

A photograph of a very muscular man, shirtless, looking down. He is in a locker room, with red lockers and a football visible in the background. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting his physique.

PRETTY

When She Cries

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PRETTY WHEN SHE CRIES

BLACK MOUNTAIN ACADEMY

A. ZAVARELLI

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PROLOGUE

KAILANI

P *eople always say you should trust your instincts. I wish I'd trusted mine. I wish I could rewind time to the day I knocked on his door. I wish I'd never looked into his eyes. And most of all, I wish he'd never looked back into mine.*

MY TOES SINK INTO THE SPRAWLING GREEN LAWN AS THOUGH I'M STANDING IN A pit of quicksand. A part of me hopes it might just swallow me up. Because then I wouldn't be here, staring up at Landon Blackwood's mansion with this empty feeling in my chest. If I could rewind time, I might go back and unlearn what my best friend just told me. I might rewind it all back to the day I first stood on his veranda with a plate of pineapple in the hot July sun, waiting to introduce myself.

I've been here more times than I can count over the summer. Two hundred steps from my driveway to his. I know what the marble in his foyer feels like beneath my bare feet. My fingers have memorized the roughness of the etched glass table on the patio. And when I breathe deeply, I can still smell the lingering notes of spicy vanilla and sweet tobacco that haunt the halls where Landon Blackwood lives.

Time never existed in this place. Nothing else existed here. Landon is an entire universe, and I always thought it was so strange he didn't seem to realize

it. Until him, I always just assumed beautiful people knew their value. They knew the effect they had on the rest of us. But Landon is an enigma. A strange, tortured boy I spent an entire summer with, yet I don't really know him at all. I don't think anyone does.

I tutored, and he listened. It never felt right. It always felt like I was holding my breath, waiting for the truth to come out. I was an imposter and didn't belong to this exclusive club. I didn't belong in his orbit with his tall, muscular body that moved like a piece of poetry. He gave me a new appreciation for art, and I wanted to study him every day. Some colors can never be replicated, and they exist in his eyes. Those gray orbs hit me like bullets every time they move, shredding me open and making me bleed. He's an entire world. An energy. The subject of song lyrics, and the reason for wars.

When he looks at me, my heart gallops. And then it shatters to pieces. I've never seen anyone so achingly empty. He's a house with four walls but no pulse. His insides are covered with dust, broken furniture, and memories long forgotten. In the echoey cavern of his heart, I can only imagine a dark, shadowy landscape where dreams go to die.

This house is a reflection of him. Impossibly beautiful, but hollow. Everything he owns is expensive and orderly, but there's no life inside. I've felt that way from the moment I first entered his sacred space. It's always been too quiet. Too clean. Too still.

Tonight, it feels unfamiliar and ugly, like betrayal. The behemoth white mansion is lit up like Gatsby's fictional residence on Long Island Sound. Music blasts from the open windows, and partygoers stumble about with raucous chatter. I imagine this was exactly what Fitzgerald envisioned when he wrote the magnum opus on self-indulgence. But that fictional setting doesn't make sense in this reality. Landon hates everyone. He's the boy who grumbles responses and tosses dark looks around like candy. He doesn't throw parties.

So why the hell did he leave this note on our front door, asking me to come over tonight?

I glance at the piece of paper in my hands again. Landon's handwriting is artistic. I should know because I've had plenty of time to study it. But this looks

like it was written in a hurry. Just three little lines.

My house.

8:00 PM

Landon

My chest feels weird. Maybe I'm coming down with a fever. Or having a heart attack. It's possible, right? I think I need a sick note to get out of this party. But as much as I don't want to go in there, another part of me is desperate to see why he wants me here.

"You really didn't know?" Courtney peers at the scene from beside me, her eyes shooting laser beams into the mansion and everything this town represents. Her face is carefully neutral, never allowing any emotion to bleed through.

My bestie throws off a hate-the-world vibe, and the only color that exists in her wardrobe is black. She's not a ray of sunshine. She's a hurricane. And if you told her the world was ending in two seconds, she would simply shrug.

Court doesn't come from old money either, and therefore, she's an outcast like me. I met her in the cafeteria at Black Mountain Academy, bonding over the only table that didn't require a gold-encrusted invitation. After disproving her initial doubts that I was one of the brainless urchins, as she likes to call them, she eventually let her guard down, and we became good friends. But she's been gone for the entire summer, visiting her dad in Georgia, and she came over to see me as soon as she got home. While I've been getting her up to speed on what's been happening in her absence, she's been getting me up to speed on who Landon Blackwood really is.

"I didn't know." I release a breath, realizing how stupid that sounds.

Most girls my age are obsessed with social media, but I was raised on a steady diet of sunshine and surf. Growing up in Hawaii, my mom was a single parent trying to bring me up on a paper-thin budget. We couldn't afford many things, so I found ways to entertain myself that mostly consisted of reading, dancing, and spending time outdoors. I was taught the importance of being present. My grandmother didn't want me to lose touch with the world around me

like everyone else has, and since she looked after me so often, that practice sort of stuck. I guess you could say I was a little sheltered in that way. When I finally did get a cell phone, I used it for calling and texting. It never occurred to me to look up Landon's Snapchat or Instagram or whatever because I don't have those accounts myself.

When the principal asked me to tutor Landon, the only information I received was that he'd just moved back to Black Mountain. Being a transplant myself, I hadn't been here long enough to know his history. After a rough start to the tutoring sessions, I saw him practically every day. The school said he needed a little help, but that was obviously an understatement because Landon was behind in almost every subject. Of course, I thought it was a little strange, but being that he was so cagey, I never worked up the courage to ask him for an explanation. I was more concerned with getting him caught up in time for the new year than checking to see what he posted each day. But now that Court just dropped this bombshell of truth about his identity, I'm dying to know.

"Why didn't you tell me you guys were hanging out?" She eyes me curiously. "You never mentioned him when we talked this summer."

"We only hung out a few times."

I'm not sure why the lie slips from my lips, but I always got the impression that Landon wouldn't want anyone to know about the tutoring. It felt like a secret, and I didn't want to betray that. But the longer I stand here, digesting the scene before me, the more I realize this summer was a bigger secret than I ever could have imagined. Nobody knew he was here, and the entire time, I was completely oblivious to who he really was. Now everything makes so much sense. His barbed wire exterior. The immediate distrust when we met. The disbelief when I said I didn't know him. I thought he was just an angry guy with trust issues. As it turns out, he's one of the most famous faces of our generation.

The time we spent together doesn't mean anything. This party is proof of that. That must be why he invited me. He wanted me to see the truth.

I always suspected it would be like this summer never happened once school began this year. We'd sit at different tables, and maybe he'd look at me in the hall, but he'd never admit that he knew me. Because deep down, I understood he

was one of them. I just thought we had more time before the line was drawn. I'd nurtured a silly, girlish hope inside me that these feelings weren't one-sided.

"I'm so stupid," I groan toward the sky. "I just thought he was the new kid."

"Yeah, no." Courtney snorts. "This town loves to claim him as their very own. Black Mountain's child actor turned teenage heartthrob. He never really lived here permanently, but his grandmother did, and he'd visit her between filming breaks in LA. I still can't believe you've never seen *Blood River Legacy*."

"We didn't even own a television before I moved here," I remind her.

Before my mom married Theo, we didn't own a lot of the things we do now.

Courtney blows a giant pink bubble between her lips. "My mom says he's like their generation's version of Johnathan Taylor Thomas. Whatever that means."

"I can't believe this." My voice wobbles. "Why didn't he tell me?"

"You have to admit, it's a little funny." She quirks a brow, clearly amused. "It was probably refreshing for him to be around someone who didn't worship the ground he walks on. Everyone here has always lost their minds whenever he came to town. He couldn't walk down the street without fan girls flinging themselves at him like dodgeballs. And now he's going to school here? He's automatically elevated to god status."

I dig my fingers into my temples. "Yeah, and meanwhile, I'm the only idiot in town without a clue."

"Well, he invited you tonight." She pokes me in the arm. "You should go in there and let him know you already know. He probably wants to get that conversation out of the way before school on Monday. That way, there won't be any awkwardness."

Oh, but there will be awkwardness. How could there not? Over the past few months, Landon has quietly crept into every aspect of my life. Peeking over at me from his backyard to ask what I was reading. Texting me his observations about the books on his reading list. Asking me questions he just as easily could have googled. He was always unsociable and moody, but he became a fixture in my life. I could expect to see him every day, and at some point, I started to look

forward to his grumbled responses and icy stares.

Now everything is going to change. He's a veritable deity. Black Mountain Academy's newest left tackle. Famous actor. Heir to his grandmother's fortune. And I'm... well, me. His pint-sized neighbor everyone at BMA still calls *that new girl*. The only fortune I ever knew before we came here was collecting seashells on the beach. Our worlds are not the same.

He's probably in there right now with a whole cult of admirers. All those pretty girls in my class who look as though they're walking around with a permanent photo filter on their face. The wisp thin cheerleaders and models and Instagram influencers. I can't compete with that, but it's that same notion that creates a fire in me. I have to see it for myself. I have to see what his life is really like.

"Do you want to come with me?" I ask Court.

"You know I'd rather watch paint dry." She smirks. "I have to get going anyway. My mom made me promise I wouldn't be long."

"Alright." I nod stiffly. "Well, I guess I'll talk to you later, then?"

"Text me everything when you leave. If I don't hear from you, I'll assume you've been reprogrammed."

"Very funny." I roll my eyes.

"Seriously, though, text me so I don't worry. If I don't hear from you, I'm coming back."

"I will," I assure her. "Thanks, Court."

She turns, and I watch her head back down the street. She only lives about a mile away, so we can walk to each other's houses easily enough. I just wish she didn't have to go home tonight.

When I glance back up at the most impressive mansion on the block, a deep sigh heaves from my chest. I guess it's now or never. I walk to the door and open it like I've done countless times before. Only this time, Landon's priceless marble floors are littered with empty beer cans and red Solo cups. The pungent scent of liquor burns my nostrils as I take in the scene around me. It's so loud my eardrums are vibrating, and I can't hear myself think. This must be what Las Vegas feels like. The place is wall-to-wall maniacs.

In the foyer, two guys are sliding down the banister in their underwear while the crowd cheers on their stupidity and films it. A few feet away, identical twins are dancing on a table in bikinis while entitled assholes throw dollar bills at their feet. It only gets more depraved the deeper I venture. In the sitting room is a group of footballers fondling a nearly naked brunette. In the kitchen, guys are lining up to take body shots off a girl from last year's biology class, and she's not wearing *anything*. Everywhere I look, it's chaos.

My mind conjured up a lot of scenarios for what this party might be like, but it wasn't this imaginative. A wave of nausea crashes over me as I consider what else I might find. In particular, who I might find Landon with.

I don't know what I'm doing here. I shouldn't want to see this. Technically, Landon and I aren't even friends. I'm just the girl sent by the school to help him, and he's just the moody asshole I couldn't help crushing on. So, it's no big deal what he does, right?

Except it feels like a big deal to me.

"Bruhhhh, look who showed up." One of the football players from BMA intercepts me, humping the air as he eyes my chest. "Yo, Hawaii! Wanna smash?"

"Ugh, don't be such a pig, Camden." A platinum blonde with icy blue eyes shoves him out of the way and takes his place in front of me. "Men, am I right?"

"I'm not sure you can call these atomic masses of hormones men just yet," I answer dryly.

"You're funny." Her red lips tilt at the corners, and I think I just entered an alternate universe. One where Audrey Rothschild has suddenly decided to notice my existence.

I know who she is because everyone does. Audrey is a Black Mountain Academy fixture simply for the fact that her entire family is alumni. She belongs here as much as one of the historically preserved buildings. Nobody challenges her existence. They just worship her for what she represents.

Rumor has it her grades suck, and her parents pay off the staff every year, but nobody really knows for sure. In either case, it doesn't seem to matter. She's one of those freakishly genetically gifted girls who looks like a Stepford

daughter. But she supposedly spent the summer on a medical holiday in an unknown location nipping and tucking her assets. We had three classes together last year, and not once did she ever bother to look my way. So, I can't figure out why she's talking to me now.

"It's Kailani, yeah?" She smiles, her white teeth shining through her painted lips.

"Yep." I resist the urge to roll my eyes. "We've had a few classes together. And we officially met yesterday at the bookstore."

"Oh, that's right." She pins me with her feline gaze. "You were with Landon."

Yesterday, we went to pick up the last book on the summer reading list, and when we bumped into Audrey and a few other BMA students, Landon practically sprouted wings. They weren't aware he was in town, but it became apparent pretty fast they all knew each other. Yet he couldn't get away from them fast enough. He muttered an excuse that we had somewhere to be, except that wasn't true, and as soon as we got back to my house, he ditched me too.

"Do you know where he is?" I ask Audrey.

Her eyes flick over me in that dismissive way she's mastered, but her face never wavers. "I'm not sure. But if I had to guess, he's probably balls deep in some annoying fan girl right about now. God, it's like they have no self-respect, lining up to take their turns with him. Pathetic, much?"

A nerf dart sails between us, and someone crashes into her from behind, thrusting her forward. I'm grateful for the momentary interruption, so she can't bear witness to the anguish on my face.

I don't care what's he's doing.

"God, you fucking halfwit." Audrey shoves the drunken girl away from her, knocking the interloper back onto her ass. She primps her hair and turns her attention back to me. "I swear some people just can't hang."

"Right." I clear my throat and try not to look at the girl who's crawling away on the floor.

I want to leave. I should leave.

"You should stay a while," Audrey says. "I never see you at any of these

bashes.”

“I just came to say hi to Landon.” I sound like one of those pathetic girls she was just talking about.

Her eyes flash with interest. “Let me help you find him then.”

When my gaze darts around the room, I agree that’s probably a good idea. It’s crazy in here, and even though I’m familiar with the house, it feels brand new in the current state. Audrey grabs my hand and drags me toward the staircase, but we don’t make it far before someone else interrupts us. I recognize the other two guys who were trailing Audrey yesterday. They stood out because they happen to attend Black Mountain’s biggest rival, Maple Grove. Normally, bringing anyone from MGA across enemy lines might be considered a criminal offense, but since Gavin and Wyatt aren’t on the football team, I guess nobody really cares.

“Can I interest anyone in a screwdriver?” Wyatt holds up a tray with individual boxes of orange juice, red Solo cups, and mini vodka bottles. He’s wearing a tee shirt with a tuxedo printed on it and a goofy smile to match.

“Morons.” Audrey snickers and then pouts. “Can you make mine?”

Wyatt mixes up her drink, and I stand there awkwardly for a second before deciding to do the same. I’m not much of a drinker. On occasion, my mom lets me have a glass of wine at the dinner table. But I’ve never been drunk. This is what people do at parties, I guess, so whatever. I dump the orange juice and vodka into a red cup and swirl it around.

Gavin nudges me with his elbow after I take my first sip. “They call it a screwdriver for a reason. I think they named it after Landon. He likes to screw anything that moves.”

Audrey smirks at my wincing face. It shouldn’t surprise me that she can see right through me. Girls like her have a way of sniffing out the weaknesses in others, and if she were a breed, she’d be a bloodhound. Right now, I have two choices. Walk out of here like an idiot and prove I don’t belong here or show her that I’m not as easily ruffled as she wants to believe. Audrey loves to push everyone else around, and if I walk away now, she wins by default.

I tip the cup to my lips again, forcing it between my teeth as I suck down

enough of the liquid to give me what I hope is courage.

“Good girl.” Wyatt pats me on the head condescendingly.

“Let’s check the bedrooms upstairs,” Audrey suggests.

With that sage advice, the four of us wade through the mass of people gathered around the stairs. Getting to the second level is no easy feat with the throng of bodies to navigate, and my head is already swimming from the alcohol. I’m pretty sure chugging that drink like I just did wasn’t the brightest thing I’ve ever done.

On the second landing, things are even wilder, if that’s humanly possible. A game of Twister in the middle of the hallway has stirred up a heated debate over the rules between two girls in their tiny scraps of swimwear. And beyond that, there’s an actual slip and slide with water and suds. The floor is soaked, and all I can think about is how Landon’s mom will probably murder him when she sees this place.

My vision narrows to a pinpoint as I weave through more bodies, nearly slipping on the wet floor more than once. I’m already nauseous, wishing I’d eaten something before I came here when I hear the crowd chanting a name that only became familiar to me about ten minutes ago. It’s the hot teen vampire Landon played on *Blood River Legacy*.

Killian. Killian. Killian.

Audrey pushes her way through the human wall into a second sitting area, forcing the crowd to part just for us. And there he is. Six feet of pure, beautiful male. He’s draped onto the sofa, his chocolatey brown hair artfully messy as though he’s been running his fingers through it. He does that a lot when he’s frustrated, I’ve noticed. I wanted to run my fingers through it too. I wanted to crawl into his soul and stare into those steely gray eyes and touch the hard lines on his face until they softened.

My heart is beating fast and loud, the way it always does when I’m near him. It doesn’t matter how many times I see him; he still takes my breath away. And I really do get it now. I understand why everyone’s so obsessed with him. Nobody else in this world is this interesting to look at.

He quietly observes the people around him with a dark and intense

expression. Everyone's fighting over his attention so that's probably why he hasn't noticed me. Not that it matters. Because why would he?

Two girls on either side of him hold tubes of lipstick in their hands. They've drawn arrows on their face toward their mouths, and more on their chests leading to their shirts. They look like drunken gremlins who got into their mother's makeup, but it's a game I've heard about many times over the last year. Truth or Grope.

I don't want to see how this plays out, but I can't look away. Is Landon going to participate? Is this what he does at these parties?

My throat squeezes when one of the girls, a brunette, strips off her cropped top, and the crowd goes wild. A footballer named Ken steps forward, nearly sloshing his drink over the edge of his cup in his excitement.

"Kiss them both," he pants with creepy eyes.

"You can't back down from a dare, bruh!" Easton Lang yells. "Just do it!"

My stomach cramps, and I don't know if it's the alcohol or my emotions eating me alive. The girl on Landon's right side wraps her arm around his bicep and whispers something in his ear. He stares straight ahead, his face a mask of emptiness. He's here, but he's not. Maybe that should make me feel better, but I've never seen his eyes so vacant before. I want him to push her away. He doesn't. He doesn't react at all when she emboldens herself by rubbing her palm across his thigh.

I'm in the middle of giving myself a list of reasons I need to leave when his eyes find mine in the crowd. His dark brows pinch together, and for a split second, I could almost swear disappointment flashes across his face. I don't understand. If he didn't want me here, then why did he invite me? Acid burns my throat, so I force it back by taking a huge mouthful of my drink. I nearly choke on it when Audrey grabs my arm and tugs me forward.

"Out of the way, losers," she barks at the girls next to Landon. "It's our turn."

The girls scatter like cockroaches, the way I imagine most people do when Audrey gives a declaration. In my disoriented state, I vaguely wonder what it's like to have everyone fear you. She points at the newly vacated space beside

Landon and shoves me down into it before making herself at home on his other side. Wyatt and Gavin stand like sentinels in front of the coffee table, watching in amusement as they pour fresh drinks for the other players.

“Is there room for me?” Carson swipes a pitcher of beer from the tray and squeezes between Landon and Audrey, much to her annoyance. He’s on the football team too. Tall and built with piercing green eyes, he’s hot by most girl’s standards. I used to think so too, but that was before I met Landon.

Audrey glances at the three of us. I’m trying not to look directly at Landon, but I can feel his eyes on the side of my face. I’m trying to figure out how to extricate myself from this situation as the crowd grows restless and urges the game on.

“So, I guess the secret’s out, huh?” Landon’s words fan against my ear, and I shiver.

Slowly, I turn to look at him, aware that my emotions are written all over my face. I’m pathetic. A sad little puppy whose eyes move over his features, cataloging every detail of this complicated, tortured boy. His body holds an undercurrent of tension, and a flush of red creeps up his neck. He’s vibrating with irritation, and I can’t tell if it’s directed at me.

“You should have told me,” I whisper.

“Why?” He studies me as though he’s trying to read my thoughts.

He wants to see how this has changed things between us. I wonder if he can tell that I’m surprised he’s even acknowledging me at all in front of all these people. Little old nobody that I am.

“Enough pillow talk.” Audrey’s shrill voice severs our connection. Landon and I both jerk our gazes away from each other and release a breath. “Carson, you go first.”

Carson passes the pitcher of beer to Landon, and he takes a long pull, his throat muscles working. My thighs squeeze together, and I take a drink from my cup to give my hands something to do. Carson’s eyes bounce around the room without much interest in the actual game, until eventually, they land back on Audrey.

“Truth or grope, Audrey.”

Her lips curl playfully as she leans back to meet his gaze. “Grope.”

“Kiss me.” Carson’s tone is bored, and I can’t imagine why. Audrey is easily one of the most beautiful girls here, and half the guys around us are already panting as they imagine themselves in his place.

Audrey grabs him by the collar and drags him in toward her. She kisses him. With tongue. The crowd cheers, and I watch with wide eyes as she smears her lipstick all over Carson’s face. It’s morbidly fascinating, like a vulture eating its prey. Landon’s expression never changes, but I catch him staring at me a few times again.

Everything feels different. It’s no longer just the two of us. Safe topics like math and books aren’t even options right now. The hormones in the room are surging wildly around us as the game continues, and I’m having trouble following along. So far, every person challenged has picked grope, and when one girl did try to pick truth, the crowd booed her until she left. It’s about that time Audrey’s eyes fall on me.

“Kailani, I dare you to kiss Landon.”

I suck in a breath. Our eyes collide. His are dark and hot and... *curious*. Challenging, even. Is it my imagination, or does he want me to say yes? I know what I want. If my erratic heartbeat has anything to say about it, I want to touch his lips more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life. But not like this. Not in front of everyone.

“Um, I pick truth,” I answer quickly.

“You can’t pick truth.” Audrey laughs. “Drop the nun act. We all know there’s a bad girl inside you.”

The temperature in the room skyrockets. Landon is a statue next to me. I can’t look directly at him because I can’t read his face right now, and it only confuses me more. Seconds pass with excruciating slowness until, finally, Audrey sighs.

“Okay fine, we get it. You’re shy.” Her voice softens like she really doesn’t want to embarrass me. “I’m amending my dare. I want you to go into a bedroom with Landon for five minutes. Just the two of you. Whatever happens, happens.”

I sneak a glance at Landon, but he may as well be carved from stone. He

gives nothing away when he rises to his feet and shrugs like he couldn't care less one way or the other.

“Are you coming?”

He doesn't wait for me to answer. My legs are boneless when I get up and follow him. The crowd jests us as we walk away, and my body sways slightly. I feel like I'm in a fishbowl with nowhere to hide. Landon is unfazed by the taunting laughter behind us. He opens the door to a guest bedroom and gestures me inside. When it clicks shut behind us, I drag in a mouthful of air.

“This is so dumb,” I blurt, my nerves making me talk too fast. “You don't have to kiss me. I know things aren't like that. It's just a stupid game, right?”

His arctic eyes move over my face. In the span of a few seconds, I consider at least five different scenarios in which the impending rejection will play out. When he takes a step closer, his shoe bumps against mine, and I nearly lose my balance. He smells so clean, like fresh laundry and sweet spices. I want to rub myself all over his shirt, the way I rubbed his cologne onto my wrist when I used the bathroom here. I have no shame.

His eyes are glazed, and I wonder how much he's had to drink tonight. Will he remember this tomorrow? Can he feel the herd of Clydesdales in my chest?

“Landon...”

His fingers brush over my jaw, and I nearly melt into the floor. Gently, he lifts my gaze to his. Up, and up, and up. He's so tall I'd have to climb him if I wanted to reach his mouth. I need a ladder or a step stool. I'm seeking one out when his fingertips still me, pressing into my bones with a warmth I feel between my thighs.

He examines me, and I've never felt someone's eyes on my skin the way I feel his right now. One of us moves, or maybe we both do. I grab his biceps to steady myself, and they are so firm. I want to study them to see if they're even real. My stomach presses against his hips, and I feel something warm there too. It takes me a second to realize it isn't just his body that's hard.

The world tilts. Explosions detonate in my veins. Butterflies grow wings and take flight in my belly. I suck in a breath, and then it happens. Landon Blackwood dips his lips to mine. I release an involuntary gasp, and he swallows

it. He swallows all my breaths. My fingers curl into his tee shirt, bracing myself against him as he steals my first everything. I've never been kissed before, so I have nothing to compare it to. But I already know there is nothing else on earth like this kiss. My lips part, and I inhale him. His tongue grazes mine, sweet like peppermint, and I think I die a little right then. It's intense, so intense my knees almost give out, and when I stumble a bit, he catches me.

"You good?" His words are breathless as his forehead comes to rest against mine.

I nod, but at the same time, my stomach clenches, and I feel like I'm going to puke. I curse the universe for choosing right now to make me feel sick. I want this to last forever. I want to feel his lips on mine until the earth turns to dust. But my gut doesn't care one way or the other as the alcohol sloshes inside violently, threatening to erupt at any moment.

"Is that a bathroom?" I choke out, eyeing the door across the room.

He nods and releases me.

"Okay, I'll be right back." I stumble my way to the door while Landon collapses onto the chair, staring up at the ceiling.

To my horror, I realize when I shut the door behind me that he's going to hear me puke. I manage to turn on the water and flip up the lid on the toilet before it happens. My stomach heaves for a solid five minutes, and instinctively, I know something isn't right.

My skin feels hot and sticky, and there's a dull throbbing in my head that wasn't there before. Everything seems blurry now. Misshapen. I've never had vodka before, but surely, it can't be this bad. Tears streak down my cheeks as my stomach cramps again, and I barely have the strength to drag myself up to the toilet to vomit one more time.

It's too much.

I had too much.

That's the last conscious thought I have.

MY HEAD SPLITS OPEN, BRAINS SPILLING OUT OF MY SKULL. OR AT LEAST, that's what it feels like. Everything is dark behind the curtain of my eyelids, but the distorted sounds around me bubble through my eardrums like I'm underwater. Hushed laughter. Whispering voices. The shutter of a phone camera.

I'm trying to connect the dots. I'm trying to make it make sense. Every second feels like a year. My senses come back at a snail's pace, waking me to a reality I'm not prepared to face. I'm hot and sweaty with hair stuck to my face and neck. The pungent scent of alcohol seeps from my pores, swirling with the distinct solvent of a marker. There's another familiar smell. Balloons, maybe? *Or latex...*

My eyelids are glued together from sleep and dried tears. When I open them, the blinding light on the ceiling stings, and moisture teeters on the edges as I blink, trying to dispel the blurriness. *Where the hell am I?*

Another phone shutter. More laughter.

"Shh, she's waking up, dude."

Groaning, I try to sit up. My limbs ache. Everything aches. It feels like I've been battered by a tropical storm and left to drown in the ocean. Movement doesn't come easily. I'm weighed down with what I think are cinder blocks. My thoughts are so disjointed it takes me a moment to realize they are someone else's hands. They are hot and sticky too, one clinging to my thigh, and the other to my naked breast.

My confusion comes out as panicked gibberish. The slurred words are followed by more laughter as I force my chin up, trying to make sense of what's happening. When I notice my skirt bunched around my hips, my chest caves in. This can't be real. This body doesn't even feel like my own. But the more I examine my bruised thighs and arms, the harder reality hits me. My shirt is gone, nipples heaving upward as tainted oxygen explodes into my lungs. My body is covered in smeared Sharpie, dark slashes of words and arrows inked into my skin.

Was this from Truth or Grope?

Piece by piece, everything else comes into focus. The hands on top of me are connected to two bodies on either side of me. My eyes blaze a trail up the

muscular frames to the unmistakable faces of Landon and Carson. They are passed out, bodies curled into mine, wearing nothing but their briefs. Colorful foil wrappers dot the landscape of the bed around us, and I nearly choke on my saliva when I realize what they are.

“Oh my god,” I whisper.

A group of partiers lingers in the doorway, snickering as they hold up their phones to snap photos and add commentary.

“Stop.” Panic rises like bile in my throat. “Stop taking pictures!”

Landon groans beside me, flopping onto his back as he blinks up at the ceiling.

“The fuck?” His voice is raspy and disjointed.

When his bleary eyes meet mine, a bomb detonates inside my heart. *How could he let this happen?*

I choke back my emotions as I shove his hand off my chest. His fingers flop limply at his side while I make a feeble attempt to get my body to cooperate. When I sit upright, Carson’s hand falls away too. Landon’s eyes follow the movement, and in one blink, his expression morphs from blankness to a hurricane.

He looks pissed, eyes flickering back and forth between Carson and me. Can he see how confused and hurt I am? I’m waiting for him to say something. Anything. But there’s only accusation in his dark gaze. He thinks this is my fault.

Anger. Betrayal. His emotions are mine, mirrored back at me. His reaction is so irrational I can’t comprehend it. Only one thing makes sense. I need to get the hell out of here.

My limbs are weak as I scramble from the bed, nearly tripping over the tangled sheet as the onlookers record me as though it’s the most hilarious thing they’ve ever seen. I want to scream, but I can’t. My lungs are paralyzed. My heart is hammering against my rib cage so hard I think it’s going to explode.

Fighting for a modicum of modesty, I slap my palms over my breasts and fight the tears gathering in my eyes as I search for a way out.

“Wake up, asshole.” I hear Landon say.

“What the fuck?” Carson mumbles behind me. “What happened?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Audrey and her two fuckboys linger at the front of the crowd. “You guys porked the demon slut at the same time. Congratulations. You get a shot of penicillin as a consolation prize.”

I shove past her and the prying eyes of all her friends. My sanity is holding on by a thread, and I’m on the verge of flinging myself over the railing if I don’t get out of this house. But I can’t cry in front of them. I won’t.

“You can run, but you can’t hide!” someone shouts from behind me. “You’re like famous now, Hawaii.”

I bolt for the hall, only to slam into someone on the way out. The physical presence of another body so close to mine revolts me, and my stomach threatens to spew up the little contents it has left.

“Kail?” Courtney gently reaches for my arm, forcing me to acknowledge her.

Concern washes over her face as her eyes sweep over me, and that little glimpse of human empathy is what pushes me over the edge.

“What the fuck is wrong with you people?” she hisses as she tugs off her jacket and wraps it around me. “You’re all fucking psychopaths!”

“Kail!” I hear Landon calling after me, but I can’t look at him.

“Get me out of here,” I tell Court.

Shielding me, she ushers us away, dragging my half limp body beside her. Every step feels like a mile, but I’ve never been so thankful for someone’s help in my entire life. Somehow, we manage to make it outside and across the lawn before I puke in Theo’s perfectly landscaped bushes. And the tears finally break free.

I sob, and Court drops to her knees, gently stroking my back as pain fragments every cell in my body.

“What did they do?” she whispers.

When I look up at her, she’s little more than a blurry human shape, and at that moment, I feel like I’m no longer human at all.

“I…” My voice wavers on the edge of sanity. “I don’t know.”

LONDON

-TWO YEARS LATER-

My Porsche 911 glides into a parking space at Black Mountain Academy like a bird skims over the surface of the sea. On a whim, I decided to upgrade to the GT2 RS model this year just for the hell of it. A choice that brought me at least a solid five minutes of peace. But not even the leather bucket seats can quell the suffocating feeling in my chest when I turn off the ignition and glance at the front of the school.

The entrance is overrun with Black Mountain's richest parents, beaming with pride as they drop off their spawn for their first day of the school year. My eyes glaze over as I scan the army of blazers and polo shirts. They are all so crisp and white and starched, buttoned up to their throats with perfectly knotted ties. Meanwhile, my shirt hangs haphazardly from my black trousers, the tie half undone around my collar, sleeves rolled up to my elbows. I yanked this year's uniform out of the packaging this morning, not bothering to do much with it. There isn't anyone to fuss over my shit in the morning. Nobody's coming to send me off and wish me luck. And if I don't show up for class, the only person held accountable is me.

In some ways, coming back to this place feels like another acting gig. I signed up for normal because I thought I wanted that shit, but this school is just another stage. Every day here feels like a giant fucking soap opera, and I'm not mourning the loss of my youth as I prepare for the shitshow that will be senior year.

I came back to Black Mountain two years ago because it was the only place

I'd ever really felt at home. But that was when my grandmother was still alive, and someone actually gave a fuck about me. Whatever magic may have lived here is gone now, and all that's left behind is the memory of ghosts. Some days, I could swear one of them still walks these haunted halls, leaving traces of her perfume and trails of her tears.

The sea and sky.

Those things don't exist in Black Mountain. Not after Kailani turned tail and ran back to Hawaii. Sometimes, I imagine her sitting on the beach with flowers in her hair, smiling over how easily she toyed with me. Now she has five hundred thousand ways to congratulate herself for fooling me better than anyone else ever did.

I spent an entire summer with her, believing she wasn't like everyone else. As it turned out, she was even worse. She wasn't just a liar. She was a fucking atom bomb.

After she threatened to burn my life to the ground, she lit the fuse on her own destruction. My publicist and lawyer got involved and squashed whatever story she wanted to leak to the media. They negotiated a deal with her, and like the soul-sucking demon she was, she took it. She took the money so willingly it left a bitterness in my mouth I still can't swallow. In the end, I guess she got what she wanted. She disappeared without looking back, taking the sea and sky with her.

Now everything is gray. Everything is shit. And I'd be lying if I said her betrayal didn't sting worse than all the others.

My phone buzzes with a text from my agent, asking me if I'm going to audition for the part in a new series. He wants me to come back to LA before my shelf life as an actor runs out. Translation: he misses the money that slid right into his pockets when I was on a long-running television series. He's still trying to salvage the career that I willfully imploded, convinced I'm just going through a phase.

Ignoring him, I check the rest of my messages quickly. There are a few from Audrey, asking where I am. A couple more from some of the guys on the football team, begging to have a party at my place this weekend. And then a

stream from the last person I want to hear from. My mother.

The Succubus: Can you send me cash or what?

The Succubus: I need it, Landon.

The Succubus: Don't forget everything I did for you. I sacrificed the best years of my life to make you who you are. You wouldn't have all this money if it weren't for me.

The Succubus: This is bullshit. Don't make me do something you won't like.

A dark cloud settles over me as I read those words again. It wouldn't be the first time she's threatened to sell a story to the media, and it won't be the last either. Half of the shit that gets published about me could be linked back to her. She's just the first and most persistent on a long list of parasites who want a piece of me. But the difference is she's my own fucking flesh and blood.

She's so wrapped up in herself that she doesn't even realize it's the first day of my senior year. Her half-assed efforts at being a mother stopped the day I emancipated myself from her at fifteen. Even the court agreed she wasn't fit. After she blew through half my lifetime earnings on fuck knows what, I had no choice. I put her up in a nice condo in California and send her a generous check every month, but it's never enough. It will never be enough. She's a leech, and I'm never going to be free of her or the vultures that follow me like a bad rash.

A fist rattles my window, and I glare up at Carson. He shrugs and makes a face.

What the fuck are you doing?

Good question. The people who consider themselves my friends are already waiting for me inside. Friends isn't the term I'd use for the devoted followers who trail me everywhere I go. I don't claim anybody. If I had it my way, everyone would just leave me the fuck alone, the way I prefer it. But I guess they

are good for one thing. Background noise to the constant static in my life.

I tuck my phone back into my pocket and check my reflection one last time in the rearview mirror. Haunted, empty gray eyes stare back at me. The scarred flesh on the back of my elbow itches and burns where a surgeon tried his best to piece it back together. There are more scars on my hip and back where they took skin and bone to make me whole again. I can't forget I'm only ever one bad choice away from losing control. Those scars remind me why I can't give a fuck about anyone or anything.

"Let's go." Carson huffs as I unfold my rigid body from the car.

We glance at each other, a faint acknowledgment that this is the way things are now. We aren't friends anymore. Not after that night two years ago. After Kailani left, I booted everyone out and broke Carson's nose in the middle of my front lawn. Message received, loud and clear. *Don't touch what doesn't fucking belong to you.* Shit has been tense between us ever since, but we have a mutual understanding. We're both on the football team. The same clingers-on follow us around like puppies. We can't let them see that anything bothers us. We have to play the part, all while we self-destruct in ways of our own choosing. We haven't gotten over what happened, but neither one of us is ready to pull the cord completely on this fucked-up friendship.

We walk into the school together, shoulders squared and faces blank. A few bright-eyed freshman girls try to stop us inside the door, asking me for an autograph.

"Go away." Carson bats the air like they're flies, and usually, he's the nice one.

I give him the side-eye, wondering what the hell crawled up his ass. Typically, I'm the one known for being an asshole, but today, he's walking around like we just lost the playoffs.

"What's your deal?" I sling my backpack over my shoulder and wade through the crowd that rushes to get out of our way. "They run out of mood stabilizers at the drug store?"

"You'll find out soon enough," he mutters under his breath.

The undercurrent of tension in his voice coils every muscle in my body. I

don't know why my eyes drift to her locker. Maybe it's a habit. Maybe it's instinct. I haven't had my fix of staring at that empty space for the entire summer. The school tried to reassign that locker several times, but nobody wanted it. It had been vandalized so often they had to replace the door twice. At one point, they were painting a fresh coat over the words etched into the metal every day. There were several assemblies where the principal uttered threats about the destruction, and it finally seemed to stop when they assigned a temporary hall monitor to watch during breaks. It's been sitting there like a coffin ever since. But the bright red paint can't hide the decay underneath. And now, again, it's become a canvas for someone's black Sharpie.

Demon slut.

Tension seeps into my shoulders, and the world around me narrows. Why now? Why again?

I don't realize I'm stopped in the middle of the hallway until someone breezes past me, and I catch a hint of perfume. Notes of jasmine, frangipani, and ocean breezes short-circuit my nervous system. I've carried that scent with me for two years. All I ever had to do was close my eyes, and there it was. Kailani, sitting on my patio, leaning in to explain the same math problem over again. Every time I furrowed my brow, she thought I wasn't getting it. I couldn't bring myself to tell her I wasn't really that far behind. She spent her summer teaching me things I already knew, but it gave me the chance to memorize something else.

Sun-kissed raven hair. Warm brown eyes. Perfectly sloped curves.

I try to blink away her memory, but this time, it's too tangible.

Beside me, I hear Carson sucking in a sharp breath, and my gaze follows his to the long midnight hair dipping down to the curve of a red and black skirt. My eyes collect details in rapid-fire. Her white knee-high socks. Shiny black shoes. A blazer draped casually over her left arm. It can't be her. I'm certain it isn't because Kailani is all curves, and this girl is nipped in at the waist like every other girl at BMA. I don't want to believe it. But then she stops in front of her locker and cocks her head to the side, studying the message written there.

"Cute," she murmurs, grabbing the lock and entering the combination like

she was here just yesterday.

I'm transfixed on the side of her face, aware that everyone else is watching her too. We can't look away from this train wreck. I'm still convinced I have it all wrong. This girl's energy is more voodoo and less sunshine. She's unperturbed, seemingly careless that every set of eyes is on her as she stuffs her locker full of books. She hasn't even looked at me, and I can't accept that.

"Did you not get the memo?" Audrey hisses at her as she walks by. "You were canceled indefinitely."

Kailani tilts her gaze up to meet Audrey's, and the entire hall falls dead silent. "Two years to come up with new material, and that's the best you've got?"

The steel in her voice even knocks Audrey off balance. She wavers for a mere second before reclaiming her queen bitch status, glancing around the hallway to make her declaration to the underlings.

"Anyone talks to this demon slut, they're going to regret it. She's hereby declared nonexistent. Understood?"

"Audrey." My voice echoes like a thunderclap in the hallway, and finally, Kailani turns to look at me.

Our eyes lock, and everything around us disappears. The sea and sky have returned. *Filthy little liar*. Adrenaline and fury rage in my veins. I want an acknowledgment. Something. Anything. She offers a dismissive smirk like it's nothing. *I'm nothing*.

Audrey deftly maneuvers herself to my side, staking her claim on me as she tucks her body against mine. She can sense the shift in the air. Everyone can.

"Come on." She tugs on my arm. "We're going to be late for class."

The bell rings, and I shrug Audrey off me like an insect. "Go."

She hesitates beside me, and I can feel her gaze burning into my face. She wants to be my sun—the sole reason for my existence—but she never will, and it eats her alive.

Students scatter, disappearing in different directions as Kailani slams her locker shut and zips up her bag. She pivots on her heel and tries to walk right past me, delusional enough to believe she gets to come back here and ignore me.

I snatch her arm and stop her in her tracks. She holds my gaze, looking up at me like I never existed to her. Like nothing ever happened, and she doesn't even know who I am.

"Can I help you?" She arches a dark eyebrow at me.

Her eyes are shadowed with powdery gold makeup that makes her brown skin glow under the hall lights. In those dark irises is a hint of the girl I thought she was, but she's drowning, fading into the background as this new alter ego commandeers Kail's body. I lean into her, towering over her five-foot frame. I'm so close I can smell the mint of her gum and the floral scent of her shampoo.

Goose bumps break out along her skin as I take a step forward, and she steps back. We continue the dance until she's pressed against the lockers, and I'm caging her in with my body. She's close enough to touch, yet farther away than she's ever been.

"Why did you come back?" I growl.

Why did you leave me?

A smile I don't recognize bleeds across her red lips, and she looks up at me with a hurricane in her eyes. "Oh, Killian. That's so cute. Is this like a script from your show? The big, bad vampire and his flock thought they got rid of me for good?"

"Two fucking years." I force the words out between gritted teeth. "And you think you can just walk in here like nothing ever happened?"

The smile slips from her face, and her features turn to stone. "I think I'll do whatever I want. I'm not the same girl who ran away before. So, why don't we establish some ground rules now."

"Ground rules?" I'm vaguely aware that I'm staring at her like she's my last meal.

It's tempting to reach out and feel the warmth of her skin. Test if she's still human beneath that military-grade armor. But it would be like reaching into a steel trap. She really isn't the same girl who left without a second thought, and she proves it with her parting shot.

"Yes." She places her palms against my chest and shoves me back. "It's pretty simple, even for you, Landon. All you have to do is stay the hell out of my

way.”

KAILANI

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six.
Shit.

My fingers dig into my temples as I tilt my head up toward the ceiling, willing the nerves to disappear. It's like when you get a bloody nose, and you just want to make it go away. Except, in this case, it's my fear bleeding out of my brain. My breath hisses between my teeth, edging near panic as I repeat the mantra inside my head.

No weakness. Never let them see you as weak again.

"Kailani, are you in here?" Coach Lopez yells.

Crap. I wipe the moisture leaking from the corner of my eyes and suck in a deep breath, pinching my arm hard to focus on the pain. *Pull it together, Kail.*

"I'll be out in just a second," I call from the changing room.

Realistically, it takes me a full minute to plaster on a badge of courage before I can show my face. Coach Lopez accepted my assurances I could do this, and I won't let myself fail, no matter how much I'm screaming on the inside.

I've already overcome the biggest hurdle. It's the end of my first day back, and I've managed to survive the angry whispers and death glares directed my way at every turn. True to Audrey's decree, nobody dared to speak directly to me apart from Courtney. To everyone else, I'm insignificant, and they want me to know it. So much so that when I returned to my locker at lunch, there were another twenty insults etched into the metal. There were also two handwritten notes warning me I'd better leave now before something really bad happens.

You'd think for a bunch of trust fund kids with nothing else to do, they could be more creative.

I meet Coach Lopez in the locker room with a bright, indestructible smile. Fake it till you make it, or whatever.

"You ready for this?" She studies me as though she's looking for cracks.

"I was born ready." More accurately, I was reborn in the flames of my destruction.

Coach nods. "You've earned this, Kail. You're the best dancer in the class, and I have faith in you. Just be careful, okay?"

"You're probably not allowed to tell me they're vultures who will eat me alive the first chance they get, are you?"

She chuckles softly and shakes her head. "No, but I'm allowed to think it."

I shake out the rest of my nervous energy through my fingertips and glance at the door leading to the rec field. While the weather is still nice, Coach Lopez said she'll let us practice outside to enjoy it as long as we can. Everyone is out there right now. The cheer team. The footballers. All the people from the party who laughed and shared photos of the worst night of my life. The keyboard warriors and bullies, and worst of all, Landon. I already know he'll be just across the field while his girlfriend and her gang of devoted followers stare me down directly.

This moment is everything I've been working toward for the past two years while I've quietly rebuilt my crumbled foundation. It's not quite rock solid, but this is the only chance I'll have. It's senior year, and if I want revenge, it's now or never.

"I'll follow your lead," I tell coach.

We walk to the door together. When she pushes it open, sunshine blasts in from the other side, warming my skin under the red skirt and black leotard. But sunlight can't touch the glacier beneath my rib cage. That landscape froze over the night I met the real Landon Blackwood.

All of my enemies are lined up like a firing squad, ready to take aim as I march toward them. At the head of the pack, Audrey's mouth literally drops when she sees me in the dance uniform, her brows pinching together in disgust.

“What in the fresh hell—” she begins to protest.

Coach Lopez holds up her hand and cuts her off. “Not now, Audrey. Listen up, ladies. Here’s the deal. It’s a new season, and big things are happening this year. I know you’ve all been waiting to hear the announcement for captain, so we’ll start there.”

My eyes lock with Audrey’s. We’re like two rams, ready to throw down. She steps forward, prepared to snatch the crown she’s convinced is already hers. In her universe, nobody holds the power to dismantle her throne. Nobody would ever dare. History has proven it to be a fact, but history’s about to rewrite itself.

“This year’s captain is new to the Cougarettes, but she’s not new to the sport,” coach begins. “She’s a three-time champion at both the regional and national level with over a decade of experience in a variety of genres. Please give a warm welcome to your new cheer captain, Kailani Hale.”

“Hey.” I offer them a sweet smile. “Remember me?”

There are quiet gasps all around, and everyone’s eyes fall on Audrey, waiting for her reaction. Her pale cheeks are on fire, fists curled at her side, and her ugly is showing. She has ruled this school since the day she stepped foot through the overpriced doors. But I have one thing that Audrey doesn’t. And that’s a hell of a lot more experience when it comes to dance.

“Coach, this must be a mistake.” Her head rattles back and forth. “She wasn’t even here for tryouts!”

“There’s no mistake.” Coach stands her ground, something I respect her for since not all of Audrey’s teachers will. “Kailani tried out just like everybody else, and she’s earned this position fair and square. If you’d like to air a grievance, you can make an appointment with me later to do so.”

“You better believe I’m going to air my grievances,” Audrey snarls. “Wait until my mother hears about this. She will tear this—”

“Kailani, the floor is yours.” Coach Lopez ends Audrey’s tirade with a firm voice, and the rest of the dance team watches me nervously as I step forward. The energy in the air is frenetic, and I know my future at Black Mountain Academy hangs in the balance. I’m here to show them I’m not the same girl they ran off two years ago. It’s time to establish my place at the top of the food chain.

At least there's one friendly face in the crowd. Courtney is smirking back at me, enjoying the showdown just like she promised she would. She's not even remotely into school spirit, and she looks more than a little uncomfortable in the uniform, but she showed up like only a good friend would. This summer, I gave her an intensive crash course in dance over video chat. I had to twist her arm and promise her the world to get her to do this for me. But she's here, and I've never been so grateful to have someone on my side.

"Hey, everyone." I step forward and square my shoulders. "As coach mentioned, I'm Kailani." *Or as you all like to call me, the demon slut.* "I've been dancing for thirteen years, and I have a background in hula, samba, jazz, and Polynesian fire dance. When I was twelve, I traveled with a professional dance troupe for two years, performing all over the world."

"Yeah, only because of your mother." Audrey nearly snaps her neck from the dramatic eye roll as I drop my credentials.

I offer her a fake ass smile like she offered me when she pretended to be a friend. That was the first and last time I'd ever trust one of these girls.

"I have a lot of ideas about incorporating fresh routines into the Cougarettes legacy," I continue.

"That's not what the Cougarettes are about." Audrey crosses her arms and glares at me. "You wouldn't know that because you've been here for like five minutes, but our traditions are sacred. We perform the routines that have been passed down through generations because they are classics. And I can assure you the alumni won't tolerate this sort of mutiny."

Coach Lopez gives me the side-eye, leaving me an opportunity to handle this on my own. Audrey is flexing the muscle of her family name to stake a claim. She's not going to make this easy for me. I don't doubt she will involve her mother and half the other parents in this matter. But I came here expecting as much, and I won't back down regardless of what her last name might be.

"You were captain of the junior team last year, weren't you, Audrey?"

She stares laser beams into my head like she hopes I'll spontaneously combust. "Your point?"

"Did you make it to championships?"

The vein in her forehead pulses, and someone in the back snickers. Audrey whips her head around to see who it was, and I use the opportunity to take back my power.

“The point is the Cougarettes haven’t made it to a championship in three years. And the year before that, the performance was a hot mess at best. We can do better, and we will. Coach Lopez has already approved the routines. If the alumni wish to be heard, they have that right, but ultimately, how we perform is up to us—”

“You can’t be serious about this, coach,” Audrey huffs. “She’s going to desecrate everything we stand for!”

“Audrey,” Coach warns her. “You can either get on board or ship out. Nobody is forcing you to be here.”

Everyone holds their breath while they wait for the toddler-sized meltdown Audrey is known for. But she surprises all of us when she schools her features and an eerie calm washes over her. I’m not fooled for a second. She’s biding her time and plotting my destruction. I just put a giant target on my back, and I’m going to have to watch it every second.

“I’m not going anywhere.” Her voice is syrupy sweet as she offers an apologetic smile. “I was just having a moment. I’m here for my team, coach.”

“Alright, then.” Coach grabs her clipboard and glances at her notes. “Then let’s get started.”

We spend the next forty minutes breaking down the first routine. Following Audrey’s lead, the girls refuse to make eye contact with me while she seizes every opportunity to make a snide remark about my moves. The battle lines have been drawn. It’s teenage warfare, and I’ve got an army of two. But it’s worth every second of discomfort to witness the agony on her face when she’s forced to listen to my directives.

I smile at her like we’re besties as we wrap up the session, and under her breath, she hisses. “I give you one week before you’re on a plane back to Hawaii, demon.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” I tell her. “Or, on second thought, maybe you should. It’s much nicer around here when you just don’t talk.”

She glances over my shoulder and smirks. “Oh, look. Here comes my boyfriend. You remember him, right?”

I follow her gaze to Landon and the rest of the footballers as they head for the locker rooms. Audrey has already imprinted an imaginary ring on his finger. In her mind, there is no other alternative. They’ll get married and spit out a couple of perfect kids who look just like them. Little does she know I have plans to destroy them both.

“How could I ever forget?” I spear her with my eyes. “Enjoy my sloppy seconds. I hope you think of me every time you kiss him.”

“You’re disgusting.” She flips her hair over her shoulder and shakes her head. “Everyone knows you followed him around like a pathetic little stalker, begging for any scraps he might throw you.”

“That’s open for interpretation.” I shrug and lock eyes with the guy in jersey number nine. “And trust me when I say you and Landon deserve each other. I think I’ll keep what I’ve got.”

Her head snaps back in shock as Jared Price swaggers up to me in his football uniform. He’s hot, ripped, and he has that bad boy personality that women eat up with a spoon. Audrey can hardly hide her disbelief as he greets me with a five-alarm kiss in front of everyone, sweeping me up into his arms and spinning me around like one of those scenes from a movie. When he plants me back on my feet, he slaps me on the ass for good measure, and I have to give him credit where it’s due. He’s good.

As one of the most popular guys at Black Mountain Academy, Jared has a reputation for being unattainable. He’s undeniably gorgeous, but sadly for the entire female population, he’s in love with the quarterback from our biggest rival, Maple Grove. A fact I only discovered because I stumbled upon them last week in the next town over when I was trying to lay low.

It’s an unwritten rule that nobody on the football team at BMA associates with Maple Grove. Cheerleaders, dance squad, other players. It makes no difference. They are our sworn enemy. I really don’t care who Jared dates, but I saw an opportunity when I saw the panic written on his face. Maybe it was cheap, but I needed an ally, and at this point, I wasn’t above negotiating. I

assured him over coffee that his secret was safe with me once he promised to do me a solid and help me out here. Really, I like to think it's a mutually beneficial relationship. He can keep his mystery boyfriend under wraps until graduation when the rivalry ends, and in the meantime, I get automatic street cred for landing one of the popular guys.

"How's my girl?" Jared winks as he squeezes and releases me.

I smile up at him, and then my eyes drift to Landon, who's rooted to the grass, frozen mid-step. His expression tugs at a familiar memory. The betrayal etched onto his face when he woke up and saw Carson lying on the other side of me that night. Apparently, it was all fun and games until after the fact. And the sweet cherry on that terrible sundae was that he had the nerve to look at me like I was the one who screwed up. More than anything else, that's the thing I can't seem to understand.

He had no regret. No shame. Just anger. The same angry eyes reflected at me now.

"Price?" he clips out.

"Yo." Jared tucks me into his side and pivots to meet his gaze. "What's up, Blackwood?"

Landon stares at us, red creeping up his neck. His jaw is flexed so hard I think he might be having a stroke. Whatever he was about to say died in his throat, and I think that's probably for the best. But before I can escape unscathed, Audrey joins his side, vomiting out her thoughts for the world to hear.

"Does anyone smell that?"

"What?" Misty, one of her loyal sheep, takes the bait.

Audrey makes a show of sniffing in our general direction and turning up her nose. "Oh, never mind. It's just the trash. Hope you've got protection, Jared. You're going to need it with that one."

"Stay classy, Audrey." Jared leans into me and cups my face like I'm the most precious thing in the world. "Ready to go, babe?"

I can feel Landon burning a shotgun-sized hole into the side of my head as I answer. "Absolutely."

KAILANI

Before my mom married Theo, we lived in a tiny apartment in Oahu and took public transportation. Now, she lives in a fifteen-thousand-square-foot Italian Renaissance-style mansion and drives a BMW. Everything is arched and vaulted and wrought inside, and I can't fault her for loving this place because it really is stunning. The architecture is an ode to Florence's cathedrals, and it feels like you're sitting in one when you pause to study the columns, stained glass, and ornate stone features.

After I get home, I pop into the main house to say a quick hello to my mom. If I don't, she'll just come to the pool house to check up on me. She doesn't much care for me choosing to live on the other side of the property, but she's so relieved to have me back here that she didn't put up much of a fight about it either.

Though my mom knows something happened two years ago, she isn't aware of all the dirty details. After I was done vomiting in the bushes, Courtney and I debated what to do. She told me, at the very least, I needed to see a doctor. But after she drove me into town and parked the car in front of the clinic, I chickened out.

I just couldn't do it.

I was humiliated and ashamed. I couldn't remember what I'd done, and somehow, it seemed like my fault. That's when the texts started flooding in, and it didn't take me long to realize everyone at BMA blamed me too. They said I was down for anything. A total freak. Guys were sending me dick pics. Girls

were calling me every name they could come up with. And Landon went radio silent.

I shut down after that. I didn't even want to show my face at school. So, yeah, I ran away. I went back to Hawaii to live with my grandmother, where I stewed in my anger and pain. The time away was necessary, and it gave me room to grow stronger, but I regret that it tore my mother and me apart. I feel terrible for keeping secrets from her, especially when it's killing her not to know what hurt me so much. But my mom is such a good person, so I don't think she could even wrap her head around how vicious my classmates are.

Since I've returned, we've been awkwardly dancing around the subject while she tries her best to make me happy. Part of that plan consisted of huge shopping sprees and a brand-new wardrobe, courtesy of my stepdad. I still feel a little weird about accepting things from him, but I figure it can only help. If I'm going to take back my dignity, I might as well do it wearing nice clothes.

I find my mom in the kitchen with a spatula in hand, eyes twinkling as she glazes a fresh batch of poi mochi. Alana Hale-Grant is dynamite packed into five feet, five inches of sunshine. She still maintains a dancer's body even though she's retired from the sport. She competed at the professional level for most of her career and snagged some of the most prestigious titles at Hawaii's biggest festivals. But her knees are shot, so now her dancing is confined to the kitchen while she cooks.

My features are a carbon copy of hers, right down to the freckles on our noses. The only difference between us is her taller, slimmer frame and a smile that could finally achieve world peace, given the opportunity.

She passed down her thirst for dancing, but I missed out on her confidence gene. The woman is unapologetically in love with herself, flaws and all. She's always instilled in me that women should celebrate their unique beauty, regardless of their wrinkles, scars, or body shapes. Her philosophy is wearing what makes you feel good and eating what makes you happy, dessert included. But then again, she can afford to. Her figure is more forgiving. I inherited my father's build, and I'm a lot curvier for it.

On that note, my stomach rumbles, and the old me is reaching out to grab

one of the treats my mom made before I think better of it.

Goals.

I have them this year, and I can't give my haters any more ammunition to use against me. If I gain back even so much as a pound, every girl at BMA will throw it in my face.

"Hi, honey." My mom smiles when she sees me, her face lighting up the whole room.

"Hey, Mama." I smile back, nearly cracking open when she wraps her arms around me and squeezes.

"Have I mentioned how happy I am to have you home?"

"Only like a thousand times." I close my eyes and force down the emotions threatening to spill out. *I missed her so much.*

She releases me from the hug and holds me at arm's length while she studies me. "Are you doing okay? How was the first day back?"

She looks worried, and I want to put her at ease.

"Everything was fine," I lie. "Most of the students don't even remember who I am."

"Well, I want you to tell me if you have any more issues," she says firmly. "I will march right down there and handle them myself."

"Okay, Mama." I laugh. "It's gonna be fine, though."

"I made your favorite." She wiggles the tray of carbs in front of me. "You want one?"

"I'll take one to go." I grab one and wrap it in a paper towel, so I don't upset her, but there's no way I'm actually eating it. "I have some homework to do before dinner."

"Homework on the first day?" She frowns. "I was hoping we'd have some girl time before Theo comes home."

"Rain check for tomorrow?" I plead.

"Of course." She nods and shoos me toward the door. "Go do your homework so we can enjoy dinner later."

Outside, I dart across the massive lawn to the pool house and shut the door behind me. I don't have the energy to move, and the mask I've been wearing all

day is already beginning to crumble. When I close my eyes and sink against the door, my backpack falls to the floor with a thud. A heavy sigh deflates my lungs, followed by a choked sob. Silent tears streak down my face, refusing to stay inside one second longer. Warring emotions rip through me like shrapnel, eviscerating the composure I fought so hard to maintain.

Grief, anger, fear. The demons of the past tug at my seams, threatening to pull me apart. I don't know if I can pull this off. But I have to. *I have to.*

For ten solid minutes, I let myself cry. I've accepted that it will be this way for a while, and it's okay as long as nobody knows how fragile I really am. After the purge, I drag myself from the door and force one foot in front of the other. My hollow reflection feels like someone else as I clean her face and retouch her makeup in the bathroom mirror. My breathing evens out with each stroke of the brush, and slowly, I piece myself back together again.

I fibbed when I said I had homework. The only thing on my agenda tonight is plotting the destruction of my enemies. The pool house is the perfect base camp for war strategy. It's far enough away from the main house to offer me privacy but close enough that I'm not alone. Theo agreed to have it converted into an apartment-style living quarters upon my return, and my mother redecorated the space with shades of gray and blue. Everything here is clean and brand new. The way I want to feel. And I wonder if somehow, my mom sensed that.

Collapsing onto the oversized lounge chair, I sink my head back against the cushion and stare up at the ceiling. My phone signals a text from Courtney, but I'll have to check it later. I only have a couple of hours before dinner, and I need to mentally prepare myself for all the ways Audrey, Landon, Carson, and their stans might come at me this year. Then I need to think of a way to hit back even harder.

Obsessed much? Maybe. But I've been boiling alive in my emotions for two years. This is my one shot at making things right, and I can't get complacent now.

I'm Om deep in my meditative state when the door to the pool house clicks shut, jarring me back to reality. My eyes fly open, only to collide with a steel

gray that will haunt me until the day I die.

Landon.

He's standing on the threshold of my personal space. Muscles rigid, spine straight. His body vibrates with irritation, and I feel it pulsing through my bones. My breath catches as I stagger to my feet, and to my horror, every muscle freezes, locking me in place. His cold, heartless gaze has incapacitated me. Those unforgettable eyes slice through me like a jagged razor blade, bleeding out emotions I swore I'd never feel again.

Dread. Rage. Warmth. Hate.

How does he always make me feel so helpless? Nerves are fraying the very threads of my being. Any second now, I might disintegrate. I drag in a deep, wary breath, and my eyes never leave his. I'm like a wounded animal, and he must see it. Surely, he must see it.

Slowly, I regain control of my body and force it into submission before I hiss a warning through my teeth.

"Get. Out."

"Jared fucking Price?" he growls. "Really, Kail?"

"It's Kailani to you." My eyes fling flaming darts of poison straight at his beautifully demonic face. "Or better yet, nothing. And what I do with my life is none of your business."

He prowls into the sitting area, and I nearly choke on my own oxygen. My heart is beating so loud I can hear it thrumming in my ears. I'm scrambling to wrap my fingers around the canister in my pocket. I carry it everywhere now.

"I told you to leave." I steel my voice, and a frisson of pride runs through me, considering I feel like I'm going to melt all over the floor any second now.

"Why did you come back?" He stalks toward me and stops just out of reach, crossing his arms. The maneuver should appear disarming, but he's never looked so dangerous to me.

"Why does it matter?" I glare at him, and I wish he weren't so beautiful. Monsters aren't supposed to be like this. They shouldn't have such melancholy eyes and perfect lines. They shouldn't make your face feel warm, and your belly flip every time they look at you, especially when you hate them more than

anything.

“Tell me.” He reaches down and drags his long, calloused fingers over the side table, purposely touching my books.

“You can’t always have what you want, Killian. This is real life.”

He cringes at the name, his broad shoulders visibly tensing under his black tee shirt. “Don’t call me that.”

“Everyone else does.”

“You aren’t everyone else.”

“No.” I shake my head. “I’m just yesterday’s garbage, right? Another casualty in a long line probably.”

Irritation flashes in his eyes, and my inner bitch is beating her chest victoriously. I want him to hurt. I want him to pay equally in humiliation and degradation. And most of all, pain. The pain I feel every time I have to look myself in the mirror.

“Do your lies ever taste bitter on your lips?” He closes in on me, stopping only when the heat of his body penetrates mine.

His hair is wet from a recent shower, and the clean, woody scent of his deodorant lingers between us. Back when I was trying and failing to suppress my obsessive fantasies about him, I used to rifle through his cabinet and touch his things. Aesop deodorant became one of my favorite highs, and admittedly, I’d use every opportunity to smear it onto my skin, imagining what it would feel like when his body moved against mine. Those masculine notes smelled like heaven before I came to hate him with every fiber of my being.

“If you even think about touching me, I will mace your ass.” I flash the canister in my palm, and the edge of his lip twitches. I can’t tell if he’s amused or frustrated. I can never tell with Landon because he’s like a stupid vault. He always felt like one of those nesting dolls. Every time I’d peel open a layer, expecting to find the heart of him, there was only ever another barrier to crack. But somehow, he always seemed to see me. I know when his eyes trail down my arm, he hasn’t missed the tremor there. He probably heard it in my voice too. I’m not as tough as I claim to be, but I’ll die on this hill before I ever admit it.

“So, do it.” He opens his arms, and I catch a glimpse of a deep, jagged scar

beneath his elbow. It wasn't there when I left two years ago. I know because I memorized every line on his body. I'm dying to ask how he got it, and more importantly, if it hurt.

I force my gaze back to his. "Do what?"

"Mace me. Then you can run to the media and tell them all what a big, bad wolf I am. That should make you feel better."

"Are you kidding me?" I slap a palm against his solid chest and shove him back, forcing some much-needed distance between us. "The only thing that will ever make me feel better is to see you pay for your sins. And you will, Landon. Mark my words. You will wish you never crossed me."

Heat flashes in his eyes, and it hits me in the gut like a lightning bolt. "Pay for my sins? Didn't I pay enough already, Kail?"

He takes a step forward, and I move back.

"W-what?" I stumble over the word as he takes another looming step. I'm running out of space to move.

"My only sin was believing for one second that you weren't another soul-sucking hypocrite just like the rest of them. But you know what? You are so much worse."

Heat blooms across my skin as his words pelt at my thin armor. The visceral rage I swore I'd hold onto is already evaporating in his presence. His resentment isn't even rational. Does he really believe he's innocent in all of this?

He drags a tremulous hand through his hair when he sees the tears clinging to the edges of my eyelids. I'm trying to hold them back. God, I'm trying. But I know it's too late. If I blink, they will fall.

"I don't even know who the hell you are," he says gruffly.

"I'm the monster you created." I throw my hate-fueled words back in his face. "How could you possibly forget?"

His eyes snap away in disgust, and he shakes his head. "What do you want, Kail? Name your price. Tell me how much it will cost to make you go away for good."

My mouth falls open, and I'm so stunned by his callous remark that I can't hide the hurt. The sting of his words is worse than a slap. I thought I could

handle this, but I can't. Not yet. I dig my nails into my palms so I can focus on the pain instead. He has no right to wound me anymore.

“Get. Out.”

He dips his head, his voice colder than I've ever heard it. “If you stay, I hope you know you'll be going to war.”

I'm on the edge of a cliff, dangling above a gulf full of sharks. I can see things clearly now. He's not the tortured, broken boy I met on his doorstep on a hot summer day. And I'm not the naïve girl who thought he actually liked me. We are two wounded animals with overgrown claws, just waiting for an excuse to rip each other's throats out.

“You started the war two years ago.” I fortify the cracks in my voice. “I just came back to finish it.”

For a split second, he looks almost human again. I want to believe there's even a hint of regret in his eyes before he turns away, calling out over his shoulder as he heads for the door.

“Bring everything you've got, Kail.”

LONDON

Jared fucking Price.

My eyes bore into his skull for the duration of the team meeting. Coach is going over the playbook, talking strategy for our first game of the season, but my head isn't in it. Football is serious shit at Black Mountain Academy. Most of these guys are vying for spots at top colleges while a chosen few might even be drafted into the pro leagues.

I'm here because football sounded like the thing you should do when you missed out on your entire childhood experience. But honestly, I don't know why the fuck I show up every day. Other than channeling my frustrations into blood and sweat, I don't see the benefit. My teammates either love the sport or they want the glory that comes with it, but for me, it's just background noise. A way to fill the empty space in my schedule. It keeps me busy so I don't have to think. Because when I think, bad shit happens.

A sharp pain radiates down to the plates and screws holding my elbow together. It's a good reminder of the bad shit. Kail accomplished what most people never have. She left me with permanent scars.

Technically, my doctor probably wouldn't approve of me playing football. But Coach doesn't say anything about it as long as I show up to practice and eat the pain. Pain in my bones. Pain in my chest. Pain whenever I look at Jared fucking Price. The problem with pain is it has a bad habit of morphing into rage. Every day this week, I've watched him scoop Kailani into his arms after practice like a victory trophy. He touches her. Kisses her. Whispers shit into her ear that

makes her smile. The testosterone overloading my system feels like a circuit breaker about to explode.

Coach rambles off more shit I don't catch, and then he tells us to do the walkthrough. Tomorrow's our first game against Glen Ridge. It's important. Well, it's important to these guys at least. I should probably give a shit about it too, but right now, I'm not thinking about the game.

The quarterback fakes a pass to Marcos and tosses the ball to Jared. He's on the outside, and I'm lateral, closing in as he cuts back inside. For the purposes of the walkthrough, we aren't wearing pads or helmets. It's a no-contact practice. That doesn't stop me from plowing into him anyway. The sound of the breath heaving from his lungs as he tumbles onto the turf makes me feel better, for all of two seconds.

"What the fuck, Blackwood?" he snarls up at me.

"Blackwood," Coach snaps. "What the hell are you doing?"

My eyes don't leave Jared's. "Tonight. Devil's Bluff. Eight o'clock."

A smirk plays across Jared's lips. "Hope you've got good insurance, bro."

"Blackwood!" Coach yells again.

I brush off my uniform and shrug. "Sorry, Coach."

He looks back and forth between the two of us. "You good, Price?"

"I'm good." Jared snaps back to his feet, wearing a smug expression on his face.

"Save the pissing contest for the urinals," Coach barks. "Now, let's get back to it."

DEVIL'S BLUFF IS A ONE SIZE FITS ALL STOMPING GROUND. WHEN THE RICH pricks at school can't host parties at their mansions, they resort to coming out here. The scholarship kids have been known to hang out here more frequently, along with the stoners and the misfits from other district schools. But if a guy wants to get his dick wet and not be seen, you're likely to find a few parked cars here during the week too.

The bluff overlooking the lake is halfway between Black Mountain and a few other nearby towns, so it's anyone's guess who's going to be there on any random night. Tonight, though, I can safely say I recognize most of the cars from BMA. It looks like half the football team showed up when they caught wind of it. Someone has already set up a keg, and the cheer squad is waiting along the sidelines, ready to sink their teeth into whoever wins.

Carson shifts in the passenger seat beside me, peering out the window with a locked jaw. "What the fuck are you trying to prove with this caveman bullshit?"

"Who said I'm trying to prove anything? Maybe I just want to blow off some steam."

My arm is fucking throbbing, so I pop a couple of painkillers even though they barely touch the ache anymore.

"You don't have a claim on her," Carson reminds me bitterly. "Do you think swinging your dick around with Price will fix anything?"

"It will make me feel better." I turn off the ignition and glare at him. "And this isn't about her."

"No?" His muscles coil with tension, and I don't understand why it bothers him so much. This is what we do. We punish ourselves and everyone else who gets in our way. It's the only thing we're good at.

"So, your beef with him has nothing to do with the fact that she came back a week ago, and he's been all over her every chance he gets?"

My jaw ticks. I'm not in the mood to listen to his shit. I don't know what the fuck crawled up his ass, but he's been more of a dick than usual this week, and I'm running out of patience as far as Carson is concerned.

"You can go or stay." I open the door and climb out of the car. "Your prerogative."

Just as I knew it would, Carson's door opens behind me. For reasons I can't fathom, he's still trying to act like we have some type of loyalty after he crossed me two years ago. His efforts are futile because we both know I'll never forgive him. Yet here he is, day after day, putting up with my shit. We're just two miserable assholes.

His footsteps echo behind mine as I head for the clearing where Price is

leaning up against his black Mercedes G-Wagon. He's a rich prick who's never had to work for anything in his life, and it shows. He has a reputation for doing whatever he wants, and it's never bothered me as much as it does now. He gives zero fucks about any of the girls at school, and that's why he and Kail will never make sense. Their relationship reeks of bullshit, and I want him to know I know it.

"Well, if it isn't America's favorite bloodsucker." He jerks his chin in my direction as I approach. "Shouldn't you be wearing a helmet? I wouldn't want to damage that pretty face."

The crowd falls quiet, slowly creeping closer to watch the show. Already, I can hear people recording. This shit's going to be all over the internet if I don't squash it now. The first person who sells me out to the media will make a killing. I can already see the headlines. *Child actor turned bad boy. Hollywood golden boy on a path of destruction. Where did Landon Blackwood go so wrong?*

I should give a fuck about that, probably, but I can't find it in me to care right now.

"I got ten G's on Price," someone calls out behind me.

"Twenty on Blackwood."

The bets continue as we square off, our eyes locked in a familiar male posturing ritual. Jared's still smirking as though it's all so amusing as we both remove our shirts. Everyone knows how this goes down. We didn't come here to talk about our fucking feelings. People want to see a fight, and they will.

"Why don't you throw the first punch?" Price extends his arms theatrically. "It might make you feel better about being such a bitch."

"Fuck you," I spit.

He tosses out a half-assed left hook, narrowly clipping my jaw. He doesn't have time to blink before I return an uppercut so solid it nearly knocks him on his ass. His jaw snaps up, but he recovers quickly, coming at me harder. Now the real fight begins.

We move in circles, swinging left, right, and dead center. In the thick of it, I couldn't tell you who was winning or losing. All I know is it feels good to

pummel his face like a punching bag, and Price gives it back just as good as he gets. The pain floods my body with warmth, and the blood dripping down my face reminds me I'm human. Somewhere inside, I still have a heart. And right now, it's pumping crimson through my veins into the crevices of my split skin.

I can't focus on all that red because the irony is if I look at it too long, it will probably take me down faster than Jared ever will. I've always had a tendency to get a bit woozy around it. But if I take short, shallow breaths and focus on the soothing feeling of my fist on his bones, I can manage.

Jared takes my rage like he does this every night, never wavering for even a second, but it only serves to piss me off more. He seems like he's getting high on it too. Punch, punch, thrust. We fight until we are both so bloody you can't distinguish between the two of us. We're exhausted, chests heaving, but neither of us will back down. I'd keep going forever, but Carson and a few of the other footballers eventually intervene, calling it a draw as they force us away from each other.

The low murmurs of confusion over who won ripple through the crowd, but Jared and I are still locked in a battle of wills, even as they drag us apart.

"She hates you." He grins through bloody teeth. "She's always going to hate you."

I lunge for him, breaking free from the arms around me long enough to land one final blow. Knocking him out cold.

KAILANI

Somehow, I've managed to survive the first week with only a handful of private meltdowns. I consider that a victory, but I still can't shake this eerie feeling that it's almost been too easy. Audrey is way too quiet for my liking, which means she's definitely scheming, and Landon has been dutifully ignoring me since our spat in the pool house.

"That's good, right?"

I blink at Courtney, my cheeks heating when I realize I must have said that out loud.

"You want him to leave you alone." She grabs her foot behind her butt, stretching out her hamstring. "He's a total dirtbag."

"Yeah," I choke out my agreement. "He is."

Honestly, I wish I could be as certain as Courtney sounds. But the worst part about not remembering what happened is that I still question my own sanity, even after all this time. Most days, I'm mad as hell. This grudge I bear has kept me warm, but there are still moments when the doubts creep back in. *What really happened?*

It's a rabbit hole I can't venture down. The only thing I know for certain is the bone-deep truth that doesn't waver. What happened at that party isn't me. No matter how much alcohol I had, it doesn't make sense. I've been trying to play it off as though it isn't a big deal. Like losing your virginity to two guys could totally happen to anyone. But it still feels like a big deal to me.

"Stop picking yourself apart." Courtney drags me away from the mirror in

the locker room. “You look great.”

“Really?” I smooth my hands over the red and black sequined dance dress. I haven’t been able to shake my nerves all day. It’s the first game of the season, and I feel like I’m going to throw up.

“You need to stop worrying about what they think.” She bounces up onto the toes of her clean white shoes, warming her body in preparation.

“It’s not about them,” I insist.

But it is. It’s always about them. Because they make me feel small. Insignificant. I’m just the collateral damage from their fun and games. They want to see me crumple and fall. This is their domain, and as far as they’re concerned, I’ll never be worthy of breathing the same air.

“Twenty minutes until showtime.” Coach Lopez pops her head into the girls’ locker room. “You ready to do one last run-through?”

Courtney offers me an encouraging smile as I nod. “Let’s do it.”

We follow Coach out to the empty gym. Outside, the crowd is going wild for BMA. They are winning just as expected. Everyone is so pumped this halftime routine should be a cakewalk. But high school football isn’t just entertainment in Black Mountain. It’s a religion. Or cult, if I’m more accurate. You’re either dedicated to the cause, or you’re against it. When I walk out onto that field tonight, I’ll be breaking the status quo. Everyone expects to see a legacy’s daughter. They’ll anticipate the same old routines they could set their clocks by. Instead, we’re going to shake things up with a mashup of samba, belly dance, and jazz. It’s a big gamble. An unconventional aesthetic in the production line of their carefully curated lives.

“Alright, ladies.” Coach Lopez tucks her clipboard against her side and scans our uniforms, checking for consistency. “One last rundown. Let’s make it count.”

Leading the charge, I break down the moves we’ve practiced all week while the rest of the team follows along fluidly. For a few blissful moments, we are united. A strong, synchronized machine. But the devious smirk on Audrey’s face as we prep is eating at me. She’s up to something. I just don’t know what it is.

There isn’t time to think about it. A few minutes later, Coach is leading us

onto the dead center of the field under the glare of the lights and bleachers packed with fans. The energy in the air is potent as the announcer introduces the Cougarettes dance team. That same energy is vibrating through my veins as I repeat the mantra in my head.

I've got this.

Nothing can take this moment away. Across the field, I catch Landon staring at me. His uniform stained with grass, eyes colder than ever as his helmet dangles from his fingers. I suck in a breath when I notice the purple and blue bruises on his face. Five feet away, Jared is covered in bruises too. I'm trying to unpack the reason for it when Jared glances at Landon, and then swings his gaze back to me, blowing me an overexaggerated kiss. I force my face into a smile as the microphone crackles to life, and the announcer informs the crowd the Cougarettes will be performing a Black Mountain classic.

Coach looks at me, and Audrey doesn't bother to hide her snickering beside me. She did this. Of course, she did. She wants to force me into a routine I haven't even practiced, yet they all know by heart.

"What do we do?" Megan, the girl on my right, whispers.

"We're sticking with our routine." I meet Audrey's gaze. "They'll figure it out soon enough."

She smiles up at the crowd, and the music starts to play. It's all wrong. It isn't just the routine they flipped. It's the song too. The beat is off, and it becomes painfully obvious as we begin to dance with grimaces on our faces. Within seconds, our unity begins to crack and shatter like shards of glass. Two of the girls collide mid-turn, while another one screeches when Megan steps on her foot. We look like a bunch of drunken toddlers under my direction, and it's all I can do to hold on through the performance.

"Just keep going," I grit out as Misty bumps into me.

The rest of the team is as humiliated as I am. But I can bet it won't be Audrey who takes the rap for it. The crowd is dead silent, watching us fumble through the moves as if we haven't practiced all week. When the song finally comes to an end, there's nothing but static. Tears prick my eyes as the girls behind me start to hiss under their breath.

“What a hot mess!”

“Can you believe this shit?”

“Uh, please give it up for the Cougarettes!” the announcer urges over the mic.

There are a few slow claps, but all I can feel is the heat of everyone’s attention on me. It was my job to lead. I should have accounted for this. I should have double-checked everything myself.

I’m already on the verge of a very public meltdown when the mascot bounds across the field, dancing in the wake of our grand failure. He’s throwing up his arms, trying to rev up the crowd and get them pumped again. And then he weaves through the dancers, winding his way toward me. He squeezes me in his arms and picks me up, much to my dismay.

“Demon slut,” he hisses into my ear.

In slow motion horror, I watch as he produces a hefty balloon from his pocket and squashes it on top of my head, splattering my hair and face with red paint. The girls around me burst into a fit of laughter as I try to wipe it from my eyes, choking back a silent howl when I realize I can’t. There’s too much. Beside me, Courtney is practically hissing at them as she drags me from the field.

“It’s okay,” she says. “I’ve got you.”

Someone calls out my name, and in my shock, I could almost swear it sounds like Landon. But I don’t look back. I don’t stop for anything. I just let Courtney lead me away, a fresh wave of tears carving rivers through the red paint before they splatter onto my uniform. Courtney keeps telling me it will be okay, but even she doesn’t sound like she believes that.

BY THE TIME I LEAVE THE STAFF SHOWER, THE GAME OUTSIDE HAS ENDED. MY skin is red and blotchy from scrubbing, and I still don’t feel clean. I just want to go home and hide. I throw on my leggings and a tank top in a daze and tie my hair back into a messy bun. I don’t have the energy to deal with makeup, so I

give up and walk out with my chin held high. The floor beneath me feels tenuous at best, but I have to preserve my fragile ego.

Never let them see you hurt.

“Kailani.” Coach approaches me carefully with Courtney trailing beside her. “You doing okay?”

“I’m fine.”

It sounds weak to my own ears, but neither one of them calls me on it.

“I’ve spoken with the announcer,” she says. “He doesn’t know what happened with the program. We’re looking into it.”

I nod, but I already know what this means. They can’t prove who messed with it. That’s the way this goes. People like Audrey always get away with their dirty deeds.

Coach stuffs her hands into her jacket pockets and rocks back on her heels. “As far as the mascot goes, we’re trying to track down who was really in the costume tonight.”

“What do you mean?”

“It wasn’t Daniel,” she explains. “Someone tied him up in the boy’s locker room and stole the costume.”

“And he didn’t see who it was?” I ask incredulously.

“According to him, they were wearing masks,” Coach says.

It’s all a bunch of bullshit. The truth is, even if Daniel knows who did it, he won’t talk. Why should I expect anything else at this point?

“Okay, well, I’m gonna go home.” I shrug my heavy shoulders. “I’m tired.”

Coach Lopez reaches out to give my arm a gentle squeeze. “I’m not giving up. These things just take time.”

“I know.” I offer her a neutral smile. It isn’t her fault, and she’s one of the rare few teachers at BMA I trust not to look the other way. It’s a tedious system, and she looks as exhausted as I feel.

Her phone rings, and she holds up a finger when she answers, brows pinching together as she listens to the voice on the other line. Her eyes flash with surprise before they move to me, and she nods while murmuring a quiet affirmative and disconnecting the call.

“That was Principal Dawson.” Disbelief tinges her voice. “He found the culprit tied to an office chair in the staff parking lot. He was still wearing the costume, and his hand was covered in red paint. It looks like someone roughed him up a bit, but it doesn’t sound like he’s talking much.”

“Who is it?” I ask nervously.

“A student from Maple Grove.” Coach tucks her phone back in her pocket and shakes her head. “Mr. Dawson thinks it was meant to be some sort of a prank.”

“Do you know his name?” Courtney asks the same thing I’m wondering.

“Gavin.” Coach shrugs. “That’s all Mr. Dawson could get out of him.”

Court and I look at each other and nod. Audrey was definitely behind this, but I doubt I’ll ever be able to prove it.

“Am I missing something here?” Coach Lopez asks.

“No.” I school my features and hope she doesn’t grill me on this. I have to play my cards carefully.

“Okay.” She sighs. “Well, try to have a good night, ladies.”

Court and I walk out to the parking lot. I’m quietly scanning for more threats while she studies me.

“Why didn’t you tell her it was probably Audrey?” she asks.

“Because we both know Gavin will never admit it has anything to do with her.” I reach into my pocket and curl my fingers around the canister of Mace to give me some semblance of control.

Court pauses when we reach the red Audi TTS Theo and my mom gifted me on my return from Hawaii. Across the lot, some of the football players are congregating around their vehicles. Landon’s leaning against his pretty teal blue Porsche that reminds me of the ocean. He’s not talking to anyone else. He’s just standing there, arms crossed, eyes on me. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he was waiting for me out here.

“Whoa,” Court whispers. “He looks pissed.”

“Yeah.” I swallow.

“What’s his deal?”

“Who knows.” I fumble with my key fob.

“Sometimes, I think all that big dick energy goes to his head.”

I blink at her and laugh. “Big dick energy?”

She shrugs. “You have to admit he has it. That effortlessly cool vibe everyone worships. They all follow him around panting at his feet. I think secretly his ego is the size of a monster truck—”

“But he isn’t really like that,” I answer, a little too defensively, which makes no sense whatsoever.

I hate Landon Blackwood. Don’t get me wrong. But I also know he’s not full of himself. He definitely could be because he’s ridiculously hot in that broody, dark warlord sort of way. Girls hang on their every breath waiting for him to look at them or speak to them. But I never got the impression that he thought he was better than anyone else. If anything, he comes off as more antisocial and a little shy. It took him weeks to warm up to me, and even then, I was lucky to get one-word responses out of him.

“I’m confused.” Court cocks her head to the side. “I thought we hated him.”

“We do,” I assure her. “We definitely do. I just... I think he’s more complicated than everyone assumes.”

“Rightttt.” She injects as much sarcasm as she can into her response. “If you say so.”

I unlock the doors and toss my bag on the passenger seat.

“Who do you think roughed Gavin up and tied him to the chair?” Court wonders aloud.

“Probably Jared.”

He might be a fake boyfriend, but I get the sense he feels protective over me in a big brother sort of way.

“Yeah, I guess.” She unwraps a piece of gum and pops it into her mouth. “You want to get some ice cream? Or we can watch a movie if you want. I promise I won’t bitch about the plot the entire time.”

I wish I could just tell her yes. Like things were simple, the way they used to be. Court and I were practically nonexistent then, and none of this shit mattered. We’d go to the bookstore and drink hot chocolate and talk about real things. But now all my energy is sucking me into a black hole of revenge. It’s exhausting

and relentless, and after tonight, I'm more determined than ever to make them all pay.

“Rain check?” I offer her a weak smile. “I'm really wiped.”

“Okay.” She shrugs and pulls her keys from her pocket. “Just promise me you aren't going to let this bother you all weekend.”

“Promise.” I nudge her pinky with mine.

I guess I'm a liar now.

LANDON

The thumping subs at my place vibrate across the lawn, rattling the windows of Kail's pool house like an earthquake. Piercing screams of drunken girls split my ears open and make them bleed. The after-party is in full swing, and everyone is already well past lit. I'll have to pay the cleaning crew double tomorrow morning.

Audrey's been blowing up my phone, demanding to know where I am. I read all her messages and ignore them because that pisses her off more than anything. Carson's been asking where I'm at too, and I don't know why he even cares.

I feel a hundred years old.

High school was supposed to be my chance at the life I never had. For some reason, I thought it would be more interesting than this. I wanted to know what normalcy felt like, but the constant loop of teenage problems at BMA has plunged me into ice-cold clarity. I grew up a long fucking time ago.

The parties, the pills, the booze. More noise. It's what's expected of me. And sometimes I wonder if coming back to Black Mountain was the dumbest thing I could have done. Even here, I can't escape the expectations. The teachers pressuring me to apply for colleges. My teammates wondering why I don't try harder to go pro. *Am I going back to acting? What's next? But surely you have a plan?*

The truth is, I can't find a single fuck to give about any of it. I've been working since I was four years old, and I'm fucking exhausted. I don't know what I want to do with my life, but it isn't this. The constant chatter, keeping up

with the rich prick beside you. This treadmill might satiate these assholes, but it sure as hell isn't going to be my life forever. In a matter of hours, my face will be splashed across another online tabloid, courtesy of one of my so-called friends. Someone at the party will swear they have the latest juicy gossip, and it won't matter if it's true or not. Not to them.

I suppose that's how I ended up here again, back in her pool house. Touching her things. Smelling her clothes. Remembering the way she tried to hold back her emotions tonight in front of everyone after she'd been humiliated. Admittedly, I wanted a front-row seat for that show. Kail might be a liar and a fake, but her tears were real. Gavin's were too when I pounded the hell out of his face.

I'm not going to analyze the reasons I did it. I just know when I found him lurking behind the school, trying to peel himself out of the costume, it had to be done. It wasn't for Kail. It was because I felt like it.

I flop onto her bed and focus on the ceiling she stares at every night before she goes to sleep. Her sheets smell like her too. The fading notes of Skylar Salt Air haunt me. *Sea and sky*. That's what her name means. It should come as no surprise that she's a walking olfactory wet dream too. *Why did she have to turn out to be another fucking liar?*

My phone chimes again. It's Audrey.

Psycho Parasite: WTF KILLIAN????????!!!!!!!

I reply with six middle finger emojis and toss the phone aside, closing my eyes as I bathe in my enemy's scent. I guess it's true what they say about forbidden fruit. Kailani is the sweetest poison. I'll never taste her again. Not after she pieced together her own narrative after waking up at that party. She had to go and make me the villain. But I suppose we all have our own narratives of what happened that night. Mine is one of betrayal, and Carson's is one of drunken stupidity.

Kail can spin her web of lies as long as she wants. If hating me gets her off, let her have it. My hate for her keeps me warm at night. It keeps my dick hard,

and my thoughts loud. So loud, sometimes the only thing to do is give in.

I tug down the zipper of my jeans and drag my cock out. There isn't anything to pass for lube within reach, so I wrap her sheet around my flesh, using it as a silky sleeve. Fuck, that's soft. But Kail would be softer. Warmer. My head sinks into her pillow as I recall the way her tits threatened to spill over the edges of that dance uniform tonight. That shit should be prohibited around a bunch of hormonal fucks like me.

By the time I got back to the locker room, someone had already scribbled an ode to Kail's tits on the wall. Someone who clearly didn't know there would be a price on their head if I got wind of their name. I blacked out the message with a Sharpie and replaced it with a note to the artist to get fucked.

I wonder if Jared fucking Price touches her tits.

My fist jerks harder, faster, but my frustration is stalling out the orgasm. I need something... more. My eyes dart to her nightstand. There, staring back at me, are her pristine white knee socks. Hell yes.

I wrap the end around my dick and go after it with reckless abandon. *Fuck you, Kailani.* I repeat that sentiment until I blow my load deep into her sock and release a haggard breath. I feel lighter and somewhat vindicated as I squish my come between the fabric and throw it back onto her nightstand where she left it.

I'm zipping up my jeans when the knob on the door turns, and the hinges creak. It's dark in here, but she doesn't bother turning on the light. She isn't looking for the monster inside. She doesn't know I can see the outline of her body in the moonlight as she collapses against the door. Her head tips back, knees nearly buckling as agony rips out of her lungs like a wounded animal. Tears drip down her face, staining her pretty cheeks.

There's an intimacy in witnessing something so raw. I'm so used to scripted emotion that I can't remember the last time I observed pain this real. She's got me under a spell, held captive by her devastation. Strangely, I can feel it too. This is what tethers us together, destroying us from the inside out. We're tied up in knots, and the worst part is neither of us will sever the connection.

Kail shatters before me, and I don't say a word. I don't even take a breath as she sags into herself, letting it all out. What a fucking mess. What a pretty

fucking mess. Even I can't deny there's beauty in her pain. Insecurity is the only true authenticity. She can flash her bulletproof armor all she wants, but she can't repair the hairline fracture. Once it breaks, she'll still be the same fragile girl inside.

"Pull yourself together, Kail." She wipes her eyes and draws in a deep breath. "It's over. Tomorrow's a new day."

"I thought you didn't care what anyone thought of you."

My voice startles a gasp from her lips, and when she opens her eyes, I'm already closing in on her. Horror washes over her face as it occurs to her I witnessed her entire breakdown, and for a moment, she just stands there, wordless.

"What the hell are you doing?" Her voice cracks as I cage her in with my arms. Her back hits the wall, and she forces her chin up, trying to look braver than she feels right now. I'm itching to touch her even as she murders me with her eyes.

"I don't know, Kail." I breathe her in. "What will you tell them I did this time?"

She flinches like I just sucker punched her, and I suppose it felt that way. But the truth fucking hurts.

"Don't you have anything better to do?" She curls her hands around my biceps and tries to wriggle her way out of the prison of my body.

"Not really." My breath fans across her lips. "I was enjoying the quiet here. At least I was until you came along."

She shivers, and I'd give anything to know what she's really thinking when she glares up at me. "News flash, you're the idiot who lets them throw parties at your house. That sounds like a you problem. Now, let me go before I knee you in the balls."

"Is that what you call foreplay?" I tease.

The fire in her eyes is like a shock paddle to my dick. All my blood is heading south, and logically, I know this can only end in disaster. But fuck, I have to touch her.

"One kiss and I'll go."

“Are you crazy?” She blinks up at me, her face all red and swollen and wrecked. Pretty. Little. Mess.

“We both know I’m not the monster you act like I am.” My fingers graze her chin, and this time, goose bumps break out along her arms. “If you were really afraid of me, you would have locked your door.”

Her eyes dart around me, nervously, searching for a way out of facing the truth. When she doesn’t find the answer she wants, she blurts out an empty threat.

“I’ll tell everyone you needed a tutor.”

My rough thumb skates down her jaw to the beating pulse in her neck. “What’s the matter? Terrified you might like this?”

“I don’t,” she hisses, but she really is a terrible storyteller. “And I mean it. I’ll humiliate you in front of the whole school. I’ll tell them how behind you were—”

“Go ahead. Tell them whatever you want. That’s your thing, isn’t it?”

Her lips fall apart, and her shoulders deflate. Her defense sucks, and if this is the best she’s got, she better buckle up for a rocky ride this year.

“I’ll tell the media!” She heaves the words out venomously.

My grip on her tightens reflexively as I force her to look me in the eyes. “Liar.”

Her nails dig into my biceps, and everything else blurs as our eyes remain locked. Neither one of us wants to be the first to tap out. I might harbor some serious hate for this girl, but fuck, it’s hot when we fight.

“Landon—”

Whatever protest she had is swallowed the second my lips crash into hers. I’m expecting a knee to the balls or a punch to the side of the head, but Kail just freezes and then lets out a strangled sound, which I promptly devour. She tastes like salty tears and cherry lip gloss. She tastes like freedom.

Her fingers curl into my shirt, and the little liar does the last thing I expect. Her lips start to move against mine, and she kisses me back, drowning out the looping monologue about how fucked up this is. My palm wraps around the base of her skull, and she sighs into me. Our sins are washed away in a dopamine

rush. We're desperate and thirsty and hurting for it. For a few seconds, I can't remember why she's my enemy. When my tongue slips into her mouth, and I drink her sweetness, she moans, and then abruptly crashes this one-way train as she shoves me away.

"Oh my god!" She stares up at me with wild eyes. "That did not just happen!"

"But it did." I smirk. "Wanna do it again?"

"No!" she screeches and ducks under my arm, slipping out of my grasp. "I hate you, remember?"

"Is that why you moaned when my tongue was in your mouth? It was just that horrible?"

Her cheeks flush, and she tugs her hair free from her bun, attempting to hide it. "That was just me choking on my disgust. Shouldn't you be out devouring souls with your girlfriend anyway?"

"On that note, where is your *boyfriend*?" I wonder aloud. "Good old Jared. I thought for sure he'd be here to comfort you after tonight. I wonder what he'll think when I tell him about our little reunion. Should I embellish a little? I know you're fond of embellishments."

"Jealousy does not look good on you." She combs her fingers through her hair and crosses her arms. She's way too calm about this, and I don't like it.

"I'm just saying, clearly you weren't thinking of him when you were pressed up against me."

"Can you just leave, please?" she snaps.

Her nipples are poking against the fabric of her tank top. I make a show of staring at them for a long few seconds before I drag my gaze back to her face.

"I'll leave, but you know this isn't going away."

"What does that mean?" Her eyes narrow.

"I'm inside you. Even when you're hating me, that means you're thinking of me."

"Oh, please." She rolls her eyes. "You wish I thought of you."

"Enjoy fingering yourself tonight while you remember that kiss." I grab the doorknob and turn it. "Oh, and by the way, I jerked off in your bed."

KAILANI

When I came back to Black Mountain, intent on destruction, I didn't expect it would be easy. But I'm beginning to realize I may have underestimated the power of my enemy. There's one fatal flaw in my plan, and it's Landon Blackwood. In the scenario that played out in my head, it was me distracting him on the field after school. Every time he glanced over and saw me thriving on the dance team, I wanted him to remember that night at his house. I wanted him to suffer.

I never accounted for how much that visual reminder would affect me too. Landon isn't just dominating the field at Black Mountain. He's dominating my thoughts too. Everything he does looks so damn easy; it's as if he's not even trying. He's one of those freakish people who is effortlessly good at almost everything they do, and the worst part is, he doesn't even care. I really don't think he cares about anything. But why should he? He doesn't have to try. His face is his free pass to life. Everyone knows who he is before he even says a word. A hush comes over any room he enters, and people ooh and aah like they're in the presence of true greatness. Guys want to be him, and girls go stupid whenever he even glances their way. I should know because I used to be one of them.

I told myself he'd never get past my armor again. But now I'm the girl he kisses in secret. A kiss I haven't been able to stop thinking about since he branded me with his stupidly beautiful lips. I can't even articulate how many times I've watched that spy cam video of him in the pool house, jacking himself

off in my bed. The play-by-play is hard written into my brain, and for some demented reason I can't identify, I still haven't thrown away the sock on my nightstand. There's something wrong with me. It's undeniable now. Any normal person wouldn't react this way.

When I went back to Hawaii, I thought I could untangle the endless loop of my thoughts and make sense of everything. For months, I explored these themes with a therapist. If I can't remember what happened that night, who's really responsible? I shouldn't have had that drink. I shouldn't have gone to the party. I should have, could have, and would have done so many things differently. It feels like my own mind has betrayed me. I'm so angry with Landon, but I blame myself too. I can't have it both ways. And the worst part is, even with so much lingering uncertainty, I confessed to my therapist that Landon still appeared in my dreams. Only they weren't nightmares. They were fantasies.

The therapist tried to tell me it was okay. She said my brain was trying to make sense of what happened. Subconsciously, I was trying to make a scary situation safe. But it never felt like that to me. It felt depraved and dirty. There was no way it was okay to think about my tormentor like that. Not anymore.

I quit therapy after that and tried to make sense of things myself. But in the end, I determined there was only one thing I could do. Come back here and destroy them all. Particularly, Landon Blackwood.

So, when the opportunity presents itself after practice on Monday afternoon, what do I do?

I freeze.

I never anticipated I'd round the corner of the locker room and stumble upon such a rare moment of vulnerability. His broad palm is slapped against the brick exterior, his football uniform clinging to his muscular frame as his head sags into his chest. It's like a secret nobody knows. Not even him. He's in too much pain to notice me even if he wanted to. Clutching his elbow as his stomach revolts, he's clearly fighting back the urge to vomit. He pinches the bridge of his nose and tilts his head back, eyes squeezed shut as he fights for control of his own body. It's raw, and it's unexpected. Why does he play football if he's in so much pain? And what caused those scars on the back of his arm?

My phone sticks to my palm as the rational side of my brain shouts at me to take a picture. This is what I've been waiting for. I could ruin him with one photo. I could send it to every media outlet in the country and, even worse, to all the rival football teams. But can I really do that? Is this who I've become?

I swallow the lump in my throat and try to justify why I can't do it. This wouldn't be a fair fight. And I will do Landon dirty. I will. But not like this.

"Pathetic, much?"

I whirl around to find Audrey watching me watch Landon, and my cheeks flame with heat. This is the last thing I need right now. Play it cool, Kail. Just play it cool. I breeze past her and try to flip my hair over my shoulder, but it whips me in the face. Real smooth.

"I was just making sure your boyfriend didn't keel over," I say. "Not that I care either way."

Her voice is dripping with venom when she replies. "Coach Lopez is looking for you. We're having an impromptu meeting."

I come to a halt, glancing at her over my shoulder with narrowed eyes. "What?"

Her lips curl into a devious grin as she points her perfectly manicured claw at the gym. "They're all waiting for you."

This is bad. Her barely restrained glee is evidence of that. But just in case she didn't successfully make the ground shake beneath me, she drives her point home with an embellished princess wave.

"Ready to kiss your crown goodbye? Hope you enjoyed it while it lasted."

I feel like my windpipe is caving in on itself as I walk to my inevitable doom. It's obvious what's happening here, and when I open the door to find the committee of alumni seated across from Coach Lopez, I'm not even surprised.

My vision sways a little as my pristine white shoes squeak across the gymnasium floor.

"Kailani." Coach nods at me, her face tight. "We're having an impromptu meeting with the committee. Can you join us?"

She gestures to the open seat next to her, and I take it. Audrey walks around the table and joins the woman in the middle, who can only be her mother. They

are exact replicas of each other.

“This is Mrs. Rothschild.” Coach gestures at Audrey’s mother, and then goes around the table, introducing the rest of the women. I don’t hear their names. My head feels like it’s underwater. I expected something like this, but I thought I’d have time to prepare before facing them. There should have been some warning.

“This is about what happened at the first game.” I venture a guess.

“That’s exactly right.” Mrs. Rothschild practically snarls at me. “We have standards at Black Mountain Academy. A legacy to uphold. Our traditions have been in place much longer than you’ve been around, and it isn’t up to you to change how things are done.”

“I understand those traditions have been around for a long time.” My fingernails dig into my thighs beneath the table. “Because it shows. The routines are stale. The Cougarettes can do better, given a chance.”

Her lips flatten into a thin line as she glares at Coach Lopez. “Are you going to do something about this?”

Coach Lopez sighs, and honestly, I wouldn’t blame her for throwing me under the bus at this point. This battle we started was my idea, and she is clearly exhausted from years of dealing with women like Mrs. Rothschild.

“I understand emotions are high right now,” Coach answers. “Traditions have always been important at Black Mountain Academy, and we have no intention of eliminating them completely. Our vision for this year was to incorporate the new with the old. There will still be ample opportunities to present traditional dance routines at the upcoming games, in addition to the new routines.”

“Oh yes, I can see how well that plan has worked so far.” Mrs. Rothschild stares down her nose at Coach, refusing to acknowledge I even exist at this point. “The mockery of the first game will be forever written in our history. Are we to expect our daughters to be the laughingstock of every game this season under your captain’s direction?”

“Maybe you should ask your daughter that,” I hiss. “Considering she was the one who thought it was a good idea to sabotage all of us for the sake of her pride.”

Coach holds up her hand as the vein in Mrs. Rothschild's Botoxed forehead pulses like she's about to implode. "Kail, let me handle this."

"You can handle it by getting rid of her!" Mrs. Rothschild slices her finger through the air like a machete.

"What happened at the first game is not an indication of Kailani's abilities as a captain," Coach replies in a steady, controlled voice. "She earned the position, and through no fault of her own, she was sabotaged and humiliated. While we have not identified the perpetrator yet, I can promise you when we do, they will be punished to the fullest extent allowed by the Academy's guidelines."

Her words sound like a thinly veiled threat, and Mrs. Rothschild doesn't miss it.

"Sabotaged," she scoffs. "Where is the proof? If you haven't caught said perpetrator, it's probably because there isn't one. This just sounds like a convenient excuse to me."

My fingers tremble when I meet Audrey's gaze. She knows what she did, but the indifference on her face right now only proves one thing. She'll never get caught, and even if she does, her mother will probably buy her way out of it. How can I possibly compete with that?

Coach Lopez shakes her head and stands. "Mrs. Rothschild, I think it's quite clear we won't be coming to an agreement today—"

"I want the routines changed back." Mrs. Rothschild slaps her hand against the table. "And the committee agrees that Audrey should take over as captain."

"It's not the committee's job to choose the dance captain," Coach responds tiredly. "It's mine."

"Are you sure you want to die on this hill?" Mrs. Rothschild arches a pale brow, looking every bit the villain in this scenario.

"Excuse me?" Coach cocks her head to the side.

"I'd give it some serious thought before you make your decision." Audrey's mother rises from her seat, and the rest of the committee members follow suit. "Ask yourself if it's worth losing your job. Because if you go to war with me, I can promise you won't win. I have unlimited resources, and all you have is your pathetic little dancer wannabe. Nobody will miss either of you when you're

gone.”

“That sounds like a threat.” Coach laughs hollowly. “Which means we’re done here. Come with me, Kailani.”

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, WE LEAVE THE PRINCIPAL’S OFFICE AFTER GIVING OUR statements that Mrs. Rothschild openly threatened us in front of an entire committee. Mr. Dawson didn’t look thrilled at the prospect of dealing with the situation, and Coach doesn’t seem confident in the outcome either. With Mr. D’s vague assurances he would look into it, all we can do is wait.

“I don’t want you to lose your job because of me,” I tell Coach once we’re in the hall.

She offers me a sad smile. “Kail, if I lose my job, it’s because of a corrupt institution, not you. And I don’t want you to worry about it, okay? Let’s just focus on what’s important. Championships, remember?”

“Right, championships.” My body feels like it’s weighed down by cinder blocks. That’s so far away, and there will be so many battles before we can get there.

Coach hugs me, and we part ways. The school is empty and quiet and oddly peaceful as I head for the parking lot. I’m expecting my red Audi to be the lone car in the student section, but instinct has me reaching for the Mace in my pocket when I see the guy leaning against it.

“Get the hell away from my car,” I demand. “And if you try to come near me, I will mace you.”

Carson sways a little to the left as he drags his body away from my car. Clearly, he’s drunk. His eyes are glossy, and he looks like a wreck. This is not the same quiet, unassuming guy I first met here.

“I’m not coming near you.” He holds up his hands and slowly steps away from the car, but not far enough that I’d even consider approaching.

I don’t know why he makes me more nervous than Landon. Probably because I don’t really know him. Before that night, we’d barely had a mumbled

greeting. He's a stranger to me, yet he's not. Because he knows things I don't about that night, and now, I can never admit how uncomfortable that makes me.

"I know you just came back here to destroy him," he slurs. "And he's falling for it, isn't he? He can't stay away from you."

"Go home, Carson." I squeeze the key fob in my palm, wishing he would just leave already.

"I want to tell you something about that night." He stumbles back a step, struggling to find his balance. "It's important. Really... very important."

"You and I have nothing to discuss." I edge my way to the car.

Sensing my nerves, he backs away, but his eyes are pleading.

"Just listen to me," he implores, and for a second, he looks so miserable I almost consider it. But I can't. I can't let either of them get under my skin. If he's miserable, it's because he deserves it.

"Tell it to your therapist." I get into my car and don't look back.

KAILANI

“**A**re you doing okay, honey?” my mom asks as I shove my salad around the plate with a fork.
“I’m fine.” I shrug.

The lies seem to pour from my lips easier every day. But deep down, I feel like I can’t taint my mother’s good heart with the true depravity in mine. When she moved us to the mainland to live with Theo, she genuinely wanted a better life for me. Even though my father died when I was just a toddler, I had a happy and fulfilling childhood. We loved our lives in Hawaii. But my mother always struggled to support me on her own, and her job took her away from me often. Regardless, she always managed to make me the center of her world. As far as I was concerned, she was practically a nun. Of course, men were interested in her, but she never seemed to worry about any of that.

When she met Theo, she was performing at a lū’au for a corporate retreat. He was instantly smitten with her, and admittedly, it knocked me off balance to see them falling for each other so quickly. I still remember the day my mom came home, beaming brighter than I’d ever seen her. She told me he was the one, and I couldn’t deny her this happiness. But the happiness came with a price. We uprooted the only life we’d ever known to move here. She insisted I would have a better education at a private school, and Theo offered to pay for it. It was a lovely fantasy.

The truth is, she wanted to give me what she never had. Her family couldn’t afford to send her to a private school, so the cutthroat reality of the uber-rich

spawn at BMA isn't something she could even comprehend. In her mind, girls my age are probably still making friendship bracelets and braiding each other's hair. I think it would break her spirit if she ever found out the truth. That's why I haven't told her why I really left. If she knew I carried such a dark grudge in my heart, I could only imagine how ashamed she would be.

"I don't think you're eating enough." She nods to my plate, interrupting the endless stream of chatter in my mind. "Are you feeling off? Should I make you a doctor's appointment?"

"It's fine," I assure her. "I'm just not that hungry."

"Maybe you should listen to your mother," Theo chimes in. "A doctor's appointment couldn't hurt, just to make sure everything is alright."

I shoot daggers at him with my eyes, which he doesn't really deserve, but I don't need them teaming up against me. They don't understand what's at stake here.

"I'm dancing a lot more," I tell them. "I'm just tired."

"All the more reason to eat your dinner." My mom wiggles the breadbasket at me. "You need the energy for your performances."

A knock on the front door interrupts the conversation. I'm grateful for the reprieve until my mom jumps up with a huge smile on her face. "Oh, look. Landon's here."

"What?"

She doesn't hear me. She's already out of her seat and halfway to the foyer, where he's apparently let himself in.

"What the hell is he doing here?" I choke out.

Theo gives me a strange look. "He eats dinner with us sometimes. Although, I suppose it has been a while. We haven't seen him since you've been back. Aren't you two friends?"

Whatever answer I may have had slides back down my throat like toxic sludge. Landon saunters into the dining room and meets my gaze with a taunting smirk as he takes the empty seat beside me.

"Kail." He greets me with a nod before turning his charming gaze on my mom. "Sorry I'm late."

“I was starting to get worried about you,” she tells him. “We haven’t seen you in so long. I’ve stopped by a few times, but you weren’t home.”

“Football season.” He shrugs and reaches out to grab two bread rolls from the basket.

My eyes bounce among them as Theo asks him how the season is going so far. I’m still trying to figure out what alternate universe I’ve stepped into when my mom looks at me encouragingly.

“Kailani, you remember Landon, right?”

“How could I ever forget,” I murmur into a bread roll.

Beneath the table, his foot bumps mine, and I send him a withering glare. Since when does he come over to have dinner with my family? Why isn’t he at his own house, annoying the poor woman who birthed him?

“Here.” My mom dishes up a giant heap of salad and two pieces of chicken onto a plate. “Eat as much as you want. I made plenty.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Grant.” He takes a bite from the bread roll, and my blood pressure boils.

“It’s Hale-Grant,” I correct him. “She was married to my father first.”

“Kailani.” My mom’s eyes widen, and an uncomfortable look passes over Theo’s face. All their attention shifts to me as though I’m the sour grape in the room.

“Well, it’s true.” I shove my plate away and bunch the napkin up between my fingers. “But I guess you forget a lot of things. It looks like you weren’t missing me too much while I was gone after all.”

Both Theo and my mother stare at me in shock. I’ve never spoken to either of them this way before, but I can’t help it. I feel like I was blindsided and then flayed open with a bayonet. My guts are still lying all over the dinner table, and nobody else has even had the decency to notice. They’ve been having dinner with my enemy the whole time I’ve been gone, and my mom never thought to mention that to me?

“I can leave if it’s a problem,” Landon offers half-heartedly between chews. Beneath the table, his thumb skates up my bare thigh, and I nearly jump out of my seat.

“Of course, it’s not a problem.” My mom stares at me as though she’s waiting for the demon who possessed me to exit my body. “Kailani is clearly having a bad day. And I’m sure she’d love to apologize for her outburst.”

“Actually, what I’d really love to do is leave.” I stand and grab my plate. “Can I be excused, please?”

She looks heartbroken, and I hate that I’m hurting her, but I just can’t deal with this right now.

“I’d really like it if—”

“Courtney’s going to be here any second. She’s bringing a ton of junk food for movie night. I promise I’ll eat some of that.”

Her shoulders fall, but she caves in with a dip of her head. This conversation is far from over, but my mom doesn’t air our dirty laundry in front of company.

“Alright, then. You girls have fun tonight. If you need anything, we’ll be in here watching *The Bachelor*.”

FIVE HOURS LATER, COURTNEY IS GIVING ME THE SIDE-EYE AS WE HOVER around the entrance of Alistor Barrington’s mansion. I don’t know much about him, except he’s friends with a few BMA guys, and his house is a near-constant party scene.

This was a really dumb idea. I know that’s what Court is thinking. I’m thinking it too, but I’ll never admit it out loud. After the shitshow that was dinner tonight, I’m determined to make some waves. If Landon can’t respect my own house as a safe zone, then I won’t respect the unwritten rules about who’s invited to these stupid parties. While I’ve been busy wavering in my morality, Landon and Audrey continue to find new ways to torture me. If I want to get real dirt on any of them, this is the place to do it. The party has already been in full swing for a few hours. If we’re lucky, they’ll all be too intoxicated to pay any attention to us.

“Are you sure about this?” Court asks.

“Yeah, I think so.” My eyes nearly vibrate out of their sockets.

“Um, are we just going to stand here all night then?”

“No, of course not.” I check my phone again. Jared still hasn’t responded to my messages, and we had a plan for tonight. But I can’t chicken out now. We’re here, and I’m just hoping once we’re inside, Jared will follow through like he promised.

“You know I’m only doing this for you,” Courtney groans as we approach the door. “One hour, right?”

“Yes, just one hour.” My entire body feels like it’s gone into rigor mortis as we step onto the landing.

“Do we knock or ring the doorbell?” She yells the question over the loud ass music filtering through the open windows. “My party etiquette is as dead as my soul.”

“Let’s just go in,” I suggest with more courage than I actually feel.

Court opens the door, and two drunken guys nearly trample right over us as they stumble out. I’m half expecting one of them to yell that we don’t belong here, but they are so out of it they don’t pay us any mind as we step inside.

Like most of the houses in Black Mountain, Alistor’s is huge and impressive. Right now, it’s stuffed wall to wall with so many people it’s a literal fire hazard. The place is chaos. People are dancing, drinking, fighting, and nearly getting it on everywhere I look. It reminds me of the party at Landon’s. Bitterness coats my tongue as my hands lock into fists at my sides.

“Where to?” Courtney’s eyes bounce around the room in horror. She already looks like she wants to vomit. She really doesn’t people very well.

“Um…” I scan the crowd for Jared. It’s so loud in here I can’t think. “I don’t see him. Maybe we should check out back.”

Court follows my lead as I wind through the throng of bodies, heading for the French doors that lead to the backyard pool. Anyone who’s someone in Black Mountain has a pool. It’s a popular hangout during parties where girls can use the excuse to flaunt their designer bikinis while all the guys drool over them.

Once we’re outside, I drag in a breath of fresh air and relax a little when I see the back patio is full of people too. Jared has to be here somewhere.

“Uh, Kail.” Court tugs on my sleeve, and when I follow her gaze, irritation

bubbles up my throat.

“Ouch.” Someone whispers in my ear from behind me, his fingers grazing my elbow. “I bet that hurts the ego a little.”

“Go away, Landon.”

I can’t face him. Not when my fake boyfriend is humiliating me in front of everyone by cheating on me with another girl. I recognize her as one of the cheerleaders at BMA. She’s tall and thin and gorgeous, and there’s no way he could have mistaken her for his quarterback boyfriend from Maple Grove. I’m confused and stunned, unable to look away as he writhes all over the girl in the pool, practically sucking her face off. My cover is officially blown.

“Why would I leave?” Landon chuckles darkly. “The entertainment just arrived. Maybe I should get the popcorn.”

“Maybe you should go jump in the deep end and see how long you can hold your breath.” I glance over my shoulder and smile sweetly.

“Funny.” He crosses his arms, cocking his head to the side as he studies me. “Is someone a little pissy that their boyfriend has his tongue down another girl’s throat?”

“It wasn’t a joke.”

In a moment of extraordinary bravery, I grab his arm and thrust him forward, and he loses his balance, stumbling straight into the pool with all his clothes on. His fall splashes me and everyone else nearby, but it’s totally worth it to see the infuriating smirk disappear from his face when he comes up for air.

“More foreplay, Kail?” He swipes the water from his hair and peels off his wet shirt, tossing it onto the pavement. “I know you live for these moments when my attention is on you, but you don’t have to go to such extremes.”

I know I shouldn’t look. God, I don’t want to look. But his abs are right there, and they should be illegal. I hate him. It isn’t fair that he gets to look like that when he’s a terrible person. I force my gaze up to his face and try to focus on that, but I don’t know what I’m even doing. I’m supposed to be talking to Jared right now. But if my fake boyfriend has noticed me here, I couldn’t tell. This wasn’t the plan. I was going to come here tonight and kiss Jared in front of Landon, and show everyone our relationship is rock solid. And then, I could

quietly collect an abundance of damning evidence to shame my enemies with later. Now everything is falling apart, and I can't quit glaring at Landon's wet body.

He swims to the edge of the pool and nods to someone behind me. Courtney shrieks, calling out my name in warning just before one of the footballers picks me up like a sack of flour and tosses me into the pool. I sink to the bottom and then bob up to the surface, hair clinging to my cheeks as mascara bleeds down my face. Landon stares at me for a second, and then the strangest thing happens. He laughs. His chest actually rumbles and vibrates with that normal human emotion I didn't even know he was capable of. He's carefree and pleased as hell with himself when I shove at him and splash his face with water.

"You are such a dick!"

He circles around behind me and presses his body close to mine, cinching his arm around my waist. His erection is poking into my back, and it's so huge I have to admit Courtney was right. Total big dick energy.

"Fighting with me gets you so wet," he growls into my ear. "That's why you like it, isn't it? I bet your thighs are sticky too. Go ahead, admit you want to hate fuck me in a dark corner."

My thighs squeeze together, trying to suffocate the desire triggered by his crude words. Visions of him gripping my hips and slamming into me from behind infiltrate my mind, and the worst part is, it doesn't even repulse me in the slightest. But it should.

I hate myself for reacting to him this way. He shouldn't have any control over my thoughts or my body, but somehow, he still does. I wonder if he thinks about what happened that night. I wonder why he invited me in the first place. Did he know what would happen? Does he get off thinking about it?

"Not even if you were the last man on earth," I answer primly, squeezing the water from my hair. "Been there, done that. Remember? Perhaps you and Carson should find some other desperate soul who's up for your twisted games because I'm sure as hell not."

His hand falls away from me, and my stomach shivers in protest. When I turn around to meet his gaze, his eyes are vacant and icy. He's staring at me as

though I'm the worst person on the planet. As though I'm the one who imploded everything. I want him to fight back. I want him to interact with me. This is what we do. But tonight, Landon turns his back on me and drags himself out of the pool without another word. When he walks away, I watch him until he disappears into the crowd. I don't understand him. I really don't think I ever will.

My heart is still rioting in my chest when I glance up at Court.

"How's the water?" She arches a suspicious eyebrow at me.

"Um, fine," I mutter, dragging myself to the edge and hoisting my body up the ladder.

I feel like a drowned rat, and I can tell by the look on Court's face I'm a mess, but she's nice enough not to point it out.

"What was that all about?" she asks.

"What?" I play stupid and untangle my hair with my fingers.

"Landon." She gives me a look that tells me I'm caught. "You weren't exactly acting like he was your mortal enemy, which is super weird, considering that's all I ever hear out of your mouth."

"He is." I wipe the mascara from beneath my eyes and wring my tee shirt out between my fists.

"Are you sure? Because—"

"Court." I peek up at her, hoping the shame I feel isn't written all over my face. I know what she's thinking. What the hell is wrong with me? How could I ever let him touch me? I can't deal with her judgment right now because honestly, I don't have a clue myself.

"Yes?" She crosses her arms and frowns.

"Can we just talk about this later?" I beg. "I still need to have a conversation with Jared."

"You're going to confront him now?" She glances over at him. "In front of everyone?"

"Yes."

My jean shorts and tee shirt are clinging to my body in the most uncomfortable way, but I can't leave yet. I wasn't planning on this, but I have to

show them I'm not bothered. No matter what. Nothing can get to me.

"Alrighty then." She collapses onto a pool lounge with a sigh and drags her phone from her pocket. "I'll just wait for you here. Go give him hell, or whatever."

"Thank you."

Gathering up the shattered pieces of my broken confidence, I pivot on my heel and head straight for Jared, who still hasn't noticed my arrival. He's too busy Frenching the life-sized blow-up doll to notice me. At least until I poke his shoulder, interrupting his ick fest.

"Can I have a word with you?" I stare down at him.

"Who is she?" the cheerleader asks.

"I'm his girlfriend." I flash all my teeth in a smile so fake my face hurts.

"Ugh. Jerk!" She shoves him away, and he stares up at me with a glazed expression. He's definitely drunk, and I'm second-guessing my determination to have this conversation right now.

"Hey." He jerks his chin at me and climbs out of the pool. "You take a swim with your boyfriend over there?"

Odd, I didn't think he'd even noticed.

"I should ask you the same thing." I cross my arms and glare at him.

He shakes his head like I'm ridiculous. There's something different about him tonight. Jared's always been a little cocky, but there's a sharpness in his eyes I've never noticed before. He seems uptight, and I wonder if it has anything to do with the fading bruises on his face.

"Over here." I grab his arm and drag him to a quiet corner of the garden, away from prying eyes and ears. There's a large wooden gazebo tucked into the shadows, and I steer us behind it where I can confront him privately.

"What the hell is going on?" I snap at him. "Why are you making out with some random chick when we had a deal? And what about your boyfriend?"

"I fuck whoever I want." His words are clipped, an undercurrent of tension polluting his voice. "Chicks. Guys. I don't really give a damn as long as I can get my dick wet. Everyone already knows it, so if you think it's some big secret, you really are delusional."

“Um... that’s not what you told me before.”

I’m genuinely confused. When we struck our deal, he said he was in love with Jacob. He told me if the football team found out he was dating a rival, they’d never let him hear the end of it. This sudden shift in attitude doesn’t make any sense.

“Did you just come here to nag my ass?” he gripes. “Because this relationship isn’t worth the trouble if I have to listen to you bitch at me, and I don’t even get to fuck you.”

“Excuse me?” I stumble over my shocked response. Jared is one of the few guys at BMA who’s always treated me with respect. This doesn’t even sound like him. In fact, it doesn’t even look like he’s the same person tonight. I’ve never seen him so angry, or so drunk.

“You heard me.” He tears his gaze away like he can’t even stand to look at me. “You’ll spread your legs for Carson and Landon, but you want to act like a saint whenever you’re around me.”

His words hit me like a torpedo, and it fucking hurts. How could he be so cruel? How could he throw that in my face? But should it really surprise me? That’s what everyone thinks about me.

“I’m not doing this with you,” I choke out. “You totally blew our cover tonight. The deal’s off.”

“Fine by me,” he mumbles. “You aren’t worth the headache, and I’d rather catch a bad case of syphilis than sample Landon’s leftovers.”

With those ice-cold words, he leaves me standing there alone. Shame swells like a storm surge inside me. This kind of filth, you can’t wash away. I blink away the sting, convincing myself it’s just the chlorine. I can’t possibly have any feelings left.

But it’s my feelings that lure me to drag out my phone and pull up the anonymous texting app. I programmed every BMA contact into it at the beginning of the year. My righteous indignation insists Jared just made himself another casualty in this war, and he knew what was at stake. My fingers fly over the keyboard, typing out the details of his treasonous relationship with Jacob Ellis, Maple Grove’s beloved quarterback. The message is written hastily

without time to contemplate the fallout.

This isn't me. I'm not this person. There's a faint voice whispering inside my head, but I ignore it, focusing on Jared's hurtful words.

Leftovers.

He called me fucking leftovers.

He threw those words in my face, and now I'm going to throw everything I have at him. If they hit me with a bullet, I fire back with a grenade. That's how it is now, and it's the only permission I need to attach the photo I've been holding ransom until the school year was over. It's Jared lip-locked with Jacob at a park in a neighboring town. The proof is undeniable. And so is the urge to shrivel up and die after I hit send.

But this is what he deserves, right? He hurt me. He broke the agreement we had. I can't let him say those things and just walk away. I told myself I'd never let them screw me over again. And when I see him across the yard, talking to Carson as if he didn't just verbally eviscerate me, I know I made the right decision.

The sound of chiming phones all over the backyard makes my muscles knot with tension. I watch as, one by one, they start to check them. Slowly, their gazes slip to Jared. He shifts, his entire body tightening, and Carson glances around in confusion before he reaches for his phone too. Whatever happens next is lost on me. There isn't time to see because someone is heading this way. At the sound of approaching footsteps, I dart behind the gazebo just in time.

"Shh..." Someone purrs as the footsteps stumble into the gazebo. "We don't need the whole party to see."

"They didn't," the other voice growls.

Curiosity draws me closer, and I know I shouldn't look, but that first voice sounds so familiar. When I peek through the slotted lattice, the lighting is dim, but I'd recognize that hair anywhere.

Audrey Rothschild.

My stomach lurches violently. The first thought I have is that I don't want to see her and Landon together. But moving requires coordination, and right now, I seem to have none. Their silhouettes are like a gory movie I can't look away

from.

Audrey wedges her body between a pair of masculine thighs, and his hands wrap around her tiny waist, plucking at the strings holding her flimsy bikini in place. I can't see his face because she's grinding her body all over his.

"Get your phone ready," she orders.

"It is." He grabs a fistful of her hair as she tries to climb on top of him. "Suck my dick first."

"Mmm," she moans. "So bossy."

"Less talk, more face fucking. Come on. I don't have all night."

I try to take a step back before witnessing anything I can't unsee, but something about the whole scenario feels off. Part of me wants confirmation that it's Landon so I can hate him even more. But there's also a nagging sense of hope that it isn't. A thought I don't want to examine too closely.

Then an idea strikes me. A terrible, filthy, awful idea. Something straight from the BMA playbook on humiliation. It isn't difficult to recall how none of them hesitated to take photos of me. How they all shared them around the entire school.

I reach for my phone in a daze, silencing it before I pull up the same texting app. Only this time, instead of photos, I turn on a live stream of the show, inviting the same contacts to watch. Viewers from the party are already flooding in when Audrey sinks to her knees and exposes the guy behind her. My bombastic heart beats wildly as I suck in a sharp breath. It isn't Landon. That's Jacob Ellis. *Jared's boyfriend.*

Holy shit.

My gasp is audible, but luckily, they don't hear me over Audrey's slurping. I want to look away, but the comments are blowing up, and I'm distracted. I'm too frozen by indecision to stop it. Why is she here with him? Is this why Jared was so pissed?

"Hold the phone up, so he can see your face." Audrey pauses her theatrics to direct Jacob as he snaps photos of her face in his crotch.

Why the hell are they taking photos? I don't get it. Is this some kind of kinky game him and Jared play? Trying to one-up each other at parties with random

people? And what about Landon? How does he fit into all this?

“You aren’t selling it very well,” Jacob remarks dryly as Audrey works his shaft like a possessed demon.

“Screw y—” Her response is abruptly cut off when Jacob grabs the back of her head and starts face fucking her in earnest.

UGH.

I keep the phone up but force myself to look away because... gross. I do not want to see this. And if I’m being honest, the guilt is starting to creep back in. Chances are, Jared has already heard about this. As if the last message I sent wasn’t enough. Somehow, he went from my biggest ally to my biggest casualty in the span of a few minutes.

I was convinced it would be Audrey and Landon getting it on in there. I didn’t think it through, and it’s too late to turn back now. But does it really matter? This is what I wanted. I wanted Audrey to pay for all the terrible things she’s done. One by one, I recall them, fortifying my justification.

She sabotaged my performance. She pretended to be a friend, only to take photos of me in my weakest moment and pass them around. She spearheaded the *Destroy Kailani Hale Campaign*. She threatened my position on the dance team. And she took Landon for herself. Not that the last one means anything because I sure as hell don’t want him.

These are just a few of her transgressions, and I’m convinced giving her a taste of her own medicine will make me feel better... *eventually*. But I’m also wondering if maybe my justifications are just a way to distance myself from the responsibility of what I’m doing right now. This video will hurt them all. Landon. Audrey. Jared. Maybe a few others. But did any of them step in to help me at the party? No, they didn’t.

They deserve this. That’s what I keep telling myself throughout the entire performance, which lasts roughly five minutes. After Audrey worships at his feet, he bends her over and fucks her against the table, giving all the viewers a clear shot of both their faces. It’s the final blow. And when Jacob comes, I end the video, ducking down as they pull away from each other and begin to adjust their clothing.

“Let me see the photos,” Audrey says.

There are a few seconds of silence, and then she speaks again.

“Send him that one. I want him to see your face.”

“You really are a cold-hearted bitch,” Jacob replies gruffly.

“As cold as they come,” she boasts proudly. “Now, be a good boy and run along. I don’t need anyone to see us together.”

Too late for that.

Their footsteps retreat, and then a shadowy figure rounds the corner of the gazebo. I nearly squeak as I slap a hand over my mouth. But as it turns out, it’s Courtney.

“Why are you so jumpy?” She examines me as though I belong in a straitjacket. I probably do.

“No reason.” I shove my phone into my pocket as if that will somehow erase what I just did. Courtney notices.

“You’re a horrible liar.”

“Can we please just go?” I blurt. “I’m tired, and I’m over this party.”

She shrugs, letting me off the hook for now. “I thought you’d never ask.”

LONDON

Monday morning at school is a shitshow. Rumors are flying, and everyone's staring at me, wondering if I know. A few random dudes in the hall offer me their condolences on my relationship with Audrey. I'm not surprised she didn't show her face at school today. She's probably at home mapping out a battle plan to destroy us all.

The only person who has my attention is the girl walking around with her head down, hoping to slip by unnoticed. She doodles quietly throughout first period and remains stoic at practice after school. The fake confidence she flaunted like a badge is nowhere to be found, and for a moment, I get a glimpse of the same girl who knocked on my door during the summer of Kail. She was awkward, innocent, and nerdy then. I didn't even know what to do with her. I hadn't ever met someone so unsure of themselves, but goddamn, it was charming. I didn't want to trust her, but after a while, it just felt natural. Things were uncomplicated with her. She never judged me. She didn't even know who the fuck I was, and it felt good.

But was it real? Or was she really playing me?

Looking at her now, I can't tell. She wanted to win, no matter the cost. That's why she did what she did this weekend. So why does she regret it? Why does she feel bad at all? Or is this just another act? Fuck if I know. But her coach is on her case at practice, and the whole dance team looks frazzled and uncertain. Nobody has ever dared to cross Audrey before. Hell hath no fury when she finds out it was sweet little Kail.

At football practice, Coach pulls us aside to inform us that Jared's parents yanked him out of school. Apparently, the news of this weekend got back to them somehow, and they weren't pleased. Now the word is he'll be attending the remainder of his senior year at a Christian wilderness program far, far away. I won't lose sleep over the loss, but admittedly, I do feel a little sorry for the dude now that I know he wasn't actually banging Kail. Although, there's still that question. He could have.

Like clockwork, Alana shows up on my doorstep when I get home, asking me if I want to come to dinner. If I tell her no, she'll just bring a plate by, and honestly, I'm in the mood to piss Kail off. I want to see how long this contrition of hers will last.

“WHAT IS HE DOING HERE?” KAIL BLINKS UP AT ME AS SHE ENTERS THE DINING room, freezing when she sees me at the table.

“Kail.” Alana stares at her daughter with wide eyes. “Be nice.”

“Aw, come on, Kail.” I smirk. “Am I really that bad?”

She lets out an audible groan and forces herself into the seat next to me.

“Theo's working late tonight,” Alana calls out as she heads back to the kitchen. “So, it'll just be us three for now.”

As soon as her mother is out of earshot, Kail leans forward on her elbows and hisses. “Shouldn't you be out tormenting some unsuspecting victim right now?”

“You're one to talk.” I arch an eyebrow at her. “How does it feel to destroy other people's lives?”

Her face blanches, and suddenly, she appears fascinated by the plate in front of her. Shiny tears cling to the edges of her eyelids, proof that no matter what she'd like anyone to believe, there's still a conscience in there somewhere.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” she whispers.

Alana returns with a casserole big enough to feed a family of ten and sets it on the table between us before taking her seat.

“I hope you’re hungry.” She grins at both of us.

Neither Kailani or I speak, so her mother dishes up our meal and tells us about how she filled care packages for impoverished children. When she’s finished with that topic, she maneuvers to another. Something about Theo’s son, Miles, hopefully coming home for Christmas this year. I’ve seen him around a few times when he’s on leave from the military, but I don’t know him well enough to add anything to the conversation. I eat two helpings of the chicken and rice, and Kail shoves her food around her plate, opting for only a few small bites while her mother watches in disapproval.

“Wait until you see what I made for dessert.” Alana pushes to her feet, desperate for her daughter to eat something.

“I’m full.” Kailani grabs her plate and takes it into the kitchen, dumping the remnants into the trash.

Her mother watches with a hollow expression, and I listen to them argue about Kail’s eating habits for the next five minutes before she orders her daughter to be polite and join me at the dining table. She complies with a scowl on her face, and my amusement doesn’t improve her sour mood.

“You shouldn’t be such a brat to her,” I remark. “She wants you to be healthy. That’s what mothers are supposed to do.”

“Don’t you have your own family you can bother?” she snaps.

The smug satisfaction slips from my face as I force my gaze just over her head. I should be used to this question by now, but the truth is, I don’t think I’ll ever get used to it.

“Tell your mom I said thanks for dinner.” I shove my chair back.

Kail calls after me as I walk away, but I’m already gone.

KAILANI

It's the end of the week, and we're supposed to be prepping for Saturday's game, but I'm a walking zombie. I haven't slept well at all since the party at Alistor's house. Jared is gone, and Audrey is rumored to be sick, but that doesn't seem likely. The icing on top of this shitty cake is that Landon refuses to acknowledge me since our spat at the dinner table. When he sees me in the halls, he just walks on by. No smart-ass remarks, or cold stares, or his trademark asshole grin. Nothing. It's exactly what I told him I wanted, so I don't know why it bothers me so much.

I'm not proud of the fact that I spent the bulk of my study time this week turning over every internet stone I could to uncover information about his family. The only thing I managed to learn is that whoever his father might be, it isn't public knowledge. As for his mother, well, she's just an unrecognizable face from the paparazzi photos. I've never seen her around Black Mountain, which is weird. When I tutored him at his house, he always told me she was out, but you would think at some point I would have seen her coming or going. I'm dying to ask my mom if she's ever seen her, but I don't want to give her the wrong idea, and things are still too tense between us.

I'm exhausted and irritable, and it only adds to my frustration when I open my locker to find that someone has left me a treat every day this week. First, it was a box of chocolates. Then it was macadamia nuts, my favorite. One day, it was almond croissants from the local specialty bakery. After that, I stopped looking at the labels and immediately threw the boxes in the rubbish can,

convinced they were probably poisoned if it was from anyone around here.

At first, I suspected my mom, but she never comes to the school. She also doesn't know my combination. Someone here does, though. That's been obvious for a while now. In either case, it's making me stabby, and I wish everyone would just lay off and leave me alone.

When Courtney approaches me at lunch, I have an awful feeling things are only going to get worse. I've been doing my best to avoid her all week, running off as soon as practice ends and pretending to study during breaks. But the determination on her face when she sits down across from me and tugs out my headphones says it all.

"What is going on with you?" she demands.

"What do you mean?" I fidget with the tab on my La Croix can.

"Don't play dumb, Kail." She glares. "You look terrible. And you're acting all cagey—"

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

My stomach rumbles as I concentrate on the plate of food in front of me. I can't remember how many bites I've taken because my head feels like it's full of cotton wool.

"It was you, wasn't it?" She lowers her voice to a whisper, but that doesn't disguise her disappointment.

"What was me?" I croak.

"The text," she grits out. "That video? You were the one who sent it to everyone. That's why Jared's gone, and Audrey is MIA..."

"So, what if I did?" Heat burns my throat, and irrational anger bubbles to the surface. "Whose side are you on anyway? Have you forgotten what they did to me?"

"Of course not." She flinches, and I don't miss the pity in her eyes. "But you aren't like them. And you won't heal your pain by hurting everyone else."

"That's easy for you to say." My voice is like a hot iron, and I hope it burns. Courtney is supposed to be my friend, and right now, it feels as though she's betraying me too. "You weren't the one who had her pictures shared all over school. You have no idea what it's like to wake up with no memory of what

happened. To see yourself that way, while everyone just laughs—”

The words crack and dry up on my lips. *Shit*. Will these horrible feelings ever go away? I can't break. Not in the middle of the cafeteria. I stand and gather my books, pausing to look at Court.

“You're either with me, or you're against me. But don't you dare judge me.”

“I'm your friend,” she says softly. “I want what's best for you, even if that means telling you something you don't want to hear. I support you, but I can't support the decisions you're making right now. I don't like the person you're becoming.”

Her observation feels like an ice pick to the jugular. And it isn't fair. Why can't she understand this is what I need? My anger is the only thing keeping me focused right now. Revenge will make me whole again. I refuse to let anybody take that away from me.

“Well, do yourself a favor and stay away then,” I lash out. “That way, you don't have to see it anymore.”

TO NOBODY'S SURPRISE, COURTNEY DOESN'T SHOW UP FOR PRACTICE THAT afternoon. Coach tells me she handed in her uniform, and the rest of the team barely blinks over the loss. But it cuts me deep, even if I don't show it. I know Court only joined the dance team for me. She's always been a good friend, and I think that's why her betrayal hurts the most. But I just keep telling myself she did me a favor. I can't embark upon a journey of revenge if the morality police are breathing down my neck at every turn. It's time to stop feeling guilty and pull my shit together.

Our rehearsal goes off without a hitch. With Audrey gone, it's amazing how much the dynamic changes. Instead of challenging me at every turn, the girls actually meet my eyes and speak to me without mumbling or grunting responses. Everyone except for Alexa Daniels. There's something about that girl I can't quite figure out. She's friends with Audrey, sort of, but not close. More like a quiet, easily manipulated type that Audrey just uses for whatever she can get out

of her. But I've noticed she never meets my gaze at practice, even when I address her directly. And as soon as coach calls time on the day, she's the first one to run off. It's odd.

A commotion across the field catches my attention, and all the girls stop practice to check it out too. It's hard to see what's happening at first, but the football coach is barking out orders as the guys crowd around someone on the ground. My heart picks up speed as I search for Landon's jersey. A sick sense of relief swells inside me when I spot him, his helmet dangling from his fingers as he watches the scene unfold with a dark expression. It isn't until the ambulance comes that we see who the injured party is.

"Oh my god," someone whispers beside me. "It's Carson. That looks bad."

"What happened?" I ask Coach Lopez as she returns from that side of the field.

"Knee injury," she answers solemnly.

We all watch as they haul him away, and an ominous cloud settles over us. He said he wanted to talk to me. He wanted to tell me something. But it was just a trick. I can't allow myself to feel sorry for him.

"Let's call it a day," Coach says. "I'll see you all tomorrow at the game."

KAILANI

Tugging at the hem of my black Lycra tank top, I count the seconds between breaths and wonder when it became normal to ring the doorbell at a literal mansion. Probably about the same time I started living in one, I guess. Sometimes, it still feels surreal. Like I was abducted by aliens and dropped into a completely new existence. The kind where gated communities and fast sports cars and first world problems are the new normal.

I stare through the glass door at the front of my neighbor's house. Inside, the overhead lights reflect off pristine marble floors the same way the sun reflects off the sea. I miss Hawaii. Everything was so different there. People were friendly. We were all one big family, looking out for each other. That's how I was raised. We respected our elders and called everyone Aunty and Uncle, even if they weren't related. Aloha Spirit was in our blood. But here, everyone is out for themselves. It's all about who has the most impressive house or car or whatever. And forget about spreading kindness. I learned the hard way if you try to do that here, people look at you like you've gone mad. It gives me anxiety every time I'm forced to talk to someone now. I feel like I'm never going to fit in here.

My eyes dart to our villa next door, where my mom offers me an encouraging wave from the window. God, how embarrassing. She's watching me stand here like an idiot, waiting for someone to open the door. When I shrug back at her, she gives me two thumbs-up. Just a few more seconds. The pineapple plate she made sticks to my hand in the summer heat, and my heart thumps against my

ribs like a tambourine. Everything is different here. The crisp scent of the mountains surrounds us. The lack of any nearby ocean. And so many windows. This house has them in spades. Why do rich people like so many windows?

Theo, my stepfather, told us not long after we moved in a year ago that the mansion next to his was designed in a classic French provincial style. When he's not busy making millions doing something with investments, he likes to read architectural digests. It's a little weird.

Admittedly, the house is impressive, but I didn't really give it another thought, being that it was vacant. Then last week, the principal called my mother, and that was pretty much when it all went wrong.

Apparently, the neighbors have just moved back to Black Mountain, and the boy who will be going to school with me in the fall needs a tutor. Naturally, I was the only person from the Academy who wasn't sunning in the south of France, and therefore, I was the first person on their contact list. My mother, ever the optimist that I'll find my place here, agreed that I'd love to tutor this spoiled rich stranger, and then promptly sent me right over to introduce myself.

That pretty much brings us up to speed on why I've been standing here for three minutes. I'll be late for my summer dance class at the local gym if I don't leave soon. And it's just like one of these noble blooded princes to keep me waiting even though I'm doing him a favor. As I'm considering leaving the fruit on his veranda, the door swings open, startling me.

My eyes collide with a pair of steely gray irises so intense it deflates the air from my lungs. This can't possibly be my new classmate. My mom said I'd be tutoring a sixteen-year-old boy. And now I know it's true. I've been transplanted into a world where sixteen-year-old boys are a consolidation of every teenage girl's fantasy rolled into one. If I had to find a way to describe this otherworldly human, he'd be the love child of every troubled hero from all my favorite novels.

Hot. I didn't expect him to be so... hot. Or tortured.

I think that's what catches me off guard the most. A lot of the guys in Black Mountain think they are tough shit, but this guy really looks it. His cold stare is like an arctic chill, and I'm trapped in the clutches of it. My ability to speak forgotten as my eyes roam over him. He's taller than any other sophomore I

know, and there's no way those abs are real. Why isn't he wearing a shirt?

It takes a real effort to drag my gaze away from those hip bones dipping into the black shorts hanging low from his hips. I swallow the golf ball in my throat and stare at his face instead. Dark hair. Hard lines. Tan skin. He could definitely pass for a morally ambiguous vampire from one of my novels. If that vampire were a mute who could make his victims wither with one stare. Does he not speak?

His eyes dart around the driveway as though he's seeking out threats, and it occurs to me long seconds have passed since he opened the door. I guess I should probably say something. Yeah, that would be good right about now if I could get my mouth to cooperate. Ever the outsider, fumbling over my words and making horrible first impressions is my superpower.

He can see it too. I can tell when his eyes roam over me, taking me in with a sweeping glance, I don't belong here. I never did. The silent lines have been drawn. He's one of them. The trust fund kids from old money. I'm just the stepchild Theo got saddled with when he married my mother. The girl who doesn't dress the part and never says the right things. And right now, I'm overly aware of my curvy figure sticking to the black leggings and tank top I picked out haphazardly today.

The girls at Black Mountain Academy maintain a strict air and gossip diet. While they are busy stuffing cutlets into their bras or finding doctors crazy enough to give them implants, I'm trying to find bras that hold my boobs in. When his gaze flickers over my body with mild disinterest, I've never been more aware of the fact that I look nothing like them.

"Who are you with?"

The dark prince does have the ability to speak, but his words are tinged with accusation, and I know I didn't imagine the narrowing of his eyes just now. It might be hot as hell outside, but the temperature seems to have plummeted a thousand degrees suddenly.

"Who am I with?" I repeat dumbly, blinking at him before I shake my head. "Uh, nobody. Here."

I thrust the plate of pineapple at him, but he doesn't make an effort to take it,

so now I'm just standing here with my arms extended as heat floods my cheeks. Why did I have to be cursed with awkwardness?

"My mom made this," I babble while he stares at me as though I'm speaking a foreign language. "She gets the pineapples shipped over from Hawaii. Maui Gold. Um, we live next door with Theo. They got married a couple of years ago, and we moved here after that. That's probably why we've never met. Anyway, she said you guys had just moved in, or back or whatever, and she wanted me to drop this off. I'm Kailani. Principal Dawson sent me as the tutor."

He drapes his long body against the door, his eyes moving over me like he's trying to figure me out. I wish he'd just take the stupid fruit. Or at least respond so I can erase the word vomit that just erupted from my mouth. How is it that rich people have such a way of making you feel like you're from another planet with just a single look? This guy screams antisocial. I convince myself quickly he must hate everyone, so I feel better about the circumstances.

"This is the part where you introduce yourself." I straighten my spine, refusing to let his intensity intimidate me.

Again, he doesn't answer. I release a breath and shrug, withdrawing the plate. "Fine. Good talk. I would say it's nice to meet you, but honestly, you seem like a dick. So why don't you just let me know when you're actually serious about the tutoring."

I pivot on my heel, and his hand catches me around the arm, halting me. Warm fingers dig into my skin, squeezing me in a way that makes my nervous system short circuit. When I turn around, he's much closer. So close, I can smell the sweet and spicy notes of his cologne. To my horror, I find myself inhaling that scent, and I hope he didn't notice.

"Are you fucking with me?" He arches a brow at me, and from this angle, I have to crane my neck to look up at him.

"What?"

"You know who I am. So, just tell me what you really want."

"Um, you're starting to sound like a cliché plot from a thriller novel." I yank my arm away from him and frown. "Are you high?"

He cocks his head to the side, considering my response for much longer than

necessary before he comes to some sort of silent conclusion. When he drags his phone out of his pocket and checks it, it seems like an opportune moment to leave. But a weird part of me wants to see how this plays out when he frowns at the screen and drags his eyes back to me, his jaw flexing.

“Kailani Hale?”

My name sounds weird on his lips, and I find myself nodding along robotically.

“That’s me.”

“Mr. Dawson sent you,” he murmurs.

“Yep. Like I said.”

He types something else into his phone. After a few more moments, the tension in his shoulders intensifies.

“No social media?” he asks.

“What?”

“You don’t have any social media.” He repeats as if I’m mentally challenged. “Why?”

“Uh... what does that have to do with anything?”

“Did you volunteer for the position?”

He’s switching gears faster than I can keep up now.

“For the tutor?” I shake my head. “No. The school called me.”

I leave out the part about them assuming I had nothing better to do.

“So, what exactly qualifies you to tutor me?”

God, what the hell is with this guy? Here I am, offering up my time to help him, and he’s giving me crap about my qualifications?

“Okay, yeah, you know what? You’re right. You should probably just hire a professional.”

I put some much-needed distance between us, fully prepared to leave this whole strange situation behind me when he calls after me.

“Tomorrow.”

“What?” I peek at him over my shoulder, and there’s a lingering curiosity in his gaze that draws me in. His eyes move over me in lazy appraisal, and I hope he hasn’t noticed the flush on my face.

“Tomorrow at four,” he says. “Tutoring.”

“Four.” I nod because I’m still not sure what the hell just happened. The way he says tutoring makes it sound like sex.

“Oh, and Kailani?” he calls out again.

“Yeah?”

“Bring back my pineapple.”

“HI, HONEY,” MY MOM GREETs ME AS I WALK INTO THE KITCHEN AFTER practice. “How was school?”

There’s a nervous edge to her voice, and I feel guilty because I know she doesn’t have any idea what to expect from me anymore. I’m like a hellhound that just showed up one day in the body of her daughter. It isn’t fair to her that I’ve been so moody, and I hate that things feel so tense between us. Especially when I seem to be on the outs with everyone lately.

She’s prepping a tray of her homemade granola for the oven, and the sweet scent of cinnamon and coconut makes me feel homesick for her love. I know when she smiles at me, it’s still there, but she has a lot of reasons to be disappointed in me.

When I was a bitch to Landon the other day, and he left, it looked like I’d taken an ice pick straight to her heart. She came back with the dessert she’d worked so hard on, eager to have us eat it, only to find him gone and me sulking in my chair. Of course, I didn’t eat it because I was too worried about the calories. It’s official. I’m an asshole.

“Mama—” My voice breaks a little, and I try to maintain some composure as I slide onto the barstool across from her. “I’m sorry I’ve been... a total nightmare.”

“Oh, Kail.” Her eyes shine with emotion when she looks up at me. “I know things are hard sometimes. You’re at that age when you’re trying to figure out who you are, and believe me when I say I know it isn’t easy. I’m sure you think I’m a million years old, but I was there once too. I just want you to know you

can talk to me about anything. I'll always be here."

I offer her a watery smile because it's all I can do without breaking. She really is perfect. Sometimes, I wish I could be more like her. I often wonder what she would tell me to do if she knew the truth about my situation. I know she wouldn't condone my hate sick heart, and she'd want me to find a way to heal. But I don't think she'd agree that steamrolling over everyone is the path to inner peace. That's probably why I just can't bring myself to tell her.

She drizzles some honey over the oat mixture, tossing it around with her spatulas while I watch. I'm tempted to steal a piece right now, but that stupid voice is always in the back of my mind, reminding me what's at stake.

"Have you ever met Landon's mom?" I ask while she's distracted.

Her hands pause, and she blinks up at me. Sadness washes over her features, and she gives a little shake of her head. "No, I haven't. I get the impression she's not around very much."

Well, that explains the parties at his place almost every weekend.

"Is that why you and Theo started having him over for dinner?"

She chews on her lip. "Does it really bother you, honey?"

"No," I lie. Only a little. Only because it's hard to be around him when everything is so confusing, and maybe a small part of me feels like he wormed his way in here while I was gone.

"I thought you two were friends," she answers cautiously. "That first summer he was here, you seemed to get along with the tutoring and everything."

"Yeah, we did." I toy with the hem of my skirt. "But we are just from two different worlds, you know."

"I get that." She sets down the spatulas and wipes her hands. "But just because his life looks one way on the outside doesn't mean it's all it's cracked up to be."

I feel like there's something she's not telling me, but I don't want to grill her too much. She'll get suspicious about my curiosity, and I'm not prepared to have that conversation with her right now.

"Hey, I was thinking, maybe we could watch *The Bachelor* together tonight."

"Really?" She looks so excited about the idea my heart thaws a little.

“Yeah.” I shrug. “I think that’s what I need right now.”

LANDON

“**W**hat the hell are you doing here?” I answer the door with a growl.

Suzy shoves past me and lets herself inside, a cloud of alcohol and perfume trailing in her wake.

“You’ve been ignoring me again.” She stumbles over the marble floor as she wags a finger at me.

The clock on the wall shows it’s after midnight. I have a game tomorrow, and after the shit day I’ve had, this is the last thing I want to deal with.

“Ma, I’ll get you a hotel.”

“Like hell, you will.” She snaps her gum and crosses her arms. “I’m staying here with you.”

“You can’t stay here. I bought you a place in California for a reason.”

“That place is a shithole!” she sneers.

Her eyes are spastic, which means she’s probably coked out of her mind. Fucking great.

“I’d hardly call a million-dollar condo in Malibu a shithole.”

She reels her arm back and belts me across the face with surprising speed, considering her current state. Psychotic as ever. The imprint of her palm burns into my cheek, and I just feel so goddamn empty when I look at her. At times like this, I just wish she’d fucking die already.

“You think you’re sooooo perfect.” She slams both her palms against my chest, knocking me back against the wall. “Look at the way you live! Seven

bedrooms and you can't spare one for your own mother? I gave you this life, you ungrateful prick! You're just like your father..."

The rest of her tirade is lost on me as I retreat to grab a hoodie from the coat closet. She'll go on all night like this, comparing me to a man I've never even fucking met. Some big shot producer in Hollywood she tricked into impregnating her. I was always a meal ticket to her, and the sperm donor gave her a cash settlement to fuck off out of his life forever. When Suzy blew through that and kept going back for more, he gave it to her just to keep us away. He didn't want me, and neither did she. Every choice she's ever made has been about what she can get from it. Suzy Blackwood has always been a user. She had every opportunity growing up. She could have been anything she wanted, but all she wanted was a free ride. That's why my grandmother cut her off and left me the family inheritance instead. Her own mother couldn't stand to be around her for more than five minutes, and neither can I.

I open the closet and yank a hoodie from the hanger, slinging it over my arm as I head for the front door. "Sleep wherever you want. Burn the whole place down while you're at it. I don't give a fuck what you do."

"You worthless piece of—"

The door rattles the frame when I slam it behind me. I step out into the night air, realizing the keys to my Porsche are still inside. I could grab an Uber and go to a hotel, but I don't want to.

My feet are moving before I can even consider how bad this idea is. Rounding the backyard, I cross the landscaped boundary onto the Grants' property. There are no fences in this gated community. Everyone just chooses to believe the gates up front will keep the shitty people out. But if that were true, my mother wouldn't be at my house right now.

The door to the pool house is locked, which shouldn't come as a surprise. It's late, and I didn't expect her to make it easy for me. But Kail is a creature of habit. She's used to sleeping with the breeze coming in through the window. She left one of those cracked open, and with a bit of maneuvering, I'm in.

She's lying on her bed, asleep, but it's not a peaceful sort of rest. She looks so tormented I can't tear my eyes away from her. Her black hair is fanned across

the pillow, her body curled into itself. It would be so easy to climb in right behind her and sleep better than I probably have in years. But if she woke up and found me in her bed, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't live to see tomorrow.

Instead, I make myself comfortable on the big gray lounge chair she uses to read. It smells like her, and so does the throw blanket I toss over myself. It only covers about half of my body, but it's a hell of a lot better than nothing.

My mind drifts as I stare up at the ceiling, contemplating all the ways my chance at normalcy has backfired. It feels like I'm juggling a fuckton of fragile plates, and sooner or later, they're bound to come crashing down. Suzy is going to ruin this for me. I already know it in my gut. Keeping her away this long was a miracle, but it was only a matter of time before she clawed her way out of hell and grabbed me by the foot. There is no such thing as normal in my world. This is as normal as it's ever going to get.

Inevitably, my eyes drift back to Kailani. She's restless, rolling around, her leg falling out of the sheet. I'm trying to imagine what else is beneath that sheet. Does she sleep naked? Am I in her dreams? Her nightmares?

My chest heaves, and as if she can sense me, she sits upright in her bed, searching for monsters in the shadows. It takes a minute for her eyes to adjust, but when she notices me on the lounge chair, she makes a tiny noise of protest. The bedside lamp comes on as she shifts her legs over the side of the mattress and shoves the covers away. To my disappointment, she's not as naked as I'd hoped. Apparently, she wears a tiny white tank top and shorts to sleep in.

"Um, hello, psycho stalker." She snaps her fingers at me to get my attention. "Mind telling me what you're doing here in the middle of the night?"

I shrug the elbows tucked behind my head. "Thought I'd catch some zzz's."

"Are you drunk?" she asks slowly, as though my comprehension isn't up to speed.

"I don't drink anymore."

She snorts like it's impossible to believe. "Just the blood of undeserving souls, right, Killian?"

"Don't call me that."

The tension in my voice gives her pause, and she grabs a remote from her

nightstand, using it to turn on the overhead lights too. When she looks at me again, her eyebrows pinch together, and I know she can see the red imprint from my mother's hand across my face.

"Are you okay?" She blurts the question before she can help herself and then immediately shakes her head like she regrets it.

"I knew you were still in there somewhere." I offer her a lazy smile. "Should I call the priest? Maybe it's time to perform an exorcism."

She sighs. "Why are you here, Landon?"

"I needed a place to crash. Just for the next few hours. No biggie."

"You know that's not going to happen." She crosses her arms, retreating into her uncertainty.

My eyes do a slow, leisurely perusal of her face, her skin, her hair. It would be a hell of a lot easier to hate her if she didn't look like everything I ever needed. Even now, I can't tell if she's playing a game or if she really is nervous around me. At times, the truth seems so obvious, and with most people, it is. But Kail isn't so easy to figure out. She's either the most deceptive liar I've ever met, or she truly is delusional enough to believe I'm the bad guy.

"Has it ever occurred to you that if I were really such a threat, something would have happened by now?"

She blinks, and her gaze grows distant, and I know what she's thinking. *Something already did happen.* If either of us was brave enough to hash that shit out, maybe we'd find some sort of understanding.

"Why aren't you at your own house?" She fiddles with the edge of her blanket, buying herself time to decide how to handle this.

"Because I don't want to be."

"Well, you can't stay here," she murmurs, but the hard edge in her voice has disappeared.

Her face is a battlefield of emotions, and I'd bet all the money in my bank account her thoughts are impossibly loud. She can't deny the tension between us is laced with something dark and hungry. We can hate each other until the day we die, but that doesn't change the fact that we want each other too. I've wanted her since the afternoon she showed up on my doorstep, like a gift straight from

heaven. Now, I'm beginning to wonder if she was a gift straight from hell instead.

My gaze swoops over every curve on her body like a winding highway. She keeps trying to lose weight, but she has no idea how many guys wonder what those curves would feel like beneath their palms. It's the thing that bothers me most about her transformation. She's trying to convert herself from a renaissance piece into a digitized, lifeless printout. Kail could never see her body was exactly why the other girls felt she was a threat. She's a classical film star, and everyone else is just an extra.

"Landon." She snaps her fingers again, breaking my stare. "Did you hear me?"

"Yes," I groan. "Alright, I'll go. On one condition."

Suspicion creases her features when I sit up.

She shakes her head. "There are no conditions. This isn't a negotiation."

"Everything is open to negotiation." I smirk. "If it weren't, you'd have already maced my ass with that canister on your nightstand."

"You know, I'm beginning to think you actually want me to." She rolls her eyes. "But sure, okay, I'll bite. What do you want?"

"One kiss and I'll leave."

"You're insane." A pretty blush spreads down her neck. "You know that, right?"

"With long intervals of horrible sanity."

"Really?" She laughs like she can't help it. "Quoting Poe to me?"

"You aren't the only one who likes to read."

She cocks her head to the side. "I thought you hated to read. Isn't that why you needed tutoring in the first place?"

Ignoring that topic, I stretch out my body, not missing the way Kail's eyes drift over it with appreciation.

"So, yes or no? Are we having a sleepover, or are you gonna let me have a kiss?"

She analyzes the stinging mark on my face with a grimace. "Is that from Audrey?"

“No.”

When I give nothing else away, she lets out a small huff. She wants to know if I’ve talked to her. If we’ve broken up. She wants to know all of it. It’s written all over her face, and I don’t think my dick has ever been so hard.

“Well, in that case, maybe you should go ask your girlfriend for a kiss.”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Since when?” Bitterness laces her words, and I can’t hide my answering grin.

“My, my. You are one jealous little pineapple.”

“You wish.” She finger-combs her hair, something she does whenever she’s nervous but wants to appear unbothered.

“I take it you’re not still smarting over the loss of your boyfriend,” I muse. “Did he ever kiss you like he kissed that cheerleader in the pool?”

What I really want to ask is if she’s ever been with anyone else. But the words get caught in my throat because I doubt I’d like the answer.

She shrugs noncommittally. “That’s none of your business.”

“You brought it up,” I remind her. “We can spend all night talking about Jared and Audrey if you want. I’m up to the task if you are. You can tell me what really went on between you two, and then I’ll lay bare every sordid detail ___”

She scrubs her hands over her face and grumbles. “You know we both have to be up early tomorrow for the game.”

“Better decide quickly then.”

“You are so infuriating!” she growls. “Fine, one kiss. Then you leave.”

I flash my victory like a medal as I stalk toward her. She rises to her full height of five feet nothing and stands her ground, but the tremble in her muscles betrays her nerves. She wants this. She might be practically shoving me out the door, but her eyes are begging for me to stay.

“You’re the worst.” I tug her body close to mine, sandwiching my erection against her. “The absolute worst.”

“So are you.” She flattens her palms against my chest and drags them down to my waist. “Just look at these muscles. They’re... disgusting.”

The breathiness in her voice makes me want to smile. But I can't let her win. If I give her too many, she'll get the wrong idea about this. She'll think I actually like her.

"Can't you ever say something nice?" I stare down into her satanic brown eyes.

"Something nice," she replies like a smart-ass.

I brush her hair back over her shoulder and slide my finger beneath the thin strap of her tank top. Her throat bobs.

"Your eyes aren't the ugliest thing I've ever seen." Her confession comes out as a whisper, and she looks as though she hates herself for it.

"You're warmer than I expected." I continue to stroke her shoulders. "Very human-like."

"You don't smell like a sewer," she says primly. "Even though I was sure you would."

"Is that why you like to rub my cologne all over you?"

Her eyes flare, and for once, she doesn't have a response. Funny, the little stalker didn't think I knew what she was doing in my bathroom every time she came over.

"Jasmine. Ocean breezes. Frangipani." I lean in and inhale her hair. "I guess you don't smell like a dumpster either."

"I mean, I guess your face isn't that bad," she chokes out. "If you were the last man alive and there weren't any other options, it would do in a pinch."

"Want to sit on it?" I tease her ear with my lips, and she melts into me a little more.

"Um..."

Her words trail off as I slip my palm beneath the hem of her tank, pressing the pads of my fingers against the warmth of her back. "Hmm, strange. I was expecting scales."

She squeezes her thighs together and arches into me without thinking it through. "Are we going to do this all night, or are you going to—"

"You didn't eat any of the gifts I left you this week." My fingers curve around her waist.

She shivers. “What, you mean the arsenic cupcakes?”

“Of course, you would think that.” My hand drifts down and pauses on her hip. “Are you going to take off your shorts, or am I?”

“What?” she yelps. “You said a kiss.”

“I did.”

When she looks up at me, it takes all my restraint not to devour her lips right now. But I’m not wasting another kiss there if I only get one. Instead, I lean in and bite at her neck, my words muffled against her skin.

“I didn’t say where I was going to kiss you.”

Her chest heaves, and she jerks away again, trying to collect herself. But her nipples are hard, and despite her protests, it’s obvious she likes the idea of it. I have no doubt she also wishes she could hate the idea of it. I tug my tee shirt up over my head and toss it aside.

“What are you doing?” Her voice comes out all froggy.

“I’m anticipating a torrential downpour.” I nod to her shorts. “Now it’s your turn.”

She hesitates again, and in that second, her eyes drift over my abs before she licks her lips and turns her head.

“You do it,” she orders.

“Take off your shorts?”

She nods as though she wishes a natural disaster would just take us both out right now.

I reclaim the distance between us, guiding her back until she’s flat against the wall. She watches me carefully as I slip my fingers into her waistband and tug down the shorts and her panties at the same time.

“If anyone hears about this, I’ll murder you,” she threatens.

“Funny coming from you.” My palms skate up the inside of her thighs, widening her stance.

When I kneel in front of her, she tilts her head back against the wall and holds perfectly still as I inhale her sex with a groan. Just as I suspected. Wet little liar. Kail makes a sound in her throat, her fingers digging into my hair as I dip my head forward. I kiss her just like I promised, and she whimpers.

“I forgot to mention I wanted to French kiss you,” I tell her.

She arches into me as my tongue lashes against her. And when I do it again, her knees nearly buckle.

“That isn’t horrible,” she rasps.

“I wasn’t asking for your approval.” I dive between her legs again, tasting her like I’ve wanted to since she showed up on my doorstep with that stupid plate of fruit. Fucking pineapples, for fuck’s sake.

She’s a nightmare. This girl could ruin me, and a part of me wonders if she still will. She could still go to the media. She could tell them whatever she wants, and they would print it. But would she?

I watch her as my tongue slips inside her. She’s gripping my hair so hard it stings in the best way. My fingers are branded into her ass as I hold her exactly where I want her. Her eyes are closed, and she’s so pretty it hurts sometimes, but especially like this.

I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing, but Kail isn’t complaining as she squirms against my face. She’s biting her lip now, trying to hold back the sounds threatening to rip from her throat. I’m not gonna lie. A part of me considered being a dick. I could bring her to the edge just to leave her hanging there. I want her to understand how she makes me feel. But punishing her is the last thing on my mind when she’s touching me like she never wants to let me go.

“God, this is so wrong,” she whines.

When I pause, she shakes her head, her grip on me tightening. “No, don’t stop.”

“Then don’t tell me it’s wrong,” I growl.

She whimpers when I hoist her body up, using the wall for leverage against her back as I toss her legs over my shoulders. Her pussy is in front of my face, my new favorite all-night diner. I eat her like a prisoner’s last meal on death row.

Her toes curl against my back as every muscle in her body contracts. Her chest is heaving, hair spilling around her shoulders as she makes the sweetest sounds of surrender. It’s too late to fuck with her, but the worst part is, I don’t even want to anymore. She comes for me without inhibition, her breath hissing

between her teeth, and her nipples scraping against her tank top. I'm still lapping at her sweetness when she shudders and begs me for mercy.

"Too much." She jerks breathlessly. "Too much."

I take one last deep hit of her before I ease her off my shoulders and set her upright again. When I reach down and adjust my dick in my pants, she watches me, her eyes glazed as her pulse thrashes in her neck. I'm pretty sure she's trying to figure out how she can ruin this moment because it's way too vulnerable for her. Though a part of me hopes she won't. A fucked-up part deep inside me wants her to want me for real. I feel like Kail is the only one who really could. I want to go back to that summer when she didn't know who I was, and I never had to question her motives. Everything was so simple then. But now there's a new determination in her eyes. She's already reconstructing me as the monster she swears I am.

"Tomorrow, we go back to hating each other." She yanks her shorts up abruptly.

The muscles in my back contract as I stand and shrug. "Who said I don't hate you right now?"

An awkward pause of silence hangs between us. She doesn't know what to do, and I'm trying not to let my emotions get the best of me.

She points at the lounge. "You can sleep there if you're desperate, but don't think this is going to be a regular occurrence. And if you come near my bed—"

"Yeah, yeah. You'll mace my ass," I finish for her.

Her eyes flare as I tug off my sweatpants and toss them aside, revealing my cock. She breathes too loudly, and I stroke it once while she watches.

"I'm gonna jack off in your shower first," I tell her. "Want to watch?"

She's still standing there speechless when I head into the bathroom. Using her bar of soap, I then jerk myself off all over her loofah.

KAILANI

I watched.

Clearly, something is deeply wrong with me. Because even when he comes back out and puts on his sweatpants and climbs into my bed, I don't kick him out.

I could, and I should. But I don't.

We both lie there, staring up at the ceiling. The Mace canister is curled into my fist like a lifeline, but it doesn't feel so necessary anymore. The more I'm around him, the more it makes me question what the hell even happened between us. Maybe it was all just a bad dream, and I'm insane. It's easier to justify it away because the alternative means that some twisted part of me is still attracted to him. And if that's true, that weak fragment of my soul wants more than anything to feel his touch again.

"How did you get those scars on your arm?" I whisper into the darkness.

Landon turns his head, and I can feel him staring at the side of my face, but I don't trust myself to return his gaze.

"Don't ask questions you don't want the answers to."

His response hurts, so I pretend it doesn't by rolling onto my side, leaving him to face my back.

"Whatever."

At this point, I don't have much faith sleep will come, especially while he's here. But when he curls his body against mine and slings his arm over my waist, I melt into him.

“I still don’t like you.” He breathes into my hair.

“Just don’t talk,” I reply crisply. “It’s so much better when you don’t.”

I feel his smile against me, and secretly, I smile too. Something is definitely wrong with us. We fall asleep like that, and the terrible truth is, I’ve never slept better in my life.

“YOUR TIMING IS OFF, ALEXA.”

She jerks her eyes up to mine, flinching as if I slapped her. “What?”

What the heck is her deal? Why is she so skittish around me?

“You’re a second behind everyone else. Just want to make sure you’re okay.”

She nods, but I don’t believe her. More and more, I’ve noticed that she seems distracted at practice, particularly with Audrey gone. It’s like some of these girls don’t know what to do without their fearless dictator around to give them orders.

“Well, if you need to talk, I’m here,” I offer lamely even though I know she’s one-hundred-percent team Audrey.

She blanches, and my offer only seems to add to her distress. But there isn’t time to contemplate the reasons for that now because Coach is calling us out onto the field for the halftime performance. It’s amazing what a difference in energy there is without Audrey here to torture everyone with her evil glares and catty remarks.

The crowd goes wild for us, cheering us on as we perform the routine flawlessly. It makes me feel alive, and instinctively, my gaze drifts to Landon’s across the field. His hair is damp and messy in that sexy way, and I finally understand what the authors in my favorite books mean by panty meltingly hot. That’s exactly what Landon is right now. His beautiful, powerful body is pure catnip to all the feline eyes in the stands tonight. Or basically anyone with a pulse and functioning retinas. When he catches me staring, he smirks, and I turn away quickly as we return to the sidelines to watch the game.

He left this morning before I woke up, but my sheets still smelled like him. His warmth lingered on my skin when I washed myself in the shower. When I closed my eyes and touched myself between my thighs, I replayed the scene of him under the hot spray the night before, bracing himself against the wall with one hand while he stroked himself with the other.

He blew his load on my loofah just to be a dick, and the diseased little fiend at the helm of my insanity refused to throw that away either. Now all I can seem to think about is how the hell I'm going to navigate the rest of the year when I'm so twisted up inside.

I came back here with vengeance on the brain, and so far, all I've managed to do is let Landon slip through the cracks in my defense. I need to regroup and reassess my strategy. Because this is exactly what he wants. He's weakening my shields with his sly smiles and infuriating comments. He's an actor at heart, and that's what makes him so dangerous. There's no way to discern what's real and genuine from what's just a script to him.

When the game ends, I'm the first one off the field. I can't risk bumping into him in front of our classmates because I'm not ready for that. I don't trust my face not to betray everything that went down in the pool house last night. Space. I think that's what I need right now.

At home, I tap furious thoughts into the journal app on my tablet and draft a hundred apology texts to Courtney. I don't send any of them because what can I say? That I've given up my revenge? Because I haven't. I get where Court is coming from, but she couldn't possibly understand what I feel.

Still, I miss her more than anything. It's so tempting to call her or walk to her house. But I can't bring myself to do it. We are in a cold war at school, passing each other in the halls without a word and sitting at different tables for lunch. This is the longest we've ever gone without talking, and I'm not sure how to fix it anymore.

My head is pounding as I toss my phone aside with a growl. It's already after midnight, and the noise from the party next door is grating on my last nerve. I've come to expect these parties at Landon's every weekend, so this isn't unusual by any stretch. We both agreed we would go right back to hating each other today,

but all I can think about is the fact his hands were on me last night. His mouth was on *me*. And I can't contain the jealous little beast inside who's demanding to know what he's doing over there.

Best-case scenario, he's doing exactly what I expect. Hooking up with some other girl who I'll inevitably have to add to my shit list, reminding me why I hate him in the first place. Worst-case scenario... well, is there any? What Landon does with random girls isn't my business, and I shouldn't care. But that logic isn't doing me any favors as I slide into my slippers and stomp across the boundary line into his backyard.

I'm walking into enemy territory. I half expect somebody to say something, but nobody seems to pay me any notice. I realize it might have something to do with the fact my hair is in a messy bun, and I'm wearing boring leggings and a tee shirt. All the other girls are in bikinis so small it should be a crime to charge for that much fabric. When I look at them, that nagging voice in my head is quick to remind me I'll never be that perfect. Even in a constant state of deprivation, my body refuses to conform to society's standards. It's exhausting, and life feels so unfair.

My mom always tried to tell me that bodies are meant to be different shapes and sizes because we all have different genetics and metabolisms. That's all well and good, but I wouldn't hate it if I could wear a bikini and not even think twice about all the insecurities crowding my mind. The worst part is, the guys drool all over them, reaffirming that's what they expect. Is that what Landon wants too? And if it is, then why did he send me all those treats? Is he trying to make me eat so he can laugh at me with his friends when I gain the weight back?

Every step I take toward the mansion leaves me more unsettled. My insides are twisted up into a pretzel, and my brain is full of ping pong balls bouncing in different directions. I just want one freaking night of peace without this stupid music. But as soon as I'm inside, I forget about the music and realize how irrational this idea was. My palm is still on the door handle when I freeze.

I underestimated the power of this place. The bad memories of that night are swirling around the black hole of my mind, threatening the edges of my vision. It smells the same. The liquor. The chlorine from the pool. Beer. Marijuana. Too

much expensive perfume and the overwhelmingly toxic cloud of men's spray deodorant.

I remember walking into this place. That part is clear, except I came to the front door that night. The conversation with Audrey, the drinks, the game of Truth or Grope. Almost all of that is still there in the recesses of my mind. But nothing after I threw up in the bathroom. Not until I woke up in that bed. And then the laughter. The humiliation. The horrible ache deep in my gut like I wanted to purge my very soul and sever it from this body.

Bitterness clings to my tongue as I force my gaze to the stairs, refocusing my vision. It's just a house. This space can't hold any power over me. None of them can hold any power over me.

My fingers curl around the Mace I brought with me, and I weave through the crowd, keeping my head down and focused. Luckily for me, everybody is already drunk, and they are more engrossed in the current shenanigans than me. But when I bump into Alexa, she looks horrified to see me here. Before I can even say hello, she immediately turns and scurries off as if her life depends on it.

Alright then.

Chalking it up to her following Audrey's schoolwide ban on speaking to me, I continue my path up the stairs. My hand grips the banister so hard I could swear it splinters when the guest room door comes into view. I'm grateful it's closed and I can't see inside. I won't go in there, no matter what. I'll never go in there again.

I venture a little farther down the hall where a crowd is gathered around a cracked door to another guest room. Finding a place at the back of the onlookers, I try to see what's going on, but I'm too short. Regardless, my ears work just fine, and it's impossible to miss the whispers and choked laughter.

"Dude, that's his mom!"

"Holy shit, look at her go. She's sucking him off like a freaking Hoover."

"I heard she charged him two hundred bucks."

"I wonder if she'll let me have a turn next."

I wiggle my way around people until I find a tiny gap to peer through, and that's when I see what everybody's talking about. There's a middle-aged woman

I don't recognize going to town on Andrew Crawley's crotch. I'm not sure what's more disgusting—Audrey's public blow job or this one. The slurping is painfully loud, even over the music and laughter.

Double gross.

My stomach sours as something occurs to me. Glancing around at some of the bystanders, I notice one of the stoners from my biology class.

“Whose mom is that?” I ask, referencing the comment I heard earlier.

“Dude, that's Landon's mom.” He snorts. “Fucking demented, right?”

What. The. Actual. Hell.

That is Landon's mother? She looks so haggard and thin. Like she's been on one long-ass binge with a rock group who hasn't slept for the past two decades. Everything starts to make sense now. He never talks about her. I've never seen her. Now I understand why. This would be humiliating for even the most well-adjusted person, but I have a feeling it might just be the icing on the cake for Landon.

I need to find him. I don't know why, but I just need to see that he's okay.

Moving farther down the hall, I navigate past all the drunken laughter until the walls open up into the familiar sitting area. And there, on the sofa behind a bunch of topless girls, is Landon.

His large frame is sunken into the cushions, eyes vacant as he watches the girls dance for him and his football buddies. One of them, a cheerleader, is curled up beside him, stroking his arm beneath her fingers.

It really fucking smarts. I didn't expect it to hurt so much, but it's hard to breathe when I look at him right now. It would be impossible not to notice the scratches down his neck. There's a drink in his hand, and an empty bottle of vodka on the couch. So much for not drinking, I guess.

I thought I braced myself for this, but how do you prepare for a tidal wave? It still feels like a hot knife to the hungry organ in my chest demanding all his attention. I can't believe I could have ever been so stupid.

His gaze collides with mine, and we stare at each other, silent for the longest pause. Everyone else turns to stare at me too.

“Hey, isn't that the chick you and Carson double-teamed?” The cheerleader

wrinkles her nose in my direction.

“Hey, aren’t you the chick who’s been with every guy on the football team?”
I retort.

“Landon!” she whines, shoving his arm. “Are you going to let her talk to me like that?”

He doesn’t even seem to hear her. His eyes haven’t moved from me, and it’s clear he’s out of it. For a moment, he’s still that same tortured boy I met on his doorstep two years ago. Only now, he isn’t just tortured. He’s broken too.

My breath catches. I should just go. I don’t even know why I’m still standing here. I’m humiliated and confused, and I really do hate him. *I hate him*. Maybe if I keep saying it, I’ll believe it. Because right now, the only thing I feel is pain.

“My sea and sky,” Landon murmurs as his hand dangles in the air between us. “What are you doing here?”

My pulse thrashes violently. *His sea and sky?* Since when?

The cheerleader abandons him, snarling at me as she brushes past, knocking me in the shoulder. But my focus on Landon never wavers. And shit, I need some words before I get lost in those sad gray eyes all over again.

“I came to tell you to shut it down,” I answer lamely. “Some of us are trying to sleep.”

Darkness seeps into his features, and his gaze grows distant as though he’s coming back to himself. As if, for a second, he forgot who he really was.

“What are you going to do about it, little demon?”

That word from his lips hits me like a cannon, obliterating whatever truce I may have thought we had. How many times did I see that stupid word carved into my locker? It’s one thing from them... but him? Molten hot rage bubbles up inside me, and there’s nowhere else for it to go. I take aim and fire without mercy.

“Very funny.” I cross my arms to hide the tremble in my body. “By the way, if you’re looking for your mother, she’s just down the hall, sucking off all your friends.”

My parting shot hits him where it hurts. I can see it on his face, at least momentarily, before the storm clouds roll into his eyes. I wounded him, and

there should be some satisfaction in that, but as I turn on my heel and march myself back to the pool house, I feel worse than ever.

LANDON

“I bet Coach is pretty pissed, huh?” Carson sinks his head back into the sofa and sighs.

“He hasn’t been by to see you?” I sit down on an overstuffed, ridiculously ugly floral chair. A remnant of his mother’s midlife crisis when she decided to redecorate everything before she ran off with a man half her age.

“My dad said he stopped by,” Carson mumbles. “But I was pretty out of it. It’s not like it matters, though. I won’t be back on the field before the season ends.”

He glances at his elevated knee with droopy, unfocused eyes. He looks like hell. Actually, he’s looked like hell for a while, but I didn’t want to get into it with him by nagging his ass. Two years ago, Carson would have never dreamed of showing up to practice drunk. He talked about going pro all the time. It was all he ever talked about. And then shit happened, and here we both are, two completely different people who can barely look at each other.

I’m not sure why I’m here. He probably doesn’t expect it of me. We keep up appearances at school, but we haven’t had a real conversation since I busted his nose. Now the gap between us is so wide I don’t even know where to start.

“I drank last night.” The admission tumbles from my mouth without much thought. Something about this sad, dark room feels like a confessional. Carson knows since that night, the night we don’t talk about, I’ve only drunk one time, and it ended in disaster.

His jaw flexes, and his gaze moves over my head as though he can’t even

look at me. “Did you go to her?”

“No.” I drag a hand through my hair, regretting what I’m about to say. “She came to me.”

He’s quiet, but I know what he’s thinking. I’m fucking stupid for letting her back in. This whole situation is a bonfire, and she’s the gasoline.

“I sent her away,” I add, leaving out the part where I was a dick. I also leave out the part about wanting her to stay.

Carson’s shoulders relax, and he jerks his chin in acknowledgment. He thinks I did the right thing. I can always count on him to tell me so when it comes to Kail.

“So you had a few drinks. Don’t beat yourself up about it.” He reaches for the bottle of prescription pain medication on the side table and swallows three of them.

We’re both fucked.

What happened that night with Kailani can’t be undone. I think it may have screwed us up for life. Regret is a heavy burden to carry, and maybe this is what we both deserve. Maybe it’s just easier to hate her because it’s a free pass from reality. There are days I’m convinced she’s a liar and a schemer because it’s the only thing that makes sense. But then on other days when she looks just as broken, I find myself questioning everything.

“I think the best thing we can do is stay away from her,” Carson says as if he can hear my thoughts. “She doesn’t want to hear the truth.”

“You should stay away from her,” I warn him, silently reminding myself that I can’t. I never will. She’ll hate me for last night, but this is what we do. We hurt each other. We fuck each other up in the head. And then we come back for more because we’re addicts.

“What is it about this girl?” he asks, and there’s a sorrow in his eyes that wasn’t there a minute ago. “Why her?”

I shake my head, refusing to go there. Carson could never understand. He doesn’t hook up anymore. The guy is practically a fucking monk as far as I know. Girls throw themselves at him often, but he never bites. It would be impossible for him to comprehend what it’s like to want someone beyond all

logic and reason.

“What if it happens again?” He squeezes the bottle of pills in his hand.

“What if she destroys you?”

“It won’t.” I stand abruptly and avert my eyes. “You should get some rest.”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever.”

He sounds disappointed in me, and I don’t need him to tell me I’m an asshole. My doubts are loud enough without adding anyone else’s to the mix.

“I’ll stop by again in a couple of days,” I say.

He doesn’t respond.

“WHY ARE YOU STILL HERE?”

My mother glances up from the sofa, her cigarette dangling from her lips. Her hair is a ratty mess, and she stinks like she hasn’t showered in days. Fucking disgusting.

“I told you,” she mumbles around the paper. “I’m not going anywhere until I get what I want.”

“You know it might be faster if I just gave you a box of rat poison.” I stare through her. “It’ll probably taste the same in your crack pipe.”

“What did you just say to me?” She flings herself off the couch and stomps toward me in her neon pink heels. I know what’s coming, but I don’t give a fuck anymore. I’m in the mood for some pain tonight.

“You want to kill yourself, do it somewhere else,” I spit at her.

She wraps her bony fingers around my face, her yellowed claws biting into my skin. “You think you’ve got it all figured out, don’t you? Well, let me tell you something. You don’t have a fucking clue how hard it is out there in the real world.”

“From where I’m standing, you don’t have it so bad either.” I pry her dirty fingers off my face. “When’s the last time you actually worked for anything? And I don’t mean spreading your legs to my father.”

Red blotches bloom across her face as her entire body vibrates with rage.

She's always reminded me of one of those angry bombs in the cartoons before they exploded. When I was a kid, I thought it was strange how she'd go off on me during breaks on set, and everyone else would just pretend not to notice. Their reactions affirmed this was normal, and it was okay. So, whenever she hit me, I took it because I figured maybe once she was done being mad, she would love me again. Except she never loved me. It just took me fourteen years to figure that out.

"You ungrateful little shit!" She hurls her clenched fist at me with all her might. "I will destroy your whole fucking life. Just watch me!"

Thwack.

"I wish I'd just aborted you!"

Thwack.

"You're fucking worthless! WORTHLESS!"

She peppers her assault with a diatribe of expletives, and I stand there like a punching bag, taking it. Nothing pissed her off more than when I got too big for her to push around. Now, I'm immovable. As hard as she tries, it doesn't produce the results she wants, and it burns her alive. A scream of frustration erupts from her throat as she grabs my hair and yanks until she produces a clump in her hand.

My vision blurs, and hot liquid pricks my eyes. I shove her away, wondering what the fuck I'm even doing here. Does high school matter? Does anything really matter?

"Get the fuck out of my house," I call over my shoulder as I start to walk away.

Her heels clomp after me, but she always does this. She'll probably try to throw one last fist. I'm expecting it. But I'm not expecting a fucking cannon.

Something crashes into the back of my head, shattering as I stumble forward in a stupor. Blood trickles down my temple as my knees collapse onto the tile. Suzy launches herself onto my back and jams the cherry of her cigarette into my neck as my face hits the marble.

"Give. Me. My. Fucking. Money!"

For a few delirious moments, I can't seem to move. The smell of burning

flesh makes my stomach revolt, and all I can think about is how much I want this to be over. Why can't she just fucking go away?

When her cigarette dies, she wraps her hands around my neck and tries to squeeze the life out of me. She wishes I was dead. Then she could have everything in my bank account. The only thing that matters to her.

I pry her fingers off my throat and fling her hundred-pound frame off me. She lands on her bony ass with a shriek and then tries to come at me again when I stagger to my feet.

“Leave me the fuck alone!” I roar in her face.

She rakes her nails down my cheek, snarling back at me. “You ruined everything!”

I grab her by the hair and manage to get the door open long enough to toss her out and slam it back in her face. That doesn't stop her from clawing at it or screaming every thought that infects her mind.

Blood soaks into my shirt, and my head throbs where she split it open with what I can now see was the lamp from the hall table. It looks like a fucking crime scene in here, and I'm pretty sure I'm going to need stitches. The longer I look at it, the woozier I get, and by the time I make it to the back door, I'm not even convinced I'll get farther than the lawn.

I can see her window from my yard. So close, but so far away.

My sea and sky.

KAILANI

I'm lying in bed, half-reading a book on my tablet when I hear what sounds like a muffled groan outside my window. My body goes still, and I listen for the sound again, but when it doesn't come, I'm convinced I'm losing my mind.

It's late, and I should have been asleep hours ago. School is going to suck tomorrow. But I can't stop thinking about what happened last night. I have a bad habit of replaying things over in my head, cringing every time I think about that stupid word.

Demon.

Words aren't supposed to break bones, but I feel like they do when they come from Landon. He's made jokes about me not being human before, but he's never said that stupid word. The word Audrey decided was so fitting for me after the party. Landon using it too feels like a slap in the face. Like it really was them against me the whole time, and I was just collateral damage.

But am I really?

That question will haunt me until the day I die. Because when you can't remember, how can you deny that you didn't do anything wrong?

I squeeze my eyes shut and wish it wasn't all so complicated. I wish I didn't feel so uncertain about him. I wish I could just hate him for real. On my worst days, I wish I'd never even come back.

Something thumps against the wall beneath my window, and this time, I know I'm not imagining it. I reach for the Mace on the nightstand and bolt

upright, turning on the lamp. I'm half expecting someone to be there in the dark window, but nobody is. After a few long, painfully silent seconds, I creep closer to the frame and peek outside with my weapon clutched between my fingers. And there he is. Landon, faceplanted in the grass, probably drunk.

Cracking open the window just enough to speak, I yell at him. "Go away!"

He doesn't move. At first glance, I think he must have passed out, but when I shine the light from my phone on him to get a better look, I gasp. His shirt is bloody, and there's a gash on the back of his head that looks bad.

"Landon?"

He groans.

"Just... stay there!" I tell him.

My bare feet slap against the tile floor as I dart outside in my pajamas, meeting him where's he's lying beneath the window. I kneel beside him, frantically checking him over, and not really sure what to do.

"What happened?" I ask.

Another groan.

"Kail." His voice is rougher than I've ever heard it. "I need you."

I try to roll him onto his side, but it's like trying to shift a concrete wall with your bare hands. He's too big for me to help on my own, and whatever's going on, he does need help.

"Shit." I frown when something occurs to me. It's not the greatest solution, but I don't see any other choice. "Stay here, okay? Don't go anywhere. I'll be right back."

He mumbles something about the sea, and I assure him it's going to be okay. But really, what do I know? Until we can get him inside, I have no clue how bad it is.

I sprint across the lawn and into the main house, screeching across the tile floor. Just as I'm about to fling myself up the stairs, Theo's voice in the kitchen stops me.

"Kailani? Are you alright?"

He's standing by the kitchen sink in his pajamas, rinsing out his nightly cup of milk.

“Oh, thank god you’re awake.” I run to him and grab his arm, dragging him outside with me. “I need your help.”

“What’s going on?” he asks as our feet squish into the moist grass.

My breath comes in jolted fragments of words. “Landon. Hurt. Help.”

Theo springs into action, taking off in the direction I pointed, and it’s the first time I see him in a whole new light. To me, he’s always just been my mother’s husband. I didn’t let myself get close to him, even when he tried, and nothing he had to say registered as important. But now, he feels more important than ever. Before Theo decided to hang up his military uniform and cash in on his inheritance, he was a combat medic. He can help Landon. He’ll know what to do.

When I reach the pool house behind him, he’s already assessing the situation with a cool efficiency I’d never be capable of.

“Bring me a flashlight, a blanket, water, and the first-aid kit,” he orders.

My mind is a jumble of thoughts as I race back into the pool house and gather the items he requested, carrying them to him as fast as I can. When I return, Theo has Landon rolled onto his side, examining his face. But it isn’t until he shines the flashlight that we see the extent of the damages.

There are claw marks down his cheek like a rabid animal attacked him, and there’s an ugly round burn mark on his neck. Dried blood coats his temple, and there’s a big patch on his scalp where he’s missing a clump of hair.

It makes my heart ache unlike anything I’ve ever seen before. And right now, I don’t care if it’s right or wrong. I’m miserable over this.

“Landon, can you tell me what happened?” Theo asks.

A stifled sound escapes me as I collapse onto the grass beside them. I hate that I react this way whenever something horrible happens, but it’s just the way I’m hardwired. My natural response is to freak out and cry, and I tell myself that’s all this is. That’s why I’m panicking.

Landon tries to talk, but his voice is too hoarse to understand. Theo helps him take a drink from the water bottle, and then he tries again.

“There’s a gash on your head,” Theo says. “These wounds tend to bleed a lot, but it should be okay once you get stitches. We can take you to the hospital,

and they'll check for a concussion."

"No hospital," Landon growls, and he seems to be coming around, but not enough that I trust him to make any decisions for himself.

"Yes, you need to go to the hospital," I argue.

"No." He meets my gaze, and the pain in his eyes nearly chokes the life out of me. "The media."

That's all he needs to say. Whatever happened, he doesn't want anyone finding out. And he doesn't trust that someone won't leak the story to the press if he goes to the hospital. It's the first time I've stopped to think about what that's like for him. He can't even get medical attention without someone invading his privacy.

"We can give them a fake name," Theo suggests.

"No," he grunts. "Just take me home."

Theo sighs. "Kail, can you grab his other side?"

I position myself on the opposite side of Landon, and between the three of us, we manage to get him upright and on his feet. Theo steers us into the pool house, where we deposit him on the same gray lounge he decided to make his bed on the other night before I discovered him.

"I'll stitch him up here." Theo pulls a stool up beside the lounge. "Can you grab the first-aid kit?"

I retrieve the kit from outside and any other supplies I think he might need while he works on cleaning up Landon's wounds. Over the course of the next twenty minutes, after hydrating and resting, Landon seems to be coherent enough to talk in complete sentences. Theo asks him a series of questions about the current date and year and then tests his vision with his finger. Landon answers everything clearly, and after he gets annoyed by all the questions, he makes a startling admission.

"I don't have a concussion," he insists quietly. "It's just the blood. There was so much of it. I think I just got woozy."

I think it's the first time I've ever seen Landon embarrassed. But this strangely intimate detail relieves me more than he could know. It makes him human. It almost makes us even for my ridiculous fit outside.

“Well, that explains a lot.” Theo snaps off his gloves and starts to clean up the supplies. “But I’d still advise you to see a doctor. If not tonight, then tomorrow.”

“I’m okay now,” Landon assures him. “Thanks, Mr. Grant.”

“Is there someone we can call for you?” Theo asks, but his voice betrays a hesitancy that leads me to believe he knows more about Landon’s situation than he’s letting on. “You shouldn’t be alone.”

“He can stay here,” I volunteer. “I’ll keep an eye on him, just for tonight.”

Theo dithers as he tosses a heap of gauze and wrappers in the rubbish can. I know what he’s thinking. It isn’t his job to parent me. He’s not my birth father, and he knows my mom trusts my judgment. Not to mention the fact that they’ve obviously developed some kind of relationship with Landon in my absence, which means they must trust him too. I’m almost eighteen, and they aren’t naïve enough to believe I’m a saint. My mom has given me multiple embarrassing talks about the birds and the bees, and to make matters worse, she bought me a jumbo box of condoms, just in case.

I think Theo seems to be aware of all these things, and ultimately, he agrees, albeit a little reluctantly.

“I’ll be in the house if you need anything.” He heads for the door and then pauses before he leaves. “Oh, and I’ll leave it up to you two to tell your mother about this.”

“Thanks, Theo.” I smile at him, and he smiles back, and it feels like some sort of strange barrier has just broken between us. With a quiet nod, he shuts the door behind him, leaving me alone with Landon.

“Still hate me?” Landon tilts his head back to look up at me.

“Always.” I offer him a weak smile.

I’m too vulnerable to admit that I don’t. At least not right at this moment.

“Tell me what happened,” I plead.

“You got anything to eat here?” He perks up with a sudden interest in anything other than this conversation.

It bothers me that he doesn’t want to talk about it, but I also get it. There’s value in secrets. If he told me his, it would mean he’d have to trust me with

them, and we both know he doesn't.

With that knowledge in mind, I walk to the fridge and open the door, listing off the items inside. "I have yogurt, apples, string cheese, cupcakes—"

"Cupcakes?" he repeats. "How about a couple of those."

I grab two of the cupcakes my mom baked this week, and my stomach rumbles in want. I've been staring at them in the fridge for three days, only allowing myself a small taste of frosting here and there. But right now, I could use a sugar high if I was feeling reckless. But I'm not. Definitely not.

"Here." I hold them out for him.

While my hands are full, he tugs me onto his lap, startling a squeak from my mouth. He plants my ass right over his thighs, so I'm straddling him. When I start to wriggle around, he grabs my waist.

"Hold still, unless you want to wake the beast in my pants."

That does still me. "What are we doing right now?"

Being this close to him feels... intimate. So close, I can see the tiny fragments of kaleidoscopic color in his eyes. So close, I can feel his chest drawing oxygen into his lungs when he breathes. I want to taste that oxygen.

"You said you'd take care of me, remember? I'm pretty certain this will make me feel better. Your ass, my lap. A sugar rush. What else do we need?"

"Pervert." My lips tilt, but I stop them before they turn into a full-blown smile.

His fingers skim against my bare thighs, and I nearly jump out of my skin. My shorts have ridden up, and I'm quite certain he can see every little dimple and flaw. It's unnerving, and I can't stop myself from cringing when I imagine what I must look like to him right now.

"I'm crushing you." I try to wriggle away again, and he pulls me closer yet, and this time, I do feel the beast in his pants. Holy moly...

"It would take at least five or six of you pint-sized hellions to crush me," he boasts proudly.

I want to ask him who he's kidding, but I don't. It doesn't look like he's lying. In fact, it looks like he's perfectly comfortable like this. Landon is a big guy, but I always just assumed since he's drop-dead gorgeous himself, he'd want

one of those tall, wispy model types.

He steals a cupcake out of my left hand and sets it on the table beside him before nodding to the other one. “That one’s for you.”

“Oh, I’m not hungry,” I lie.

“Sell that bullshit to someone else,” he says. “Eat the damn cake, Kail. Enjoy it.”

I stare at it, giving just the tiniest shake of my head. I want to but giving in would be weak. And I don’t ever want to be weak again.

“What are you so afraid of?” he asks.

“I…” Words fail me. There’s no way I could explain this to him so he’d ever understand. And there’s no way I could ever be that vulnerable in front of him. He’d probably use it against me the first chance he got.

“If you were my girl, I’d rather see you happy and healthy with thick thighs and a bouncy ass than miserable and starving to be some magazine standard.”

His girl? What?

I’m still trying to wrap my head around that concept and what it all means when he grazes the curve of my hip with his giant palm.

“Let me tell you a secret, little pineapple.” He leans in closer to whisper against my lips as he grabs a handful of my ass. “Guys like this. When they look at you, they see a bunch of fun pillowy toys. They think about your tits bouncing in their face. Your ass grinding in their lap. Your soft, naked body rubbing up against theirs. They aren’t even remotely considering what size you are.”

“Guys like that?” I blink at him. “Or you do?”

My face burns as soon as the words leave my mouth. But it just seems too impossible to believe. How could Landon want something so imperfect when he’s the definition of perfection? I mean, if I was the kind of girl who was into all these muscles and hard lines and beautiful faces. Which, I’m totally not. Definitely not. Because he’s still my enemy, I think. I’m pretty sure.

He tilts his hips up, so I can’t deny how hard he is against me. Hard and… freaking huge. “What do you think? Does this mean I like it?”

I swallow. Then my thighs squeeze against him reflexively, and he smirks. He knows I’m thinking about it.

“Did you like those half-naked girls at your party?” I sound like a jealous little beast.

“Why?” His eyes are teasing. “Want me all to yourself?”

“No.” Now the heat is creeping down my neck. He doesn’t even pretend not to notice it.

“You’re a terrible liar.” He brushes my hair back over my shoulders. “And just because you see a bunch of half-naked girls at my house doesn’t mean I’m doing anything with them. It’s their choice to take off their clothes. That’s just how people...”

His words drift off when he clamps his jaw shut, but I think I know what he was going to say. That’s just how people are around him.

“Here, let me see that.” Landon gestures for the cupcake in my hand.

I hand it over, feeling a jolt in my belly as he peels away the wrapper and licks the frosting from his thumb. Something about that motion reminds me of the way he licked me. My thighs are squeezing the life out of him now, and I’m trying to snap myself out of the wayward fantasy when he shoves the cake right between my lips, smearing frosting all over them.

“What the—” I mumble around the gooey frosting, horrified.

Our eyes lock, and he grunts out a chuckle as he takes the cupcake away, only to replace it with his lips. It’s so unexpected that I freeze for a second before I melt into him. He tastes like ice-cold water and buttercream.

“It feels good to be bad.” He teases the words against my lips. “Doesn’t it?”

Responding isn’t an option. Cupcake forgotten, I just want to eat him. But Landon is insistent, only offering me more of his lips between bites of the cake in his hand. I know what he’s trying to do. He’s tricking me into eating it. But I don’t care because all I can think about is my next taste of him. And before I know it, the cake is all gone, and I’m wondering how the hell that just happened.

“Good?” He swipes some frosting from my lips with his finger and sucks it off.

My whole body breaks into goose bumps, and I nod. God, I just ate an entire cupcake from those fingers. And it isn’t enough. I need more. I need...

“Can I just...?” I’m dragging his shirt up over his head before I can stop

myself. When I toss it onto the floor, Landon's eyes flash.

"I just want to..." I drag my palms over the hard planes of his pecs before they drift down to the ridges of his abs. And before I know it, they are grazing that dark trail of hair that disappears into the band of his sweatpants.

I close my eyes, so I don't overthink it. I just want to feel him against my palm. See what it's like. Maybe I'll remember...

My fingers slip into his waistband, and I hear him suck in a sharp breath. He's wearing briefs, and at first, I just slide my palm over them, surprised by the heat I feel there. So, so hot.

My hips roll a little on instinct, and Landon stifles a groan. When I open my eyes again to meet his, I'm surprised by how out of control he looks. His eyes are only half-open, and his head is leaned back against the cushion, exposing his vulnerable throat where his pulse is beating against the flesh wildly.

"Does it... feel good?"

He grunts a response, his fingers digging into my hips. It makes me brave, and I slip my fingers into his briefs this time, wrapping them around the hard, solid flesh.

Landon hisses out a breath and closes his eyes when I drag my palm up the shaft. Yeah, I've read about this in *Cosmo*. I'm not a pro by any means, but I think I have the basics down.

After a few soft tugs, I fall into a natural rhythm, squeezing him in my palm as I slide up and back down. His body is open and defenseless. So, while my hand is in his pants, I lean forward and kiss his neck the way I may have thought about a million times before. When I do, his cock jumps against my palm, and he whispers.

"Do it again."

I do it again. And again and again and again. Sucking and biting at him like he belongs to me. Like this night will never end. He tastes so intoxicating I can't seem to stop. And at some point, my hand comes out of his pants, and both of them are touching every inch of skin I can reach while he grinds my hips over his erection.

The sounds ripping from his throat captivate me like nothing else ever has. I

didn't know I could do this to him. I didn't know I had so much power. It's a high like I've never experienced, and all I can think about is how I don't want it to end.

Between my thighs, the friction is getting to me too. I can feel it in the tightening of my muscles. The tingling in my nipples. When Landon sees them scraping against the material of my white tank top, he slides a palm underneath it and brushes his fingers over the tight bud.

Game fucking over.

I come without warning, biting my lip to try to stifle the sound. But my modesty is forgotten when Landon drags the tank top up and dips his head forward to suck my nipple into his mouth. His hand squeezes my ass, harder and harder, and then he groans against my skin as warmth leaks into the fabric of his sweats, soaking into my thighs too.

He's still got my nipple in his mouth, clenching his fingers around me reflexively as he falls back against the cushion, dragging me with him. He looks up at me, and I know I've just won this round.

Eat your heart out, Landon Blackwood.

KAILANI

Audrey is back.

The low whispers of her return have rippled through the school all morning. The first time I see her is in third period when she flounces in, ignoring everyone who can't seem to take their eyes off her. She only has laser focus for me, and she makes it clear when she pauses beside my desk, bending down to hiss in my ear.

"I know it was you."

I ignore her, but all day, tension simmers inside me, winding me up so tight I can't think straight. I don't know what she's going to do. At least not until I head for the gym after school to get ready for dance, only to be interrupted by the principal's assistant.

"We need you in the office, Kailani."

I follow her like a zombie, and unlike last time, there isn't a committee waiting for me on the other side of the door. It's just Mr. Dawson and Audrey's mother. Before I sit down, I already know this is a witch trial, and I'm about to burn.

"Is everything okay?" I ask quietly.

Mr. Dawson sighs. "Mrs. Rothschild has come to me with some rather disturbing allegations, Miss Hale. I'd like to address those with you."

"Okay."

Outwardly, I'm trying to stay cool, but inwardly, I'm totally freaking out. This must be about the video from the party. Audrey actually ratted me out.

“Is it true that you went to the Rothschild’s home and physically assaulted Audrey before turning on her mother?” he asks.

“What?” The blood drains from my limbs.

“Mrs. Rothschild says you attacked Audrey after the complaint regarding the dance routines, and furthermore, you’ve been threatening her at school as well. There are also two additional witnesses who support these claims—”

“That isn’t true!” I gape at Mrs. Rothschild, who’s as cool as a cucumber. “You know that never happened.”

“Deny it all you want.” She sniffs as she gestures to a stack of photos on the principal’s desk. “The evidence doesn’t lie.”

I examine the photos of Audrey’s scratched-up arms and neck in disbelief. There are also a few bruises for good measure. I always knew she was nuts, but this is borderline sociopathic.

“I didn’t do that!” I focus on Mr. Dawson, silently imploring him to believe me. “I swear it.”

He looks exhausted, and I can only hope he knows how manipulative Audrey and her mother are. But those hopes are dashed in the next sentence.

“I’ve spoken to your mother. She’s on her way to pick you up.”

“But I have dance!” I blurt.

“Pending the investigation into these claims, you won’t be allowed to participate on the dance team until further notice.”

“That’s not fair.” My body vibrates with anger, and I know it’s only proving their point. I look like I can’t control myself. But I can’t help it. This just isn’t right.

“Please gather your things and meet your mother in the parking lot,” Mr. Dawson instructs me. “You can attend classes until we come to a decision, but in the meantime, you will keep your distance from Audrey Rothschild, or it will result in immediate expulsion.”

My legs feel like noodles when I stand and grab my backpack, but apparently, the threats hanging over my head aren’t bad enough. Audrey’s mother has one last parting shot for me.

“Oh, and you might want to tell your mother to get herself a good lawyer. I

already have.”

“I CAN’T DO THIS ANYMORE, KAILANI.”

My mother stares out the window of her BMW because she doesn’t want to look at me or the melted cup of mint chocolate chip ice cream in my lap. This was what we always used to do. Whenever there was a bad day, or even a good one, she’d buy me ice cream, and we’d talk it out. She always said ice cream could fix almost anything. The memory isn’t as sweet anymore, and I know it’s because I’ve tainted it.

“I didn’t do this.” My voice wavers. “I swear, Mama.”

There’s a long beat of silence before she looks at me again. “Don’t you think I know that?”

I blink through the tears, confused. “You do?”

“Of course, I do,” she says. “Lily Rothschild doesn’t have a conscience or a soul. But you do. And I know my daughter. I know you wouldn’t do the things they said you did.”

Guilt consumes me. She still looks at me like I’m the girl who made her flower necklaces as a child. She doesn’t know I’ve gone bad, like a spoiled apple. I’m still shiny on the outside, but inside, I’m all rotten.

“I didn’t do what they say,” I admit. “But I did want to get back at Audrey. And I did something I shouldn’t have.”

“Tell me what happened,” she pleads.

But I can’t. I can’t admit all the ugly and terrible truths. The party. The reason I left. The blackmail photos of Jared and the video of Audrey. Pushing away my best friend. This place has turned me into a monster and saying it out loud will only confirm what I’m not ready to face. I can’t win. There is no such thing as revenge. The only one who loses here is me.

“Audrey’s just horrible,” I blurt. “She’s had it out for me from the start.”

My mom looks away again. “Kail, I’m beginning to wonder if you were right. Maybe this isn’t the best place for you right now.”

“What?” My hands go numb around the stupid cup of ice cream. “You don’t want me here?”

“Of course I want you here.” Emotion chokes her voice when she reaches out to tuck a piece of hair behind my ear. “But I’m afraid for you. This isn’t normal teenage stuff. You’re not eating like you should. You’re keeping secrets. You just seem so angry all the time. I’m worried if I don’t do something now, it’s only going to get worse.”

“What do you mean do something now?” I whisper.

“There’s a program.” Her shoulders shake as she lays it out for me. “It’s a residential in-treatment therapy. Maybe they can help you work through some of these issues since I seem to be failing—”

“You aren’t sending me away!” I yell at her.

Her eyes widen as she snaps her gaze back to mine in shock. I’ve never yelled at her before. Not like this. She used to be my best friend. My confidante. And now, it feels as though we’re strangers. Because this secret is poisoning everything. My own mother wants me to go away. It hurts. It hurts so much I don’t know what else to do. So, I open the car door and bolt down the street.

She doesn’t follow.

LANDON

I spend every night of the next week sleeping on the lounge in Kail's pool house. She leaves the door unlocked for me, and the gesture doesn't go unnoticed. Neither does the extra blanket she left there. But I wait until after she's asleep to come in and leave before she wakes up.

Sometimes, she stirs, and I can feel her eyes on me. Neither of us says a word. She doesn't ask me why I'm there, and I don't ask her why she's been moping around all week. Things are starting to feel too familiar. Too comfortable. I can't let myself get wrapped up in her problems when I have my own to deal with.

Suzy has come knocking on my house a few times since she left, but I ignore her and hope she'll eventually get the message. It's a dangerous game to play with her because I never know what she might do next. That's why I'm here in the pool house. It's become more comfortable to me than my own home. A truth I don't want to analyze too closely.

Every night, Kail's mom invites me to dinner, and I go because it feels good to have someone give a fuck for a change. Kail and her mom have always had a pretty solid relationship, but the new cold war at the dinner table hasn't gone unnoticed. It's awkward and tense as Alana and Theo make conversation and ask me about football while Kailani stews in her silence. Tonight, though, in the middle of dessert, the tides turn.

Kail's mom serves up a cheesecake, and I'm on my second slice when they start whisper arguing in the kitchen. Except they don't realize both Theo and I

can hear them.

“You promised me you were going to try,” Alana says.

“How am I supposed to think about food when the school could decide to expel me at any moment? I could lose everything.”

Kailani snuffles, and the piece of cheesecake I’m chewing gets lodged in my throat. When I glance at Theo, there’s a grim expression on his face.

“Whatever happens, we’ll figure it out, Kail. I promise you.”

Footsteps echo through the house, followed by the slam of a door. Alana is the only one to return, and she looks defeated as she sits down and stares at the plate of cheesecake in front of her. I polish off my dessert quietly, trying to figure out how to approach this situation. But as it turns out, Alana figures it out for both of us.

“Landon, do you know what’s going on between her and Audrey?”

“Audrey?” I repeat.

“Honey—” Theo reaches out to touch her hand, but she shakes her head.

“No, I can’t handle the secrecy anymore. I need to know what would make her do something so horrible.”

“What did Audrey do?” I ask, understanding without a doubt that it is Audrey she’s referring to.

“She went to the school and told them Kail attacked her,” Alana says. “They’ve already suspended her from the dance team while they investigate, but now they’re threatening expulsion too. I just can’t figure out why Audrey would do something like that.”

The beautiful dinner she made sours in my gut. From a young age, I came to understand that people will say and do things that can damage you forever without a second thought. As long as it benefits them, they don’t care about the fallout. It’s happened to me more times than I can count. Betrayal is a constant expectation in my life, but it shouldn’t be for Kail. It’s one thing for petty teen rivalry. But getting her expelled from school? Audrey is trying to destroy her. I’ll be damned if I’m ever going to let that happen.

“What day did Audrey say this happened?” I ask through gritted teeth.

“On the thirteenth.” Alana frowns.

“Audrey is jealous of her.” I pick up my plate to carry it into the sink. “That’s all this is. But I’m going to handle it, Mrs. Grant. Just trust me, okay?”

PRINCIPAL DAWSON IS QUIET AS HE STUDIES THE VIDEO FOOTAGE ON MY PHONE. It’s rock solid, and he knows it, but he watches it several times anyway, checking the timestamps.

“As you can see, she was home that entire day. What they told you is a lie.”

He sighs and hands the phone back to me. “I’m going to need you to hold onto that footage.”

“It’s already been sent to Alana’s attorney,” I bluff.

“What a fortunate coincidence that you happen to have a camera facing her pool house,” he observes.

“Yeah, it turned out that way.”

It’s a bullshit lie, and we both know it. That camera is aimed directly at her pool house because I’m twisted like that. After everything went sideways at that party sophomore year, I had the whole exterior fitted with security cameras. When Kailani moved back, that one may have been adjusted so I could keep an eye on her. But it will be a cold day in hell before I ever admit it.

“Thank you for bringing this to my attention,” Principal Dawson says. “I’ll be in touch if I need anything else.”

KAILANI

I can still hear Mrs. Rothschild ranting like a lunatic when Mom and I shut the office door. We spill out into the hallway with equal sighs of relief. After Mr. Dawson called us in today, I was convinced I was walking to my doom. I'd already prepared my last resort battle speech, but as it turned out, it wasn't necessary.

The principal informed us an anonymous student came forward with evidence that proved I couldn't have attacked Audrey. I don't know what it was, or who my unknown saint is, but I've never been so relieved in my life.

"See." Mom squeezes me in her arms. "Good always triumphs over evil."

"Yeah." I choke out my agreement, but it feels like a dreadful lie. I'm not good. And if I'm being honest, I'm not even sure I deserve such a lucky break anymore.

"Want to go get some celebratory ice cream?" She wiggles her brows eagerly.

"I have dance practice," I remind her. "I don't want to miss any more."

"Oh, right." She smiles and shakes her head. "Maybe later then."

We part ways in the hall, and I head for the gym, where Coach Lopez is already waiting for me. She surprises me with a hug when I walk in, but the warm reception doesn't last long. Audrey is staring daggers at me over her shoulder, and any relief I may have had is washed away by one glaring certainty. This isn't even close to over. If I thought she might receive any punishment for her unfounded accusations, it would be laughable.

“Go get changed,” Coach tells me. “We’ll do warmups, and then you can run through the routines with the team.”

TONIGHT, AT DINNER, I EAT EVERYTHING ON MY PLATE. MY MOM LOOKS LIKE she’s about to throw a victory party, and admittedly, there’s an all-around good energy hovering in the air. Landon is here too, and it’s strange how normal it feels to have him at the dinner table every night. I’m still curious why his mom doesn’t seem to care, but I’m too wary to poke at those types of intimate questions. He seems to understand I’m thinking about him, smirking at me as Theo peppers him with questions about his future plans.

“I haven’t decided yet,” he answers unapologetically. “I’ve been working most of my life. I think what I really want to do after I graduate is take a break. Travel, maybe. Then I’ll figure out the rest as I go.”

“How very bohemian of you,” I remark dryly.

He shoots me a look that feels like a spanking. Honestly, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with his plan. But I don’t necessarily like the idea of him traveling around the world to amazing places with some random beautiful women on his arm. Because why wouldn’t it be that way?

As if he can sense my irrational jealousy, his hand slides up beneath the hem of my skirt, cupping me between my thighs. I nearly choke on my water, and he grins, telling me I should be more careful.

“Well, I think it’s a great idea.” Mom adds another heaping of vegetables to his plate. “You deserve a break. And anyone who pretends to have it all figured out at eighteen is only kidding themselves.”

Landon toys with me through the thin cotton fabric of my underwear, rubbing his fingers against the wetness that’s already gathered there. My face feels hot, and I’m convinced everyone can see me about to lose it. Then to my dismay, he drags his hand away and goes about eating his dinner with an infuriating smirk that tells me he’s quite pleased with himself.

I slip my hand beneath the table and slowly graze the length of his thigh until

my fingers are brushing over the warm, hard bulge in his jeans. Landon pauses mid-chew to look over at me with smoldering eyes, but I turn my attention away from him as Theo speaks.

“What about you, Kail? Any thoughts on choosing a college yet?”

“I don’t know.” I squeeze Landon’s jean clad erection in my grasp and smile when he reaches beneath the table to pry me off. He isn’t the only one who can play dirty. “Maybe I’ll be a rebel and take a gap year too.”

It’s a lie because I do know what I want, but I’m not brave enough to say it out loud just yet. Regardless, my mom nods along in agreement. She isn’t the sort to pressure me into having everything mapped out right now. She had me when she was only eighteen and went to school later, so she’s okay with me taking some time to figure out who I am. But the truth is, my dream is a simple one. Sometimes, I think, maybe too simple. It’s hard not to feel pressure when most of my classmates will do huge things with their lives. It’s no secret that BMA churns out record numbers of elite professionals. But I just want to teach the thing I’m passionate about. I want to open a dance studio of my own.

“I have a hunch Kail’s going to do what she loves best,” Mom says. “But no pressure. Whatever you decide, we will support your dream.”

“Thanks, Mama.” I beam, but it’s hard not to miss the sadness in Landon’s eyes.

I know I’m lucky to have a mother who would love me no matter what I choose to be. She’s proud of me for the little things, and not everyone has that. It makes me think of Courtney and the fact that her parents are always pressuring her to be what they want. They are really hard on her, and I think that’s why she acts as though she just doesn’t care about anything.

I’ve been a shitty friend to her, and I need to fix that. But I also need to figure out what’s going on with Landon and his mom because I’m sensing things aren’t okay in that department either. Not that it’s any of my business.

“Thanks for dinner, Mrs. Grant.” Landon takes his plate and mine to the sink. “It was amazing, like always.”

“I’m just glad you could be here.” My mom joins him in the kitchen and envelops him in a hug, which seems to catch him off guard. The tiny woman

clinging to his huge frame would be almost comical if it weren't for the frozen expression on his face as his arms hang limply at his sides. It's the strangest reaction. Doesn't his mom ever hug him?

"I have some homework to do." He extricates himself from her arms and prepares to make a quick escape. "I'll see you tomorrow."

After he leaves, I'm still thinking about the incident as I help my mom wash the pots and pans. I haven't done it in a while because I was so busy planning everyone else's destruction. But it feels good to have this familiar routine. Almost like things are getting back to normal somehow. The only thing that's changed is me.

"Do you think it bothers Landon's mom that he's over here all the time?" I ask as she hands me a pan to dry.

My mom scrubs a spatula for way too long, her eyes shining with sadness. She definitely knows more than she's let onto.

"I'm not really sure, honey."

"Is there something you aren't telling me?" I turn to study her, hoping I can get her to open up.

Mom shakes her head. "No, it's not that. But you know how people are in this town. I've heard a few stories about her from some of the other moms who grew up with her. The way they tell things, it just seems like maybe she's not the nicest person."

"What kind of stories?" I prop my hip against the counter and watch as she continues to scrub.

"A few people have mentioned that she's never really been able to pull herself together enough to be a good parent." Mom's voice lowers like she's too ashamed to say the words out loud. "There are rumors that she's a heavy drinker, and maybe some other things. I don't know, Kail. I just think he needs someone in his life to let him know they care about him without any ulterior motive. That poor boy has been through hell growing up in the spotlight. Having his every move criticized and dissected. I can't imagine the damage that must have caused him as a child. You can see it in his eyes. He acts like everything is fine, but deep down, I think he's lonely and hurt."

My throat feels tight when I nod, and here comes that reaction I hate so much. It's almost an automatic response for me. I can't watch those sad children commercials or any kind of true crime stories. I start blubbering on sight because I'm an emotional wreck. When I think back to the first time I met Landon, I know what my mom says is true. I'd never seen anyone so... damaged. It was there in his eyes, and I think it still is. He's just gotten better at hiding it.

"He's lucky to have you in his corner." I hug my mom, squeezing her tighter than ever.

"He's lucky to have all of us." She smiles back at me, completely unaware that my only intention was to destroy him.

KAILANI

After I slip out the door, I'm trudging back to the pool house when I stop in the middle of the lawn. I don't want to go back in there. I know how it will go if I do. I'll spend the entire night overthinking things. Landon stopped sneaking in to sleep on the lounge a couple of days ago, and it feels so empty and quiet in there now. It feels lonely, and I can only imagine how lonely his huge house must be. Is that why he always says yes to the parties, even though he appears to hate them? Is it just so he has people there to fill the cavernous space?

What does he do when he goes home? Does he just sit there by himself, waiting until the next dinner at our house?

My pulse slows as I pivot in that direction to look. He's probably busy. He said he has homework. I shouldn't even wonder what he's doing at all. But that little truth doesn't stop me from venturing over the property line. I head for the front of his house, but as soon as I round the corner, I'm startled by the woman on the stairs. She's pounding her fist on the door, screaming at Landon to let her in. She sounds drunk, and I recognize the stringy hair and skinny legs. She's the same woman from the party who was giving blowies to Landon's football buddies.

"Open up, you prick!" she yells. "I know you're in there."

I'm too stunned to move. And for a second, I'm glad she hasn't noticed me because my eyes are nearly bugging out of my head as I watch her completely lose her shit. All the things my mother said she heard about this woman are

starting to appear painfully true.

I'm not sure how old she is, but her face is puckered like an old rotten lemon. Her hair is ratty and knotted and tinged with brassy streaks and what I think might be dirt. The expletives fly from her mouth in a raspy way that sounds like she's smoked so many cigarettes, her lungs are about to give out. She doesn't look like a woman who has her shit together. I can't even imagine her raising a child. *How did he ever survive?*

"Open the goddamned door!" she screeches again. "Or I'll make you pay for real! You think I don't have shit to sell? I do. I can have your name splashed across every newspaper in this country. Just you wait and see."

My heart nearly drops out of my chest, and I don't realize I wheezed out loud until she turns around and meets my gaze.

"Who the hell are you?" she demands.

"Nobody." I pivot on my heel and run because my reptile brain is screaming predator, but to my horror, she comes after me.

"Who are you?" She's hot on my heels, and she doesn't stop even after I cross the property line.

"I'm just one of Landon's friends," I gulp out.

"Good. I want to talk to you!"

"Sorry, I can't right now." I pick up speed, and so does she.

I'm tempted to bolt for the main house, but I'm too close to the pool house now. The only chance I have is to get inside and lock her out because clearly there's something wrong with this woman.

"Stop." She grabs my arm, and I try to shake her off.

"Don't touch me!" I snap. "You don't even know me."

"I bet you think he's so perfect, don't you?" She digs her nails into my skin as I spin to face her. "You don't know how he treats his own mother. He threw me away, and he'll throw you away too. Just you wait and see."

Her eyes look like two huge black marbles in her head. I can't tell if she's drunk, high, or just insane. This can't seriously be the woman who gave birth to Landon.

Beautiful Landon.

“Leave me alone!” I pry her fingers off me and stare at her in disgust. “How can you even call yourself a mother? It’s no surprise he doesn’t want to be around you.”

It happens in slow motion. At least that’s how it feels. I see her wrench her arm back. I feel her palm collide with my face like a wrecking ball, and my legs nearly give out as I stumble backward. I’m stunned. Immobile. I can’t even speak. I’ve never been hit before. Ever. It’s almost incomprehensible that a mother could even do that. But then I remember Landon. His head, his scratched-up face, that burn mark.

“It was you.” The accusation falls from my lips helplessly as I clutch my face. “You attacked him, didn’t you?”

“Oh, please.” She cackles. “You’re just as delusional as he is.”

“Suzy.” The dark and thunderous voice behind me calls out, rumbling over my shoulder like an earthquake.

I don’t have to turn to know it’s Landon. He’s in my pool house. Thank god for his stalking tendencies.

“So, this is your girlfriend, huh?” Suzy’s eyes bounce between the two of us. “Is that where all your money is going? To your little whore?”

I’m not sure what comes over me. Maybe it’s instinct or emotion, or just the bottled-up rage erupting inside me. But when my fist collides with her face, it feels like I’ve lost my grip on reality. I’ve never hit anyone before. I didn’t even realize I knew how. But the heat of the moment teaches me I’m capable of anything.

“What the fuck?” She stumbles back with a yelp, clutching her nose as Landon inserts himself between us. But I’m not even close to done yet.

“You leave him alone!” I scream at her as he tries to shield me with his body. “You stay away from him. I’ll... I’ll call the cops. I’ll have them arrest you if you come near him again. I’ll hire someone to watch you. I’ll...”

“Shh, Kail.” Landon clutches my face in his palms, and for a second, I forget why I’m even so upset.

“It’s okay,” he murmurs.

“No.” My lip wobbles. “She doesn’t get to do this to you. I won’t let her.”

“I know you won’t.” He smiles and then shakes his head like he’s amused by me nearly blowing a gasket over him.

I lean across his body to yell at Suzy again. “Get the hell off our property before I have you arrested for trespassing!”

Landon releases me and tries to usher her away, but she snarls at him, shoving his hands off her.

“You’re going to pay for this,” she screeches. And somehow, I know she means it.

We both watch her stumble away, and I’m humiliated by the tears shining in my eyes. But I’m even more horrified to think that maybe this just made things worse for Landon.

“I’m so sorry.” I shudder. “But.. she’s awful. God, Landon, she is so awful.”

He approaches me slowly and wraps his arms around me, but when I do the same to him, he stiffens. This doesn’t come naturally to him, but as I hold him there, he relaxes. His chin is resting on the top of my head, and his voice is rough in a way I haven’t heard before.

“I didn’t see her out there. I should have seen her, Kail. I’m... sorry.”

“It’s okay.” I squeeze him a little tighter and rest my stinging cheek against his chest.

Neither one of us moves for a while after that. He strokes my back and comforts me in a way I suspect he’s never known himself. It’s just so messed up. I know I’m not supposed to care, but how can I not? He’s human. He has a heart. And I’m sure he has feelings, even if he buries them under all the sarcasm and dark looks.

As I cling to him, I realize I have feelings too. A strange new mix of emotions that nagging voice in my head insists are dangerous to me. But are they? When I look up at him, I don’t want to believe it anymore. I want... I think I want something else. God, this is so confusing.

Landon brushes his palms over the goose bumps on my arms, and I hope he thinks they’re from the chill in the air and not something else.

“Let’s go inside,” he says.

I nod, and he takes my hand as though we aren’t mortal enemies and leads

me into the pool house. It's strange how comfortable he feels here. Like he can just show up anytime and make himself at home. It's even more unnerving how safe I feel with him here.

"Wait here." He parks me on the gray lounge and heads to the fridge, filling a baggie full of ice and wrapping it in a thin towel. When he returns, he gently presses it against my red cheek, his eyes clouding over with so many emotions it's hard to identify them all.

"She's insane," he growls. "But I never thought she'd come after you—"

"Tell me I'm right." My thumb skims over the new burn scar on his neck. "She was the one who hurt you. Wasn't she?"

His shoulders strain, but he shrugs like it's no big deal.

"More than once?"

His silence tells me I'm right. Part of me wants to ask him how many times it happened, but the other part of me realizes I couldn't handle those details without completely losing my shit again.

"You have to get away from her. We need to do something!" I'm tugging at him desperately. My voice is frantic in a way I've never heard it. I just can't imagine him spending one more second around her.

"I already have, Kail." His fingers smooth away the worried lines on my face. "I emancipated myself from her care when I was fifteen. But that doesn't stop her from showing up anyway."

I shake my head in refusal. "Something else then. There has to be something else. A restraining order maybe—"

He kisses me to shut me up, and it works. I don't know how to help him, but I do know how to kiss him. It isn't something I have to think about. It's animal instinct that has me yanking him closer until his body nearly collapses over mine. His knee comes to rest between my thighs while his hands dent the cushion on either side of my head. His tongue slips past my lips. I hum my approval, and he swallows it like the sound gives him life.

My hands slide beneath his tee shirt, skating over the warm expanse of his back. He's so hot looming over me like this. So huge, he could squash me if he wanted to. I need to feel more of his body on me. I need all of it.

I wrap my thighs around his hips and grab a handful of his shirt, giving it a firm tug. He falls further into me, just like I want, but I'm greedy, and it's still not enough.

"Skin," I breathe the word against his lips. I want to feel his skin.

He tugs his shirt off and tosses it aside, and we both drag in a deep breath before our lips meet again. Landon kisses me the way all girls should be kissed. Passionate, intense, and real. It isn't just a means to an end. He could lie here all night, never coming up for air. We could do this until the world implodes. It would be a fine way to go. I'd have no complaints. Except I'm achingly wet between my thighs. I need him to fill that space. I need him to make me whole again.

I reach down and rub his erection through his jeans, groping him as though it's the last chance I'll ever get. Subconsciously, I'm aware of how dangerous this game is. Landon doesn't know I haven't been with anyone else. It might be easy for him to switch on and off, but it isn't for me. If I give myself to him right now, I could end up hurt worse than I already am. But if I don't give myself to him right now, I might wither up and die anyway.

"Fuck, Kail."

He rocks his hips against my palm, but at the same time, I can see the warring doubts in his mind. The last time we did this, it didn't end well.

"Don't." I shake my head and kiss his jaw. "We can go back to hating each other tomorrow."

His forehead dips into mine, and he nods silently. But when I reach for the zipper of his jeans, he halts me.

"Patience, little pineapple."

I'm pouting when he eases back onto his heels, but then his fingers come to rest on the waistband of my skirt. I didn't bother changing after school, so I'm still in my uniform. Landon looks like he's been thinking about this moment for a long time as his eyes take a leisurely path from my thigh down to my ankles.

His fingers straighten the fabric of the skirt, only to skitter just under the hem and drag it up, inch by inch. When he exposes my black cotton panties, heat trickles down my chest. They probably aren't sexy, but they're comfortable.

“I just wear these—”

“Shh.” His tongue darts out and licks his lips. “I’m concentrating here, Kail.”

“Alright,” I whisper.

A soft noise rumbles from his throat as he drags his palms down my thighs to the tops of the white socks just beneath my knees.

“You kept them, dirty little perv.”

I shrug, and he offers me the most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen. I’m still blinded by it when he unbuckles my Mary Janes and tosses them aside. Next, come the socks. He drags them down and stares at them for one more pause before he flips them onto the shoes. When he unzips the skirt and tugs the hem of my polo out of the waistband, I have to lift my hips so he can pull it off. We repeat the same dance with my panties and, ultimately, the polo shirt and bra.

I’m completely naked.

I’ve never felt so exposed, but for the first time, I’m not hiding. I need to see him look at me. I need to see the lies in his eyes. The disgust. Doubts. Second thoughts. But the only thing I see is a dark, hungry monster who looks ready to devour me whole.

His eyes collide with mine, and he reaches down to his zipper. Now it’s my turn to watch. He drags it down with excruciating slowness, and then stands up to kick off his jeans in that sexy way only guys can pull off. And then... my monster is naked too. So... *gloriously naked*.

“Why do you ever put clothes on?” I gape at him.

Landon shakes his head, his lips tilting at the corners. “I could ask you the same thing.”

He reaches down to grab something, and then, after what feels like a century, he lowers his body between my legs. It’s different when we’re this close because now we’re naked, and I can feel every inch of his hard, strong body against my softness. When I lightly graze his biceps with my nails, his abs ripple against me. Who knew I could make him shiver too?

“God, I’ve waited so long for this.” He whispers the words against my neck as he resumes his favorite kissing sport in my most sensitive spots.

It feels like a confession. A secret. How many more will he give me?

His erection juts into my belly, spearing the delicate flesh there as he rolls his hips. There's the slightest undercurrent of tension in his back, and I could be wrong, but when he looks at me, he seems... nervous.

"Condom?" I ask.

He holds up his fingers to show me that's what he grabbed from his jeans. Thank goodness because I really didn't want to tell him there's a jumbo-sized box in my nightstand.

Landon rips open the foil and rolls on the condom while I watch. He's concentrating so hard I can't tell what he's thinking. When I reach up and touch his face, it brings him back from wherever he was. He leans into me, kissing me again as he wedges his hips deep between my thighs.

He looks at me uncertainly. I smooth my fingers over his pinched brows, and his eyes flutter shut. I never noticed how much my touch seems to affect him. It's like he's never felt affection before. But surely, the girls he's been with must have touched him.

A knot of emotion forms at the base of my throat, so I bury my face in his neck to hide it. I don't want him to see me upset right now because he wouldn't understand it's not because of him. It's for him. Landon has never been loved. I realize that now. He's been admired, worshipped, wanted by many... but he's never been loved. Not the way I could love him. Not the way I'm scared I already might.

When I slide my palm between us and curl my fingers around his cock, he buries his face in my hair and groans. I guide him to my entrance and reach up to stroke his hair with my free hand. He's inhaling me. Taking hits of me as his lips move to my throat. I arch into him and wrap both of my arms around his waist, digging my fingers into his back.

"Do it," I whisper.

At the same time, I'm silently pleading that this feels good. But when it comes to Landon, I don't think there's anything that won't be at least a little painful.

His hips inch forward, and his hard flesh sinks into me. I close my eyes and suck in a breath. It stings a lot more than I expected. Landon is big, and it feels

like he's splitting me in half. I'm breathing through the pain when he seats himself fully inside me and shudders.

"You feel so fucking good," he rasps.

I nod into his chest, and he smooths my tangled hair away from my face. His gaze captures mine, and it's so much more intense when he's in my body. His eyes are usually so stark, but right now, they are on fire.

The green-eyed monster inside me is wondering how many other girls have seen him this way? Does he look at them like this? Do they get to touch him this way? The image flames my already heated body. I don't think I can give him back to the world. I want him for myself. The truth is so close to spilling from my lips I have to bite it back and swallow hard.

"Tell me." His mouth hovers against mine. "I want to know what you're thinking."

"Have you been with..." I nearly choke on the words. "A lot of other girls?"

His thumb drags along my jawline and dips down to my pulse. "Why does it matter?"

Impulsively, I squeeze his cock inside me, and his eyes flutter in response.

"It matters to me."

"Why, Kail?" His voice is hoarse. "You hate me, remember?"

"I just... I want to know."

"Are you sure this is the conversation you want to have with my cock inside you?" he asks.

My eyes are blurry now. God, how embarrassing. Landon sees it, and he uses the pads of his fingers to wipe at the edges of my lashes. He wins. And when I look up at him again, I'm guessing I'll find that arrogant amusement I've come to expect from him. But he just looks... uncertain.

He rolls his pelvis a little, and sparks of heat shoot through my core. I'm relaxed now, and it doesn't sting anymore. Now, it just feels tender.

Landon drags his lips to my ear and rocks into me again, deeper this time. "What if I said you were the only one?"

My head sinks into the pillow as I try to look at him, but his lips are on my jaw, and he isn't fighting fair. He doesn't want me to answer that question. He

wants to leave it hanging between us as he torments me with his lips and teeth and tongue. And then, he starts to move his hips for real.

He pulls back and rocks into me. Then he does it again and again and again. Any pain is a distant memory as I beg for more. This is so screwed up, so why does it feel so right? How can the person I hate the most make me feel so good? That good is building inside me like a nuclear bomb.

Holy. Fuck.

Landon bites down on my shoulder and grinds his hips against my pelvis, giving me so much sweet friction, I'm going to explode.

"Let go," he grunts. "Come on, Kail."

When his fingers brush against my clit, it's all over. Starbursts fragment my field of vision, and I free-fall into oblivion as aftershocks ripple through my entire body. I feel it all the way down to my toes. It's unlike anything else I've ever experienced. A roller coaster. The rumble of a jet engine. Nothing else can compare to the way Landon Blackwood makes me feel.

Because I'm in love with him.

My eyes snap open, and I'm praying I didn't say the words out loud. But when I see him arched above me, eyes shut and mouth parted, I know he wouldn't have heard me anyway. His hands are beneath my ass, squeezing as he thrusts into me one last time. He's unraveling, body shuddering, chest heaving as his cock jerks inside me. He empties himself with a grunt and collapses onto his forearms, dipping his forehead against mine.

His heart beats heavy against my chest, and I know what he said was true. I'm the only one. I can feel it in the way he finally looks at me. Our walls are down, and for a few blissful moments, nothing else exists. I drag my fingers through his hair and pull his beautiful face back to mine. He kisses me until our lips are raw, and we're forced to come up for air. When he finally rolls onto his side, it feels like a loss. But I can't anticipate how real that loss is until my eyes drift to the condom still wrapped around him. My stomach twists when I see the blood there, and I can't understand it.

"What the fuck—" He follows my gaze, and in an instant, the heat in his eyes is snuffed out by an arctic chill.

I don't know what to say. What to think. But he's already thinking it for both of us.

"You're a virgin?" His voice is tinged with disbelief. "All this time, you were acting like I... what the fuck, Kail?"

"I... I don't know what's happening," I answer. "It doesn't make any sense."

"The money," he murmurs so low I can hardly hear it. "It was always about the money."

Abruptly, he gets up and turns away.

"Landon." I sit up, frantically searching for something to cover myself with. "We have to talk about this. I don't know what you think, but—"

"I can't believe you would actually do this." He tosses the condom into the rubbish and yanks his jeans back on. "You made me believe..." He shakes his head and lowers his voice. "You're just like everyone else. I can't trust a word you say."

"That's not true!" I cry out, but he can't even hear me right now. The only thing I know for sure is what I saw when I woke up at that party. We were all practically naked, and the condoms... none of it makes any sense.

"Landon, please don't go!"

He freezes in the doorway. The muscles in his back are so rigid I know this is the end. He'll never believe me. He'll never let me in again, regardless of what I say. We got too close, and Landon doesn't let anyone get close. Everyone hurts him, and now I have too. I can already hear the door slamming in his heart. If there was a key, he just threw it away.

"You win, Kail. Sell your story to whoever you want. Tell it to anyone who will listen this time. Because this is the last chance you'll ever get. You and I are done."

KAILANI

He's turned me into an obsessive stalker. A heartsick fool who stares out the window all night, waiting for him to come home. I text him so many times I lose count. Until the status icon changes, and I realize my messages are no longer being delivered.

He blocked me.

I want to puke. My stomach is in knots, and all I can think about are his last words to me. *You and I are done.*

If we could just talk this out, I'm sure we could find some sort of understanding. There has to be something that makes sense. I feel so desperate with the need to see him that I find myself standing on his lawn in the middle of the night.

I'm not this girl, am I? What happened to being strong? What happened to hating him until the day I die? Truthfully, I don't know what the hell I'm doing anymore.

I scrub my hands over my face and groan. He never even came back here. I know because I heard the rumble of his Porsche a minute after he left me in the pool house. So, why am I here?

I peek at the handle on his back door. It's taunting me. Surely, he wouldn't have left it unlocked. But then again... he did plan to come back here tonight. Maybe, just maybe...

I wrap my fingers around the handle and twist. To my equal delight and dread, it opens. Now I'm standing on the threshold, asking myself how this

could possibly help. But he does it to me all the time. He comes to the pool house unannounced, sneaking through my window or an unlocked door. It's pretty much the same, right?

Except I know I'm not welcome here anymore. It's an undeniable fact.

I go in anyway. The door quietly clicks shut behind me, and I listen for the sound of life. I'd hope his mother would have more sense than to come back here tonight. After a few long moments, I'm satisfied that I'm alone.

I don't have a plan. For a while, I just wander around the bottom floor, taking everything in. It's clean and tidy, which I attribute to the housekeeper I've seen coming and going. Right now, the place almost looks like one of those model homes. It would be easy to think nobody lives here. In the darkness, it feels so empty.

In the kitchen, I examine the contents of his cupboards. There are boxes of healthy stuff like granola and oats, and glass containers filled with grains. I was sort of expecting Pop-Tarts and chips, but there aren't any. The fridge is more of the same. Glass containers filled with ready-made meals. When I examine the contents, I realize my mother must have made them. It warms me to know that he isn't going hungry because of her.

I check the clock on the wall. It's after midnight now. Where is he?

I wander up the stairs to the second floor and hesitate in front of the door to the guest room. The last time I was here, I avoided it. But now, I'm wondering if I should have. Is there something in there that could jog my memory?

Sweat prickles my skin as I wrap my fingers around the knob. It's just a room, and this room can't have any power over me. Nothing happened in here. At least, not what I thought. But what did happen?

I fling it open quickly so I can't chicken out. At first glance, it looks just the way I remembered. The bed is made with a soft gray duvet. The carpet is a neutral, unassuming beige. The walls are white. There's nothing special about this place.

When I take a few steps inside, I pause where Landon and I first kissed. I remember that kiss. It felt like I was zapped by lightning, and I wanted it to go on forever. But then I got sick.

My eyes dart to the bathroom, and I hold my breath as I duck my head inside. Everything in here looks the same too. I can still recall how cold the tile was on my face when I collapsed against it. I thought it felt so good. And then... everything went blank.

I'm trying to connect the dots. But no matter how I examine it, I can't figure out how I went from lying on the floor to that bed. Did I wake up and drink more without realizing it? Did I get so drunk, I just can't remember the game we played? And why was Landon so surprised tonight? Shouldn't he have already known I was still a virgin? What does he think happened that night we never speak of?

The answers don't come flooding back to me as I'd hoped. I still feel strange in this place. My skin is too hot, and the hair on the back of my neck is standing on end. My therapist once told me our bodies remember what our minds can't. I know it must be true because my body is screaming at me now. And as much as I want to believe nothing bad happened here, I can't. In my gut, I still feel that humiliation and sickness. It's been poisoning me for so long. It can't have been for nothing.

In a daze, I leave the room behind me and venture down the hall like a ghost. I don't even feel like I'm part of my body anymore. It's just my spirit, floating through the halls of his mansion until he returns.

I check each room I pass. They are all empty squatting boxes of nothingness. And then, I reach the biggest room. Landon's suite. During the summer we met, I watched him come in here a couple of times, but I never had a reason to follow. Now, the only reason I need is that I want to see his space the way he's seen mine.

When I open the door, his scent envelops me. It's a mixture of his cologne, deodorant, and maybe a little laundry soap. I wish I could capture this scent and carry it with me always. If I don't get to smell him again, I'll be forever homesick.

I tiptoe around the room like a creep and touch all his things. His backpack. His bed. His closet full of clothes. When I find the hoodie he was wearing after practice today, I slip it on, and it nearly swallows me whole. I keep it on anyway

and start opening all the drawers in his dresser. Most of them are full of tee shirts and his briefs, but there's one that's just full of stuff. It takes me a minute to realize what it is.

A pencil. A notebook. Folded pieces of scratch paper with my handwriting on them. The dog-eared books we read together when I was tutoring him. A bottle of my perfume. My leopard scrunchie. A sweatshirt I thought I lost a long time ago. An address scribbled onto a sticky note. *My grandmother's address.* And beneath it, one unused plane ticket to Hawaii.

Was he going to come to me?

My heart flutters, and I can't decide if this is the strangest or sweetest thing I've ever seen. Landon Blackwood has kept everything that's ever reminded him of me.

A door slams downstairs, and I nearly jump out of my skin. I slide the drawer shut as quietly as I can and listen. There's a soft, feminine giggle, and multiple pairs of footsteps on the marble floor. Someone turns on low background music, and a couple of guys start talking about the tits on a stripper at the Eager Beaver.

Within a minute, the familiar stench of marijuana smoke is creeping up the stairs, and Landon's grunting at his friends to take that shit outside. He sounds drunk.

More doors open and shut, and then the noise spills out onto the lawn below the windows. I'm wondering if I'm in the clear to run down the stairs when I hear another familiar voice.

"Let's go upstairs," Audrey purrs.

What?

My stomach bottoms out.

I glance around frantically as footsteps echo up the staircase, drawing closer by the second.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

What is she doing here? Why is Landon with her?

Without any other options, I close the door to his closet and burrow behind his hanging clothes. All I can do is pray they don't open it.

A second later, his bedroom door shuts, and I slap a hand over my mouth as Audrey starts talking. They are in his room together.

“Mmm... you like this, don't you? You're such a dirty, hot bloodsucker. I want you to sink your teeth into me while you fuck me hard.”

A deep masculine groan follows, and I nearly collapse against the wall. I don't want to believe it. Landon wouldn't do this. Not right after...

“Give me that cock.”

Something unzips and rustles before falling to the floor. The slurred words that follow are indistinguishable. But the sounds that come next aren't. For a full minute, I'm too paralyzed to move as her familiar slurping pierces my ears.

She's sucking his dick, and I think I might vomit.

He was just inside me. I gave myself to him.

I was the only one.

And now I'm not.

For an eternity, I lean into the wall for support, unable to breathe or think or move. All I can do is listen to the rumbles of masculine pleasure, and then, skin slapping against skin when he starts to fuck her. Audrey tells him over and over how good he makes her feel. How much she loves him inside her. I feel like I'm going to die. And then she mortally wounds me with one final blow.

“Yes, Killian! God yes. Bite my neck. Claim me.”

Killian.

There's no denying it's him on the other side of that door. I always knew he was going to destroy me. I just didn't think it would be on the same day I finally realized I'm in love with him.

I sink to the floor and cry silent tears until it's over. Until the last shuddering breath heaves from their lips, and the room goes silent.

They don't move for a long time, so I can't either. I'm trapped in hell, listening to my heart shatter in a million pieces. I curl my forehead into my knees and try to imagine another time, another place, another world. But there aren't any where he doesn't exist. I don't know how this pain will ever end.

Landon was right about one thing.

We're over, and we never even had a chance to begin.

LANDON

“Landon?” Alana calls out for me just as I’m slipping into my Porsche, hoping for a quick getaway.

“Hey.” I barely glance at her.

“You haven’t been over in days,” she says. “I was getting worried.”

It’s strange how long I’ve waited to hear those words from somebody. Nobody has ever really said them and meant them. In the past, I learned the hard way people didn’t want to be a friend because they actually cared or genuinely liked me. They’d come into my life for a while, help me through some rough times, and then one day, I’d wake up to find a story in a magazine about it. Funny, those stories always painted them as the do-gooder saint and me as the misguided recipient of their charitable love. The public ate that shit up. Little did they know once the Samaritans got their media payout, I’d never hear from those assholes again.

Admittedly, I expected the same when Alana first started inviting me over for dinner. I figured she was one of those rich housewives with nothing better to do than take on a charity project like me. I went because I was curious, but I knew it was just a matter of time until the headline would break. When it didn’t, I thought maybe she was biding her time. She’d ask me for something eventually. But she never did. She genuinely gives a fuck about me, and I can’t figure out why. She makes me cookies and fusses over what I eat. She checks in to make sure I’m doing my homework and asks if I ever need help around the house. She wants what’s best for me and talks to me the way I imagine a mother

is supposed to. And now I'll have to forget her too.

"Sorry." I adjust my sunglasses and slide the key fob between my fingers. "I've been busy."

"Well, where are you off to now?" she asks hopefully. "I have a taco bar that's just about ready and a ton of food. Why don't you join us."

"I can't," I lie. "I have to go visit a friend. He's waiting on my notes from school."

She frowns, and I can tell she wants to ask more, but she never pushes me too far. The truth is, if she knew all the things that had gone down between her daughter and me, she wouldn't want me anywhere near her house. It was only a matter of time. Once Kail tells her my mother hit her, Alana won't care what happens to me anymore. If it isn't that, it will be whatever story Kail decides to sell to the media. It was always bound to get fucked up. People like me don't get to have a family, and that's just the way it is.

"Well, alright, then." Alana looks crestfallen, and I hate myself just a little bit more than I already did. "Maybe another time. Don't be a stranger, okay?"

"Okay."

The Porsche slips into gear, and I hit the throttle, putting as much distance between us as I can. Trying not to think about Kail and what she did is a full-time job.

A fucking virgin.

Part of me wanted to be relieved when I found out. Hell, maybe I was. She was only ever meant to be mine. But that relief washed away in a flood of anger a second later. She's been punishing me for that night, treating me like a monster. Threatening to mace me and plotting out her revenge.

It's funny how easily I wanted to forget her motivations. But now all I can think about is how she took the money and ran. Her actions then should have told me everything I needed to know. But once just wasn't enough for me. I had to go and give her the opportunity to do it again. And she will. I don't doubt there will be another demand for cash any day now.

It doesn't matter if I felt something. It doesn't matter how much I might have wanted it. Kail is and always will be the girl who betrayed me. And now, there's

only one place I can go to for answers.

Carson is still out of school, but he's due to come back next week. I haven't checked in on him as often as I should have, and it's just another reason I'm an asshole. When I get to his house, his dad is gone like always, and I find him practically living off his sofa. Empty fast-food bags and dirty laundry surround him, and it doesn't look like he's showered in days.

He blinks up at me as I take a seat in the ugly floral chair across from him.

"I would ask how you've been, but you look like hell."

"Yeah," he mutters and tosses an empty can of beer onto the floor.

His face seems more sunken in than the last time I saw him, and his eyes have a glazed quality that reminds me of Suzy. Clearly, he's been eating, but it looks like he's lost a bit of weight too.

"What's up with you?" I ask. "Are you feeling alright?"

"I'm fine," he grunts. "Just bored as fuck."

It feels like a lie. Something heavy hangs in the air between us. More than just the normal tension since Kail tore us apart and sent him spiraling into a state of self-destruction. We've both struggled with the reality of that night. Carson has been moody and withdrawn ever since. He's done some pretty stupid and reckless things, but it's not like I can judge him. The scars on my elbow are a permanent reminder of the terrible decisions I've made. Mine almost cost my life. I'd like to say I've changed since then, but Carson's vacant face feels like a reflection staring back at me. Are either of us getting any better?

"I heard you were out with Audrey the other night." He shoots me an irritated glance. "Don't tell me you're hitting that again."

"Where did you hear that?" I grimace.

"She was snap chatting pictures of you all night. Party at the Eager Beaver?"
Fucking Audrey.

"I wasn't at the strip club." I sigh. "I went to Spark's Curve for some coffee. I was sitting there when some of the guys from the team came in, and they wanted to party. Audrey tagged along with them because she was all over Robertson like a bad rash."

"It didn't sound that way to me."

He seems pissed, and I really don't get what his deal is. I would have told him to come over if I thought he actually wanted to leave this depressing hole.

"Why is Audrey snap chatting you, anyway?" I ask.

He looks away and shrugs. "No clue."

Another lie. Maybe he wants to fuck her. If that's the case, he can have her.

"For the record, I've never hooked up with Audrey."

"Yeah, right." He snorts.

"I haven't," I deadpan. "Ask her yourself if you want."

Carson's brows pinch together, and he still doesn't look like he believes it. But I didn't come here to waste my breath talking about Audrey. She's enough of a headache as it is.

"I need to talk to you about that night with Kail," I tell him.

His eyes darken, and he reaches for the bottle of pills beside him, emptying two into his palm. "The last time I tried to bring it up, you plowed your car into a ditch at ninety miles an hour."

His observation poisons the air with resentment. We haven't talked about it. Not really. It isn't like him to be so harsh, but I suspect the pills are talking now.

"I want to hear your side of things," I push.

Carson tips his head back and swallows the painkillers, chasing them with a fresh can of beer. I wonder how many he's taken today. Nobody's ever around to monitor him. His dad works long hours and travels a lot. He's pretty much always here by himself.

"My side of things?" His eyes cut to mine. "You made up your mind about my side of things a long time ago, remember? Does it even fucking matter anymore?"

"It matters." My palms flex against my thighs, and he reads me like an open book.

"You couldn't stay away from her, could you?"

"I just need to know what the fuck you wanted to tell me about that night," I grit out. "Come on, man. Let's put this shit to bed."

"Are you fucking her?"

"Don't go there," I warn him.

My indignation doesn't make any sense. I don't owe Kail anything, and I shouldn't give a shit what anyone says about her anymore. But despite everything that's happened, I still feel some sort of fucked-up loyalty to her. Will I ever get her out of my system?

"You're pathetic. You know that?" Carson shakes his head in disgust. "Just admit it. You've been obsessed with that girl since the day she walked into your life. It doesn't matter what the truth is. If you came here looking for confirmation so you can go back and screw her without guilt—"

"I told you not to fucking go there." I rise to my feet and curl my fists at my side, trying to contain myself.

"What do you want to hear?" He throws out his arms. "That I took her for a joy ride all night long while you passed out like a little bitch?"

"What the hell is your problem?" I snarl. "You want another smashed knee? Because if you say that about her one more time—"

"Just get the fuck out." He tosses a throw pillow at me. "Don't come here asking me about her now. I'm not a priest, and this isn't your confessional. If you want to absolve yourself, do it somewhere else."

He reaches for the bottle of pills again, and I hesitate. Carson's always prickled easily, but I've never seen him like this. As much as he's trying to piss me off right now, I can't leave him this way.

"Who's monitoring your meds?" I ask.

He snorts and swallows another pill. "Don't act like you give a shit. My football career is over now in case you didn't get the memo. Let me deal with my own shit. You just worry about yours like you always do."

I snatch the bottle from the sofa, and he lunges for it at the same time, but I'm quicker, and my leg isn't all fucked up. The name on the label has been blacked out. These aren't even prescribed to him.

"What the hell are you taking?"

He eases himself back into the cushion and readjusts his knee pillow. "What are you my mother now?"

"Are you in that much pain?"

He stares at the wall, ignoring me.

“Let me take you to the doctor. Or bring one here. If your knee hurts, then —”

“It isn’t my goddamned knee.”

The rest is left unsaid. He’ll never admit something’s eating him up inside, but after all this time, I expected him to get better, not worse. Maybe I missed the signs. Maybe it was there all along, but we were too busy pretending everything was fine.

“Carson, I know things have been screwed up, but—”

“You could never understand,” he cuts me off.

“Then make me.” I clear away some of the trash on the sofa so I can sit down beside him, but he just scoots farther away when I do.

“I don’t want to do this anymore,” he says. “I’m sick of this fake bullshit.”

“Then lay it on the table right now. Let’s hash it out.”

“You think you want that.” He flexes his jaw. “But you’d never want to speak to me again if you knew the truth.”

Heat prickles my skin, and I’m trying to keep it cool, but a thousand different scenarios are playing through my mind, and none of them are good. Did something really happen that night? Did I get it all wrong?

“Whatever it is, we can sort it out.”

“Don’t bullshit me.” He squeezes the beer can in his hand. “And don’t bullshit yourself. There are some things people just don’t overcome. You still haven’t forgiven me for that night, and you never will. Because when it comes down to her and me, you’re always going to choose her.”

I want to tell him that isn’t true, but it would be a lie. I chose Kail when I decided to punch him in the face. I chose Kail when I let that night taint every waking minute of my life after it happened. When my car rolled over and over, nearly crushing me to death, I was thinking of her. I’m always thinking of her. Even now, when I should be able to deny it, she’s contaminating my thoughts. She betrayed me. She lied and schemed to get what she wanted and then ran back to Hawaii with her cash bonus. That’s what happened. So, why is there still a weakness in me grasping onto what Carson isn’t saying? I know there’s more to the story. At least his side of it. But he isn’t willing to give up the pieces.

“I’m tired, bro.” He sighs. “I don’t want to do this right now. Can you just go?”

“I’m not leaving you here like this.” I look around the pigsty and shake my head. “When is your dad going to be home?”

“Fuck if I know.” He shrugs. “I’m fine. Just let me sleep it off.”

“Then sleep.” I kick my legs up onto the table and make it clear I’m not going anywhere. “I’ll be here when you wake up.”

KAILANI

“S eriously?” I toss everything out of my backpack for the third time, convinced I’m losing my mind. “Where the hell is it?”

I’m late for school, running on just a few hours of sleep, and I can’t find my tablet. But I know I had it last night. I did some homework and wrote in my journal app before I ate dinner in the main house. Then I came back here, turned on some music, and forgot about it.

Now it’s gone.

I can’t quell this weird panicky feeling in my chest when I look around. Something felt off when I came back to the pool house. It was that feeling you get when someone’s been in your space. I thought a few things looked out of place, but I told myself it was just my imagination. I didn’t want to think Landon had been here, rummaging through my things. What could he possibly be looking for?

“God,” I groan. “Where the hell is it?”

I’m low key freaking out, but I don’t have time to keep looking. Even though it’s suspect, I don’t want to jump to conclusions yet. I probably just lost it, and it’ll turn up stuffed into a cushion or something. Because Landon might be a lot of things, but a thief isn’t one of them. Audrey, on the other hand... I wouldn’t put it past her to do something like this. But would she go so far as to break into my house? There isn’t time to check the spy cam right now, so I toss everything back into my bag. If I can focus and get through the day on hardly any sleep, I might not bomb my biology quiz.

The school day passes slowly, and with a steady stream of sugar-free Red Bull, I make it through somehow. But by the time I get to dance practice, I'm exhausted. I don't know how long I can keep running on autopilot like this.

Across the field, Landon is running through plays with his team, and it makes it hard to focus on what I'm supposed to be doing. It's been two weeks since I snuck out of his house without a word. I woke up on the floor of his closet early that morning and crept out. At some point during the night, he went back to the party with Audrey, but I still couldn't move. I stayed there all night, hoping I'd wake up in my own bed and realize it was just a dream. But it wasn't. And now, it's like we never knew each other at all. There's an empty space at the dinner table every night, and Mom can't hide her disappointment. She keeps hoping he'll show up, but it isn't likely, considering he passes me in the hall without even glancing at me.

Carson is back at school now, and they seem to be together all the time. I didn't think they were that close anymore, but Landon doesn't go anywhere without him since he returned. I can't help but wonder if he told Carson what happened between us. Did they have a good laugh when Landon told him I'd given myself to him, only for him to hook up with Audrey on the same night? Was it all just some big joke?

After talking with my doctor and getting the all clear, she assured me the bleeding would be totally normal for the first time, and there wasn't any cause for concern after her exam. So, in other words, there's no explanation. I was a virgin, and all this time I'd been harboring hatred for something that never even happened.

Everything sucks, and I don't know how to handle any of it anymore. I can't eat. I can't sleep. Everything feels like it's falling apart, and it shows.

"Kailani, stay a minute, will you?" Coach gestures for me when practice ends, and I meet her on the field as everyone else clears out.

"Are you okay?" she asks as soon as everyone is out of earshot. "You seem a little off this week."

"I know, I'm sorry." I cringe. I hate disappointing her. I made promises to the team about being the best captain I could be, but I don't know if I'm holding

up my end of the bargain right now.

“Don’t be sorry,” she says. “I just want to make sure you’re alright. You’re here, but it seems like you aren’t really here.”

“I just have a lot on my mind,” I admit.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

I don’t know. Do I? Coach is awesome, and I know I can trust her, but the person I really want to talk to is Courtney. Things have gotten so out of hand, and I don’t even know how to apologize to her after all this time. I keep seeing her around school, and I want to talk to her so badly, but I always chicken out. The truth is, I miss her terribly, and I need my best friend back in my life.

“I think I just need to make a few amends,” I tell Coach. “Get my priorities straight, you know?”

She smiles and squeezes my arm. “Okay, well, I’m here if you ever need to talk. Just keep that in mind.”

We part ways, and I find a comfy place in the grass. The rest of the field is empty now, and everyone’s in the locker rooms getting ready to go home. It’s as good a time as any to text Court before I can think about putting it off any longer. I write out several long messages and delete them before settling on three simple words.

Me: *Can we talk?*

She texts me back within a few seconds.

Wifey4Lifey: *It’s about time.*

Despite feeling pretty crappy about everything, I smile. I know I should get home because my mom will start to worry, but I don’t want to put our conversation off another second. So, I pull up a video chat. Court answers on the third ring, and I can tell she’s lying on her bed by the pictures on the wall behind her.

“I’m sorry,” I blurt out the second I see her face. “I’ve been a terrible

friend.”

“Yep, pretty terrible,” she agrees, but her lips are already cracking into a smile. “I missed you anyway, asshole.”

“God, I miss you too.” I sigh. “It sucks not talking to you every day. Will you forgive me?”

“That depends.” She blows a bubble and pops it. “Are you going to try to make me into one of your Barbie clones again?”

“Definitely not.” I shake my head. “That was a horrible plan.”

She laughs, but it falls away quickly. “And what about your revenge?”

I pluck a few pieces of grass and toy with them between my fingers. “I honestly don’t know what the hell I’m doing anymore.”

“Well…” She considers me for a minute. “Tell me about it. Maybe I can help.”

Over the next twenty minutes, the confessions pour out of me like lava. By the end, Courtney is just as unsure as I am. She tells me we’ll figure it out together, and we agree to meet tomorrow after practice.

When I hang up, it’s already dark out, and I still have to shower. Inside the locker room, a couple of girls are still applying the finishing touches to their makeup, and one more is in the shower. This place will be a ghost town pretty soon, and it gets uber-creepy when everyone leaves. Coach is probably in her office on the other side of the school, so I’d rather not be here by myself.

I take a quick shower and throw on a pair of leggings and a hoodie. When I head to the mirror to brush out my hair, the other shower is still running. Someone’s been in there for a long time, but I’m not hanging around to see who it is. I need to get home for dinner before my mom freaks.

Outside, the chill of the air bites into my skin, and I’m second-guessing myself for not drying my hair. But as I step onto the empty field, I’m regretting staying so late even more. It’s dark, and it’s hard to see on this side of the building. I don’t realize why until I glance up at the light, only to realize it’s broken. And it isn’t the only one.

“What the—”

Something crashes into me, knocking me to the ground so fast I can barely

comprehend what's happening. As I cough and sputter for air, the crushing weight of the shadowed figure on top of me sends a surge of adrenaline through my veins. I open my mouth to scream for help, but he backhands me so hard, stars burst into my vision. I'm still stunned and disoriented as he scrambles to his feet, but I try to squint up at him, preparing for the worst.

I can't make out his face, but it's impossible to miss the baseball bat in his hand. Several terrifying seconds seem to move in slow motion as he wrenches his arm back.

"Wait—"

Crack.

The aluminum collides with my ankle, crunching the fragile bones as a blood-curdling scream erupts from my throat. I don't even have time to blink before he swings it again and smashes the same target with so much violence, I'm convinced this is the end.

I can't breathe. I can't even see through my blurry eyes as I try to crawl backward, only to wilt under the horrendous shock of pain.

"Demon slut," he hisses under his breath.

And then, he's gone.

Tears drip down my cheeks as I try to sit up to assess the damage, but the agony is unreal. My ankle is already swelling like a balloon. There's no doubt it's fractured in multiple places. Whoever did this wanted to destroy me. They knew what an injury like this would do to a dancer. It's the end.

I choke on my sobs as I fumble around for my phone, but I must have lost it when I fell. I can't move. I can't do anything. I'm not sure how long I sit there before another shadow exits the girls' locker room. My body falls completely still when the person pauses a few feet away. I don't know who to trust anymore.

"Oh, my god." The soft voice whispers, and I recognize her face when she shines her phone light at me.

"Kailani?" Alexa approaches me carefully. "What... what happened to you?"

"Someone just came out of nowhere with a bat..." My voice breaks.

She clutches her stomach as though she's going to be ill. "Again?"

Again? I don't understand what she means.

“My ankle.” I point at the shattered bones. “Please, can you help me? I can’t find my phone.”

For a second, I’m not even really sure she will. She seems frozen, trapped in a different time and place, the same way she always is when I talk to her.

“Alexa?”

“Oh god, yes. I’m sorry.” She fumbles with her phone screen. “I’ll call for help.”

LANDON

I'm sitting in the parking lot at BMA when my phone rings. My publicist's name flashes across the screen again. It's the fifth time he's called me, and that's excessive, even for him.

Already, I know what's coming. I've been waiting for it since I left Kail's pool house. It took longer than I thought, but this must be it. This is the fatal blow.

I dial him back and watch the other students filter inside. I'm completely numb.

"Landon?" He answers breathlessly, and I can hear him punching buttons to slow the treadmill in his office.

"Yeah?"

"Hold on." The phone shuffles around a bit, and the volume rises as he adjusts his Bluetooth. "We have a problem. Have you seen the headlines?"

I swipe a hand over my tired face and shake my head even though he can't see me. "Nope. What is it this time?"

"Parties. Drinking. You going off the rails."

"Is that it?" My jaw flexes.

"That's not it," he says carefully, and I know by the edge in his voice that I'm not going to like whatever it is. "There's also a story about that night. You and your buddy with that girl."

The phone nearly cracks between my fingers. "So much for the cash deal."

Well fucking played, Kail.

“The tabloids didn’t leak any names,” Phil says, “but there are vague details. The story is about you waking up with an unidentified male and female at one of your wild parties. There are photos of your house, supposed witness accounts—”

I close my eyes and smash my fist against the steering wheel. *How could she fucking do this to me?*

“Just read it,” Phillip tells me. “I’m sending you the link.”

I pull up the message and follow the link. Beneath the bold headline that reads *Trouble in Landon’s Paradise*, there are an array of photos of me taken inside my own house. Photos of me drinking. Shots of me on the sofa surrounded by blurred faces. And then the worst of them. Photos of the guest bedroom. They couldn’t print the images of us in bed, but this is the next best thing, I guess.

I continue to read, and the golf ball in my throat swells to a basketball. The details are too close to home. The drinks we had that night. The game of Truth or Grope. Physical descriptions of my unidentified bed partners. And then I see it. The one piece of information that could only come from Kailani.

Our source tells us she was his tutor over the summer, and that’s how they met...

My cold, dark heart thumps one last time before every emotion I thought I had fades to black. This must be what death feels like. Flat and empty.

“I’m sorry, Landon.” Phillip’s voice drags me back. “I know it’s bad, but it could be worse. I’m worried this is an unspoken threat. *A look what I can do*, sort of threat. I’m sure she just wants more money. I’ll talk to her—”

“No,” I reply with more ferocity than I even knew I was capable of. My head dips, and blackness creeps into the edges of my vision as I lower my voice. “Just leave her alone. Let her do whatever she wants. Let her ruin me if that’s what makes her happy.”

Phillip is quiet on the other end of the line. He’s not the type to say he told me so, but from the beginning, he warned me this story would come back to bite me in the ass. He begged me many times to let my lawyer track Kail down again. Have her sign an NDA, threaten to sue her, whatever it took to keep her from going to the media. I told them no because even then, I was still trying to protect

her. And for what?

The faces of my classmates' blur as I look around the parking lot of Black Mountain Academy. They are all vacant and unfamiliar. People I've seen a thousand times, but don't really know. They don't know me either. Nobody does. And I don't want to be here anymore. I don't know if I ever want to come back here again.

"I'm leaving," I tell Phillip.

"I already sent a car for you," he assures me. "It's waiting at your house. There's security there too, just in case. I had your housekeeper pack you a bag..."

The rest of his instructions fade to background noise, and I disconnect the call as I meet Carson's gaze outside the window. He's waiting for me to get out. When he sees the expression on my face, concern washes over his. I shift the car into gear and speed away, leaving him without an explanation. He starts calling me as soon as I round the corner, and I send it straight to voicemail. That doesn't stop him from texting me, though.

Carson: I need to talk to you. It's important.

Carson: Landon, come on.

Carson: What the fuck, bro? You're really just going to leave like that?

Carson: I saw the articles. There's something you need to know.

I toss the phone out the window, watching it bounce off the pavement as I leave it behind in my rearview mirror. Fuck this town. Fuck high school. Fuck everything.

My foot jams on the throttle, and the speedometer climbs. Seventy. Eighty. Ninety. My vision blurs, and a memory forces its way into my consciousness. *The steering wheel vibrates. The engine rumbles. The winding lines on an empty mountain road sway back and forth. Cool air blows in from the window, and I*

wave my hand through it like I did when I was a kid. This was supposed to be my fresh start. A new life. And then I met Kailani fucking Hale.

I close my eyes and forget to open them again. The tire catches gravel, and the steering wheel jerks to the right. I'm free-falling. Spinning around and around on a Tilt-A-Whirl as metal crunches around me. Shattered glass peppers my face and body as I welcome death. Nobody will miss me here. I look for the light, or whatever the fuck it is that's supposed to happen. But who am I kidding? Everyone knows I'm going to hell.

The car comes to a stop with a final aching groan. Blood drips down my temple, and my hope for a peaceful exit is destroyed by blinding pain. I reach up to wipe my face off, but my arm dangles like it's been split in two. When I look at it, I realize it's bad. It looks as though it's been put through a meat grinder.

Fucking hell. Why couldn't I have just died?

A car horn blares, jarring me back to the present. Sweat beads on my forehead, and I realize I'm at a stoplight. I don't even know how I got here. Everything feels distorted, and for a second, I think maybe this morning was all a dream. But it's never a dream. This is the only reality I know.

The rest of the drive to my house is heavy with silence. Around me, other cars weave through the traffic. Lights change colors, and the sun beats in through the window. Yet everything feels dull and gray. The world is barren, like my soul.

When I arrive, I'm swept up into a blur of meaningless motions. Security ushers me in through the gates, holding the paparazzi at bay. They hurry me off to a waiting car with tinted windows. My bags are inside, just as Phillip said they would be. I'm almost in when I hear the commotion at my front door. When I glance up, Suzy is there, waving her arms frantically as she tries to fight off the security guard holding her back. I pinch the bridge of my nose and try not to lose my shit. But do I care anymore? Do I give a fuck what Suzy or anyone has to say to me?

"I need to talk to you, Landon!" she bellows. "I promise you'll regret it if you don't."

Money. That's what it always comes down to with her. She could bleed me

dry, and it still wouldn't be enough.

“Your bag!” she screeches. “I left a note for you in your bag.”

How the hell did she get near my bag? I shake my head and climb inside the car, refusing to listen to one more second of her bullshit.

“Take me to the airport.”

The driver nods and does as I request with an efficiency I can appreciate for once in my life. The only problem is, I have no idea where the hell I'm going to go.

KAILANI

“**A**re you comfortable, honey?” My mom frets over the pillow propped beneath my ankle. “What can I get you? A cold drink? A snack?”

“I’m fine, Mama.” I offer her a weak smile.

She sits down beside me with a sigh. I’ve never seen her so worn down, and I can’t help feeling guilty about that even though it’s not my fault. The past four weeks since the incident have been a blur. For me, it was surgery. Pain management. Appointments with various specialists. Sessions with a therapist. Homework by correspondence. My mom did her best to make everything peaceful and calm, but I know behind the scenes, it’s been nothing but chaos.

The school has launched a full investigation, and Theo hired a private investigator too. The entire football team, cheer squad, and dance team were questioned with no results. Everyone except for Landon.

He never showed up at school after the headlines broke, and he’s been MIA ever since. My mom hasn’t said much about him, but I can see the worry in her eyes. When the police questioned me, all I could tell them was that it was a large male. It wasn’t much to go on, but I never even caught a glimpse of what he was wearing because it happened so fast.

They asked me a lot of questions about the guys at school, and particularly, Landon. I could see how they might think it was suspicious that he disappeared right after it happened, but there’s no way it could have been him. He would never do something like that. Just because I know it doesn’t mean everyone else

is on the same page, though. The cops want to talk to him. And Courtney told me the rumors have been flying like crazy at BMA.

Nobody knows where Landon went, and nobody has spoken to him. At least not that the students are aware of, and if the faculty knows differently, they aren't saying so. After the articles broke, he just... vanished. When I first saw that someone leaked a story about that night, my shriveled-up heart nearly fell out of my chest. Whoever it was claimed to be me, and I couldn't help wondering if this was somehow connected to my missing tablet. Someone broke into the pool house. I know that now with certainty. When I was finally able to check it out after I got home from the hospital, I realized it wasn't just the tablet missing. Someone had stolen my spy cam too.

I don't know what's more unnerving. The fact that they found the camera or the idea that they could gain access to my tablet and all the journal entries I'd kept since that first summer with Landon. All my obsessions were written in there. The creepy things I used to do, like sniffing Landon's hoodie when he wasn't looking, or smearing his deodorant on my skin. There are confessions of times I'd drink from his water glass when he went to the bathroom, just so my lips could touch the same place his had been. Long, meandering descriptions of his face and eyes and moody personality I could never quite decode. Embarrassing dreams I'd had about him that first summer. And then, eventually, the details of that night. If someone accessed my journal app, they'd have all that information. There's no telling what they might do with it, and every morning, I find myself frantically googling to check that they haven't shared that as well.

My mother waited until I was home from the hospital before she started interrogating me too. I couldn't deny it now. As soon as she read the word tutor, she knew the unidentified girl at the party was me. She's asked me multiple times if that's why I left, but I haven't been able to answer her. When she asked me if there was something she should know about Landon, I was emphatic that there wasn't. I don't want her to get the wrong idea. Not after I screwed things up so bad in the first place.

She asked me once if I leaked the story, and it horrified me that anyone might think that. I told her about the tablet and camera situation, and she made

an appointment the next afternoon to have security installed. None of us can believe it's come to this. Black Mountain is supposed to be safe. My mom isn't the sort of person to lock up her house, but now, I guess she has to be.

The days go by slowly, leaving me with more questions than answers. The only thing I have to look forward to are Court's regular visits when she updates me on all the current news. Carson is supposedly a wreck since Landon left, and he's been missing a lot of school. And Audrey has taken over as captain of the dance squad, gleefully, from what I hear. During my absence, Jared has returned to school but not the football team. Apparently, his parents are being real assholes about everything. But on his eighteenth birthday, he left the wilderness program voluntarily, and now he's couch-surfing at some of his friends' places while he finishes senior year. The thought makes me sick with guilt, and I know I need to make amends somehow. What he said hurt me, but it didn't give me the right to upend his entire life.

Honestly, I wouldn't even blame him at this point if he was the one who bashed my ankle in. My list of enemies has never been longer, and I'm exhausted just thinking about the possibilities.

I won't be able to dance again this year. The doctors aren't confident that my ankle won't cause me problems for the rest of my life. Theo, being Theo, hired the best of the best. I've seen specialists that take years and connections to get appointments with. But they all say the same thing. Only time will tell.

My bones are mending slowly, but some things never will. Whoever said time heals all wounds obviously never met Landon Blackwood. After I heard him and Audrey together and cried about a million tears, I tried to patch up my armor and fortify my heart. But try as I might, I could no longer find even an ounce of hatred for him anymore. Now there's just pain. So much pain.

In another life, maybe we could have worked things out. If there was no party that summer night, and there weren't any misunderstandings or miscommunications between us. But this is the lifetime that fate decided to throw us together. Lightning and gun powder. It was never meant to be. The truth is, loving him is like lighting yourself on fire and hoping you don't burn to death. Because Landon and I can't love each other without destroying each other

too.

He can't see past his wounds to believe anything I say. And now, I can't see past what he did with Audrey. What we had was special. I know he felt it too. But he went to her and washed it all away. I can't forget that final cut, and I can't forgive.

I've tried to imagine myself, ten years from now, living my life with a different man. We'd be happy, somehow. Maybe have a couple of kids, maybe not. But in that image, the love never feels as profound. Instead of a bonfire, it's a flickering candle. Second best. Anyone else will always be second best. And I think maybe it would just be better if I'm alone forever.

Hot tears prick at my eyes, and my mom gives me a gentle pat on the arm, uncertain how to address the turmoil inside my head.

"It's okay, honey," she assures me. "We'll find out who did this."

"It's not that—" My voice breaks, and try as I might, I can't allow another lie to spill from my lips. I can't tell her I'm okay when I'm not. "I think I'm ready to talk."

Worry creeps into her eyes. "What is it, Kail? You know you can tell me anything."

My hands knot together in my lap. "I think I really screwed things up."

"There's nothing that can't be fixed," she says softly. "Let's talk it through."

"You asked me if that night at Landon's party was the reason I went back to Hawaii."

Her body turns to stone beside me. I'm not even sure she's breathing or blinking anymore. She's been waiting so long for me to open up about this. Her hands begin to tremble, and I know she's scared about what I might tell her. I'm scared too. She might not ever look at me the same way again, but I can't keep it inside me anymore. It's been eating me up, and I have to let it out. I have to tell the truth, so I can finally be free.

"That night I went to the party, I couldn't remember what happened," I admit. "I drank, and we played this stupid game, and I kissed Landon."

I tell her the rest in broken fragments. About waking up confused. The markers. The clothes. Everything. My emotions break free, and my mother

envelops me in her shuddering arms. She's crying too. I can feel the moisture on her face. I'm scared she's going to be so ashamed, but I can't stop now. I just need to get the poison out.

I go on to explain how I felt betrayed. Like Landon didn't protect me somehow, or I made a mistake, but I couldn't admit it. I was so humiliated, and everyone at BMA turned against me.

I tell her how I planned to come back here and get my revenge on all of them. Every dirty, ugly, awful thing I did spills free from my lips. When there's nothing bad left to tell her, I admit that I made a mistake. Nothing happened the way I thought, and I ended up hurting Landon and so many others because I couldn't see that.

"Kail." My mom's voice fractures as she tries to hold it together. "This is not okay. Someone could have drugged you."

"I know," I choke out. "I've thought of that. But I poured my own drink. The bottle and the juice were sealed. So it doesn't make any sense."

She's quiet for a long moment, considering something before she voices it. "Have you actually talked to Landon about what he remembers from that night? Or Carson?"

"No." I look down at my twisted hands. "I just couldn't bring myself to do it. Carson said there was something he wanted to tell me, but I didn't want to hear it."

"I wish you'd told me," she whispers. "I should have been there with you."

"I was too embarrassed," I admit.

"Honey, this is not your fault." She squeezes me tighter.

I hug her back, and it feels like a brick wall just crumbled around my heart. I'm lighter now. Still fragile, but the anger I felt so strongly before is little more than a flicker. I think this is what they call a healing moment.

"Do you..." She clears her throat and steels her voice. "Do you hate Landon? I want you to be honest because if you don't want him around—"

I shake my head forcefully. As mad and hurt as I am over the way things ended, I still feel protective of him. He needs this family in his life, and I refuse to take away the only real mother figure he has.

“It wasn’t his fault,” I say. “I understand that now. I think we’re both still a little bruised over that night. He can’t get over what I did. The way I blamed him —”

Mom wipes the tears from my cheeks, her eyes shining with so much pain I know she wishes she could fix it all for me. “My sweet daughter. How I wish I could have helped both of you. If I’d known...”

“I was just too ashamed to tell you,” I confess. “I was worried you would be disappointed in me.”

“Oh, Kail.” She crushes me in her grip. “I’m not disappointed in you. You were going through a difficult time, and you shouldn’t have had to deal with any of it on your own. Anger is a natural response to pain. The important part is how we handle things going forward. And I know we can get through this. Together.”

Her assurance floods my body with so much relief all I can do is cry. I cry until I can’t cry anymore. She holds me throughout, stroking my hair and loving me just the same, regardless of the monster I’ve become.

“We can hire someone to investigate,” she tells me as I pull back to wipe my face. “We can find out if this has ever happened to anyone else. We’ll leave no stone unturned. Just tell me it’s okay, and we’ll do it.”

Would Landon and Carson want that?

I’m not sure anymore, but at this point, I can’t see how it could hurt. I think I need to find out what really happened for my sanity. I want to put the whole thing behind me. I want to be Kail again.

“Are you hungry?” Mom asks gently. “I can make you something to eat if you like.”

A smile cracks across my face, and it feels strange to me. “How about some monster cookies?”

My mom smiles back, and at that moment, it feels like everything might just be okay.

“Fresh monster cookies coming right up.”

“YOU LOOK LIKE YOU’RE GETTING AROUND BETTER,” COURTNEY OBSERVES AS I maneuver myself onto the seat on the patio. Now that my cast is off and I’m in a walking boot, I feel like I’m finally gaining back some of my independence.

“It still hurts a little.” I wiggle my toes. “By the end of the day, it’s swollen again, but the doctors said that’s normal. It could be up to a year before it stops swelling.”

She cringes. “I hope they catch the asshole who did this to you.”

“Me too.”

Court seems to sense the tension creeping back into my body, so she changes the subject.

“Are you back in the pool house now?”

“Not yet,” I groan. “My mom and Theo are being extra vigilant until they know it’s safe, so for now, I’m stuck in the main house.”

Courtney unscrews the cap of her iced tea and takes a drink. “That’s probably for the best, considering you still don’t know who ransacked the place.”

“I know.” A shiver moves through me as I imagine someone rifling through my things for the hundredth time. It’s so creepy.

“So you’re coming back to school next week?” she asks hopefully.

“Yep.” I try to hide the nerves in my voice. It’s been a little over six weeks now, and my doctor gave me the green light to resume my normal school schedule, sans any dancing. My mom is still reluctant to let me go, but Mr. Dawson worked out a system to have a staff member escort me between classes in the interim.

“Thank God.” Court sighs. “That place is insufferable without you.”

“Any news I should know about?” I fiddle with the string of Landon’s hoodie. I never gave it back after I left his house that night, and I’m only wearing it because it’s warm and comfy. Not because it still smells like him.

“Well, Audrey never shuts up about her role as captain.” Court rolls her eyes. “Half the dance team has quit under her tyranny, and the other half is so stressed out, I keep finding clumps of their hair in the bathroom.”

“Really?” I frown. “It isn’t like Coach Lopez to let that sort of stuff slide.”

Courtney hesitates for a moment, chewing on her thumbnail. “Um, yeah, about that...”

“What?”

“Coach Lopez quit.”

I frown. “Why would she do that?”

“I heard some of the girls talking about it. Apparently, Audrey’s mother has been hell on wheels since their last showdown. She got Coach banned from the committee meetings, and I guess Coach’s house and car have been getting vandalized regularly. Then her dog went missing for a week. When it turned up again, he had a note attached to his collar warning that next time, he’d come back in a body bag. Total sociopathic stuff. And meanwhile, Audrey is all smiles, bragging all over school that she’s gone. It sounds like Coach just couldn’t take it anymore.”

My jaw clamps down in frustration. I haven’t talked to Coach since she stopped by to see me a few weeks ago. She looked tired and apologized about a hundred times for not being there to protect me, but it never occurred to me she might be going through hell too. Audrey and her mother are terrorists, plain and simple. And it’s just not right that they keep getting away with this shit.

“I’ll call her later and check in,” I say. “Hopefully, she’ll be okay.”

Court nods and drums her fingers against the mosaic table edge. “Let’s see, what else... Oh! I almost forgot. This one is pretty shocking, actually!”

“What is it?” My heart skips, and immediately, I think she’s going to say something about Landon.

“There’s a rumor that Carson’s in rehab,” she whispers like it’s a dirty word. “I didn’t even notice he was gone, but apparently, he disappeared a couple of weeks ago after showing up totally out of it every day.”

“Rehab? I didn’t realize he was struggling that badly. I mean, I knew he was drinking and stuff, but not enough for extreme measures.”

“It’s weird, don’t you think?” Court eyes me like she’s trying to say something without quite saying it.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know.” She fidgets with the hem of her skirt. “I just think it’s

strange how he's been a hot mess ever since that night shit went down at the party. I keep wondering if he feels guilty about something. Or maybe he regrets something. Why else would he be so off the rails?"

I shake my head in denial. "I told you what the doctor said. I think Carson's just trying to deal with it like we all are. He found his way of coping, and I found mine."

"And Landon," she reminds me. "His way of dealing with it is to blame you for everything."

Her observation stings. And I don't want to see it that way, but how can I not? He has always been so cryptic about everything. Calling me a liar. A schemer. Telling me I'm just like everyone else. It's his default defense.

"Carson mentioned he wanted to tell me something." I steer the subject away from Landon.

"When?" Court's eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

"In the parking lot after school one day. He was waiting for me by my car, and he was drunk. I didn't hear him out."

She considers it for a moment. "You don't think... it could have been him with the bat?"

"What?" My voice squeaks out. "No, definitely not."

"How can you be sure?" she argues. "There's no way to know for sure it wasn't him or Landon."

I drag the edge of my fingernail along my palm. I don't know how to make her understand the way I feel. But sometimes, you just know what you know. Call it intuition, call it whatever, but that guy who hit me wasn't either of them.

When I don't respond, Court peppers me with another question instead. "Any word on the investigation?"

"Not much. The guy Theo hired has talked to all the potential witnesses himself, apart from Alexa. He mentioned she's been evasive, but that doesn't surprise me. She's always been like that."

She mulls this tidbit over, her eyes creasing as she comes to some sort of a conclusion. "That's odd. I mean, I know she can be flighty, but why wouldn't she just talk to him?"

“I don’t know. Every time I see her, she practically runs the other direction. I just figured Audrey told her not to speak to me.”

“I gotta say that girl has been acting weird for a while now too.” Court frowns. “But maybe you should try talking to her yourself. Since she was technically the last person there, she could have some helpful information that’s been overlooked.”

“Maybe,” I concede, but honestly, I don’t think Alexa will tell me anything.

I have so many things to worry about right now. It’s hard to prioritize them. I still have to make amends with Jared and find a way to talk to Carson so we can have a real conversation. And there’s one other thing. For my own sanity, I just need to know Landon is okay. Even if I never see him again, it would make me feel better knowing that he’s out there somewhere, and he’s alright. I’m hoping Carson can at least tell me that much.

“Do you think Landon will ever come back?” Court seems to read my thoughts.

My heart thumps a sad little protest, and I shake my head. “I don’t know. But probably not.”

LANDON

Los Angeles never changes. On any given day, you could walk down the street and see the same bright-eyed hopefuls who came here to make it big. They haven't been chewed up and spit out by the machine yet. They can't smell the filth and greed poisoning the air. But, in time, they will.

They all want something. Fame. Fortune. Purpose.

Want. Want. Want.

I remember being chained to that treadmill too. All I wanted was my mother's love. It's funny how time and distance bring everything into perspective. After today, I doubt I'll ever have a reason to come back here again.

Phillip's office is in a building on Wilshire Boulevard. Clearly, he wants too. But I can't fault him for not knowing any better. He's lived here his whole life. He was driven from a young age, lured in by the glitz and glamour. He works hard, and he lives well, all things considered. Other than the fact his Bluetooth is permanently attached to his ear, and he'll probably work himself into an early grave from the constant pressure of this job. When that happens, I'll remember him as an ally when I needed one most.

"Oh, Landon." His receptionist shoots out of her chair as if there's a bomb in the seat cushion. "I didn't know you were coming in."

She frantically combs back a few pieces of stray hair in her face, blinking at me like a deer in the headlights. Grace is usually well put together, but it's obvious my arrival shocked the hell out of her. Given that nobody has been able to find me for the last two months, I'm not surprised by her response.

“Is Phillip in?” I glance down the hall.

“Yes, of course.” She waves me forward. “Follow me.”

Phillip’s office doesn’t have a door. It’s one giant cube of glass, and I’m not sure how he gets anything done in this fish tank. Everything is sharp, clean, and shiny, much like him. When Grace ushers me in, he’s propped against his desk, staring out the window as he talks through the device in his ear. She lightly taps the doorframe, and he jolts upright when he sees me standing there.

“Brad, let me call you back.” He doesn’t wait for a response before he ends the call and rounds the desk. “Holy shit, Landon. I’ve been worried out of my mind.”

He pauses like he wants to hug me, but then shakes my hand the same way he always does. Phillip has worked with me since I was a child, but he never treated me like one. I’ve always respected him for that.

“Where have you been?” He pulls out a chair for me, and I take it. “I was seriously considering sending out a search party.”

“Sorry about that,” I murmur.

Grace stands there awkwardly, probably trying to ask me if I want a drink, but Phillip waves her away without a word. He resumes his position leaning against the desk, this time facing me.

“So?”

“Florida.” I shrug. “I rented a beach house there. Bummed around in the sun for a while. Read a few books. The usual.”

“What happened to your phone?” he asks.

“I tossed the phone. I needed to disconnect for a while.”

“You could have at least told me where you were.” He sounds affronted, but deep down, I know he gets it.

“I didn’t need to hear all the dirty details. I just needed to get away.”

“Well”—he sighs—“that’s the thing. There haven’t been any new stories, which is odd. I was certain that it was just the beginning. I kept waiting for another call requesting more cash, but it never came.”

I expected it too. When I finally typed my name into the search engine last week, I anticipated a flood of articles since I left, but it was just more of the

same. When I came here, I was pretty certain Phillip would tell me Kail was demanding more cash. That's the only thing that would make sense. Now, I don't know what to think.

"Maybe the media payout was enough." I intentionally leave out her name. I've been trying not to think of her, and talking about her isn't part of that plan.

"I guess anything's possible." Phillip drags his fingers through a thinning patch of hair. "Either way, I'm glad to see you. I had the housekeeper watch your place while you were gone. And I spoke to your principal. He said he'd keep your spot at school until you were ready to come back. But you'll have some catching up to do."

"Thanks, Phillip. I appreciate that."

"Now, I've been thinking about how we could spin this absence. We could tell them you've been on a mountain in Tibet, enlightening yourself with Buddhist monks. Or a spiritual quest through the Andes. Of course, if you want to keep it simple, there's always rehab. You know people eat that shit up. We've got options."

My lips tilt at the corners, and I can't help laughing a little. Same old Phillip. He has my best interest at heart, but I didn't come here so he could save my reputation, and I think he senses it. That's why he's trying so hard.

"I don't want to do damage control. That's not why I'm here. I just wanted to talk to you face-to-face because I owe you that much."

He walks around his desk and collapses onto his desk chair with a long sigh. Opening the bottom drawer, he pulls out a bottle of Crown Royal. "Should I be sober for this?"

"You do you."

He takes a long pull, twisting the cap back on before he looks at me again. "Okay, hit me with it."

"I'm done." I meet his gaze, so he understands this isn't one of those half-hearted tantrums celebrities often throw when things don't go their way.

"Done, as in... done until graduation?" he asks hopefully.

I shake my head. "I've had a lot of time to think about it. This life, it's just not for me."

“I had a feeling it would be option D,” he grumbles. “Fading into obscurity.”
“That would be fine by me.”

He takes another long pull from the bottle and replaces the cap. Phillip wants to believe he won't drink the poison anymore, but we all do. It's the nature of the beast.

“You promised me you'd give it the year to think about it,” he reminds me.

“I did. But I know now. And I want you to know too.”

“Christ, Landon.” He rocks back in his chair and stares out the window. “I can't say I'm not disappointed, but I understand. This life, it's not for everyone. I think I realized that about you from the moment I took you on as a client. Hollywood just won't be the same without you.”

“Thanks, Phil.” I nod to him. “I appreciate everything you've helped me with over the years. You're a good man.”

There's a long moment of silence as he comes to terms with the death of my career. “So, what will you do now?”

I tell him the truth. “I have no fucking clue.”

FIFTY FEET.

That's all that separates me from Lane Silvestri. I only know his name because Suzy mumbled it once when she was too high to refer to him as something other than that fucker or the sperm donor.

If I'm being honest, I had my doubts she even knew who my real father was. But looking at him now, throwing the ball for his dog in a posh Los Angeles park, I know it without a doubt. I look just like him.

His wife and kids are sitting on a picnic blanket a few feet away, watching him with pure love and admiration. He was married when Suzy lured him in somehow, and his eldest son is already away at college. Something I learned from the dossier the investigator gathered for me.

It's strange to think I have two brothers and a sister who don't even know I exist. They never will. It's what he wanted, and I have no intention of begging to

be in his life. I just wanted to see for myself what he was like. I wanted to know the other half of my DNA, at least from a safe distance.

Lane seems like a decent man. By all accounts, that's what his file says too. He works hard, and he makes a lot of money, so he enjoys the trappings that come with it. Fast cars, huge estates on both coasts, luxury vacations.

It's hard not to feel a little bitter when I think about how different my life could have been. I never wanted his money. I just wanted to know him the way his other children do. But I was a mistake. A huge regret he probably always hoped would never come back to haunt him.

I never intended for him to see me here. But when the ball rolls under the bench and the dog comes barreling at me, he turns my way. His strides are long and powerful. He's tall, like me. Strong and lean like he spends a lot of time in the gym. Gray peppers the sides of his hair, but otherwise, he looks healthy.

I've studied his photos, but it's not the same as seeing someone in person. It's not the same to witness your own eyes staring back at you. He notices it too when he pauses mid-stride a few feet away. His features pinch together at first, and then, quiet panic washes over him.

"What are you doing here?" he grits out.

He knows exactly who I am.

I choke down the hostility I'm tempted to spew at him because what's the point? Did I expect anything else?

"Is it a crime to enjoy a nice day in the park?"

He glances over at his wife and waves and then bends down to retrieve the ball, but his eyes don't leave mine.

"Suzy and I had a deal. Did she send you? Is this about money?"

I close my eyes and drag in a deep breath. He's a fucking asshole, but he has a good point. What the hell am I doing here?

"Just tell me where to send the check," he clips out. "Don't make a scene, and I'll give you whatever you want."

I stand and meet his gaze. "I guess she was right about one thing. You really are a fucker."

His wife calls out to him, and he looks at me pleadingly.

“I don’t want anything from you.” I let him off the hook. “I’ve survived eighteen years without you in my life. I’m sure as fuck not going to expect you to care now.”

I leave him standing there and walk into the park. He’s trailing me, probably about to piss himself when I pass by his wife and kids. I’m sure he expects me to say something, but I wouldn’t—not in front of his children—because they don’t deserve that shit. I don’t have anything to gain by destroying his family. But it doesn’t matter anyway. I can see it on his wife’s face when she looks at me and gasps.

I’m a younger version of him. She can see it, clear as day. That seed is in her head now, and it’s up to her what she decides to do with it. But this will be the first and last time I ever see Lane Silvestri.

LANDON

Sometimes, life is like an Alanis Morissette song.

“Ironic.”

When I called Carson’s father from the beach house in Florida, we argued over his son for a good twenty minutes. He didn’t want to believe Carson needed help, but when the school told him the same, he reluctantly caved. I offered to pay for the treatment, but being the proud man he is, he refused. When the upper crust sends their kids to rehab, they don’t just send them anywhere. They send them to the best of the best. In fucking Malibu, of all places.

Carson’s rehab facility happens to be a couple of miles from the condo I bought my mother. I wonder if she ever came back here, and then I remember her shouting something at me from my doorstep before I left. I was so out of it I couldn’t be bothered to deal with her on top of everything else, but as I’m sitting here waiting for Carson, it pops into my head out of nowhere. She mentioned something about a letter.

Was it in my bag? I don’t recall seeing it, but I never really bothered to look for it either. How many ways could she ask me for money? It didn’t matter if her message was through text, mail, or blood. It was all the same.

Carson appears on the patio, pausing when he sees me waiting for him on the wooden bench. The rehab center asks their clients to visit with friends and family outside in the garden. From here, it almost looks like a luxury hotel.

“Hey.” I nod at him, standing up to greet him when he doesn’t move. I wouldn’t blame him for being pissed at me. I’m expecting it.

“Hey.” He nods back, scrubbing over the stubble on his chin.

He looks different than the last time I saw him. He looks better than he has in a long time, actually. His eyes are clear, his body looks healthy, and he isn’t limping around on his knee anymore. He’s bulked up a little, and there’s a new quiet peacefulness in his features.

He comes to sit beside me before thinking better of it and opts to pull a chair over instead. We both take a seat, our bodies mirroring each other as tension bleeds into the space between us.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been around,” I start. “It was bullshit for me to leave like that. I should have talked to you first.”

“My dad told me about your conversation.” He rubs the back of his neck and shrugs. “It’s okay.”

“You aren’t shitty with me?”

“No.” He sounds a little surprised by his response. “I’m thinking clearly for the first time in years, and I guess in some fucked up way, I have you to thank for that.”

I lean back against the wooden slats and relax a little. “So, you’re getting shit worked out then?”

“Yeah.” He gazes over my shoulder at the ocean. “I am.”

He’s quiet for a minute, and I know it’s because he has something he needs to say. Carson tends to hold back when he shouldn’t, only to explode when his inhibitions are down. When he was drunk or high was the only time he could be honest with anyone.

“Have you been back to BMA?” There’s a slight edge to his voice when he asks.

“No.” I kick at the paver beneath my shoe.

He nods like he expected as much. “So, I take it you haven’t heard about the shit that went down with Kail then?”

My eyes snap to his. “What shit?”

He hesitates, and every worst-case scenario filters through my mind.

“She’s okay now,” he says. “But I was trying to tell you the day you left...”

“What happened to her?” I press.

My chest feels tight, and I don't understand why he won't just tell me.

"She..." He mutters something indecipherable and stands up, pacing away a few feet with his back to me. "Christ, Landon. I didn't expect you to show up here like this."

"Carson," I growl. "Come on. Just fucking tell me, please—"

"I will." He turns around slowly and releases a shaky breath. "But first, I have to tell you something else while I still can. Before I lose my nerve, and you take off again."

His jumbled thoughts aren't making any sense to me. I'm tempted to head to the reception desk right now and get a phone, so I can call Alana and ask her myself. *Is Kail okay?*

"I've been messed up in the head for a while," Carson says, dragging me back to the conversation. "And I know you think it's because I felt guilty over what happened that night at the party. The truth is, I did feel guilty."

"You didn't do anything with Kail," I tell him. "I know that now."

He blinks at me. "I know. I mean, I can't remember what happened, but when I woke up, I was never worried I did anything with Kailani. I was worried I got drunk and made a move on you."

I stare at him in confusion. "What?"

"Landon..." His face flushes. "I've had a thing for you since freshman year. I'm gay, bro."

The moisture in my throat evaporates, and I'm at a loss for words. At first, I think he's just screwing with me. I would never have thought... there would have been some clue, surely. But when I look at his face, the torment in his eyes is so undeniable, I wonder how I didn't notice it before. Is this why he was so angry with me? Because I couldn't see the truth right in front of me?

"You're gay?" I repeat his statement back to him.

"Yes." He swallows. "And I know you aren't. I understand this doesn't change anything between us, but I had to tell you. I can't keep it in anymore, and I don't want to. That night after the party when you punched me, I thought it was because I must have said something to you when I was drunk. It never occurred to me until you mentioned Kailani that it was because you thought I'd done

something with her. You were jealous of me, and the entire time I was jealous of her. She was the only one who ever had your attention.”

When he finally spits out his confession, he looks so hurt I can’t help feeling like the world’s biggest dickhead. I’ve been a shitty friend. So absorbed in my own problems and petty jealousy that I never considered any other alternative. I thought he hooked up with Kail that night, and I hated him for it. All this time, he’s been tormented because he couldn’t tell me the truth.

He dips his head. “I understand things are probably weird now. I should have told you a long time ago. If you don’t want to hang out anymore, I get it.”

“Carson.”

His eyes snap to mine.

“This doesn’t change anything,” I tell him. “Gay or not gay, you’re my friend. You’re the only real one I’ve probably got. And I should have listened to you. I should have tried harder when I saw you struggling. You should have been able to come to me with this.”

His chest shakes with relief. “You aren’t mad?”

“Why the hell would I be mad? I mean, you know I’m into chicks, so—”

“I know,” he says quickly. “And I don’t expect anything. I just wanted to explain why I’ve been so cagey. It was hard for me to watch you falling for her even though I knew I never had a chance. I’ve wanted to tell you for a while, but I didn’t know how you would take it.”

“I’m proud of you for telling me the truth,” I say. “I’m sure it wasn’t easy. But I think you’re doing the right thing by taking this time to work through shit and figure out what you want. You seem like you’re doing well here.”

He nods, but then something he said earlier triggers a realization.

“You said you didn’t remember that night?”

“Yeah,” he admits. “I thought it was weird because I didn’t drink that much, but I blacked out. I almost mentioned it a couple of times, but I was pretty sure you’d just think it was bullshit.”

“So, neither of us remembers.” I stuff my hands into the pocket of my hoodie and stare down at the pavers. “I thought it was just me. But both of us?”

I think back on the night we woke up in that bed. Kail looked shocked, but I

assumed she was humiliated because half of BMA knew we'd just had a threesome, by all appearances. They were snapping photos, taunting us. I wasn't thinking clearly. My head was still groggy, and the minute I realized Carson was beside her, I saw red.

I was pissed, and I was fucking jealous. The only thing I could think was that she'd betrayed me. I hated myself for allowing it to happen. Things got too crazy. We were all so drunk. It was the only explanation that made any sense. But Kail hated me so much after that night. She acted like I'd done something wrong even though she was the one demanding cash. It was hard to see past that, but now, I'm questioning everything. Did she wake up without any memory either? Is it possible I've been that fucking blind?

"I think we were drugged." Carson gives voice to what's already taking shape in my thoughts.

"Who the fuck would do that?" I stand and start to pace.

"Maybe the same person who bashed Kailani," he offers quietly.

I come to a halt, pulse thrashing, eyes wild. "What?"

"Someone went at her with a baseball bat after practice," he answers grimly. "They shattered her ankle. That's what I was trying to tell you the morning you left. The school still doesn't know who did it."

No.

My head rattles in denial. I don't want to believe it. But Carson would never lie about this. He knows I'd lose my shit. The urge to murder whoever did this to her is already coursing through my veins.

"Is she okay?" My voice barely registers.

"She's alright," he assures me. "Courtney's been giving everyone updates. Kail is at home recovering until they think it's safe for her to go back. The police interviewed all of us. They want to talk to you too."

A sickening realization settles into my gut. I've been gone for two months. Kail was probably in the hospital, terrorized... and I just... fucking left her there.

I'm already heading for the exit when I glance over my shoulder at Carson.

"I get it," he says. "You have to go."

LANDON

The flight back to Black Mountain is agonizingly slow. As soon as someone recognized me at LAX, it wasn't long before the paparazzi showed up. They hassled me all the way to security, making the entire event a circus.

When I sat down on the plane, people kept stopping in the aisle to ask for an autograph, disrupting the entire boarding process. I didn't think to stop and buy a hat or a pair of glasses in my urgency to get back home. All I wanted was a quiet flight where I could think, but I haven't had a moment of peace, and I still have no idea how I'm going to fix this clusterfuck when I get back.

If my suspicions are correct, Kail has every reason to hate me. She trusted me to protect her, and I didn't. When I look at the situation from her eyes, it feels so different now. What was going through her mind when she woke up in that bed? She looked at me, and instead of comfort or reassurance, she found a half-drunk idiot full of jealous rage.

If I were her, I would hate me too. I let her go that night. I let her run out of there alone, not understanding what was happening. I watched her cry as our classmates tore her down and called her names, all because my pride was wounded, and I chose to believe the worst in her.

I failed the only person I've ever cared about.

My fingers pinch the bridge of my nose, holding back the urge to vomit. What the fuck have I done to her?

"Excuse me, Mr. Blackwood." The flight attendant smiles down at me. "The

captain has asked that all seatbacks are adjusted into an upright position for landing.”

I blink and nod in a daze, glancing out the window with the first real sense of relief I’ve had in two months. I’m almost home.

AS THE DRIVER NAVIGATES THE LONG, WINDING MOUNTAIN ROADS WITH EXTRA caution, I rifle through my bags to give my fingers something to do. I’m anxious to get home, and I’m trying not to yell at him because it isn’t his fault I’m a fucking dumbass.

I just need to see Kail. That’s the only thing that matters. But Suzy’s words have been echoing through my mind all day, and now I have a growing sense of morbid curiosity. She said she left me a note. Why would she leave me a note? And why do I feel sick every time I think of it like I already know what she’s written?

The first bag turns up nothing. And after double-checking the contents of the second, I’m trying to convince myself she was just high and didn’t know what the hell she was talking about. But then I see the internal pocket, and as I inch the zipper open, a white envelope comes into view.

My chest squeezes. The song on the radio fades away. Everything narrows to a pinpoint as I tear open the seal and drag out the letter. It’s short, written in messy, hasty scrawl. But the message is painfully clear.

I have her tablet.

I’ll tell everything.

Give me what I want, and I can make this all go away.

If you don’t, you know what happens next.

IT WAS SUZY. IT WAS FUCKING SUZY.

My eyes cloud over with red, and my blood pressure skyrockets. The paper crumples between my fingers as I jerk my gaze up to the driver.

“Do you have a phone I could borrow? There’s been a change of plans.”

SUZY IS A CREATURE OF HABIT. EVEN THOUGH I PROVIDE HER WITH A GENEROUS allowance every month, she will always find the cheapest, seediest place to lay her head at night. Crack houses. Cardboard on street corners. And sometimes, when she hasn’t blown all her money on dope, a shitty motel. Which is exactly where I happen to find her tonight.

It’s in a little shithole a few towns over from Black Mountain where things aren’t so shiny and clean. As soon as I read her letter, I knew she wasn’t leaving anytime soon. Her threat wasn’t an empty one, and just because she hasn’t followed through yet doesn’t mean shit. She wants her money. That’s always the goal. More money to snort up her nose or inject in her veins. She’ll take her high however she can get it, and she’ll bulldoze anyone who stands in her way.

I’ve put up with a lot of shit from Suzy over the years. She’s dragged me with her from one bad situation to the next. She’s used me and exploited me and taken out all her shortcomings with her fists. But through all of it, a small part of me still hoped she’d turn it around one day. That she’d wake the fuck up and decide to love the only son she had.

It hasn’t happened yet. But this is the last chance she’ll get. I’ve loved her when she was at her most unlovable. I accepted the way things were a long time ago. But that was for me. Not Kail. She crossed the invisible line when she fucked with her. I won’t allow her to pollute my life anymore. Something has to give before she destroys the only good thing I’ve ever had.

The window to her room is open, the rusty screen a nonexistent filter for her growling snores. The pile of cigarette butts on the ground just outside the door reminds me of the only homes I ever knew with her. This place is filthy, but there are thousands more just like it. We lived in them from week to week in LA

during good times, and during bad times, we slept on the street. Even when I had a steady stream of income from my gigs, Suzy would blow it on her vices and leave me in a hooker's paradise with nothing to eat. It was only ever about what she needed.

I shake away the memories and use my fist to knock out the screen. The sound doesn't even jolt her from her sleep, which isn't surprising. She has a habit of staying up for days, so she sleeps like the dead when she crashes.

When I climb through the window, my feet land on the old, matted carpet with a dull thud. Suzy doesn't stir. For a minute, I just watch her there. Sprawled out across the mattress in nothing more than a dingy old bra and soiled underwear.

This isn't my mother. I don't even know if my mother is in there anymore, but after tonight, I'll find out. One way or the other.

I do what I came here to do, dumping the contents of the brown paper bag in my hand on the nightstand next to the bed. A veritable buffet of all her favorite things. When I was younger, and she was too dope-sick to move, so I'd have to go out and buy these things for her. This is probably about a two-week supply for Suzy. Syringes. Pills. Powders. All her favorite party favors.

Beside them, I leave the plane ticket I bought her along with the brochure for the best rehab money could buy. She has a place waiting there for her. I opened an account with them, and she can stay indefinitely if that's what she needs. I expect it to be the hardest decision she'll ever make, but part of me still fears it will be the easiest. This isn't the first time I've asked her to go, but it will be the last.

While she's still passed out, I rifle through her meager belongings, checking her bag, purse, and jacket. But I already know where she hides shit. Suzy never was smart enough to consider this. Between the mattresses, wrapped up in a pillowcase, I find what I'm looking for.

Kail's tablet.

As if she can sense the money slipping out of her hands, Suzy chokes on her spit and startles herself awake. Her glazed eyes dart around, pausing when they land on me. She sees the tablet in my hands, and bolts upright with a snarl.

“Hey! What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Hello, Suzy,” I answer calmly. I don’t have the energy to fight with her anymore. “I came here to get this back. And to give you one last chance to make things right.”

She scowls at me as though she doesn’t understand. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I stare through her. “The things you wanted are on your nightstand.”

A smug expression twists her wrinkled face as her eyes flick to the nightstand. I don’t exist to her anymore. She’s already crawling toward them like the fiend she is.

“It’s about fucking time,” she mutters.

She examines a few of the pills and baggies, but her eyes keep darting back to the syringes. I knew they would. She always goes for the good stuff. The needle is Suzy’s only true love.

“Suzy,” I call out to her.

In a hurry, she flings open the drawer and retrieves a rubber tube she uses to wrap around her arm. While she pokes and prods herself, searching for a viable vein, I take a seat in the chair by the door. She tears the cap off with her teeth and spits it onto the floor. The needle hovers above her skin, and I try again.

“I can’t do this anymore, Mom.” My voice cracks. “You’ve been sick for a long time, but it’s not too late to get better.”

She blinks up at me, startled. She did forget I was here.

“You could turn it around. Go to rehab. You could choose a different life. The ticket is on the nightstand. There’s a room for you and people who want to help.”

“I don’t want a different life,” she mutters. “Fucking asshole.”

She pushes the needle against her skin. I’m running out of time to tell her while she’s still somewhat coherent.

“If you choose this, it will be the last time you speak to me. The last time you get anything from me. I’ll cut you off and have you banned from the property, and you’ll never be allowed to come near me again. I’m asking you for once in your life to choose me. Choose your son.”

For a moment, she wavers. But when she looks at me, it's not indecision in her eyes. It's resentment.

"You ruined my whole life."

The needle pierces her skin, and she injects the liquid into her vein. I shouldn't be disappointed when I expected nothing more from her. But I meant what I said. Suzy can't be a part of my life anymore. Not like this.

She grunts and collapses back onto the pillow, the needle still hanging from her arm as her head starts to nod. Nothing else even touches her consciousness when she's like this. So, for our last few moments together, I move to the bed to sit beside her. I brush the hair away from her face and try to recall one good memory, even a split second when I felt truly loved, but there aren't any. All she ever left me with were scars.

Her eyes drift shut, and our conversation is officially over. The only thing I can take with me are the last words she said to me.

You ruined my whole life.

I look at her withered face one last time, and whisper, "Goodbye, Suzy."

KAILANI

My mom makes a huge deal about my birthday every year. She always says we should celebrate life, and this year is no different. Just after midnight, she and Theo sneak into my room to wake me up with a celebration.

She begins with our usual tradition, placing the lei po'o she probably spent all day making onto my head. The crown of flowers is beautiful with vibrant shades of pink and white, just like the others before it. I've saved every crown she's ever given me.

It isn't long until the music comes on, blasting one of my favorite songs by Israel Kamakawiwo'ole. "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." I think it's the most beautiful rendition of all time.

Soon, I have a cup of pineapple whip in my hand, and they are dancing around the room like maniacs since I can't. Theo's dance moves are pretty much restrained to bobbing his knees left and right, but it brings a smile to my face regardless. My mom bursts into a fit of laughter as she tries to instruct him, and soon, we are all laughing so hard our sides ache.

They join me on the bed, dipping into their own pineapple whips after the performance. When they offer me my gifts, I open them eagerly. There's a new pair of dance shoes for when I'm ready to get back on my feet, a few gift cards for my favorite bookstores, and a handwritten journal with some of their life's wisdom and advice to guide me into adulthood. It warms my heart to see they went to all this trouble, and I honestly can't wait to read it.

When I look up at them, I almost burst into tears. I haven't had a father for as long as I can remember, but right now, it feels like I do. He's been here all along, and I took that for granted. Theo didn't have to accept me the way he has. He didn't have to make an effort even when I was a little beast, but he did. He loved me anyway. And he loves my mom more than anything, which I can't thank him enough for because she deserves the whole world.

I think it shocks the hell out of everyone when I fling myself toward him and hug him. When we finally pull away, my mom is crying happy tears, too, nodding her understanding. I squeeze the life out of her next, and then we all go to bed with the promise of more celebrations to come.

Of course my first day back at school would happen to fall on my eighteenth birthday. Mom tried to convince me to stay home one more day, but I need to get back to my routine. The longer I put it off, the harder it will be.

If I had any hopes that people would forget who I was or just ignore me, those are dashed as I hobble down the hall with my boot. Everyone is whispering and staring. I can hear their quiet speculations, blaming me for Landon's absence and even my own shattered ankle. A few of the cheerleaders snicker as I walk past, gleefully pointing out I've gained back the extra weight I lost before the year started. And just like that, I'm back to being the gum on their shoe. *Happy Birthday to me.*

The death of whatever status I may have clung to in this place doesn't bother me as much as I anticipated. It's actually a relief. I don't have to pretend anymore. No more lies. No more revenge. No more anger. This is who I was always meant to be. Before Landon Blackwood. Before there was a gaping hole of sadness in the space where my heart used to be.

"You need to get over him," Court tells me at lunch as I absently chew through a sandwich.

"I'm not—"

"Don't bullshit me." She narrows her gaze. "You've been walking around here with sad puppy dog eyes all day. I know things suck right now. But after everything that's happened with him, don't you think it's time to move on?"

The sandwich in my hand plops back onto the tray, and I bow my head. "I

know.”

She isn't telling me anything new, or anything I haven't figured out myself. Landon is like a jagged edge. Even his memories are sharp. Being back in this place has reopened old wounds, and the bloodshed is hard to forget. I'm making a conscious effort to move on, but it's easier said than done when everyone keeps bringing him up.

“I'm sorry,” Court says softly. “I'm not trying to be a bitch.”

“I know.” I shrug. “I would probably tell you the same thing.”

She nods, and we finish our lunch in silence. Before we can make it out of the cafeteria unscathed, Audrey appears at our table out of nowhere.

“God,” I groan. “What now?”

Her eyes flick over me with disgust. “It looks like you've been in a good paddock lately. Shall I ask the cafeteria staff to get you a bucket of oats?”

“Fuck off, Audrey,” Court snaps at her.

“It's okay.” I pin her with my gaze. “I'd rather be soft around the middle than starve myself to be like you for one more second, you toxic bitch.”

Her mouth falls open, and her eyes cloud over with rage. “What did you just call me?”

“You heard me the first time.” I smile up at her sweetly. “You might be pretty and plastic on the outside, but inside, you're a fucking sewer. Your hate and bitterness are rotting you alive, and believe me, we can all smell it.”

A few people around us snicker, and Audrey looks as though she's about to lose her shit. Someone on the other side of the cafeteria claps, and another person cheers. I recognize Aspen, the student council president, giving me a little thumbs-up. Audrey's eyes are bulging out of their sockets when she heaves her claws in my direction. Before she can grab me, someone snatches her wrist and shoves her back.

“Leave her alone,” Jared growls.

I blink up at him in surprise. Why would he bother to come to my defense after what I did to him?

Audrey spins on her heel and shoves at his chest, but he doesn't loosen his grip.

“Let me go,” she grits out. “Or I will make you regret it.”

“Go ahead.” He releases her and steps between us. “You have nothing left to hold over me anymore, you donkey-faced thundercunt.”

Another round of laughter and cheering ripples through the cafeteria as Audrey gapes in disbelief. She’s always been the queen bitch. It never occurred to her that she could lose her crown, but judging by the atmosphere here, it looks like she has way more enemies than she realized.

“This isn’t over,” she screeches over her shoulder as she stomps away.

I glance at Jared and force my appreciation through parched lips. “Thank you.”

He nods, and I’m worried he’s going to leave. So, before he can, I reach out to grab his arm. “I’ve been trying to call you.”

“I have a new number,” he says.

“Oh. Well, I was hoping... maybe we could talk?”

“Sure.” He shrugs.

“I’ll wait for you at my locker.” Court winks at me as she gets up from the table.

“Okay, thanks.”

She leaves, and Jared takes her place. The cafeteria is starting to clear out, and the bell will sound soon. But I have to do this now. I just hope he’ll hear me out.

“I’m so sorry, Jared. I did an awful, horrible thing. I betrayed your trust, and —”

“It’s okay,” he cuts me off. “I deserved it.”

“What?”

He taps his fingers against the table and sighs. “I said all that shit to you that night because Audrey told me to. She wanted me to humiliate you and cheat on our fake relationship with one of her friends at the party, so I did.”

I should have known. None of Jared’s words or actions made any sense that night.

“But why would she ask you to do that?”

He’s quiet for a moment, and the sadness in his eyes catches me off guard. I

recognize that hurt because I feel it too.

“When Jacob and I first got together, we agreed to keep our relationship under wraps. His team was important to him, and he didn’t want to compromise that. I thought I was okay with it, but the longer it went on, the harder it was. I was sick of lying to everybody and watching girls throw themselves at him right in front of me. One night, at a party, I let my emotions get the best of me, and we started arguing. I didn’t even realize Audrey had heard us until it was too late.”

“Oh, no.” My stomach twists. I think I can see where this is going.

“She didn’t even hesitate,” he says. “She threatened to out both of us, and Jacob freaked. He was pissed at me for being so reckless. I just wanted to fix it, so I told Audrey I’d do whatever she wanted. She asked me to humiliate you, and I didn’t want to do it, Kail. I swear I didn’t. But it felt like an impossible choice. I was in love with Jacob, and I thought he loved me too.”

“Didn’t he?” I whisper.

“Apparently not.” Indignation taints his voice. “Audrey made another deal with him behind my back. It wasn’t enough to punish you. She wanted to punish me too because I didn’t abide by her schoolwide ban on you. That’s why she fucked Jacob in the gazebo. It was all to prove a point. Audrey gets what Audrey wants.”

“That’s just... so messed up. I’m sorry, Jared. You didn’t deserve that.”

For a second, we sit there in silence, digesting the awful truth. I hate Audrey for what she did to him. But more than anything, I hate that he’s hurting because of me. I know it might not mean much now, but I want him to know that I’m here as a friend. A real, honest to god friend.

“I want to apologize for my actions,” I tell him. “What I did that night was rotten and I’m not going to make excuses for my behavior. I just let everything go way too far.”

“This place has a tendency to do that to you,” he answers wryly. “Don’t sweat it, Kail. You did me a favor, honestly. I mean, yeah, my parents were dicks when they found out, but that’s nothing new. I can be myself now. And fuck anyone who doesn’t like it.”

“Yeah, fuck them.” I glare around the room.

We both laugh then, and it feels like another enormous weight has been lifted off my chest. But the humor gradually disappears, and Jared lowers his voice.

“I’m sorry someone hurt you,” he says. “If I ever find out who it was—”

“You’ll have to get in line,” I tell him jokingly. “Because I’m going to murder him first.”

He smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Just be careful, okay? I’m here to walk you to class, or your mom’s car, or wherever else. You shouldn’t be alone until that guy is off the streets.”

“Thank you.” I feel a little relieved by his offer. I’d rather have his company than the stuffy, unsociable staff member they assigned to watch over me. “I might have to take you up on that.”

THAT NIGHT, MY MOM PROLONGS DINNER WITH THREE DIFFERENT COURSES OF MY favorite dishes. I suspect her motives are to keep me talking about my day. She’s still worried about me and needs my constant reassurances that going back to school was the right decision. To make her feel better, I fill her in on the mundane details, leaving out the confrontation with Audrey. While my mom might be proud of me for standing up for myself, telling her about it would only make her worry more.

After dinner, cake, and a movie, I shower and then head up to the guest bedroom to read. I’m still stuck in the main house, so we’ve been carrying what I need back and forth from the pool house every few days. I think my mom believes if she brings enough of my stuff back here, I’ll just stay. But I’m determined to get back my little slice of independence just as soon as I can.

I crack open my worn copy of *Dead Until Dark* and snuggle into the bed. I’ve been on a vampire kick lately, so I’m revisiting some of my favorites. This series never disappoints, and if anyone asks, I’ll always be Team Eric.

I must fall asleep at some point because I wake with a jolt and the book clatters to the floor. The room is dark, and I’m trying to figure out what woke me when I see the shape of a man standing next to my bed. A scream bubbles up my

throat, but he slaps his hand over my mouth before I can release it.

“Kail, it’s me.”

My eyes snap up to his, and I’m trying to make out his face, but I can’t. Sensing this, he turns on my bedside lamp, and my galloping heart seems to stop completely when I find Landon staring back at me. I pry his fingers off my mouth and take a deep, gulping breath.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I just needed to see you.”

My tortured boy is back. His eyes are a stormy sea of gray, and for a moment, I can’t help getting lost in them all over again.

Our knees touch when he sits on the bed. His warmth penetrates my icy heart like the sun, dissolving the small barrier I had only just erected to keep him out. Why does he make me feel so weak? Why can’t I just feel nothing for him when I know it’s the best thing for me?

“What are you doing here?” That’s the question that comes out of my mouth, but all I really want to ask is if he’s okay. Where has he been? What has he been doing? And did he miss me too?

“Kail—” His voice cracks, and emotion chokes the light from his eyes as they move over my face.

Right now, he’s looking at me like I’m the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen. I wish I could believe it. I wish we could rewind time and change so many things, but we can’t.

“I need to talk to you.” He reaches for my hand, but I pull away.

I burrow deeper into the comforter, hoping it will protect me from flinging myself at him the way I want to. “I don’t think there’s anything left to talk about between us. All we do is hurt each other.”

“I know.” He rests his open palm between us. “But that’s why it’s so important. I’ve realized something—”

The bedroom door flies open, startling both of us. My mom and Theo rush into the room in their pajamas with matching expressions of concern.

“What’s going on here?” Theo’s eyes move back and forth between us.

“Shit,” Landon groans.

“We had a silent alarm installed.” Theo tugs the hem of his tee shirt down, and I can tell he’s packing his handgun.

“Kail, are you alright?” my mom asks.

“I’m fine.” I offer her a reassuring smile. “Landon just came back home. He didn’t want to disturb you guys, but he wanted to say hello. He’s leaving now.”

His face falls, but I tell myself this is how it has to be. We’ve been at war too long. We’ve both flung poison arrows, and we hurt each other repeatedly. But Landon crossed the line from fair play when he went to Audrey and shattered me. There are just some things you can’t come back from.

I can feel his eyes on my face. He wants me to look at him, but I can’t. Eventually, the silence lingers too long, and he has no choice.

“Yeah,” he says, woodenly. “I just wanted to give Kail her birthday present.”

He slides a small velvet box onto my nightstand and gets up reluctantly, glancing at me one last time.

“Great.” Theo gestures for him with a stern expression on his face. “Then you won’t mind having a word with the two of us downstairs.”

They leave, and my eyes dart to the box several times. I consider shoving it into the drawer so I don’t have to look at it, but I don’t know who I think I’m kidding. I have to look at it.

I open it up to find a rose gold anatomical heart necklace. It’s morbidly beautiful in an unusual way, and I can’t help tracing my fingers over the fine details. There’s a small, folded piece of paper beneath it, and when I pluck it out, I’m not sure my own heart can take it if I look at what he’s written inside. But I do. And I was right.

This belongs to you.

I may have locked you out, but you’ve always had the key.

Happy Birthday, Kail.

KAILANI

The next morning, my mom wakes me up early to eat breakfast, but I know she really just wants to talk to me. As I suspected, when I get dressed, she's waiting for me downstairs with a smoothie bowl and a smile that betrays her motives.

"Thanks, Mama." I take the bowl and sit down at the counter.

"Did you sleep okay last night?" She busies herself at the cutting board, chopping up some fruit for herself.

"Pretty good." I shrug.

Truthfully, I don't think I slept at all after Landon left. All I could think about was him getting an earful from my mom and Theo before they sent him on his way.

"So..." She wipes her hands on a towel and tries to act casual. "Is everything okay with you and Landon?"

"Yep." I shove a spoonful of fruit into my mouth.

She frowns at my one-word response.

"Honey, can I ask... is there still something going on between you two?"

She looks worried, and I know she's probably torn because she doesn't know how to handle this situation. My mom cares about Landon—that much is obvious—but she doesn't want to hurt me either.

"There's nothing going on anymore," I tell her. "I don't know if there ever really was."

"Oh, okay." She sounds a little disappointed by that revelation. "Well, I just

didn't know if you wanted him here for dinners anymore."

I pause with the spoon halfway to my lips and stare at her. "Landon loves you and Theo. And I know you guys love him. We're not going to tear each other's throats out, I promise. You don't need to banish him from the house or anything like that."

She releases a tiny, almost inaudible sigh of relief. "Alright. I just want you to be comfortable in your own home. That's the most important thing."

"I am." I polish off the bowl and carry it to the sink. "But I'd like to move back into the pool house soon if that's okay with you."

"I don't know, Kail."

"It's all secure now," I remind her. "Nobody can get in unless I let them in."

"I'll think about it," she says. "Are you sure you don't want me to drop you off at school?"

"I told you Jared is picking me up." I grab my backpack and double-check that my homework is in there. But as I'm doing that, something else catches my eye. Something I was not expecting to see again.

My tablet.

My stomach flips, and my mom says something else, but it doesn't register. Where the hell did this come from? Did Landon put it there last night?

"Kail?" My mom waves her hand at me, trying to get my attention.

"Huh?"

"Jared's here." She points at the alert on her phone.

"Oh, right." I nod. "Okay. I'll see you later."

JARED ESCORTS ME INSIDE THE BUILDING, AND WE HEAD FOR MY LOCKER FIRST. When I see Landon there, waiting for me, I nearly burn skid marks into the floor.

"You okay?" Jared asks as he looks back and forth between us.

"Yeah." I force a smile. "I'll just put this stuff in my locker, and we can go."

"I'll be right here." He leans up against the bank of lockers a few feet away and meets Landon's irritated glare with one of his own.

“Are we playing this game again?” Landon asks as I open my locker and start stuffing my books inside. “I thought we were past the fake boyfriend bullshit.”

“Cool your jets.” I roll my eyes. “Why do you care who I’m with? And why are you standing here waiting for me?”

“I told you we need to talk.” His voice lowers, and from the corner of my eye, I can see him reaching out to touch me before he thinks better of it. “I fucked up, Kail. I get that. And I have so much to say, but I need you to listen to me. I’m trying to make things right.”

His words are everything I thought I wanted to hear. Except he can’t make it right. He can’t erase the sound of Audrey touching him. The auditory loop I hear on playback every single night won’t go away just because he apologizes. I’m not even angry with him anymore. I’m just... hurt. It hurts so much, and I know I can’t go through this again. Too much has happened, and Landon has proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that he’s capable of breaking my heart. I have to preserve what little dignity I have left.

“You should move on,” I tell him gently as I shut the locker and turn away. “I already have.”

LANDON

After Kail's ice-cold rejection, I spend the rest of the week nursing my wounds and trying everything I can to get her to talk to me. She hasn't moved back into the pool house yet, and since Theo threatened to chop my balls off if I upset her, catching her alone isn't as easy as I'd hoped.

At school, if she isn't with Jared, she's with Courtney. When I wait for her at her locker, she refuses to acknowledge me. Lunchtime doesn't fare any better. The first day back, I pulled up an empty chair and sat down with all three of them. Kail got up and left without a word. She's slammed the door, but I'm determined to pry it back open somehow. I'm just not sure what it's going to take.

On the second day back, I had an arrangement of Dancing Lady Orchids waiting for her in her locker. When she saw them, it only seemed to make her more withdrawn if that was possible. So I left her a box of chocolate-covered macadamias for the third day, which I knew were her favorite. She barely glanced at them and slammed her locker shut. The fourth day, I left her my Cougars hoodie with my uniform number on the back. That day, she actually sighed, so it was something.

On the fifth day, I decided to go big or go home. I had a huge stuffed pineapple and a balloon waiting for her, which only managed to humiliate her even more. It wasn't my finest decision, but I was going out of my fucking mind. She'd shut me out completely. Being close enough to touch her but knowing that I couldn't was like staring down a cupcake after a hunger strike.

I'm starving to death without her. Nothing tastes as sweet. Even the oxygen I breathe feels tainted. I don't know how to get through to her. And watching her hobble around in that fucking boot makes me murderous. Someone hurt my girl. Someone crushed her ankle with a goddamn baseball bat, and I can't even comfort her because she refuses to break this crushing silence.

Knowing I deserve her wrath and more doesn't make it any easier to accept. If I thought it would make her feel any better, I'd tell her to mace my ass. Punch me in the face. Whatever she wanted. But Kailani doesn't even seem angry anymore. She's just quiet and sad. Of course, the exception is when she's with Jared fucking Price. He makes her laugh. Fucking asshole.

When the weekend rolls around, Alana shows up at my door. It's a little awkward, considering the last time we spoke, I had just broken into her daughter's bedroom. But she didn't come to bust my balls. She came to invite me to dinner. I feel like a dick for disappointing her when I decline. As much as I want to go, I can't sit next to Kail while she ignores me. We need to hash our shit out in private, where we can fight it out and then make up. And by make up, I mean get her naked and worship her until my dick falls off or we die.

A few of the guys from the football team ask if they can party at my place, and I tell them to fuck off. It's Saturday night, and I'm balls deep into my own investigation, trying to figure out what happened the night of the party. I've been asking around to see what people remember. I've written down every detail I can recall. I've rehashed it with Carson over the phone and gathered a list of every name we can remember. Then I sent them to my attorney and asked him to dig up whatever he could. If any of those assholes sold stories to the media before or after that night, I wanted to know about it.

After I started that ball rolling, I asked around about the incident with Kail at school. I'd already talked to the police myself. After Mr. Dawson agreed to let me come back to school, he set up a meeting so they could interview me. Once I showed them my security footage placing me at home, they sent me on my merry way.

When Monday comes around again, I stuff a few first editions of Kail's favorite books into her locker. This time, I don't wait around to see her reaction

because, honestly, it's starting to feel a little hopeless. It sucks having that door slammed in my face every day. But I'm not quitting her, and I won't let her quit me either.

She doesn't talk to me that day. Or the day after that, or even the day after that.

When I'm not trying to figure out how to crack Kail's silence, I'm keeping my head down and focusing on schoolwork. There's a lot to catch up on. Coach let me come back to the team, but my heart isn't really in it. It's just something to kill time, but I'm not sure it's worth it. Especially when Audrey bounds across the field every day after practice to annoy the fuck out of me.

It makes no difference if I respond to her inane commentary about the day's events. She just likes to hear herself talk. When she finally realizes I'm not listening, she'll try to fuss over me by using any excuse to touch me. Audrey is the kind of girl who thinks all guys can be led by their dicks. All she has to do is crook her finger, and they'll fall at her knees without question.

Yet she still hasn't managed to leash me.

Today, after practice, she's waiting for me by the locker room. It's funny she seems to be the only girl here who isn't afraid of the lurker who attacked Kail. Since my return, I've noticed them all walking in packs, rushing to get out of here as fast as they can. But not Audrey.

This little detail has been eating at me. I know Audrey to be a lot of things. Manipulative. Greedy. Vain. But violent? It's hard to imagine her being capable of that type of evil. By all accounts, it was a guy who bashed Kail's ankle, so that should rule Audrey out. But does it?

"Sooo..." She twirls a bleached blond curl around her fingers as she looks up at me beneath the caterpillars she calls lashes. "Prom will be here before we know it. Have you given it any thought?"

I stuff my cleats into my duffel and zip it up. "Nope."

She makes an irritated sound. "Do I have to spell it out for you, Killian?"

"I don't know." I toss the bag over my shoulder and meet her gaze. "Do I have to spell it out for you? Because clearly, you haven't received the message."

Her stamped on eyebrows pinch together in frustration. "Seriously, do you

have to be such a dick? I know I pissed you off with the whole Jacob thing, but everyone expects us to go together. I think it's time to smooth things over, don't you? You can't deny we're perfect for each other. Everyone can see it. So, let's kiss and make up already."

"Audrey." I stare at her like she's deranged, well, because she fucking is. "We were never together. I don't know how many times I have to explain this to you. I never asked you out. I never took you on a date. I never fucked you. Yet you seem to think you have some form of ownership over me. Whatever twisted fantasy you've created in your mind is a delusion, and you need to let it go."

Her jaw clenches, but otherwise, she remains undeterred. "I know you want me. Quit playing games, baby. The two most beautiful people always end up together. Just like in *Blood River Legacy*."

"Wow." I scrub a hand over my face, exhausted. "I don't even know how to respond to that, so I'm just going to say this. Clear as fucking day. I don't want you, Audrey. I never have, and I never will. It's not a game, or a riddle, or a fucking clue to some deeper, unspoken meaning. You and I are a nonstarter. Get it?"

She cocks her head to the side, eyes narrowed to thin slits. "Is there someone else?"

Jesus. What the fuck do I have to do to make this girl understand? I let her tell everyone I was her boyfriend before because I couldn't be fucked correcting her. She followed me around like a total fangirl calling me Killian every chance she got, and for a while, her annoying chatter overshadowed the dark thoughts looping through my mind incessantly. But it's clear to me now that was a mistake.

"There's only one girl I want," I tell her slowly, so she can't possibly misunderstand.

"Oh, please." She rolls her eyes. "You can't possibly mean that stupid fatty who can't even walk properly."

"What the fuck did you just say?" The question roars out of my mouth with such violence it seems to vibrate the air between us.

Her lips fall open as she stumbles back in shock. "Don't be like that,

Killian.”

“What. Did. You. Just. Say?”

“Well, it’s true,” she answers, her voice quieter this time. “It’s not like I’m the only one who thinks it.”

“Do you think I give a damn about your opinion?” I sneer at her in disgust.

Her shoulders cave inward, but she forces her chin up, refusing to back down. “Why would you want to be with the girl who fucked your best friend and then took your money? It’s just gross. I thought you had better taste.”

“Money?” I freeze. “How the hell did you know about the money?”

She blanches, and I can see her trying to come up with something. Nobody knows about the money. Nobody but my lawyer, my publicist, and me. There isn’t any reason that Audrey would know about this unless she had something to do with it herself. When all of that went down, I was too pissed to think straight. I let my lawyer handle it, and he told me he did. He met Kail up at Devil’s Bluff and dropped the cash off there. That’s what he said. But now I’m wondering if it even was Kail.

“Audrey.” Her name hisses between my teeth. “How the hell did you know about the money?”

“It’s common knowledge,” she bites back. “Everyone knows.”

“Bullshit.” I grab her by the arm and shake my head. “I’m onto your fucking games. And let me tell you something about Kailani Hale. She’s mine. So I’d think very carefully about what you say. In fact, as far as you’re concerned, you don’t know her. If you ever utter her name again... if you even think about looking at her wrong, I will destroy you. We both know I can. Your power is only as strong as your associations at BMA. If you fuck with my girl again, I will have you shunned so fast your head will spin. Are we clear?”

“You’re going to regret this,” she snarls.

She leaves the threat in her wake as she storms off the field. I don’t doubt she means it, and I know I’ll have to deal with her later. But for now, I’m just glad she’s gone.

I turn the opposite direction to head for the parking lot, but I come face-to-face with an unexpected surprise when I round the corner. It’s a grim-looking

Mr. Dawson with a law enforcement officer beside him.

“Landon.” Mr. Dawson offers me a sympathetic nod. “We need to speak with you.”

KAILANI

It's already dark when I slip out of the main house and head back to the pool house. My mom fell asleep watching TV, and she would lose her shit if she knew I was walking across the lawn alone, but I'm so tired of having an escort everywhere I go. I'm eighteen years old, and I shouldn't need a babysitter.

The cold bites into my skin as I punch in the security code on the door. I'm shaking so hard my teeth are rattling my jaw.

"You should be wearing a coat."

My head whips to the side. Landon is sitting in the patio chair, his breath billowing out into the night air.

"What are you doing out here?" I yelp. "You've got to be freezing."

"I need to talk to you, Kail."

God, this guy. Why can't he just let me go? Can he sense how close I am to breaking down and letting him back in? When I look at his beautiful face under the light of the moon, all I want to do is kiss him and forget everything else that happened.

But how long would it last? How long would it be until the next heartbreak? Because Landon won't ever let himself believe someone could truly love him without a motive. All he knows how to do is push people away when things get too hard or scary. I don't think I can go through that again, and I'm terrified we'll never be able to trust each other after everything that's happened.

"You can't sit out here all night." I sigh. He's totally playing on my empathy

now.

“So let me come in.” His lips are tilted into a half-smile. Half hopeful, half weary.

I hesitate, but I’m too cold to overthink this right now. Maybe if he comes in, I can finally get my point across.

“Okay.”

Landon blinks like he wasn’t expecting my agreement, but the moment I have the door open, he follows me in before I can change my mind. He looks around the place as though he missed it, but then his attention moves to me. It’s impossible not to notice the redness around the edges of his eyelids. I’ve never known Landon to have allergies, so it doesn’t make sense. *Has he been crying?*

Everything else disappears in the face of this realization, and I think I should have been smarter. I should have just let us freeze to death outside because now I can smell him, and it’s so good I just want to inhale him like a drug. I want to hold him and promise it will all be okay, even if it’s not true.

“I’ve missed you so fucking much,” he rasps.

He takes a cautious step toward me, and internally, warning bells scream at me to push him away. But I can’t, and I don’t. When his fingers brush over my jaw, my eyes flutter shut, and my heart revives from its dead sleep. He drags me to him, wrapping me in his arms as his lips brush over my temple.

For a second, I allow myself to lean into him. He breathes me in. He tangles his fingers in my hair. My lungs pant, and I blurt out the only thing I know to make this stop before he destroys me all over again.

“I know what you did.”

He freezes, slowly pulling back to meet my eyes. “What I did?”

I extricate myself from his body to recalibrate. But cold-hearted bitch is no longer available in my default settings, so I opt for rational. As it turns out, even my rational side is too emotional because when I try to speak, my lip wobbles.

“You went to Audrey. You... had sex with her.”

His eyebrow shoots up like the idea amuses him, and it pisses me off.

“This isn’t funny, Landon.” I pace away a few steps and drag my hands through my hair in frustration. “We had just been together for the first time, and

that meant something to me. But as soon as things got hard, you ran to her.”

“Kail—”

He tries to take a step toward me, but I back away. We need distance for this conversation. It’s the only way it can work.

“You can deny it if you want,” I say. “But I was at your house that night. I was waiting for you in your bedroom, so I heard everything. There’s no point in lying.”

Landon studies me for a few moments. His brows furrow like something is clicking into place. But he doesn’t look repentant as he fishes his phone out of his pocket and taps the screen.

“The twenty-seventh, right?”

I shift uncomfortably, somewhat surprised he even remembers the date. To me, it was important, but I didn’t think he’d be able to rattle it off so easily. When he looks up at me in question, I reply with a jerk of my chin, which is all I can manage.

He taps his phone a few more times and then glances at me again. “So, just to be clear... you think I came here, slept with you, picked a fight, and then ran off to do the same thing with Audrey a couple of hours later?”

Well, it sounds pretty dumb when he says it like that. But I know what I heard, and I won’t let him convince me otherwise.

“Yes,” I answer defiantly.

“Okay, let’s test that theory.” He walks over to the gray lounge and parks himself on it, slapping his palm down on the space next to him. “Come on. I won’t bite.”

I wait a few seconds just to be stubborn, but I am curious about what he wants to show me. I don’t know how he thinks he’s going to prove anything.

When I sit down beside him, I leave a gap of a few inches, which Landon swallows when he leans into me. He holds his phone up so both of us can see it.

“This is my security app,” he explains. “See the date?”

“Yes...” I answer slowly.

He hits the play button, and on the screen, there’s a video recording of the people who were there that night. A handful of guys from the football team, a

couple of random girls, and Audrey. They are all gathered in Landon's sitting area. When he unmutes the footage, I can hear him ragging on them about the weed. He speeds up the video a bit, and most of the group breaks off, filtering outside. Landon goes with them.

I frown as he switches to a different camera. The one monitoring his second-floor hall. A minute goes by, and then Audrey is sneaking up the stairs with Tyson Robertson. He's a linebacker for BMA, and admittedly, I always thought he looked a little like Landon, only a less handsome version. Audrey is dragging him down the hall on the footage, and it's obvious he's pretty wasted as he stumbles around, but she doesn't seem to care. She glances around quickly when she reaches Landon's bedroom door and then wrenches it open to slip inside.

Something gooey melts in my chest. Is it regret? Or just my righteous indignation?

"She called him Killian," I murmur. "I heard her say it..."

My shoulders cave inward. I feel so stupid. Landon sets his phone aside and pulls me onto his lap, insulating me with his arms.

"She's fucking cuckoo," he tells me. "That's part of the reason I came here to talk to you. I think Audrey's been screwing with me for a long time. She made me believe things too. Things that weren't true."

"Like what?" I peek up at him.

He hesitates like he's nervous to tell me. But eventually, he caves in.

"The reason I've been so pissed off at you this whole time is because I thought you threatened to sell a story about me to the media. The morning after that party at my house, my publicist said you called him and my attorney and asked for a cash deal. They said you asked for five hundred thousand dollars in cash, and if you didn't get it, you were going to destroy my career with a story about that night."

I blink at him, stunned. "That's crazy. I never spoke to either of them."

"I know that now," he answers gruffly. "But I didn't before. As far as I knew, you took the money and ran off to Hawaii."

"But I didn't," I insist. "I've never wanted your money. That wasn't even remotely my concern. Why would they tell you I took the money if it wasn't

true?”

“Because someone did.” He shifts beneath me, circling his arm around my waist and pulling me closer. “Someone called them and pretended to be you. She met my attorney up at Devil’s Bluff to pick it up, and he really couldn’t see who it was. That wasn’t the way he wanted things to go down, but I was so angry I couldn’t think straight. It’s impossible to say for sure, but I suspect it might have been Audrey.”

“What the hell?” I clench my teeth so hard my jaw aches. “And you actually believed it was me?”

“I’m so sorry, Kail.” He squeezes me in his grasp. “It’s a weakness of mine. When it’s all you’ve ever known, it’s easy to believe anyone has the potential to screw you over. I was stupid, and I didn’t think it through. The same goes for the night I took off on you. I was too bullheaded to see clearly, but I meant what I told you. You’re the only girl I’ve been with. The only one I want.”

“You just left, though,” I whisper. “You didn’t give me a chance to say anything. You always assume the worst—”

“I know.” He cups the back of my head and eases it against his shoulder, stroking my hair through his fingers.

“You know?” I gripe. “Is that all you have to say?”

“No.” His lips tilt just a tiny bit, but then his eyes are as serious as I’ve ever seen them. “I’ve been a dick.”

“A real asshole,” I agree petulantly.

“A douchebag.” He nods.

“A wanker.”

His thumb grazes my lips. “A fuckwit.”

I peek up at him, and I can’t help it. Laughter bursts from my lips, and he laughs too. It feels so... disturbingly normal. So, naturally, I have to ruin it.

“We’ve both done things we can’t take back. And maybe Audrey was to blame for some of it. But does it really change anything?”

“Yes.” His fingers curl into my sweater, gripping me like he’s afraid I might bolt any second. “I came home because I wanted to apologize to you about that night. About all of it. I was too angry to see past my jealousy. The thought of

you and Carson, it blinded me to everything else. I never stopped to think about how it must have looked to you—”

“None of that matters anymore,” I say.

He grunts in frustration. “Of course, it matters. This is what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

“But it doesn’t,” I argue. “We could dissect what happened that night for the rest of eternity, but that won’t fix our real issues.”

“What are the real issues?” he asks hesitantly.

“Trust. We don’t trust each other, Landon.”

“Let me earn your trust then.” He slides his hand down my back, rubbing circles into the tension gathered there.

“It’s not me I’m worried about.” I dip my head. “It’s the fact you’ve never let anyone inside. You think everyone will hurt you, and I understand why. But when someone actually cares about you as much as I do, you can’t believe it’s real.”

My words fade away as I realize what I just said. When I blink up at him, he’s frozen.

“You... care about me?” he repeats.

I’m frozen too now. We’re just a couple of statues. Maybe if he blinks long enough, I can slip away and find a big hole to fall in.

“Kail.” He pokes my arm lightly. I must look catatonic.

“I didn’t mean to say that,” I groan.

His face falls, and I shake my head like an idiot.

“No, I meant it. I just didn’t mean to say it out loud.”

He picks me up like a doll and deposits me back onto the lounge by myself. When he backs away, I’m convinced this is it. He’s going to run now like he always does, and that’s exactly the point. But he just paces along the length of the floor, silently debating something.

When he turns back to me again, he looks terrified and more vulnerable than I’ve ever seen him.

“I want to tell you something,” he says. “To prove a point. But you might look at me differently if I do. You might hate me, and I’m not sure I can handle

that.”

My heart softens. “I could never hate you. I tried. Repeatedly. Remember?”

There’s a slight tremor in his arms when he stuffs his hands into his pockets.

“Did you find your tablet?”

My tablet. Holy crap. How could I have forgotten to ask him about that?

“Were you the one who took it?”

He shakes his head, then continues to pace. “No, it was Suzy.”

“Suzy?” Her name tastes like dirt on my lips. “She came into the pool house?”

“I didn’t find out until it was too late,” he says. “It never occurred to me, but it should have.”

“So she went through my journal and leaked that story to the press?”

It’s hard to swallow. This is his mother we’re talking about. His flesh and blood. The woman who is supposed to love him unconditionally and support him. Instead, she abuses him and sells him out to the media. I’m shaking mad. I want to find her right now so I can punch her in the face again. But that still wouldn’t be enough. She’s like a disease, and I can see how she’s sucked the life out of him. It isn’t fair. She needs to be stopped. Someway, somehow...

“She hurt you.” Landon’s voice is paper-thin. “She would have kept coming back here. If she ever did something else to you... I couldn’t live with myself. I couldn’t allow that to happen.”

He sounds so different. As if he’s not really here right now. And I can tell by the glazed expression on his face that he isn’t. He’s remembering something, and it doesn’t look good.

“What happened?” I ask gently.

“I gave her a choice.” He stares at the floor. “Drugs or me. I told her I would cut her off. I offered to send her to rehab, but the decision had to be hers. She chose the needle like she always does. I left her in a dirty motel room with a two-week supply. She must have taken too much. She couldn’t handle the temptation, and she overdosed. The police just notified me.”

His confession settles between us like a dense fog. I’m trying to wrap my head around it. Swallow it down. Do something with it. Because right now, it’s

stifling.

“Is she...”

He blinks at me. “Right before she stuck the needle in her arm, she said I ruined her whole life. It was the last thing she ever said to me.”

“Landon.” My voice fractures as I walk to him. He seems uncertain when I reach up to touch his face as though he can’t be sure it’s real. My fingers graze his jaw, and he closes his eyes and shudders against me. “This wasn’t your fault. Her choices were her own. I’m so sorry she hurt you for so long. I know deep down, you loved her. You’d taken care of her your whole life when she should have been the one to take care of you. She couldn’t see how special you are, and that was her loss. You deserved so much better than that.”

His head dips into my hair, and I wrap my arms around him because no matter what’s happened between us, I know he needs me right now. He needs someone to let him grieve. For a few long minutes, I think that’s exactly what he does. He lets me hold him, and I whisper my assurances over and over.

This wasn’t his fault. I repeat it until I know it sticks and he calms down enough to look at me again. I massage the tension from his shoulders and open my heart for him regardless of the risks. For him, I can be vulnerable if it helps ease his pain. At least temporarily.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I tell him. “I’m here for you whenever you need to talk. No matter what’s going on between us, that offer will always stand, okay?”

His response is bone-tired. “You said I didn’t trust you. This is me showing you that I do. Nobody else knows. I asked the funeral home to cremate her body, and I declined to print a death notice. If you wanted to destroy me, this is how you could do it. I’m telling you because I want you to know I do trust you.”

“I would never tell a soul unless you wanted me to.”

His lashes flutter shut, and when they open again, gray eyes ensnare me. I don’t think I’ll ever stop being fascinated with them. Forever and a day still wouldn’t be long enough to study the artistry of Landon Blackwood.

“Does this mean you could forgive me?” He’s gripping my waist with his fingers in a silent plea.

I consider it. That’s a loaded question if there ever was one. If I say yes, that

means we're really doing this. We're all in. In my heart, I know I want that, but I'm still scared. So I ask him the question that's been on my mind since I found the tablet in my backpack instead.

"Did you read my journal app?"

He lifts one shoulder noncommittally as he knows he's in trouble. "I just wanted to see what was on it. I expected more pictures of me with my eyes scratched out or something."

"Oh, my god," I grumble. He knows about all my obsessive stalker entries.

"If you're in the market, I know a guy who can get you some of that deodorant you like so much." His tone is playful now, the darkness of the past few minutes behind us. "The cologne too..."

"Don't sound so smug, okay." I glare up at him. "I saw the drawer in your closet."

His eyes widen. "Yeah, well..."

I grab his face and drag it down to mine. Our lips crash together, and it feels like lightning zinging through my veins. I'm alive, and so is he. All my fears are swept away in a rush of need. It's breeding inside me, manifesting in my greedy hands as they slide beneath his shirt to touch his bare skin.

My legs are squeezing together, fingers gripping, teeth biting. I want him more than I've ever wanted anything. He tangles his huge palms in my hair, angling my head back so he can deepen our kiss. His tongue slides over mine, and he breathes life into me. I can feel it changing me, all the way down to my DNA. I don't know where his soul ends and mine begins anymore.

My heart beats faster as I silently acknowledge the depth of the feelings I've been trying to deny for so long. And then, like an echo, I hear the words repeated back to me.

"Kail, you made me care," he whispers against my skin. "I've been a dick, and I screwed this up a million different ways, but I need you to understand this. I... *care*."

I think that's Landon's version of I love you. When I peek up at him, his eyes are tormented. His fists are curled into my clothes now, anchoring his body to mine. It's terrifying, this feeling. That fear is electrifying our skin. He could

hurt me again. I could hurt him. Vulnerability sucks. We have a lot of armor to unpack. Weapons to put down. Wounds to heal. But right now, I just want to feel him.

Landon buries his face in my neck and breathes me in. He doesn't know what to expect from me. When I slip my fingers beneath the hem of his shirt and touch his skin, his eyes flash back to mine.

"We can talk tomorrow," I say.

He seems frozen, unsure, so I push him along by dragging his shirt up over his head. He watches me with blazing eyes as I toss it aside and reach down to cup the hard bulge in his jeans. When I lean up on my toes to kiss him again, he finally caves. Slowly, he walks me back toward my bed, stripping off my shirt, bra, and panties. I distract him by tugging down his zipper, so he'll leave my skirt on, and then all that's left is my ugly boot, which I yank off and set aside. He stares at my ankle for far too long, shoulders tightening, hands clenching. I touch his jaw and force his gaze back to me.

"Tomorrow," I remind him. We can talk about all the shitty stuff tomorrow.

He nods stiffly and eases his body over mine, tipping my chin up to connect our eyes in the deepest way. My nipples brush against his skin. The softness of my belly rubs against his hard abs, and for a second, I'm consciously aware of the fact that he must feel it. He must have noticed I've gained back the weight. My body was made to be curvy, and I realize I can't fight it anymore. But just because I've realized that doesn't mean I'm not still at war in my head. Landon senses my distraction, and when he drags his hands up over my rounded hips, he squeezes, his approval rumbling from his chest. He can't fake that hunger in his eyes. So, for once, I accept it, and it stirs a primal need in me. His erection is poking against me, so close. Just a couple of inches lower and he could be inside. Drugging me with the hypnotic thrusts of his glorious body.

"I'm on the pill now..." I leave the words hanging between us.

Understanding emerges on his features, and he groans as I open my hips wider for him. An offer he can't decline. He reaches down between us, nudging against me. I arch into him, aching for it. My body is pleading for him to put me out of my misery already. But then he pauses just to stare at me like if he

doesn't, he will die.

“You are so fucking pretty.” The words come out all gravelly.

Hot liquid clings to the edges of my eyelids as I drag my fingers down his back, and he finally pushes his way inside me.

“Even when you cry.” He kisses the tears away.

I moan into him when his mouth finds mine, and his dick swells inside me. Landon pivots his hips, and I feel him everywhere. Skin on skin. Stretching me open for him as his chest brushes against mine. He kisses me like every second might be our last, and soon, he's fucking me like it too.

Electricity pulses through my veins as we fuse, my hips rocking up to meet his. He thrusts into me hard, and the shockwaves vibrate through my entire body. It feels so much more intense this time, so addictive, and I never want him to stop.

I melt into a puddle of ecstasy when he reaches down to touch me, sending me spiraling out of control. Landon isn't far behind. He thrusts into me one last time, his cock pulsing as he empties himself, and warmth spills into me.

I grab his face and kiss him, silently begging him not to pull away. He doesn't. He stays inside me, kissing me and touching me until his cock swells, and we do it all over again.

Later that night, as I fall asleep in his arms, I feel like everything might finally be okay. At least for a little while.

KAILANI

“So today was the big day, huh?” Court greets me in the empty hallway with an unusually cheerful smile. She used a bathroom pass to sneak out of class and say a quick hello after I texted her to let her know I was here.

“Yep.” I look down at my black Vans. “No more boot.”

“What did the doctor say about dancing?”

I release a long breath and shrug. “Same thing as always. Give it time.”

She nods. “Where’s your fake boyfriend this morning?”

“Ha.” I poke my tongue out. “Jared had an appointment today too, so he’s not coming in. But I told him I’d be fine for the day.”

I don’t mention that Landon will probably be watching over me as soon as he sees I’m back at school. When we woke up together this morning, there wasn’t much time to talk about what happened. I had my doctor’s appointment, and he had to get ready for class. He asked if we could talk more tonight, and I told him yes. Right now, it’s hard to focus on anything else.

“Oh,” Court says. “Well, I can walk you to class.”

“Actually, I have to head to the office. I have an appointment with Mrs. Oaks.”

“Ugh,” she whines. “Career counseling sessions are the worst.”

“Yep.” I plop my backpack onto the floor and start rifling through it to see what I need. “But I’ll be fine. I don’t want you to be late, so we can just meet up at lunch.”

She checks the empty hallway again before agreeing. It's been so long now I think everyone is finally starting to let their guard down, including me. You can only spend so long checking over your shoulder before it taxes your nervous system completely.

"Okay, I'll see you in the cafeteria then. Text me if you need me." She flounces off down the hallway, and I turn back to my locker.

When I unlock it, a nervous flutter erupts in my belly. Every day, Landon has left something in here for me. Admittedly, I expected him to give up, but he didn't. And now things finally seem like they could be going our way. But I know there's still a lot to talk about. We have to hash things out before we can move forward. Band-Aids won't fix the gaping stab wounds we've left each other with.

With a sigh, I open the door. Just as I expected, there's a decorative box full of tissue paper waiting for me inside. I wonder what it will be today. More sweets. Jewelry. Flowers. Those would be the obvious choices, even though he doesn't need to get me anything. But when I tilt the box to examine the contents, instead of that warm fuzzy feeling I usually get, there's a sick sense of foreboding.

I move aside the tissue paper with stiff fingers to uncover what I can already see is a pregnancy test. It's positive. Hot acid burns my throat when I try to swallow. I want to throw the box in the rubbish and pretend I never saw it, but I can't look away. I can't pretend I don't see the photo beneath the test. It's an image of Landon and Audrey tangled up in the sheets of a familiar bed.

Everything inside me turns to ice when I flip over the photo and read the pretty, perfect handwriting.

I win, demon slut.

Choking back the bitter taste on my lips, I return the photo to the box and haul it to Landon's locker in a daze. The bell rings, and the hall floods with other people. Everything around me is spinning violently. Someone bumps me, and I look up at what I know will be my biggest heartbreak.

Landon Blackwood.

“Kail?” He reaches out to touch me, and I shrink away, shaking my head in warning.

I can’t even speak. There are no words. I throw the box at his feet and dart away.

He calls after me in frustration. “Kail, wait. Please.”

But I’m already gone.

I DIDN’T GO TO MY MEETING WITH MRS. OAKS. I JUST WALKED OUT THE FRONT door, got into my car, and drove away. Landon tried to call me. He left me voicemails and texts, but I couldn’t look at any of them.

I didn’t even know where I wanted to go. I just knew I couldn’t be there. I couldn’t think about him, and I couldn’t accept what I saw.

He lied to me.

You can’t deny a photograph. There are no excuses. No justification. He was with her in that bed. He told me I was the only one. The thought of Audrey carrying his baby makes me so violently ill, I pull over to vomit twice.

How could he do this to me?

In a daze, I navigate the winding mountain roads until I end up at Devil’s Bluff. This is the place people come to when they want to find some quiet during the day. On weekends, students from the surrounding schools show up in hordes, dragging in kegs and cases of liquor. They park their luxury vehicles along the edge of the gravel and stuff their pockets full of condoms and weed. They rage and dance and have sex, and when the sun comes up, they all disappear like it never even happened. If these canyons could talk, the stories they could tell would probably put us all to shame.

It’s beautiful and isolated here, which makes it the perfect place to hide out. The problem is, I’m not the only one hiding from something today. When I turn off the ignition, my eyes flick to the other car parked along the edge of the bluff. It’s like someone drove to the precipice and then thought better of tipping their

vehicle over it.

The driver's door is open like maybe they jumped out in a hurry. A shiver moves over me as I get out to examine the scene. It seems so ominous, but I'm sure it's just a tourist who came up here to take some photographs. I read something once about the inordinate number of people who die every year trying to capture that perfect selfie. I hope the tourist didn't tumble over the edge.

But that's a ridiculous notion, right?

Except the longer I stare at the car, the more familiar it seems. It's a silver Lexus convertible. I don't pay a lot of attention to all the cars at school, but I'm pretty sure I've seen that same car parked at BMA. The top is down even though it's chilly, and the owner is nowhere in sight. It seems really strange, and I can't let it go. What if someone really did fall over the edge?

I reach into my pocket and grab my canister of Mace. Maybe I'm using this as a distraction right now, but if someone really needs help, I can't just leave. Where would I go, anyway? I know what's waiting for me back at BMA, and I just can't think about that right now.

It's a long walk to the car. My feet drag against the gravel, and every once in a while, my ankle still gives a little twinge of pain. I welcome it for a change. It gives me something else to focus on.

When I reach the Lexus, I hang back a little at first, cautiously walking around to examine it. There's nobody inside. No corpse on the back seat. But there is a BMA blazer sitting on the passenger seat.

Sweat prickles my skin as I edge along the cliff and peek over. The drop is so steep and high, I can't even see what's down there. If someone did fall, they would not have survived.

I'm trying to figure out what to do when I hear the softest of sobs coming from the clump of trees to my left. Convinced I'm hallucinating now, I stall my breath and fall perfectly still, but the quiet sob erupts again, followed by a sniffle.

I reach for my phone, fingers hovering over the screen. I think I should call for help, but what would I even say? Someone is crying in a clump of trees up at Devil's Bluff. No, I need more information first. I need to go see for myself. But

what if it's a trap?

I hesitate, but the crying continues. Shit. What if they really are hurt and scared?

My legs move woodenly in that direction. When I reach the grass, I try not to step on anything that will crunch. Maybe I can just get a peek, and if it's nothing catastrophic, I'll turn around and leave without a word. But the closer I get to the noise, the faster my heart beats. The melancholy sounds are echoing around me now, intensifying my own agony. Whoever this is, they are in a world of pain.

A halo of brown hair comes into view, and I freeze. At first glance, the girl curled up in a ball on a bed of dirt looks like a small child. Her whole body is shaking with grief and sorrow so profound it suffocates the air from my lungs. But I know this isn't a child. She's wearing the BMA uniform, and before I even get a glimpse of her face, I have an idea who it is.

"Alexa?"

Her head snaps up, and she stares at me, horrified. An orange prescription bottle tumbles from her hand as she tries to ball herself up even tighter.

"Wh-what are you doing?" she whispers.

My knees nearly buckle as I examine the empty bottle. "Did you take those?"

She shakes her head violently, bringing her palms up to cover her ears. "You aren't real."

She thinks she's hallucinating.

Holy crap.

I reach for the empty bottle and nearly topple over. I need to categorize my thoughts. Call 911. Tell them what she took. Give them directions. A second passes, maybe two, but it feels chaotic. I'm punching the numbers on my phone when Alexa speaks again.

"I couldn't have stopped what they did to you," she yells. "Please go away! You aren't real!"

What they did to me?

"Hello, is anyone there?"

Shit. The 911 operator. How long has she been speaking to me? I answer her in a daze, and I don't know if any of what I'm saying makes sense. My sentences

eject in broken fragments, and she tells me the ambulance is on the way. But her assurances are drowned out by the sight before me. Alexa's still talking, but her words are becoming increasingly incoherent. Her shaking limbs are growing sluggish. Gradually, one of her palms slips from her ear, followed by the other. She's lying on her back now, staring up at the sky with a glassy expression.

"Please, make them hurry!" I hang up the phone without thinking and kneel at Alexa's side, trying to stir her back to life. But she doesn't hear me anymore.

Her head rolls in my direction, and her eyes drift shut.

KAILANI

“**H**ere.” Jared plucks the red Starbursts from his palm and hands them to me. “You can have the cherry. I know they’re your favorite.”

“Thanks.” I unwrap one and toss it into my mouth absently.

“Are you sure I can’t grab you something else from the cafeteria?” he asks.

“I’m good.” I offer him a weak smile. “I just appreciate you being here.”

He glances around the hospital waiting room and nods. “Do you think they’ll even let you see her?”

“I don’t know.” I squeeze my hands together in my lap. “But I don’t want to leave until I know she’s going to be okay.”

“Hospitals freak me out.” He shudders. “But I wouldn’t let you sit here alone.”

I lean into him and sigh. It’s weird how he went from being a fake boyfriend to a good friend. Jared and I come from two completely different worlds. He was born into this life of money and privilege, but now that I’ve gotten to know him, I can safely say he isn’t like most people at BMA. I can’t imagine any of them even faking concern for Alexa. They surely wouldn’t take time out of their day to come sit here to see how she was. When Jared called to check on me this afternoon, I sort of blurted out what happened in a panic, and fifteen minutes later, here he was.

I haven’t told anyone else from school what’s going on because I don’t want Alexa to become a target for their cruelty. But I did give my mom a quick call to

explain I wouldn't be home for a while.

"Are you ever going to answer him back?" Jared nods at my phone, where Landon's texts are still lighting up the screen every ten minutes.

"I don't think so." The words are the most painful I've ever uttered. But I can't even let myself think about him right now. It's just too much.

"I'll give you this," Jared mutters. "The guy can be a total dick, but he obviously loves you."

"What makes you say that?" I look up at him, and I can feel the agony in that question. I shouldn't have asked.

"He stares at you constantly." Jared snorts. "And he looks like he's going to murder anyone else who even thinks about talking to you. That's why he feels so threatened by me. I have to admit, it's kind of fun to mess with him."

"Jealousy isn't the same thing as love." I nudge my shoe against the squeaky tile.

"No, but it's part of it," Jared says. "And I don't just mean his jealousy. He's protective of you too. Like the way he beat the shit out of that dumbass Gavin after he dumped paint on you at the football game. Oh yeah, and he worked me over pretty good too when he thought I was your boyfriend."

"Wait, what?" I blink.

"Don't worry." He waves off my concerns. "It was mutual. We both needed to blow off some steam, and we took it out on each other."

My mouth dries up. I'm still trying to imagine the two of them fighting, and then I remember when both of them had bruises on their faces. It's all starting to make sense now.

"Oh, shit."

Jared and I both glance up. Carson is standing in the hall just a few feet away, wearing an uneasy expression on his face when he sees the two of us sitting there.

"Carson?" Jared perks up beside me, smoothing his hair back like he's trying to look casual. Except he's totally not casual at all. He seems... flustered.

"Hey." Carson nods at us, but his body is so stiff, I'm beginning to wonder if rehab turned him into a mannequin.

Apparently, he's back now. His eyes are clear, and he looks different. Good different. Like he's finally taking care of himself. I don't think I've seen him sober since I returned to BMA, and it's a little weird. In fact, this whole situation seems awkward for all of us.

"I didn't know you guys were here." He stuffs his hands into his pockets and glances around. "I just had an appointment next door. I was going to grab a coffee. I didn't mean to interrupt."

His eyes dart from me to Jared, and I don't think it's my imagination that his cheeks seem a little flushed. They are both acting so nervous I'm not sure what to make of it.

"It's alright." I offer him a reassuring smile.

Carson and I still have a lot to talk about. I wasn't in a place to listen to him before, but I am now. And I want him to know that.

"Okay, well, uh..." He hesitates, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "Kail, would you mind if we talked for a minute?"

"Sure."

Jared gets up out of his seat. "I'll go grab us some coffees. Americano, right, Carson?"

Carson's eyes widen in surprise. "Yeah, thanks."

"Just a hot chocolate for me," I tell him. "Thanks, Jared."

He jerks his chin and walks away, leaving me alone with Carson. I don't know him all that well, and after everything that's happened between us, I'm not sure how to navigate this situation. He sits down, leaving an empty seat between us, and we both try to speak at the same time, laughing when we glance at each other.

"Sorry, you go first," I tell him.

"Okay." He drags a hand over his face. "About that night, I want you to know—"

"Nothing happened between us," I finish for him. "I know."

His shoulders relax, and he nods. "Something about that whole night feels off. I've been trying to figure it out."

"Me too," I admit.

Silence falls between us, and I'm not sure what else to say.

"And in case there was ever any question in your mind, I just wanted you to know I was never into you," he adds.

"Um... thanks, I guess." A strangled laugh gets caught in my throat.

"I don't mean it in a bad way." He glances at me apologetically. "It's just, I'm into guys, not girls."

"Oh." I was not expecting that. But Carson looks so relieved I don't interrupt him as he rushes to get the rest out.

"I already told Landon. I've told a few people actually, and I wanted you to know I was never a threat to you. In fact, it was always the other way around."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"I was so jealous of you." He chuckles, a little embarrassed. "Ever heard that saying you can't help who you love? Well, that was me with Landon."

You and me both, buddy. I want to tell him that, but I don't.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize." I offer him an apologetic smile. "That must have been hard for you. But if you're open to it, maybe we can try our hand at being friends going forward."

"I'd really like that," he says.

I'm fidgeting with the empty Starburst wrapper in my hands, wondering where we go from here, when he lowers his voice and speaks again.

"As your new friend, I know it's not my place, but would you please just talk to Landon? He cares about you, Kail. He's totally freaking out right now because he can't find you."

"I don't think that's a good idea—"

"Kailani Hale?" A nurse appears from the hallway, and I immediately forget everything else as I brace myself for the news.

"Yes?"

"Alexa is asking to see you now."

"HEY," I WHISPER A STRANGLED GREETING AS I TAKE IN ALEXA'S PALLID FACE.

She's wearing a hospital gown, warm blankets weighing down her legs as she clutches a bedpan in her hands. Before the nurse disappeared, she warned me Alexa might have to vomit again. Then she left me with Alexa's parents, who are now waiting outside in the hall. They both looked horribly distraught, and it was difficult to witness. It's obvious they care for their daughter very much, which only makes everything more confusing. Why would Alexa try to end her own life?

As I'm standing beside her now, I keep replaying the reel of events in my mind, wondering how I missed the signs. What could I have done differently to help her? And why does she want to talk to me now?

She peeks up at me from beneath dark lashes. "So I guess that really was you at Devil's Bluff, huh?"

"Yeah, it was. I'm sorry I didn't realize sooner. I heard you crying, and then I wasn't sure what to do."

I'm babbling. Why do I always do this in stressful situations?

"It's not your fault," she answers softly. "None of this is your fault. If anything, it's theirs."

"Whose?" I question.

Her gaze drifts out the window, and a few stray tears leak down her cheeks when she blinks. "I've been keeping a secret for a long time, and it was killing me inside. And then what happened to you brought it all back. That's why I could never look at you. I thought maybe it would go away eventually, and I'd get better. But it never did. I didn't know what else to do."

She's trembling, and I feel like I should do something to help her, but I'm not sure what. I fold my body into the chair beside her bed, hoping it will make her feel more comfortable. A silent offer of sisterhood. *I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere.*

"You can tell me if you want," I answer in a gentle tone. "If it will help."

When she looks at me again, her eyes are filled with shame. "You shouldn't be so nice to me."

"You've never done anything to hurt me. Why wouldn't I be nice to you?"

"That's not exactly true." She fidgets with the hem of her blanket, smoothing

it between her fingers.

I'm not sure what to say, but it turns out I don't need to say anything. Alexa isn't even here anymore. She's somewhere else, trapped in a memory.

"My first year at BMA, I went to a party with Audrey," she says. "We'd been hanging out with those guys from Maple Grove every weekend. You know, Gavin and Wyatt?"

"Yes." I nod stiffly. How could I ever forget Audrey's foot soldiers?

"I thought Wyatt was cute." She laughs humorlessly. "I was so naïve."

"What happened?" My palms stick to the chair beneath me, so I wipe them on my skirt, hoping this isn't going where I think it is.

"We were playing Truth or Grope," she says. "And Wyatt brought out some of those little orange juice boxes and vodka bottles. I poured my own and never thought twice about it. The first one was fine, but after the second one, I started to feel woozy. I woke up later that night covered in vomit. Wyatt was next to me, asleep. We were both naked."

Her hand begins to tremble, and I reach for it automatically without thinking about it.

"I'm so sorry, Alexa. I had no idea."

"It was the same way they drugged you," she tells me between tears. "Wyatt wanted you, but Audrey was calling the shots that night. She wanted to get photos. The whole scheme was supposed to make Landon believe you'd slept with Carson and him because she knew it would humiliate you, and he would hate you for it. That's why she invited you to the party."

Audrey invited me to the party? All this time, I'd thought it was Landon. But he was right about her. She's been screwing with all of us the entire time.

My mouth feels like it's full of concrete when I hinge my jaw back open. "Did she tell you that?"

"I heard it." Alexa dips her head in shame. "I was there that night. After what happened with Wyatt, I thought I was going crazy. I couldn't understand why I didn't remember anything. That had never happened to me before, and it just didn't make sense."

"So you went to the party for proof?"

“I just... I wanted to see if I really was crazy,” she says. “But I never expected things to go the way they did. I was in the room before they came in. I saw Audrey leave her purse in there, so I snuck in. I just wanted to look through it. When I did, I found a bottle of crushed up pills and a few empty syringes. I think that’s what they were injecting the orange juice boxes with. It was so small nobody would even notice.”

Acid bubbles in my stomach, threatening to come back up. Alexa doesn’t notice me clutching my waist. She’s so engrossed in the story she just keeps going like it’s opened up a volcano inside her. She can’t stop the words from spewing out now.

“I was just putting everything away when I heard you and Landon outside the door. I didn’t have anywhere to go, so I hid beneath the bed.”

My head spins, and I try to blink it away. “You were there the whole time?”

She’s staring at the wall, dazed. I’m not even sure she heard me.

“I heard you go to the bathroom, and then Landon sat down on the chair to wait. I could see his feet from where I was. You were gone for so long, and he was so quiet. I never saw him move. I think he passed out then. After a few more minutes, the bedroom door opened again. I heard Audrey, Wyatt, and Gavin dragging Carson into the room. They were laughing and telling him he had too much to drink. He groaned, and they dropped him onto the floor and just left him there. Then Audrey started telling everyone what to do. She made the guys drag Landon into the bed first, and she undressed him.”

Alexa pauses for a moment, releasing my hand to clutch the bedpan like she might throw up. When nothing happens after a few deep breaths, she goes on.

“I remember Wyatt opening the bathroom door. He said you were out like a light and asked if he could play with you. Audrey told him no. She had more important things to worry about than his dick. She stripped off some of her clothes and made them take photos of her and Landon together in the bed.”

“They took photos of them together?” I repeat numbly.

The image in my locker returns to the forefront of my mind. It’s all I can see. I knew that bed was familiar. Everything about that room felt so familiar, and I should have noticed it right away.

“That was just the beginning,” Alexa lowers her voice. “She tried to get him hard. Gavin and Wyatt watched the whole time, making suggestions about how to jerk him off, but it didn’t work. Audrey was pissed. I think she was going to try to have sex with him.”

“What the hell?” The words hurl from my lips like venom. “Why would she do that?”

“She wanted to use it against him later,” she explains. “To make him think they hooked up. She’s been obsessed with him since the first day she saw him, and it’s always burned her that he wouldn’t have her.”

“Did she do anything else to him?” I ask, needing Alexa’s confirmation. It isn’t even about my fragile heart anymore. It’s about Landon being hurt when he had no idea what was going on.

“No.” Brown strands of hair fall into Alexa’s face as she shakes her head. “There was no way she could that night. And before that, she tried at least a million times, but he never took the bait.”

“She left a pregnancy test in my locker this morning,” I confess. “I thought it was real.”

“She’s getting desperate.” Alexa frowns. “She feels threatened right now, and I think she’ll do just about anything she can to get Landon. But I know for a fact she’s not pregnant. She was just bitching about being on her period a few days ago.”

“She’s seriously psychotic,” I grit out.

“I know. But there’s more.”

“What is it?” At this point, I’m not even sure I want to know.

Alexa’s eyes move to the ceiling, focusing on the tiles there. “That night, I laid there under the bed, completely paralyzed as I listened to them drag you out of the bathroom. They put all three of you in bed together, twisting you around and posing you like dolls. She wanted everyone to think you were a slut, and I was too much of a coward to stop it. I wanted to do something or say something, but after what happened with Wyatt, I couldn’t face him. I knew what he was capable of, and I couldn’t go through that again. I’m so sorry, Kail.”

Her pleading words make me realize that somehow, in this fucked-up

scenario, I was the lucky one. What happened to Alexa could have happened to me. All this time, I'd been so angry, blaming Landon and Carson when they were victims too. She wanted to have Landon so badly she would have done anything to get her way. She touched him. *She touched him.*

I'm so infuriated I could scream. Who the hell does Audrey think she is? She can't get away with this. I won't let her.

Alexa breaks down again, dragging me back to the present. She thinks I'm angry with her. God, I need to focus. This is just... too much.

I reach out and touch her arm. "None of this was your fault."

She sniffles. "I should have told you right after it happened."

"It isn't your fault," I insist. "You were traumatized. I just wish I could have helped you then. I wish I had done something differently."

"No, you don't get it." Her whole body jerks as she drags her fingers over her face. "I'm a terrible person. I could have helped you. All I had to do was prove what really happened."

"But how?" I ask, unsettled by the certainty in her voice.

"I recorded it," she cries out. "I have the whole thing on audio."

My pulse slows to a crawl. *Audio.* She has an audio recording of everything that happened that night.

"I gave it to my parents," she says. "And they turned it over to the police. I wanted to talk to you first, but they insisted. When they found out what happened, there was nothing else I could do."

"The police?" My voice is so faint I'm not sure she even hears me.

"They have to pay for what they've done." Her eyes flash. "This was the only way. It's too late for me, so it's up to you now."

"What do you mean it's too late for you?" I demand.

She leans back into the pillow, and the first sign of life flickers in her features. "I'm going away. I'm finally getting the help I need."

LANDON

“I’m only going to ask you one more time, Audrey,” I growl. “Who broke her ankle?”

“You can’t do this to me!” she yelps.

Her bony ass is duct-taped to a chair in her bedroom, and she’s squealing like a stuck pig every time I ask her a simple fucking question.

Wyatt’s on the floor beneath her feet, groaning after I beat in his ugly tomato face. Carson’s standing above him, his shoe hovering dangerously close to Wyatt’s balls, which will look like pancakes pretty soon if he doesn’t give up the tough-guy routine.

“I asked you a question,” Carson warns. “Who drugged us?”

“C’mon, bro.” Wyatt flops around like a fish, trying to loosen the tape around his wrists. “Anything but my nuts.”

“Then tell me what I want to know.”

Audrey glares at Wyatt, sensing he’s about to break. She’s trying to make eye contact. Trying to control him like she always does. But his loyalty to her isn’t as strong as his love for his favorite appendage.

I step between them, so she’s forced to look at me. “Answer me, Audrey.”

“I don’t know anything,” she hisses. “My parents are going to be home any minute, and they will string you up if they catch you here!”

“Funny,” I muse. “Because according to your mother’s Instagram, they are still in the Bahamas.”

Her face pales, and she shakes her head. “No, they aren’t.”

“Quit fucking around. The gig is up.”

Wyatt howls in pain as Carson nudges his groin with his shoe. “Choose wisely. Your dick or the truth. Nothing is stopping us from tying a string around your little smoky and leaving it to shrivel up and fall off.”

“Fuckkkkk,” Wyatt bellows. “Okay. Alright, man. Alright, I’ll tell you. Just stop.”

Carson releases some of the pressure on Wyatt’s junk just as Audrey opens her mouth to scream at him. I slap a hand over her mouth and then grab one of her dirty socks from the floor. She squeals when I pry open her jaw and stuff it inside, but it seems to do the trick when I rip off a piece of tape to secure it.

She’s raging, thrashing against the chair as Wyatt spews his confessions.

“It was all Audrey’s idea,” he says. “She stole the pills from her mom, dissolved them in water, and kept syringes in her purse. She was planning on Kail showing up that night. She kept ranting about seeing you two in town together the day before. She was hella pissed. She made us stay up all night, putting together a plan. She injected the solution into a few juice boxes and dumped some into the pitchers of beer on my tray. She knew you and Carson would drink those. I was just supposed to carry them. That’s all, bro. I swear.”

Audrey tries to mumble her protests around the sock, and I shoot her a look that tells her to shut the hell up.

“Why?” I kneel and grab Wyatt by the shirt, dragging his face up to mine. “Why did she do it?”

“For pictures,” he blurts. “She didn’t like Kailani, and she wanted to humiliate her. And she wanted to get on your dick, but she couldn’t get it up.”

“What the fuck?” Carson glares at her.

I shudder at the visual, and I can’t hide my revulsion.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I ask her.

“She’s obsessed with you, bro,” Wyatt answers. He can’t seem to shut up now that he’s started. “That’s why she was always texting photos of you to Carson. She knew he had a thing for you too. She wanted everyone to know who you belonged to, and she was willing to take out anyone who got in her way.”

I glance over at Carson, and he nods to confirm Wyatt’s admission. Now the

Snapchat makes sense. He never wanted her. She was just trying to make his life miserable.

“It’s all in there,” Wyatt says. “You can see everything for yourself.”

Carson and I both look at the closet where he’s pointing. Audrey screeches, nearly choking herself on the sock.

“What’s in there?” Carson asks.

“Everything.”

We exchange a glance, and Carson nods before disappearing into the closet. He’s gone for a minute before he returns, and he looks like he might puke.

“You better go check it out yourself.”

I leave him to watch Audrey and Wyatt and head for the closet. I imagine she’ll probably have some of the pills in there. Maybe some pictures or a journal or something. But when I step inside, it’s like a goddamn insane asylum.

The entire closet is a shrine to Killian O’Conner, the character I played on *Blood River Legacy*. Laminated photo montages cover every wall. Lines of script etched into the paint with what looks like a knife. Lists of female characters from the show with their names crossed out, and the word DIE written over them in bold marker.

It only gets worse from there. There’s a lock of what looks like my hair pinned to the wall. Tee shirts she must have stolen from my duffel bag hung in rows. Pairs of my socks. A piece of cardboard with gum plastered all over it. Gum I can only imagine she must have dug out of the trash. On the opposite side of that are vacuum-sealed bags of clothing items. When I start to pick through them, I realize they are items from the *Blood River Legacy* set. Every year, the studio would donate some of the wardrobe items to charity auctions. From what I can tell, it looks like Audrey bought every piece she could find that Killian O’Conner had worn. Is this what she used the money for?

My stomach heaves as I take it all in. Photos of Kailani with her eyes gouged out. Her entire schedule printed on a piece of paper with scribbled notes about her habits. Where she goes after school. What she does. And beneath that, there’s a list of ideas to break her, crossed out and rewritten hundreds of times.

DIE DEMON DIE.

The words are written all over Kailani's face in another photograph. I can't stomach looking at it much longer. But then I see the clear plastic bottle full of liquid. The label looks familiar, and it isn't until I get closer that I realize why. It's an exact replica of the label from the TV show. In the fictional world of Blood River, vampires would use bottles of acid to kill the demons.

The room spins as I pick it up, instinctively knowing it was meant for Kailani. It's all beginning to make sense now. *Demon slut*. That's what Audrey always called her. Because she's so fucking delusional, she actually wants to believe I'm Killian O'Conner and Kailani is a demon.

I try to compose myself as I carry it into Audrey's bedroom and set it down on her dresser. I know I can't expect an honest answer from her, so I look at Wyatt.

"What the hell is this?"

"It's some kind of acid from one of her dad's renovation sites." He winces as he wriggles his wrists against the tape. "God, this is fucking tight, can you at least loosen it up a bit?"

"What is the acid for?" My voice is murderous.

"What do you think?" He glances back at Audrey, who's shaking her head spastically. "That freaking psycho wanted Gavin to use it on Kailani. Destroy her face or some shit. I don't know. You have to ask her."

Heat crawls up the base of my spine and bleeds into the outer edges of my limbs. I close my eyes and try to rein it in because if I don't, I'm going to lose my shit. Carson seems to sense this, so he takes control of the room.

"And which one of you fuckwits did she ask to break Kail's ankle?"

Wyatt hesitates. I open my eyes in time to watch Carson kick him in the nuts again. His face turns green, and he curls into a little ball, gagging like he's going to vomit.

"Which. One?" Carson repeats.

"Fucking Gavin," he heaves. "Okay? It wasn't me."

"Yeah, you are so innocent in all of this, aren't you?" Carson shakes his

head.

My homicidal gaze swivels to Audrey, and for a moment, the weight of her destruction settles over me. Because of her, almost all our lives were ruined. Kail left for two years and came back so full of hurt and rage she nearly lost herself. Carson spiraled into addiction and destroyed his knee, along with any chance at a football career. I nearly killed myself in a car accident. Kail's shattered ankle. The money. The lies. Our tattered relationship. The list goes on.

Audrey has left a wake of destruction so deep and wide it's a miracle any of us have made it out alive. There's nothing left in that void of a soul. I can see it now when I look into her empty eyes. I used to think the vipers in Hollywood were the worst, but I was wrong. Audrey is the worst of humanity. The demon spawn ejected from hell because even the devil himself didn't want her. She deserves nothing less than pain and suffering for what she's done.

"Now what?" Carson asks, glancing at me with the same question in his own eyes.

What can we possibly do to her that would make things right again? Even the darkest, most depraved solutions don't feel permanent enough. Nothing can wipe her slate clean.

"Let's talk outside." I jerk my head toward the door.

Carson nods, glancing back and forth between the human scum. Wyatt looks like he's still trying not to puke, and Audrey is plotting ways to spin this situation back in her favor somehow. I'm too wound up to think straight, but Carson grabs a desk chair and drags it out into the hallway behind us. He wedges it beneath the door and wiggles it into place.

We walk downstairs and out the back door. It's getting late, and the moon is winking at us from behind the cover of clouds as we step onto the porch. Audrey's house is secluded enough that we don't have to worry about the neighbors seeing us here, but there is a main road just up over the hill. We parked a mile away and walked here through the woods, just in case.

"This is so fucked up." Carson scrubs a hand over his face. "What the hell are we going to do now?"

My eyes are unfocused as they drift over the tree line. There are too many

things to consider, and answering that question feels almost impossible right now. What would Kail want if she knew the extent of Audrey's depravity? What would hurt Audrey the most, but leave our futures untarnished?

"What was that?" Carson's head snaps to the side, and I hear it at the same time.

There's a thud, and then an ear-shattering scream. At the front of the house, the door slams open so hard it sounds like a thunderbolt. Carson and I are heading that way when Wyatt peels around the corner, clutching at his bloody shoulder.

"The bitch fucking stabbed me!" he bellows. "She stabbed me!"

He weaves up the hill at a frantic speed, and Carson glances at me. Audrey is screaming like she's being murdered inside the house. We're trying to make sense of it when she comes flying out the door next, and the image looks like something straight out of a horror film. Half of her face and parts of her chest are covered in red, scaly burns that look like her skin is melting off. We only catch a glimpse as she stumbles after Wyatt with a bloody knife still clutched in her grasp.

She's screaming as though she might die from the pain, but she's not willing to give up the pursuit of her latest victim.

"Jesus," Carson murmurs. "I think she's going to fucking murder him."

We take off behind them, chasing them up the hill. Wyatt's blood is splattered into the dirt beneath our feet, so he can't be in good shape. As we round the corner, I can just make out the shadow of Wyatt's back as he darts across the road. Audrey is hobbling right behind him, slicing her knife through the air.

In a split second, lights flash around the bend. Tires squeal. A horn blares. It's a logging truck skidding right at them. My brain barely registers it a second before Wyatt and Audrey splatter across the grill. There are two thuds, and then they disappear beneath the truck before the tires spit them back out onto the pavement like two boneless rag dolls.

"Holy fuck," Carson and I whisper in unison.

I blink and then blink again. The bodies are still there. Blood smeared across

the pavement, spattered with god only knows what. The truck rumbles to a final stop, nearly jackknifing in the middle of the road, and the driver is looking around in his mirrors, freaking the fuck out. But it still doesn't seem to register in my mind.

I'm looking at the bodies, waiting for them to get up even though it isn't logical. Audrey and Wyatt are just lying there, so still, it doesn't even look real. Carson and I are both frozen and wordless too. Seconds pass. Maybe minutes. The driver's door opens, and his voice filters out into the cool air. He's on the phone with the police.

"Just hit a couple of people in the middle of the road. I think they're dead..."

His words send a jolt of adrenaline through my veins, and I look at Carson.

"Did that really just happen?"

He nods with a vacant expression. "I think we need to get the fuck out of here, bro."

KAILANI

The news of Audrey's and Wyatt's deaths ripples through the school like wildfire. At least, that's what Courtney tells me via text as I spend the morning with two detectives. I got home from the hospital late last night, and they showed up at my door before I even had a chance to leave for school this morning.

They came here because of the audio recording. They want me to give a statement about the night of the party. I tell them everything, and my mom remains at my side the entire time. She's spitting mad. I've never seen her so fired up. Between questions, she seems to calm, only to get triggered all over again when they ask me something else that I answer in detail. I didn't want Landon to get dragged into this until I had a chance to talk to him, but I have no choice when they ask me about him. I explain what Alexa told me, what Audrey tried to do to him, and my mom drops an f-bomb. Actually, she calls Audrey a fucking bitch.

I turn to look at her with wide eyes.

"I'm sorry." She brushes a few pieces of hair behind my ear with a trembling hand. "I just want to wring her neck."

"Well, she's already dead, so there's that," the detective answers humorlessly. "And so is Wyatt."

"Good riddance," my mom snarls. "May they rest in hell."

Holy moly. She is on fire today. My mother's Aloha Spirit is strong, but she is fiercely protective when it comes to her family. We look after each other. And

I know right now, she's trying to figure out how to do that after everything that's happened.

I'm not sure how I feel about all of it myself. There has been so much to process lately. When I heard the news, it didn't shock me as much as I would have expected. I'm not mourning the loss of Wyatt and Audrey, but it seems a little surreal. They were here yesterday, and now they aren't. The detective told us it looked like they had one hell of a fight before they ran out into the road. From what they could piece together, it appeared Audrey had stabbed Wyatt, and he had burned her with some type of chemical. Crazy, party of two.

"What will happen with Gavin?" I ask.

"He was taken into custody this morning," the detective assures me. "We'll keep you updated on the charges."

He hands me my statement and goes over it one more time before asking me to sign it. Since Audrey and Wyatt are dead, Gavin is the only one who will be prosecuted. My mom is already asking about going to court, and the detective explains how the whole process works. But first, they have to finish their investigation to make sure there aren't additional charges that need to be brought against him. God only knows how many other people they did this to.

I sign my statement, and my mom walks the detectives out, peppering them with more questions while I text Court back. She's asking if she should come over, but I tell her I'm okay. I just need to find Landon. When I got home last night, every light in his house was off. It didn't even look like he was home. And when I knocked, nobody answered. The detectives let it slip that they'd spoken with Landon and Carson before they came here, so I assume he's still around this morning.

Jared texts me again to check in on me, making sure I'm okay. He's asked about Carson too like he thinks I might have more information than he does, which seems odd. But then I remember their interaction at the hospital, and something occurs to me. Do they have a thing for each other? Maybe I should invite them both over for dinner this week. It couldn't hurt just to see what happens.

My mom returns and frets over me needlessly, offering me everything short

of a full buffet to an expensive vacation.

“I’m good, Mama.” I hug her tight and smile up at her, and for once, it feels pretty true. At least I will be when I talk to Landon.

The truth really does set you free, and I won’t allow Audrey’s evil to steal one more second of my happiness.

“Okay, how about some tea?” Mom asks, her hands itching to do something useful.

“Actually, I’d like to go find Landon.” I slip off the barstool.

She smiles way too brightly. “Really?”

“Yeah, it’s been pretty crazy lately. We have a lot to talk about, and I want to make sure he’s okay.”

I head for the door, and she calls after me. “Call me if you need anything, okay? Oh, and Kail?”

“Yeah?”

“Give him a hug for me, please?”

“Okay.” I hide my smile.

I HEAD FOR THE POOL HOUSE FIRST, DESPERATE TO CHANGE OUT OF MY SCHOOL uniform before I go over to Landon’s. But as it turns out, we really are magnets. He’s already here, waiting for me on the patio chair.

His eyes snap up to mine when he hears me approaching, and his are shadowed with darkness. He looks exhausted, and if his clothes are any indication, he didn’t get much sleep last night. Instead of his trousers and blazer, he’s wearing a pair of jeans and a gray Cougars hoodie. It’s so tempting to crawl into his lap right there and curl up in the safety of his body. Instead, I unlock the door without a word and leave it open. He follows me inside.

“Kail?”

He’s still standing on the landing with a wary expression on his face. The last time we saw each other, I’d just found Audrey’s gift box in my locker. It didn’t exactly end well, and I’m sure he doesn’t know what I’m going to do

now. But things have changed so much since then.

I walk to him, shocking the hell out of him when I reach up and touch his face. Memorizing the lines by swooping my fingers over the curves. Watching the way his lashes flutter and his entire body relaxes. He needs so much love—an entire lifetime’s worth—and I won’t give him anything less. I’m keeping him forever, I’ve decided.

“I broke my own rule,” I whisper.

He opens his eyes. Soft and gray to my fiery brown.

“What rule?”

“I preached about trust, and then I acted like a complete hypocrite. I should have trusted you, Landon. I should have known. You’ve never lied to me before.”

He exhales a shaky breath. “So I guess this means you know Audrey was a complete psychopath.”

“Are you okay?” I ask.

We seem to understand each other without saying the words. He knows what happened at the party now. He knows what Audrey did. I can see it in his eyes.

“I’m okay.” His hands stroke over my shoulders. “If you’re okay, then I’m okay.”

I don’t want that wretched human stain to pollute one more second between us, so I bring his face down to mine and kiss him. Landon drags me closer and sighs into my mouth as though this is his paradise. I swallow that sound, and every breath after. I inhale his warmth, notes of vanilla and cocoa. Nothing has ever smelled more like home to me.

My hands drift up under the hem of his hoodie, pressing against the heated skin on his back. When I curl my fingertips into him, I feel like I’m inking the message into his skin.

Mine.

He responds by sliding his hands beneath my skirt and cupping my ass as he lifts me against him. Our lips never part as he carries me to the bed and eases me down onto the mattress, the weight of his body pressing into mine.

I’m breathless and needy when he pulls away long enough to tug the hoodie

off over his head. He tosses it aside, biceps flexing and abs winking at me as he moves. God, he's insanely beautiful. It makes me hyperaware of my flaws when he unbuttons my blazer and helps me remove it. His fingers hover over the buttons of my shirt, and I try to distract him by going for the zipper on his jeans again. But he pauses, and I know I'm caught.

"Kailani." He slips his palms up beneath my shirt, lightly grazing the soft skin of my belly. "Are you trying to hide yourself from me?"

"Yes," I admit weakly.

Can't he see it? Can't he see the softness on me? The rounded hips and drumstick thighs? I'm not one of those perfect Hollywood actresses. I'm not a BMA Barbie. And somewhere, in the back of my mind, I'm still afraid he's going to figure it out. He'll open his eyes and see me for what I truly am.

"You still don't get it, do you?" He cocks his head to the side, frustrated.

"What?"

He makes slow, leisurely work of unbuttoning my shirt, then spreading it apart as heat swirls in his eyes. When he splays his palms across my stomach, it caves in, and he dips his head to kiss the softness there.

"This is what makes you human." His lips brush against me. "I want you exactly as you are. Soft, feminine, beautiful. These curves are my addiction. So, please, for the love of God, let me worship them."

Something melts inside me, and I nod without a second thought. "Okay."

"Okay." He drags his body up mine, thrusting his hips against my panties. "Just in case you forget what you do to me, here's a reminder. And I'll keep giving them to you every chance I get."

His dark growly words trigger the animal in me. I arch into him, and he resumes operation get me naked. Buttons slide, zippers untether, pieces of clothing rain down from the bed. One by one until we're both skin on skin. I curl my fingers into his hair and pull him to my lips as my heart beats a wild staccato in time to my new favorite song.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

Landon's heart plays the same tune.

"I love you." My words land squarely against his lips.

He freezes and pulls back to look at me. Uncertainty lingers in the depths of his eyes like he isn't quite sure he heard me correctly. The warring want and pain on his face makes the edges of my eyes blurry. Hasn't anyone ever told him they love him before?

"Landon." I squeeze his face in my palms, my words laced with an intensity I don't recognize. "I surrender, okay? We have to be on the same team no matter what. I love you too much to lose you for one more second."

He closes his eyes and shudders, and I swear I can feel it. The wall inside him just detonated, exploding dust and debris all over the desolate landscape of his barren heart. It's been dead inside for so long, but there's new life now. Possibilities.

He buries his face into my neck, his body shaking a silent release of emotions. I have a feeling he's been waiting forever for this, so I tell him over and over again. Stroking his hair. Kissing his throat. Touching him everywhere I can reach. *I love you. I love you. I love you.*

He drags me into an upright position and settles me onto his lap. His eyes are blazing with an intensity I've never seen in them. Like he's determined, and this is it. This is our only existence now. It feels true.

"I love you too, my little pineapple. More than you could ever know."

I scrape my fingers over his broad shoulders and cling to him. He nudges his erection into me, and we come together. A slow slide of silk and heat. I collapse into his chest as he cups my ass, using his palms to guide me up and down his length. Our lips move together, and our hearts beat an ancient rhythm that's been written in the stars. We immortalize ourselves at this moment forever.

There will never be another.

I know it now as sure as I know the sun will rise tomorrow.

EPILOGUE

THREE MONTHS LATER

“**W**here’s Landon?” Jared asks as he flips through the channels on TV.

Carson smirks in response, and I shoot him a glare.

I cross my arms and lean back into the sofa. “I don’t know. He’s doing something super secretive, apparently.”

I sound like a toddler, but I don’t care. He’s been gone all day, and I’m embarrassed to admit just how much I miss him. Nothing is the same without him around, and as the school year crawls toward an end, everything feels so unpredictable.

We haven’t really talked about the future. Landon knows what I want because that’s never changed. I didn’t apply for any colleges because I’m slowly working my way back to dancing again. I want to open a studio, but I’m not sure where. Landon once said he wanted to travel, but I’ve been too nervous to bring it up. I’m not afraid of losing him. We are magnets, after all. We’re always going to end up together, no matter how far apart we are. But I just can’t imagine our paths deviating even for a year. He’s spoiled me by being around all the time. In some ways, it feels like we’re just getting started. Things have only just calmed down.

Wyatt and Audrey were laid to rest, but when the truth came out about the things they did, nobody besides their own parents showed up at their funerals. My mom waited two weeks out of respect before she marched into the spa where Lily Rothschild gets her facial injections. As the rumor goes, Alana Hale-Grant

caught her on her way out the door and belted her across the face so hard it displaced her fillers. It's been called the slap heard around Black Mountain, and oddly enough, Lily stopped showing her face after that. Their house went on the market, and they quietly left town in the middle of the night, never to return.

After additional victims came forward, Gavin accepted a plea deal. It was a win for all of us since it means we won't have to go to court, and his future will involve a prison cell for his part in Audrey's schemes.

Alexa wrote me a letter from her treatment facility to thank me, and she asked if we could be friends when she's ready to come back to Black Mountain. I replied with an unequivocal yes.

All seems like it's finally going right with the world. When my mom learned Jared was still couch surfing, she invited him to move in here, and he did. Of course, he talked it out with Landon first, and they seemed to make their peace when they finally came to a mutual understanding. They both want me to be happy. It doesn't mean they don't still give each other shit all the time, but at least it's in good fun now.

By default, Carson is here all the time, too, since he and Jared got together. It only took two months of awkward tension before Carson finally worked up the courage to ask Jared out. They'd both had their hearts broken before, but looking at them now, I know they're going to make it. They both got into San Diego State, and this summer, they'll be leaving Black Mountain behind for the sunny state of California.

Meanwhile, Courtney has been over at my house every day for the last week, claiming she needs bestie time. I suspect it has more to do with the fact that Theo's son, Miles, is finally home. After his honorable discharge from the military, he moved back in too. Now, Court is over here on a near-constant basis, staring at him as though he's the main course at dinner.

"Would you quit drooling over him?" Jared steals the licorice dangling from her mouth and takes a bite for himself. "You've got saucers for eyes."

"Oh, god," she whines. "I can't help it. Have you seen those abs?"

Miles glances over at her with a smirk. He's wearing earbuds while he powers through his daily push-ups, but clearly, he can still hear through them.

Court nearly faints. I've never seen her so tangled up in knots. Honestly, I think Miles will totally go for her, but I have a feeling he's waiting until she graduates. Until then, I suspect we can all look forward to more of these awkward interactions.

My phone chirps, and sticky warmth floods my chest when I check it.

Landon: Come to the pool house.

Me: You are so bossy.

Landon: Be naked.

Me: In your dreams, sailor.

Landon: You're always in my dreams.

“UGH, YOU GUYS ARE GOING TO GIVE ME A SUGAR COMA.” COURTNEY ROLLS HER eyes as I leap off the couch with a grin.

But I don't care. I'm going to see Landon.

I throw on my boots and trudge across the crunchy lawn. It's cold outside today, and it will give me the perfect excuse to wrap myself up in his warm body when I get to the pool house. My teeth are still chattering when I fling open the door and burst inside with a gust of cool air behind me.

“Brrr...” My mouth falls open.

There he is, in all his glory. Landon Blackwood's magnificent body draped in a crisp white shirt and black trousers. It doesn't matter if he's in his football uniform or jeans and a hoodie. He always looks as hot as a billboard model in Times Square. But he knows I'm a sucker for him in these rule-the-empire outfits. It's so not fair.

When he sees me, he smirks and lifts a white poster board, gripping it between his palms. There's a message written in that artistic scrawl I'd recognize anywhere.

*I hate everyone else.
Go to prom with me?*

A laugh bursts from my lips, and I'm already nodding a resounding yes as I kick off my boots and make a beeline toward him. He tosses the sign aside just in time to catch me, hoisting me up so I can squeeze his hips between my thighs.

"So this is what you've been up to all day?" I pepper his warm cheeks with cold-lipped kisses.

"Not just this," he murmurs.

I follow his gaze to the two shoeboxes on the floor next to the gray lounge. It's his favorite piece of furniture, I think. We've broken it in many times since he's claimed me as his own.

"What are those?" I ask.

His response is to carry me to the lounge. He gives me one last lingering kiss, digging his palms into my ass and thrusting his hips against me before he sets me down. I'm miffed when he reaches down to adjust himself, clearly having no intention of giving me the package I *really* want.

He kneels in front of me, reaching for my left foot, frowning when he feels how cold it is. After he warms it up in his palms, he opens the first box, revealing the most beautiful pair of shimmering red heels I've ever seen. They are expensive and rare. Something I know because I added them to my Pinterest board when I was looking at ideas for prom. Landon must have been doing some research too, but that's no surprise. He doesn't half-ass anything.

He slips the heel onto my foot and glances up at me. "Yeah, I don't know if I thought this through. Every guy at BMA is going to be staring at your legs in these."

"So let them stare." I hold out my foot, examining it from every angle. "You're the only one who will see them wrapped around your body that night."

“That’s right,” he growls, leaning up for another drugging kiss.

Just when I think I have him where I want him, he pulls away again. I groan.

“Patience, little pineapple. You never learn.”

He produces a clear plastic container from his pocket, and I recognize the flower inside when he pops it open. It’s a plumeria. His eyes are smoldering when he reaches up and tucks it behind my left ear. I don’t miss the significance. In Hawaii, a flower is symbolic of romantic status. By placing the flower there, Landon is laying claim to me and letting the world know I’m his.

“Nothing has ever been truer.” I brush my fingers along his jaw.

“I’ll buy you one every day.” He leans in and kisses the shell of my ear. “So you never forget.”

“I won’t ever forget,” I assure him because I know he still needs that from me. Landon hasn’t had many people in his life who were there for the long haul, and I think a part of him is still worried I’m going to disappear too. But little does he know I have plans to prove him otherwise. I’ll prove it to him every day for as long as our hearts keep beating.

“I hope you mean that.” He reaches down for the other shoebox, and this time when he opens it, there’s a pair of hiking boots.

“What are those for?” I laugh.

He offers me a lazy smile as he tests one out on my other foot. It fits perfectly too.

“For the next adventure.” He looks up at me. “If you’ll say yes.”

“Say yes?” My voice sounds so weird.

He takes my hands in his and strokes my palms with his thumbs. “Take a year off with me, Kail. Let’s travel the world together, and then we can move wherever you want. You can set up your dance studio, and I’ll figure out what comes next for me.”

My racing heart makes it difficult to catch my breath. He looks so nervous. As if I would or could ever say no to him.

I curl my hands into his shirt and drag him up to meet me, whispering my answer against his lips.

“I thought that was already a given.”

EPILOGUE

TWO YEARS LATER

It's funny how things change. I can remember our Christmases in Hawaii so clearly, yet they feel like a lifetime ago. My mom would wake me up early to open my presents, usually a new pair of dancing shoes or a skirt I'd had my eye on. Then we'd make stacks of pancakes with sweet coconut sauce while we sang "Mele Kalikimaka." My grandmother, or Tutu as I call her, would join us, and we'd go to the beach to build sandmen and watch the local surfing Santa.

For me, they were the best times, but I could remember the sadness in my mother's eyes when she thought I wasn't paying attention. She longed for something I couldn't understand in my small brain at the time. She loved me more than anything, and she had dedicated her whole life to raising me, but she was lonely.

So much has changed since then. Now, everything makes sense. The location is different. Instead of the ocean, it's mountains. And instead of surfers in the distance, it's family.

In fact, one glance at the kitchen table, and you'd think my mother had adopted half the strays in Black Mountain. Court is here, sitting next to Miles, his arm wrapped possessively around the back of her chair. My best friend decided to stay in Black Mountain and attend the local university for a digital arts degree, much to her parents' annoyance. Court decided to walk her own path, and I suspect she's much happier for it. There's an odd sunniness in her disposition today, and Miles looks so gratified, I'm certain I don't want to know what he gave her this Christmas morning.

Beside them, Jared and Carson are savoring the last of the sweet coconut sauce, their faces kissed from the California sun. Theo and my mother are making out like teenagers under the mistletoe in the kitchen, and Tutu is singing “Mele Kalikimaka” to herself as she clears the dishes with a smile.

Landon’s fingers graze the nape of my neck, and I shiver when he leans in to whisper in my ear.

“Remember Mykonos?”

Goose bumps break out along my skin as I nod, biting back a smile. How could I ever forget? We stayed in that beautiful suite for days. Every morning, our personal host, Nico, would make the journey from the kitchen down the narrow, winding stairs with a full spread of breakfast for us. He’d set it out on the patio overlooking the sea, and we’d eat our fruit and pastries and espressos while ships came and went, swaying to and fro in the unreal blue waters.

At night, we’d watch the moon rise from the private cave pool nestled into our suite. He’d ravaged me more times than I can count in that pool, and I’m sure I’ll never forget the pure contentment in his eyes. It was the most relaxed we’d ever felt. And we both agree, of all the places we’ve been and the things we’ve seen, Greece will always be our favorite.

“I think we should do it again,” he says.

I arch an eyebrow at him. It’s been a little more than a year, but in many ways, it feels like we just got home. Between taking some business classes online, I’ve been working on setting up the studio with my new partner, Coach Lopez. Although, I just call her Carmen now. We’ve kept in touch since she left BMA, and when we started talking about the studio, it all came together naturally. We both have different dance backgrounds, so we can offer a variety of instruction, and I couldn’t think of anyone else I’d want to help me along this journey.

It’s been hectic, considering Landon has been busy launching his own e-commerce empire. With Theo’s business guidance and Landon’s innate tech-savviness, he’s forayed into the online world of digital marketing with hardly a hiccup. Of course, it doesn’t hurt that he’s got millions in his bank account to play with, and those numbers are growing by the day.

I never stop being in awe of him. I remember telling him once I didn't think he could fail at anything, and he seemed to take it as a personal challenge. He's been steamrolling ahead ever since, laying down a solid foundation for our future. He knows the money isn't important to me, but it's important to him that I'm proud of his work. I still shiver when I think about the look in his eye when he told me he wanted to be settled and ready for our children when the time comes.

There are three of them, apparently. Two girls and a boy. He's already got names in mind, which we've squabbled over until we ultimately agreed. The same goes for the nursery colors. It's fun to imagine, but we aren't in a hurry for babies. Practicing is the fun part. And we have all the time in the world.

Whatever happens with our careers, friends, or outside circumstances, there's one certainty that won't ever change. Our futures are entwined together. We will always be magnets, drawn back to each other, never too far apart.

When we decided to come back to Black Mountain, it was the easiest decision in the world. This is home to us. This is where our family is. My mother, Theo, Miles, they belong to him now too. And if you ask them, he's already their son and brother. Not to mention Courtney, Jared, and Carson. Family isn't always blood. Sometimes, it's just the people you love the most.

Landon sold his mansion next door and bought us one a few houses down instead. Somewhere we could start fresh together. We still come over here for dinner almost every night, though. It might seem strange to some people, but I can't imagine having it any other way.

He reaches beneath the table and drags his fingertips along my inner thigh, reminding me he's feeling pretty amorous this morning. I close my eyes and melt into him like I always do.

"I'll never get sick of seeing that," he tells me.

"I'll never get sick of feeling it." I smile.

"So, Mykonos?" he asks again.

"Another vacation?" I turn to study him and still somehow manage to get lost in those eyes.

He cocks his head to the side, his lips tilting up at the corners. "I was

thinking more like a... honeymoon.”

The room around us stills, and it occurs to me that everyone else heard it too. It wasn't just my imagination. And it's not a hallucination when he plucks a ring from his pocket and looks at me with an intensity only Landon could ever possess.

Everyone is watching. I'm not breathing, and I don't think they are either. I'm preparing myself for what he might say in front of them, but first, he leans in to whisper in my ear. The words that still make me feel lightning in my veins.

“I love you, Kail. More than anything.”

I can feel his smile against my skin. His love for me still feels like a confession even after all this time. Landon doesn't say anything else the way he says these words to me. It's so raw I could never doubt the magnitude of his feelings.

“So, my little pineapple.” He leans back to take my hands in his. “Can I keep you forever?”

“No take-backs,” I murmur with tears in my eyes.

“Never,” he agrees.

He slides the ring onto my finger. A black pearl with diamond accents set into a rose gold band. Nobody could ever know me better. Nothing has ever felt more significant than his ring on my finger. And I cannot wait to spend the rest of my life with this man.

We kiss, and howls of excitement erupt around us. My mom is already grabbing the champagne. Jared and Carson are arguing over who gets to be the best man. Court and Miles are sneaking kisses of their own. And everything is crazy but so, so perfect.

THE END.

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