “To see Kit.”

Since I don't want him reading anything more into this, because my feelings about her are mine and mine alone, I add, “I'm not the only one Becca hurt and Kit has a right to know that the baby isn't mine.”

I'm thankful when he doesn't pry further and taps the hood of my car. “Drive safe, little brother.”

I salute him. “Call me if you need me. I'll answer.”

A familiar urge snakes up my spine as I drive off. If there was ever a night I needed the escape, this is it.

I make a left that will bring me to the highway, but when my car veers to the opposite side of the road due to the snow, I'm reminded that not only is it hazardous to be driving, but I can no longer rely on my father's money because he's a goddamn carrot.

Or can I?

As it turns out, it's a blessing in disguise that my father either couldn't or wouldn't transfer all his money to me in one lump sum when I demanded it last night.

Not only because it would have looked suspicious as hell right now, but because I know I'm the primary beneficiary of his will.

It used to be Asher, but after the falling out him and my father had, I was upgraded.

However, I can't celebrate just yet, because there's still a very distinct possibility that he transferred an undisclosed sum of money into my account like he said he was going to, and that alone will look odd. Unless I can come up with a valid reason as to why he did it. But in order to do that, I need to figure out how much money I'd be covering for in the first place.

Christ, I wish I went ahead and had him offed instead of blackmailing him now. Would have made things a heck of a lot easier for me.

I skid to a stop, pull out my phone, and log into my bank account. Not knowing what he did or didn't do is driving me crazy.

I'm relieved when my savings shows that I have a little over twelve grand—exactly what I had the last time I logged in.

Tossing my phone in the console, I breathe a sigh of relief...until I

remember that it takes over twenty-four hours to process a transfer.

I slam the steering wheel in frustration. There's no way to know for sure what he did unless I look at *his* account.

Shifting the car back into drive, I decide to make the short trip to his house and find out.



It takes me longer than I anticipated to get here due to the roads, but after I enter the code on the keypad and open the front door, I march straight to his office.

I'm halfway up the staircase when I hear footsteps approaching. “Hey, Ms. Panfile.”

Ms. Panfile has been our live-in housekeeper since we moved here six years ago.

She's also one of the only people on the planet who doesn't annoy the living shit out of me. Which probably has something to do with the fact that the woman hardly speaks a lick of English. Well that, and her favorite recreational activity happens to be the kind that can be rolled and smoked while listening to *Bob Marley*, but I'm not going to split hairs.

“Preston!” she yells in her broken English, rushing up the stairs.

I'm tempted to ask her what's wrong, but then she cries out, “Mr. Holden.”

I shrug since there's no point in pretending to be sad about it. “Yup. He's toast.”

Sheer confusion mars her face. “Hungry?”

“No.” I point upstairs. “I need to take care of some things.”

She gives my arm a squeeze. “Mrs. Holden home soon.”

My neck prickles. “When? I thought she was stuck on a boat?”

“Sì.” She holds up three fingers. “Three weeks. But tomorrow night she come back home.” She clutches her chest. “So sad.”

Yeah, I bet she is. It's no secret my mother gets more money from him being alive than she ever will upon his death.

My father was many things, but naive about his sham of a marriage wasn't one of them. That prenup is iron-clad. She'll be lucky if she gets to

keep her car and the condo in St. Barts when all is said and done.

I can practically hear her praying for a miracle from the middle of the Atlantic. Maybe if she was a decent mother, instead of being so wrapped up in her trophy wife role and his money, she'd have my sympathy and support. Instead, all I feel is even more relieved that I didn't marry Becca.

Unlike my parents, I'll never marry someone for convenience or money.
Or because I'm being threatened by a manipulating bitch.

When I marry, it will be because I love her more than I love myself.

Because I value her heart more than my own.

But since neither of those things are on my bucket list, I don't foresee it being an issue.

I give her a tight smile. "I'm gonna go." I turn, but an idea hits me. "On second thought, I think I am hungry."

Although she's about as harmless as a stuffed dove, I don't want her checking up on me while I'm in there. At least now she'll be distracted.

Her face perks up, like she's relieved she can do something for me.

I wait until she scurries off before I trek my way to his office.

It looks exactly like it did the last time I was home.

The large oak desk is spotless and shiny, courtesy of Ms. Panfile. The brown leather office chairs are made for business, but comfortable enough to endure long meetings. Football memorabilia line the shelves, but not enough to be considered tacky, more like a tasteful homage to his favorite sport. And when my eyes scan the corner of the room, I notice the small bar still has various bottles of top-shelf whiskey to choose from.

Not a single thing is out of place. Including the computer that sits smack dab in the center of his desk.

The one he doesn't enable the password protection for because our house has top of the line security, and according to him, an intruder would never make it this far.

Fucking idiot. Computer passwords aren't for home intruders. It's to stop those who pry.

I press a key on the keyboard and a second later, a younger version of him in his Duke's Heart football jersey illuminates the screen.

He looks so much like my brother, it's sickening.

I plop down in the chair and pull up a browser so I can auto-log into his bank...

And then I freeze.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out a man on life-support wouldn't be logging into his bank account.

Even though I'm almost positive his accident isn't raising any red flags with the authorities, it doesn't mean his financial attorneys won't comb through things and report anything deemed suspicious.

Like a large installment of money being transferred mere hours before his death.

My stomach lurches, and I know I'm being paranoid about this...but the man wasn't exactly a recluse or a Joe-Schmo. He was a filthy rich sports team owner.

And when a rich person dies before their time, regardless of the circumstances, foul play is always presumed.

At least, that's what all the crime shows on T.V. lead us to believe.

I rest my elbows on the desk and press the heels of my palms to my eyes. I'm completely stumped as to what my next move should be.

I'm starting to feel like I'm in the middle of a fucked-up poker game.

Do I log in and check...this way I can see what the flop will bring? Or do I cover my ass and fold before the flop...because my cards aren't all that great to begin with?

Then again, any decent poker player knows it's less about the cards and more about how you play the hand you've been dealt.

If you play with a good strategy, you can still win with a shitty hand.

I crack my knuckles and pull out my phone. My best course of action is to go right to the source.

My father never made a move without consulting Bob, his financial attorney and close friend. And lucky for me, I know him fairly well. He even pulled some strings and got me an internship with a stockbroker firm last summer.

I don't know why I didn't think of calling him before.

Bob, like most attorneys, burns the midnight oil, so I'm not surprised when he picks up on the first ring. "Hey, Preston. I'm still getting caught up with everything on my end. I'm so sorry."

"Yeah." My voice conveys just the right amount of sadness. "Thanks, Bob. It's been—" I pause for dramatic effect. "It's been a really hard day."

"I bet. I tried to tell him appointing a healthcare proxy without explicit instructions regarding life-sustaining measures wasn't ideal, but he didn't listen." He sighs heavily. "Anyway, I'm sorry I didn't call you earlier, kiddo."

I've been a bit tied up with paperwork. In addition to handling all of your mother's phone calls of course."

I hear him strike a match in the background. "I reminded her what she agreed to in the event of his death when she signed that God-awful prenup, but needless to say, she's still pissed."

At that, my ears perk up...until he says, "Not to be rude or anything, but is your brother around by any chance?"

His question throws me. "No, he's spending the night with his girlfriend." I sit up straight. "I can tell him to call you, though. Is it an emergency? Something important that you need to tell the both of us?"

"Not exactly, but it is urgent." He takes a long drag off his cigarette. "Given how irate your mother is, I think it's best I sit and talk with him before she comes home and things get ugly. She's already threatening to put him in another facility and contest the will."

A strange feeling skitters up my spine. It's not that what he's saying doesn't make sense. In fact, it makes perfect sense. The man's body isn't even cold yet and already she wants to raise hell.

What doesn't make sense, however, is why Bob's asking to speak to Asher when *I'm* the primary beneficiary.

Nerves bunch in my stomach and I undo the first few buttons of my shirt, hoping it will get rid of this constricting feeling.

When that doesn't work, I walk over and pour myself a glass of the most expensive whiskey on the bar. *Macallan 25*.

I take a refreshing sip and come to the obvious conclusion that my father must have stuck Asher back in the will after all.

I'm not upset, seeing as I was planning to cut him a check anyway.

I raise my glass to my lips, mulling over his words from before. "Yeah, it's probably a good idea for the three of us to get together and formulate a plan on how to deal with her."

He's silent for a moment too long before he says, "Sure. Your brother's going to need all the support he can get when she comes home, given she's going to fight him tooth and nail." He swallows thickly. "And you know I'm always happy to sit down and give you advice about your classes at Yale."

Suddenly the stupid transfer is the least of my worries and the sick feeling in my stomach is back with a vengeance.

What in the actual fuck is going on?

"I appreciate that, Bob. I'll be sure to take you up on that soon. However,

I really want to talk about my father's will...seeing as he informed me a few months ago that I was his primary beneficiary.”

My knuckles rap against the desk. *Check.*

Come on, Bobbie. Let's see that flop.

“You know, on second thought. I think we're getting a bit ahead of ourselves here. It's probably best that we wait and see what the next few days will bring before discussing this any further.”

He's circumventing, there's no doubt about it, but I remain calm and raise him downright confrontation.

“According to the doctors, he's not coming back from this. Therefore, I don't really see the point in drawing this out and waiting for the inevitable. And up until a moment ago, you didn't either, given you were so quick to want to talk to my brother about it.”

He clears his throat. “It's my professional opinion that you should wait and see if you receive a copy of the will before jumping to any conclusions.”

Oh, now he's going to get all professional on me. *Fuck that.*

Sweat drips down my back and my hands clench at my sides. Most poker players would say I'm experiencing tilt right now. Which is a nice way of saying your emotions are getting the best of you and you need to fold because you can't think clearly.

The worst thing to do when this happens is to keep playing. And you most definitely never want to raise or go all in.

Because you'll lose everything.

“Funny, because I don't recall asking for your professional opinion. But, hey, since we're exchanging advice, here's some...I'm not deaf and I'm certainly not dumb, I know what he told me.”

“Listen, I know you're on edge, but I'm just the messenger here,” he says. “And I hate to be the one to say this, especially now, but sometimes what our loved ones tell us doesn't match what's expressed in their will.”

“You don't have to explain things to me like I'm a toddler, Bob. Tell me who his primary beneficiary is.”

“Your brother Asher.”

He says it so matter-of-factly it makes me want to put my fist through the phone.

“How much is he getting?”

“According to your father's wishes, all of it.”

But it's not Asher's money. It's *mine*.

In one fell swoop, I send every bottle of whiskey crashing to the floor.

“You're still a teenager, Preston,” Bob says frantically. “Your father most likely wanted you to graduate college first before putting this responsibility on you. Asher's older. He's more mature. He's—”

The golden child. The Prodigy.

The son he didn't choose to make his victim.

I disconnect the call just as Ms. Panfile comes barging into the room.

She tries to look at my hand that's bleeding, but I direct her to the door. “Get the fuck out.”

When she doesn't listen, I grab her arm and show her the way out.

And then I lose my shit entirely.

Things go flying off shelves, wood splinters and cracks, glass is shattered. Everything in my path is destroyed until I can no longer stand from the exertion.

But it's not good enough...it will never be good enough.

Even in death...he still won.

Because the house always wins.

The air around me becomes stifling and the room starts to sway. I need to find a way to get rid of this feeling slithering under my skin.

On instinct, I dial Buster's number.

When he doesn't pick up after the sixth ring, I curse his existence. Blizzard or not, being a bookie is a twenty-four-hour operation. Which means it's time for me to find a new one.

Unfortunately, it won't be happening tonight, seeing as I'm stuck until the snow lets up and they plow the roads.

I need to escape.

Claustrophobia has the ugly feeling rising again, only this time, it threatens to engulf me entirely.

Grunting, I slump against the wall and bury my face in my hands. My head is pounding so hard it feels like an anvil, and I absently trace the scar that's throbbing.

Kit.

Just the thought of seeing her tomorrow releases some of the pressure, makes it easier to breathe again.

Especially since there's no longer a dark cloud named Becca looming over us, preventing us from being friends.

And God knows I could really use one of those right now.

Even though it's my fault I don't have any in the first place. Not only do I push people away when they get too close, but I'm not exactly what you would call approachable.

In fact, most would say I'm unfathomable.

But when I talk to Kit it's...I don't know.

Maybe that's just it. I don't know what I want from her, because with her there's no agenda.

All I know is that I want to tell her things. Important things. Non-important things. Things I've never admitted to anyone else.

I want to hear her important things, too, because they matter to her. And for some reason I can't pinpoint, that matters to me.

She matters to me.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I pull up her number and press the call button.

I told her I wouldn't call her again last night, but I made that promise under different circumstances.

Circumstances that no longer exist.

Disappointment fills my chest when it goes straight to voicemail.

I make the split-second decision to leave one, mostly because I know I don't have a snowball's chance in hell of her calling me back unless I give her a good reason to.

"I'm going to cut to the chase. I think you're interesting, genuine, and a little strange like me if I'm being honest." I continue without stopping for air. "Whenever I talk to you, I walk away feeling like a better person. Not because you're particularly inspirational or anything. No offense. But because I feel a little more human. A little less alone."

I wince. "Fuck, that was cheesy. So cheesy I should take my balls back, delete it, and start again." I inhale a breath. "But I won't...because it was real." A ghost of a smile touches my lips as I think back to our conversation on the bridge. "And you, Kit Bishop, deserve the real fucking deal."

I hang up and exhale heavily as the reality of the situation settles over me.

Somewhere between all of Becca's lies and my monumental fuck-ups...I ended up catching some peculiar feelings for a girl who made it clear she wants nothing to do with me.

The sound of the door opening snags my attention and when I see Ms. Panfile standing there with a first aid kit and a worried look on her face, I can't help but feel a twinge of remorse.

She must sense it's safe now because she kneels beside me and starts tending to my hand.

“My life went to complete shit over the last twenty-four hours,” I grind out, because explanations and apologies are one and the same for me.

I hold up my phone. “To top it off, my bookie isn't picking up.”

Her brows knit together in confusion...and then she smiles and pulls a joint out of her apron.

She's clearly mistaken bookies with drug dealers, but I know there's no point in explaining the difference to her because she won't understand.

Instead, I accept the joint and light it. Unfortunately, all it does is make me wish I was partaking in my own favorite pastime.

And just like that, the urge is crawling under my skin again, even stronger than before.

She makes to stand, but I reach for her hand and shoot her a grin that has her blushing. “Ever play poker, Ms. Panfile?”

Kit

"IF LOVE ISN'T COMPLICATED. THEN CLEARLY I'M JUST REALLY BAD AT IT." –
KIT BISHOP

“Are you close?”

The fact that she even has to ask should tell her I'm not. Then again, most of our sexual relationship consisted of me pleasuring her all the time and rarely vice versa, so I guess it's really no surprise.

“I can't do this.”

I spring up before I do something stupid that will further add to my horrible lapse in judgment, like apologize for not having an orgasm.

She stands up slowly, incredulously. Like she's baffled that just the mere thought of her going down on me wasn't enough to get the job done.

And while I'll admit that in the past it might have, that was before.

Before she cheated. Before she got pregnant. Before she played the living shit out of me.

Her lips purse. “Last time I checked, you weren't the one doing anything.”

I glare at her. “I don't mean sex.” I tug my pants on faster than the speed of light. “I mean us.”

Her expression softens. “Come on, Kit. Don't be like that.”

She tries to reach for me but I back away. “You were wearing red lingerie.”

It comes out before I can stop myself.

She quirks an eyebrow. “Huh?”

“Yesterday,” I whisper, the memory tearing through me all over again. The very same one that's been ricocheting like a ping pong through my mind since the moment Becca parked her face between my thighs.

Why is it that hindsight only happens after you make bad decisions?

“You told me you never loved him and it was over, but you wore sexy lingerie for him yesterday.”

A shirtless Preston standing in a doorway flashes before my eyes and my teeth clack.

She blanches. “You know I like to wear pretty things. It doesn't mean anything, baby doll. I swear.”

I don't know what makes me queasier. Becca lying right to my face again, or her using her old nickname for me while she does it.

“I think you should leave.”

Her lower lip trembles and I hate the way my heart clenches. I wish the stupid organ was a machine that was immune to emotions, instead of worn on my sleeve like some fashion accessory. One that makes people treat it like it's nothing more than a passing trend.

People like Becca.

Her hand skims my cheek. “I know I hurt you.”

“You did.” *You still do.*

She ruffles the ends of my hair. “But don't make any final decisions about us right now, okay? Not without giving me a chance to fix this so we can go back to the way we were.”

“That's just it.” I turn away from her touch. “I don't want to go back to the way we were. Because the way we were ends with my heart getting broken.”

I force back the tears that are a heartbeat away from escaping. I don't want to cry in front of her anymore. I don't want to give her all my power so she can wield it to suit her own needs like she always seems to do.

“I'm going to shower. Be gone by the time I'm out.”

She starts to object, but I don't let her because I know that every vowel, every single syllable out of her mouth is meant to throw me off the wagon I just got back on.

“I need time to think and I can't do that with you here.”

After I safely lock the bathroom door behind me, the first tear falls.

And they don't stop falling.

Not until I scrub her off my skin, step out of the shower, and walk back to my room to find her gone.



When my alarm goes off at the buttcrack of dawn, I vaguely recall I told Breslin I'd cover her early morning shift at the coffee house.

With a grunt, I slip my hand out of the covers and grab my phone to tell Larry—whose name I only bothered to learn after working for him for the better part of two years—that I'm running five minutes late.

After a solid minute of playing some version of Whac-A-Mole with my nightstand and finding no sign of my phone, I get out of bed.

Only to nearly trip over it a second later—which is strange, because I'm positive I put it on my nightstand to charge at some point last night.

Of course the thing is nearly dead when I pick it up, but I hope for the best as I connect it to the charger and get dressed; even though the five minutes it's plugged in won't last me five seconds into my shift.

Then again, it's not like I have anyone to talk to anymore.

Not since my relationship with Becca ended. Or since Breslin's been involved in her not-so-secret relationship with both Asher and Landon.

Or should I say just Landon...because she refuses to date, much less acknowledge her feelings for her ex-boyfriend, Asher.

Even though Asher and Landon are dating each other. I think.

I rub my temples and make a mental note to ask her what the deal with that is at lunch today. Last I heard, Asher and Landon got into a huge argument before Landon left to perform with an indie rock band in England during the winter break. And according to Breslin, he's barely talked to either of them since then because he's still mad at them.

I look up at the ceiling and give my head a shake. It all sounds like one heaping bowl of drama soup.

Even more so now because Breslin dropped everything to go back to her hometown with Asher yesterday.

Freaking Holdens. They have a way of complicating everything.

I try not to think about a certain Holden as I twine a braid in my hair and check my phone for any missed calls or texts.

When the only text that shows up is from some guy that I'm supposed to be going on a date with later this week, thanks to my incorrigible grandmother, I grab my purse and keys and jet out the door.

I'm halfway across the poorly plowed dorm parking lot when I slip and bust my ass on a sheet of ice.

“Nice to see our tuition dollars hard at work,” I shout to the maintenance man who watched my fall from his snow plow while enjoying his bagel.

Muttering a curse, I get back up, convinced the only upside to this dismal morning is that it's the first day of my last semester before I graduate college.

A knot forms in the center of my chest when I think about how much it sucks that my parents aren't here to witness it.

You'd think I'd be used to it considering it's been so long, but no matter how much time has passed, it still hurts.

Even more so with every milestone that approaches, because it's a reminder of how many they've missed...and how many more they won't be here for.

I square my shoulders and force myself not to dwell on it anymore as I unlock my car. I know that's what my parents would want me to do.

They'd want me to be happy and positive like they always were.

They'd tell me to let go of the past...because every sunrise is the start of a brand-new day. A chance to make some great new memories.

I'm the first to admit it's not always easy for me to be optimistic about things. More often than not, I'm angry at the world for taking my parents from me at such a young age.

But when I stop and notice the sunrise is pink this morning, I can't help but smile, because I know it's the universe's way of telling me that my parents are still with me.

Maybe today will be a great day after all.

Preston

"I WANT TO BE WITH YOU. IT'S AS SIMPLE, AND AS COMPLICATED AS THAT." —
CHARLES BUKOWSKI

The highway I'm traveling down seems to go on forever, despite the sun shining and clear roads ahead of me.

I check the time on my watch since I got off to a later start than I wanted to this morning—thanks to some marijuana, alcohol, and letting Ms. Panfile hustle me into a game of strip poker after I took all her money playing heads up.

Waking up next to a naked sixty-two-year-old housekeeper spooning me isn't an experience I'd care to repeat.

Which means I need to get my shit together.

As if on cue, I glance at my phone and grit my teeth.

I've never been the kind of guy who had to wait for a girl to call and I can't say I like it.

I ignore the weird feeling gnawing in my gut when I realize Becca hasn't called either. Not that I want her to, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't expect her to grovel after she got the results.

Then again, she probably knows there's a better chance of being struck by lightning *twice* than getting me to take her back after what she did.

I turn the radio up, hoping the distraction will knock out all the bleak thoughts threatening to break free and help me focus on repairing things with Kit instead.

I have no idea what to say when I see her. I suppose I should start with the reason I gave Asher last night, but then I'm afraid she'll see right through me and know how much it kills me that the baby isn't mine.

I also don't want to give her any reason to think I'm hung up on Becca. Or

that I'm only trying to be her friend so I can use her to make Becca jealous...because then our friendship will be over before it begins.

But if I don't tell her about the paternity results first, she probably won't give me the time of day in the first place.

Rock meet hard spot.

Determination surges through my body like a live wire and I press down on the gas until I'm flying down the highway.

Even though the cards are stacked against me...I'll place my bet and let the chips fall where they may.

Kit

"IT WAS THE POSSIBILITY OF DARKNESS THAT MADE THE DAY SEEM SO BRIGHT." —STEPHEN KING

“Go away,” I tell the imbecile knocking on my door from under my covers.

My shift at the coffee house just ended and since Breslin's running behind and won't be here for lunch, I decided to take advantage of the hour I have before my class starts and catch up on sleep.

Knock. Knock. Knock. Knock. Knock.

Evidently someone with a death wish has deemed that impossible.

I get out of bed and stumble to the door, ready to tell Becca off for not giving me the space I asked her for.

The words I was ready to dish out fade when I shove my sleep mask up and see Landon standing there.

Judging by his appearance, and the fact that he smells like he's been bathing in nothing but alcohol for a month straight, I'd say he had quite the time being a rock star in England.

As I continue glaring at him through my squinted vision, I vaguely recall Breslin mentioning his tour wouldn't be over until later this week.

So why is he here now?

On second thought, I don't care. I'm far more annoyed with my disrupted sleep than I am curious.

“You know, there are these nifty things called phones. You press a few buttons and it allows you to speak to someone without having to wake a poor innocent person up with your relentless knocking. You should try it some time.”

His face falls and I feel like a bitch for snapping at him. Landon's a

sweetheart, and from the looks of it, he's already having a bad day.

I motion for him to come in. "She's not back yet."

He takes a hesitant step inside. "I left my cell phone on the plane."

I grab my phone off the charger and hand it to him. It died when I got to work, but it should have enough juice to make a quick call.

"Knock yourself out."

He stares at it cautiously, like I just handed him a stash of stolen drugs from the cartel instead of a communication device.

Fuck a duck. I can kiss that nap goodbye.

"Ugh." I stomp around the room, gathering my things. "Okay, let's go."

He lifts a dark brow in question. "Go where?"

I throw a sweatshirt over my head. "The cafeteria." I reach for my jacket and knapsack next. "Breslin's still not home and you obviously need someone to lay your shit on before you talk to her. Plus, I'm grumpy when I'm hungry, so you're buying me lunch."

"I'm fine."

When I give him a look, he says, "Okay, I'm not fine. I'm jealous and I don't know how to make it go away."

I point to the door because I hate giving advice on an empty stomach. Even though the solution to this giant cluster fuck is as clear as day.

"You're not jealous, Landon. That would imply you're envious of what someone else has. But you already have what Asher has." I pause, realizing I'm leaving out the other one. "And what Breslin has."

We start walking down the hallway. "What you are, my friend, is threatened."

He thinks about this for a moment before he says, "Fair enough. I keep trying to get over it, but whenever I picture them together without me I'm—"

Seriously contemplating washing your brain out with acid just to get the image of them together out of your head forever?

Wait, this isn't about me.

"Hurt?" I offer.

He shakes his head. "Afraid. They have a connection and a past that I can never compete with."

"Then why are you? Trying to compete with it, that is."

Why am I? Despite Becca swearing they're over, Preston and Becca are still having a baby together. There's no way I can ever contend with that kind of bond.

He frowns. "Because I love them and I don't want to lose them."

I hear you loud and clear, brother.

Becca's not just under my epidermis, she's under all the layers of my heart. And she's festering like a bad case of mold.

I focus back on Landon and his issues. "Look, I don't know shit about being in a polyamorous relationship, and Lord knows the thought of one penis, let alone two, seriously skeeves me out, but I have fallen in love more than once in my life."

Forty-nine times to be exact.

"Okay," he drawls, sounding puzzled.

I stop mid-stride and look at him because I need him to understand where I'm going with this. I might not be able to fix my broken heart, but I know without a doubt that Breslin, and even Asher—despite being a major douche canoe at times—both love him deeply and will stop at nothing to fix his. That alone tells me their relationship—however unconventional it may be to outsiders—is worth salvaging.

"Did you fall in love with Breslin for the same reasons that you fell in love with Asher?"

He runs a hand over his jaw. "No. Different reasons entirely. Same feeling, but the two aren't mutually exclusive because they aren't the same person. I'm attracted to and value different aspects of them individually."

He hikes his guitar case up his shoulder. "Breslin because she's feisty and stubborn, and yet underneath that hard exterior she's sensitive and warm." He taps his chest. "We run on the same wavelength and I can be myself around her, no pretenses. She gets me and accepts me for who I am. And even when she frustrates me, I'm somehow at peace when I'm with her."

I take a seat on a bench in the courtyard because I have a feeling this might take a while. "And Asher?"

"Asher is a wild card. On the surface, he's unpredictable, reckless, and self-centered. And yet, there's a genuine depth to him once he lets you in." He rocks back on his heels. "He challenges me and even though we're opposites, we somehow fit when we're together. He's my best friend and rival all in one. We're turbulent and complicated, but that's part of the draw."

I study his face, wondering what the problem is. "I don't understand why you're threatened by what they have when it sounds like you have something pretty amazing with them too."

I hold up a finger because I'm not done yet. Sometimes outsiders can

objectively see things about people's relationships that the people in them can't because they're so clouded by their feelings.

And a sensitive and caring guy like my buddy Landon has a *lot* of feelings. Which means he's extra cloudy.

“Their connection and past doesn't negate the connection they have with you, because if it did, no one would be fighting to make this relationship work. One or all of you would have given up by now.”

I stand because talking about emotions is making me hungrier by the second. “I get that you're insecure and afraid that they're going to run off into the sunset without you, but look at the big picture here. If they didn't want you or love you, they would have dumped you to be with one another. You give them something that the other can't. And before you get upset, that doesn't mean you're lacking, it simply means that you're important, Landon. You matter to them. For the same reasons they matter to you.” I pat his shoulder. “You're not spare parts. Quite the opposite actually, you're the part that makes them complete. And I bet if you communicated and told them your concerns, they would reassure you of that in a way that I can't.”

He smiles and I see some of the tension he was carrying vanish.

He gestures to the dining hall. “Come on, Kit. You've earned that lunch. I'll buy you two of anything you want.”

If the thought of kissing a guy wouldn't ruin my appetite, and he wasn't dating my best friend, I'd totally lay one on him right now.

I rub my stomach as we walk through the cafeteria doors. “Good, because I am starving.” I grimace. “I had to do five whole hours of coffee slave labor by myself this morning.”

He laughs as we look for an empty table in the semi-packed room. “Otherwise known as work?”

I'm about to make my own quip, but we spot a table all the way in the back and head for it.

We exchange a glance when we see some guy wearing a black jacket hunched over at the very end, his back to the wall.

Given his hood is on and he's face down, resting his forehead on his arms, he's clearly sleeping.

I think this guy might be my spirit animal.

“Hey,” I say in his direction, just to be sure he's not bored while waiting on some friends. “Mind if we join you?”

When there's no response, I shrug and sit.

I fight the urge to tease Landon about how *that's* the standard protocol for those who are sleeping.

Landon places his guitar case down and grabs the seat across from me. “Ready to go up and get food?”

Clearly my friend didn't grasp the part about me being on my feet for five hours. Then again, the dude works like twenty different jobs...in addition to being a double major who's also on the dean's list.

I open my arms wide. “And give up this prime seating? Uh, no. I'll take the grilled chicken and avocado club, though.” I give him a shit-eating grin. “Two of them...and a *Dr. Pepper*.”

“Got it.” He stands up. “Watch the guitar.”

I start to wave him off because it's not like I'd let someone mosey on over and steal it...but I look up and the tiny hairs on the back of my neck prickle.

Preston Holden's heading straight for our table, and the hard edges of his structured jawline, combined with the severe look in his eyes tells me he's ready to battle.

I feel the color drain from my face when I realize he must be here to confront me about Becca.

I mean, of course he would. She's the mother of his child...and I'm...

Shit. What exactly am *I* in this situation?

My stomach heaves when it comes to me.

Crap on a cracker. *I'm a homewrecker*.

I yank Landon back to his seat. “Don't go.”

“What?” He turns his head. “Why—” His words fall when he sees Preston.

I look at the exit, wondering if I have enough time to run out before he comes over.

My hopes are soon dashed because Preston's standing in front of us a moment later, thanks to his freakishly tall stature and long legs.

“Hey, can we talk?”

I silently hope his question is directed at Landon.

I'm out of luck though because those eyes are solely fixated on me.

“Sorry, can't.” I stand up so briskly it sends my chair sailing. “My class starts in a few.”

When he opens his mouth to object I add, “Breslin will be walking through those doors any minute now and I haven't seen my bestie in almost a month.” I reach for my knapsack. “Bros over hoes and all that.”

I motion for Landon to get up so I can stop rambling like an idiot and leave.

He looks between us, appearing uneasy. “Listen, guys, I don’t—”

“You’re supposed to be in jail,” Preston yells abruptly, cutting him off.

Sweet Baby Jesus. It’s on the tip of my tongue to argue that jail is a little harsh for my transgressions and remind him Becca was mine first, but the guy at the end of our table stands up without warning, latches on to the back of my jacket, and tugs me to him.

“What the fuck? Stop it.”

Not only do I hate being manhandled, I honestly have no idea what’s going on or what this guy’s problem is.

Preston who was visibly irked turns pale suddenly...and that’s when I feel something cold and hard against my temple.

I don’t have time to freak out about having a gun pointed at my head though; because in a flash, the guy extends his other arm and opens fire in the dining hall.

There’s nothing but bone chilling screams of terror as a huge wave of people rush for the exits.

I’ve read about school shootings in the paper, I’ve seen it covered on the news, and I’ve watched it depicted in school safety films.

But none of those could have ever prepared me for what it’s really like.

There’s nothing more harrowing than realizing whether you live or become another statistic on a memorial plaque...is up to some psycho with his finger on the trigger.

When I see that neither Landon nor Preston have moved, I open my mouth to tell them to forget about me and get out while they still can, but the guy holding me at gunpoint sneers, “Run and I’ll kill her.” And my stomach free falls.

“Kyle, don’t do this, man—” Preston starts to say, and I want to ask him how he knows this maniac’s name, but then something absolutely horrific happens.

The guy points his gun at the mass of students who are all fighting to make it out alive.

And then he pulls the trigger...multiple times.

It happens so fast, it’s almost like I’m in a dream. No, a *nightmare*.

My ears ring and the already petrified crowd turns violent as they all shove and trample each other to get through the double doors.

I make the mistake of looking down and notice blood pooling from two bodies on the floor.

Oh, God. This can't be happening.

I want to shut my eyes and scream all the pain away like I used to when I was a little girl.

But I can't...because I'm still standing in the eye of the storm.

Everything around me whirls and bile rises up my esophagus when I recognize one of them as Kelly from my economics class.

Tears blur my vision and my knees buckle when I see the purple notebook soaked in blood right beside her.

It no longer matters that I thought she was annoying and she thought I was a dyke freak.

None of that superficial bullshit will ever matter again.

Because she's dead.

I freeze, paralyzed with fear.

And he's going to kill me too.

Preston

"DEATH ISN'T COMPLICATED. ACCEPTING YOU'RE GOING TO DIE IS." –
PRESTON HOLDEN

*G*et it together, Kit.

I silently urge her to look at me, but she's checked out completely.

Can't say I blame her. Not only is a lunatic holding a gun up to her head, she just witnessed two people get shot and killed.

I shift my weight to one foot and then the other, wondering how the fuck Kyle managed to get out of jail in the first place.

I doubt he made bail, considering he shot a nurse at the hospital before he tried to attack Breslin. And God knows he isn't savvy enough to not only hatch but effectively carry out an escape plan in the few short hours he was locked up.

And let's not forget the alarming fact he has not one, but two guns.

I watch as Kyle turns one of those guns on Landon. "You—get the bag from under the table and pull out all the bungee cords. Then, I want you to secure the doors shut with them. I'll be watching you, so make sure you make it nice and tight. Got it?"

When Landon nods in agreement, he digs the gun into Kit's temple. "If you run out those doors, I will kill her and then him. Their lives are literally in your hands right now, four eyes. Understand?"

I don't know a lot about my brother's boyfriend, but I do know he's a stand-up guy.

However, this is life or death, not giving up the last slice of pizza.

What we think we know about others doesn't mean shit when the stakes are this high.

I'd walk right out that door and never look back if I had the same opportunity.

My eyes fall on Kit again, and the sheer terror I see in those hazel orbs makes something in my chest pull tight.

I have to divert my attention back to Landon because looking at her so scared and fragile is fucking my head up and I can't think straight.

I watch in bewilderment as he pulls out a black bag with the word *Police* on it from under the table before he locates the bungee cords.

My brain attempts to put some pieces together again, but then Kit chokes out, "Please don't."

How Kyle snagged himself a police bag is now the least of my worries...because all I care about is doing whatever it takes to keep that sorrow out of her voice.

"I'm not gonna run," Landon assures her. "I promise."

I can practically hear her heart beat with every step he takes toward the doors and it strikes me just how brutal this must be for her.

If Landon bolts, Kyle will kill us.

But in Kit's case, it's not just the fear of death that has her panicking.

It's the fear of being abandoned and left to die like her parents were.

Primitively, I take a step in her direction.

"No one move until those doors are secured," Kyle barks at me. "Then we can get this party started." His eyes narrow. "Maybe I'll take another bite of a juicy apple off the Holden family tree and make it a real party."

Rage pumps through my blood and if it wasn't for Landon almost dropping the bungee cords and Kit's loud gasp—reminding me there are other people here with me—I'd lose my shit and do something that would be liable to get us all killed.

Suffice it to say, their reactions tell me they know exactly who Kyle is now.

However, it occurs to me Kyle has no idea who Landon is—because I'm positive if Asher's deranged stalker knew he was my brother's boyfriend...he would have killed him already.

Landon looks spooked; and for a split second, I think he's going to make a run for it.

I keep my eyes trained on him as he finishes securing the doors... until the elevator on the opposite end of the cafeteria chimes.

The heavysset guy holding a camera looks absolutely horrified when the

doors open and he sees a man pointing a gun at him.

A millisecond later, Kyle pulls the trigger and fires two bullets into his chest, causing his large body to drop between the elevator doors.

His entire life ended in the blink of an eye.

Kit starts sobbing hysterically and Landon staggers back over to us.

And Kyle, bastard he is, latches an arm around Kit's waist before he proceeds to drag her around the room like a toy.

“Now that *that's* all taken care of,” he says, fastening his grip on her.

Kit winces through her tears and my blood simmers because he's clutching her so tight there's no doubt he's hurting her.

Abruptly, he stops moving and zeros in on Landon. “You know, I'm not sure what to do with you.” He gestures to me and Kit with the gun in his right hand. “The bestie and the brother are valuable assets in my revenge plan. But you? You serve no purpose, which means you're dead weight in this scenario. Pun intended.”

His statement is so wrong it's almost comical. If he really wanted revenge against my brother and Breslin, Landon would be the perfect way to extract it, given they're both in love with him.

Christ, it's downright bemusing how unaware Kyle is. You'd think someone would have been more diligent and done their homework before going through with something so extreme.

Then again, the emotionally disturbed aren't known for being meticulous.

The gun in Kyle's hand shifts to Landon. “Which means you have to go.”

Fuck, that backfired with a vengeance.

“Wait,” I yell at the same time Kit does.

I need to know his endgame so I can figure out a way to get us out of here alive. “What do you want, Kyle? Tell us and we'll do it.”

“Unless you kill him,” Kit adds jutting her chin at Landon.

Kyle shrugs. “We're all gonna die today anyway. What's a few more minutes.”

As far as responses go, that one has to be the worst.

History has proven assassins and terrorists never fare well...because they always die along with their victims.

Nevertheless, I was hoping Kyle was delusional enough to think he'd end up getting whatever he wanted out of this ordeal. Like Asher telling him he loved him and promising they could live happily ever after, and in turn; he'd set us free.

But the fact that he's already accepted his own death...means we don't have a chance in hell of making it out of this room alive.

I swallow and it feels like acid going down my throat. "What exactly do you want before that happens?"

As usual, the gambler in me can't help but roll the dice.

A smile stretches across Kyle's face. "Call your brother and tell him about the little predicament you're in. Make sure you put him on speakerphone so I can hear the agony in his voice as he pleads for your life."

"Okay." I inhale deeply. "I can do that, no problem. But first, can I ask you for a favor?"

To say he's surprised at my request would be an understatement. "What?"
If my life is about to come to an end...I want to pay my debts.

And I owe Kit far more than I owe anyone else.

Because for a few hours on a bridge one night...I knew what it felt like to have a genuine connection with another person.

And if I died three months ago...I never would have experienced that.

"Let me trade places with her."

I know Kyle won't let her go, but at least now he won't be hurting her. Or holding a gun to her head.

Kit's glassy eyes widen and I'm not sure what to make of the look on her face.

Not until she gives me that angry scowl...and I bite back a grin.

She wouldn't be scowling if she wasn't angry, and she wouldn't be angry if she didn't care.

Kyle scratches his head with one of the guns, interrupting our little impasse. "Look, I'm not interested in whatever star-crossed lovers shit you two have—"

"We're not lovers," Kit interjects. "I don't swing that way."

I smirk—her proclamation affirms I've gotten under her skin too—and her scowl deepens.

Kyle rolls his eyes. "Christ almighty, I don't think you people understand the meaning of the words not interested or *dead*." He sighs. "Fine, but no funny business. Make it snappy."

When he shoves her forward, her eyes cut through me like a hot knife through butter.

"I owed you one," I mumble as we exchange places.

She starts to respond, but Kyle holds the gun to my head and we start

walking backward until we come to a stop near the elevator. “Call Asher.”

I pull out my phone and press the number for his speed dial.

“I was just about to call you,” Asher says through the speakerphone. “Don't go to Woodside today, there's a shooter on campus and the police called—”

My skull practically vibrates when Kyle hits me with the gun, urging me to talk. “Yeah, I know. Because Kyle Sinclair is currently holding me at gunpoint in the cafeteria.” I look at Kit. “Kit's here too and—” I look at Landon who's silently pleading with me not to say his name.

I wasn't planning to, considering Asher's reaction to that news would make Kyle go apeshit and shoot Landon.

I open my mouth to continue talking to Asher, but then Landon does something peculiar.

He subtly rolls the sleeve of his shirt up, almost like he's trying to communicate some secret message to me.

But the only interpretation I can draw from that action is he's preparing to do some work, which wouldn't make any sense.

Well, either that or he...

Holy fucking jackpot.

Landon has an ace up his sleeve.

“Yeah, that's pretty much the situation right now, brother.”

Asher's breathing turns ragged on the other line before he says, “Kyle, I know you're listening right now. Tell me what you want and I'll make it happen. I'm driving to the campus, I'll be there in less than five minutes. Let Preston and Kit go, they don't deserve this.”

There's muffled crying in the background and a voice that sounds like Breslin's chokes out, “Please, Kyle don't do this. Take me instead.”

“Tell that stupid bitch to shut the fuck up before I make her friend's murder long and painful instead of quick and painless,” Kyle screams behind me and Kit goes rigid.

“You don't have to kill anyone,” Asher says. “We can work this out, I know we can. Talk to me about what's going on and tell me what you want. I'm listening.”

Kyle laughs maniacally. “You know, I thought killing Breslin would be enough. This way, I could make you both suffer for what you've done. Her for being a dumb trailer whore that took you from me, and you for still being obsessed with a dumb trailer whore when you know how much I love you.”

The irony of him calling someone else obsessed isn't lost on me as he continues, "I hid out in the cafeteria today hoping I'd spot her, because we all know that was Breslin's favorite place to hang out in high school and it was only a matter of time before she'd show up."

He chuckles. "But then an opportunity presented itself and I thought to myself—Self, there's a better way to make them both pay. I can kill the two people they love the most. This way, you'll both have to live the rest of your lives with the agony of losing someone you love. Then maybe you'll know how I felt, because you'll feel that ache every moment of every day."

"Kyle," Asher says calmly. "That doesn't have to happen. I know you're hurting and I know you're upset. I get it. But it doesn't have to be like this, you can still have what you want. I'm standing in the parking lot of my dorm right now. Come and get me. I'm yours."

"Too late for that now," Kyle spits. "Do you hear that?"

The sound of sirens in the distance has my heart beating hard in my chest. We're nearing the end of our rope.

"You had your chance, Asher. I loved you so much, but you blew it. Now it's game over. The only way any of us are coming out is in a body bag."

Both Asher and Breslin start begging for our lives, which only makes Kyle even more irate and he begins shouting all sorts of vile things to them.

Jesus, this guy has so much rage, so much venom inside him.

Blood whooshes in my ears and the pain that slams into my rib cage is sharp and searing as I recall what I overheard Asher tell the police.

I know exactly why Kyle is the way he is.

The knowledge sits like the weight of a thousand bricks on my chest.

I look at Kit who's so distraught she's no longer paying attention to anything around her, and then at Landon who's focused on Kyle.

I once read some safety article that said if you were ever held hostage you should keep telling your assailant your name and some other things about yourself...because it forces them to acknowledge you're a person and not their pawn.

And while I don't think rambling off a bunch of fun facts will help any of us because Kyle's too far gone, and it will only make him angrier; I do think there's something I can tell him that he might identify with.

But that would require disclosing the one thing I'd rather die than ever tell another soul about. *Literally*.

My shoulders slump in defeat, because even if it meant saving my life...I

can't do it.

The only thing I can do is hope that whatever Landon has up his sleeve will work.

It's probably the only time in my life that I wish I didn't have hope.

Because hope isn't solid, concrete, or tangible.

It's nothing more than an illusion we believe in because we hate our reality.

The goddamn irony of it all.

I walked into this cafeteria today with a heart full of hope and determination, even after my life went to shit...hoping to convince a girl who detests me to take a chance on whatever this thing was between us...whatever she was willing to give me.

But I got far more than I bargained for because it turns out that hope—the magical entity that always lingered deep in my soul, despite all the pain...can be fatal.

Kit Bishop. Her name carries a weight that wasn't there before.

She's the girl responsible for the reason I'm here, and the reason I'm going to die here.

I should hate her for this. Part of me wants to. But it's my fault for letting her impact me in the first place.

Landon's gaze locks with mine again and he turns his head to the left...silently motioning to the elevator that's a few feet away.

The one being held open by a corpse.

I'm pretty sure he's trying to insinuate the elevator is a good way to escape, given the cafeteria doors are all tied with bungees.

I raise an eyebrow at him. Although he's not wrong, I think he's failed to realize Kyle would shoot us before we'd ever make it inside.

It isn't until he looks at Kit who's still a shaking, sobbing mess—then at me again—before his eyes rest on the phone I'm holding up for Kyle...that I connect the dots.

It might work if Kyle was distracted. But the only way he would be distracted is if one of us attacked him, giving the other two a chance to run.

And the look in Landon's eyes tells me he's already stepped up to the plate.

I shake my head. That's not a motherfucking option. We're all in this together.

He narrows his eyes, but pink hair in my peripheral vision claims my

attention.

Kit.

I don't want her to die.

I don't want Landon to die, either, but if I have to choose...

I choose her.

I choose *us*.

Fuck. My brother's never going to forgive me for this, but it's the only option.

Kyle's not going to spare our lives. Our death warrants were signed, sealed, and delivered the moment he stepped foot inside this cafeteria with a gun.

It's up to us to change our fate.

I take a deep breath and give Landon one final look. We have one chance at this, and our best course of action is to act now while Kyle's still preoccupied on the phone.

I don't want my brother to hear what's about to happen, so I slide my finger over the end call button...right before I drop it.

“Pick that up,” Kyle barks, like I hoped he would.

As I sink down to my haunches, I say a silent prayer that Landon knows how to throw a punch, and Kyle doesn't pull the trigger.

Everything happens so fast, it's all a big blur as Landon charges for Kyle and I maneuver away and run straight for Kit.

I hear Kyle howl in pain behind me, but it becomes background noise as I wrap my arm around Kit and proceed to drag her, kicking and screaming, toward the elevator.

My blood turns to ice and my heart pounds out of my chest when a bullet whizzes by my head.

She's still fighting me, so I have no choice but to pick her up and force her through the gap in the doors.

“Landon,” Kit cries out as I shove the dead body that's in my way to the side and step in.

The last thing I see right before the doors close is what appears to be an insulin needle stuck in Kyle's eye.

I start to smile because that was a bad ass move, but then Kit dives for the button panel like a lunatic. “Get out of the way, asshole. I'm not leaving him.”

I push her back. Landon's sacrifice won't mean a damn thing if those

doors open and Kyle kills us too. “Are you out of your fucking—”

I'm cut off by the sound of bullets firing in rapid succession.

There are only four buttons on this piece of shit, including the emergency stop button, so I press the only one I can...the one for the floor above us.

“What's upstairs?”

Generally speaking, if there's an elevator, then there are stairs leading to the same destination.

I don't get a response from her, but it doesn't matter. We won't be getting off until I know it's safe. And since I'm almost positive Kyle's the last man standing, that won't be for a while.

I slam the stop button when we're between floors...and that's when a fist goes sailing into my jaw.

I'm too flummoxed to speak. I know she's upset, I get it. I don't like what happened to Landon either. But I don't understand why she's treating me like I'm some kind of villain.

If anything, I'm her hero. I was the one who tossed her ass in this elevator, despite her kicking and screaming.

“We have to help him!” She shoves me and when I don't budge, she pounces for the panel again. “I can't let him die. He's my friend.”

I place my hands on her waist, holding her in place. “Stop.”

She tries to knee me in the balls, but I twist before she can make contact. “Calm the fuck down, Bishop.”

“How could you do that to him?”

My heart tugs and I know the guilt I feel is something I'll carry around forever. “There was no other choice.”

“There's always a choice.” She points to herself. “*I'm* not the kind of person who leaves someone to die. I'm not—”

She collapses in my arms and sorrow wraps around me like one big cloak of grief.

God, my heart is so heavy. So heavy for what happened to Landon. The choice I was forced to make. So heavy for how it will destroy my brother. How it's already destroying Kit and making her relive what happened to her parents.

The worst part is, there's no way I can fix this. I can't lie and reassure her everything will be okay. I can't turn back time and refuse to go along with Landon's plan.

The only thing I can do is hold her as she falls apart. “I'm so—”

I don't have a chance to finish that sentence because she reaches around me and hits the button, causing the elevator to jolt back to life.

I don't know whether to be impressed or pissed.

I'll go with pissed. Pissed will keep us alive.

I punch the button and it shakes to a stop...and then I do the only thing I can do. For her safety and mine.

I back her into the wall, lock her wrists in my hand, and pin them above her head. "If Kyle kills us, then Landon will die in vain. *He* chose this, Kit. This is the plan he came up with. Get that through your fucking cerebellum and let it marinate, because I am not the bad guy here. I'm the guy who saw his chance and took it."

Her body goes slack, her expression defeated. "I hate you."

"Duly noted."

Her chest heaves right before she lets out a scream. Or whatever's between a scream and a wail...all I know is that the sound shreds me.

But not nearly as much as when those tears come again. So much faster now. Only this time, they're mixed with giant waves of shivers that wracked her entire body, and with each ebb of the tide, she cries out for her mom and dad.

My God. I never knew a person could cry so hard. So severely.

It's like she's sobbing from the very depths of her soul. Falling apart piece by broken piece right in front of me.

Not only is it one of the most personal things I've ever witnessed. It's the saddest and most gut-wrenching.

I despise the things it does to me.

Her breathing speeds up, coming in short tattered bursts. I need to figure out a way to calm her down before she passes out.

I cup her face with my free hand. "I won my first poker game when I was twelve." I wait for her to look at me before I go on. "My father had a few of his old football teammates over one night, and even though he told me I wasn't allowed in the room with them, I snuck in anyway."

I run my thumb over her jawbone and she sucks in a breath. "He decided to teach me a lesson for disobeying him, so he made me sit down and play. If I won, I'd get whatever I wanted. But if I lost, I'd be grounded and confined to my room for the rest of the summer."

Her eyes widen, and I continue. "The stakes were pretty steep, but to everyone's shock, including mine, I ended up winning. It was the first time I

ever beat him at anything. The first time I ever truly felt like I won in life.”

I reach into my pocket and take out the small blue disk. “This was one of the chips from the winning pot that night. I took it when he wasn't looking, and since then, I've always considered it my lucky poker chip. I know most people will say there's no such thing as luck and that it's nothing more than an illusion, but I believe in it. I feel calmer and more in control of my life when I have it.”

She gasps when I slide the chip inside the pocket of her jeans. “Illusions aren't always a bad thing, Kit. Sometimes it's your mind's way of saving you when reality keeps trying to break you. A way of giving you something to believe in when you don't have anything left.”

I rest my hand on her hip. “Our reality sucks right now, and unfortunately for you, I don't know the first thing about comforting someone. But if you can pretend I'm not your mortal enemy and work with me, I'll do my best to get you through this. Deal?”

She gives me a small nod. “Deal.”

She looks like she wants to say something else but decides against it.

“What?”

“I...” She hesitates, looks down at her feet. “Breslin told me what happened to your father. I feel like I should apologize, but I know how horrible he—”

“Kit.” My voice is low, lethal. “I don't want to talk about it.”

“If you change your mind—”

“I won't.”

Not now. Not ever. Not with her or anyone else.

That mouth of hers starts to protest again, but I pin her with an icy stare, issuing her a final warning.

“Okay, fine. I'll drop it.”

Her gaze swivels around. “How long do you think we're going to be in here?”

“Not that long.” I look down the length of her body and tell my cock not to react. “Do you have your phone on you?”

She shakes her head. “It's in the cafeteria. Probably dead by now.”

She flinches, and I tamp down the urge to ask her why she never called me back.

It's not like it matters anyway. Her reaction to me showing up was loud and clear.

“Well, in that case, it could be hours. Maybe days.”

It's a cheap shot. I know she's scared and my ego is bruised.

Her eyes go big. “Days?”

“Worst case scenario.”

“What's the best case?”

“We walk out of here in one piece,” I deadpan.

She swallows. “Right.”

When she starts to tremble, I feel like a dick. I told her I'd get her through this and I'm doing the opposite and making it worse. I need to put my sour grapes aside before she has another meltdown.

“We'll be fine.”

Her stare ping-pongs around. “I'm feeling a little claustrophobic.”

I don't want to let go of her wrists because I don't trust her not to lunge for the button, so I tug down the zipper on her jacket. “Better?”

“Not really.” She looks up. “Mind giving me my extremities back?”

“That depends. Are you planning on punching me again?”

“Do you think I would tell you if I was?”

Can't argue with that logic. “Fair enough.”

I release her and she wastes no time schlepping her jacket off her shoulders before reaching for the hem of her sweatshirt.

Heat ripples down my back and settles in my cock when she pulls it over her head and I catch a sliver of her toned abdomen and belly button piercing.

“Preston?”

I'm so fixated on the hint of black ink peeking out above the waistband of her jeans, I almost don't hear her. “Yeah?”

“What if he finds us?” She cranes her neck, looking at something behind me. “He could climb the elevator shaft and find a way in. It's not like it would be that hard, there are only two floors in this building, including the cafeteria. It happens all the time in movies.”

I follow her frantic gaze to the blood on the floor and alter my stance, blocking her from looking at it. “He won't.”

She clutches her throat. “How can you be so sure? He's clearly a psychotic murderer who—”

I bring my finger to her lips, silencing her. “I won't let him kill you.”

She pales. “You can't promise something like that. And why would you in the first place? We're not even friends. And you left L—” Emotion clogs her throat. “I don't want to die.”

She's so vulnerable in this moment, so pliable. It chips away at the ice around my heart.

“You're right, I can't promise you that. But what I can promise is, I'll do everything I can to make sure we make it out of here alive. Both of us.” I frame her face with my hands, forcing her to look at me. “It's me and you, angry girl. Until the end, got it?”

She wraps her fingers around my wrists, holding me in place. “You make it sound like we're some kind of dynamic duo.”

I grin. “Who says we're not?”

She snorts. “If that's the case, I think you need a better sidekick. I'm kind of a pussy when it comes to dying.”

“I gave you my lucky poker chip, remember? So, if by some freak chance he finds us, you'll be okay.”

She smiles and even though her eyes are puffy and that black shit is smearing her cheeks, I'm awestruck by how gorgeous she is.

“You really believe in that thing, huh?”

“I'm a gambler, Kit. Superstition is our religion, casinos are our churches, and Lady Luck is the God we worship.”

The corner of her mouth tugs up. “I think you mean Goddess, given Lady Luck is a female and all.”

I smirk. “That she is. Makes getting down on my knees to pray a whole lot of fun.”

She makes a face. “Wow, even in the face of danger you still find time to be a perv.”

“Priorities, baby.”

She scowls. “Don't call me baby.”

There she is.

She crosses her arms with a huff and the logo on her t-shirt catches my attention. It's a hideous goat drinking coffee. “What's the deal with the ugly goat?”

She looks down. “That's not a goat, it's a llama. And he's not ugly.” The offensive bite in her tone is adorable. “I work at the Java Llama Cafe.”

“You have a job?” There's no point in hiding my surprise. “I thought your parents were billionaires and you got an allowance every month.”

She jabs a finger in my chest. “Okay, first—that was rude. And second—yes, I have a job.”

“Why? It's not like you need the money.”

“I went with Breslin when she applied. Figured it couldn't hurt.” She shrugs. “Plus, I hear it looks good on resumes. I'd like to do something more than shop my life away after I graduate. Especially since my Nanna keeps insisting on these—” She waves a hand. “Never mind, it's not important.”

The fact that she won't tell me proves otherwise. “What's not?”

She rolls her eyes. “Why would I tell you when I said it's not important?”

“I'm allergic to seafood.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “What?”

“I just told you something that's not important. Your turn.”

“Well, that's kind of important—”

“Why?” I blatantly run my gaze from her small and perky tits down to the curve of her hips and back again. “You planning on taking me out to dinner, Bishop?”

“Sure.” Her eyes narrow. “How does an all-you-can-eat seafood buffet sound?”

“Like something *you'd* really enjoy.”

Her mouth drops open in shock, and then she bursts into laughter. Not just ordinary laughter either. She tosses her head back and clutches her stomach, her small frame convulsing.

The girl laughs just like she cries...with every part of her.

I want to point out that it was more of an amusing retort than it was funny, but the sight of her looking so carefree steals my breath.

She wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. “You're a jackass, but I needed that.” Her expression goes slack. “You really want to know?”

I nod.

“My Nanna makes me go on dates with guys for money.”

“What?” I roar, causing her to jump.

Grandmothers are supposed to give you ugly sweaters and butterscotch candy, not pimp you out.

Then again, from what Kit told me, her grandmother is a real piece of work.

Anger rolls through me and all I can think about is finding that old geezer and giving her a piece of my mind.

Making her granddaughter sleep with men for money. That's some fucked-up shit.

“I think I understand why you told me your parents were rich now. Man, everything makes so much sense. No wonder you're a lesbian.”

Her brows furrow in confusion, but I hold up a hand. I don't want to judge her, but she needs to know she's better than this.

“Look, I know the money's good. And clearly you're very talented, given your expensive car and other perks. But you don't have to suck dick—”

“You think I'm a prostitute?” she screeches.

I blink. “Is that a trick question?”

Just how far down the rabbit hole is she?

She groans. “I don't have sex with them, you ass. I told you, I go on *dates*. In turn, she gives me my monthly allotment from my parents. I can't believe you thought I was a hooker.”

My shoulders rise in a shrug. “In my defense, I've never been on a date that didn't at least end in a hand job.”

“Right, well, there's none of that going on. The guys she chooses are sweet and respectable for the most part. Usually we just grab fast food and hang out.” She chews on her thumbnail. “It's a pretty simple arrangement. I go on a date with a guy of her choosing, I get my allowance. It's only once a month, so it's really not a big deal.”

“Except it is. Because she's forcing you to do something by manipulating you with your parents' money.”

She sinks against the wall. “I know. I guess I keep hoping she'll eventually get it. Give up trying to change me and accept me for who I am.”

“Is the money really that important?” When she gives me a look, I say, “No judgment here. Trust me, no one understands what a powerful aphrodisiac money is more than I do.”

“It's not about the money. I mean it is, but not because of monetary greed. The money is all I have left of them.” She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “And whenever she threatens to cut me off, I get scared. Like if I'm not careful, everything they left will slip right through my fingers and it will be like losing them twice.”

On some level, I can understand that. Although different reasons and circumstances entirely, the result is still the same.

She's not getting the money she rightfully deserves either, because someone else is in control of it.

People who deserve it far less than we do.

It's like a glimpse of what I can look forward to in the future.

I know my brother will gladly give me some of our father's money, that's not the issue. The issue is that it will come with his own contingencies and I'll

be at his mercy. A lap dog to the rich and powerful NFL star.

Screw that noise.

I've already spent my life being controlled by a man I hate, and I'll be damned if I'm going to sit back and let it happen again. No matter who it is.

Kit shouldn't stand for it either. The money will be all hers in another four years. She should tell her grandmother to go get fucked and live her own life.

“Why do you put up with it? I know the money is your tie to them, I get it. But do you really think your parents would want you to accept the way she treats you?”

“I'd like to think they wouldn't but...” Her voice trails off and she bows her head.

“But what?”

Her eyes are glassy when she looks at me. “The more time that passes, the more things I forget about them. Like the sound of my dad's voice. Or what my mom's hands looked like.” She sniffs. “I'm fortunate I have a video and pictures to help me remember those things...but lately, I'm starting to forget the things that can't be captured. The things I won't get back. Like how soft my mom's skin was. Or how precisely she applied her lipstick.” Her voice cracks like crystal. “The way my dad used to hum to himself while he was coding on his computer. Or the robot skit he did whenever I'd wander into his office.”

She folds her arms around herself. “I'm beginning to think my uncle was right that night.”

The heartbroken look on her face makes my chest ache. “About what?”

“Remember when I told you I came home early from the Caribbean because I got into a fight with my Nanna?”

“I do.”

It was only a few days ago. Although now that I think about it, it feels longer.

Is that how it is when you meet someone who's supposed to be a permanent fixture in your life? Like actual time doesn't apply to your relationship because you feel like you've known them forever?

She wrinkles her nose. “Well, the reason we fought was because *he* showed up.”

“Shit.”

She gives me a tight nod. “I know. I haven't seen him in years, not since they pulled my parents out of the river, and he had the nerve to show up at

my grandmother's condo like a king greeting his peasants. On the anniversary of my parents' death no less.”

She balls her fists. “Turns out she invited him. Meanwhile, he couldn't even be bothered to come to their funeral.” She makes a noise in the back of her throat. “Which is probably a good thing because I'm pretty sure I would have spit on him and caused a scene.”

Her lips pinch. “Needless to say, I lost my shit during dinner that night and ripped him a new one. I threw my drink in his face and threatened to stab him with a steak knife if he didn't crawl back under the rock he came from like the snake he is.”

Pride swells in my chest and I smile. “Atta girl.”

She doesn't return my smile. Instead, her shoulders hunch and her gaze draws inward. “She told *me* to leave. She chose him, just like I knew she always would.” A breath shudders out of her. “As I was packing my bags, he cornered me in my room.”

Instantly, I'm on alert. Like a guard dog ready to attack. “Did he hurt you?”

I'm all but foaming at the mouth, ready to draw and quarter the motherfucker like they did in the old days.

“No,” she says softly. “Not physically anyway.”

Dread coils my gut as I watch her try to get a handle on her emotions. “He told me I was crazy for thinking he had something to do with their deaths, and that I was just looking for someone to blame because I was angry. And to further drive his point home, he brought up the pilot...and the pictures.”

When I give her a questioning look, embarrassment floods her features. “I...um. I had a lot of issues when I was younger. I would flip out for no reason in school—attack my peers, teachers. Basically anyone and everyone for no real reason. And when I wasn't doing that, I was drawing pictures of the pilot. Violent and disturbing pictures. Pictures that scared people.” She clears her throat. “My personality did a complete one-eighty. I was no longer the happy and cheerful little girl that I used to be.”

My urge to defend her is instinctual. “Who could blame you?”

“That was pretty much everyone's standpoint for the first few years. Until my behavior became worse and I was kicked out of school. After that, I had a private teacher and my grandmother put me into therapy. My therapist informed us both that it wasn't normal for me to still be so triggered about

what happened, and my unhealthy obsession with seeing the pilot suffer...was just that...unhealthy. I was put on a few mind-numbing medications that caused me not to feel anything, good or bad, and eventually—I stopped arguing with people and stopped drawing pictures. I was allowed back in school by the time high school started.”

Her words punch a hole through my chest and I wait for her to continue.

“My uncle brought all of that up when he cornered me. He told me it was proof I was mentally unstable and making things up in my head. He said I needed to get over it and move on because it happened so long ago. That there was no reason for me to still be mourning my parents when it's not like I even knew them to begin with.”

She curls her arms around her waist. “I can't help but think that maybe he's right. Maybe I am crazy. And maybe, I never really knew my parents in the first place. How could I? They died when I was eight. I turned twenty-one last month. They've been dead for more than half my life. And now that my memories are fading and I barely have any, it's almost like they never existed at all.”

She tucks her chin down and covers her face with her hands like she's trying to shield herself from a dangerous storm.

It breaks my goddamn heart.

“Kit.” I don't recognize my voice. There's a note of warmth in it that I've never heard before.

She looks at me through her fingers and our gazes clash.

Everything inside me stirs, sends me spiraling into uncharted territory.

The connection between us feels like a tangible thing. A stream of energy that you can reach out and touch. It's enough to knock me right off my feet.

But I won't let it. Because if she's headed for a crash, I want to be the one to soften her landing.

No, more than that. I don't just want to break her fall, I want to crash with her. This way, she never has to go through it alone.

I hold out my arms and her response is automatic. A gravitational force that pulls her to me like a magnetic tether. Permanently binding us.

The moment she's in my arms and all four of her limbs wrap around me, something changes.

For the most part, I tend to operate on supersonic speed—lights, colors, all sorts of stimuli whiz through my brain. It puts my body in a constant state of fight or flight as it desperately struggles to keep up with my impulsive

need for more, more, more. The only time my neurons aren't firing rapidly is when I'm drunk or sleeping.

But right now? It's like my circuits have been regulated.

Kit doesn't drown out the noise, dull the colors or slow things down.

No. She centers me. Makes it easier to take everything in.

Like the smell of her hair. It's some kind of fruity mixture, maybe blueberry or raspberry. Whatever it is, it's intoxicating.

My hands slide down her lower back, stopping when I reach the little indents above her ass, and *fuck me sideways* because her skin feels like warm satin. So delicate and smooth.

It makes my heart shift into overdrive.

Or maybe not, because it's not my heart thumping wildly against my chest like a feral animal stuck in a cage.

It's hers.

It throws me for such a loop, I briefly forget the reason she's in my arms to begin with.

“You're not crazy.” I cup her cheek, waiting for her to look at me. “You're colorful and beautiful and unconventional. A unique blend of heart and fire that should never be diluted. A girl who's so imperfectly perfect, she steals my breath.”

Tears fill her eyes and she clutches me tighter.

“They existed,” I whisper when she lays her head on my shoulder. “I'm holding the evidence right here in my arms.”

And I don't want to let her go.

The seconds stretch between us for what feels like forever before she speaks. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

She snuffles. “For this. For not calling me a basket case. For saying the nice things you did.”

I want to tell her she never has to thank me for that, because I meant what I said, but she lifts her head.

I'm not sure what to make of the expression on her face.

“I have to ask you something important and I need you to tell me the truth.”

“Not a problem.”

“Are you still with Becca?”

I shake my head so hard I'm surprised it doesn't detach from my body.

“No.”

She eyes me skeptically. “You swear?”

I meet her stare. “On my life. We are over. So over I'm gonna have to find a way to resurrect the ancient Egyptians so they can invent some new hieroglyphics for the word.”

“Are you sure—”

“Finito.”

“So you don't have any—”

“Niet.”

“Okay, because s—”

“Caput.”

“Preston.”

“Persona non-fucking-grata, Kit. We're done.”

Relief flashes across her face. “So it's really true then. God, I was so worried you two were still together and I was some kind of homewrecker. Or worse, that you still had feelings for her and we—”

I cut her off because I need her to believe me. Especially now that she's made it clear she wants to pursue whatever this thing is between us just as much as I do.

“You have nothing to worry about. In fact, part of the reason I came here today was so I could tell you we were over.” I tip her chin. “Believe me, the only feelings I have for her are the murderous kind. If I never see her again in my lifetime it will be too soon.”

Her eyes narrow into tiny slits. “Won't that be a little difficult considering she's—”

“Still living with me?” I grind my molars. “Yeah, not for long. I'll be getting rid of that succubus and her bastard baby for good.”

Kit's mouth drops open and she frantically motions for me to put her down.

The moment I do, she shoves me. “What the fuck, Preston? Becca told me how bad you treated her last night, but it's so much worse than I thought.”

Her statement roots me to the spot and I shake my head, certain I must have misheard her.

Right as I open my mouth to ask her what the hell is going on, an authoritative voice shouts, “Police!”

Kit

"CONGRATS, JACKASS. NOW I HATE YOU." –KIT BISHOP

“*P*olice!” the voice repeats. “I’m going to need whoever is on that elevator to identify yourself.”

“Last night?” Preston bites out, oblivious to the officer trying to rescue us.

He takes a step forward and my heart clenches, despite the swell of anger pumping through my veins.

It turns out the guy who consoled me like a friend and held me like I was something precious...is nothing but a wolf in sheep's clothing.

No, worse than that. He's a heartless monster who would refer to his unborn baby as a bastard after declaring he was going to toss the future mother of his child out on the street.

No matter what she did, neither Becca nor the baby deserve someone who would do that to them.

“Answer me, Kit.”

His voice is a deep rumble that makes my blood boil.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

I raise my middle finger at him and then direct my attention to the policeman. “Thank you, officer. My name is Kit Bishop, the person I’m with is Preston Holden, and we’ll be right down.”

I go to reach for the button, but Preston's large hand wraps around my wrist and he tugs me to him.

“Let go of me.”

“No, not until you—”

“Miss,” the officer shouts. “Is everything okay?”

I start to answer, but Preston pounds on the wall with his free hand. “We need a minute here.”

I gape at him. “Have you lost your mind? You can't—”

“Listen,” the officer says. “We can either do this the easy way or the hard way, because once—”

“Goddammit, officer. I just need one motherfucking minute with her!”

I gawk at the unhinged jerk in front of me. “So help me God I am *not* in the mood to have another gun pointed at my head again today, you freaking psychopath. Cut the shit, Holden.”

A radio crackles in the distance. “This is Officer DeBoer requesting assistance. It appears there is an active hostage situation on the elevator.”

My heart jumps into my throat. “No. I'm not his hostage, officer. He's just a stubborn schmuck.” I kick the schmuck in question. “Do you even realize what's happening because of you right now, you idiot.”

He remains unfazed, his features hard like granite. “Answer the question.”

Swear on my life, I've never met anyone who gave fewer fucks than he does.

“Let go of me and I'll consider it,” I grit through my teeth.

He drops my wrist. “Start talking.”

Nerves catch in my throat and I swallow thickly. “She came to my dorm room last night and we talked.”

His gaze is scrutinizing. “You talked.”

It's not a question, it's an accusation. And had it been five minutes ago, it would have cut me down to size and made me feel horrible.

Five minutes ago, when I thought we could be friends.

Five minutes ago, when I asked him about Becca because I wanted to come clean to my friend about what happened.

Five minutes ago, when I thought..

I shake the thought out of my head before it can take root. It doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is what's happening between us now.

And right now? I hate the way he's sizing me up like I'm the one in the wrong. “Are you hard of hearing or something? Yes, we talked.”

He braces both arms on either side of my body, trapping me. Like a cobra who's found his dinner. “Well, evidently I was the topic of conversation. Mind informing me what she said?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

He tips his head to the side, studying my face. Like he's calculating my every move and can see right through me.

I hate how unsettled it makes me feel.

Almost as much as I hate how for one split second he...we...

No, no, no.

For fuck's sake, I don't even like dick.

Whatever I thought I might have felt was nothing more than a response to an emotional and stressful situation.

I needed comfort...he was the only one around. It was nothing more than human biology.

And now that the fog has lifted and reality has set in, I see the truth clear as day.

Preston Holden is toxic. A scheming vulture who preys on people.

Becca, his unborn baby, even his own brother. And now *me*.

Screw that.

I refuse to let him intimidate or use me. I know who my heart belongs to and it's not him.

It's the girl who made me cry myself to sleep nearly every night over the last few months...because I missed her so damn much.

And if I have any chance of making it work with her, I need to get rid of him.

“What we talked about is none of your business. I don't owe you any explanations.” I get close to his face. “But if you value your testicles, I suggest you back the hell up and stay away from me *and* Becca for good.”

“Christ, why are you acting like this? I thought we—” He pauses, his eyes blazing with confusion. “What exactly did she tell you?”

His earnest expression makes my heart clench and I have to remind myself that he's a cold and heartless prick who doesn't want anything to do with his baby.

He's everything Becca told me he was.

“She told me everything, Preston.”

“Then none of this makes any sense. Not unless—” Slowly, he drags his gaze up and down my body. “You slept with her last night, didn't you?”

I glare at him. “That's really none of your concern. Especially now that you aren't in the picture anymore.”

His jaw tics. “Stupid or desperate?”

“Excuse me?”

“Which one are you? Stupid enough to fall for someone who was obviously playing the shit out of you again? Or desperate to get laid?”

My cheeks flame, but I won't let him know how much his words sting.

“That's pretty interesting coming from you. Considering you're the epitome of a loser if there ever was one.” I grimace, disgust rippling through me. “Therefore, what you think about me means absolutely nothing. You can stick your judgments where the sun doesn't shine.”

He smiles, the action showcasing his deep dimples. “See, that's where you're wrong. I'm not judging you. If anything, you have my condolences, baby.” My abs clench when he runs his nose along my neck and inhales me. “Her pussy isn't worth the trouble it brings. Take it from me.” He leans in until his lips are a centimeter from mine. “Thanks for getting rid of my headache for me, buddy.”

With that, he reaches over and hits the button on the elevator.

Kit

"IT ONLY HURTS WHEN I BREATHE." –KIT BISHOP

“She's not available. May I take a message?”

Irritation crawls up my spine as I cradle the hospital phone between my ear and shoulder. It's bad enough my Nanna wouldn't answer her cell for me, now I have no choice but to resort to leaving a message with one of her housekeepers.

“Actually, you can. Tell her that her only granddaughter is in the hospital after she was almost shot and killed at her college university today, and she could really use some family support. Perhaps a ride home too, if it's not too much to ask.”

“I can't make any guarantees that I will reach her in a timely fashion, but I'll be sure to pass your message along. Might I suggest that it would behoove you in the future to call her cell phone regarding these particular situations.”

“I did. Six times since I've been here.”

“I see. Well, in that case, is there anything else I can do for you, miss?”

“Yeah, tell my Nanna it would *behoove* her to pick up her cell phone and listen to her voicemails once in a while.”

I ignore the obnoxious snort coming from the other side of the curtain and slam the phone down on the receiver.

I think about calling Becca next, but a nurse walks in.

“When can I go home?”

She gives me a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. “Not for a few more hours I'm afraid. Given the circumstances, the doctor wants you to talk to a social worker before he clears you for discharge.”

She pats my leg sympathetically before she turns to leave.

“Wait.” I maneuver off the stretcher turned pseudo bed and stand. “Any news on Landon Parker yet?”

Both Preston and I tried asking the police about him after we were forced to come out of the elevator with our hands up, but they wouldn't tell us anything.

The gruesome cafeteria we walked into didn't provide any answers either, seeing as most of the crime scene was covered with tarps and whatever wasn't...was in a body bag.

I couldn't bring myself to count them. And given the way his hand enclosed mine when I impulsively reached for it at that moment, I don't think Preston could either.

Well, except for one—because they were still zipping him up as the police escorted us out.

I fight off a shiver as Kyle's lifeless eyes bore through my mind.

Even in death, they looked exactly the same. *Hollow.*

Like all the pain in his heart ate right through his soul...but not before stripping him of every ounce of his humanity first.

I don't think I'll ever be able to get the visual out of my head.

“I'm sorry,” the nurse says, zapping me out of my thoughts. “I can't give out any information.”

“He was my friend.” My voice cracks and I know I'm a razor's edge away from losing it again, but I'm powerless to my emotions. “He saved my life.”

The curtain dividing the small hospital room opens swiftly.

“And mine,” Preston says, positioning himself at the end of his bed and crossing his arms.

The nurse looks between the both of us. “I really can't—”

“What if it was you?” I question at the same time Preston says, “He's my brother's boyfriend. I know that doesn't technically qualify us as family but I think it warrants telling me if he's alive or not.”

His stoic expression softens slightly. “I don't need to know specific details, but I'd appreciate it if you could give me a heads up. This way I can prepare myself for when my brother walks through those doors and I have to pull the rug right out from under him.”

I know Preston's only trying to persuade the nurse, but a lump swells in my throat when I realize I'll have to do the same for Breslin.

She frowns. “He was airlifted to the hospital.”

Relief flows through me because that means he's alive, but then she says,

“His injuries are substantial, so you should probably prepare your brother for the worst. That's really all I can say at this point, I'm sorry.”

Tears blur my vision when she walks out, and I clutch the side of the bed. It's like someone took out my beating heart and submerged it in a sea of guilt.

“Kit,” Preston starts to say at the same time Breslin and Asher charge into the room.

I barely have time to process what's happening before Breslin's wrapping me up in a hug so tight it hurts, and Asher does the same to Preston.

“Thank God you're okay,” she whispers, and I lose the tiny shred of composure I was clinging to.

I can't do this to her. I know this grief too well and I'd rather walk through fire than ever put my best friend through it.

She cradles my face in her hands, mistaking my dread for affliction. “Kit, honey, it's okay. You're okay.”

No, I'm not okay and it's not okay. Nothing will ever be okay again...and it's all my fault.

Landon wouldn't have been in that cafeteria if it wasn't for me.

Oh God. I can't breathe. Truth is a tenacious, callous bitch. She could give Karma a run for her money any day.

No matter how you slice it, there's no way his death won't fall on my shoulders.

I'm responsible for taking a sweet and caring human like Landon out of this world.

It makes me no better than the pilot who took my parents.

“What's going on?” Asher whispers.

I look down at the floor and suck in a breath, trying with all my might to gather the courage it will take to say the words that will shatter both their hearts.

“Kit,” Breslin says sharply.

I curl my arms around myself. “Landon was in the cafeteria with us.”

She stares at me in confusion and I know she's not comprehending what I'm saying because how could she?

Landon's supposed to be in England and Preston never told them he was in the cafeteria.

I'm not just pulling the rug out from under her, I'm pulling the entire world out from under her.

I *know* how much she loves Landon. Hell, I knew she was in love with

him before she even knew she was.

How do you tell your best friend you're not only responsible for her boyfriend being in harm's way in the first place...but you left the man she loves to die?

I can't do it.

Even though she deserves to hear it from me and I should be the one to tell her...

I just don't have what it takes to break someone's heart. It's an ability I never inherited.

I look over at Preston. I need him to do it.

He meets my eyes briefly before he says the words I can't bring myself to. "He was trying to protect us and Kyle shot him."

Breslin blanches and blinks, too shocked to understand a word of what Preston told her. Not until a guttural sound tears from Asher's throat just before he runs out of the room and she follows him.

I'm right on her heels, which is a good thing; because when a woman wearing bloody scrubs—the same woman Asher's currently yelling obscenities at—says Landon's name, she clutches her chest and sways.

I fold my arms around her and we both fall to the ground. She's so hysterical I don't even think she realizes she's screaming Landon's name. Not that it matters, because inside I'm screaming, too.

Screaming how sorry I am.

Screaming how much I regret ever making Landon go to the cafeteria with me.

Screaming how I wish I fought Preston harder in the elevator.

Screaming how much I want to take her pain away...even though I know I'll never be able to.

I'm screaming just like I used to.

Because it hurts.

Because it *always* fucking hurts.

Because the pain never goes away.

Death is a wound that never heals. You can't bandage, stitch, or fix it.

It's chronic. Incurable. Permanent. *Final*.

And it doesn't just end the life it takes...it destroys a huge part of those who are left behind. The people who are forced to continue living in a world where their loved ones no longer exist.

It's a punishment no one deserves.

“Preston said Landon was trying to protect you both when he was shot,” Breslin chokes out. “I didn't know he was there. Preston never told us. Why didn't he tell us Kyle shot him?”

“I'm so sorry,” I whisper, even though I don't deserve her forgiveness. “I know it doesn't take back what I did, I just need you to know.”

She stands up slowly, her limbs shaking like tree branches in a hurricane. “I don't—”

I rise from the floor. “Kyle had no idea who Landon was. That's why Preston never mentioned he was with us when he was on the phone. He didn't want Asher to freak out and give Kyle a reason to hurt him. Kyle didn't shoot Landon until after the phone call.”

She staggers back. “If he didn't know who Landon was, then why did he do it?” She looks me up and down. “You and Preston aren't injured. Did Landon step in when Kyle tried to attack one of you?”

I start to close my eyes but think better of it. The least I can do is look at her as I confess. “Not exactly. I don't know the precise—”

“What do you mean you don't know, Kit? You were there when Kyle shot him, weren't you?”

My culpability is asphyxiating me, but she deserves to know the truth.

“No, not technically.”

“Where were you?”

“In the elevator with Preston.” I take a step forward. “Landon attacked Kyle so we could have a chance to escape. He did more than protect us, he saved our lives.”

A strangled sound breaks out and she grips her stomach. “You mean to tell me you just ran off? You didn't stop when Kyle shot him? Never tried to help him? Instead you left him to die by himself on the cold cafeteria floor...like some kind of sacrificial lamb?”

My heart bottoms out and fractures right down the center. I go to hug her, tell her how much I hate myself, but she shoves me away.

“Don't—”

“She didn't leave him,” a deep voice booms behind me. “I pulled her in the elevator and refused to let her out. She didn't have a choice.” He walks up to her. “I know you're upset, but don't make her feel worse than she already does. If you're looking for someone to blame, blame me. Landon gave me an out and I took it.”

The sound of Breslin's hand whipping across Preston's cheek is

deafening. “You are the most selfish person I've ever met in my life.”

He rubs the red mark she left. “Considering who your father is, I find that hard to believe.”

I open my mouth to inform him this is not the time or place to be his typical mordant self, but Breslin surges forward. “Listen to me and listen good, you arrogant asshole.” She points to his chest. “If you ever felt anything inside this vacant cavity for your brother, you'd quit using him to clean up your messes and stay away...before he ends up just like my Landon.”

Preston's firm expression falters. “Bre—”

“No. Don't even try it. I'm not your brother, and I'm definitely not one of your little sluts, bookies, or poker buddies. You can't con or swindle me with your bullshit lines or excuses. I see you for the piece of self-serving shit you really are.”

She takes a step back, her furious stare bouncing between us before resting on me. “I don't know what to say to you. But don't follow me when I turn around.”

With that, she storms off...and the organ in my chest that was hanging by a thread, pulverizes.

The events of the last twenty-four hours crash into me like a tidal wave and big, ugly tears retch out of me.

In one long stride, Preston pulls me to him until I'm wrapped up in nothing but his warmth. A sturdy wall of protection between me and all the remorse and heartache I'm drowning in.

I know I shouldn't let him near me, let alone touch and console me, but his arms are the only thing preventing me from hitting rock bottom.

I can't even begin to understand it and I'm not so sure I want to. All I know is I need this. I need him right now.

Even though it's nothing more than an illusion, I need to feel like someone in this world actually cares about me...or I'll shatter into so many parts, it'll be impossible to ever put myself back together again.

“I've got you,” he says before he lifts me into his arms and starts walking.

I know he does. It makes no sense, just like nothing else does...but I believe him.

I latch onto Preston like he's an anchor, crying so hard I lose every ounce of air from my lungs with each sob.

Even though we shouldn't be friends. Even though I detest the kind of

person he is.

Even though I should know better.

I trust Preston Holden.

Preston

"WHAT'S THAT THING BEATING IN MY CHEST?AND HOW DO I GET RID OF IT?"
—PRESTON HOLDEN

“Excuse me,” some nurse wheeling a patient on a stretcher says curtly.

Kit stirs in my arms, burying her face in my neck.

“Move.”

“This is a hospital, young man. Not a—”

“I don't give a fuck, lady.”

I plow past her and continue down the short hallway until I find our room. Once I'm inside, I head to my bed and pull the curtain around us.

Kit snuffles. “She's never going to forgive me.”

My jaw locks and I debate my next words carefully.

What I want to tell her is that Breslin's a bitch, so it's really no great loss if she doesn't, but I know that won't help matters.

Breslin's important to her. And judging by the frantic way she came in here earlier, Kit's important to Breslin.

However, the girl knows how to hold a grudge. If Landon dies, the resentment Breslin will harbor for Kit will sever their bond.

“She will,” I offer, giving her the standard crap people say. “She's upset right now, but she'll get over it.”

“No, she won't. Don't you get it? I was the reason he was there in the first place.”

Christ, I don't know how much more I can take of this. Kit's acting like she's the Grim Reaper and it couldn't be further from the truth. “You want to know what I really think?”

She nods, easing back to look at me.

I tighten my hold on her. “It's not your fault. What happened to Landon sucks, there's no getting around that. But you didn't put a collar around his neck and drag him there with a leash. Nor did you coerce him into going somewhere dangerous.”

My thumb sweeps across her wobbly lower lip. “It was a school cafeteria. Millions of students all over the world eat lunch in one every day. But the thing is, whether it was a cafeteria or not, it doesn't matter—it could have happened anywhere, Kit. And the only person who could have predicted what happened today was the one who took it upon himself to walk in there and take the lives of innocent people. But that person isn't you, and it isn't me. There's only one person to blame for all of it, and his name was Kyle.”

She looks down. “I get that, but it still doesn't change the part I played in it.”

I tip her chin. “You went to eat lunch with your friend, angry girl. That's all. There was no way you could have foreseen what was going to happen.” I shrug. “Technically you're the reason I was there too, but I'm not blaming you.” I palm her cheek. “Because I know, no matter how good the hand you start out with is, the river can change everything.”

She scrunches her face. “The river? Is that some kind of poker analogy?”

I laugh, not only because she's adorable, but because the double entendre isn't lost on me. “I take it you've never played.”

She shakes her head. “I think gambling is stupid. No offense. I just don't see the point. You lose far more than you ever stand to gain.”

I grin. “I see your challenge, Bishop, and I raise you one game.”

“No.” She rolls her eyes. “I have no desire to gamble, let alone with someone like you.”

I put my hand over my heart, feigning offense. “You wound me.”

She starts to smile, but then without warning, she untwists herself from around me and stands up. “This is wrong.”

I raise a brow. I have no idea what she means. “I'm not sure I follow.”

She backs up, putting a few feet between us. “We can't be friends.” Before I can respond, she adds, “I appreciate what you did for me in the elevator and just now, but it doesn't change anything.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “So, I'm only good enough to be your friend when you're upset and there's no one else around?”

Her nostrils flare. “No, that's not it. Don't stand there and act like you don't understand why a friendship can't happen. Becca—”

“Is a manipulating cunt,” I roar, frustrated with her inability to take off those rose-colored glasses. “Jesus Christ, how can you not see that? Are you that fucking gullible? That goddamn stupid?”

Her hands clench at her sides. “I’m not gullible and I’m not stupid. I know more than anyone how Becca can be.”

I smack my skull. “Then what the hell—”

“She’s who I thought about!” she screams, her voice thick with emotion. “After Kyle shot those first two students and I thought I was next...Becca flashed through my mind. Despite how much she hurt me, I wanted one more chance to tell her how much I loved her...and hated her. It didn’t matter; I just wanted more time with her.”

She wipes her tears. “There’s a reason for it, Preston. I know you don’t get it and I don’t expect you to. Your relationship with her was very different from the one she and I had. You don’t love her, and she doesn’t love you. But I love her and I know she—”

“Is playing you.”

I don’t know what Becca told her last night, and she’s so far gone it no longer matters.

I have to pull her out of Becca’s vortex.

I walk over to her. “I’m not telling you this to be a jerk, or because I have any residual feelings for her. I’m telling you because I know for a fact that even though you think you love her...she doesn’t love you. She never did.”

I tap her temple. “You didn’t think about her in the cafeteria because it was a sign, or destiny, or real love, or any of the bullshit you’re convincing yourself it was. You thought about her because that’s how users and manipulators work. They invade your thoughts. Fuck up your psyche. They prey on innocent people like you, Kit. Trust me, I know.”

My stomach churns with nausea, but I stuff it down. This isn’t about me; this is about getting through to her. Making her see she deserves better than someone like Becca.

She starts to turn away, but I grab her face and bend down so we’re eye level.

The air between us turns heavy. Charged with tension so dense it prickles over my skin.

I know she feels it. I can practically hear her heart beating a mile a minute.

Those full lips of hers part to take in more air and my cock strains against

my zipper, taunting me with what I've wanted to take since the moment she scowled at me on that bridge.

I lean in and Kit trembles, those wide eyes staring at me like I'm crazy. Hell, I just might be.

But I'm not folding...fuck that. I'm betting max and going all in.

She places her hand on my chest. "Pres—"

I close the space between us.

Instantly, her body melts into me, her fingers gripping my hair as I coax her mouth open. I groan when the tip of her tongue flicks mine in the sweetest little tease...right before she bites my lip so hard I taste blood and her knee recoils, attempting to strike me in the nuts.

I back up, narrowly dodging the intrusion, much to the relief of my frightened family jewels. That's now twice in one day she's tried to attack them.

She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. "What part of I'm in love with Becca and *lesbian* do you not understand?"

I spit blood on the floor. "I was trying to—"

"What, convert me? Or fuck me and make me all confused in hopes of luring me away from her?"

"Are those my only choices? If so, I'll gladly go with the latter."

She narrows her eyes. "You're unbelievable."

I wink. "I know."

"I don't mean that as a compliment, you freaking narcissist."

My jaw works. "Get over yourself, Bishop. It was a goddamn kiss, not Chinese torture." I hold her gaze. "Don't act like there was nothing there. Lesbian or not, I know you felt it."

She shakes her head. "The only thing I felt was someone using me as an escape in order to avoid their own problems."

"I don't—"

"That's just it...you don't." She starts walking toward the door. "You don't care how your actions affect other people. You don't care about the damage you leave behind. The only thing you care about is yourself."

"Kit," I whisper, willing her not to leave.

Our eyes meet and my chest closes up.

If looks could kill...I'd be grateful.

Because the look she's giving me is worse than death...it's the cold, hard reality.

She's seeing the real me for the very first time.

“You know how users and manipulators work because you're one of them, Preston.”

She walks out, leaving me with nothing but the taste of blue raspberry on my lips and a spasm in a heart I wasn't so sure I had.

But I know it's there now. I feel it...and it fucking hurts.

Kit

"YOU ARE AT ONCE BOTH THE QUIET AND THE CONFUSION OF MY HEART."
— FRANZ KAFKA

*D*on't turn around, I tell myself as I continue marching down the hospital corridor.

I'm not sure where I'm going, but anywhere is better than being in that room. With him.

Kissing me.

Kissing me like my sexuality doesn't mean a damn thing.

Kissing me like I'm not in love with the girl he wants nothing to do with.

Kissing me...like I belong to *him*.

"Baby doll!" a voice I know so well I hear it in my dreams screeches.

I turn just in time to see Becca run down the hallway and my heart leaps out of my chest.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, breathless.

She hugs me. "Where else would I be? I was in my first class when I got the school alert on my phone informing me some maniac was in the cafeteria shooting people. When they finally let us out, I overheard a few students talking about a video posted on *YouTube* of him holding a pink-haired girl at gunpoint. It had almost a million views before it was taken down."

Tears lodge in my throat. "I can't believe you came here for me."

"Of course, I—"

She doesn't have a chance to finish that statement because I incline my head and kiss her.

I kiss her the way I wanted to when I thought my life was over.

My heart starts to flutter...until it stops and tumbles over itself like a faulty car starter on a cold winter morning.

All I can think about is where my lips were last.

“Are you okay, baby doll?”

Becca's voice zaps me back to where my focus should be.

I give her a small nod. “Yeah, just a little shaken up still I guess.”

She pouts. “You know, it's too bad we don't have our apartment anymore. I'd take you home and nurse you back to health.” She loops her arms around my neck, pulling me close again. “I'd even—”

The sound of someone clearing their throat cuts her off.

“Kit Bishop,” a voice dripping with disdain says.

I angle my head and recognize the man standing there as one of my Nanna's assistants. Why a seventy-year-old woman has personal assistants is beyond me, but she has several.

“Hi, Reggie.”

“Reginald,” he replies tersely.

I know.

I look past him and his stuffy demeanor, hoping to spot my Nanna. No doubt she's off somewhere fuming due to my lip-lock with Becca. “Where is she?”

His lips purse. “If you're referring to your grandmother, I'm afraid she's not here.”

“Then what the hell are you doing here?”

He peers down his nose at me. “She sent me to collect you.”

“To collect me?” I unhook Becca's arms from my neck. “Has she listened to any of the voicemails I left her?”

“She did,” he assures me. “Hence, *I* am here.”

“Why isn't my Nanna here?” I grit through my teeth, not caring that I sound like a toddler in the middle of a tantrum.

You'd think the one day my Nanna would drop everything for me would be today.

“Ms. Bishop is indisposed. My instructions are to bring you back to your dorm when you're through here.”

“Let me get this straight,” I say, feeling like a volcano about to erupt. “She told you to take me back to the campus where I was almost killed today?”

Reggie looks around, visibly uncomfortable.

“You know, Reg. I think I'm good.” I reach for Becca's hand. “You can tell her I got a ride home from someone else.”

Reggie looks up to the ceiling. "Very well."

"Also, would you be so kind as to let her know I won't be able to fulfill my monthly obligation next week." I twist my hair around my finger innocently. "If she asks why, you can tell her I'm indisposed."

"As you wish," he says before he turns on his heel.

"Indisposed having loads of hot, dirty lesbian sex with my pregnant girlfriend."

Poor Reggie nearly trips on his way down the hall.

I turn to Becca. "I have to talk to a social worker before they discharge me, but it shouldn't take long."

"No problem." She looks down. "Do you really think it's a good idea to upset your grandmother?"

I want to ask why she cares so much about the woman who obviously doesn't care about me, but my nurse from earlier appears. "The social worker is ready for you now."

I let go of Becca's hand and give her a kiss. "I'll be back soon."

She gestures to the crowded waiting room. "I'm gonna try to grab a seat somewhere."

"Becca?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you for being here."

Thank you for loving me when no one else does.

Preston

"WE STARTED WITH A SIMPLE HELLO, BUT ENDED WITH A COMPLICATED
GOODBYE." –UNKNOWN

I dig into my pocket for my cell and curse when I come up empty. It's most likely with the police, which means I won't be seeing it until they determine I can.

I eye the hospital phone in the room and frown. Buster doesn't pick up unknown numbers.

My body tenses and the walls around me start closing in.

I need to get out of here. *Now.*

But I can't, not only because my car is still at the school, but they won't discharge me until I speak to someone.

Screw that.

I'm not talking to some shrink in exchange for my freedom. I'm over eighteen. These people can go kick rocks.

The only reason I came here in the first place was to see what happened to Landon.

And *her.*

I run my tongue along the small cut on my bottom lip, tasting the hint of copper.

Fuck her. If Kit wants to get tangled up in Becca's web of deceit all over again, I'm not going to stand in her way.

Don't even know why I bothered to in the first place.

She was nothing more than an itch to scratch. An escape. A girl I thought about non-stop because I didn't want to settle down with the girl who trapped me.

Bullshit.

I rub the knot forming in my neck and blow out a breath.

Bullshit or not, it doesn't matter. Kit's not only obsessed with Becca, she bats for the other team. No amount of persistence on my part will change that.

Besides, what could I offer her anyway?

Her last statement might have pissed me off, but only because it's the truth.

I know exactly what kind of person I am. Hell, my list of habitual sins is well over a mile long.

Kit was right to walk away from me. Too bad she can't do the same when it comes to Becca.

I pick up the phone so I can call a cab and get out of here, but the sound of footsteps on the other side of the curtain has me pausing.

For a moment I think it's Kit, and my fucked-up heart threatens to beat out of my chest.

It slams to a stop altogether, though when I hear the nurse say, "The waiting room is filling up fast. You're much better off waiting in here for your girlfriend."

"Thank you," the angel of manipulation herself responds, and the infuriation that courses through me is enough to make my head ring.

"Sure thing, honey. Now, if you don't mind me asking, how far along are you? You look like you just walked off the cover of a glamour magazine. What's your secret?"

"I'm twenty—"

"Twenty-six weeks and five days."

I yank open the curtain. "Although I guess it really depends on what day she screwed the guy she cheated on me with, now doesn't it?"

Just like that, the organ in my chest burns with rage for the bitch sitting across the room from me...and longing for the baby that isn't mine.

Becca's jaw nearly hits the floor before she recovers. "Are you lost, Preston?" She makes a show of looking around. "The casino is a few miles back."

The nurse looks between us. "I'm going to see if I can make a room switch."

I give Becca a shit-eating grin. I've got her right where I want her and she's not going anywhere.

"That won't be necessary. We're both adults, surely, we can handle being

in the same room together. Right, *baby face?*”

I all but spit the word at her.

Becca smiles at the nurse. “We’ll be fine.”

I don’t catch what the nurse mutters to herself as she scurries out, because Becca gets out of her chair and walks over to me.

“What are you doing here?” She crinkles her nose. “I knew you had a thing for her, but I didn’t think you progressed to full-on stalker.”

She clearly has no clue I was at Woodside today, or that I was trapped in an elevator with Kit.

I think I’ll hold onto those cards.

“I’m not stalking her.” I cross my arms. “And I’d ask why you’re here, but fortunately for me, I don’t have to. I already know what a conniving and nasty piece of work you are.”

She runs a finger up my bicep. “Sounds like someone’s butthurt about their fiancée leaving them for a girl.” She looks down. “I’d say it was about the paternity results, but we both know you never gave a damn about the baby.”

Anger pumps through my veins and I clench my teeth so hard my jaw aches. “Eat shit, you vile cunt.”

She takes a step back. “Whoa, you kiss your mother with that mouth?”

“My mother? No.” I thread my fingers through her hair, drawing her closer. “However, a sexy, gorgeous blonde.” When her eyes become hooded, I add, “With pink tips and a great ass...”

I smirk, inviting her to fill in the rest of that sentence on her own.

Becca glares daggers at me. “Cute, but I know for a fact Kit wouldn’t go near you, let alone kiss you. Not only are you not her type, she’s too infatuated with me.”

I lean forward. “Wanna bet?”

I’m level expert at Becca’s games. Too bad she isn’t when it comes to mine.

Her hand wraps around my nape. “Sure. Because I spent last night in her bed.”

Call.

I remove her hand. “I know.” *Check.* “She told me.”

She looks so confused, it almost hurts not to laugh.

“When?”

I start to answer but pause. I’ve had a sneaky suspicion burrowing in my

gut since I walked out of that elevator.

Raise. “Not that it's any of your business, but I left her a voicemail last night and she called me back this morning.”

Her eyes light up and I know without a shadow of a doubt she knows exactly what I'm referring to. “That's not possible.”

It's amusing how she's trying to call my bluff. Little does she know the hand I'm holding is a full house.

And I'm about to drop it on the wicked witch standing in front of me.

I stare her down. “I know it's not. Because you deleted my voicemail from her phone while you were there.”

She blanches and tries to turn away, but I snatch her arm. “Admit it.”

“Fine, but it was only because *you* left me no choice,” she snaps. “So I hope you enjoy reaping what you sowed, because this is only the beginning.”

Rage billows up my spine and I have to remind myself I'll never hit a woman, because if Becca was a dude, she'd be lying face down with no teeth left in her mouth.

Maybe then she'd stop spewing all her lies and bullshit.

She attempts to wrench out of my grasp, but I compress my hold. “Why do you like to hurt people, huh?”

It's not a rhetorical question, I'm genuinely curious why she's so miserable.

Her face twists and she raises her chin in defiance. “Why do *you*?” She jabs a finger in my chest. “You want to point fingers at me? Well, look in the fucking mirror, because you and I are cut from the same cloth.”

I stay silent, not only because I refuse to give her statement credence by acknowledging it—but I know if I give Becca enough rope, she'll end up hanging herself.

Preferably when Kit walks in.

“You can deny it all you want, but you know it's true,” Becca continues. “Just like you know deep down, underneath all those corrupt layers of yours—she'll never want you. No matter how many times you chase after her in a parking lot, or show up at her school to give her back her jewelry...none of it makes a difference. You'll never be her knight in shining armor. As far as she's concerned, you're nothing but the villain.” She wedges her leg between both of mine, grazing my balls with her knee. “Not only because the mere thought of your dick repulses her, but because she's still in love with me.”

An unexpected cocktail of wrath and jealousy surge through my blood.

It's all I can do to remain still, not put my hands around her windpipe, and squeeze until she finally shuts the fuck up.

Her lips brush my cheek. “That's what really has you so wound up right now, isn't it? Whether I want her or not...I have her. In all the ways you never will.”

Dramatics aside, the validity of her words are like a sucker punch to the throat.

A royal flush to my lousy full house.

She flicks my ear with her tongue, like the slithering snake she is. “Funny thing is, I'm not even into pussy. But Kit? She makes quite an exception. Not only is she loaded, but the girl is so desperate and helplessly in love with me, she's putty in my hands. Someone I can use to satisfy every single need of mine.”

Her fingertips dance along my thigh. “You wouldn't believe how easy it was for her to forgive me. All I had to do was tell her I was sorry and say I missed her, and poof—she was ripping off my clothes and begging to make me come with her mouth.”

My heart rate accelerates and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to stop the wave of lust and hatred that slams into me.

Becca, cunning little whore she is, takes the opportunity to stroke her finger up the length of my cock. “I'd forgotten how good she was at eating pussy. So eager to please.” She rubs my tip, smirking when it thickens. “Like she can never get enough of it.”

I yank her hand away. “Then what exactly did you need from me?”

When her brows draw together in confusion I add, “You said it yourself—Kit's not only easy for you to manipulate, she has way more money than I do. Not to mention, she'll keep believing your lies and taking you back. It makes me wonder why you chose me over her when she was clearly the better choice for you.”

Everyone has a motive for doing the things they do, good or bad.

But that's not why I'm asking her. I know Becca well enough to know her answer to my question will be whatever fits her agenda best.

It's what I'm counting on.

As much as I wish it wasn't true, Becca's not wrong about Kit.

The fact that she accepted Becca back with open arms combined with the things she said earlier proves it.

And while I don't understand it, because love isn't an emotion I can wrap

my head around. I know it's Kit's weakness.

Hell, I could go to her right now and tell her everything Becca just told me, but she won't believe a word of it. She'll either make excuses or convince herself I made it up. And that's before Becca can work her magic.

Kit's a lover. Despite being a little spit-fire, that heart of hers is as big and deep as the Pacific.

She's a good person. A good person who draws in all the bad ones like a moth to a flame.

Becca will keep siphoning whatever she can out of her until there's nothing left of her heart but an empty space. A vacant part that no longer works.

I don't want that to happen.

I don't want her to keep giving all she has to offer to someone who doesn't appreciate or deserve it.

And as much as I wish it was me who could be that someone, I know it won't ever be. *It can't.*

Not only because she's a lesbian, but because me and Becca are more alike than I care to admit.

Which means I need to do this now before it's too late.

If I don't, she'll not only continue being Becca's pawn, but she'll also earn herself a spot on my hit list of people I use when it's convenient for me to do so.

Unfortunately, there's only one way to permanently take those blinders off her for good.

My own fucked up theory of utilitarianism.

I have to smash her heart into a million pieces in order to protect her and hope that when she puts it back together, she'll remember the lesson without being too jaded to ever fall for someone again.

Someone better than the bitch in front of me.

I cup Becca's cheek. "You gonna answer me?"

She's so surprised by my touch, she startles. "Isn't it obvious?"

I shake my head and something flashes in her eyes.

For a moment, I fear she's not going to give me the answer I'm anticipating. The one I'll need in order to do this.

I soften my gaze and run my thumb over her bottom lip. Lure her into my entrapment.

She closes her eyes in pain briefly and if I didn't know any better, I'd

almost believe the next words out of her mouth.

“I really loved you, Preston.”

A tear falls down her cheek. It's impressive how good of an actress she is. Maybe that's where she should set her sights next.

“You were always so distant and cold, and I knew you didn't feel the same about me, but I didn't care. I still loved you.” She looks down. “I slept with a guy I shouldn't have right before we started dating. Looking back, I should have told you, but I didn't think it mattered. Not until I saw two lines on a pregnancy test.”

This isn't a conversation I want to be having. Not because I have any lingering feelings for her, but because of the ones I still have for the child she's carrying.

I don't know what to do with these leftover feelings for a baby that's not mine. Where exactly are they supposed to go?

Agitation locks my jaw and I have to remind myself not to fall into the obvious trap she's setting out for me.

“I should have told you then, but I wanted the baby to be yours. For a while, I honestly thought he was. And the more time that passed, the more I convinced myself of it.”

Her lips pull tight. “Then you brought up having a paternity test again and I got scared because I knew I fucked up by not telling you in the beginning.” She rubs her belly. “I know we can't change the past and I don't expect you to believe me, but I'll always be sorry for what I did to you. There are so many things I wish I could take back.”

The pain in my chest is so sharp I damn near keel over.

Not because I believe her. I don't. If she was sorry, she would have come clean about the possibility that he wasn't mine. She wouldn't have tried to blackmail me into marrying her.

If she was truly sorry, she would have called me right after she received the paternity results. Not run off to Kit to ensure she not only hurt me but also had a backup plan.

No, the girl standing before me with crocodile tears in her eyes isn't sorry, and she most certainly doesn't love me. I'm pretty sure she'll never comprehend the concept of something so unselfish.

Not that I'm much better, but she crossed lines I never would in her quest to get what she wanted.

Until now.

I bring my other hand to her face and bridge the distance, kissing her gently. Showing her far more kindness than I ever have in the past. Far more than what she did to me warrants.

She's too taken back by my gesture to return the kiss at first, but then she does...and my stomach recoils.

If she tastes another woman on my lips, she doesn't say it when she pulls away. "What was that for?"

"I'm going to ask you this once and once only, got it?" The acrimony in my voice has returned.

She nods, looking wary. "Okay."

"Me or her? And I suggest you choose wisely because I won't be giving you another opportunity."

She looks at me in awe. "You." She scrunches her face. "I thought you hated me."

I do.

"You thought wrong. Hearing how much you love me and how sorry you are—"

"I do love you. And I am sorry," she interjects, placing her hand on my chest.

I flash her some dimple. "Is that so?"

She nods earnestly, and I look down, gesturing to my erection that's now at half-mast.

"Then why don't you take care of this for me. Get on your knees and prove how sorry you really are."

Her eyes go dark with lust and she kneels on the floor. "You didn't want this the other night."

I tug down my zipper. "Things change. Now take it out and suck it. If you do a good job, I'll let you come back home. I may even fuck that dirty little cunt of yours in my bed."

If she's offended at being so debased, she doesn't show it. Quite the opposite.

She goes in for the kill, eagerly taking me into her mouth.

I grab the back of her head and make her choke on it before I come to my senses. The last thing I need is to leave any room for doubt when Kit walks in.

I remove my hands and fold them behind my head. "Tell me how much you want me. How much you love me and my cock."

Nausea twists my insides because I don't want this Venus flytrap anywhere near me. Not even for the privilege of sucking me off.

Becca must tell my interest in her isn't what it once was because she starts going at my shaft full force, gagging herself to the point of tears.

"I fucking love your big cock, Preston," she says between long slurps that end with spit dribbling down her chin.

I close my eyes and pretend like it's not her mouth around me but someone else's.

A certain angry girl with a gorgeous scowl. The girl I've never been able to stop thinking about since the moment we met.

Which utterly baffles me because it's not like we were lovers or friends.

We were nothing more than two ships passing in the night.

And yet...I know without a doubt she's the one person I'd do anything for. Whether or not it makes sense to me or anyone else.

Kit Bishop is in my veins.

But unfortunately for me, she's the drug I'll never be able to indulge in and the high I can't chase.

She's nothing more than an illusion. It's all she'll ever be.

I grunt and thrust my hips, fighting like hell to keep my hands behind my head as a sick fantasy of Kit pleasuring me starts to play out in my mind.

It's impeccable timing too, because a moment later; two things happen.

One—Becca repeats her last statement.

And two—I open my eyes and meet a pair of devastated hazel ones.

Kit doesn't yell or start crying like I expect her to. Like I *want* her to—not even when Becca tilts her head to look at her briefly before going back to my dick.

Instead, she clutches the spot over her heart, almost like the organ itself is physically breaking—all while staring at me like I'm the culprit. The one who should be held accountable for the impact.

The person responsible for this crash.

Because I am.

The muscles in my chest draw tight with regret—but I ignore it, part my lips, and utter a low moan.

Kit's still staring at me, so I harden my gaze. "Fuck, you're gonna make me come soon."

Becca's response is to speed up her movements and I give Kit a sly smirk of satisfaction.

I want her away from Becca for good. I need her to finally see Becca for what she is.

She starts to turn away, but pauses, sparing me one last glance. This time, there are tears in her eyes. “Preston.”

My name comes out in a choked whisper, like a small wounded animal on their last breath.

It makes me hate myself for tarnishing something so goddamn precious.

Every cell in my body wants to shove Becca away and tell Kit why I did this, but I can't because she runs out of the room.

Leaving me with nothing but the mess I made.

Exactly like I wanted her to.

I look down in disgust at the Antichrist who still has her lips wrapped around me. Seething, I grab the back of her head and fuck her lying, cheating, whore mouth furiously.

The small hint of satisfaction I get from watching her choke so hard on my climax that it comes out of her eight-thousand-dollar nose does little to dull the contempt I have for her.

When she makes to stand, I snap my fingers and point to my scrotum. “Clean off my balls.”

She does as told and I'm torn between wanting to laugh at her pathetic ass, and wanting to ask if the jizz she's lapping off my nutsack tastes as acrid as my feelings for her now are—but I don't want to spend another second breathing the same air she is.

Fortunately for me, I no longer have to.

I tuck myself back in my pants and stride past her.

“Where are you going?” she calls out when I reach the doorway.

I bite back a smile. “Well, this is awkward.”

I look over my shoulder at her. “That was your parting gift. I thought our relationship should end the same way it began...with you on your knees.”

The smug look on her face throws me. “Guess we both got what we wanted then.” When I stay silent, she adds, “You wanted Kit to hate me. But unfortunately for you, you ended up playing right into my hand instead.” She stands up and wipes the corner of her mouth before licking her thumb. “I believe gamblers call it bluffing, right?”

My jaw works and I shake my head. I won't waste my energy going round and round with her anymore. For the first time in my life, I'm folding. I'm done with her and there's not a damn thing she can ever do or say to change

that.

“Have a nice life, Becca.”

I'm one foot out the door when it happens.

“Preston,” she screeches, her voice shaky and sharp.

I'm about to tell Becca to dial down the dramatics and save them for someone who gives a fuck, but then she screams, “Help.”

When I make the mistake of turning around...the thing beating in my chest freezes before it drops to the floor.

Where the blood running down her legs is starting to pool at her feet.

Kit

"OH, DARLING, IT'S TRUE. BEAUTIFUL THINGS HAVE DENTS AND SCRATCHES TOO." —ANONYMOUS

A beam of sunlight blazes through the small window of my dorm room, forcing me to open my eyes with a groan.

Fuck you, sun. You over-inflated, pompous star.

Turning over in bed, I take a breath past the ache in my ribs and wince.

Yup...still feels like someone put my heart in a blender. Then smiled from ear to ear as they pressed *liquefy*.

Bile churns in my gut as Preston's face flashes through my mind and I reach for the small garbage can by the side of my bed.

Just the thought of him makes me sick. Literally.

When all that comes out is a mouthful of stomach acid, I'm reminded that I haven't eaten much while I've been holed up in here for the last six days.

Or is it seven now? Maybe four? I honestly have no idea.

I take a swig of water from the bottle on my nightstand and swish it around my mouth before I spit it into the trash.

Heartbreak—not only does it hurt like hell, but it gives you some impeccable freaking hygiene.

I reckon it's because simple, everyday things like cleanliness no longer seem necessary or important. Not when the vital instrument in your chest that's responsible for keeping you alive ceases to function as it should.

A sharp pang slices through me and I burrow under the covers, waiting for it to pass.

Tears threaten to spill when the intensity kicks up a notch—my body desperately seeking an outlet to all this anguish trapped inside me, but I sit up and dig the heels of my palms into my eyes, keeping them at bay.

I refuse to give them my tears. Lord knows one of them has had more than her fair share of them already. Along with all the other parts of myself I'd given to her.

I suppose this is my karma for refusing to read the writing on the wall and letting myself get swept away by the likes of Becca Dragoni again.

And my penance for trusting someone like Preston Holden.

Quite the dynamic duo *those* two are. One seduces...and the other destroys.

That thought causes me to launch my water bottle at the wall so hard the plastic breaks and the contents splatter.

Just like they did to me.

"I take it you're feeling better?"

I turn my head to find Breslin standing by the door, concern lining her pretty, albeit exhausted face.

"A little," I whisper, my voice sounding about as guilty and sheepish as I feel.

"That's good." She walks across the room and opens a drawer. "I came by to pick up a few things before I head back to the hospital. I'll be out of your hair in a minute."

I stay silent as the awkwardness surrounds us like a fog.

I can't bring myself to tell her what happened with Becca and Preston...because it hurts too damn much.

And she can't bring herself not to hate me for being responsible for one out of the two loves of her life almost dying.

I can practically feel the divide of our friendship growing larger with every brief interaction we've had since the shooting, and it kills me. Yet, I have no desire to do anything to stop it from running its course.

I'm not sure I have the desire for anything anymore. It's like I can only operate on certain frequencies now, and my mood is either miserable and bitter. Or numb and detached.

It goes without saying which one I prefer.

"Kit," she says suddenly, and I look into her now glassy eyes. "I need you to know despite how upset I was at the hospital that night, I'm happy you're alive."

That makes one of us then.

She waits for me to say something, but when I don't; she hikes her bag up her shoulder and heads for the door.

“Breslin,” I whisper, my voice barely above a whisper.

She pauses, her back to me. “Yeah?”

“I—” I swallow the words I really want to say. “Drive safe.”

Her shoulders tense. “I hope you get over this stomach bug of yours soon.” She goes to close the door behind her, but not before uttering, “Maybe then you can visit Landon. I know he'd really love to see you.”

The hard slam of the door tells me the words she really wanted to say too.

The words I deserve to hear.



*S*pace up and down the hallway with my heart in my throat.

I have no idea what to say aside from the obvious—I'm sorry for letting you bleed out on a cafeteria floor while I stayed in an elevator like a spineless jellyfish.

Because of *him*.

My belly flips and I have to clutch it to stop myself from dry heaving.

Shit, maybe I really am getting sick and it's not a ruse anymore.

I blow out a quaky breath and lower the hood on my sweatshirt. *Stop being a sissy, Kit*. The least you can do is look the man in the eyes, apologize, and thank him for saving your life.

It's the right thing to do. What I *should* do. What my parents would want me to do. Heck, if they were still alive they'd—rightfully so—be disgusted and ashamed it took me so long.

My heart thuds painfully against my chest with each step I take toward his hospital room.

The kiss Breslin and Landon are in the middle of comes to an abrupt stop when I enter, and I spew the first words that pop into my head. “Sorry, I probably should have knocked or something.”

Breslin bolts upright. “Don't be silly. I'm glad you came.”

Landon smiles at her and then at me. “Hey, stranger. How's it going?”

His cheery disposition only makes the lead in my stomach grow heavier. He has every reason to throttle me and yet he's acting like he's happy I'm here...instead of the reason he's here.

I shuffle my feet, wishing the floor would open and swallow me whole.

“Kit?” Breslin and Landon say at the same time and I realize I never answered Landon's question.

“Oh, you know, it's going,” I say to my shoes.

I can't look at him. Seeing him in that hospital bed only adds another painful cinder block to the rest of the pile.

“Can you give us a minute, Bre?” Landon says and it's all I can do not to beg her to stay.

“Sure.” She looks between us before her gaze settles on me. “I'm gonna catch up with Asher in the cafeteria and bring you back some food, okay?”

When Landon and I wince, she curses under her breath. “I'm sorry. I didn't—”

“It's okay,” Landon assures her at the same time I say, “I'm not hungry.”

It's not a lie. Just the thought of eating causes vomit to work up my throat. The last time I was hungry...three innocent people were killed and my friend was shot.

I don't miss the worry that lines her face as she walks out. Leaving me all alone with Landon.

To say I'm uneasy would be an understatement. My eyes roam around the room, looking anywhere but directly at him. “You got the basket of bran muffins.”

“I did,” he says, shifting on the bed. “You only sent about a dozen of them.”

I rock back on my heels and study the paint on the ceiling. “Well, you know, fiber is healthy. Keeps you regular and all that. I hear it's good for—”

“Kit,” he snaps, the frustration in his voice unmistakable.

Finally, I look at him, and the dam inside me bursts wide open—spilling a week's worth of tears, guilt, and heartache with it. “I'm so sorry, Landon.”

His expression softens. “Come here.”

I want to protest because I don't deserve to be consoled by him, but when he starts to maneuver out of bed and grimaces, I rush over.

Instantly his arms envelop me and it only makes me cry harder. “I'm so sorry,” I repeat through sobs because I'll never be able to stop apologizing to him. “And I'm sorry for being such a coward and not coming here to apologize to you sooner. Not that me being sorry changes anything or makes it—”

“You have nothing to be sorry for, Kit.”

“Yes, I do.” The harsh tone of my voice has him pulling back to look at

me. "I left you. You were my friend and I left you there."

He shakes his head. "Okay, first of all—I'm still your friend. Second—last time I checked, you were dragged into that elevator kicking and screaming." The pad of his thumb touches my tear-stained cheek. "But even if you weren't, you'd still have nothing to be sorry for."

"You're wrong," I tell him, pointing to my chest. "I should have—"

"Dammit, Kit. No," he interjects, grabbing my face. "Look at me."

When I do, he says, "I made a choice for all of us in that cafeteria. It was my plan and I gave you and Preston no other option but to go along with it. Don't apologize for doing what I wanted you to do." His jaw hardens. "I would have hated you both if you didn't."

His statement causes a rush of anger to spiral through me, not only because it echoes what Preston said in the elevator, but it makes me feel even worse. "Why would you sacrifice yourself for us? Weren't you scared of never seeing Breslin or Asher again?"

Thoughts of Becca pummel me and I clench my fists as I continue. "Why would you risk your life for two people who don't mean nearly as much as the two people you're in love with do?"

It was supposed to be a question, but instead it comes out as an accusation.

His expression is pained. "I was petrified of never seeing them again, but I knew Breslin couldn't lose you and Asher couldn't lose Preston. They'd never be the same if they did and I couldn't let that happen. The only shot you two had of making it out alive was by me doing what I did."

I throw my arms around him because there's nothing else I can say to him after that. Nothing good anyway. I can't stand here and tell the man who saved my life that I wish he didn't bother.

If Kyle killed me, at least I would have died knowing the girl I gave my heart to loved me back...even though it was only an illusion.

Pretending you're loved is so much better than knowing you're not.

But Preston took that from me. He didn't just break my heart; he broke my illusion.

"I hate him," I choke out as a fresh dose of white-hot pain slices through me like a hot knife through butter. "I hate him so fucking much."

Landon cradles me to his chest. "I know, sometimes there are moments when I do too. I have to keep reminding myself he was mentally ill and struggling with his demons."

I stare at the bandage peeking out from the top of his hospital gown, feeling both stupid and embarrassed. “Yeah.” I stand up straight and wipe my eyes with my sleeve. “You're right.”

He gives me a strange look. “Kit is there something else going on? I know I'm not Breslin, but you can—”

“No.” I take a step back. “I'm fine. Everything is fine.”

He starts to open his mouth but Breslin and Asher walk into the room. My eyes fall to where their hands are joined and then back to Landon who is smiling brightly at the both of them.

I guess something good came out of this tragedy after all, because it appears the three of them ended up working their issues out.

My heart twists and right when I start thinking of an excuse to leave because being around the happy trio is the equivalent of picking at an ugly, oozing scab, I hear a phone ring.

I watch as Asher—who I now realize is wearing a suit—peers at his cell and frowns before returning it to his pocket.

He looks so much like his younger brother in this moment; it makes my teeth clack.

“I take it that wasn't him?” Landon questions, yanking me from my thoughts.

“Nope.” Asher releases Breslin's hand and plops down on the large chair in the room. “I tried calling his cell, but it's out of service. The only thing I can do is pray he'll either call me so I can help him or decide to come back on his own.”

“He will,” Landon says. “The funeral just happened this morning, maybe he needs a few days to clear his head before he gets back in touch.”

Breslin snorts. “Clear his head? I think you mean gamble every cent he has before he calls Asher to get him out of whatever trouble he's in.”

Landon rubs the back of his neck. “Yeah, that too.”

“Funeral?” I question, hating myself for being so curious when they're clearly talking about the very asshole I detest.

Breslin walks over to Asher who is looking more distraught by the second. “Asher's father ended up passing away the same night the shooting happened.” She rubs Asher's back. “The funeral was this morning and Preston skipped town after the service was over. Asher thinks he might be in trouble again. As usual, he offered to help him, but Preston declined...for now.”

I'm so caught off guard by the news I nearly do a double take.

And then I realize.

"I can't believe he left his baby," I blurt out, rage replacing my shock. I feel like a bomb mere seconds before it detonates. "Actually, on second thought, I can."

I glare at Asher because I'm on fire now and he's the closest thing to the real target I have. "Your brother is the most selfish and self-centered jackass I've ever met."

I laugh sardonically, like some kind of deranged hyena. The hate I have for them both is practically hemorrhaging from every orifice of my body. "Too bad he left, because he and Becca deserve one another. And I hope for everyone's sake their baby doesn't take after either of them—which I suppose, is about as pointless as wishing for a stream of water in a desert, considering it is the spawn of Satan and his dumb, cheating whore."

They all stare at me wide-eyed like I've gone mad.

They're not wrong. I have and I *am*.

Asher starts to speak, but Landon cuts him off. "Kit has a point...sort of. I can't see your brother ditching his unborn child. There's no way he's gone for good."

Asher tries to speak again, but this time, it's Breslin who interjects. "Preston isn't an upstanding citizen by any stretch, but he wouldn't abandon his kid. He'll definitely be back in town in time for the birth."

Asher raises an eyebrow, appearing confused. "What the hell are the three of you smoking? It's not his baby."

I look at Breslin and Landon who both seem as baffled as I am.

"It's not?" Breslin questions at the same time I say, "It's his baby. Trust me."

Asher shakes his head. "No, it's not."

Breslin's gaze ping-pongs between us. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," I yell at the same time Asher says, "Positive."

Breslin and Landon exchange a glance.

"That really clears things up," Landon mumbles.

Breslin takes a sip of her drink and sighs. "Okay, obviously we need to get to the bottom of this."

Landon nods. "Asher, you go first, why are you sure the baby isn't his?"

Asher leans back in his seat and opens his arms wide, looking at all of us. "Well, for starters, my brother gets more ass than a toilet seat. He was already

having threesomes by the time I got my first hand job from Breslin.”

I ignore the strange ache in my chest as Breslin chokes on her drink and Landon pinches the bridge of his nose. “We have got to work on your explanation skills. What does any of that have to do with him not being the father?”

“Condoms,” Asher exclaims. “My brother doesn't have sex without them *ever*. Our father was super strict about us not knocking anyone up before we turned thirty. Preston always uses them, and I know he used them with Becca because he told me he did. He might have liked her at one point, but he knew better than to trust her.”

I roll my eyes. “Right, because condoms never tear or malfunction.” I fold my arms across my chest. “Condoms or not, your brother confirmed the baby was his while we were trapped in the elevator.”

Asher shrugs. “Well, then he lied to you for some reason. Probably because he didn't want you to freak when you figured out that Becca not only cheated on you with him but some random guy too while confined in a small space together.” He twirls a finger around his head. “Can't say I blame him, you are kind of crazy.”

I swear there must be something in the Holden DNA that is specifically designed to piss me off. “Or maybe he lied to *you* so you wouldn't give him shit about abandoning his kid before he left town, ever think of that?” I throw my hands up. “Oh wait, of course not...because condoms. Swear to God, people like you are the reason we have warning labels.”

“Enough, Kit,” Breslin grits through her teeth as Landon narrows his eyes at me.

Asher leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Look, my brother isn't exactly a saint, and I don't understand why he does half the shit he does most of the time, but he wouldn't do that. He was devastated when the paternity results came back and he found out the baby wasn't his. I don't think I've ever seen him so upset.”

“Paternity results?” I whisper, or at least I think I do. All I can hear is my pulse drumming in my ears as I replay the last part of our conversation in the elevator.

“And that right there is what you should have started with, Asher,” Landon says as I close my eyes.

It doesn't make any sense...at all. Why would he let me believe Becca's lie instead of telling me the truth? And why would he hook up with her again

after she lied to him about being the father?

I take a step back as the realization hits me like a hot pan to the face.

The arrows only point to one direction. Preston did all that...to hurt me.

Worse than hurt me—he wanted to destroy me.

It's also why he kissed me. He wanted me to question my sexuality and have feelings for him. This way, my fall would be that much harder.

I trusted him.

I try to breathe past the tsunami of pain that floods my chest, but I can't. Becca's betrayal was an undertow. But Preston's is a riptide...and it's pulling me under.

I'm drowning, just like he wanted me to.

I need to get out of here.

I'm halfway down the hall when Breslin catches up to me. “Becca's even more of a bitch than I thought. I seriously want to kick her in her petri dish of a vagina for fucking with you.”

I brush off her words and keep walking. I can't be around her or anyone else...I don't want to. I want to push everyone away because I'm so tired of being hurt. I'm tired of being used. I'm tired of giving everyone my heart and watching them stomp on it.

I'm tired of never being good enough.

And I'm so tired of everyone I love leaving me in one form or another.

Maybe I should be the one to do it first this time.

Breslin doesn't need my friendship anymore. She's happy and in love with not one, but two people now. And considering college is almost over and we'll no longer be roommates, there's no reason for her to keep in touch.

Therefore, I'm cutting the cord before she does and sparing myself the torture of having her slowly unravel it.

“Kit,” she screams, and I turn and face her.

“What?”

She gapes at me. “What do you mean *what*? I'm trying to talk to you and make sure you're okay.”

I press a finger to my lips. “Sorry, I'm having trouble keeping up. A week ago you ripped me a new one for being okay and not dying when your boyfriend decided to attack the person holding us at gunpoint...and today you're worried about my well-being?”

Guilt sweeps over her face. “You know I didn't—”

“No, I don't know. And to tell you the truth, I'm not so sure I even care.” I

jut my chin out before I deliver the very same words she said to me. The words I know will either piss her off or push her away. “Don't follow me when I turn around.”

I go to walk again, but her arms wrap around me, holding me in place. “I was beside myself. All I could think about was Landon and how much it would kill me to lose him. I was terrified and needed someone to blame because the person I wanted to was dead.” Her voice quivers and she tightens her grip. “But I was wrong and I'm sorry.”

My head hurts and whatever's left of my heart twists, but I wrench out of her hold anyway.

“I don't know what you want from me or why you're choosing to apologize now.” I leer at her. “Oh, wait, I get it. Now that Landon is fine, and you and your boyfriends have worked things out and you're all one big, happy orgy—everything in the world must be great again, huh? Well, news flash, B. The world doesn't revolve around you.”

There's no mistaking the offense on her face, and I want to take the words back the second they leave my mouth, but I refuse to.

“I have shit to do, see you around.”

She yanks my arm. “Jesus Christ, Kit. What else do I have to say or do to prove how sorry I am?”

I look her right in the eyes. “You can start by leaving me alone. For good.”

She blinks. “You can't be serious. You're my best friend.”

“Things change.”

Her face falls. “This isn't you, Kit.”

She's right...it isn't. This is the new Kit. The Kit who can walk right out those hospital doors, ignoring her best friend's pleas for her to come back.

Adrenaline courses through me, causing my body to shake as I run out to my car.

God, I'm so angry. So fucking angry at the both of them.

A choked sob tears from my throat. At *him*.

I'm sticking my key in the ignition when my phone rings and I see my Nanna Bishop's name flash across the screen.

I promptly hit the ignore button and peel out of the parking lot.

Because this is the Kit who no longer gives a fuck about anything or anyone.

The Kit who doesn't get hurt...ever. Because she no longer feels a damn

thing.

Three years later...

Kit

Chapter 1

“The upcoming merger will not only increase revenue for this company, it will expand growth for both parties involved.” She licks her lips and smiles, and it's a good thing I'm sitting because I feel my knees go weak.

“I know some of you have reservations and I understand—big changes can be scary. However, I've put my blood, sweat, and tears into *Pretty Kitties*, so trust me when I tell you this is the best solution to save the company.”

Marge, the billing supervisor—if you can even call her that—rolls her eyes. “Oh please. This is the wrong move and you know it. I think I speak for everyone when I say that *Pretty Kitties*—a female sex toy company is classy and harmless. But joining forces with *Porn Rub*? What am I supposed to tell my kids? Sorry, gonna be home late tonight, I have to calculate the billable hours for some bimbo taking a dick up the ass.”

A few of my co-workers snicker and nod their heads in agreement.

I pick at my cuticles. “Sounds like someone's a little jealous they're not getting paid for the stick they have up their ass.”

Marge shoots me a dirty look. “Says the lesbian.”

I lean forward. “Was that supposed to be an insult?”

“Don't worry, Marge, it's not contagious,” Juan, my flamboyant and impeccably dressed friend from sales says and I give him a smile for coming to my defense.

“All right, enough.” My boss sharpens her gaze as she looks around the table at us. “I know this merger with *Porn Rub* isn't ideal for everyone. However, if the new direction isn't something you're interested in, don't let

the door hit your ass on the way out. This is a business and there's a fuck-ton of money that can be made with this deal. And if you want Mama to feed you a piece of the pie—I suggest you pipe down and pay attention.”

It's all I can do not to stand up and give her a round of applause. Not only is she one of the most gorgeous women I've ever seen—her take-charge attitude is such a turn on.

Stop it, Kit. I pinch my thigh under the table. *She's your boss.*

Your really hot boss.

A hot boss who kissed you while sharing a taxi after the company holiday party last month. And then pretended like it never happened the following Monday.

“Kit?” she questions, her voice rich like velvet.

I look up and suck in a breath. If *Rihanna* and *Eva Mendez* had a love child...it would look just like her.

I can feel everyone's stare on me as I clear my throat. “Yes?”

“Are you still with me?”

Hell yes. “Absolutely.”

She looks relieved. “Good. Because Porn Rub wants you to be the head of their social media department. They know you'll require some extra training, but if you do a good job, you'll make double what you do now. Sound good?”

I wasn't aware porn companies, even the most well-known, had social media departments, but I'm not about to turn this down. Not only because of the money but because Jess gave me a chance and hired me when no one else would.

Because I am a fuck up.

I shove that thought to the back burner before it can drag me down. I've worked hard to get my life back after my downward spiral, and I'm finally in a good place again. “I look forward to it.”

She bites her lip and my stomach dips. “Me too.” She holds my gaze for a fraction of a second before she reaches for a stack of envelopes and starts tossing them at us individually.

I'm about to ask what's in them but then Juan screams, “Vegas! This is better than a sale at *Nordstrom*.”

Everyone around me squeals and cheers, and sure enough; when I open my envelope; there's a plane ticket with my name on it.

My boss clears her throat, waiting for us to calm down before she speaks again. “Porn Rub, along with myself, have put together a little workshop.

Given this is such a drastic change, we thought some training would be helpful.” Her eyes gleam. “And since we want this to be a fun experience for all involved, as well as a celebration, we figured Vegas would be just the place.” She waits for the excited chatter to die down again before she speaks. “Okay, that pretty much wraps up today's meeting. Finish out the rest of your day, enjoy your weekend, and I'll see you all in Vegas.”

With that, she dismisses us.

“Can't believe I'm going to work in porn,” Marge mutters as she gathers her things and walks out the door.

“Something tells me it won't be for long,” Juan murmurs before he leans over and whispers. “More pie for us, though, right?”

I grab my notepad and stand up. “Pie with a side of porn. America's favorite pastime.”

He gives me a strange look. “You know, for a girl who found out she was going to Vegas and getting a raise, you don't seem that excited.” He pokes my arm. “Is it all the peen you'll be seeing now? Because take it from me, honey. Dick is fantastic.”

I give him a look. “Let's agree to disagree on that. Unless of course, you don't mind me listing all the reasons why pussy is the next best thing to heaven.”

He turns his nose up. “Ugh, point taken. Lord knows I hear enough of that crap whenever I visit my parents.”

I reach for my coffee and toss my bag over my shoulder. “I feel your pain. My grandmother wasn't too accepting of my” —I make air quotes— “sickness, either. Being raised by her wasn't exactly a picnic.”

“Sounds like you're better off without her.”

I inwardly wince. “Yeah, I am. I mean, she's still alive and kicking, but we haven't spoken in years.” I wave a hand because I hate the sour note our conversation has taken. “Like you said, it's for the best.”

He tips his coffee cup at me. “Y—”

“Can you hang back a minute, Kit?” my boss calls out, cutting him off.

Juan must notice the blush creeping up my cheeks because he winks and whispers, “I want all the details. Minus the vagina monologues,” before he skedaddles out of the room.

I try to relax before I turn and face her. “What's up?”

“I didn't want to say it during the meeting, but PR wants you to spend a few weeks at their office in New York.”

“PR?” The moment the question leaves my mouth, I realize. “Right, Porn Rub. Duh.”

I seriously hate the way my brain turns to mush around her.

Given I turned twenty-four last month, you'd think I'd be mature enough to stop morphing into an imbecile around women I'm attracted to.

Then again, Asher, who recently turned twenty-five, has become notorious for twerking on the football field whenever his team scores a touchdown. So I guess age really is just a number and not an indicator of maturity.

My boss tilts her head and I realize she's waiting for me to respond. “A few weeks in New York won't be a problem.” I chew on my lip, debating my next words carefully. “Can I ask you a question?”

The fingers typing frantically across her phone come to a stop. “Of course.”

“I hope this doesn't come off rude. I'm not a judgmental sourpuss like Marge is, it's just—”

Her lips twitch. “You want to know how and why someone who owns a business encouraging women to embrace their sexual needs ends up merging with a porn company.”

“Yeah.” I shrug. “Not that I have anything against porn, but there's no denying it's very one-sided as far as what particular sex the porn industry caters to. From a business standpoint, I don't understand how Pretty Kitties would benefit. If anything, we'd be losing clients.”

She points her pen at me. “You're 100% correct about it being one-sided. Which is exactly what Pretty Kitties, or rather, PR, is going to change. The company alone is worth millions, but the CEO—along with the executive assistant who oversees the main headquarters in New York—realized they could make even more money and possibly double their profits by opening a division which exclusively caters to women.”

“But Porn Rub earns most of their revenue by ads and content uploaded by users. They don't make the content themselves, so I don't understand how they can—”

“Right now they don't,” she interjects. “But there will be some changes shortly. Users will still have the same options on the site they always have, only now there will be videos produced by Porn Rub geared toward women. The videos will include products made by Pretty Kitties in addition to the popular uploaders showcasing our toys in their videos.”

I nod because, in theory, it makes sense, but I can't help wondering. "Do you think it will be successful?"

Her jaw sets and for a moment I think she's going to let me have it, but to my surprise, she looks down at her feet. "It has to be. Otherwise, I'm royally screwed." When she lifts her head, I notice her eyes are glassy. "If I tell you something, can I trust you'll keep it to yourself?"

I've never seen her look so timid. "Of course."

"I was a heartbeat away from filing for Chapter 11."

My hand flies over my mouth, not in condemnation, but in shock. "I never would have guessed. I thought business was good?"

She wrings her hands. "It is. But when I started this company three years ago, I put everything I had into it, along with things I didn't...like money. I was young and optimistic, though, so I took out a huge loan and figured I could pay it all back once it took off. But, I found out the hard way that was a terrible thing to do, because I ended up having so much debt. I was barely hanging on, which was so frustrating because sales were triple what they had been, but it still wasn't enough to save the business. The way I saw it, I only had two options. One, beg my bank for another loan—which of course they immediately denied. Or, propose a business merger with one of the largest porn companies around and make them see they were missing out on major money by not including women in their demographic, and pray they were intrigued enough to contact me. I was driving to meet with the bankruptcy attorney when I got the phone call, and they set up a meeting. After I proposed my plan and showed them my data, I had to be upfront with them about my debt. To my astonishment, they were still willing to do business together, but only if I handed them 90% of my company and gave them full control to do whatever they wanted with it—including liquidate if it doesn't produce enough of a profit for them. Luckily, I was able to negotiate a deal to keep my staff of seventeen employees as well."

I feel so bad for her. Selling sex toys isn't an industry I ever thought I'd be involved in, but I know it's her baby. And now she has to hand it over to someone else.

"I'm sorry, Jess. I can't imagine how nervous you must be."

She nods. "You have no idea, Kit. I'm either going to end up a millionaire by my twenty-seventh birthday. Or, I'll be living in a cardboard box."

I instinctively reach for her hand. I can't help myself. "I won't let you fail."

And had I turned twenty-five last month instead of twenty-four, she wouldn't have to fear being homeless, because I'd pay back those loans, and she'd get to keep full control of her company. But, as it stands currently, my financial situation isn't much better than hers. Only unlike her, I have a guaranteed light at the end of my tunnel.

And my God, what a dark tunnel it's been for the better part of three years.

After I left the hospital, vowing to never let anyone hurt me again...I was in a bad place. A place so depressing and bleak, I shut off and shut down.

I was tired of drowning. Tired of feeling. I just wanted to float and go numb.

So that's exactly what I did.

I left Woodside without graduating and sailed through life in a thick haze of various places, various substances, and various bodies.

I even ended up on the back page of a few tabloids. Something that would have devastated my introverted father who, despite his wealth, stayed far away from all things Hollywood.

I became what I swore I never would. The epitome of everything my parents despised.

But they weren't around to stop me...and I made sure I pushed away anyone who tried to. Including my best friend and my Nanna...even after she made good on her threat to cut me off.

I didn't care.

For eighteen months, I hung around people who had access to more money than they'd ever know what to do with but were miserable deep down—because they all knew what I did.

That even though money could buy me a lot of nice things, no amount of money could ever buy me what I truly wanted.

Money would never bring my parents back.

And it sure as hell would never buy me love—not the kind I'd always wished for. Not even when I gave all of mine away for free.

So, I partied whatever money I had saved from my prior allowances into oblivion.

Things were so much easier without any responsibilities or accountability.

My life was downright fucking beautiful when I stopped giving a shit about it.

Until it wasn't.

My reality check came in the form of a tall, leggy model from Brazil named Gabriela.

It was love at first sight, I was sure of it. Gabriela was an angel sent down to me from heaven. And the bartender who served me my third Long Island iced tea and sixth shot of vodka that night eagerly agreed as he watched us make out before we hit the dance floor.

Thirty minutes and another shot later, however; she was apologizing for having to leave because she was late for the big party her agent was throwing.

I, of course, decided to invite myself because I was both drunk and infatuated with her.

She had no objections as she grabbed my hand and led me out of the club. I remember saying we should call a cab because I was in no shape to drive—but she told me it would take too long and her agent would drop her if she didn't show up in the next half hour.

Looking back, I should have protested and told her it was a bad idea.

Instead, I swooned when she told me how good she was going to fuck me. And I didn't argue when she insisted she was sober enough to drive us there herself and took my keys out of my purse.

The last thing I remember is waking up wedged between the driver and passenger seats and the sound of sirens.

Well, that and the fact that my car went through a large glass window and was in the middle of someone's house.

Unfortunately for me, Gabriela was nowhere to be found. And given the homeowners of the house she drove my car through weren't home, and the car was registered to me, it was near impossible to prove I wasn't the driver.

But at least my girl was kind enough to leave me a token of our whirlwind romance.

A purse containing cocaine. Which, looking back, explains why her agent demanded she get to the party. The girl was holding all the entertainment.

I couldn't be that mad, though. After all, she did say she was going to fuck me good.

And boy, did she ever.

She fucked me so good...it resulted in a hospital visit, a trip to jail, expensive lawyer fees...and a record.

However, it gave me my best friend back, so there's that.

I thought Breslin was going to pass out when she saw me in jail. And then

I thought I was going to pass out when Asher of all people ended up posting my bail. A bail I couldn't even pay him back for because I blew most of my savings during my reckless shenanigans, and I knew I had a better chance of finding a genie in a bottle than my Nanna giving me a penny of my parents' money. Especially once she heard the reason I was in this predicament was because I'd fallen hard for a Brazilian model I'd known for all of two hours.

I was facing a felony, and I knew I was most likely going to be sent away until I needed dentures.

There was rock bottom...and then there was me. And I couldn't blame anyone but myself for it.

Preston might have lit the match that sparked my self-destruction three years ago, but I was the one who chose to keep the fire burning until it turned into an inferno.

Thankfully, I had luck on my side, because Landon and Breslin helped me find a great lawyer who was persistent enough to insist they run prints on the purse and the bag of cocaine to prove it wasn't mine, and track down surveillance from the club showing Gabriela—who left her passport in that purse—taking my car keys and jumping in the driver's seat before we took off.

That, along with it being my first offense, my lawyer mentioning to the court that I was one of the hostages in the infamous Woodside campus shooting, reminding the court I was never found behind the wheel, and me breaking down because I was both grateful no one was hurt, and truly sorry I messed up, granted me leniency.

I got off with one year of probation.

I stayed with Breslin, Asher, and Landon at their home in New Orleans for the duration of it, and if I hadn't been grateful for all of them before...I certainly was then.

They had every right to turn their backs and leave me with my mess—it's what I deserved. But instead, they helped me clean it up and get back on my feet.

I owe them everything.

“You're sweet,” my boss says, interrupting my thoughts. “Even though we both know I don't deserve your kindness.”

Her statement confuses me. “Why—”

She levels me with a look. “I kissed you after the holiday party last month.”

I'm pretty sure my face matches the pink tips of my long locks. "I thought you were too drunk to remember. But I promise I never told anyone, including Juan." My palm flies to my forehead. "Dammit, that's a lie. I told my best friend Breslin, but she would never say anything, not even to her boyfriends Asher and Landon. Although—"

"You're kind of adorable when you're nervous." She laughs. "Now do me a favor and breathe before you pass out."

I take her suggestion and fill my lungs. I'm torn between wanting to do a happy dance because she thinks I'm adorable and wishing the ground would open up and engulf me because of my tendency to ramble when I'm seriously into someone.

"I remember the kiss, Kit," she says and I swallow hard. "But it was a huge mistake that never should have happened. I'm your boss."

The disappointment that slams into me is potent. Figures, just when I find a girl who is not only gorgeous, but also smart, hardworking, and *not* a user or manipulator—I can't have her.

Jess is everything I want and the kind of girl I should be pursuing.

Man, this situation blows.

I plaster a smile on my face. "It's totally fine. I get it." I hike my thumb in the direction of the door. "I should probably go back to my desk and schedule Pretty Kitties' posts for this weekend."

"Kit," she says when I reach the door.

"Yeah?"

"I won't be your direct boss anymore after Vegas."

Before I can say a word, she reaches for her cell phone that's vibrating and brings it to her ear. "I have to take this, it's the new boss, but have a good weekend."

I wave like the grinning, stunned dork I am. Thankfully she's too into her phone call to notice.

"Hey, you. I meant to return your call after the meeting, but I was talking to Kit, the girl I was telling you about." She giggles. "She's incredible, Jared. You're really going to like her." She gives me a wink. "I know I do."

When she gestures for me to give her some privacy, I realize I'm still standing there grinning at her like a lovesick creep.

I quickly close the door behind me and fall against it.

Smooth, Kit. Real smooth.

"I like it black and sweet, just like my men," Juan declares as he walks

past me to the copy machine.

“Huh?”

He presses a button. “It's how I'll take the cup of coffee that's going to save your ass from looking like a clingy, hot mess.” He snaps his fingers. “Now peel yourself off her door before she opens it and you fall on top of her.”

I walk over to him. “I'm not clingy.”

He raises one perfectly waxed eyebrow. “Right, and I own a minivan and live in a mansion with my wife Cathy who cooks me and my three children dinner while wearing the pearl necklace I bought her for her birthday.”

I rest against the copy machine. “I don't know, Juan. That's an awful lot of detail to not be true.”

The corner of his mouth quirks. “Probably because it's based on my actual fantasy. Only Cathy is *Charlie Hunnam* and I'm the one wearing a very special kind of pearl necklace.” He swats my arm with the stack of papers he's holding. “Now quit playing and get me some coffee, Ms. Clingy.”

“I'm not clingy,” I repeat as I make my way to the small coffee room.

“You kind of are,” Marge calls out from her cubicle. “I asked if she wanted half my sandwich once and she acted like it was a marriage proposal. The girl brought me flowers and lunch the next day.”

“I was hungry,” I defend above the laughter of my co-workers. “I was trying to be nice and thank you.”

That only makes them laugh harder.

With a groan, I pull out my cell phone and call Breslin. I need an objective opinion and I know she'll give me one.

She picks up on the second ring and I don't waste any time. “Am I clingy?”

“What—” *Woof.*

“Are you kidding? We went for a walk two minutes ago, Picasso,” she tells her golden lab puppy who I realize isn't a puppy anymore based on his deep bark.

“Sorry, what were you saying?”

“Am I clingy?”

Woof. Woof.

“Crap, he's peeing all over Asher's lucky jersey. Stop it, Picasso. Mommy spoke to you about this, we don't pee on Dad—”

“What the hell, babe? Again?” Asher yells in the background. “I thought

you said he graduated from doggie academy with honors.”

“He did,” Breslin says at the same time Landon says, “It's not his fault you left your jersey lying around. You know it's his favorite target. You're practically taunting him with it.”

“I'm gonna go, B. Sounds like you have your hands full.”

“I'm sorry. I'll call you back when it's not so hec—”

“Now he's taking a dump on it and *smiling* at me,” Asher roars. “Why do you have to be such an asshole, Picasso?”

Woof.

“He's not an asshole,” Breslin says defensively.

“He's smiling because he's relieved now,” Landon adds before the line disconnects.

I try to suppress my laughter as I finish making Juan's coffee and head back to my cubicle to get some work done.

Three hours later, I've scheduled a variety of posts to go off on various social media sites for the weekend and personally responded to over five hundred emails, messages, tweets, inquiries, and Facebook comments on Pretty Kitties' social media pages.

And since Juan's—along with the other sales representatives—phone lines are still blowing up around me, I give myself a pat on the back for doing a good job.

Then I whip out my notepad and brainstorm some new catchy ad ideas to post for the upcoming week.

I'm typing up one for our special Pretty Kitty G-spot vibrator when my cell rings.

I press the button connecting my Bluetooth to my headphones. “Quick, B—I need a sexy word that rhymes with inspector G-spot.”

There's a throat clear that's distinctly masculine. “Kit Bishop.”

I recognize the disdain in his tone immediately. “How did you get this number, Reggie?”

“Reginald,” he corrects. “And I'm calling on behalf of your grandmother.”

“Well, I certainly didn't think you were calling me to hang out and catch a movie. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do. I'd appreciate it if you'd lose my number.”

I go to hang up, but his next statement stops me in my tracks. “She's dying.”

“What?”

His words are like a kick to the stomach and it sends a flurry of emotions through me. Other than my piece of shit uncle, this woman is the only family I have. Yes, she was ruthless and mean. And God knows I hated her punishments, rules, and how cruel she could be.

But I also can't help but remember the times she wasn't so cold. Like when I found out my parents died, and she held me as I cried my heart out and promised she would always take care of me.

“It's cancer,” he says softly. “Last year she was diagnosed with throat cancer and the prognosis was good. However, two weeks ago she was diagnosed with lung cancer. Given it's in the advanced stage, she's chosen not to undergo treatment. She doesn't have long, Kit. Maybe a month or two at most.”

My chest grows heavy and I squeeze my eyes shut.

The promise she made to that inconsolable little girl turned out to be a lie. She didn't support me when I realized I was gay—she condemned me instead. And she couldn't be bothered to come to the hospital after the shooting, or when I ended up in jail. Basically, all the times I needed her. Or rather, the times I needed to be loved and taken care of more than I needed her judgments and disapproval.

I swallow the tears threatening to break free. I can't bring myself to mourn a woman who made me wish I was dead so many times I lost count. A woman I deemed important, all because my parents appointed her to be their placeholder. A woman who spoke to me via punishments and threats, instead of words and understanding.

A woman whose idea of love was taking a hammer to all the parts of me she didn't approve of—until I was broken...just like her promise.

“Sorry, Reg. I tried digging deep to find a fuck or two to give, but I came up empty. Have a—”

“She can't speak,” he interjects. “Perhaps that will sway your decision to see her.”

“It doesn't.”

“She's been asking for you.” The desperate twinge in his voice is indisputable.

“I thought you said she couldn't speak?”

“She doesn't. She refuses to use her electrolarynx, so she communicates with her notepad.”

“Goodbye, Reg—”

“Wait,” he says before I disconnect the call. “Your grandmother wants me to inform you that the family lawyer stumbled upon some interesting information during his most recent review, and it would behoove you to hear about it. He'll be at her residence this Sunday finalizing her will, should you come to your senses and change your mind about visiting. Good day.”

With that, he hangs up the phone.

It rings again almost immediately, and I don't hesitate to answer. “Do you really think threatening me will work?”

“Who the heck is threatening you?” Breslin questions.

I massage my temples. “I thought you were my Nanna's assistant— apparently something is going on with my parents' will, but I won't find out what unless I go over there on Sunday to speak to her and the family lawyer.”

“Not to be insensitive, but why are they only figuring this out now? Your parents have been gone for years, you'd think—”

“She has cancer...it's terminal. The lawyer probably came across it when he was preparing her will.”

“Oh,” she whispers. “I'm so sorry, Kit.”

I start to speak, but she curses and says, “Asher's team is in the playoffs on Sunday. But maybe if I fly in tomorrow, and we show up at—”

“No.” I need to nip this in the bud before Breslin ends up missing the biggest game of Asher's career. “If something goes wrong and your return flight is delayed, or you accidentally miss it altogether, Asher will be heartbroken. I'll be fine, B. Asher needs you.”

“I know, but I don't want you to go off the deep end again.”

Her concern makes me want to reach through the phone and hug her. “I won't, I promise. I can handle this.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. Besides, what's the worst that can happen? I've already lost my parents, so it's not like I can lose them again. This is nothing more than her trying to get one last dig at me before she croaks.”

“Yeah, you have a point. But promise you'll call me if you need me. I can catch the next flight after the game and—”

Woof.

“I swear to God!” Asher yells in the background. “It's like he *wants* me to lose the playoff game. That's it, I'm tossing your treats in the pool, you mutt.”

Woof.

“Maybe Picasso peeing on it makes it extra lucky,” Landon offers. “Ever think of that?”

Breslin sighs. “Here we go again.”

I laugh. “Go take care of your dog...and your men.”

Kit

Chapter 2

*M*y stomach drops as I peer across the table at my Nanna, who's looking like the cat who ate the canary. Or rather, gutted the poor thing, watched it suffer, and then licked her fingers clean.

Even when the woman can no longer speak, she's still a malicious shrew who delights in making me miserable.

When I arrived and saw her for the first time in three years—sitting in a wheelchair, looking so much frailer and thinner than I remembered, it pulled on my heartstrings. I couldn't help but think that maybe there was a chance we could bury the hatchet and salvage our relationship before it was too late.

However, less than two minutes later, she scribbled on her notepad that I had too much eye makeup on and that my favorite jacket looked like it was made in a Bangladesh sweatshop.

Then, before I could defend my appearance, she passed Reggie another note that read: *Ask my granddaughter if it would kill her to stop looking like a dyke unicorn and get rid of that pink hair.*

If it wasn't for the lawyer choosing that moment to walk into the room—I'd have choked her with the silk scarf draped around her neck.

Hell, I still might, depending on how the rest of this meeting goes.

“Your father appointed your grandmother as his beneficiary,” Barry, the lawyer, repeats slowly, almost like it hurts him to say it. And maybe it does, given he was friends with my dad and it sounds like he dropped the ball on the most important documentation my father left behind. “Therefore, his estate is in her name.”

“I know.” I sit up straight. “I get that, but I was told everything will be turned over to me when I'm twenty-five.”

He looks at his pile of paperwork. “That's what your parents wanted.”

“So, what's the problem?”

He looks at my Nanna and a horrible feeling crawls up my spine. “The incentive clause.” I look down at my shoes. I don't think I can stomach the satisfaction my next statement will give her. “Look, you had every right not to give me my allowance when I dropped out of college and went through my rough patch. But, I'm doing much better now—”

“It's not the incentive clause,” Barry says, not bothering to hide his annoyance. “The clause determined whether you were paid your monthly allotment, but that money came from a separate trust fund. Dropping out of college and getting arrested isn't why you stopped receiving it every month. Your father only intended for the money in that trust to last until you turned twenty-one.”

I feel like someone just dumped a bucket of ice water over my head. “So, there's more than one trust fund for me?”

Barry shoots my grandmother a look. “I can't believe you never told her any of this.”

My grandmother shrugs and lights a cigarette. We all stop and stare at her, because evidently having a hole in her freaking neck isn't enough to make her quit the bad habit.

“Don't worry,” Reggie says. “She can't smoke anymore. At least, she's not supposed to.”

My grandmother rolls her eyes and lights a second one, billowing them around as if she were burning sage, which is ironic, considering she's selfishly infecting all of us with her second-hand smoke like the evil demon *she* is.

Barry shakes his head and focuses his attention on me. “Not exactly. Technically it's just the one trust fund and everything else is considered his estate. Money, property—”

“Which is supposed to go to me on my next birthday.” I look at my Nanna. “You told me after the funeral that's what they wanted.”

For a moment, I see a flicker of something resembling human emotion in her eyes, but it's gone when Barry speaks again.

“It is, Kit. However, there's an issue.”

“What kind of issue?”

He sweeps his hand back and forth, trying to direct the smog wafting from my grandmother's cigarettes out of his face. "Sorry, I'm allergic to smoke."

He starts coughing violently, and my grandmother casts him a look packed with enough ice to build an igloo, then proceeds to light up two more of them.

When poor Barry starts coughing up what I'm certain is a lung, Reggie wheels my Nanna to the patio so she can wave her cancer sticks around outside.

After I hand him a glass of water, he continues where he left off. "Even though your father wanted his estate turned over to you, he never went through the proper channels to ensure it would."

He solemnly points to his paperwork. "When we drew up his will, naturally, your mother was the beneficiary. But when you have children, especially minor children, it's a good idea for parents to put things in place. I told him what we could do to ensure his estate went to you if he and your mother passed before you were of age—but he declined. He said if that happened, your grandmother would be appointed guardian, and he wanted his estate to go to her until you either turned twenty-five or got married, whichever came first. Again, I explained he should take the proper steps, but he—" His face falls. "He said he trusted your grandmother to fulfill his wishes, and he didn't want his estate tied up until you were twenty-five in case you or she needed the money before then. He thought making her the beneficiary was best for everyone."

His shoulders hunch. "He ended the conversation shortly after. He was only thirty-six, Kit. Young people don't typically take their wills seriously. And it's hard for young parents, regardless of wealth, to think about what would happen if they were to pass. It's not a conversation any parent likes to have."

I reach for a tissue and force myself to inhale a breath. I'm not upset about the money, I'm upset at the reminder of how young they were when they were taken from me.

I'm upset because I'm talking to a lawyer about my parents' last wishes, instead of them.

I'm upset because this weird feeling is burrowing in my gut, but I feel guilty for even acknowledging it and wanting answers—because I'd choose my parents over their money in a heartbeat if given the choice.

But I wasn't given the choice...and their money is the only thing I have left of them.

Or it was. I'm not sure anymore, and it doesn't help that Barry keeps skirting around whatever the issue is when I need him to spit it out. "If he wanted his estate to go to me, and trusted my grandmother to do the right thing...then what's the problem?"

He looks at my grandmother who is being wheeled back in by Reggie. "Her." His face goes slack. "You're not the primary beneficiary listed in her will."

A surge of anger and confusion rushes through me. "What?" I turn and look at her. "Every penny you have is from my parents. Why wouldn't you make me your beneficiary?"

I'm their daughter, there's no one else it should go to.

She jots something down on her notepad and hands it to Reggie.

"She'll make you her beneficiary if you get married." He peers down at the notepad again and shifts uncomfortably. "To a man." His eyes become saucers. "She says it's her dying wish."

My knee-jerk reaction is instant and I bolt out of my seat. "Oh my God, you're unbelievable! Dying wish or not, it's not happening."

My Nanna snaps her fingers, gesturing for Reggie to wheel her out of the room.

In a flash, I grab the armrests of her wheelchair, forcing her to look at me. She's gone too far this time. "This is wrong and you know it. You can't keep punishing me because my sexuality offends you, Nanna."

She viciously scrawls something on her notebook, but I snatch it and throw it. "No. It's time you listen to me for a change."

I'm no longer the confused and lonely teenager she can lock in a basement for being gay. I'm done letting her have all the power and control over me.

I get close to her face because these are the last words I intend to say to her, and I want to make sure she hears them loud and clear. "Do whatever you want with the money. I don't need it, and I don't need you. I never did."

With that, I flip her the bird, turn on my heels, and exit with my head held high.

I'm almost to the front door when I hear Barry's footsteps behind me. "She's leaving everything to your uncle."

His words are like a bullet straight to the heart and my knees buckle right before they hit the marble floor.

Pain saws through my lungs and I clutch my throat, fighting for air.

My Nanna knew exactly where to hit me when she delivered her final knockout punch.

Tears sting my eyes, but I swiftly wipe them away. I won't give her the satisfaction of rolling in here to witness me nurse my battle wounds from the knife she plunged into my back.

White hot rage courses through me, and I start shaking with anger. I would rather watch her piss on my parents' money and then light it on fire before a single dime of it ever goes to that bastard.

Barry eases me back on my feet. "We can go before a judge, but considering she doesn't have much time left, it might not happen until after her death." His voice drops to a whisper, despite no one else being around. "And once your uncle has access to the estate..." His voice trails off, but he doesn't have to finish that sentence. I know all too well what my uncle is capable of. I live with the loss every day.

There's no way in hell he's getting a cent from the people he set up to have killed.

Over my dead body.

"Barry?" I question, cutting him off when he starts to speak again.

"Yeah?"

"Are you married?"

He blinks. "Yes, my wife and I celebrated our twentieth wedding anniversary yesterday as a matter of fact."

Well, there goes that idea.

I take out my phone so I can call Breslin. If anyone can help me with this situation, it's her. The girl has not one, but two boyfriends.

I just need her to let me borrow one of them for a little while.

My chest stings with guilt as I hover over the call button. Breslin's boyfriends aren't sweaters—it's safe to say she won't be thrilled at the idea of me marrying either of them.

Not to mention the fact that they all have already done so much for me. The least I can do is not disturb the equilibrium in their relationship by involving them in another messy situation of mine.

I'll just have to figure something else out. And fast.

I eye Barry. "Do you have any single friends who would be willing to tie the knot for an hour in exchange for a million dollars?"

Barry makes a face. "You mean you're considering going along with

this?”

“What other choice do I have? I'm not letting him get a penny of my parents' money. If I have to marry someone with a Y chromosome for a few hours to prevent that from happening, then so be it.” I start heading back to my Nanna's office. “Now excuse me while I go kiss my grandmother's ass and try not to hurl.”

My Nanna gives me a smug smile as I enter the room, almost like she was anticipating my return.

“Fine, you win,” I say, defeated. “I'll get married.”

Barry comes in a moment later. “The Bar will have my ass if they ever find out about this.” He whips out a pen and looks at my grandmother. “I want this agreement in writing, and you better leave her everything like your son wanted.”

My Nanna gives him the stink eye and reaches for her cigarettes.

Barry writes something down on his legal pad. “I'll need you both to sign this.” He coughs, waving away the smoke. “Reggie will have to sign as a witness after, and then we can draw up a new will that lists Kit as the beneficiary. Agreed?”

I start to nod, but my Nanna pinches Reggie. “No. Ms. Bishop has a list of rules her granddaughter must abide by.”

My teeth clench. “Of course she does.” I plop down on a chair. “Let's get this over with.”

Reggie clears his throat and holds out the paper my Nanna hands him as if it were a scroll. “Rule number one—you must remain married for one full year.”

The breath I was holding comes out in one big whoosh and bile rises up my throat. It's been less than a minute since I've agreed to this and already it's the worst decision of my life.

Marrying a man for five minutes is a piece of cake. Hell, celebrities do it all the time.

But an entire year?

I clutch the armrest so tight my knuckles turn white, and I have to remind myself why I'm doing this in the first place.

I eagerly take the glass of water Barry hands me, wishing it was something stronger.

My Nanna, not bothering to hide the pompous smirk on her face—flicks a hand in Reggie's direction, indicating he should continue.

“Rule number two—your grandmother must choose the suitor.”

“The suitor? Are you serious? This isn't the eighteenth-century.” I glare at her. “No. I'm the one being forced into marrying someone to get what's rightfully mine. I should get to choose.”

My Nanna's eyes narrow and I know she's going to argue.

My throat tightens. Knowing her, she'll pick someone I can't stand just to spite me. Someone arrogant, manipulative, egotistical, and controlling just like *she* is.

Christ, I feel like I'm in a locked box and she's slowly cutting off my air supply.

Maybe that's why the next words out of my mouth are. “Besides, I have a boyfriend.”

Reggie raises an eyebrow, Barry chokes on his water, and the look on my Nanna's face tells me she knows I'm full of it.

But I press on because I don't want to be stuck with someone I can't stand for three hundred and sixty-five days straight. At least now I stand a chance at acquiring some sort of control over this ridiculous situation.

“Don't give me that look, Nanna. You haven't seen me in three years, you have no idea what's been going on in my life.”

She scrunches her nose and seizes the notepad back from Reggie. After she's done writing, she turns it so I can read it.

Bullshit.

I cross my arms and stare her down. “It's not.”

My inner voice is telling me to shut up and quit while I'm ahead, but I ignore it. “He's great. We met a few years ago, but we got back in touch recently and...you know. We can't keep our hands off one another and all that jazz.”

Stop talking, Kit. Just. Stop. Talking.

“Probably because he's overseas on business a lot.”

“What is his name and what does he do?” Reggie questions and Barry motions for me to be quiet.

“He's...sorry, I'm not at liberty to say.” I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. My only option is to continue this charade. “His job is top secret. So is his name.”

“Are you sure it's not *Bond*?” Barry mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose.

The corners of Reggie's lips twitch.

My Nanna tilts her head, and for a moment, I think she actually believes me.

That is until she jots something on her notepad and motions for Reggie to read it.

“She wants to meet him. If she approves, she'll arrange the wedding and change the will.”

Barry fixes me with a look that reflects exactly how I'm feeling.

I've somehow managed to make a bad situation downright horrific by complicating everything.

In other words—I've royally fucked this up.

Preston

Chapter 3

“New Orleans is gonna take it this year,” some man calls out above the din of the small sports bar.

His accent is unmistakably southern.

“Nah,” the man sitting beside me argues. “Their new quarterback is no match for New York's. Plus, he's too cocky. He's more into dancing on the field than playing on it. Probably because he's queer.”

I down the rest of my beer and order another as the men continue bickering back and forth. After I check my phone, I look up at the television. Player number three is gearing up to throw the ball.

There's not much time left in the game, and New York is in the lead by four points. They need a touchdown.

“Want to put your money where your mouth is and make a bet?”

They stop quarreling and look at me.

“Yeah, all right,” the first guy drawls. “I'll throw down some money on New Orleans.” He slams a crisp hundred-dollar bill on the bar. “Gay or not, he has a killer arm.”

The other guy laughs and pulls out his wallet. “I'll put one hundred on New York just to prove you wrong.”

They both turn to me expectantly. “Who are you rooting for?”

“I'm rooting for number three.” I toss two fifties into the pile and look up at the T.V. “But my money's on New York.”

A moment later, the ball gets intercepted and half the people in the bar cheer while the other half curse.

I swipe my winnings. “New York had better stats this year. Numbers

don't lie.”

My co-conspirator, Max, holds out a fist and I bump it. We've been doing this shit to tourists for months.

Wonder what our new schtick will be now that football season is over.

The guy who lost the bet eyes me suspiciously. It's clear he hasn't caught on yet. “Why did you say you were rooting for number three then?”

I take a swig of my beer. “He's my brother.”

He nearly falls off his bar stool. “Dang, I thought you kinda looked like him.” Max starts howling with laughter and the man curses under his breath. “Guess it's true what they say. There's a sucker born every minute.”

My phone vibrates and I click the message icon.

Matteo: Here's the address. Rumor has it there's a game later. Toss the burner before you go.

Preston: Got it.

Matteo: One more thing.

Preston: ?

Matteo: Salvatore said you better win tonight. Or else.

I slip the phone in my pocket and stand. “Welcome to Vegas.”

Kit

Chapter 4

I run my fingers through my hair and apply another coat of lip gloss when I catch my reflection in the mirrored walls of the elevator. Given everything that happened at my Nanna's house earlier, I almost ended up missing my flight.

I was looking forward to getting some rest after I landed, but Juan informed me that Porn Rub and Pretty Kitties planned a meet and greet at the bar in the hotel. I had no intention of going, but since I'm sharing a room with Juan—he pretty much forced me into it.

He told me if I didn't put on the dress I accidentally packed in my haste to make it to the airport on time, get dolled up, and meet him at the bar in the next hour for a drink—he would torture me by singing show tunes for the duration of our Vegas trip.

So, here I am. Wearing some black, tight, strapless dress that hugs every curve and flaw of mine—and pondering when the best time to ask my homosexual work friend to marry me for money would be as I step off the elevator and make my way to the bar.

The music is pumping so loud and the colorful lights are so blinding, I don't see Juan until he yanks my hand and pulls me over to him.

“Ah! You're here!” he screams over the music before turning to the handsome and visibly uncomfortable guy standing beside him. “Kit this is my new friend Ronald. And Ronald, this is my friend Kit I was telling you about.”

The man looks me up and down, appearing perplexed. “I thought you said she was a lesbian.”

“Oh my God, Ronald.” Juan laughs hysterically and the man flushes with embarrassment. “She is, honey. They don't all wear flannel and *Timberlands*.”

I cross my arms. “Some of us even bathe, put on deodorant, and pee sitting down.”

I leave out that I *do* enjoy wearing flannel sometimes. And why not? It's cozy and comfortable, unlike this spandex mini dress Juan insisted I squeeze myself into tonight.

“I'm sorry,” the man says. “I didn't expect you to be so pretty is all.”

I should probably be offended by his statement, but the sincere look on his face tells me he means no harm.

Juan leans into him. “Ronald does IT for Porn Rub and doesn't get out much. Being social isn't his strong suit.”

The man nods sheepishly. “It's true. I haven't been out in years. Sometimes I forget what it's like to have conversations with people face to face.”

“I totally get it; my dad was into computers and he preferred them over people too.” I smile. “Juan here is a social butterfly, but don't let that scare you off. He's a great catch—” I stop talking when Juan gives me a look.

I'm about to pull him aside and ask what his deal is, but he turns to Ronald and says, “Would you be a peach and get us a drink at the bar?”

When Ronald leaves, Juan leans down and whispers, “He's married.”

“Really?” I look up at him. “Wow, that sucks.”

He holds up a finger. “To a woman.”

I'm pretty sure my mouth hits the floor. Juan could give my best friend Breslin and her complicated relationship a run for her money right about now.

He pouts. “I'm almost positive he's gay, though.” He looks around. “Why else would a married man flirt with men?”

He has a point. Then again, I know my own gaydar has been off a time or two. Usually due to wishful thinking on my part after meeting a smoking hot girl. It sounds like Juan's caught a bad case of it himself.

“Maybe he's really friendly. You know, for someone who's antisocial.”

He raises a shoulder in a shrug. “Who knows. He said he brought his wife to Vegas, but he left their hotel room early this morning and hasn't spoken to her since. He's basically been wandering around by himself today. When I asked him why, he said he didn't want to talk about it.”

Something is definitely fishy there. “Maybe they got into a fight.” I reach for his arm. “Either way—not your circus, not your monkeys. Let's go find our co-workers.”

He looks straight ahead. “We don't have to go far.”

He's right because when I turn around, I see Marge dancing with people I've never met before. And Jimmy, the accountant, who never says a word to anyone is telling jokes to a few people at the far end of the bar. The rest of my co-workers are all mingling and enjoying themselves.

This is by far one of the most successful meet and greets I've ever been to.

Too bad I can't wait to leave.

“I really like him,” Juan whines. “I know this whole thing is strange, but there's something between us.”

It's all I can do not to roll my eyes. “Don't pursue it, dude. You only met him an hour ago and so far, the only things you know about him is one—he keeps to himself a lot. And two—he's potentially lying to his wife about his sexuality and cheating on her. Those are pretty much key traits of a serial killer.” I poke him in the ribs. “For all we know, he left their room after he chopped up his wife's body and—”

“I didn't,” Ronald says behind me. When we turn to face him, he shoves the two glasses he's holding at me. “Here are your drinks. Have a nice night.”

Juan's face falls as he walks away. “Thanks a lot, Kit.”

“I'm sorry, I—”

Juan doesn't hear my apology because he stalks off after Ronald.

Perfect. I've managed to not only piss off my one and only friend at work, but my future ex-husband.

I'm about to leave myself, but then it happens.

The smoke clears, birds start chirping, and I'm pretty sure the cylinder-shaped bar overlooking Las Vegas that I'm currently standing in tilts.

She's the most gorgeous woman I have ever seen in my life.

And that's just on a regular Thursday at the office. But tonight?

Jess is out of this world hot. Something she has to be aware of because every single person in the bar is staring at her.

Or maybe not, because she's too busy staring at...

Well, shit. The hottest boss in the history of hottest bosses is staring right at me. Instantly, I guzzle one of the drinks in my hand. I've made it a point not to consume alcohol since the incident with the Brazilian model, but if I

don't have some kind of liquid courage right now, I will blow my shot with her.

I'm about to down my second drink and walk over, but I freeze when it hits me.

I'm supposed to be getting married...to a guy.

I can't flirt with my boss who's making bedroom eyes and giving me a come-hither stare. No matter how much I want to hither. There's no way she's going to pursue anything with a girl who's married.

I suppose I could tell her about the inheritance in hopes she'll understand—but I'm not sure if I'm ready to disclose that yet.

The last thing I need is to fall for another gold-digger who will use me.

Not that Jess is one, she isn't. I'm ninety-nine percent certain of it. But that one percent? It's burned me before.

I have the scars to prove it, and the welts on my heart that serve as my constant reminder so I never forget.

Which is why I need to make sure that the next time I fall...someone is waiting to catch me.

Someone who won't let me crash.

Someone who can give me something real.

Someone who's madly, deeply in love with every single part of me...not just the parts that benefit them.

My heart won't survive another parasite like Becca again. It barely did the first time.

Jess could very well be the love of my life, but unfortunately, I'll never know—because my Nanna's managed to ruin any chance I had of finding out.

There's a heavy ache in my chest as I head for the exit, and it only grows when I feel a soft tap on my shoulder.

“Hey, stranger.” Jess frowns when I look up at her. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing, I think I'm a little jet-lagged is all.” I nod to the dance floor.

“This is great, though. Everyone's having a lot of fun.”

“Yeah, except you.”

I open my mouth to protest because I don't want to be a party pooper and ruin her evening, but words fail me when she leans in suggestively and says, “How can we change that?”

Without waiting for an answer, she leads me to a booth in some dark corner of the bar.

“Here.” She picks up a glass of what appears to be champagne. “It's the

good stuff, I promise.”

I should decline, I know this. I should save us both the trouble and walk back up to my room.

I should...but I don't.

Because if I'm going to be locked up like a bird in a cage for the next year of my life? I want one last night of freedom.

And I want it with the irresistible, sexy girl standing in front of me. The girl looking at me like she wants me every bit as much as I want her.

My nerves kick up a notch and I take the glass with shaky fingers. Jess reminds me of expensive jewelry. Gorgeous and stylish, but I can't help but feel like a kid about to play dress up whenever I look at her. She's only two years older than I am, but she's light years ahead of me in all the ways that count.

She's cooler, smarter, better looking, and so much more badass than I'll ever be. She knows exactly who she is and she wears her self-assurance like a crown.

But me? I'm awkward, weird, sensitive, and emotional. My mood changes with the color of my socks and my idea of the perfect date is scarfing down a burrito at a tattoo parlor instead of fancy restaurants or clubs. And even though I'm twenty-four and officially an adult—most days I feel like I'm only half my age.

Just like that, my mind slams into overdrive—because what if everything I am turns out to be the very qualities she hates? What if I'm too strange for her? What if I screw this up like I do everything else? What if she finds out about the inheritance and uses me like every other girl before her has? What if Juan's right about me being clingy?

What if I never find out any of those things because I lost my one and only shot with her? All because I wasn't honest about the predicament I'm in.

“Kit?” Her velvety voice pulls me from my thoughts. “What's going on?”

“Look, I'm not sure where this is going,” I say without stopping for air. “But before things get serious between us, I think I owe it to you to tell—”

She places her finger over my lips. “You are so adorable, but you're way too worked up right now.”

She's right. Forget clingy—that ship has already sailed. I'm on the express boat to neurotic land.

Jess gave me a glass of champagne, not an invitation to move in with her. I look at Marge who's pretending to reel in Jimmy on the dance floor and

sigh.

Damn you, Marge. No more lunches and flowers.

“What?”

My cheeks heat when I realize I said that aloud. “Sorry, I was zoning out.” I take a sip of my drink. “You're right, this is good.”

She starts to smile, but a group of ridiculously attractive people walking by snags her attention. “Hey, guys.” She waves the beautiful people over. “Kit, these are some of your new co-workers.” She rattles off a list of names, but none of them stick. I'm too focused on their appearances, which is horrible, I know—but they all look like they walked off an *Abercrombie & Fitch* ad. Only they're wearing way less clothing...which is impressive.

And that's when I realize. She means *those* new co-workers. The talent.

Jess invites them into the booth with us, and before I know what's happening, our quiet corner is being infiltrated by porn stars.

I finish off my glass of champagne and try not to sulk. *Talent indeed.* They're completely cock *and* titty blocking my date with my boss. How the hell am I supposed to compete with implants and—fuck me, because the girl snorting a line of coke off some dude's six-pack is wearing pasties that barely cover her nipples.

The guy pretending to be a human table waggles his eyebrows at me. “Hey, hot stuff. You party?”

Not like this, I don't. “I'm good, thanks.”

“Suit yourself.”

I look over and see Jess typing away on her cell phone while some girl leans in a little too close for comfort and giggles at whatever Jess is typing. A moment later, the guy next to her orders a round of shots before he rolls up a dollar bill and snorts a line off the human table.

God, I'm far from a prude, but this isn't my scene. Not anymore.

When table boy and pastie girl start making out, I take the opportunity to slide out of the booth.

I'm searching for Juan so I can apologize for earlier when Jess runs over to me. I start thinking of an excuse to give her, but every single one evaporates when she drags me off to another dark corner.

Only this time—she kisses me.

I want to pinch myself to make sure this is truly happening, but I'm too afraid if I do it will end.

Our kiss is equal parts playful and manic and I'm out of breath when she

pulls back. “You're cute when you're jealous.”

It takes me a second to grasp that she thinks it's the reason I walked away. I'm not quite sure how to respond because everything's becoming hazy due to both the alcohol and the kiss.

She ruffles my hair. “But she's not who I want to hang out with right now.”

I swallow a gulp of air, my head spinning like a cyclone. “I um—before things go any further, I need to tell—”

Her lips find mine again, effectively silencing me.

“I know that mind of yours is going a mile a minute,” she says between kisses. “But you need to relax and have some fun tonight. We can be serious tomorrow, okay?”

My body goes slack against the wall when her lips nuzzle my neck. Maybe having fun isn't such a bad idea after all. Tension coils low in my belly when her tongue flicks my ear, and I'm reminded that it's been well over a year since I last had sex. If it weren't for a few of my favorite Pretty Kitty sex toys helping me out, I probably would have caved and taken home anything in a skirt a long time ago.

But I didn't. No matter how lonely I got—I stayed strong, stayed single, and stayed focused on getting my life back together.

I gasp when she slides a finger up my thigh. *And this is my reward.*

“You want to have fun with me tonight?” she purrs coyly.

I close my eyes and nod. I don't want to do something stupid like babble and ruin the moment.

She kisses me again, and something chalky lands on my tongue. It tastes horrible and I go to spit it out, but she hands me her glass of champagne.

“Here, this should help it go down easier.”

“I don't do drugs.”

“Don't worry, it's nothing bad. Just a little something to help you loosen up and enjoy yourself.”

When I give her a look, she pulls a small tin out of her cleavage and pops a tab in her mouth. “See? Perfectly safe.”

I want to tell her that I'd be enjoying myself plenty without any substances, but she tilts my chin up and says, “I'd never hurt you.”

I should know better than to listen to her because I've heard those very same words from people who have done nothing but hurt me.

But Jess isn't like the others. That's why I like her so much. She's never

once given me a reason not to trust her. Not even so much as a warning sign.

I take a sip and the pill goes down with ease. “What is it?”

I ignore the little voice in my head chiding me for not asking *before* I swallowed it.

“Ecstasy. It's super mild though so you probably won't even feel it.”

Considering I've never done E before, I doubt that. I look around nervously. I trust Jess, but the idea of being high on something I've never taken before in a bar full of people I don't know isn't sitting too well with me. I wonder if it's too late to run to the restroom and throw up.

“Want to get out of here and go up to my room?”

“Yes,” I breathe, feeling relieved she's perceptive enough to understand my concerns without me having to tell her.

She finishes her glass of bubbly, waves goodbye to the porn stars, and we hightail it out of the bar.

The second we're inside the elevator, Jess pulls me into another kiss. People are staring at us, but neither of us care. I'm so drunk on her, I feel like I'm soaring, and I never want to come back down again.

I don't even realize the elevator doors have opened and we've reached our destination until some woman clears her throat.

We stumble out, all giggles and smiles, and it strikes me that I've fantasized, wished, and waited for this moment with Jess for over eight long months.

I stop walking and look at her. Really look at her.

“What's—”

I kiss her again, because she's here. Because this is *real*. I know it is.

Jess isn't a fling. For once, I'm not jumping into things with someone I don't know because of some spark of attraction. Of course, she's gorgeous. But she's so many other things, too. Like hard-working, determined, independent. And the way she's looking at me right now tells me this thing between us won't be another painful mistake I'll regret when the sun comes up.

I press my lips to her neck before I begin my decline of kisses down her body.

“Please don't hurt me.”

My voice comes out small, like a plea. Because it is. I need her to be gentle with the beaten and bruised heart I'm about to hand her.

A heart that's easy to break, but so hard to put back together.

A heart that wants so desperately to be loved—it's managed to stagger to the edge once more. Prepared to plummet, but scared to death of crashing.

The stove is hot—my mind warns me.

And then I close my eyes and fall.

Because some of us chase the burn.

Even after we've already crawled our way out of the fire.

Preston

Chapter 5

All eyes are on me waiting for me to make my move.
It's an easy decision—fold on the flop.

One of the men seated at the table mutters something in Russian under his breath, no doubt annoyed with my decision.

Tough shit. I can't afford to take chances, there's too much at stake.

Like the million I'm going to have to win and then give to Salvatore Campanelli so he doesn't hack off my kneecaps and throw me in Lake Mead.

This game isn't for fun, it's strictly business. Get in, get the money, and get the fuck out.

I never thought the day would come where I wouldn't enjoy playing poker, but like they say—it's all fun and games until someone gets hurt.

Or in my case—they end up working for the mob...whether they like it or not.

Playing poker because I want to is one thing. Playing because you have a proverbial gun held to your head is another.

As it turns out, there's way more money to be made in an illegal underground gambling operation than a Vegas casino.

In a casino, after you win a substantial sum, you're lucky to be allowed in again. They'll either accuse you of counting cards the next time around or refuse to pay you for breaking some bullshit policy that didn't exist until moments before.

There's a reason lightning never strikes twice.

It's something Salvatore Campanelli, the new head of the Campanelli crime family knows all too well.

Rumor has it he used to be a big-time gambler—but that all ended after he lost his baby brother over a debt he couldn't pay to some Russians when he was in his early twenties. Long story short, the Campanellis got their revenge and Salvatore never gambled again.

However, the guy has one hell of a grudge against any and all Russian mobsters. And now that he's the head of his own mob, he makes it his mission to stick it to the Russians whenever he can. Only instead of killing them like a normal mob boss—his favorite weapon is a player who can keep siphoning money from them.

Which is why I'm currently sitting here. The plan is simple. One of Campanelli's informants gives him the info about the monthly underground poker game and secures me a spot. Campanelli, in turn, gives me the money for the buy-ins and blinds, and I spin it into gold.

Or rather, I did.

Everything changed last month when I lost my first game. You'd think the fucker would have cut me some slack seeing as he gets ninety-fucking-nine percent of all *my* winnings—but he didn't take it so well.

I tried pointing out that me losing a game worked in our favor, because the Russians were starting to become suspicious about my three-month winning streak, and that if I hadn't lost, my next game would be a rigged game of Russian roulette.

But it turns out that Salvatore, much like myself, is a man who gives a fuck about very little.

He accused me of turning on him and working for the Russians. When I opened my mouth to tell him he was fucking crazy, he calmly informed me that he would kill me and every member of my family if I didn't win the next game.

There's no reasoning with an Italian psychopath who's convinced you're siding with the enemy.

Needless to say—I got the memo loud and clear. Winning this game isn't an option.

The current hand plays out—and the mutterer whose name I now know is Niko, mutters some more shit in Russian after he loses.

I'm about to ask him to repeat what he said in English when there's a shift in the air. They all sit up straight like the good little soldiers they are when their commander in chief Vladimir Pavlovich walks in.

A chick named—fuck if I can remember, but she gives decent head,

immediately runs over and hands him a glass of vodka.

He appraises the table before his eyes rest on me. “Ah, the pretty boy.”

The men snicker like it’s the funniest shit they’ve ever heard.

Inside I’m chomping at the bit to tell them all to go fuck themselves, but I know better than to let them see me sweat or give Vladimir any reason to throw me out.

I pick up my beer and give them all a shit-eating grin. “Come on, fellas. Don’t let me be good looking *and* rich. Not fair for one man to have it all.” I point to my chips. “Are we playing poker or what?”

My statement amuses Vladimir who laughs a hearty chuckle, finishes his vodka, and leaves.

Back to business as usual.

Or not, because Niko, the mutterer, gives me a hard look. “He’s not even Russian. How come he’s allowed to play with us?”

A couple of the guys stop looking at their cards and look at me, no doubt pondering the same thing.

Fuck, I don’t need this tonight. “Money is money, right? Besides, who says I’m not Russian?”

I’m not, but this guy is pissing me off and I need to shut this shit down before it escalates.

He swirls the liquid around in his glass. “That American accent says otherwise.” He spits the word American out like it’s rancid.

I hitch a shoulder up. “Well, your babushka had no complaints about my American dick last night.”

He leaps up from the table, sputtering a slew of what I’m sure are sweet Russian pleasantries, but a few of the guys pull him back and tell him to settle down.

I raise my hands. “Look, man. I’m here to play, not draw you a diagram of my family tree. Russian or not, Vladimir has no problem with me being here, so you shouldn’t either.”

That makes the other men relax, but not this guy. It only makes him angrier. He spews something else in Russian before he sucks his teeth at me and picks up his cards. “Let’s play.”

A little over three hours later, two out of the seven players have left after losing everything they came here with, and the pot is finally up to one million.

It’s now or never. A couple of the men are talking about going home after

this, so if I don't act now, I'll miss my only opportunity.

Unfortunately, my cards aren't cooperative. I have a pair of twos and a three after the flop.

Normally, I would fold in this situation. If I don't have face cards right off the bat, I reject the hand quicker than a hooker with a venereal disease.

But not this time.

This time—I raise. I'm going all the way.

Since I've been notorious for folding on the flop and rarely making it past a turn, it sparks some interest around the table.

“His balls have finally dropped,” Niko declares, but I don't miss the look of uneasiness on his and everyone else's face.

Which is exactly what I want.

The key to making people fold is by tricking them into thinking they know how you play. If they think I'm a careful player like folding on the flop or turn suggests—then it's safe to assume when I do bet, I've got a damn good hand.

My stomach pinches after the turn gives me a five, but I remain stoic like the rest of them. Aside from the language barrier, another disadvantage of playing poker with Russians is that they all have their poker faces down pat.

I have no choice but to bluff big or go home, so I go in for the kill.

I raise again, pushing a little over half my chips in front of me.

Apprehension is practically coming off them in waves.

Except for Niko who rises to the challenge and re-raises.

It's an aggressive move and it causes three men to fold immediately. The last man looks at Niko who rubs his nose, and then me, and then at his cards again before he pushes his stack of chips forward. Fortunately, that nanosecond of trepidation tells me he doesn't have a great hand himself; he just wants to impress Niko who was undoubtedly giving him a signal.

Not the ideal situation for me to be in. Another man might start goading the two men to fold, but not me. Actions speak louder than words, and I want them to listen to that little voice inside their head telling them to fold.

The river gives me another three. Not bad, but sure as fuck not good either.

Not enough to *win*. Not unless Niko and his buttbuddy are both bluffing. I'll find out by the end of the showdown.

Niko cracks his knuckles before he pushes his entire stack forward. “All in.”

I don't look at my cards as I do the same. "Me too."

For a fraction of a second, Niko's composure wavers before his face goes back to an impassive mask.

His friend, on the other hand, runs a hand over his head, teetering on the edge. Niko rubs his nose again, no doubt telling him to calm the fuck down before he ruins their little side deal. But that only makes sweat trickle down his forehead. "He's not the type to bluff, Niko."

He's wrong. I'm the type to bluff, lie, cheat, and steal to keep my head off the chopping block, but I'm flattered he thinks so highly of me.

He stands up, paces back and forth for a bit, and pours himself another glass of vodka.

I've never seen a Russian experience tilt before, but I can't say I blame him, there is a million dollars on the line.

Niko's eyes become tiny slits. It's clear his friend has blown his end of the silent agreement and he's not going to call like he was supposed to. Smart move.

As predicted, he shakes his head and flips his cards over. I inwardly wince when I see a straight. Much better than my measly two pair. Dude should have called.

Niko looks at me. "I'd reconsider if I were you."

His vodka must be spiked with absinthe if he thinks I'm going to fall for that.

"I'm good." I smile and gesture to his cards. "After you."

My heart pounds and my blood runs cold when the first cards he flips over are two aces. Bile rises up my esophagus as memories of the only other time I've been so nervous during a showdown clobber me.

No, fuck that. I won't go to that place. Not here, not now. Not in front of them. I beat that son-of-a-bitch when I was twelve and I'll beat this one too. I don't have much, but there must be something of mine this guy wants. Something I can barter for another round. I can't lose. I refuse to.

I'm so busy thinking of ways to negotiate, I almost don't realize until it's too late that his other cards are a five, four, and a two.

Those pair of aces are the only good thing in his hand.

My smile grows as I flip my hand over—revealing two pair.

I want to ask him if he wants some cream for that burn, but I'm already filling up a duffle bag. I just want to leave, give Salvatore his money, and go back home to my crappy motel room.

“How does he keep winning?” Niko exclaims as I situate the money in the bag.

I look him right in the eyes. “Because you guys are gambling.” I tug the zipper. “And I’m playing poker.”

With that, I pull the strap over my shoulder and walk out.

Kit

Chapter 6

“Close your eyes.”

I barely hear the command over the frantic pounding of my heart.

The blindfold dangling from her finger swings like a pendulum and I try to wrap my head around what she’s asking. Everything is starting to feel a bit disjointed and it’s taking a little longer for my brain to process things than usual.

Not in a bad way though. Far from it. I feel like I’m floating in a balloon of helium that’s sailing through a sky made of cotton candy.

A laugh bubbles out of me, because that doesn’t even make any sense.

Get a grip, Kit. Or you will ruin everything.

Nodding, I do what she says and the silk material is placed over my eyes. After Jess secures it in place, I rest the back of my head against the hotel room door we managed to fumble our way through only moments earlier.

My heart knocks against my chest like a jackhammer and I place my hand over it, hoping the action will prevent it from jumping out of my body.

An image of a cartoon heart with wings permeates my mind and I laugh again.

It’s not funny, but it expels some of my anxiety and helps me ride out the waves of nerves that keep rippling through me. I want her and I want this, but I’m so scared I’m going to do something to mess it all up. Or worse—she’ll come to her senses and realize what a dork I am and my feelings about being way out of her league will be confirmed.

“Sounds like someone’s enjoying themselves. Mind if I join the party?”

I open my mouth to respond that she is the party, but then Jess lifts my dress up and her mouth finds the fluttering spot between my legs.

Warmth spreads through me and I gasp when she tugs my panties down with her teeth. I eagerly kick them to the side, not wanting to waste another second. I'm so ready for this. I've been so ready for this.

Her breath hits my bare skin, and I feel the sensation all the way down to my toes. She licks a hot line along my slit, and my balloon floats higher and higher. I got her off in the hallway before, but I wasn't sure if she was going to reciprocate, and I'm not the kind of girl to ask or beg someone to; no matter how much I'm aching for it.

But as it turns out, I didn't have to with Jess, because she knows what I need without me having to tell her. She repeats the movement and I moan as the balloon I'm in escalates and my knees start shaking. Or maybe it's the earth beneath my feet that's quivering. God, it's been so long since I've been touched like this, and thanks to the alcohol and the ecstasy in my system making me even more sensitive, along with the blindfold heightening my senses; I'm liable to come apart with the next soft brush of her tongue.

"You ready to have even more fun?"

I lick my lips and nod, hating that I'm being deprived of the visual of her pleasuring me, but not wanting to be a buzz kill. "Yes." My voice is a thick rasp laced with need. I need to come so badly I can't see straight. Actually, I can't see because of the blindfold, but that's beside the point. I'm dying for Jess to have her naughty way with me.

The tip of her finger circles my clit and I swear I see stars.

"Look how wet she is."

I'm so far gone, drifting aimlessly like a feather in the wind, I'm not even bothered that she's talking about my pussy like it's a separate entity. Without warning, the soft feminine touch between my thighs is replaced with sharp, scraping stubble and a muffled masculine voice groans, "You were right, Jessica. She is perfect."

Like the flip of a switch my stomach lurches, my blissful balloon pops, and I start freefalling.

On instinct, I kick the man who has no right to be so close to such an intimate part of my body as hard as I can and rip my blindfold off.

My eyes dart around the room, adjusting to the dim light. I look at Jess first and then at the man hunched over, howling in pain. A man I've never seen in my life.

Blood drips from his nose onto his crisp white shirt. “What the fuck?”

What the fuck is right. I can’t fathom how the hell I ended up in this messed up position. Jess never once mentioned a guy joining us. Heck, I wasn’t aware she swung that way. I never would have pursued things with her in the first place if she did. I learned my lesson about dating bi-curious girls a long time ago, thanks to Becca.

“Oh my God,” Jess says, rushing over to him. “Are you okay, Jared?”

My mind reverts back to last Friday at the office when she was on the phone, but I don’t have time to scrutinize the thought because Jess screams, “Shit. I think you broke his nose. Go get some ice, Kit.”

Is she seriously asking me to provide aid to the jerk who stuck his face between my legs without my permission?

I swallow back bile as everything hits me like a Mack truck.

Seven minutes ago, I was handing this girl my mangled and maimed heart in the middle of a hotel hallway and begging her not to hurt me.

Two minutes ago, I was soaring while offering her a part of me I don’t give to just anyone. Not anymore.

And one minute ago, she was granting permission on my behalf for some guy to use me as his plaything. After she...after I...

My hand flies to my stomach. God, I feel sick. Sick and betrayed. And so goddamn stupid.

“What are you waiting for? Get the fucking ice!” Jess barks like I’m nothing more than an employee she can boss around.

Because that’s all I am to her.

If her actions didn’t already make that blatantly obvious to me, the fact that she’s cradling some old dude’s head in her hands and tending to him instead of the girl she hurt does.

I refuse to spend another second in this room, so I snatch my purse and run out the door.

Tears prickle my eyes as it slams shut behind me, but it isn’t until I’m halfway down the hall that I allow the first one to break free.

Curling my arms around myself, I take the elevator down to my floor, ignoring the looks I get from strangers.

I feel so dirty and used. I want to peel my skin off and soak it in bleach. But the icky feeling pales in comparison to the way my heart stings or how my soul blisters with sorrow.

I’m so bad at love I should be court ordered to have the statement tattooed

on my forehead in capital letters.

I thought Jess was different from all the others and we had something special. Turns out she was just another delusion. I blink up at the ceiling. If I keep dishing out parts of my heart to the wrong people, pretty soon I won't have one left.

I rummage through my purse for my key card when I reach my room. Maybe Juan will forgive me, and he'll lend me a shoulder to cry on tonight.

The sound of skin slapping together and male grunts assault my ears the second I turn the handle.

"Yes, Ronald. Harder, Daddy," a voice that's unmistakably Juan's wails and I quickly close the door.

Christ on a cracker, I could have happily gone my whole life without hearing that. Same can be said regarding the knowledge that Juan's a bottom.

I shake my head and make my descent down the staircase. Since staying in my room for the time being is out of the question, I'll do the next best thing. I'll go for a walk and clear my head. Or cry. Whatever, it doesn't matter. I just need to breathe before the weight of what Jess did combined with the scab that's been ripped off my old agonizing wound sends me spiraling down another rabbit hole.

My black four-inch lace-up heels clack against the concrete and I curse myself for not wearing a jacket. It's Vegas so it's not like the late January weather here comes close to how brutal it can be in Connecticut, but it's still chilly.

Then again maybe the cold is good for my anger, because right now it's rising like a tidal wave. The nerve of Jess. Where does she get off doing that to me? For fuck's sake, I'm a lesbian. Did she really think I'd be okay with a guy—one I've never even met before—performing oral sex on me and God only knows what else? Boss or not—correction, *bosses* or not, that is not okay.

Freaking porn industry, it's filled with nothing but drug users, douchebags, and manipulators.

Perhaps that's a tad judgmental of me, but I'm exasperated and upset.

And sad...because I loved my job.

The realization is a punch to the gut. Not only did I love being the social media manager for Pretty Kitties, but I was damn good at it. It gave me a sense of accomplishment and pride.

But now I'm jobless. Without purpose. Lost and wandering aimlessly. I

look around. Both literally and figuratively, because I don't recognize anything nearby.

I clench my fists, my head spinning like a whirlpool. Fuck that. I won't let them fire me for their discretions. I'll sue their asses for sexual misconduct in the workplace. I'm sure the judge will raise an eyebrow considering it's porn and all, but still. I get a W2 and pay my taxes dammit. I'm an American citizen. I have a right to due process and habeas corpus and all that good stuff. Or is it bad stuff? I don't know because I'm freaking drunk and high off my ass.

I suck in a breath and try to stop the air from whirling around me. Gosh, I don't feel so good. As if agreeing with me, my stomach trips over itself like a sorority girl at a keg party. What happened to all the pretty lights and that dome-shaped building that was my hotel? I've only been walking for fifteen minutes or so, how far could I have gone?

Evidently far enough because not only is this street not well lit at all, it looks rundown.

Shit. I must be off the Strip. Another round of the spins hits me, and I hold out my arm, bracing myself against the side of a building that's positively not open for any kind of business. Same can be said for everything in the near vicinity given how eerily quiet it is. This is my own fault for not paying attention. Fortunately, I have my phone with me, so I'll call an Uber. I'm sure they encounter this kind of thing all the time, so they'll have no problem figuring out where I am and bringing me back to the hotel.

I just need the twirling in my head to stop for two seconds so I can fish my phone out. Easy peasy.

I don't want to let go of the building because it's the only thing keeping me upright, so I reach inside my purse with my free hand. I do a mental fist bump when I locate the sleek object. As soon as I go to take it out, however; something or rather, someone, pummels into me and I lose my bearings and fall.

"Thanks a lot, asshole."

The asshole in question doesn't hear me because he's running faster than the wind, all while carrying what appears to be a duffle bag of some sort. But who knows, it's dark out and my brain is having what feels like an underwater rave party with my neurons despite my insistence that they take it elsewhere. Not to mention all the alcohol I can feel swooshing around in my belly and filtering out through my veins.

I'm in worse shape than I thought. In fact, this pavement is looking like a mighty good place to crash right about now.

I shake my head, cursing myself when it elicits another round of spins. Shucking the gravel off my hands and knees, I watch *Forrest* continue his sprint and rise from the ground.

Only to be walloped by another person the second I stand. Fuck a duck, I'm not made of glass. Surely, they can see me. Rude nincompoops.

“Seriously? Does anyone have any manners anymore?”

This guy ignores me and continues running. Same as the first one did. A second later, another dude whizzes by, narrowly missing me.

Good lord, I wasn't aware Vegas had so many marathon runners training at two in the morning.

The first guy is still ahead but not by much because the guy raging bolts like a cannon. Then he grips the back of the first guy's shirt and they both tumble down.

Serves them right. I look around to make sure the stampede is over before I stand again.

I pull out my phone once more, but furious yelling snags my attention and when I look at the men, my stomach drops.

The two guys are teaming up and throwing punches at the first guy who's protecting his duffle bag with his life. Granted he's big, and he's holding his own just fine with his one free hand, but two guys against one isn't a fair fight.

Stay out of it, Kit.

A scream burns in my throat when I see one of them pull out a gun. The guy being attacked doesn't realize it though, because he's too busy fighting off the other guy who keeps trying to pry the bag from his grip.

I don't know what's so important in that stupid bag, but it's not worth dying for.

“Hey,” I scream, hoping I'll startle them enough to scatter, but they're too far away to hear me.

Don't go over there, Kit.

My feet start moving on their own accord and while my brain is chastising me for becoming the girl in a horror movie who's too stupid to live, my heart is thudding with panic as flashbacks of the shooting slice through me like a sizzling knife through butter.

The people who lost their lives will always live on in my guilty

conscience, and I will eternally blame myself and wish I could have done something to prevent it.

Maybe this time I can.

Despite the whoosh in my head growing worse, I manage to locate my phone, preparing to call the police. “Give him the bag, he has a gun!”

Two things happen at that moment.

One—the guy with the gun says something in what sounds like Russian right before he points it at me.

And two—a second later, the duffle bag lands at the gunman’s feet with a heavy thud.

“It’s yours, Niko. Now, put the fucking gun down and go.”

The deep rumble of his voice roots me to the spot. I know that voice better than I know my own. It’s the voice that haunts me, plagues me, and twists my insides up so tightly I can’t breathe due to the swell of anger that strangles me whenever he crosses my mind.

It’s the voice of the man who saved me in a school cafeteria...and then turned right around and killed me in the most brutal way.

Straight through my heart.

I shake my head, desperate to hold on to some form of logic. It can’t be him. It’s not him.

I look up at the same time the men start to leave, or at least I think they do. My heart is thrashing so hard it reverberates through my ears and my vision is blurry, causing everything to be out of focus...

Except for *him*.

My head buzzes and there’s a weird hum in the air that seems to roll through my entire body. I stagger back, trying like hell to swim, but I can’t. I’m being swept away in the tide.

I peel my gaze away, certain it must be a mistake. This guy looks different. Older. Solid. A little edgier...dangerous even. Nothing like the lean, preppy guy in suits who continues to prowl the dark corners of my mind like a burglar.

I clutch my chest; my reality is so disorientated I can’t form cohesive thoughts. He’s saying something, I think it might be my name, but I can’t hear anything because the humming zigzagging through my head is getting worse. I try to walk away again, but my body doesn’t get the memo. I wobble instead and when I make the mistake of looking up—my worst fear is confirmed.

Through the kaleidoscope made of the pieces of my broken heart—I see him. And this time there's no mistake about it.

Preston Holden is standing right in front of me.

And he's the last thing I see before my body gives out, everything fades to black...and I crash.

Preston

Chapter 7

“*K*it.” I clap my hands, hoping the action will make her focus.

Her bloodshot hazel orbs peer up at me in confusion and then in horror as she totters back.

Before I have time to react, she falls faster than a stack of dominos. I manage to catch her right before she hits the ground.

Great. This situation just went from bad to worse. Dealing with a passed-out chick is the last thing I need after losing Campanelli’s money to the Russians.

A passed-out chick I haven’t seen in three years and two days, but who’s counting.

“Bishop. Wake the fuck up.”

Silence. I’m tempted to leave her here, but the poltergeist beating in my ribcage won’t let me. Instead, I check to make sure she’s still breathing before I throw her over my shoulder.

Christ, I can’t believe the unstable girl in my arms is Kit Bishop.

She almost got herself killed tonight. What the hell was she thinking?

Scratch that—judging by her skimpy dress that leaves little to the imagination, and that glazed over look in her eyes before she collapsed, she wasn’t thinking at all. She’s too intoxicated. Presumably due to partying in Vegas.

Which I suppose, explains why she was wandering around by herself at two in the morning. Kit’s not stupid. A bit naïve sure, but she’s far from an idiot. And she’s more than just drunk.

“What are you on?”

When I don't get a response, I jerk my shoulder until she moves.

“Bar.” She starts slipping away, so I nudge her again. “Alcohol.”

“Yeah, no shit. Did you take drugs tonight?”

“No—a little bit.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “What—”

“The kind that makes me roll in really warm clouds.”

Ecstasy. Those clouds of hers are warm because she's overheating and most likely dehydrated. And if she scored E off some prick at a bar, there's no telling what else was in it.

I feel around my pockets for my phone and curse as I recall that I tossed it before the game. Shit.

Thinking fast, I look around for the one she was holding. As luck would have it, I don't have to search far, because seconds later, a phone on the ground lights up and some *Melissa Ethridge* ringtone starts to play.

When I bend down to pick it up, I see the name “BILF” flash across the screen. I have no idea who or what that is, but I don't care. I press the ignore button so I can call a cab.

“I'm dropping you off at the hospital.”

She makes a whimpering sound. “No.”

“Why?”

She stirs. “My nanna—please, no hospital.”

My jaw clenches as something deep inside my chest shifts.

They say everyone has either an addiction, obsession, or weakness in this world. Something that can penetrate you down to the core and influence you in a way nothing else can.

I have all three.

One happens to be her.

But she's also the one thing I can never have—which means I need to get rid of her.

“Tough shit, I'm not in the mood to take on a charity case tonight.”

She squirms, trying to maneuver out of my grip. “Then leave me.” Her voice is slurred, nearly inaudible. “Everybody else does.”

Nope, I'm not giving in. I can't afford to...for a multitude of reasons. The most current one consisting of the fact that I'm going to have a psychotic mob boss on my case in a few hours.

Her breathing softens, and she sags against me, settling in—like she

knows I'm going to relent before I do.

Like she knows she's still in my veins, embedded in my marrow...no matter how much time has passed or how much things have changed.

She's still my constant. The last person I think about when I drag my sorry ass to bed after too many beers, and the first person I think about when I wake up with my head throbbing.

She's my twenty-one in blackjack, my jackpot on a slot machine, and my royal flush that's always just out of my reach.

She's the lethal poison I can't get out of my system.

Fuck you, angry girl.

With a sigh, I surrender and head toward my motel. Carrying the girl who holds all the fucked-up shards of the person I still can't face in the mirror.



“*W*arm, it's so warm.”

“This is nothing, you should visit in the summer.” I kick the door behind me closed and drop her on the outdated floral comforter. “Don't puke in my bed.”

She murmurs something I can't decipher before turning on her side. I try not to stare at the curve of her ass as I walk into the bathroom to get a cool washcloth.

I make sure to grab a bottle of water from the mini-fridge on my way back. “Here.”

Soft snoring is my only response.

Cracking open the bottle of water, I ask the good Lord for some patience. Then I roll her back toward me, place the washcloth on her forehead, and prop her up to take a few sips.

I should have asked him for some willpower instead because the top of her dress slips down ever so slightly and those pouty lips of hers moan around the bottle before she swallows.

I've been with lots of women, but none of them have ever sent me reeling quite like she does. I still want her in every capacity, on every surface, and at my every disposal.

You'd think three years would have diluted the potency, taken some of the shine off the apple, but it didn't. Not even close.

Every time I jerked and every time I fucked...she was there. Lingered like a stain that won't come clean.

Reminding me that we always want what we can't have.

I bite the inside of my cheek when the tip of her tongue darts out to catch the liquid trickling from the corner of her mouth.

She misses it completely though, and I watch as the drop runs down her suprasternal notch—otherwise known as that sexy little indent between her clavicles, before gliding down her chest and continuing to her...

“This is good water.”

Feeling like I got caught with my hand in the cookie jar, I peel my gaze away. “I'm pretty sure it's just tap with a fancy label.”

“Can I have more?”

Nodding, I go fetch her another one from the mini-fridge. “Aside from going to bars and popping ecstasy, what else are you doing in Vegas?”

“Work.” Her voice is low, and her words are still a bit garbled. “I really loved my job.”

My ears tune in at her use of the past tense. “Loved? What happened?”

She drops her head in her hands. “I'm not sure.”

The sadness in her tone makes me want to put my fist through a wall and I have to remind myself that whatever the issue is, it's Kit's bullshit and not mine.

I hold the bottle out to her. “Here.”

She makes no move for it, instead, she sinks down, dozing off for a second time.

Placing one knee on the bed, I wrap an arm around her for support and haul her back up. “Not yet, sleeping beauty. You need to drink some more water first.”

“No thank you.”

“Kit.”

When she starts to decline again, I push on her chin until her lips part and shove it between her lips. “Take a sip.”

Finally, she concedes. Swear it's like dealing with an infant. My chest contracts with that thought, but I focus back on Kit who takes the water from me and begins guzzling it down like she can't get enough of it.

I seize it back and place it on the nightstand. “You'll get sick if you drink too much too fast.”

I freeze when her palm slides over my chest. “This is really soft. What's

it made from?”

I'm about to tell her it's just a regular black t-shirt, but the words fall from my lips when she ventures lower, causing my abs to contract under her touch. Apparently, I've unknowingly entered one of the circles of hell because this is the sweetest form of torture there is.

I catch her wrist while I still have the restraint to stop her. “Don't touch me.”

She shrugs, not looking at all put-off. “Sorry.” Her eyes become droopy and she slumps down on the pillow. “Thanks for the wa—”

“I want you out of here by morning.”

I start to move off the bed, but a tug on my arm halts me. “Why?”

Because I can't stand being in the same vicinity as you.

My jaw works. “I have shit to do.”

“That's not what I meant.”

Against my better judgment, I look at her...and immediately regret it.

On impulse, I go to wipe away the black crap smearing her cheeks due to her tears, but reach over and turn off the light instead. “Get some sleep.”

I go to stand again, but she tugs me back, more forcefully this time, and my composure snaps. I've had about all I can take of this.

“What the fuck do you want from me, Bishop?”

I don't realize how deadly my tone is until her eyes go wide. “You've never been this mean in my dreams before.”

A callous, bitter laugh escapes me—of-fucking-course she would think this is all some kind of hallucination in her delusional state.

Shifting, I prop my arms on either side of her body, hovering above her. “Well, I hate to tell you, sweetheart, but this isn't a dream.” I incline my head so we're nose to nose. “However, if you don't shut the hell up and stop pissing me the fuck off, it will become your nightmare real quick. Got it?”

“I don't understand—”

I punch the mattress. “That's just it. You don't understand, and you never will, so do us both a favor and stop talking.”

She scowls and the organ inside my chest skitters to a stop altogether.

“I don't know why you're being so mean to me when—”

“When what?” I lean in farther, ghosting over her lips. “When I hurt your little feelings by getting sucked off?” I tilt my head, brushing my mouth along her ear. “What's the matter, angry girl? Did it make you jealous?” She whimpers, but I don't stop. I need her to hate me. I need to push her buttons

the way her mere presence seems to push every single one of mine.

But mostly, I need her to get the fuck out of my life again. For good.

I nip at her neck, deliberately provoking her. “That’s it, isn’t it? You wished it was you taking me deep and sucking all the cum out of my dick. Don’t you?”

“No—” A moan cuts her off and it surprises us both. But not nearly as much as what happens next.

She starts grinding against the leg that’s wedged between both of hers.

A flush spreads from her cheeks to her chest. “I can’t help it.” Embarrassment floods her features. “Oh, God. I need to wake up.”

I’m torn between wanting to burst that bubble of hers with a reality check, and my own selfish greed. As usual, the latter wins out.

I look down the length of her body and a surge of arousal hits me like a freight train, making my dick strain against my zipper. All of her dry humping has caused her dress to bunch up past her thighs...the only thing preventing me from seeing every inch of that smooth holy grail is the leg she’s still rubbing herself on.

My jaw tics and I peel my gaze away. “You’re not wearing any panties.”

It’s like she’s intentionally provoking me.

Either she doesn’t hear me, or she’s too far gone to acknowledge my question. Her eyes roll back and her chest heaves, causing the top of her dress to dip more—revealing an agonizingly, teasing peek of her pink nipples.

Like a cobra who wants to sample his meal before he devours it whole, my mouth finds the exposed skin and I give it a little flick with my tongue. “What happened to your panties, Kit?”

My self-control is hanging by a thread. She has less than a second to stop what she’s doing, or I’m going to do us both a solid by spreading her legs, grabbing the headboard, and fucking her into the middle of next week.

“My boss took them off with her teeth.” She winces. “Right before I ran out of the room because she wanted me to have sex with some old guy.”

Two things happen at that moment.

One—I have the sudden urge to find this boss of hers and toss her off the nearest bridge. No wonder she was walking around by herself.

And two—I grow a conscience. Based on what she just told me and given the dazed state she’s in; her boss is either an unprofessional sexual manipulator or a conniving bitch who doesn’t give a shit about Kit—because Kit’s too drunk and high to stop anyone from taking advantage of her. Hell,

depending on what else Kit might have been slipped, she may not even remember any of this tomorrow. There's low and then there's scum.

Promptly, I get off her and stand up, the clarity of the situation slamming into me.

"Will you be back tomorrow night?"

I have no clue what she's talking about, and I don't think she does either because she closes her eyes and drifts off to sleep. With a heavy sigh, I pull the comforter around her. Until something catches my attention, rendering me immobile.

Attached to the thin, silver necklace she's wearing, nestled between those small, perky tits...

Is my lucky poker chip.

Just like that, I'm cracking, splintering right down the center like the ground during a magnitude eight earthquake.

"Be gone by sunrise, Bishop."

With that, I make my way to the bathroom so I can take care of my hard-on, figure out how to get Campanelli a million dollars in the next twelve hours...and find a way to forget all about the girl sleeping in my bed.

I look down at the damp spot on my thigh and curse.

I need Kit Bishop gone and out of my life for good before she ruins everything.

For the second time.



T

o be continued...in August 2018.

Want to be notified about upcoming releases?

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Afterword

If you liked the book, it would mean the absolute *world* to me if you left a review. It's so hard for indie authors to receive acknowledgment and reviews *really* make a difference for us.

Want to be notified about my upcoming releases?

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Acknowledgments

Complicated Parts is the biggest gamble of my career...so far. People advised me not to write it. Told me it was career suicide. And I get it...because technically, it should be. Because this book is everything we're told NOT to write in romance.

But Preston and Kit wouldn't leave me alone. So, I wrote it.

Well, I wrote it *after* I already wrote the book four different times. I originally set out trying to write it to market. I tried to make it what everyone else was writing because I was so scared it wouldn't sell.

And then I tossed 50k words in the trash. *Twice*.

Because it wasn't Kit and Preston's story.

The words finally stuck and stayed when I started writing what I was supposed to.

But none of that would have been possible without the support of some really awesome people.

There's no way I can properly thank the people who stood by me through this enough for their support. A simple acknowledgment in a book doesn't do it justice, but I hope it matters all the same. I'm so incredibly humbled and grateful for each and every one of you. I hope like hell I'm not leaving anyone out...and if by some horrible chance I did...just know that I'm so sorry.

Before I begin, though—I must thank all the amazing bloggers and ARC readers. I'm so incredibly thankful for you.

And my awesome betas: Avery and Kristy. “*Fuck all the ducks.*”

Avery: To put it simply, this book wouldn't be possible without you. You were there for me every single step of the way. From reading my word vomit in a FB message, to literally reading the same chapter one million times all because I made one tiny change and needed to know right then and there if it was good or not. I know it wasn't easy staying up until 3:00 am with me going over every single word with a fine-tooth comb.

Yet, you treated every paragraph, every single syllable like it was important. And that's just when it came to this book. Personally, you help me keep my head above water. When my life is chaos and I don't know which end is up or down. You point me in the right direction and help make it calmer. I can't thank you enough.

Kristy: Thank you for pushing me and making me a better author. Some days were hard, but it was ALWAYS worth it. I know that just like a Momma cub—you pushed me because you cared and saw potential. You pushed me because you believed in both me and Preston and Kit's story.

You pushed me...because you gave a shit. Even though you work your ass off, take care of your kids, and you're up until all hours of the morning writing yourself—you still made time for me and this book mattered to you. I can't thank you enough.

Beth: You're amazing and I'm so very thankful for you. You're so encouraging, supportive, and just an overall beautiful human being. I couldn't have done this without you. Thank you so much for being you. <3

Ellie: Thank you for taking a chance on me and letting me stalk you until you finally agreed to stick me in your editing schedule. Seriously. I know your schedule is beyond jam packed and adding an author you weren't familiar with in your schedule was like me throwing a monkey wrench.

Yet, you never made me *feel* like I screwed anything up. And that goes for editing as well. You made what's usually one of the most painful steps before publishing easy and calm. And you never once spoke down to me when you made a correction or suggestion...you spoke to me like a person. Thank you so much.

Vickie: My cliffhanger Queen. You know what you did. And I can't thank you enough. Having you as a reader has been one of the very best things ever. There's something to be said for when a long-time reader knows your work and your style so well...they can and will call you on your shit. I wanted to make CP a duet since I wrote the first word that stuck...but I was so scared people would never accept it. Thank you for telling me to pull my head out of my ass. I needed that. Preston and Kit needed that.

Lucy: I love you. You're amazing and you make me feel like I'm someone super talented and important. Truth is—you're the Queen, babe. And don't ever let anyone tell you different. <3

Pennie: Not every author is blessed to have a guardian angel in the book world. Thank you so very much for being mine. You are such an incredibly valued soul to have by my side.

Preston's Harem: You babes are my backbone. The wind beneath my wings. I can't thank you enough for your unconditional support. But, I'll try and thank you with some pretties instead. Or you know...by sending you inappropriate half-naked postmarks of Preston. :P You babes are the real fucking deal. Preston told me so himself. Thank you so much.

Street team: Sometimes it feels more like my therapy group than a street team, but that's what I love. We're weirdos and we sit together on the grass and eat our lunch instead of mingling with the cool kids.

But you babes *ARE* the cool kids. You're the *coolest* kids and I'm so lucky to have you.

Little Survivors: I know I'm not one of those authors who have their shit together. And I'm sorry for that. Thank you for accepting all my flaws and for accepting my human side. Thank you all for *not* being assholes. Thank you for being the best readers an author could ever ask for.

Thank you for being excited, laughing, telling jokes, being my cheerleaders, sharing your stories, supporting me, and being the salt of the earth people you are.

Thank you for giving me my safe bubble.

What I lack...you babes make up for in spades. You all are perfect. I'm so incredibly lucky.

Cassie: You were my very first 'fan'. Starting all the way back from the days of the 'Twisted Fate' series. I will never, ever forget that. Thank you so very much. You're my 'MVP' for life!!!

And last but not least...my favorite asshole. The person who makes my world go round'. My '*Hammie*'—My heart and soul. I couldn't do this without you, baby. My love for you knows no bounds...because we'd find a way to demolish anything standing in our way. You're my 'alpha', my strength, my weakness, but most importantly...my everything.

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If you or anyone you know is a victim of **sexual assault**, again; I urge and I *beg* you to reach out.

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About the Author

Want to be notified about my upcoming releases? <https://goo.gl/n5Azwy>

Ashley Jade craves tackling different genres and tropes within romance. Her first loves are New Adult Romance and Romantic Suspense, but she also writes everything in between including: contemporary romance, erotica, and dark romance.

Her characters are flawed and complex, and chances are you will hate them before you fall head over heels in love with them.

She's a die-hard lover of oxford commas, em dashes, music, coffee, and anything thought provoking...except for math.

Books make her heart beat faster and writing makes her soul come alive. She's always read books growing up and scribbled stories in her journal, and after having a strange dream one night; she decided to just go for it and publish her first series.

It was the best decision she ever made.

If she's not paying off student loan debt, working, or writing a novel—you can usually find her listening to music, hanging out with her readers online, and pondering the meaning of life.

Check out her social media pages for future novels.

She recently became hip and joined Twitter, so you can find her there, too.

She loves connecting with her readers—they make her world go round'.

~Happy Reading~



Feel free to email her with any questions / comments: ashleyjadeauthor@gmail.com

For more news about what I'm working on next: Follow me on my Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Ashley-Jade/788137781302982>



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Broken Kingdom

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Complicated Parts - Series (Books 1 & 2 Out Now)

Complicated Hearts - Duet (Books 1 & 2)

Blame It on the Shame - Trilogy (Parts 1-3)

Blame It on the Pain - Standalone