



Cruel.
Ruthless.
Dangerous.
Lover.

a haven grace prep novel

THE SAINT

KELSEY CLAYTON

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*To all the good girls who just need a little bad boy in their lives.
This ones for you.*

Maybe you should set me free.
Maybe I don't really want you to.
Maybe I just want to be the person
that you just can't lose.

— CAMILA CABELLO

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IT'S A FUNNY THING, HOW WEED, BEER, AND GOOD COMPANY CAN MAKE ALL YOUR problems fade away. Zayn and Gage sit beside me, laughing as Stone tries to balance an empty bottle on his head. He's so high that he doesn't even realize when it falls onto the floor and shatters, continuing his attempt to remain completely still, his eyes rolling in his head as he tries to look at us.

"You moron. Clean that shit up," I tell him, and only then does he notice the mess he's created.

"Oh, shit. When did that happen?"

Zayn chugs the rest of his can of light beer—such a pussy—and throws it at Stone. "Balance that, bitch."

Like a monkey doing tricks, he glares at him but then picks up the can to do exactly what he was told. I sigh and rub my forehead. I really need new friends.

Rapid pounding on the front door pulls my attention from the circus act in front of me. I groan, standing up and walking toward it. Another set of harsh knocks come just before I get there.

"I'm coming!" I shout. Jesus fucking Christ.

I pull the door open with a scowl on my face, but as soon as I take in the sight in front of me, it's gone—along with my high. Grayson Hayworth—Pretty Boy, as I like to call him—is standing on my porch. His clothes are stained a deep red, blood covering almost every inch of him. Fury radiates from his body in waves as he grips at his brown hair. He may be a lot of things, but weak is not one of them. Whoever put him in this chaotic mental state should take cover if they're not already lying in pieces somewhere.

"What the fuck happened to you?"

He shakes his head. "I need your help."

I jolt awake, panting heavily and drenched in a cold sweat. My eyes search around the dark bedroom as my breathing starts to calm. The lack of light shining through the window tells me it's still the middle of the night. *Of course.*

Slipping out of my bed, I make my way into the kitchen, ignoring my mom as I grab a beer from the fridge. Concern is etched across her face, and I can already tell she's battling between minding her business and asking questions. She goes with the latter.

"Still having nightmares?"

I shrug. "Something like that."

The fact that it's so much more than a bad dream isn't something she needs to know, nor does she need to know what it's about. Hell, the only damn reason she's aware *something* is wrong is because this house is small as shit and sometimes she can hear me yelling in my sleep. Thank fuck she hasn't been able to figure it out.

Since I was younger, it's only ever been the two of us. My dad ran out on us when I was two, and, despite the many times she's tried dating, my mom has always been a single mother. She does her best, I'm sure, but making minimum wage at a diner has never provided us with anything beyond bare essentials. As for our relationship? It's about as strong as this house—might crumble with a light breeze. I'll always appreciate everything she's done for me, but after the fifth time she disappeared with a new boyfriend and left me to fend for myself at the age of eight, I gave up on hoping she would ever become the mother I needed.

I pop the cap off the beer and take a large swig. The ice-cold liquid helps cool my body, allowing me to put that dream, *that night*, into the back of my mind—where it belongs. I put away two-thirds of the bottle in only a matter of seconds then retreat to my room. I probably won't be getting any more sleep tonight, but at least behind a closed door I don't have to deal with my mom's half-hearted attempts at being parental.

THE SNOW-COVERED GRASS and the frigid January air are a harsh reminder of my least favorite season. I shiver in my black ripped jeans and long-sleeved shirt. A part of me wonders if I should go back inside to get my jacket, but as Stone pulls up, I decide against it. I jump off the porch and walk around to the passenger side.

“Took you long enough, asshole.”

He rolls his eyes. “Fuck off. I’ll make you ride your motorcycle in the damn snow.”

“Nah, you wouldn’t.”

“And why’s that?”

I pull the joint out of my pocket and wiggle it between my fingers. “Because then you wouldn’t get any of this.” The corners of his mouth raise, but as he goes to reach for it, I pull away. “Aye. Eyes on the road.”

The school isn’t far from my house, so it only takes a couple minutes to get there. Just before we pull into the parking lot, I eye all the douchebags in uniforms. Haven Grace Prep is the private school across from mine, though I’ve always said HGP should stand for Hoes, Gays, and Prostitots. It’s full of a bunch of rich snobs in a constant war of *my dicks bigger than yours*.

“Look, it’s your best friend,” Stone quips, nodding toward one particularly obnoxious shithead.

Carter Trayland. He’s had it out for me for years, since I made starting quarterback of the North Haven football team as a sophomore. Our team has wrecked his every single year. He was sure with their new quarterback, they would redeem themselves this year. Unfortunately for him, the game was rained out and never rescheduled. It didn’t make a difference to me either way, but he was royally pissed.

I watch as the blond douchebag acts the way his entitled ass always has—like no one in the world can touch him. Although, I guess no one can, being as his dad is the district attorney. He’s tried fighting me a few times, but there’s no doubt in my mind he’d have the book thrown at me if he actually got a mark on his pretty face. While my criminal record isn’t exactly squeaky clean, it doesn’t have any felony charges on it, and I’ve done things I’m not proud of to keep it that way.

Carter’s eyes meet mine and narrow instantly. I chuckle, flipping him off before looking away. I may be his number one most hated person, but he’s always the last thing on my mind.

“You know, one day you’re going to have to kick his ass, just to put him

in his place,” Stone points out.

I hum, acknowledging he’s probably right but being completely aware it’s a bad fucking idea.

As soon as he parks, the two of us get out of the car and go to join the rest of my idiotic friends behind the school. Zayn, the closest thing I’ve had to a brother since kindergarten, leans against the wall. His black hair is spiked, and he’s puffing on a cigarette. Gage and Easton are next to them. Their identical black leather jackets are always good for a joke at their expense. What kind of guys go shopping together for matching clothes? I mean, other than the mega-cunts across the street.

“What’s up, fuckers?” I greet them, plucking the cigarette from Zayn’s fingers and bringing it to my lips.

Gage smiles deviously and hands me a phone. “E was just showing us pictures his girlfriend sent him. She’s a hot piece of ass.”

I take the device into my hands and thumb through the images. For the past few months, Easton has been dating Tessa Callahan—one of the trust-fund brats from across the street. At first, I was completely against it. After he practically forced her on all of us, however, I’ve grudgingly come to tolerate her. I still think it’ll never work out between them, but they insist they’re only having fun. And Gage is right—she’s pretty hot. Psychotic as fuck, but hot none the less.

“Nice tits.” I hand Easton his phone back. “You’re going to let me hit that, right?”

He laughs. “Once I’m done with her, you can do whatever you damn well please.”

Stone slips his hand into my pocket and pulls out the joint I brought for us to share. It’s not all the time that we get high before going to class, but when we do, it makes the day more interesting. Just as he lights it, my phone vibrates inside my pocket. I pull it out and my stomach drops at what I see.

**Unknown: Boss wants to see you. Friday night behind Taylor’s Pub.
Bring your friend.**

“You all right, man?” Zayn questions while passing me the doobie. “You look like you saw a ghost.”

I take a deep inhale and shake it off. “I’m fine. Nothing to worry about.”

But that’s a lie. After reading that message, I’m anything but fine, and

there's *everything* to worry about. Boss is a very powerful *and* very *dangerous* man—a man I happen to owe a huge favor. He's not the kind of person you want to be indebted to. I've spent years avoiding being in this position, but thanks to circumstances, here I am.

No matter how much I smoke, or how high I get, I can't shake the feeling of dread. Perhaps it's the paranoia that comes with smoking pot, but I keep looking over my shoulder, convinced someone is watching me. I wouldn't put it past him. Having been through more shit than the average eighteen-year-old, there aren't many things in this world that scare me. However, the power this guy possesses definitely does.

We head inside to get our books. However, just as we're about to leave the lockers, I turn to Stone. "Give me your keys. I'm skipping."

His brows raise. "Dude, you're high as hell. I'm not letting you drive my car like that."

"I'm not looking to *drive* it." I roll my eyes. "Just give me your fucking keys."

Pulling them from his pocket, he deposits the keys into my hand. Then, my eyes search the hallway for what lucky girl I'm going to be taking with me. Being the king of this place, it's no surprise that I can have whoever I want. If I'm honest, it gets a little old, but for times like this, where I need to focus on something else and clear my head, it's useful.

My gaze lands on a girl with blonde hair, and I know she'll be an easy score. For one, she's wearing a skirt in January. And two, it's rolled up so high she's practically begging for it already. I check her out from head to toe before heading in her direction.

"See you later, shitheads," I say to my friends.

Gage is the only one to protest. "You're seriously not coming to first? It's Miss Patten today, and she's a fucking knockout."

I glance back at them and smirk. "Been there. Done that."

Three of my friends' jaws drop while Zayn just laughs and shakes his head. Since he's like my brother, he's already been filled in on the time she asked me to stay for detention, only for it to end with me fucking her on her desk. I'll probably never do it again, but I don't regret a single second of it. It's one of those things I did just to cross it off my bucket list.

"Hey," I say, getting the girl's attention. "Jenna, is it?"

She twirls a piece of hair around her finger. "Jessie."

"Right."

Crashing my lips against hers, she immediately starts to kiss me back. I grip at her waist and pull her into me. Within seconds, I'm already hard inside these tight-ass jeans. I break the kiss and rest my forehead against hers.

"How attached are you to first period?" I ask.

"That depends. What are you proposing I do instead?"

I chuckle and pull away to wrap my arm around her. As the two of us make our way to the door, my friends hoot and holler like the obnoxious twats they are.

"Knox Vaughn, you bad boy," Stone jokes.

Raising my middle finger to flip them off, I leave the school with my new distraction for the next hour.

BY THE TIME THAT school lets out, I'm no less on edge than I was this morning. Jessie was a decent fuck and didn't expect anything afterward, but she wasn't very memorable. The guys and I used to be really screwed up and rate each girl in three different categories. *Looks. Skill. Level of Crazy.* That stopped when Tessa found out Easton rated her a 9-7-9. That's what happens when your dumb ass doesn't check to see if you hung up the fucking phone.

"Wait for me here one minute. There's someone I need to talk to," I tell Zayn, and he nods.

Reluctantly, I walk across the street, hoping to hell Carter isn't around to start shit. It only takes a second before I find who I'm looking for. *Grayson Hayworth*, Haven Grace's newest quarterback and a pain in my ass. He's standing with his girlfriend, Savannah, and a chick I've never met, but wouldn't mind spending a few hours alone with. Unfortunately, private school pussy isn't something I allow on my menu.

"Pretty boy," I call with a nod his way. "I need to talk to you a minute."

Savannah and her friend eye me curiously as Grayson and I step out of earshot.

"What's up?"

I swipe open my phone and hand it to him. "Don't make plans for Friday night."

The color on his face drains the same way mine did when he reads the message.

“Is this...” I nod. “Shit. I thought they forgot about us. It’s been weeks since that night.”

“They never forget *anything*. Especially not something they’re owed.”

He runs his fingers through his hair and exhales. “What if we just don’t answer them? What are they really going to do?”

My eyebrows furrow. “Have you lost your mind? That would get us fucking killed. These guys don’t mess around, Hayworth. You’re not in the place to act like a badass anymore.” If I stay here any longer, I’ll end up taking my shit out on the wrong person. So, I take a step back. “I’ll text you where to meet on Friday. We’ll go together so I can be sure your pansy ass shows.”

Getting into Zayn’s car, I’m still seething. The only reason I’m in this fucking mess is because of his overprotective ass. He just *had* to go all knight in shining armor for his girlfriend and take it way too damn far. Now, he’s risking *my* life by having shitty ideas like “let’s ignore them.” He has no idea the kind of game he’s involved in now. This isn’t petty high school bullshit. We’re playing with the big boys now.

“Everything all right?” Zayn asks, sensing my anger.

“Peachy,” I murmur. “Just fucking drive.”

He gives me a knowing look and nods once. “I’ll call Garret and have you put in the lineup for tonight.”

And *that’s* why he’s my best friend. He can always sense exactly what I need and knows how to get it for me.

THE UNDERGROUND WAREHOUSE IS packed, with the noise of the crowd only hyping me up. Two brawlers in the ring throw punch after punch. Their blood is all over the place, making it look more like a murder scene than anything. However, despite how brutal it is, neither of them rest for even a second until that final bell dings and the winner is announced.

My favorite thing about these fights is that everyone who steps into the ring is here for a purpose. Frustration they need to take out. Money they need to win. A reputation they need to uphold. It’s always something that brings them here, and no one says a damn word.

“You ready?” Zayn hands me my water bottle as I swing under the rope

and inside the ring.

I smirk. “Aren’t I always?”

ALL'S FAIR IN LOVE AND WAR, OR AT LEAST THAT'S WHAT THEY SAY ANYWAY. Personally, I wouldn't know anything about that. I'm probably the only seventeen-year-old left in this town who hasn't had a boyfriend, let alone lost their virginity. It's not that I'm trying to avoid boys, or unsure of my sexuality, for that matter. I've just never found someone who makes it hard for me to focus on anything else. Because that's how it should be, isn't it?

Maybe I've read too many romance novels and have a false expectation for the reality of dating. I mean, for the sake of being honest, it's not like the over-the-top declarations of love actually happen—except for in my best friend Savannah's case. Her boyfriend, Grayson, really messed up before realizing his mistakes, and she made him grovel for his redemption .

Unfortunately, I'm not nearly as confident as she is. Somehow, while sharing a womb with my twin sister, Tessa, I ended up with all the angelic qualities like book-smarts and a moral compass. Tess, on the other hand, got the better personality. She's outgoing, spontaneous, and absolutely wild. There are times that I wish I could be more like her... until she comes home in the middle of the night sporting a massive hickey, and I have to listen to our father scream at her until sunrise. Let's just say he isn't the biggest fan of her current boyfriend.

I've always been destined to be the innocent one. The one who never gets into any trouble. To say I've lived up to that expectation would be an understatement. I'm in the running for valedictorian. I get perfect grades. I've already been accepted to four different Ivy League universities. Anyone looking at my life from the outside would probably say it's perfect, but they'd be wrong. Sometimes, I'm just itching to get out of my own skin. To

be able to let loose for once. To not care what I'm doing wrong or how I could be doing better.

Writing poetry has become a secret hobby of mine—a way to let out all my pent-up emotions without doing something I may regret. I keep all my thoughts inside a leather journal, hidden away from the world. For my eyes only. Despite how much I trust my sister and my best friend, I don't think they'd ever understand this feeling.

My bedroom door flies open, and Tessa comes in without a care in the world for my privacy. She throws herself down onto my bed and sighs.

"What if I was naked or something?" I ask.

She chuckles and rolls her eyes. "We're twins, idiot. It's nothing I haven't seen before."

"Fraternal twins, and that's not how that works."

Flipping over onto her stomach, she ignores my comment completely. "What are the plans for our birthday?"

My brows furrow. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, like, are we being forced to go to some swanky restaurant for family dinner? Are Mom and Dad throwing us a party with all their friends and none of our own? What are the plans?"

"They haven't told you?" She shakes her head. "We're celebrating our birthday with them a week early. Apparently, Ainsley is getting an award for something, so Mom and Dad will be visiting her in Rhode Island."

Tessa lights up like a firecracker. "Halle-fucking-lujah! Anal-beads turned out good for something after all!"

I can't help but giggle at the nickname. "She will be *livid* if she finds out you call her that."

"Don't care." She shrugs.

Our older sister Ainsley is the golden child of our family. One would think that would be me, but for some reason, no one can hold a candle to Daddy's precious first born. She graduated first in her class a few years ago and earned herself a full scholarship to Brown University. The day she left was one of the best days of my and Tessa's life. I love my sister, don't get me wrong, but she tends to act less like a sibling and more like a parent—and *that* can get irritating.

"Okay, so, let me get this straight. We're going to be turning eighteen, with this big-ass house all to ourselves?" The devious look on her face already has me on high alert.

“Tess,” I warn.

Her smile grows until she’s full on beaming at me. “We’re so throwing a party!” I go to protest, but she jumps up to cover my mouth with her hand. “Don’t say it! Come on, just live a little. Please. We are only going to turn eighteen once. And besides, do you really want to be the *only* freshman at college who hasn’t been to a party?”

I lick her hand, making her grimace and pull it away. “I *have* been to parties.”

“Oh yeah? When?”

“I go with Savannah to Jace London’s all the time.”

Tess scoffs. “Please. Those aren’t parties. They’re rich people get-togethers at best. I’m talking an actual, balls to the wall, no law left unbroken, rage until the sun comes up kind of party.”

Eyeing her carefully, I start to nod. “So, you’re looking to get our house burned down. Got it. Why didn’t you say so?”

“Ugh,” she groans. “You’re such a buzz kill. At least try coming to one before you completely rule it out.”

“I’ll pass.”

The idea of going to one of her boyfriend’s public-school parties makes me even more nauseous than the first time Savannah forced me to go to Jace’s. Tessa, however, doesn’t seem to be taking no for an answer. She juts out her bottom lip and pouts.

“This is why they call you *Saint Delaney*.”

Laughter bubbles out of my mouth. “No, it isn’t. Carter only calls me that because I won’t sleep with him.”

She throws her head back in frustration. “Laney, come on. Please? Just come to one. If you’re still completely against a raging birthday bash, I’ll *consider* throwing it somewhere else.”

“That sounds really assuring.” She doesn’t say anything—just gives me puppy dog eyes. “Ugh, fine,” I cave, and she starts to cheer. “But just one. If I don’t like it after an hour, I’m leaving.”

“Make it two and you have a deal.”

The counter offer is so typical of her. I roll my eyes. “Two it is.”

WALKING THROUGH THE HALLWAYS of the school I've spent the last four years at is bittersweet. On one hand, I can't believe we're graduating in only six short months. I don't know what I'm going to do without this place. On the other, however, I can't wait to get out of here. As people walk by, ignoring me like I'm invisible, it does nothing but remind me of the truth—I let high school slip through my fingers.

"Laney, there you are. Thank God," Savannah, my best friend, says in relief. "Maybe you can talk some sense into Grayson."

I cringe, knowing that regardless of what she's talking about, there probably isn't a thing I can say that will have any influence on Grayson. The four of us—me, Savannah, Grayson, and Tessa—go all the way back to pre-kindergarten days. I was four when Sav moved into the house next door. Before she came, Grayson was just the boy across the street I was always too shy to talk to. Once Savannah was around, though, she brought us all together.

Unfortunately, it wasn't that simple forever. Grayson moved away suddenly when his father was unexpectedly arrested, and Savannah's life completely changed. In a matter of a year, I lost two of my closest friends. It was hard, especially when I came to Haven Grace Prep freshman year to see my former best friend for the first time in years—only she wasn't the girl I remembered. She was cold. Heartless. Didn't even look my way for a while. It wasn't until earlier this year that I finally understood why. Now, I have both Grayson and Savannah back in my life, and I couldn't be happier.

"About what this time?"

She crosses her arms and levels Gray with a look. "Grayson wants to have sex with his mom home, but I think that's weird. Isn't that weird?"

Gray runs his fingers through his hair. "Shout it a little louder, Savi. I don't think the kids over at NHH could hear you."

"Oh, please. Don't be such a pansy."

He snickers and takes a step toward her, wrapping his arm around her back and pulling her close. "Pansy, huh? Say it again and I'll show you what a *pansy* I am."

Like she always does, Savannah immediately melts into her boyfriend and smiles contently. It's nice to see her this happy, and it's no surprise at all to see these two end up together. Even when we were kids, they were just one of those things that go together. Peanut butter and jelly. Salt and pepper. Grayson and Savannah. After the hell the two of them have been through,

they deserve everything good in the world.

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite saint,” a familiar voice says from behind me. I refrain from rolling my eyes as I turn around. “Hey, Carter.”

Carter Trayland is one of the most popular guys at school. Blond hair, blue eyes, and a killer smile. He’s captain of both the football and baseball teams, but sports aren’t the only thing he plays. His reputation for sleeping around isn’t a secret to anyone, and somehow, his sights are now set on me. It would be endearing if I wasn’t certain the only appeal I have to him is the fact that he sees me as unattainable.

He wraps his arms around me for a quick hug, and the amount of dirty looks I get from other girls in the hallway isn’t lost on me. Meanwhile, the rest of the guys walk past us and over to their lockers.

“I can’t decide if your PDA is sickening or envy-inducing,” Jace comments, looking at Gray and Sav.

Grayson narrows his eyes at him and pulls Savannah impossibly closer. He’s caveman-level possessive with her, especially when it comes to Jace. There was a point in time where Sav used Jace to make Grayson jealous, and apparently he’s never gotten over it. Not even a little.

Savannah chuckles, knowing exactly what he’s thinking, and at the sound of it, he sighs. His head burrows into her neck, and I watch as his whole body relaxes instantly.

I wish I had someone who loved me as much as he loves her.

FIRST PERIOD DRAGS EVEN more than usual. Last semester, I had class with all of the few friends I have. This one, however, I’m not with them until third. Plus, I don’t think AP Calculus could be fun no matter who is in it with you.

As soon as the bell rings, I jump out of my seat and rush out the door. Tessa is waiting for me at the end of the hallway—the smile on her face makes me fear for my safety. She glances down at her phone and back up at me.

“Please don’t tell me you bought another puppy on the internet,” I say as soon as I’m close enough.

She throws her head back and groans. “That was *one* time.”

I keep my face completely stoic. “You blamed it on me.”

“It’s not like anyone believed me.”

“Still rude.”

Giggling, she shows me a text on her phone from her boyfriend. “Easton said there’s a party at Zayn’s this Friday.”

Crap. When I agreed to go to one of these with her, I didn’t think she would find one so soon. Then again, it’s Tessa, and I really shouldn’t be surprised. I’ve always wondered what she’s doing when she sneaks out of the house every night and asks me to cover for her. I guess this is it—crazy parties with her gang-banger boyfriend and his degenerate friends.

“I…” I hesitate. “I, uh, have something planned Friday night. I can’t go. Maybe the next one.”

Turning, I go to walk away but she stops me. “Yeah, I don’t think so.” She grabs my wrist and pulls me back. “You told me you would come to one with me, and this is perfect. I need time to plan our birthday party so I need your approval ASAP.”

I want to tell her no, to come up with some legitimate excuse that would make it so I don’t have to go with her, but I can’t. I promised her I would, and one thing we’ve always done is kept our promises.

“All right, fine. But you’re helping me get ready.”

Her smile beams brightly. “Deal.”

WITH MY CAR IN the shop, I hitched a ride to school with my sister. However, she wanted to leave and go directly to Easton’s after, so Gray and Savannah offered to drive me home. It’s not like they’re going out of the way. Savannah lives with Grayson now, right across the street from me.

“Want to get something to eat before we head home?” Sav questions as we get outside.

Grayson’s face says he’s completely down for it, and I could go for a bite. “Yeah, that sounds good. Where do you want to go?”

The three of us all toss out options as we stand in the cold, ruling each place out for one reason or another. It isn’t until Sav recommends hibachi that we all finally appear to be in agreement. Just as we’re about to leave, a voice rings out.

“Pretty boy,” someone calls, his eyes focused on Grayson. “I need to talk to you a minute.”

Savannah tenses beside me, and that’s when I realize who this guy is. *Knox Vaughn*. The first time I saw him was at Jace’s New Year’s party. When I asked Sav who he is, she simply told me his first name, that he’s trouble, and not to pay any attention to him. At the time, I couldn’t understand why she was so dismissive about it. He stood there with Grayson, looking so cold, but there was more to him—something hiding in his eyes.

I dreamed of him that night, and the next morning I started to do my research. It wasn’t hard to find out what kind of guy he is. His criminal record is longer than the essay I needed to write for my application to Yale, but all petty misdemeanors. I found out that he lives a few houses down from the shack Sav used to live in, which explained how she knows him, and that he’s the captain and quarterback of North Haven High’s football team.

“What do you think they’re talking about?” Sav asks me as Knox hands Grayson his phone and Gray’s calm and collected attitude falters for a moment.

I shrug, trying not to get her stirred up. “Could be anything, really.”

A few more hushed words are spoken before Knox starts to grow angry. He levels Grayson with a look and tosses a final comment over his shoulder as he walks away. I watch as he crosses the street and gets into a car with one of his friends. Meanwhile, Grayson gets ahold of himself and comes back over to us.

“Everything okay?” Savannah questions hesitantly.

He smiles. “Yeah, everything’s great. So, hibachi?”

And just like that, the two of them leave the situation behind us. I, on the other hand, can’t seem to keep thoughts of Knox Vaughn from flooding my brain.

FRIDAY COMES QUICKER THAN I HAD HOPED, BUT I GUESS THAT'S WHAT happens when you dread something as much as this. The fight on Wednesday only helped release a fraction of my anger and frustration. However, half of the five hundred dollars I won was spent on some high-quality weed, and that helped *a lot* more.

I'm standing behind the school, watching as the guys fuck around with a hacky sack, when an irritating brunette comes around the corner. In an instant, Easton stops what he's doing and pulls her against him, kissing her deeply. She giggles against his mouth as he grabs her ass.

"Either get a damn room or stop practically fucking in front of me. I'm getting hard over here," I tell them.

The two of them laugh, and Tessa takes a step back. "Nice to see you, too, Knoxie."

My eyes narrow. "Call me that shit again. I fucking dare you."

She doesn't seem the least bit afraid, which means she's getting entirely way too comfortable around me. Still, Zayn notices that I'm only half kidding and pulls the attention off me.

"You coming to the party tonight, Tess?"

Taking a hit off Easton's cigarette, she nods before exhaling. "Yeah, and I'm bringing my sister."

Surprise overtakes my features as my brows raise. "You have a sister?"

"A twin," she clarifies, and my eyes rake over her body—wondering what qualities of theirs are the same. Tessa notices my expression and rolls her eyes. "Don't get any ideas. You don't have a chance in hell."

I chuckle. "CBP, have you met me?"

“Are you *ever* going to tell me what the hell that nickname means?” Her tone reveals her frustration until she shakes it off. “Never mind. But seriously, Laney isn’t that kind of girl.”

“*Laney*? What the fuck kind of name is that?”

“It’s short for Delaney. I’m sure you’ll meet her later, but no messing with her. She’s my favorite.”

I raise three fingers in the air. “Scout’s honor.”

Zayn snorts as the rest of the guys try to hide their amusement. It’s no secret that I’m full of shit. If I want to fuck with her precious sister, I’ll do whatever I damn well please. Orders from my friend’s *fuck buddy* are not something I obey.

I’M WALKING TO MY locker after third period when I spot someone leaning against it. Her back is to me, but I’d recognize that ass anywhere. I consider walking in the other direction until she turns around and her gaze meets mine. She smiles brightly and slips her phone into her back pocket.

“Hey, babe,” she greets me.

“Hailey,” I deadpan. “What are you doing here?”

Confusion graces her face. “Going to school?”

Immediately, I shake my head. “Cut the shit. I mean what are you doing at my locker?”

“I’ve missed you.” She reaches out to grab my hand but I pull it away before she can latch on.

“You mean Jason dumped your ass and now you’re crawling back.”

Hailey Waterman is toxic—the sludge from the bottom of a fucking barrel kind of mess—and the closest thing I’ve ever had to a girlfriend. I don’t do commitments by any means, and most girls don’t seem to understand that. Therefore, when I hook up, it’s a one and done kind of deal. Hailey, however, is the exception to that rule. We’ve messed around on and off since freshman year.

Every time she starts to develop feelings, she pulls some crazy shit to try to get me to make promises I know I won’t keep. So far, she has lied about being pregnant, dated guys in an attempt to make me jealous, and tried to have me jumped so she could nurse me back to health. This chick makes

psychotic little Tessa look like an angel.

“Oh, come on.” Her pleading voice goes right through me. “Don’t be like that.”

“I’m not being like anything, Hails. I just don’t have time for your bullshit.”

With that, I push my way past her and straight out the side door. I need a fucking smoke.

WAITING OUTSIDE THE LIQUOR store for Grayson to pick me up is a harsh reminder that I should start saving money to buy a car. I could have borrowed Stone’s or even Zayn’s, but they both would have asked way too many questions. This is something I need to take care of without them. The less people who know about this, the fucking better.

Relief washes over me as I hear the engine of Grayson’s overpriced sports car approach. The asshole may have a false sense of reality about the shit we’re in, but at least he came.

“Thank God. I thought you were going to pussy out on me,” I tell him as soon as I get in the passenger seat.

He scoffs. “Fuck you.”

“As I’ve told you before, you’re pretty but I don’t swing that way.”

It’s been all of five seconds and I can already feel the tension in the air. The two of us know what we’re driving into, but neither of us know what will become of it. It’s like there’s a flashing red sign saying to turn around and run, but we have no choice. They’ll kill us both without flinching.

I put the address into his GPS and stare out the window, hoping to hell I make it out of this alive—*unlike Craig*.

“What the fuck did you do?” I shout, looking between Grayson and the now-motionless body lying on the ground. “Hayworth!”

He doesn’t answer me. His eyes don’t even look in my direction. They stay completely trained and focused, watching blood pool. I don’t need to check for a pulse to know there is no more life in Mr. Montgomery. He’s

dead. He's dead, and I'm in the middle of the crime scene.

"I had to protect her," Grayson mutters.

Looking at him as if he's gone crazy, I grab him by the shoulders and force his gaze to meet mine. "Yeah? And how the fuck are you going to do that from prison, tough guy?"

As if in shock, he takes a few steps away and sits down, staring up at the night sky. What's scary is that he doesn't even seem remorseful or even the slightest bit panicked. It's like he knew what he needed to do, and he did it. Simple as that.

I know I should leave. Go somewhere to calm down and figure out how we're going to play this off in the morning. It's not like he was a good guy by any means. They'll probably assume it was a drug deal gone wrong or some shit. But as I go to walk away, a flashing red light catches my eye. A fucking camera, and it's got us both. He's committed a murder, and I'm an accomplice to it. We're either going to go away for years, or be on the run for life—either way, we're both screwed. Fucking Grayson.

Taking out my phone, I scroll to the one contact I had hoped I'd never have to call. It's dangerous, and bound to eventually leave us worse off than we are now, but it's my only option. I reluctantly hit the call button and bring the phone to my ear.

"Yeah?" the man answers.

"It's Vaughn. I'm going to need your help. It's urgent."

WE PULL UP BEHIND the seedy dive-bar, where a black Town Car already waits for us. Four men stand around, and there isn't a single doubt in my mind that all of them are armed. That's why they chose this place—it's vacant enough for them to dispose of us with ease if needed.

"Let me do the talking," I tell him. "You have a tendency to say and do the wrong fucking shit."

Thankfully, he seems to finally understand the severity of the situation and keeps his mouth shut as we get out of the car. I nod at the men and stand at the front of the car. Grayson comes up beside me, his hands clasped behind his back. Being as I sent him away when everything went down, this is the first time he's seeing any of these guys face to face. It's clear to even a casual

observer that they're anything but friendly.

The back door of the car opens, and a man in his early fifties steps out. Despite his somewhat young age, his gray hair makes him appear older. The charcoal suit he's wearing is perfectly tailored to his body and must have cost a fortune, not that money bears any meaning to him. He's as rich as he is powerful.

"Mr. Vaughn," He greets me.

I nod respectfully. "Cal. Good to see you again."

He chuckles. "You're a lot of things Knox, but you're no liar. Don't start now." His attention turns to the moron next to me. "And you must be Grayson Hayworth. Quite a conundrum you got yourself in, son."

"Yes, sir."

"Is murder a hobby of yours? Should I expect to have more *messes* to clean up?"

"No, sir. He was going to kill my girlfriend. I did what was necessary to protect her."

Cal processes his words for a moment before answering. "Very well, though I'm not sure a judge would have agreed with you based on what we cleared from the recording that night."

Of course he fucking watched before getting rid of it. The piece of shit probably got off on it. He seems like the kind who would get hard watching someone die. Sick bastard.

"I agree with you, and I appreciate everything you did to make it go away."

"Yes, well, nothing comes for free, son. It'll do you some good to remember that." He leans back against the hood of his expensive car and crosses his arms over his chest. "I'm not sure if Knox told you, but I own an underground fight ring over on the east side of town."

Grayson seems intrigued by the information, but he shouldn't be. "He didn't mention that."

"Good," Cal says, pleased with his answer. "The only reason it stays a secret is because people don't speak about it. First rule of fight club and all that."

He was trying to trick him. Give him a reason to take my ass out. My stress level reaches new heights, and this meeting can't end soon enough. Thankfully, he seems to get bored of fucking with us rather quickly and gets to the point.

“Recently, one of my best fighters met an unfortunate fate, and I need to replace him.”

My brows furrow. “Who was it?”

“Ashton.”

The instant the name leaves his mouth, my body goes ice cold—and it has nothing to do with the weather. There are two different levels in The Underground. The first is the kind I fight in. They’re standard, with three rounds, and, while people get hurt, everyone makes it out alive. The second, however, is the higher, more intense level. I’ve always stayed away from them because while the bets are more than twenty times what the lower level pays, they’re vicious. *Kill-or-be-killed* kind of fights. The amount of lives that have been lost in that ring are immeasurable.

Ashton fought in the latter.

“With all due respect, Cal, regardless of what you may have seen in that video, Grayson is nowhere near ready for those fights.”

He lets out a deep laugh, making the guys around him follow suit. “Don’t be ridiculous, boy. I wouldn’t risk my money like that.” He smirks, and I dread the next words that come from his mouth. “*You* will be replacing Ashton. Grayson will replace you in the regulated brawls. This way, I cash in on both levels. It’s a win-win. Well, for me, anyway.”

I feel like I’m going to throw up. If I wasn’t afraid of being seen as weak, I would—all over his leather shoes that probably cost more than my fucking house.

Every inch of me wants to protest.

To refuse.

To punch Grayson in the face for getting me into this shit.

But I can’t.

Anything other than agreeing will get me killed, though I may end up that way anyway, with the shit he’s making me do. I have no choice but to obey and hope to hell I make it out alive.

Cal nods to one of his henchmen, and I’m handed a packet. “Inside is the name of a gym. You are to be there tomorrow night at eight so Jackson can train you. He’s the best around, and I need you two in impeccable shape.” He fixates his eyes on me. “I’ve also given you some information on your first opponent, though that’s not a luxury you should get used to.”

“Understood,” I say briefly. The only thing I want right now is to get the hell out of here.

As if he can sense my discomfort, he smiles victoriously and nods once. "Very well, boys. Your first fight is three weeks from today. Be ready."

Grayson and I don't need to be told twice. We get back into his car, and he backs out of the alley as I try to keep myself from vomiting in his precious car. Once we're out of sight, I punch the ceiling with full force.

"Motherfucker!"

Pretty boy stays quiet in the driver's seat as he navigates us through town. To be honest, it's probably better he stays that way. Anything that comes out of his mouth may cause me to snap, and I take no responsibility for what I'll do if that happens.

I put Zayn's address into his GPS, silently telling him to take me there instead of home. The whole drive, the only thing running through my mind are the guys I've seen get carried out of The Underground for being in those fights. That ring is known around the circuit as *The Death Trap* due to the number of people who have died in there. It's no fucking joke, and now, I have no choice but to be a part of it.

Grayson pulls up to the house, and I can hear the music pulsing before I open the door.

"Thank fuck," I murmur, relieved.

Not even saying goodbye, I get out of the car and slam the door behind me. I'm bound to find *something* at this party to take the edge off. Just as I'm halfway to the porch, however, Grayson calls out for me.

"Knox, don't do anything stupid."

My body tenses. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

He raises his hands in a sign of peace. "I'm just saying, don't do anything that will make it hard for you to train tomorrow night. You heard Cal. We need to be in good shape."

"Don't try to tell me what to fucking do." I storm back over to him and shove my finger into his chest. "*You* are the reason for this! I'm in this mess, have to risk my goddamn life, because of *you*! You don't get to have an opinion on what I do!"

I know if I don't go inside, I'm going to leave him in no condition to train tomorrow. Using all the restraint I can manage, I force myself to turn around and walk away.

"Knox," he calls out.

"Fuck off, Pretty Boy."

I LOOK AT THE SHIRT MY SISTER HAS IN HER HAND, SCRUNCHING MY FACE UP in distaste. She sighs exasperatedly and throws it down onto the floor with the rest of them.

“Laney, that’s the fifth one you’ve turned down,” she complains.

Giving her an innocent grin, I shrug. “It’s not my fault all your clothes look like they’re missing half the material.”

“It’s called *fashion*.”

“It’s called *public indecency*.”

Savannah chuckles from her place on my bed. Tess turns to glare at her. “Watch it, bitch. I’m still not sure how I feel about you yet.”

As my sister goes to fetch another shirt, Sav glances up from her phone and rolls her eyes. She acts like Tessa disliking her doesn’t matter, but I know it gets under her skin. I’ve talked to my sister about it as much as I can with always the same outcome—she needs time. After Savannah disappeared when we were eleven, it was hard for me. I had lost both my best friends in such a short time, and it made me even more hesitant to make new ones. That only got worse when Sav showed up at our high school and acted like she didn’t even know who Tessa and I were.

Knowing her story now, I can understand why she made the choices she did, but I also see where Tess is coming from. If I watched someone hurt her that way, I probably wouldn’t forgive them so quickly either. I love Savannah to death, but she can stand to work for it a little.

“Okay, what about this one?”

Tess comes back in, holding a black shirt I’d never buy, but it’s the best out of the options so far. At least this one has sleeves and covers my belly

button. The cleavage is a little much, but if I tell her no again, she might rip my head off.

“It’s cute,” I say honestly.

She cheers at her small victory then stops. “Now for bottoms. I’m thinking miniskirt.”

The smile drops right off my face. “It’s January.”

“Oh, please.” She waves me off dismissively. “Once we get a little booze in you, you’ll warm right up.”

My eyes widen as they meet Savannah’s, and I can tell she’s trying to mask her amusement. *This is going to be a long night.*

PULLING UP TO THE house, I can already tell this is nothing like what I’m used to. For one, the house is only a third of the size Jace’s, and not nearly as fancy. Thankfully, Sav helped talk Tess into letting me wear jeans before she left to go spend the night with Grayson. Apparently, he texted her and said his mom was going to his aunt’s for the weekend—aka they’re going to be indisposed for the next forty-eight hours.

I follow Tessa inside, and the scent of weed and alcohol instantly fills my nose. It’s not a very pleasant smell, but I assume everyone here is far too trashed to mind it. Either that or they’re so used to it they don’t even notice.

So many people are crammed into this house that I feel claustrophobic. I grab my sister’s hand to keep from getting lost in the crowd as she leads us through the house and into the living room. As soon as she sees Easton, she releases me and jumps into his arms. *Great. I’m already getting ditched.*

“Guys, this is my sister, Delaney,” she says with a wave of an arm. “Laney, this is Gage, Stone, and Zayn.”

I sport a shy, yet uncomfortable, smile as the three of them blatantly check me out. Recognizing the black-haired one as the guy Knox got into a car with the other day, I start to wonder if he’s here. As I subtly look around, I don’t find him anywhere, but I see *plenty* of other stuff I’m not used to.

A girl snorting a line of coke off a guy’s stomach.

A couple practically having sex in the corner.

And what I’m pretty sure is a crappy attempt at a secret blow job.

I don’t know what I expected, coming here, but it certainly wasn’t *this*.

MAKING SAVANNAH THE WINNER of the bet, it only takes Tessa twenty-seven minutes before she sneaks off somewhere with Easton and leaves me to fend for myself. I knew it would happen eventually, but I thought she'd at least stay by my side for an hour. A part of me considers leaving—it's not like she'd notice I'm gone—but I promised her I'd give this place two hours to win me over.

Reluctantly, I decide to stick it out and head into the kitchen to get a drink. Bottles of liquor cover the counters, and a group of people hoard around what I assume is the beer. I go to the fridge and open it in search of water. Just as I grab a bottle, the sound of someone behind me catches me off guard.

"You lost?" he asks, and goose bumps raise across my skin as I recognize that voice. I straighten up and turn around, coming face to face with the guy who has plagued my mind for the last couple weeks. *Knox Vaughn*. "Keg is over there." His head gestures toward the crowd in the corner of the room.

"Oh, n-no, I'm okay," I mutter. "I just wanted water."

He snorts and stares at the bottle in my hand like it's diseased. "Who comes to a party and drinks water?"

"Me, apparently."

His gaze moves down to my cleavage and he leans back against the counter as he bites his lip. "Are you sure you don't want me to get you a beer?"

I shake my head faster than necessary. "My dad said beer makes you fat." *Ugh, did I really just say that?*

He raises his brows before his expression changes to a smirk. Grabbing the bottom of his shirt, he lifts it up to reveal perfectly toned abs. I gulp. "Your daddy lied."

For the first time in my life, the thoughts that run through my head are anything but innocent. The only thing I can think to do is get the hell out of here and away from him. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know what a guy like him looks for at these kind of parties, and I'm *nothing* like the girls here.

I SEARCH FOR TESSA for thirty minutes straight, which is longer than the time I've spent with her at this stupid party, but I come up empty. She's probably in a room somewhere, having sex with her boyfriend, like everyone else here. Meanwhile, I'm in the middle of what could probably constitute an orgy, and all I want is to go home. If only I could get Tess's keys.

Taking a break from looking, I sit down on the couch and start to scroll through my phone. Maybe if I stay still, she'll end up finding me. *Yeah, wishful thinking.* I consider texting Savannah and asking her to come get me, but I don't want to interrupt her time with Grayson. Besides, checking her phone is probably the last thing on her mind.

A couple collapses onto the couch next to me, their mouths not separating for a second as they basically try to eat each other's faces. I scoot over slightly to give them more room, but it doesn't do much. I feel something on my thigh. Looking down, I notice the guy is sliding his hand up my leg as he makes out with someone else. I cringe and push it off, but he puts it right back.

"Uh, excuse me," I say.

The girl breaks the kiss and turns toward me. When she sees his hand on me and watches me push him off, I expect her to be pissed. Instead, however, she smiles.

"Don't worry, babe. I'm cool with sharing." She nods toward the guy. "Kiss him. He's really good at it."

Jumping up so fast my vision blurs, I speed-walk away from them and out of the living room entirely. What I need is a second to myself—just a minute to get my head on straight before enduring more of this train wreck of a party.

My first thought is the bathroom, but when I find it, the line is twenty people long. That won't work. My eyes land on a set of stairs. If luck is on my side, I'll be able to find an empty bedroom for a minute or two. I slip through the group of people and make my way up.

The first three rooms either have locked doors or enough noise coming from them for me to know they're occupied. The fourth, however, appears to be vacant. I slip inside and shut the door behind me, letting out a breath I didn't know I was holding as soon as I'm away from the chaos. It isn't until someone chuckles that I realize I'm not alone after all.

My eyes frantically search the dark room until they land on a silhouette sitting in the windowsill. The tip of his cigarette burns a bright red as he

inhales, and I watch the smoke drift up as he lets it out.

Just like every other time I've met him, I'm entranced by him. The moonlight rests softly against his skin, showcasing the perfect shape of his face. He's beautiful, and not in the way that models are beautiful.

No.

He's beautiful in the way that makes you stop and think.

The way that demands your attention and doesn't let you look away.

The way that's heartbreaking, and pained, and real.

"Okay, now I *know* you're lost," he comments.

I'm snapped out of my trance, and I blindly scramble to find the doorknob. "I'm sorry. I didn't know someone was in here."

Just as I'm about to leave, he speaks again. "Tell me something, Bambi. What's a girl like you doing at a party like this? It hardly seems like your scene."

"What do *you* know about my scene?" I question, feeling slightly offended even though he's entirely accurate.

"I know it isn't *this*. It's probably some swanky soiree with champagne. Or even more likely, sitting in your room reading your romance novels and dreaming of your happily ever after." I'm stunned into silence as he tosses his cigarette out the window and stalks toward me. By the time he stops, he's so close that I can feel the heat radiating off him—or maybe that's me. He bends down and places his lips against the shell of my ear. "Spoiler alert: none of it's real."

Just like that, he pulls away and slips past me, leaving the room and taking the warmth I felt with him.

I LIE IN MY bed, staring at the ceiling. No matter how hard I try to fall asleep, I'm unsuccessful. It took another forty-five minutes before I found Tessa, and by then I was completely justified in wanting to go home. She decided to stay, but gave me her keys and told me she'd get a ride home from Easton in the morning.

If I thought Knox invaded my mind before, it doesn't even compare to what it's like now. I try my best to focus on something else to distract me, but nothing works. It always goes back to him.

The smell of his cologne.

The toned grid of his abs.

The feeling I got when his body was only inches from mine.

There's more to him than meets the eye—I know it. I just never thought I'd be so compelled to figure him out. I want to get under his armor. To put the pieces of him together like a puzzle, and memorize every detail like my favorite book. Getting close to him is dangerous. He's the kind of guy who could wreck me with the snap of his fingers. Still, I don't care. For some reason, I'm not scared.

Maybe I'm not as smart as everyone thinks.

THE SUNLIGHT COMES THROUGH THE WINDOW AND LANDS ON MY FACE, sending a piercing headache through my skull. It takes me a minute before I'm able to keep my eyes open without the room spinning, but when I do I realize I'm not alone. A naked blonde is face down on the bed, snoring quietly. Maybe a junior? Who the fuck knows. Judging by the lack of clothes and the used condom on the floor, I'm guessing I screwed her last night, but I don't remember it at all.

I inch out of bed, careful not to wake her. I do *not* want to have to deal with some clingy bitch who thinks that because we fucked it makes us a thing now. Once I'm free, I grab my pants off the floor and slip them on, then head downstairs.

The place is a disaster, like it always is after one of our parties. Plastic cups and empty liquor bottles cover every possible surface. The couch is flipped onto its back. Glass from what used to be a vase is scattered across the floor. It's a total shitshow, which is exactly the criteria for a good night.

Going into the garage, I open the second fridge and grab a beer. There's no better cure for a hangover than hair of the dog, though I'm half convinced this is more of a comedown from the line of coke I did when I got here. I kick the door shut and head back inside, finding Easton and Stone fixing the couch while Tessa stands back and watches.

"You look like a hot mess," I tell her with a snort.

She rolls her eyes and flips me off. Meanwhile, Easton turns around and checks her out. Her hair is piled on top of her head, and there's a stain on her shirt that looks suspiciously like cum. The makeup that was perfectly done last night is smeared across her face. Still, he pulls her close.

"I think she looks good," he compliments. "Nice and fucked, just the way I like her."

Stone and I laugh while Tess smacks his arm and pushes him away. Zayn groans as he comes down the stairs, walking over to me and taking the beer from my hands.

"Aye!" I protest, but he doesn't pause as he brings it to his lips.

"I need food," he declares. "Diner?"

"I'm down," Easton agrees. "Babe, you coming?"

Tessa shrugs. "Bring me home so I can shower and change, and then I'll meet you there."

As I go into the guest room to grab my shirt, the girl from last night wakes and gives me her best fuck-me smile. *Nope. Not happening.* I pick her clothes up off the floor and toss them onto the bed.

"You should get dressed. We're all heading out, so you have to leave," I say firmly before walking back out the door.

Downstairs, everyone looks exactly how I feel—tired, hungover, and beat to shit. Tessa rests her head against Easton's shoulder with her eyes drooped almost closed. Gage and Stone are muttering something to each other, but I don't think either of them are paying any attention. Zayn, however, perks up when he sees me.

"Ready to go? I'm fucking starved."

"Yeah."

I grab my jacket from the closet and pull it on as we all head for the door. Just as we step out onto the porch and Zayn goes to lock up, we hear someone running down the stairs. The girl I woke up next to slips out then turns to me and presses a kiss to my cheek.

"Call me," she says as she steps back.

Everyone watches her leave with confused looks on their faces and once she's gone, Stone turns to me. "Who the fuck was that?"

I shrug. "Don't know. Don't care."

The six of us split up. Easton and Tessa leave in E's car, Gage hitches a ride with Stone, and I get in with Z. It only takes a minute, however, before he eyes me suspiciously.

"Everything all right?"

My brows furrow. "Yeah, why wouldn't it be?"

"I don't know. You showed up late, and as soon as you got there you chugged three beers, took four shots, and did a line of coke. I just want to

make sure there isn't a reason for it."

Thoughts of the meeting last night move to the forefront of my mind and dread fills my stomach. Maybe Grayson was right. Going that hard when we have to train tonight probably wasn't the smartest decision I've ever made. Still, Zayn can't know about this. Not any of it.

"You worry too much, dick. I'm fine."

He may not believe me, but he drops the subject for now.

COMING TO THE DINER for breakfast after a wild night has become a sort of tradition for us. We're here almost every weekend, to the point where they keep the largest corner booth they have open for us. The waitress, Harriet, is a sweet old woman. She reminds me of my grandmother, which is probably why she's the only woman I'm respectful toward.

"Here you go, boys," she says as she places the plates in front of us.

We all thank her in unison before digging in. It's amazing how good food tastes when you're hungover. It's like your body craves it to the point where it becomes so much better than usual. It's mouthwatering.

"So, what did you guys think of Tessa's sister last night?" Gage questions.

Stone takes a sip of his drink and nods. "She's fucking hot."

"You guys met her?" I knew Tess was bringing her, but I was too out of my mind to notice if she did or not.

Zayn smirks. "Yeah. It's a shame you didn't."

"Don't speak too soon." Easton nods toward the door. "Here she comes with Tess."

I turn my head and my jaw ticks when I recognize the girl walking next to Tessa. Her brown hair is curled and rests gently against her chest. Her face lights up as her sister says something I assume was funny but couldn't hear. She's fucking gorgeous, and that's an issue for me. Not only is she the girl who was standing with Grayson and Savannah last week, but I have foggy memories of talking to her last night. She's innocent and pretentious, and was somewhere she *definitely* didn't fucking belong.

Seeing her now with less drugs and alcohol in my system, the similarities between her and Tessa are obvious, and I can't believe I didn't figure it out

last night. Still, there's something about her. Something that makes my stomach churn, and it isn't a welcome feeling.

"Hey douchebags," Tess greets us. "Hope you don't mind. I brought Laney along."

I give her a knowing look. "Even if we did, you'd do it anyway."

She smiles sweetly, grabbing one of Easton's home fries and tossing it into her mouth. "Oh, right. You were off doing God knows what." She waves her hand between her sister and I. "Delaney, Knox. Knox, Delaney."

"We've met." I turn my attention to Delaney. "Still showing up places you don't belong, I see."

Her eyes narrow, and I can tell I'm already testing her patience. "Like I told you before, you know nothing about me or where I belong."

Hmm, so little Miss Perfect has a feisty side. *Good*. She'll never make it in this world thinking everything is sprinkles and rainbows. I can still remember the look on her face when I lifted up my shirt, and the way she practically booked it from the room immediately after. She's as pure as they come. If she knows what's good for her, she'll stay the fuck away from me.

"Now, now." Tessa attempts to defuse the situation. "Knox, don't be an ass. Laney, sit."

I scoot further into the booth, and Delaney reluctantly takes the seat next to me. The scent of her perfume filters through my hangover fog. It's light—flowery, but not cloying—and I swallow down the urge to breathe in so deeply that I choke on it.

When I notice how she hangs halfway of the bench in order to avoid being pressed up against me, I grip her belt loop and pull her in closer. "What are you so afraid of? I don't bite...hard."

She fidgets and seems uncomfortable, but stays put. It's exactly how I want her—nervous, alert, on edge. She shouldn't be at ease around guys like me. She's too *clean*, too perfect.

"Knox, let me get a sip of that orange juice."

Gage moves to grab my drink, but I pull it away. "Fuck no. I saw the girl you were with last night. I don't want whatever you may have caught from her."

He chuckles. "Like yours was any better? You don't even remember her damn name."

"Because *names* don't matter. The way she sucks my dick does."

"You were with someone last night?" Delaney whispers, and I can tell by

the way her breath hitches that she didn't mean to voice that question.

I raise one eyebrow as I look at her. "Why? You jealous?" She shakes her head and focuses down at her lap. "Sorry, babe. I don't fuck virgins. Too much drama."

"Good thing I'm not interested."

A small grunt echoes in the back of my throat. "That's not what it looked like last night."

"What the hell happened last night?" Tessa practically shouts.

"Nothing," her sister hisses, trying to quickly dismiss the topic.

Leaning back, I cross my arms over my chest. "It didn't look like nothing to me." I focus my attention on Tess. "I showed her my abs, and she looked like she was about to drool before she ran out of the room."

Laney turns to glare at me. "That's not true!"

"It *definitely* is. You're a prude. Just admit it." My taunting is finally starting to get to her, I note with satisfaction.

"Go to hell," she spits, hatred burning in her eyes.

I smirk. "Oh, Bambi, where do you think I came from?"

Exhaling a heated puff of air, she gets up from the table and starts walking away. Tessa groans and calls out after her.

"Where are you going?"

"Bathroom."

Tess's levels me with a look as she slips out of the booth and follows her sister. I can't help but laugh. Fucking with Delaney may be my new favorite hobby. The way she gets all fired up and throws all her perfect manners to the fucking wind—it's amusing, and sexy as hell.

"Do you always have to be such a prick?" Zayn chuckles.

A smug grin spreads across my face. "Don't act like that's not why you love me."

"You have to admit," Stone begins as he watches the two girls head toward the back of the restaurant, "the good-girl act suits her."

"I don't think it's an act," Gage counters.

Easton takes a sip of his water and nods. "He's right. She's like the Virgin Mary, I swear. Tessa said she doesn't even curse unless she's super pissed."

I snort. Having seen the way she acted at the party last night, that bit of information doesn't surprise me in the slightest. I'm just not sure if I find it ridiculous or endearing.

Stone gets a devious look on his face and leans forward with his elbows on the table. “What do you say, Knox? You up for the challenge?”

“What’d you have in mind?”

His brows raise. “Fifty bucks. Blow job. Picture for proof.”

I laugh, reaching my hand across the table to shake his. “You’re on, douchebag.”

Eason shakes his head. “Dude, you *do* know that if Tess finds out you’re making bets about her sister, she will *literally* kill you, right?”

“Well then, let’s make sure she doesn’t find out, *okay*, E?”

GRAYSON PULLS UP TO my house, looking nowhere near ready for what tonight entails. His button-down shirt and dress pants are definitely not training attire. I get into the car and eye him strangely.

“Okay, I know you may not be all there, but you know what we’re training for, correct?”

He rolls his eyes as he puts the car in drive. “Yes, asshole. We had our sports banquet tonight. I haven’t had time to change yet, so I’m stopping home on the way. Figured I’d pick you up first.”

Fucking lovely. I lay my head back against the seat and place my feet up on the dashboard, not giving a shit about his precious interior. “Next time, pick me up *after* you get ready.”

The drive to his house is quiet except for the low music coming from the speakers. I stare out the window and watch as he drives into the expensive side of town. Two story houses turn to McMansions, and when he pulls into the richest development within a twenty-mile radius, I can’t stop the humorless laugh from leaving my mouth.

Why am I not surprised?

Turning into his driveway, the house in front of us could fit about seven of mine. It’s fucking massive. Bigger than anything anyone *actually* needs, except for maybe a family of seventeen.

“I’ll be right back,” he tells me and hops out of the car.

I take out my phone and start to scroll through it, when movement in the rear-view mirror catches my eye. Someone is walking down the drive at a neighboring house. I squint as I try to figure out what’s so familiar about the

girl until it finally clicks. *Delaney*. Of course, she lives here, too.

I watch her through the mirror. She looks naturally beautiful in a pair of sweatpants and a hoodie—wrapping her arms around herself to keep warm as she walks to her mailbox. A part of me considers staying put, but the urge to get out and talk to her is too strong to resist. So, I slip out of the car and head across the street.

“Hey.”

The surprise on her face is evident. “Knox? What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for Grayson. I saw you out here and figured I’d come say hi.”

“How nice of you,” she deadpans then turns around to go back inside.

I throw my head back, laughing. “So, that’s it then? No more playing nice? One little spat was all it took to break you?”

“No.” She stops and spins to face me again. “I just don’t feel like dealing with someone like you right now.”

“Someone like me?”

She crosses her arms. “Rude. Arrogant. A pain in the butt.”

Butt. I do my best to conceal my amusement. Easton was right, she really is the Virgin fucking Mary.

“Look at you, making assumptions like you know me.”

“Are you saying I’m wrong?”

My face splits into a wide grin. “No. You’re dead on. I’m all of those things.”

She looks me up and down before taking a step forward. “Yeah, I don’t think you are. I think it’s all a front. A mask you put on to look tough and hide whatever your real problem is.”

The air is practically sucked from my lungs. Her eyes bore into mine like she can see right through my hard exterior. All of my flaws. My fears. My insecurities. She can see them all. If that’s true, she’s so much more dangerous than I’ve given her credit for. I quickly rally and reconstruct my defensive walls.

“Now you’re way off.” I tell her, moving closer until there’s less than an inch between us. “I’m the devil reincarnated. Your living fucking nightmare. Made of stone, with no feelings for anyone or anything.”

I half expect for her to run like she did last night, but she stands her ground. “Yeah, I’m not so sure.”

“Knox!” Grayson calls from across the street, causing me to glance back at him. “Come on. We have to go.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Returning my attention to Delaney, I find she’s already halfway up her driveway. I watch as she makes her way inside, only stopping to look at me one last time before she disappears behind the door.

I’m not sure what the hell just happened, but one thing’s for sure—I didn’t fucking like it.

THE YELLING FROM DOWNSTAIRS IS SO LOUD, IT PRACTICALLY ECHOES throughout the house. It's two o'clock in the morning, and Dad caught Tessa sneaking back in again. A part of me considers coming to her rescue, but there's nothing I could really do to help. If anything, it would just get both of us in trouble, and that wouldn't do any good.

"What did I tell you about that boy?" he roars. "He's no good for you!"

"You don't even know him!" Tess snaps back.

The loud bang against the wall tells me someone threw something, and judging by the scream my sister lets out, it wasn't her.

"I know enough! You are *not* to see him again, or I swear to God, I'll ship your little ass off to boarding school! I don't care how close you are to graduating!"

It's not an empty threat—that I'm sure of. He's been looking up the best places to send her for the past few weeks, ever since he found out she's been hanging around Easton. Out of his three daughters, Tessa has always been the problem child. She's the only one who doesn't get good grades. The only one who has come home drunk. And the only one who doesn't cower to his demands. To say she gives him a run for his money is a laughable understatement.

Mom tried to get through to her a few times, and when that didn't work, she tried to get through to Dad—telling him that this is just a phase. Teenage rebellion at its finest. He refuses to let slide.

Tessa storms up the stairs and into her bedroom, slamming the door as soon as she's inside. She screams into her pillow so loud I can hear it from across the hall, and trust me, this house is anything but small. I grab my

phone and send her a text, letting her know I'm awake and here if she needs to talk. Within seconds, she's sneaking into my room and slipping into bed with me.

"Are you okay?" I whisper.

She sighs. "Yeah. He's just an asshole."

We cuddle close, like we used to do when we were younger and heard our parents fighting. No matter how old we get or how different we become, this will always stay the same.

THE NEXT MORNING, TESSA is complaining about how Dad took her car keys. I roll my eyes. I mean, what did she expect? He literally caught her climbing through a window when she was supposed to be sound asleep in bed.

"I should have Easton pick me up for school. *Really* stick it to Dad."

Brushing my hair, I chuckle. "As amusing as that may be to watch, I *really* don't recommend it. He'll send you away, and, while you may not care, I do. I've seen his search history, Tess. He's been looking at schools." I look myself over in the mirror and then turn to face her. "Come on. My car is back from the shop. I'll drive you."

Despite her obvious frustrations with the whole situation, she takes my advice and follows me outside. Throughout the ten-minute drive to Haven Grace Prep, I'm pretty sure she only stops talking to take a breath twice. The rest of the time is filled with her ranting about what an asshole our father is, and how our mother lacks a backbone because she never stands up to him. She's not exactly wrong, but being on the bad side of the people who support us financially just doesn't sound like a great idea to me.

"All right, I'm going across the street," she says, as soon as I put the car in park.

"Tess," I groan. "Can't you lay low for at least a day? If you're late to school again, Dad will find out and know exactly where you were."

"He doesn't scare me."

It takes all the patience I have not to try to shake some sense into her. Instead, I put one hand on her shoulder. "All-girl boarding schools don't have guys. With your overactive sex life, you'd literally have to become a

lesbian.”

She cringes. “Gross. Pussy freaks me out.”

“Exactly.” I smile triumphantly. “So, will you just come inside with me?”

Pondering it for a moment, I think she’s about to agree when she shakes her head. “No, I’m going across the street. *But* you should come with me.”

“Absolutely not. Why would I do that?”

“To make sure I get to school on time. You can tell me when we have to go, and I promise to listen.”

I toss my keys into my purse and open the door. “No. Not happening.”

She meets me at the trunk. “Please? I just want to see him for a second.”

Her bottom lip juts out, and I hate her for pulling that move. Under no circumstances do I want to see Knox again—not after he humiliated me at the diner, only to act like less of an ass later that night. Okay, maybe I lied, and maybe I *do* want to see him again, but that’s exactly the problem. Out of all the lies he spews, only one is true. I don’t belong anywhere near him. Still, the thing I want least in this world is losing Tessa to boarding school.

“Okay, but only for a minute.”

“Yay!” She cheers. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

Looping her arm in mine, the two of us head across the street and behind the public school. It only takes a second before I spot him—leaning up against the brick wall, looking like the pure definition of a bad boy. A cloud of smoke flows from his mouth as he laughs at something Zayn said, and I could easily find myself getting lost in that smile. Hating him would be so much easier if he wasn’t obnoxiously good looking.

“Laney.” Tess gets my attention. I’ve stopped in my tracks. “What are you doing? Let’s go.”

“R-right. Sorry.”

As soon as we’re steps away, my sister releases my arm and cuddles into her boyfriend. I roll my eyes playfully, pulling my phone out of my pocket. I don’t intend on trying to fit in here. Knox has made it crystal clear that I shouldn’t be hanging around them. I’m just giving Tessa a few minutes with Easton while making sure she gets to school on time. That’s all.

“What, no hi?” a familiar, yet cocky, voice asks.

I look up to find Knox giving me one of his smoldering looks. It’s impossible to turn away from, and I need to remind myself to breathe as I try to maintain my composure.

“Hi.”

He snickers under his breath, but it's loud enough for me to hear. "So, are you making this a new habit of yours?"

"What?"

"Tagging along with Tessa wherever she goes?"

It's only been a couple minutes and he's already on my nerves. "No."

Looking me up and down once, he locks his gaze with mine. "That's too bad."

It takes everything I have not to react as a feeling I'm not used to flutters inside my stomach. Letting myself be even the slightest bit swayed by him is a bad idea, yet I'm pulled in two different directions. One part of me wants to stay as far away as I can. Forget his name and act like he doesn't exist. Another, however, craves his presence like a drug. It wants to spend every waking moment learning all there is to know about him. His happy memories. His every insecurity. His favorite things. I want it all.

"Well, maybe if you weren't such a jerk all the time, I could stand to be around you."

He places his hand on his chest and feigns hurt. "Ouch. You wound me."

The sarcasm drips from his lips like a poison, taunting and threatening to cause damage if I let it. His goal is to pull me down to his level, and I'm up too high to fall that far.

"Knox, can't you be nice for *once* in your life?" Tess questions, attempting to come to my defense.

He chuckles. "What would be the fun in that? Besides, if Little Laney can't handle it, she should stay away—like I told her to Friday night."

"Go fuck yourself," I snap, fury building over at the fact that he thinks he has any say over what I do.

His brows raise. "Damn Bambi, those are some harsh words. Where'd you learn those?"

It's too much. No matter how calm I try to stay, he weasels his way under my skin and nips at every nerve I have. It's been all of five minutes, and he already has me ready to explode.

"Tess, don't be late for school. I'll meet you there."

With that, I turn around and walk away, in an attempt to leave the anger and rage behind me. Knox is an asshole. The worst of the worst. He knows how to get a rise out of me, and he feeds on that. I've always tried to make it a point to be kind to others, but with him, it's like I just want to punch his gorgeous face.

I'm halfway back to HGP when a hand wraps around my wrist. Judging by the way my skin burns at the contact, I don't even have to look to know who it is. What I don't expect, however, is to see the vulnerable look in Knox's eyes as I turn around.

"What do you want?"

He sighs and releases me. "I'm sorry, okay? I thought we were playing around."

I shake my head. "You weren't. You've been treating me like a pariah since the second we met, telling me to go away and that I shouldn't be anywhere near you or your friends."

"Well, you shouldn't." As soon as the words leave his mouth, I go to walk away again but he stops me. "I'm not saying it as a bad thing. You have your life together. You deserve more than to get wrapped up in our shit."

"Isn't that for me to decide?"

He shrugs. "If I thought you'd make the right choice, sure. But I see that look in your eyes, the way fire mixes with fear, and I don't think you'd choose correctly."

"Again, fuck you."

"See? Like that. I'm already poisoning your sunny disposition." He reaches forward and rubs his knuckle down my cheek. "Don't go all hard on me now. Soft looks beautiful on you."

Just like that, he turns around and leaves me frozen where I'm standing. I swear, the mood swings on that one is going to give me whiplash.

I'M SITTING IN MY room with Savannah, listening to her tell me about how she caught Jace and Paige hooking up. It doesn't surprise me. Paige is always looking for a way to feel more in charge, and Jace could have practically anyone he wants. What catches me off guard more is when she mentions that Carter hasn't messed around with anyone since New Year's.

"I don't know, Lane. I think he may actually be serious about this thing for you."

I shake my head. "There's no way. That boy is the definition of a player. The only thing keeping his interest on me right now is the fact that I'm *not* in his bed."

She smiles. "And if it's not?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what if it's not just the chase he's after? What if you're the one he actually wants to throw out his playboy ways for?"

It's not a question I've let myself entertain very often. Carter can be a sweetheart, when he wants to be, but I've also heard the rumors and the things that come out of his mouth. I'd be a fool to allow myself to think anything could become of him and me.

Just as I'm about to change the subject, Tessa barges in and does it for me—only not to one I'd like to discuss.

"What's going on between you and Knox?"

My eyes widen as Savannah chokes on air. "*Knox Vaughn?*"

"Do you know any others?" Tessa dismisses her and then turns back to me. "Seriously. What's up? I've never seen him chase after anyone like that before."

"It's nothing. He just wanted to apologize for being a douche."

"He apologized?" The two of them gawk in unison.

"Yes?"

Tessa seems too shocked to say anything else, but Savannah moves to the end of my bed. "Delaney, trust me when I say this, you *can't* get involved with him. He's bad news. Him *and* his brigade of tyrants."

"Hey!" Tess barks.

Savannah changes the focus of her attention. "What? You know it's true, and besides, Delaney is entirely way too good for him."

My sister relaxes as she sees her point. "Maybe Sav is right."

"You know," I begin, "I'm really tired of everyone telling me what to do. Who I should and shouldn't talk to. Where I do and don't belong. I'm not a child."

"We know, and we're not trying to control you." Savannah keeps her tone calm. "It's just, he's trouble and you're...pure. His world will chew you up and spit you out."

I roll my eyes. "Tessa handles them just fine."

Sav chuckles. "*Tessa* is just as bad as they are." When Tess opens her mouth to say something, Savannah levels her with a look. "Don't even start. You've been a little rebel since you were five." She turns back to me. "I'm trying to protect you here, Lane. Stay away from him, okay?"

I don't want to agree, especially after the way he made me feel today with

the simplest touch. However, I know if I don't, she'll never let it go—so I nod, making a promise I'm already half certain I'm going to break.

THE RESTAURANT IS FANCY, requiring Tessa and I to both be wearing dresses—matching ones, thanks to my parents' belief that being twins means looking the same in all aspects. I can tell it's driving her insane, since she's *not* the type to dress up in something so formal, but I don't necessarily mind it.

Our aunts, uncles, parents, and grandparents all fill the very large table while Tessa and I sit across from each other in the middle. Celebrating our birthday a week early makes me feel older than I actually am. After tonight, I'll probably be convinced I'm already eighteen, even though I'm not. Still, it's always nice to see family.

"I'd like to make a toast," Dad says as he stands with his glass. "To my two beautiful baby girls. I can't believe you're both becoming adults. It feels like just yesterday I was trying to juggle you in my arms. I hope your birthday is everything you've always imagined. I love you."

Tess subtly rolls her eyes while we all drink—champagne for the adults and sprite for us. However, I don't miss the way Uncle Dom sneaks some of his alcohol into her glass with a wink. He's always been the funicle of the family.

I spend the next few hours eating delicious food, answering questions about what university I'm learning toward, and blowing out candles on our shared birthday cake. By the time we go to leave, I'm exhausted. I climb into the back of the limo my father hired and rest my head on my sister's shoulder. I don't even realize I've fallen asleep until a loud squeal wakes me up.

"Laney! Laney, look!" she screams, and I tiredly gaze out the window.

Two Lamborghini Aventadors, one white and one black, sit in our driveway, with big red bows on them. Tess and I jump out of the limo with huge smiles on our faces, running over to look at the best presents known to man. My name in cursive is written on the bow for the white one, and Tessa's is on the black—telling us exactly which is whose.

"Do you like them?" our dad asks, and for the first time in years, Tess

smiles at him genuinely.

“Yes!” We both shout at the same time, running up to give both our parents hugs and kisses.

Dad smiles happily and hands us each a set of keys. “They’re very fast, very powerful, and *very expensive* cars. Drive them carefully.”

Everything out of his mouth after that is a blur as we check out our new cars.

Eighteen isn’t looking so bad.

BEING ON THE FOOTBALL TEAM, I'VE BEEN THROUGH MY FAIR SHARE OF heavy workouts. Hell, there have been times I've thrown up from being worked so hard. And yet, nothing has knocked me on my ass as much as training for The Underground. Grayson and I have only been working with Jackson for the past week, but fuck am I sore. I've even gone as far as taking an ice bath to try to ease the pain in my muscles. The only thing *that* did was make my dick so small it practically tried to crawl up inside me.

"I can't believe that bitch of a teacher called my dad," Stone continues to rant. "I changed the report card from an F to a B *perfectly*. It was fucking flawless, and then she went and ruined it. I mean, it's only woodshop. What kind of woman teaches woodshop anyway?"

"The bitchiest of them all," Gage eggs him on.

He throws his arms in the air. "That's what I'm saying! Such a fucking cunt, I swear. Now my prick of a father is talking about sending my ass to summer school to make it up. It's woodshop! It's not even required!"

Zayn groans and throws his lighter at Stone. "You complain like a whiny little girl, you know that? Be a goddamn man about it. Do something to get revenge and move the fuck on."

"You're right." Stone nods. "Let's jump her!"

"Okay, Rambo, a little less reprehensible."

"Egg her house?" Easton suggests.

Stone thinks about it for a second then shakes his head. "Not enough."

"*Graffiti* her house."

The idea comes from Gage, and Stone instantly jumps into his lap. "I knew there was a reason I love you."

We all laugh as Gage pushes Stone off him and onto the floor. Still, while spray-painting a teacher's house wasn't on my agenda for the day, it's not something I'm against doing. I've met the woman he's complaining about, and he's right—she's a total bitch.

"All right, are we doing this shit?" I ask, getting up from my couch.

Everyone else follows while Easton looks at his phone. "Can we wait for Tess? She'll be here in a second."

"I thought you two were just fucking around?"

He narrows his eyes at me. "We are. Why?"

I shrug. "It doesn't seem that way. You two are together more than you're not."

"She's a good lay. Don't get your panties in a twist. Besides, I think her sister has the hots for you."

Thoughts of Delaney instantly fill my mind. It's not the first time, either. The fact that I've dreamed of her beneath me is something I'll forever keep to myself. Her hair fanned out on the pillow. Her innocence tainted with every inward thrust I make. The images are burned into my brain, and it didn't even happen. I can only imagine what the real thing would do to me.

I'd be lying if I said she didn't intrigue the fuck out of me. I've never met someone so pure, so damn perfect, that enjoyed toeing the line between right and wrong. Every time she's around, I'm drawn to her like a moth to a flame. I want to lock her away and protect her innocence, all while injecting my own venom into her veins. The thought of anyone corrupting her makes me see red, but the thought of *me* doing it sends a wave of adrenaline throughout my body. It's too fucking dangerous—needs to be avoided at all costs.

"That's too damn bad for her, isn't it? Besides, I'm hoping she's gotten the message by now and will go back to her prep-school friends where she belongs."

Zayn snorts. "Not likely."

"Oh, yeah? Why not?"

He nods toward the window. "Cause she's walking up the street with Tessa now."

I throw my head back in frustration, and the five of us go out onto the front porch. Delaney does her best to avoid eye contact, which only pisses me off more. Who the fuck does she think she is, coming to my house and trying to ignore me?

"Tessa, Bambi," I greet them, feeling slightly satisfied as Delaney

squirms under my intense stare.

Tess crosses her arms over her chest. “For fuck’s sake, Knox, do you have a nickname for everyone?”

“Nope. Only the really special ones.”

Laney looks at her sister and her brows furrow. “What’s yours?”

“CBP, but he refuses to tell me what it means.”

She’s damn right I won’t. I’ve seen the mood swings of Tessa Callahan first hand when she found out Easton got a blowjob from someone chick at a party. I’m not dumb enough to put myself directly in her crosshairs.

“So, are we doing this shit or what?” Stone questions.

“What are you doing?” Delaney chimes in, like she’s got a right to know.

“Nothing that concerns you.” My dismissive tone should be enough, but apparently, it’s not.

She glares at me while Stone, being the idiot he is, takes one of the cans of spray paint from the backpack and shakes it up.

“A little redecorating of sorts, for a deserving recipient,” he tells her.

There it is again—that fire in her eyes that mixes with fear and only burns brighter. The kind of look that turns me on and morphs me into an overprotective fucking beast all at the same time. She should be mortified by the idea—running in the opposite direction and trying to get her sister to do the same. But instead, she does none of that.

“You should come with us,” Easton tells her, and I groan loudly.

“Jesus Christ, E. Read the fucking room.”

My eyes lock with Delaney’s, my stare silently telling her to go the fuck home. No words are exchanged, but I can tell she knows exactly what I’m trying to say. As if her only goal is to piss me off, she smirks.

“Don’t,” I warn, but it’s too late.

“Sounds like fun.”

My jaw ticks at her answer, and I’m so close to punching Easton in the fucking face for even inviting her. The guys all smile triumphantly while I’m straight up ready to snap. I grab the bag from the ground and head for Zayn’s car before I do some shit that I regret.

MRS. VANDALAY’S HOUSE IS the perfect canvas—all white siding that

looks like it's recently been power washed. The lack of a car out front and the lights off inside tell us that she's most likely not home, but we still need to be quiet in case any neighbors decide to see what the commotion is.

Stone grabs a can and shakes it up, instantly writing *BITCH* across the front of the house. Gage follows suit before Easton and Tessa join them. I stand back, leaning against Zayn's car and watching it all go down. My best friend steps beside me.

"You think she's actually going to do it?"

I steal a glance over at Delaney; she's still got that glint in her eyes but her feet stay planted to the sidewalk.

"I don't know. That girl is surprising me at every damn turn."

He chuckles. "So I've noticed."

"Fuck off. It's not like that."

"I never said it was," he says, and goes to take part in the festivities.

I take a cigarette from my pack and light it, inhaling the smoke and hoping to hell it calms me down. Even the fact that she's here has me on high alert. She should be at home, doing what valedictorian prospects do, not hanging around a bunch of delinquents while they vandalize a house.

"Laney," Gage calls as he jogs up to her. "Come on. You've got to try this, it's such a rush."

The second he puts his arm around her, a level of rage so strong that it blurs my vision rushes through me. There isn't a thing in the world that could keep me in place. I may not be the jealous type, but for her, I'm a possessive monster ready to kill anyone who gets in my way. I throw my cigarette to the ground and stomp it out with my foot before all but shouting his name.

"Gage!" He stops, as does everyone else, and they watch as I storm up to him. Even Delaney's eyes widen. "Get your fucking hands off her before I break every bone in your goddamn arm."

He does as I say, but doesn't back down the way I expected him to. "What the hell is your deal lately?"

To be honest, I don't have an answer for him. I've never felt the need to be so protective over anyone before. Shit, even Hailey has slept with half my friends. All I know is that Delaney is different, and the mere thought of anyone touching her but me is grounds for homicide.

Red and blue lights fill the night sky and dread floods my stomach in a flash. "Shit!"

"What do we do?" Delaney questions, the fear in her voice is evident.

“Run.”

I spin her around and shove her forward, forcing her to take off with me and the rest of my friends. We all book it down the street, turning corners in an attempt to lose the cops but they stay hot on our tails. We turn into an alley and see a fence in the distance. Everyone else climbs over it with ease, but as I approach, I see Delaney struggling to get over. I glance behind me, noticing how close the officers are, and make a split-second decision that surprises even me.

Gripping Delaney’s waist, I lift her up and practically throw her over the fence just before I’m pinned against it by the weight of two grown men. My eyes meet hers as they put me in handcuffs and her sister pulls her away. Everyone else might be confused by what just happened, but not us. For her and me, it’s crystal clear.

JAIL CELLS ARE BY far one of the most disgusting places on earth. The amount of people who have pissed in these just to get back at the officers is enough to make anyone cringe. It didn’t take long for them to book me, having been through the process before and not requiring any explanation on how things work.

After that was done, they sat me in a chair, where I saw a judge through a computer screen. She lectured me about my behavior, set bond in the amount of an unreasonable ten grand—cash only—and sent me on my way. I didn’t even bother calling my mom. She doesn’t have that kind of cash. So, I used my one phone call to let Zayn know I’m going to be in here at least until my arraignment in a few days.

I’m lying on the paper-thin mattress, staring up at the disgusting ceiling and replaying the events of tonight in my head. *Fucking Bambi*. If she had just gone the hell home like I wanted her to, she wouldn’t have risked getting herself put in here. Just the thought of her in a place like this puts a heavy pit in my stomach. I know I’m going to get shit from my friends for saving her and taking the fall, but I’d do it a million times over if it meant she never had to step foot in here.

“Vaughn!” My name echoes throughout the small cell as an officer unlocks the door. “You made bail.”

My brows furrow, but I don't ask any questions as I get up and follow him out. They give me my belongings and send me on my way. I'm almost positive they've made a mistake—until I get outside. Delaney is standing only a few feet from the door, fidgeting with her sleeve nervously. As soon as I let the door close behind me, she looks up. The tension between us is so electric it crackles in the air.

"You paid my bail?" I know she's rich, but she had to put up at least a thousand dollars cash to post bail with the bondsman, maybe more.

She shrugs and stares down at her shoes. "Seemed fitting, since you only got arrested because of me."

"Maybe I'm just a shitty fence climber."

"Maybe you're just a shitty liar."

I can't help but laugh, and the minute I do, her eyes meet mine again. She's right, I am, but not about the reason I got arrested—about her. To tell myself that she's just some private school brat following her sister around is the biggest joke of them all. I've known it since the night we met, when she stood there looking like a deer caught in the headlights. Like Bambi.

"Thank you," she tells me, the honesty in her voice hitting me straight in the chest.

"Don't sweat it."

She looks as if she wants to push it further, to make sure I fully understand how thankful she is for my sacrifice, but she decides against it. "Come on. I'll drop you off at home."

I follow her toward her car, and when I see it, my jaw drops. Never in my eighteen years of life have I ever seen something so beautiful. A white Lamborghini Aventador roars to life as she hits the auto start button on her keys.

"*That's* your car?" I balk.

She nods. "It was my birthday gift."

Birthday? Tessa never mentioned it being her birthday, and I'm sure as shit she's the kind to gloat all day about it.

"When was your birthday?"

"Next week." She walks around to the driver's side, and the two of us get in. "My parents have to go visit my sister at college so they decided to celebrate early."

I hear what she's saying, but I'm too busy admiring the interior to answer. It's all white, looking like something out of a dream. This car is hands down

worth more than my entire neighborhood, and here it is, in the hands of a seventeen-year-old Goody Two-Shoes. I don't know whether to be jealous or ridiculously turned on as I watch her navigate the roads.

"So, what are the chances of you letting me drive this thing?"

She chuckles, shaking her head. "About the same as the chances of you not being an asshole."

"There you go again with the harsh words. See, Bambi? I'm already a bad influence on you."

"That's debatable. And besides, if anyone should be taking credit for my language, it's Tessa. That girl curses like a sailor."

Laughter bubbles out of my mouth involuntarily. "Yeah, I've noticed. Not you, though, you're...different."

"Yeah," she sighs. "I'm different."

I can feel the instant the mood shifts. The playfulness is gone, and the frown on her face threatens to rip my chest wide the fuck open.

"Hey, I didn't mean it as a bad thing," I say in an attempt to lighten things back up again, but it's no use.

She pulls up to my house and brings the car to a stop. "Thanks again. Next time, I promise I'll listen when you tell me to go home."

I get out of the car and lean down to look at her one more time. The way she looks in the driver's seat of this car is enough to make me combust on the spot. I don't know what it is that makes the next word leave my mouth, but there isn't a damn thing in the world that could stop me.

"Don't."

I MAKE MY WAY THROUGH THE CROWDED HALLS, ONLY WANTING TO GET FROM my locker to Savannah's unscathed. You would think there's some reason to panic with the way kids rush around this place, but there isn't. Just a normal day in private school hell.

"I swear, one of these days I'm going to get trampled trying to get here," I tell Sav as soon as I reach her.

She giggles and looks around. "Why don't you just share a locker with me? That way you don't have to walk all the way over to yours in the morning."

"That would be incredible." I wrap my arms around her. "Seriously, you're the best."

"I know." She smiles. "Meet me at lunch and we'll move your stuff."

Grayson slips past me and grabs his girlfriend, pulling her into his arms. "Ugh, I missed you."

"Missed her? You two live together."

He glares at me playfully. "I had kickboxing this morning, so I had to leave super early."

"Kickboxing?"

Savannah nods. "Apparently, he wants to feel even more like an alpha badass. So, he's waking up at four in the morning to take kickboxing classes and then goes to another after dinner." She grabs his shirt and lifts it up, exposing a nasty bruise. "By the looks of it, he's not doing very well."

Grayson pulls her hand away and covers the injury. "I'm doing fine. My partner is just a douchebag. He doesn't follow the rules for shit."

"Sure, babe. Whatever you say."

I watch as two of my best friends bicker back and forth, laughing at them. Carter comes up to stand by my side.

“Is this just a phase or are they always like this?”

“Like what?” I question.

“Disgustingly adorable one minute and arguing like an old married couple the next?”

“Yeah. They’ve been that way since we were younger. I don’t see it changing any time soon.”

He groans. “Good to know.”

We all stand around like we do every morning, making fun of each other or watching Savannah put Grayson in his place like the little savage she is. Really, I could take a few pages out of her playbook. Maybe then I wouldn’t let Knox walk all over me the way he has been. I can’t ask her for pointers, though, without her asking who I want to use them on.

“So, are you excited?” Carter asks me as we all start to walk to class.

“For what?”

He narrows his eyes, looking at me like I’ve lost my mind. “Your birthday party this weekend. Tessa sent out a mass invite. Practically the whole school is invited.”

Of course, she did. “And uh, when did she say this party was?”

“Friday, so we can ring in your birthday at midnight.”

Savannah watches me carefully before chuckling. “You had no idea, did you?”

“None.”

A wide grin stretches across Grayson’s face. “Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

I roll my eyes. “Because it’s Tessa. I’ve got to get to class. We’ll talk about this later.”

“Give her hell, firecracker,” Carter jokes, and I walk away—making a mental note to talk to Tess after class.

I’M USUALLY THE TYPE to pay attention in class. You can’t get the grades I do by sitting on your ass and not listening to what the teacher is saying. Today, however, I’m completely absorbed into my phone.

Knox keeps sending me pictures of people in his school with his own stupid commentary. The first is of a kid who insists on wearing a weird, vampire-style cape with the caption “I wonder if he sparkles in the sunlight.” The next is of Stone, flirting with some girl who couldn’t look any less interested. The caption reads “I wonder if she’s thinking about dryer lint.”

With each one he sends, it becomes harder and harder to keep my composure. I finally can’t hold it in any longer by the time I reach the fifth. It’s a picture of the front of my school with the caption, “I wonder if any of the guys there actually have dicks.”

A bark of laughter leaves my mouth. I instantly smack my hand over it, but it’s too late. The damage is done. Everyone in the room turns to look at me, and my face turns beat red. Thankfully, Mr. Lachey pulls the attention back onto himself and everything goes back to normal. My fingers move quickly as I type out a response to Knox.

Delaney: You’re such a jerk. I literally laughed out loud and everyone looked at me.

As soon as I hit send, I can see the three dots appear. It’s only seconds before his reply comes through.

Knox: So, you agree. The guys in your school don’t have dicks.

I roll my eyes.

Delaney: You’re hopeless.

Knox: ;)

THE REST OF CLASS passes quickly, thanks to my obnoxious distraction. We’ve talked about everything, from the monotone voice his teacher has to the fact that everyone seems to have known about this party Tessa is throwing but me. Speaking of, I *really* need to talk to her.

As soon as the bell rings, I grab my things and head out the door to find my sister. It's not hard, being as she's waiting at the end of the hallway where we always meet. However, the second she sees the look on my face, she turns to run away.

"Don't even think about it," I warn, and she stops. "I thought we agreed that if I didn't like the party at Zayn's house, you wouldn't throw one."

"No," she counters. "I said if you didn't have fun I'd *consider* throwing it somewhere else. I considered it. You lost."

I groan, throwing my head back. "Tessa, I don't want a huge party!"

"Uh, in case you're forgetting, it's not just *your* birthday. And besides, I'm older, which means *I'm* in charge when Mom and Dad leave."

"Okay, one, you're two minutes older. And two, I can guarantee you that if we were to ask Dad who is in charge, the *last* person he would say is you."

She waves me off dismissively. "Yeah, yeah. What do you want me to do? Everyone already knows about it. We can't cancel it now."

"You're the worst, you know that?"

A triumphant smile graces her face. "You love me."

Just then, my phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it out to find a new message.

Knox: You could always join the convent. I'm sure you qualify.

His text is a response to me complaining about having to spend eighty minutes a day listening to my teachers go on and on about how important our high school education is, as if we're not going to forget it all two months after graduation.

"Who's putting that smile on your face?" Tess asks, ripping my phone from my hand.

"Give that back. It's none of your business," I protest, but it's no use.

She scrolls through the last few messages of the conversation. "Seriously? This is what you two are talking about?" She glances from my phone, to me, and back again. "This is boring." Her fingers start to dance across the keys. "Luckily for you, you have me."

My jaw drops and I go to take my phone back, but she pulls it away. "Stop! What are you doing? Tessa!"

As soon as she finishes whatever she was typing, she grins and hands me my phone back. "There. You can thank me later." She walks away and down

the hall. “Glad we agreed on the party!”

I roll my eyes and look down at my phone, reading the message she sent to Knox.

Delaney: Enough of this platonic texting shit. Let’s explore each other’s bodies using only our tongues. I’m dying to find out if you’re as good in real life as you are in my mind. 🍆🍆💦💦

HOURS PASS AND I’M yet to hear anything from Knox. I start to wonder if maybe he just isn’t going to answer at all. I’m just finishing up moving my stuff from my locker to Savannah’s when my phone finally vibrates. My heart skips a beat when I see his name on the screen.

Knox: Meet me behind NHH. Don’t get caught.

My eyes dart around the empty hallway. The door is so close, and with no one to see me, I could easily slip out. Even Savannah went to lunch after helping me carry my books over here. However, if anything is going to keep me from going, it will be my own lack of self-confidence.

I shouldn’t have let this go as long as I have. I should’ve told him the text was Tessa’s doing the minute she sent it, but I didn’t. The curiosity of what he would say to something like that got the better of me. And now? Now, I have the opportunity to go over there and see what he wants to do about it.

Everything in my brain is telling me not to go. It’s too risky. Too dangerous. Savannah warned me to stay away from him. It’s like he’s like the hunter and I’m the prey, and giving him a clear shot to take me out is not smart. Nothing about this is a good idea, and yet my feet have a mind of their own as they carry me out the side door and across the street.

Finding Knox is easy once I get there. He’s leaning up against the back of the school, smoking a cigarette and looking like sex on legs. The second his crystal blue eyes land on mine, I forget all necessary functions. How to breathe. How to speak. How to walk. It all goes out the window as he comes my way.

“I didn’t think you’d come.”

I do my best to seem unfazed, but I'm dying inside. "Why not?"

He shrugs. "A lot of girls talk a big game but won't back it up."

Yeah, I don't even talk a good game. "O-oh."

As if we're in some sort of face-off, he finishes his cigarette and comes impossibly closer. I don't even realize I'm slowly backing away until I hit a brick wall. He cages me in with his hands on either side of my head, and I can feel as his breath ghosts my lips. I stay completely still, afraid that if I move, I might mess something up.

"So, about that text..." I swallow hard, waiting for him to continue. "What did it say, again?" His mouth moves to the shell of my ear. "Oh, right. You want to explore each other's bodies with our tongues."

My heart-rate quickens as he places his hand on my waist. "I...um..."

It's pointless. My brain can't formulate words with him *this* close. His touch renders me completely speechless.

He pulls back slightly and smirks as he licks his lips. "Do you want to know what I think?" Not trusting my voice, I simply nod. "I think..." He moves in, making me think he's going to kiss me—but then he stops. "You shouldn't let Tessa get ahold of your phone."

Just like that, he backs away and chuckles. My jaw drops, and the nervous feeling in my chest dissipates. I reach out, smacking him in the arm for messing with me like that.

"You knew?"

He laughs, and just the sight of it alone is heaven. "Hell yeah, I knew. Do you even know what an eggplant emoji means?"

I roll my eyes. "Yes. I'm not dense."

"You're dense enough to let your sister get your phone long enough to send a text."

"No, she took it and wouldn't give it back."

"And that, Bambi, is why you need to put a password on it."

The two of us spend the next fifteen minutes joking around and making fun of how Tessa and Easton are together. By the time that I need to go back to school, I find myself genuinely not wanting to. Usually, I don't mind my academics—they're something I'm good at. Something I thrive in. But right now, sitting here with Knox, I'd be perfectly content with never moving again.

FRIDAY COMES IN THE blink of an eye, and I'm already dreading the party Tessa has planned for tonight. Not only did she invite our entire school, she also invited most of North Haven High. With what I've seen between parties at Zayn's and Jace's, it's bound to be a disaster. I just hope our parents don't find out.

The fact that I'm going to be seeing Knox tonight, while having to avoid him because Savannah will be there, sits heavy in my stomach. Knox and I have been texting almost constantly. There's something about him that I just can't put my finger on. It's like when I'm with him, I finally feel like I belong—despite how many times he's told me that I don't. There's a sort of clarity when I'm around him. I wish I could explain it. Maybe then it would make sense to me. But, I can't.

Tessa comes barreling into my room. "Hey, can you come with me to the st—what's wrong with you?"

"Nothing." I try to play it off, but she can see right through me.

"Nothing or Knox's thing?"

"Oh my God. You're so crude."

She chuckles. "Doesn't mean I'm not right." Coming closer, she climbs on my bed. "So, what's up? Do I need to kick his ass?"

I shake my head. "No, he hasn't done anything wrong, or anything *right* for that matter."

A sympathetic frown appears on her face. "I'm sorry, babe. Knox is just, well...Knox. He's troubled and messy. Maybe he just doesn't want to hurt you."

"Or he's just not interested."

Her brows raise. "Do you *want* him to be interested?"

"No," I lie, then look down at my lap. "I don't know. I can't really explain it. All I *do* know is that I like being around him, danger and all, and it'd be nice if I knew he liked being around me too."

She seems caught off guard by my answer before pursing her lips and nodding. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah. I still don't think it's a good idea, but you're my sister. If you think you can handle yourself, and he's what you want, I'm going to help you get him." Tess stands up and puts out her hand. "Come on, we're going shopping. Tonight, you're going to bring that bad boy to his knees."

RIGHT HOOK. LEFT HOOK. JAB. RIGHT HOOK. LEFT HOOK. JAB.

Jackson holds steady as I swing at the focus mitts. He counts out for me, encouraging me to keep going when it seems like I'm beginning to tire. Grayson is already worn out behind me, taking a sip of water before it's his turn again.

"Three more. Let's go."

Right hook. Left hook. Jab. Right hook. Left hook. Jab.

With the final round, I put my all into it, but I know it's nowhere near enough. Our first fights are tomorrow, and while I'm not worried about Pretty Boy over there, I'm genuinely afraid for myself. If I'm not in perfect shape for this match, I'll die. It's as simple and as complicated as that.

"All right." Jackson walks with me over toward Grayson so I can get a drink. "I'll give you guys a five-minute break, and then we're going again. Knox, you're up first this time."

I sit down, leaning against the ropes and resting my arms on my knees. The dull ache in my muscles begs me to stop, but I know I have no choice. We still have another couple rounds of this and then our usual sparring match before we leave. Speaking of...

"Hey, when we spar tonight, can we agree on no faces? We both have Delaney's party after this."

Grayson looks over at me and his brows raise. "Wow. I did *not* see that coming."

"See what coming?"

"You and Laney. I didn't even realize you two were close."

I shake my head. "We're not. She just comes around with Tess

occasionally.”

It’s a total fucking lie, and Grayson doesn’t buy it for a second. “Right. That’s why you said *Delaney’s* party, instead of Tessa’s.”

The slip-up isn’t lost on me. I know damn well I should have referred to it as Tessa’s, but that would entail Tess being the reason I’m going—and she’s not. Still, the last thing I want to do is give Grayson something to hold over me. We’re not friends. We’re just wrapped up in a shitty situation together.

“Whoever the fuck’s party you want to call it. It’s a party. I don’t give a shit.”

He eyes me intently. “So, there’s *nothing* going on between you two?”

“No. Not that it’s any of your damn business.”

I can see the suspicion in his eyes, but instead of arguing it further, he chuckles. “That’s good, because Carter has a massive hard-on for that girl. I can’t imagine what he’d do if he found out you two were messing around.”

At the mere mention of his name, I practically choke on air. Of-fucking-course, he would have a thing for her. That’s just my damn luck—not that I planned on pursuing anything. I have every intention of holding off as long as I possibly can, preferably forever. She’s too good to get dragged down into my mess. Too perfect to be tainted by my sins.

On Tuesday, when I got that text from her phone, it only took me a second before I knew it wasn’t Delaney who sent it. The language was way too R-rated for her innocent little mind. Still, when she didn’t retract it right away, I knew I had to mess with her. It was an opportunity I just couldn’t ignore.

Being that close to her, as I had her pinned to the wall, ignited something inside me that I didn’t expect. The way her breath hitched and her heart pounded inside her chest, it was a sight to be seen. It took every restraint I had not to kiss her right then and there.

Delaney Callahan is too perfect—not just for me, but for anyone. I know one day she’ll find someone deserving of her, maybe a doctor or some kind of diplomat with a foreign accent. I just hope I’m not around to see that happen, and I sure as shit will never allow it to be Carter Trayland, of all fucking people.

“Okay, break’s over,” Jackson announces, pulling me from my thoughts. “Vaughn, let’s go.”

I get up from my spot on the floor and come at him hot, swinging my fists as hard as I can. Suddenly, I have a lot of pent-up anger to take out, and if the

look on Jackson's face is anything to go by, I should use that to my advantage.

THE MASSIVE HOUSE IS filled with kids from all over town. It's probably the biggest party I've been to in years, since just about everyone from both schools was invited. I'm pretty sure Tessa's motto was quantity over quality with this one, and I can only imagine what's going through Delaney's mind right now.

I walk through the crowded living room and toward the kitchen, looking for my friends. Sure enough, they're exactly where I thought they would be—near the alcohol. Tessa is wearing a princess tiara and dancing around to the music while Easton checks her out. I roll my eyes and walk over to Zayn.

"Is she drunk already?"

"Stoned," Z corrects. "E gave her a blunt for her birthday."

Tess holds up one finger and takes a sip of her beer. "A blunt *and* three orgasms. Best. Present. Ever."

We all laugh while Easton grins, clearly proud of himself. The music in here is so loud I can barely hear myself think, but I don't think that's why I feel like something, *or someone*, is missing. I try to seem as indifferent as possible as I look at Tessa.

"Where's your shadow?"

She smirks and points toward the den.

The second I find her, my whole world is knocked right off its axis. On her worst day, Delaney is a fucking knockout—a girl who could put even the hottest of models to shame. But tonight, she's something else entirely. The red dress she's wearing leaves little to the imagination as the fabric clings to her body. Her light brown hair cascades down her back and curls at the ends, and the lightest touch of makeup accentuates her flawless face.

"Holy shit." I gawk, unable to focus on anything but her.

She's fucking breathtaking, and clearly, I'm not the only one who thinks so.

All her prep-school friends are joking around about something I honestly don't give a shit about. My eyes get stuck on Carter, who is sitting about sixty feet too close for my liking. He's looking at her like lovestruck puppy,

and I fight the urge to pick her up, caveman-style, and carry her ass out of here.

“What the fuck is *he* doing here?” I spit.

Tessa follows my line of sight. “Who, Carter? He’s harmless.”

“Harmless, my ass. Look at the way he’s staring at her.”

She smirks. “Jealous, Knoxie? Maybe you should go over there and take what’s yours.”

My jaw stiffens as I try to reign in my fury. Never in my life have I been jealous of a douchebag like Carter Trayland. He’s an entitled tool by every means measurable. And yet, standing here, watching him joke around with the only girl to hold my attention for longer than an hour, I’d give anything to be him right now.

Fucking hell.

BY THE TIME I get to so much as speak to Delaney, I’ve already been here for over an hour. She comes over to talk to her sister for a second, and her eyes land on me. Her red lipstick contrasts against her white teeth as she smiles, and it becomes *that* much harder to keep myself away from her.

“Hey. I didn’t see you come in.”

I look around. “How could you? There’s like three hundred people here.”

She laughs and cuts her eyes at her sister. “I wonder whose fault *that* is.” Tessa whistles, refusing to make eye contact, and Delaney focuses back on me. “Well, I’m glad you came.”

“Wouldn’t miss it. Happy Birthday.”

She gives me a thankful grin before going back to her friends. Zayn and Stone both start nudging me with their elbows.

“She’s glad you came,” Stone mocks playfully.

I shove him away and tell him to fuck off, but there’s nothing I can do to keep the stupid smile off my face. *What the fuck is this girl doing to me?*

APPARENTLY, TESTING MY PATIENCE is the answer to my previous fucking question. All the self-control in the world can’t get me to take my

eyes off her, which means spending the last two hours watching Carter hang all over her. She's patient with him, pushing his hand away nicely when it gets too close to places she isn't comfortable. Me, on the other hand—I'm ready to level him.

It's five minutes to midnight, when it'll officially be Tessa and Delaney's birthday, and I can only imagine what he plans on giving to her as a gift. I swear to fuck, if he tries kissing her, there isn't a person in this fucking room who could hold me back.

Delaney may not be mine, but she's certainly not for anyone here tonight. At least I'm man enough to admit I'm no good for her. Carter, however, will take everything he can and then throw back the broken pieces before moving onto the next one.

When I can't fucking take it anymore, I take out my phone and quickly type out a message I know I'll regret.

Knox: Meet me in your bedroom. Two minutes.

I watch as she pulls her phone from her bra. Reading my text, she pulls her bottom lip between her teeth. I turn around and head up the stairs.

It only takes two attempts to figure out which room is hers. The neatness of the room and pictures of her and Savannah are enough to tell me I'm in the right place. I gaze over everything, admiring the seafoam green walls that somehow suit her personality.

"Is everything okay?" she questions, pulling my attention toward the door.

I shrug. "That depends. You looked pretty cozy down there with Trayland."

"Carter? He's my friend."

"Friend, my ass. He was all over you."

Her brows furrow and her beautiful smoky eyes narrow. "So what if he was?"

"I don't like it. He's a scumbag. You should stay away from him."

She laughs, rolling her eyes. "That's really rich, Knox. Why don't you give me a list of people I'm allowed to be near? Maybe that will be easier to follow. Oh, wait, that's right. You don't have *any* say over who I can and can't talk to."

"Has he kissed you? I swear to God, Delaney, if he did anything to you,

I'll—"

"You'll what?" she shouts back. "Continue to be a coward? Act like nothing is going on between us? Fucking hell, at least Carter has the damn balls to go after what he wants. He doesn't act like a possessive asshole who doesn't want me but doesn't want anyone else to have me either."

I take a step forward. "That's what you think? That I don't *want* you?" She swallows and blinks up at me with her big green eyes, and I'm done for. "All I can think about is you. It fucking keeps me up at night. I lie awake, wondering if you're sound asleep, and who you're dreaming about." Reaching out, I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. "But I'm not the kind of guy a girl like you needs. You deserve better. Better than me, and sure as fuck better than Carter."

Using every ounce of self-restraint that I can manage, I move to leave the room. However, just as I reach the door, she speaks.

"He hasn't kissed me, yet." My head whips around so fast I almost get whiplash. "But he said he's going to at midnight."

"And you're going to let him?"

She shrugs halfheartedly. "It seems kind of pathetic, being eighteen and never having been kissed. He said he'd teach me how."

Her words hit me like a goddamn freight train. The idea of *Carter* getting one of her firsts is enough to make me throw caution to the wind. Shouts of "*Happy Birthday!*" echo from downstairs, and I glare as I walk toward her.

"He's too fucking late."

My hand wraps around the back of her neck, and I pull her into me, covering her mouth with my own. She gasps at the sudden movement but I don't miss a beat, using the opportunity to slip my tongue into her mouth and tangle it with hers. As her fingers lace into my hair and the taste of her floods my senses, I know I'm so fucking screwed. This girl is going to be the death of me.

DELANEY

I STAND ALONE IN MY ROOM, GIVING MYSELF A MINUTE TO CATCH MY BREATH before I go back downstairs. *Did that really just happen?* The tingling sensation on my lips tells me that it did, and I don't think there could have been a better way to ring in my birthday. His mouth on mine was better than anything I've dreamed in the past few weeks. He was tender and careful, while still taking everything he wanted from me. It was incredible.

When I feel like I find my footing, I make my way downstairs in a blissful haze. Savannah sees me first and throws her hands in the air.

"There you are! Happy Birthday!"

Everyone else starts shouting the same sentiment. I smile shyly, but it only grows when I spot Knox in the crowd. He tips his beer at me and winks, making the butterflies in my stomach multiply. Tessa looks between the two of us. I can tell the minute she puts the pieces together because her jaw drops. She pushes her way through the crowd and meets me on the staircase.

"What happened?"

I know the entire party's eyes are on us, so I need to be careful with what I say. "I'll tell you later."

"You better." She throws her arm around me and holds up the bottle of champagne in her other hand. "We're finally legal, bitches!"

A chuckle bubbles out of me while the house erupts in cheers. I may have no idea what's going on between Knox and me, but I like where it's heading.

AS TWO O'CLOCK ROLLS around, the party starts to wind down, but the people who matter stick around. I dance to the music with Savannah, ignoring the feeling of not one pair of eyes but two burning into me. Compared to Sav, being as she's a professional dancer and all, I probably look like I don't have an ounce of rhythm in my body, but it's my birthday and I don't care.

"Laney!" Tessa shouts from across the room. "We're going to play a game. Come on."

A game? What are we, twelve? Savannah and I share a confused look before going into the den. People are starting to gather around, sitting in a circle. There's probably only about fifteen or so of us left, but of course both Carter and Knox are among them. The second I notice the bottle in the middle, my eyes widen.

"Relax, Lane. It's truth or dare," Tessa whispers, noticing my alarm.

She takes a seat next to Easton and I follow Savannah over to Grayson. Of course, Carter ends up sitting beside me. I don't miss the way it causes Knox's scowl to deepen.

"All right," Tess starts. "Rules are simple. You spin the bottle and ask truth or dare to whoever it lands on. I'll go first." She spins the empty champagne bottle, landing on Paige. "Truth or dare?"

"Truth."

My sister grins. "Is it true you and Jace have been hooking up on the down-low?"

A bark of laughter comes from Jace as Paige's cheeks turn a deep red. Carter nudges his best friend, and Grayson is the first one to speak, his eyes on Jace.

"Oh, so your own secrets are sacred, but mine you spill to the damn world?"

He chuckles. "Hayworth, I don't know what world you live in, but shit with you and Savannah was *never* a secret." Then, he turns to Paige. "It's fine. Answer the question."

She smiles at him dreamily before looking back at her lap. "Yes."

A few more rounds go by. Paige dares Gage to shotgun a beer in under ten seconds. Gage gets Savannah to admit she and Brady Laurence were never actually dating. Savannah dares Knox to twerk—a rather entertaining ten seconds of my life.

As Knox spins the bottle, I mentally beg for it to land on anyone other

than me, but luck doesn't seem to me on my side. He smirks as the tip of the bottle stops, pointing so directly at me that I can't even try to argue a re-spin. *Fuck.*

"Truth or Dare, Bambi?"

"Bambi?" Savannah murmurs under her breath, looking at Grayson who mirrors her confused expression, but my eyes stay on Knox.

"Truth."

He bites his lip. "Out of every guy here, which one would you most like to hook up with?"

As soon as the question leaves his mouth, I know exactly what he's trying to do. The answer isn't something he doesn't already know. Given what happened in my bedroom, that much is obvious. No, he's trying to hurt Carter and get me to admit it's him in front of everyone.

"Dare."

Leaning back against the couch, he puts his hands behind his head. "Kiss Savannah for five seconds, and none of that peck shit. An actual kiss. You know how."

"You're such a pig," Savannah chastises him.

Jace's face lights up. "You know, Vaughn, somehow I hate you just a little bit less right now."

Kissing my best friend definitely wasn't on my agenda for the night, but it's a hell of a lot better than the alternative. Hurting Carter is *not* something I want to do, and answering that truth would be exactly that. Knox isn't getting to gloat tonight if I have any say in the matter.

"Come here, Sav."

She turns to face me and rolls her eyes, moving her hair out of the way. The two of us move in at the same time and our lips touch. They're smooth, softer than Knox's, but fire is nowhere to be found. Our mouths move against each other as Tessa counts to five, and when we pull away, we both break into hysterics. Knox, on the other hand, is looking at me with pupils the size of planets. I give him my sweetest *screw you* smile and go to spin the bottle.

Karma must be on my side after having to go from kissing no one to two people in one night, because the bottle lands right back on Knox. I giggle at the subtle "fuck" he murmurs under his breath.

"Revenge is the sweetest thing," I tell him. "Truth or dare."

"Dare."

"I dare you to kiss Carter."

Carter's jaw drops and he throws his hands in the air. "The fuck did I do to you?"

Tess and Savannah are laughing so hard they can barely breathe, but I keep my attention focused on Knox. I can see his confidence starting to waiver as he stares me down.

"I could just kiss *you* instead."

I hum. "That hardly seems like payback."

"So much more fun though."

It's tempting, really. I've wanted nothing but his lips back on mine since the moment he walked out of my room earlier. However, letting him kiss me right now would have the same outcome as answering that truth.

"Maybe for you." I shake my head, but can't keep the smile off my face. "Fine, I dare you to sit on Stone's lap for the next ten minutes."

He grins brightly and throws himself onto Stone, not caring if he hurts him in the process. "Hey, buddy."

Stone narrows his eyes at me. "Thanks for this, Delaney."

"You're so welcome."

THE BIGGEST DOWNSIDE TO throwing a massive party is having to clean it up the next day. Tessa suggested having the maids come in for the day and do it for us, but then there would be a huge possibility our parents would find out—and that's not a risk I'm willing to take.

"Seriously, there should be something illegal about cleaning with a hangover *this* bad," Tess complains.

I laugh, tossing more of the empty cups into the garbage bag. "I wouldn't know anything about that. One of the benefits to not drinking is no killer headache in the morning."

"Yuck. That's such a buzz kill." She picks up her phone and brings it to her ear.

"Who are you calling?"

"Easton. If I have to clean this shit on my birthday, he's going to come help me."

A half hour later, not only do we have Easton helping, but he brought along Zayn, Stone, and Gage. I managed to get Savannah over as well, but

she's not very useful. Even the guys start doing more harm than good when they start using the garbage can for basketball tricks instead of cleaning.

"Seriously? You can't shoot for shit," Tessa ridicules. "The only one of you who can throw a ball is Knox."

I try not to let my disappointment at him not being here show. "Speaking of, where is he anyway?"

"He had a thing," Zayn answers.

"A thing?"

He nods. "None of us know what it is. He didn't say, but he left my house before eight this morning."

Strange. Being as they didn't even leave here until after three in the morning, it must have been important for him to wake up that early for it. I take out my phone and send him a quick text.

Delaney: Zayn said you had a thing, and that's why you're not here helping us clean. I think you're just good at making excuses. 😏 😊

Once I hit send, I go back to cleaning, ignoring the looks Savannah is giving me as I do. The problem with knowing each other as long as we have is she can read me just as well as Tessa. I'm clearly not getting out of this one.

"What's up with your sudden interest in Knox?" she questions.

"No sudden interest. I was just curious where he was."

"Delaney."

I groan, throwing my head back and taking a deep breath. "Okay, maybe there's an interest."

"Delaney!" she repeats, this time with more urgency.

"No, you don't get to do that." I point my finger at her. "I didn't judge you when you let Grayson treat you like a doormat. Or when you automatically assumed I'd think differently of you for being poor and stopped talking to me because of it. So, you don't get to judge me for this."

She sighs and runs her fingers through her hair. "Okay, fair enough, but I just don't want to see you get hurt. I don't think there has been a single girl he's hooked up with that he *hasn't* fucked over."

"The same can be said for Carter, and yet you want me to give him a shot."

"Because Carter knows I'd kick his ass if he ever hurt you. Knox doesn't

care about anyone but himself.”

I know she’s only trying to protect me, but I can’t bring myself to believe what she’s saying. There’s something hidden deep behind those blue eyes of his—some reason why he does his best to keep out the world. Savannah can think he does it by choice if she wants, but I’m going to figure him out.

TWO DAYS PASS, AND it’s been total radio silence. I’ve tried texting Knox a few times, but my messages go unanswered. By the time school gets out on Monday, I’m seething. Who does he think he is, kissing me on my birthday and then disappearing without a trace? Even Tessa said he hasn’t been around since Friday night.

“Laney,” Carter calls, jogging up to me as I’m leaving.

“Oh, hey, Carter. What’s up?”

He rubs the back of his neck—a telltale sign that he’s either nervous or uncomfortable. “Is there something going on between you and Knox Vaughn?”

It’s a loaded question. If someone asked me this on my birthday, my answer may have been different, but right now, I’m not so sure.

“No, why?”

“You just seemed a little...flirty...at your party.”

“Ah, that.” I roll my eyes. “Nope, nothing going on between us.”

The way his mood brightens is evident. “Well, in that case, can I take you out this weekend?”

“Like on a date?”

“Uh, yeah. I mean, unless you don’t want it to be.”

It’s weird, seeing Carter so uncomfortable like this. Normally he has all the confidence in the world, but here he is, practically mumbling like a twelve-year-old talking to his first crush.

“Bambi!” A familiar voice calls, and my head whips around to find Knox in a car next to us. He narrows his eyes on Carter before focusing back on me. “Get in.”

Despite not seeing him in days, my heart still races at the sight of him. He’s dressed in a snug black T-shirt, showcasing his muscles and all the tattoos that cover his arms. I look from him to Carter and back again.

“Why should I?”

He groans. “Don’t be a pain in the ass. Just get in the car.”

“Don’t fucking talk to her that way,” Carter snaps, but that only fires Knox up more.

Jumping out of the car, he comes around the back and over toward us. “Why don’t you mind your damn business?”

“Since when is she your business?”

Knox goes to take a step forward, but I instantly step in the way. “Okay, stop.” I put my hands on his chest but his eyes stay on Carter. “Stop. I’ll come with you.”

Reluctantly, he steps away and gets back in the driver’s seat. I smile sadly at Carter.

“I’ll let you know about this weekend.”

He rolls his eyes but nods. “All right. Be careful with him.”

I open the passenger side and get in. “Don’t worry. He won’t hurt me.”

As soon as I shut the door, Knox presses the gas pedal to the floor and the car speeds down the street. I pull the seatbelt across my body and buckle it in. Once I’m done, I look over at him. He’s completely focused on the road, but I can see the tension in his jaw.

“Are you going to tell me where you’ve been the last couple days? Or why you couldn’t so much as answer my text?”

He ignores my questions completely. “Were you going to say yes?”

“Huh?”

“To Carter,” he clarifies, his hand tightening around the steering wheel. “Are you going to go out with him?”

“I don’t know. Is there a reason I shouldn’t?”

“You’re damn right there is.”

“And what’s that?”

“Me.”

I chuckle dryly. “You? The you that vanishes without a trace and then comes back insisting you get a say in what I do when you’re not around? You’re right. That sounds totally reasonable.”

The rest of the drive is quiet as he pulls up to a place I’ve never been before, but the view is incredible. It overlooks the whole town and the city beyond it. I look around, taking it all in, when he finally exhales.

“I was in the hospital.”

My eyes widen as I whip my head toward him. “You were *what*? Are you

okay? Why didn't you tell anyone?"

"That. That's exactly why. I didn't want anyone to worry."

"What happened?"

He leans back against the headrest. "I was in a fight. I'm fine. Just a few bruised ribs and a concussion."

"A fight?" He nods, and I sigh in disapproval. "You really need a better way to take out your frustrations."

"I have one—jerking off."

"Oh my God! Don't tell me that."

Chuckling, he bounces his eyebrows. "What, you mean to tell me you don't rub one out every once in a while?"

I bury my face in my hands. "Rub one...what? No. We are *not* having this conversation."

"Wait." He reaches over and places his hand on my thigh. "You mean you've never—" I drop my hands and shake my head. "How do you get off?"

"I-I don't. I mean, I haven't."

Embarrassed, I look out at the view and fiddle with my hands. Meanwhile, Knox retreats into his own seat. He's quiet for a second, making me think I completely blew it with my honesty, but then he snickers.

"You're just full of surprises, aren't you Bambi?"

I groan, grabbing the lighter from the cup holder and throwing it at him. "Shut up. I'm supposed to be mad at you."

"Okay, that's fair, but can you be mad at me and still let me kiss you? Because it's all I've fucking thought about since Friday night."

I shouldn't let him. What kind of message would it be sending if I did? That he can go days without talking to me and still get what he wants? Then again, if he really was in the hospital, I'm just relieved he's okay. And who am I kidding? It's all I've thought about too.

"Yeah," I breathe, and it only takes a second before he puts his hand on my cheek and presses his lips to mine.

This kiss isn't like the first one. It's patient and gentle, something I didn't think was in his repertoire. His thumb gently caresses my face as his mouth moves against my own. I follow his lead and open my mouth to allow his tongue inside. He tastes like mint and cigarettes, and somehow, I'm instantly addicted to it.

"Do you trust me?" he murmurs, not breaking the kiss.

I snort. "Not even a little."

A chuckle sounds from deep in his throat. "Let me make it up to you."

The warmth from his hand leaves my face, skimming down my arm, to my stomach, to my thigh, and finally, under my uniform skirt. He goes slow and gives me every opportunity to stop him, but for some reason, I don't. Ever since the first time I dreamed of him, a pressure has been building. Friday night only intensified it. And now? I want nothing more than for him to fix it.

His fingers brush against my sex as he adds just enough pressure for me to feel him through my panties. My legs spread on instinct to give him better access. As he rubs circles against my clit, my heart pounds inside of my chest. I let out a small, breathy moan, only to muffle it by biting my lip.

"Don't," he murmurs. "I want to hear you."

My panting gets heavier as he starts to move faster, and a moan slips from my mouth without my permission.

"That's it, baby. Let go for me."

I don't know if it's the sound of his voice, the way the term of endearment sounded coming from his lips, or the magic of his fingers, but I explode, ripping apart at the seams. An intense feeling takes over my entire body, and I swear I see stars. Knox doesn't stop, continuing to rub me through it until I come down from my high. By the time that I open my eyes again, everything feels lighter.

"That... was incredible."

He smiles in a way that could melt my heart if I let it. It's an image I'd like to burn into my mind and save for eternity. He looks so proud of himself, yet so enamored by me. There is a glimmer in his eyes that threatens to steal every piece of me, as if I wouldn't hand it over willingly.

Without a doubt in my mind, I know one thing for sure—Knox Vaughn is going to change my life. I just hope it's for the better.

KNOX

I SIT IN THE PASSENGER SEAT WHILE GRAYSON FLIES DOWN THE ROAD. HE'S completely erratic, though I can't say I blame him. I just hope he knows what he's doing.

"All right. Why don't you just calm down a little before you kill us both?"

"Calm down?" he barks incredulously. "He beat her so bad it ruptured her fucking spleen! He would have murdered her if I hadn't stopped him, and you want me to calm down?"

Drifting around corners, I grip the handle on the ceiling of the car. I know the more I say, the angrier he'll get. Whatever mission he's on, there is nothing that will deter him from it. Hopefully, he's thinking with a clear head.

As we pull up behind the rusted Buick, my eyes land on a shadow in the distance. There's no denying it's Craig Montgomery. I've seen his drunk ass stumble out of his house so many times in the years, I'd know that silhouette anywhere.

"You were right, he's fucking here." Grayson gets out of the car and slams the door behind him. "Aye, asshole! You and I need to talk."

I wake in a panic, taking a deep breath and wincing at the tenderness in my ribs. My eyes search around for Hayworth, knowing I need to stop him, but no one is there. It was just a nightmare—a sick, reoccurring nightmare, going entirely off memory.

I grab one of the pain pills the doctor prescribed from my nightstand and swallow it down with some water. The dull ache in my head and my chest are something I'm practically used to by now, but I'd rather not feel it at all.

My first fight last Saturday night didn't exactly go according to plan. I wasn't nearly as ready as I should have been, and I damn near lost. If it hadn't been for the knockout punch I managed to throw with the last burst of energy I had, I probably would have.

After it was over and Cal got done counting his cut of the money, Grayson brought me over to North Haven Medical. We had to make a dumb-ass excuse—something about fucking around when I shouldn't have been and falling off a roof. I don't think they bought it, but they didn't ask any further questions.

The CT scan showed I had a mild concussion and further tests determined my ribs were bruised as well, making the doctor insist on keeping me for at least 48 hours for observation. By the time that I got out of there, I had only one thing on my mind. *Delaney fucking Callahan.*

I've never been one to think about a girl when I'm not getting in her pants, but Bambi is something else. She's managed to burrow her way deep inside my mind and won't go away no matter how hard I try to focus on something else. I don't know how else to explain it. It's like the darkness in me is drawn to the light in her.

WHEN I GET TO school on Tuesday, my friends are all exactly where I'd expect to find them. Zayn does a double-take when I approach, making sure he's seeing me correctly. As if he can read my mind, he takes out his pack of cigarettes and tosses them to me.

"Where the fuck have you been?"

I shrug, playing it off. "Had some shit to do."

"Didn't stop you from taking my car yesterday, though, prick," Stone gripes. "I had to make Easton drive me, with Tessa. It was like riding home in a porn flick. And don't think I didn't notice you picking up Delaney."

"Oh, now it all makes sense," Z laughs. "So much for no private school pussy."

"Yeah, yeah. Fuck off."

The memory of yesterday plays in my head, making me want nothing more than to relive those few hours. After we hooked up in Stone's car, she came with me back to my house. Being as my mom works evenings at the diner right outside town, we had the whole place to ourselves.

"Shit," Stone whines. "Does that mean I lost the damn bet?"

I smirk, taking out my phone and flipping to the picture I took last night. Delaney's hair is a mess and her eyes are closed, but she still looks fucking sinful with my cock in her mouth. She was so nervous to do it, and I almost didn't let her, but when she asked me to teach her how, there was no way I could resist. Still, seeing this picture now and knowing I'm the only one who has seen her this way—no money in the world is worth sharing this shit.

I click the screen to my phone off and slip it back in my pocket. "You did, but there is no way in hell I'm showing you. I'll bring your money tomorrow."

"Fuck, yeah!" He cheers.

Stone goes back to playing hacky sack with Gage and Easton while Zayn eyes me intently. I light the cigarette clamped between my lips and hand him back his lighter, inhaling and holding it in.

"So, are you two a thing now? Has someone actually managed to tame *the* Knox Vaughn?"

I let out the smoke, chuckling at how intense he's making it sound. "Nah. We're just having some fun. At the end of the year, she'll fuck off to whatever Ivy League school she's intended for, and I'll be left here."

The skeptical look on his face tells me he doesn't fully believe the shit coming out of my mouth, but he lets it go for now. Meanwhile, I try not to let the heaviness of the truth drag me under. *She's just another pretty face.*

THE UNDERGROUND IS PACKED for being a Thursday night. You'd think these fights would only take place on the weekends, but they happen every damn night. There always happens to be a couple heated motherfuckers who need an outlet for their anger.

Despite my current injuries, Cal has me on the schedule tonight. Grayson's, however, isn't until this weekend. His are less nerve-racking, being as they have an end that doesn't require someone being unconscious at

a minimum, but it's still a fight. The only thing I can say about Pretty Boy is that he can hold his own. Unfortunately, I've seen that first hand.

"There's my boys!" Cal's voice booms through the office that has windows on each side looking over both rings. "How are we doing tonight? Vaughn, you ready to go after last weekend?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. It's just a couple minor injuries."

"Good, good." He turns his attention to Grayson. "And how about you? You're going to be there to support our boy, right?"

Grayson nods. "Yes, sir. Jackson is meeting us down in the training room in a few minutes so we can make sure he's in good shape."

"Perfect. I have a lot of money riding on tonight. Don't let me down."

Of course, it's always about the money with him. Fuck the fact that I could get myself killed out there. The only person Cal ever cares about is himself; that much is clear. It's why he essentially rigs these fights to go in his favor, paying for his fighters' training to make sure they're the best they can be. The scheme he's running is probably considered some type of fraud, but none of this is legal anyway. No honor among thieves, and all that.

THE CHEERS OF THE crowd are practically deafening as the two guys in the ring beat the everliving shit out of each other. It's only the standard level, since there is only one Death Trap fight every few days, but they're going just as hard. By the time the final bell sounds, I'm pretty sure the one guy has lost at least two of his teeth—he's gushing blood like a fountain.

There's a half-hour intermission between this fight and mine, and the more I wait, the more nervous I become. Jackson spent twenty minutes stretching me out and warming me up, so I know I'm ready. I just don't know much about the guy I'm up against. Apparently, he's a scrawny little shit who has no business here, but sometimes it's the smaller guys who turn out to be the scrappiest.

As the time gets closer, they start to announce the fighters. I'm standing on the side with Grayson, getting fired up and in the zone, when an arrogant voice I'd recognize anywhere meets my ears.

"Well, well, well. Look who it is."

I turn around to find Carter, sizing me up like he's ready to replace my

opponent if only someone will tag him in. Grayson's eyes widen when he sees him.

"What are you doing here?"

I don't wait for the response. "What the fuck do you want, Trayland?"

"I *want* you to stay away from Delaney Callahan," he sneers.

"Sorry, bud. No can do. You're going to have to talk to Laney about that one."

He comes closer, getting in my face until we're only centimeters apart. "No, see, I don't think I do, because I'm telling you. Stay *the fuck* away from her."

I can faintly hear my name being announced over the loudspeaker, but my focus remains on the fucker in front of me. "Are you going to stop me, shithead?"

"Okay, okay." Grayson forces himself in between us, pushing Carter back. "You need to get the hell out of here!"

"I mean it, Vaughn! I want you nowhere near her."

Who the fuck does he think he is, telling me what I can do? I take a step toward him, fuming, but Grayson instantly holds me back with a hand on my chest.

"Now's not the fucking time, man. You need to get in the ring." I keep my gaze locked on Carter as he glares back at me. "Knox! Get the fuck in the ring!"

Finally, Grayson's words get through to me, and I walk through the crowd and duck inside the ropes. Gray waits for Carter to leave and then comes to stand by the ring. The referee explains the rules, which are basically first one to go unconscious loses, and that the fight doesn't end until that happens.

I look across the ring and take in my opponent. Cal was right—he *is* a scrawny thing, but that probably means he's fast. Still, now that Carter Trayland's got me wound up, I'm not worried at all.

The bell sounds, starting the match, and the two of us dance in circles. He throws a couple of punches that I easily dodge before finally swinging. My fist connects with his face harshly, only for me to swing again—into his stomach this time. As my mind pictures Delaney with Carter, I start pounding relentlessly. Other than a few hits to my chest, this kid doesn't stand a chance. I don't even realize he's knocked out until the ref and Grayson pull me off him.

Thankfully, the guy still has a pulse, and as the makeshift medics carry him out of the ring, I'm announced the winner. The crowd goes wild, with some people chanting my name like a prayer. I look up at the office and see Cal looking down at me. He nods in approval, and I relax. I've made it through another fight.

GRAYSON PULLS UP TO my house and I climb out of the car, thanking him as I shut the door behind me. When I go to step up onto my porch, however, I find someone sitting there that I haven't seen in years.

"Brett?"

He stands up and comes toward me. "Hey, Knox."

"Long time no see, man. What's up?" I give him a bro-hug but don't mask the confusion from my face.

"I didn't want to come here, but I need your help. It's about Hailey."

DELANEY

IF THERE WAS A KING OF PLAYING HOT AND COLD, SOMEONE TO WIN THE game, it would be Knox. One minute he's texting me constantly and the next—nothing. I thought I would see him this weekend, but he's been nowhere to be found. The texts I send either go completely unanswered or get some half-assed response. It's infuriating.

Maybe if I had some idea where his mind is at, I wouldn't be so paranoid. Everything seemed like it was going fine, until it wasn't. We were talking all the time, hanging out and having fun whenever we got a minute alone. Now, it's like we're right back to where we started.

"Hey, Lane?" Tessa comes into my room unannounced, as usual. "Have you seen my sunglasses? I can't find them anywhere."

I look up from my phone for a second and roll my eyes as soon as I see her. "They're on your head."

"Seriously?" She reaches up and finds them. "My God, I'm losing my mind." When I don't take the opportunity to make fun of her, she comes to sit beside me. "What's got you all dull and gloomy?"

"Knox. I'm not sure what's going on. He goes from burning hot to ice cold without any notice or reasoning at all. I don't get it."

Tess sighs, looking like she's hiding something. "I don't know, babes. Maybe he got what he wanted and now he's not interested anymore."

"Is that really what you think?" I'd be lying if I said the idea didn't hurt.

"It wouldn't be the first time. Don't get me wrong, I'll punch him in the face for it if that's the case, but it's Knox. It wouldn't surprise me with him." She pats my bed twice before standing back up. "If you want, come with me to Zayn's party this weekend. You can get down to the bottom of it."

I give her the best smile I can manage. “Thanks. I’ll let you know.”

THE WEEK IS FILLED with so many different emotions, ranging from *I’m so mad* to *I genuinely don’t care*. Every time I feel confident and strong, I tell myself that I’m going to get over it and move on. Maybe even take Carter up on his invitation to take me out. However, that mood eventually ends, and I find myself texting him, hoping to get more than a one-word answer out of him. It always ends the same—full of disappointment.

By the time Thursday rolls around, I’m tired of his game. Clearly trying to talk to him through text isn’t going to work, so my only option to find out what’s going on is to just confront him. The idea alone is anxiety inducing, but I know it needs to be done.

I say goodbye to Savannah and Grayson before heading outside. I march out the door and down the steps, determined to get answers, but the sight of a certain someone stops me in my tracks and practically stabs me in the chest.

Knox is in front of North Haven High, but he isn’t alone. He’s with some blonde-haired girl who’s standing a little too close to be just friends. The two of them are talking, and the girl smiles brightly as she laughs. Thinking Tessa could be right is painful enough, but seeing this—it’s a total different level of heartache.

“Wow,” Carter whispers, appearing next to me from out of nowhere. “That didn’t take him long at all.”

My brows furrow as I squint at Carter quickly and then look back at Knox. “What? Do you know who she is?”

He nods. “That’s Hailey, Vaughn’s ex-girlfriend.”

Knox has an ex-girlfriend? I shouldn’t be surprised. She’s gorgeous, and clearly far more experienced than me. I was stupid to think I was ever more than a novelty to him.

“I didn’t know he dated anyone.”

“Yeah. They’ve been on and off since freshman year. They’re basically end game. It’s just a matter of when they decide to stop screwing each other over and accept it.”

As if he can feel me watching him, Knox glances over, and our eyes meet. He freezes for a moment, only to give me a sad smile and look away.

It's then that I know I've seen enough. I need to leave before I let him—or Carter—see me upset. Neither of them can see me cry.

FRIDAY IS THE FIRST day where I don't send a single text message to Knox. A part of me had hoped he'd be bothered by the silence and reach out, but of course, that was just wishful thinking. My phone stays quiet except for texts from Savannah about New York. She left yesterday to visit Juilliard for the weekend, since she'll be going to school there in the fall. I'm happy for her, but I don't know what I'm going to do without my best friend.

By the time the sun sets, I can't sit still anymore. He doesn't get to just leave me waiting in limbo, without so much as a goodbye. And he sure as hell doesn't get to keep me from living my life simply because he doesn't want to be in it anymore. No. I'm done tiptoeing around it all.

I get up from my bed and go over to Tessa's door, knocking on it harshly. It swings open and she looks at me, her makeup half done, as if I've lost my mind.

"Don't leave without me. I'm coming with you."

The words come out of my mouth with such determination that my sister does nothing but smile. Enough is enough. Goody Two-Shoes has left the building.

DEALING WITH THE CHAOS at Zayn's parties is kind of like riding a bike—you get better with practice and time. The amount of people doing drugs or showing a little too much PDA doesn't even bother me anymore. As long as someone doesn't try pulling me into a threesome again, I'm good.

"Oh, hey, Delaney," Stone greets me, sharing a look with Zayn and Gage. "We didn't think you'd be here tonight."

Tessa throws her arm around my shoulder and pulls me close. "She needed a night to relax, and what better place than this?"

Zayn shoots me a smile that instantly has me feeling more welcome. "There isn't one. Don't worry, we'll get you to let loose."

Easton goes to get Tessa a beer and comes back with a bottle of water for

me. I thank him before taking a sip, allowing the cold liquid to help calm me down. Maybe I wasn't exactly ready for this, knowing the potential to see him is high, but there's no backing down now. Hell, it's not even guaranteed he'll be here tonight. He may be too busy with his *girlfriend*. Even thinking it puts a heavy feeling in my stomach.

I stay close to Tess and laugh as Gage and Stone have a contest to see who can chug six beers the fastest—first one to build a tower with the empty cups wins. Zayn looks behind me and rolls his eyes with an attitude I've never really seen on him. He's normally so calm, cool, and collected. However, when I turn around, I see why.

Knox is standing there with the girl that was with him yesterday. They're having what looks like a heated conversation. She's no longer sporting that carefree smile from the last time I saw her, and Knox looks ready to snap.

As she storms away, Knox pulls on his hair and starts to walk toward us. I divert my eyes quickly, not being nearly ready to see him yet but knowing I don't have much choice.

"I need a fucking beer," he declares.

Stone chuckles. "What's wrong? Trouble in paradise?"

"Fuck you. It isn't like that and you know it."

"Dude, you've been so MIA lately, we don't know anything," Gage argues.

Knox scoffs and shakes his head, going behind the counter to get a drink. When he turns around, his eyes meet mine for the first time and widen.

"Delaney," he breathes. "I didn't see you there."

I smile weakly. "Yeah, well, it seems you've been a little...preoccupied."

He looks confused for a moment before he realizes what I'm referring to. However, as he's about to answer me, something else grabs his attention. "You've got to be fucking kidding me."

Without another word, he storms over to the door, where Hailey is talking to some guy, and grabs her by the wrist. She yells something in his face then yanks away and stomps up the stairs. Knox throws his head back exasperatedly before following her.

"They seem...happy," I quip sarcastically.

Zayn hums, showing his annoyance. "I don't know what the fuck he's doing. They have a long, screwed-up history, but something is different this time. He hasn't talked to me about it, though, so I'm just as in the dark as you are."

They all keep their eyes on me, the sympathetic looks doing nothing for my mood. Maybe coming here tonight wasn't such a good idea after all. My options are simple—stay and subject myself to seeing Knox and Hailey all night, or swallow my pride and leave. For the sake of my sanity and my heart, I choose the latter.

"I'm sorry, Tess. I'm going to head home."

She frowns. "Are you sure? I'm sorry. I thought it would be a good idea. I didn't think *she* would be here."

"It's all right. I'm just going to grab my keys. Where did you put them?"

"Zayn's room."

Great, upstairs. I take a deep breath. *Just get the keys and leave.* He's probably not even in Z's room—more like a guest room or something, doing God knows what. I slowly creep up the stairs, making sure the coast is clear, then duck into the bedroom to get my key and purse. Once I go to leave, however, I walk right into a warzone.

"Hailey, fucking stop!"

"No!" she shouts back. "Just leave me alone and let me live my damn life!"

She goes into the bathroom and slams the door shut in his face. I try to slip away undetected, but luck isn't on my side, and my keys slip out of my hand and clatter onto the hardwood floor. Knox turns at the sound of the noise.

"Laney?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt. I'm just getting my things."

"You're leaving? Didn't you just get here?" He actually looks hurt by the idea.

I swallow down the lump in my throat and square my shoulders. "Don't do that. Don't act like you care."

His brows furrow. "What makes you think that I don't?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe the fact that one minute, we were fine, and the next, you all but vanished from my life—and no, your half-assed replies don't count." I take a step back. "It's cool. I see why you did it, and you two have a history together. I get it. I just have no interest in being your side piece."

I go to walk away when he rushes toward me and grabs my hand. "Wait, stop. It's not what you think." I give him a look that shows exactly how over this whole situation I am, but I don't pull away, so he continues. "We have a

history, yes, but that's not what this is. Her brother asked for my help. She's gotten herself involved with some heavy drugs. When her parents found out and tried to step in, she ran away and started living at a homeless shelter. I'm just trying to get her to go home."

It's a sad story, and a part of me can even admire his need to help, but it's not enough. "No. I'm sorry, but no. You spent the last week doing everything but completely ignoring me, with no explanation at all."

"I'm explaining, *now*."

I shrug. "Too little, too late. Whatever was going on between us, it's not anymore. Only having me around or letting me in when it's convenient for you doesn't work for me."

He catches me off guard by spinning us around and pinning me to the wall, his face only centimeters from mine. "You're so wrong you don't even know which way is right, but you walked straight into the lion's den, Bambi. No way I'm letting you turn back around now. You're playing my game now."

His lips meet mine in a bruising kiss. All his frustration, his passion, his desperate need to keep me—I can feel it all, and my resolve doesn't stand a chance. Every bit of resistance I had toward him evaporates with him against me, kissing me like this. He grips my waist and lifts me with ease, allowing me to wrap my legs around his hips. Neither one of us pulls away as he walks us into a bedroom and kicks the door shut behind him.

Carrying me to the bed, he lays me down and hovers over me. His hands roam my entire body as I grip at his shirt. When he pulls it over his head, I finally get to take in all his tattoos. The ones on his arms I've seen, but the two sparrows on his chest have always been hidden, tucked away from view. I want to trace them all and commit each one to memory.

He looks down at me with such patience and care. "Do you trust me?"

The last time he asked me that, he ended up giving me my first orgasm—and you'll never hear me complaining about that. However, I'm not going to lie to him.

"Not so much."

Smiling, he slowly inches my shirt up until it's at my chest. I lift slightly, and he pulls it over my head like I'm fine china. Fragile. Delicate. Like if he moves too quickly, I'll shatter. To be honest, I might.

"Do you trust me enough?" He questions, fingers skirting along the waistband of my jeans.

It's not a good idea, giving that part of myself to him. He's trouble and already has the power to destroy me. Giving him all of me will seal my fate to his. I've read enough romance novels to know that it's a risky move, but my head is fighting against my heart and hormones.

As my heart wins the war, I pull him down and connect our lips once again. I blindly undo his pants then drag my fingernails up his back. He undresses me slowly until I'm left lying on the bed, completely bare. His eyes rake over my entire body, taking his time, as if he wants to savor this. Savor me.

"How could someone as flawless as you want someone like me?"

I reach up, placing my hand on his cheek. "You're far better than you give yourself credit for."

"I'm not, Bambi. I'm a train wreck. A bomb waiting to explode and wreak havoc on everyone and everything around me."

"Then do it, but take me with you."

His body covers mine as he kisses me with such tenderness it takes my breath away. Who knew someone so stone cold could be so warm and gentle? He slides his hand down and starts to rub me, the same way he did in the car. I moan quietly into his mouth, only for him to swallow it down. When I arch my hips up, he stops, and I whimper from the loss of friction.

He snickers quietly. "Don't worry, baby. We're just getting started."

Reaching over into the nightstand, he pulls out a condom and places it on the bed next to us. As if he can sense the fear coursing through me, he presses a chaste kiss to my lips then looks me straight in the eyes.

"You can stop me if you want. The one thing you can't do is walk out that door with the intention to cut me out of your life, because I swear to God, Delaney, I'll fight you every damn step of the way. It's not an option."

I'm stunned into silence. Honestly, I know that isn't an option for me either, but I was going to make it one if I had to. Now, it's the furthest thing from my mind.

Moving down my body, placing light kisses against my skin on the way, he finally arrives at his destination. His gaze stays entirely on me, and as his tongue licks one stripe up my clit, my entire body tenses. With one hand on my stomach, holding me in place, he reaches up with the other and laces his fingers with my own.

"You taste like fucking heaven." He does it again. "Innocent, and pure, and mine."

As his mouth works its magic, he brings his thumb down and puts pressure on my clit, bringing the level of pleasure that courses through my body to an all-time high.

“Knox,” I pant.

“Fuck, my name sounds so good coming from your mouth right now.”

He presses his face into my folds, going harder than he was before—as if he can’t get enough. Even if I wanted to, I can’t hold back. I scream his name as the orgasm rips through my body with enough force to break me.

Knox comes back up to kiss my neck, sucking a mark into my collarbone. He grabs the condom and rips it open before rolling it onto his hard cock. Then, he lines himself up at my entrance.

He pushes in slowly, and I wince in pain as I stretch around him. His hand squeezes my own, and his head lolls back in pleasure. He bites his lip so hard it nearly draws blood. As he reaches that little wall of resistance, I take a deep breath.

“You’re mine,” he tells me. “Not Carter’s. Not anyone’s. *Fucking mine.*” With one decisive thrust, he breaks through and claims me completely. The sting has me wrapping my arms and legs around him, tense but unwilling to let go. “And now, this pussy is mine, too.”

“Yours,” I repeat, a mindless mess of nerves and sexual frustration.

“Good girl.”

He picks up rhythm, giving me no time to adjust, but soon, I’m moaning his name and clenching around him. His tongue tangles with my own, the taste of myself still lingering.

“You take my cock so well. It’s like you were fucking made for me.”

His words push me over the edge, and my whole body convulses in nothing but pure ecstasy. Riding it out in a blissed-out haze, my name flows off Knox’s tongue like a prayer as he empties everything he’s got into the condom.

He brushes the strand of hair from my face and kisses me with a look in his eyes that calms every fear I have of him ditching me again after this.

“You good?”

I hum, not trusting my voice to say anything at all. Knox releases a breathy laugh. He pulls out of me gently and gets rid of the condom before getting back in bed, maneuvering me so my head rests on his chest. His lips press a kiss into my hair as he rubs soothing circles against my skin.

As I lie here, listening to the sound of his heartbeat mix with my own, one

thing is clear—not even a hero can save me now.

KNOX

I'VE NEVER NEEDED ANYONE IN MY LIFE. GROWING UP WITH NO FATHER AND A mother who was rarely there, I learned at an early age how to be alone—and I was okay with that, until tonight. Hearing the words come out of Delaney's mouth, ending things with us before they ever really got started, was a shock to my system. Girls have come in and out of my life for years, usually by my own doing, but the second she wanted to leave, it was like someone rammed a knife straight into my chest.

I sit at the top of the bed, leaning against the headboard and watching her sleep soundly next to me. The peaceful look on her face, the way her hair splays out across the pillow, the soft breaths coming from her perfect lips—it's all things I could get lost in, and that scares the fucking shit out of me.

It's dangerous, letting her in. The fact that she and I can never be more than some senior year fling is a harsh truth that I'm not ready to face. However, if it's a choice between having her for a few months or not having her at all—the answer is simple. It's almost a guarantee that at least one of us will come out of this broken into more pieces than can be put back together, but I'm a selfish son of a bitch. If she's not going anywhere, neither am I.

THE BRIGHTNESS OF THE morning starts to fill the room, making it easier for me to see what I'm doing. I drag the pencil across the sketchpad in a skillful and practiced manner, making sure to capture the softness of Delaney's skin. The last thing I wanted was to have a nightmare with her

asleep next to me, so I opted to not sleep at all. It's not like it was the first time. Insomnia is an unwelcome yet almost constant guest in my world.

As Laney begins to stir, I close the sketchpad and slip it inside the drawer of the nightstand. I've stayed in this room so many times over the years, it's practically my own.

"Good morning," she whispers.

I lie back down and turn on my side to face her. "Sleep well?"

She nods. "I'm sorry I got mad at you. I should have given you a chance to explain."

"No," I retort. "I'm sorry. Hailey is like a black hole, and I guess after her brother asked for my help, I just got sucked back in. She's manipulative as hell and knows exactly how to get her way."

"Were you ever in love with her?"

The question itself surprises me, but more so is the tone of her voice when she asks it—like she's genuinely terrified of the answer.

I shake my head. "No, it was never that serious. We just had a lot in common and have known each other for a long time. Somehow, along the way, things got complicated."

I'm not even sure why I'm telling her this. If anyone else had asked me about mine and Hailey's screwed-up past, I probably would have told them to go fuck themselves. But once again, there goes Delaney—breaking through my walls and making me question everything.

"Enough about her. Get dressed," I softly demand. "I've spent too long without you this past week, and I'm not ready to let you go just yet."

A wide grin stretches across her face, and she does exactly as I ask. It isn't until we get downstairs that we run right into Tessa and Easton. I had hoped they'd still be asleep, but apparently not.

"Laney?" she asks, confused. "I thought you went home last night." Just then, her eyes land on me. "Oh my God."

"Tess," Delaney warns. "We'll talk about this later. Please."

She doesn't want to drop the topic, that much is written clear across her face, but to both my and Delaney's relief, she does—for now, anyway. I grab our jackets from the closet and help her slip hers on.

"All right, shitheads. I'm leaving. I'll see you fuckers later."

Zayn holds up one finger as he finishes chugging his morning beer. "Don't forget the game tonight."

"Game?" Tessa questions. "Didn't the season end over a month ago?"

I groan and roll my eyes. “Yes, but your douchebag of a football captain is being a sore loser. He’s basically demanded an impromptu face-off. North Haven High versus Haven Grace Prep. No refs. No rules. Just an all-out war.”

“Something tells me this is less about football and more about jealousy.” Tess eyes her sister as she waits for her to put the pieces together.

“I don’t know why you all seem to think he has this massive thing for me,” Delaney grumbles. “He doesn’t. I’m just a conquest to him. The one thing he wants that isn’t being handed to him.”

“Damn right it’s not.” I grab her arm and pull her into me. “But I really don’t think that’s all it is. He’s...different about you. Territorial, even.”

She rolls her eyes. “Well, it doesn’t matter. He’s just a friend, and I’m not interested in anything more.”

Her words calm me down more than they should, and Zayn notices as my whole body relaxes. He smirks, giving me a knowing look, and if I don’t get Delaney out of here within the next minute, I’m going to regret it.

As we walk out the door, I notice the beautiful Lamborghini sitting in the driveway. A part of me is shocked she brought it here. This isn’t exactly the nicest part of town. Then again, her family seems to have enough money to afford the best insurance coverage possible.

“Hey,” she says, getting my attention. The second I turn to face her, she tosses her keys to me. “Just don’t crash it.”

My jaw drops as I realize I’m about to drive a car that’s worth more than my life. “Woman, you have lost your everloving mind.”

As she turns back to smile at me, with the sun hitting her face just right, I’m in awe of her beauty. She’s glowing—radiating happiness from every pore—and fuck if it’s not contagious. I could spend all day memorizing the colors in her eyes and not have a single damn complaint.

I slip into the driver’s seat, admiring the interior from this side of the car. I’m practically drooling at how gorgeous it is. The only thing in the world that even begins to compare is the girl sitting next to me.

The engine roars to life, and I can already feel the power in it. Delaney watches me as I carefully back out of the driveway. Once I’m on the road, I press on the gas pedal, and the car lurches forward. My eyes widen and I yank my foot off the gas.

“It takes a little getting used to,” she giggles. “So, where are we going?”

“I have to pick up something from my house, and then I was thinking we’d go for a drive up the coast. I want to see what this baby can do.”

It only takes a few minutes to get to my place, and by the time I do, I'm starting to get the hang of driving a car with over 700 horsepower. I leave it running and open the door.

"I'll be right back."

"Okay."

Jumping out of the car, I jog inside. It's quiet, as usual. My mom is probably either sleeping or picked up another shift. I've been trying to help out with some of the bills, using the small amount Cal allows me to keep from the fights, but we're still a long way off from being comfortable.

I go to my closet, grabbing what I'm looking for off the hanger. It's a risky move, one I'm bound to get a load of shit from my friends for, but I don't care. If I've learned anything from the past twelve hours, it's that living without her isn't an option. Not for me. If this is what she needs, I'll give it to her.

As I get back to the car, I get in and toss the jersey onto Delaney's lap. She picks it up, inspecting it carefully. The North Haven logo on the front. My name and number on the back.

"Is this for you to wear tonight?" she questions.

"No. It's for *you* to wear tonight."

Her eyes widen as she turns to face me. "You want me to wear the jersey of my school's rival to the game." It's not a question, just a clarification. I nod. "Oh, I get it. It's a ploy to make Carter jealous."

I shake my head. "I mean, that's an added benefit, yes, but that's not why. I want everyone to know you're mine."

"Is this—" An amused grin stretches across her face. "Oh my God. This is your way of making us official."

"Shut up." I groan, putting my seatbelt back on and putting the car in drive.

"I thought you don't do girlfriends."

I chuckle because she's right. "I don't, but lately you've got me breaking all my rules. What's one more?"

WHEN YOU LIVE IN a town as tight-knit as North Haven, word spreads fast—especially when it's about an impromptu football game between the

biggest rivals around. Bleachers on both sides are filled to the max, and people who couldn't find seats stand along the fence. It only takes me a minute to spot Delaney. She's standing with Tessa on the North Haven side, and, damn, does she look good.

She smiles at me and waves, making me wink in return. Tessa rolls her eyes playfully, and I read her lips when she tells her sister she's hopeless.

"Is she wearing your jersey?" Zayn questions, squinting over at them.

Shaking my head slowly, I take a step back. "Not a word."

"Now, what's the fun in that?"

The game is intense. If someone had to judge who was the better quarterback, Grayson or me, it would be a stalemate. This game is going to come down entirely to defense, and Trayland clearly isn't against changing up positions to try to get one over on us. I thought no rules meant no foul plays, but I guess standard guidelines are out the window too.

I'm coming off the field after scoring another touchdown when Carter gets into my face. He's clearly angry, his fists clenched and shoulders tight.

"What the fuck is Delaney doing wearing your jersey?" he sneers. "I thought I told you to stay the hell away from her."

I put my hand on his chest to keep him back. "Where did you get the idea that I'll ever do a damn thing you say?"

A dry laugh leaves his mouth as he looks around for a second. "What are you wasting your time for, anyway? She's not even your type. They call her *Saint Delaney* for a reason."

I smirk. "She was anything but a saint in my bed last night."

Like I hit him right where it hurts, he jerks back and mutters something inaudible before lunging at me. I jump back, laughing as Stone moves in front of me and a few of Carter's teammates pull him away. He's fighting them every step of the way, shouting something about kicking my ass, but I can't be bothered to care. We're winning the game, and I'm being cheered on by a girl who looks hot as fuck in my jersey. Even Carter Trayland can't ruin that for me.

THE GAME ENDS 24-21, in favor of NHH. Grayson, being the good sport he is, comes over to tell me good game and shakes my hand. To anyone else,

we just look like two quarterbacks exchanging respect over a well-played game. Little do they know, we're wrapped up in the same mess, just trying to get through it.

Tessa and Delaney are standing with the guys, and just before I go to leave Grayson after talking about the upcoming fights this week, he grabs my arm.

"Don't think I didn't notice what Delaney is sporting tonight."

"Yeah, and?"

He sighs. "Well, a part of me wants to tell you that I'll beat your ass if you cause her so much as an ounce of pain, but I've seen you in the ring and you're fucking fearless. So, I'm asking you, friend to friend, to be good to her. She's the closest thing I've got to a sister."

"Pretty Boy, who the fuck said we're friends?"

I laugh and walk over to my friends, ignoring everything he said. I may have no intentions of hurting Delaney, but I'm sure as hell not promising him anything under some kind of bro-code.

"Everything okay?" Laney questions as soon as I'm close enough.

"Yep." Draping my arm across her shoulders, I pull her in close. "You coming to my place?"

She smiles up at me and nods. "I just have to go home to change. I'll meet you there."

THE GIRLS TAKE OFF, leaving me and the guys to celebrate our victory before heading out. Stone, being the shithead he is, insists on pissing on Haven Grace's field. Gage uses a Sharpie to write "HGP SUCKS" as big as he can on the side of the bleachers. And Easton steals one of the helmets left on the field by one of their players. Zayn and I, on the other hand, stand back and laugh at the idiocy and immaturity of our friends.

"All right, you ready to get out of here?" Z takes his keys from his pocket.

I nod. "Yeah, let's go."

We're walking back to his car when my phone dings inside my pocket. I stop to take it out, finding a text from Delaney.

Delaney: Change of plans. Are you still at the school? I'll pick you up.

I can't help but smile as I type out my response.

Knox: Sounds good, babe. I'll wait here.

"You go ahead," I tell Zayn, as Stone, Easton, and Gage all pile into the back seat. "Laney is on her way here. I'm just going to wait for her."

Zayn snickers and shakes his head. "Damn. Love has changed you."

"Get the fuck out of here with that shit."

He bounces his eyebrows before getting into the car and pulling away. I take a seat on the step while I wait. A text from Brett telling me that he found Hailey this morning and managed to drag her ass back home remains unanswered. She's not my problem anymore, and I really shouldn't have let myself get wrapped back up in her chaos.

What I have with Delaney may be dangerous as all hell, but it's fucking real. She doesn't judge me or expect anything I can't give her. Together, we're just...us.

I'm looking down at my phone when two cars pull up out of nowhere. A bunch of guys jump out, but I only recognize one—Carter.

"Aw, look who's all alone," he mocks, coming closer. "Who are you waiting for? *Your girlfriend?*"

Before I have a chance to move, three people come behind me, grabbing my arms and holding me so I can't move. I try to break free, but it's no use. I'm overpowered. Carter stalks toward me, looking like the cat that caught the canary.

"Maybe next time you'll listen when I say to stay *the fuck* away from someone."

DELANEY

“OKAY, SO YOU’RE JUST *NOT* GOING TO TELL ME HOW THINGS WENT FROM HIM with some other bitch to you wearing his jersey at a football game? Like, we’re just pretending that didn’t happen?”

Tessa has been questioning me since the second we left the football field. I get it. The whole situation confuses even me, and I’m living it. However, I’m loving where things are at and questioning them may cause that to change. Personally, that’s not a change that I find worth it.

“I told you—he wasn’t hooking up with her. She needed help. He was trying to be nice.”

She looks at me skeptically. “And you believed that?”

I groan. “Shut up. You don’t know him like I do. He’s not *all* bad.”

“Delaney, I’ve personally seen that boy piss on a teacher’s car door handle because she gave him detention.”

“Okay,” I cave. “He’s like eighty percent bad, but not with this. You didn’t see the look on his face last night. The idea of losing me genuinely hurt him.”

She rolls her eyes. “So, clearly, sleeping with him was the only option.”

I laugh, not justifying her with an answer as I go over to my dresser and pull out a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt. I don’t know what the plans are for tonight, but I’d much rather be prepared than need to come back here *again*.

Tessa’s phone rings, and she exhales in defeat. “All I’m saying is you should be careful.” She hits to answer then brings the phone to her ear. “Hey E... Wait, what? What the fuck happened? Okay, okay. We’ll be right there.” Like it’s the end of the world, she hangs up and rushes toward my door.

“Come on. We have to go.”

“What?” I ask, confused. “Tessa, what happened?”

Her next words cause fear and a level of anger I didn’t think was possible to wash over me. “Knox was jumped.”

PULLING UP TO HIS house, I can’t get out of the car and inside fast enough. The sound of Knox flipping out can be heard from all the way across the street. He’s obviously pissed, but who wouldn’t be?

Tessa and I run up the porch and in the door. The sight in front of me makes my whole world stop. Knox’s beautiful face is swollen and misshapen. He has a gash across his cheek and a pretty bad bruise already forming underneath his eye. His lip is cracked open and his shirt shows the remnants of dried blood. If this is what I can see at first glance, I can only imagine what the covered portion of him looks like.

“Get the fuck off me,” he screams as Zayn is trying to get him to calm down. “I want to find him. I want to find him and put his fucking ass in the hospital. I swear to God.”

“His dad is the DA,” Z reminds, but Knox isn’t listening. “Just sit down, man. Come on.”

Carter did this?

Knox paces back and forth, not even realizing I’m here. “No way. He’s a fucking dead man.”

Zayn looks over at me with pleading eyes, and with a nudge from Tessa, I jump into action. I have to get directly in front of Knox before he sees me, but when he does, he freezes. I reach up, putting a tender hand on his cheek, and he leans into my touch.

“Sit down. I need to clean you up.”

To everyone’s surprise, he reluctantly listens. I go over to grab a bowl and fill it with water before snagging the first aid kit from the kitchen table. Bringing everything with me, I sit down on the coffee table in front of him. I wet the cloth and bring it to his lip, flinching as he hisses in pain but doesn’t pull away.

Over the next ten minutes, I do my best to fix him—cleaning off the dried blood and applying antibacterial cream where I can. He’s definitely going to

be sore in the morning, though, and require something better than germ killer. No one says a word as I work, either because they're afraid Knox will get pissed off again or they're shocked that he's obeying my every word.

I finish up and put the stuff away. "Tess, can you drive me to the store real fast? I want to pick up something for pain. He's going to need it." She nods, and I place a light kiss to Knox's lips before heading out. "I'll be right back, okay?"

"You better."

Just as we walk out the door, I hear Stone snort. "So much for just fucking around. You're so whipped."

And yeah, maybe I feel the slightest bit of pride for that.

I LAY WITH MY head in Knox's lap, looking over each one of his tattoos while his eyes stay fixated on the movie. The bruises on his chest and stomach are brutal, but he doesn't seem to have any internal injuries—thank God.

"I can't believe Carter did this to you."

That gets his attention, and he looks down at me. "He's not the guy you think he is."

The corners of my mouth raise. "Funny, that's what I've been telling everyone about you."

"Don't do that," he groans. "I have a reputation to uphold. You'll go making me look like a total softie."

"Aren't you?"

Poking me in the side, he makes me squirm. "Fuck no. It's just hard to be an ass to you."

"I seem to remember you having *no* issue in the beginning."

"Yes, but that was before you won me over with your fiery personality and tendency to not listen to a damn thing I say."

"And here I thought I was just a ploy to make a certain prep-school douchebag jealous."

He smirks. "That's just a nice bonus."

Wincing, he moves to the side to slip out from under me and then gets up. As he's walking away, I notice the tattoos that cover his back. A rose on his

shoulder blade. Praying hands on the other side. "*Fear No Evil. Trust No Man.*" inked across the top in fancy writing. They're all a beautiful part of him.

"What do your tattoos mean?"

He shrugs, playing it off like it's nothing as he rummages through the kitchen cabinets. "Just things I liked at the time."

"You hardly seem like the kind of person to get things permanently on your skin with no reason at all."

Stopping what he's doing for a second, he looks at me and smiles. "You're impossible, you know that?"

I bite my lip. "Yeah."

After a couple minutes, Knox comes over with a bottle of Jack Daniels and two shot glasses. I eye it all carefully before giving him a look.

"I'll make you a deal," he starts. "For every shot you take, I'll tell you about *one* of my tattoos."

"That's hardly fair. If I want to find out all of them, I'll end up in the hospital with alcohol poisoning."

He thinks for a second before nodding. "Okay, one shot for two tattoos."

When I don't argue it further, he pours some of the alcohol into each glass. I've spent the last eighteen years not letting a single drop touch my tongue, but somehow, right now, I want to. I want to experience everything with him. It's like the thrill of doing something new gets me high, but only when he's there to do it with me.

He hands me a shot glass and gives me one of his heart-stopping smiles. Even all bruised up, he's so fucking hot.

"Cheers."

We swallow the liquid at the same time, and it burns my throat the whole way down. I grimace, shaking my head and rubbing my tongue on the roof of my mouth to try to get rid of the taste.

"Oh God, that's disgusting."

Knox simply chuckles. "You get used to it over time." He lies back on the floor and puts all his weight on his elbows. "All right, Bambi, you earned it. Pick two."

I look over his body, having so many different options to choose from. However, there's one I've wondered about for a while now.

"The skulls on your forearm."

He looks down and rubs his finger over the inked skin. "I got that one two

years ago. They're all intricately tied together, and there are five of them. It represents Zayn, Easton, Gage, Stone, and me."

"Wow," I breathe. "That's admirable."

"Not really. We've just been through a lot of shit together, and they've always had my back. I have no doubt they'll always be in my life, so it seemed only fitting to get something about them permanently on my body."

Letting his words seep in, I can already see that I was right about him. He's a lot deeper than people give him credit for. There's so much more than what you see on the surface.

"And the sparrows?"

His brows furrow as he drops his head to see them—one near each collarbone. "No matter where they go, sparrows always return home. They're loyal to a fault, and loyalty goes a long way with me."

BY THE TIME WE'RE four shots in, I'm so drunk the room feels like it's spinning. In exchange for swallowing the vile liquid, I've learned that the palm tree on his bicep is something he got while he was high on spring break, the black rose is meant to show there is beauty in darkness, and the praying hands were to cover up a penis his friend tattooed on him while he was passed out drunk.

"That's too good," I laugh as he shows me where the balls are hidden within the palms.

"Yeah, fucking hilarious," he groans. "I couldn't take my shirt off for three fucking weeks, until it was healed enough for him to cover it."

"Aw. Poor baby."

He glares at me playfully and pours himself another shot, swallowing it down with ease. "It was bullshit."

I lie on the couch and relish in the fact that I feel calmer than I have in a long time. Whether that's because of the alcohol or my company, I'm not sure.

"Is there one I haven't seen yet? Like one on the inside of your lip or something?"

The look on his face tells me there is, and he takes a moment before answering. "I have one on my ass."

I gasp. “No, you don’t.”

He stands up and turns around to pull down his pants. Sure enough, in chicken scratch writing, the words “Teenage Dirtbag” are there—the black a striking contrast to his milky skin tone.

“Oh my God! What the hell made you do that?” I can’t mask the shock from my voice.

Shrugging, he pulls his pants back into place. “A good friend of mine got his first tattoo kit. He needed someone to practice on.”

“So, you volunteered your ass?”

“You’ve seen it! It’s horrendous. I’m just glad it’s in a place no one sees.”

I shake my head, trying to hold in my laughter. “Clearly, you make great choices.”

He grins. “You’re just figuring that out?”

Truthfully, no. It’s something I’ve known for a while now, but no bad decisions he’s made could keep me from being so strongly drawn to him. For the first time in my life, I feel like I’m where I’m meant to be. Like I won’t be alone forever. Like someone could love me for me.

MY FIST POUNDS HARSHLY on the door, waiting for someone to answer it. If Knox knew I was here, he would probably kill me for it, but I don’t care. He’s not getting away with this. Especially not when *I’m* the reason he did it.

Carter opens the door, and his eyes widen when he sees me. “Delaney? What are you doing here?”

I place my hands on his chest and shove him as hard as I can. It doesn’t do much, but it’s something. “What the fuck is your problem?”

“Problem?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Carter. It doesn’t look good on you.”

His act is so believable that I almost buy it. “Laney, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You fucking jumped Knox. You got him to think he was waiting for me, and then you and a bunch of your friends ambushed him when he was alone. The only thing I can’t figure out is how you managed to text him from my

number when my phone never left my pocket.”

He keeps his shoulders squared, showing zero remorse for what he’s done. “Whatever happened to Vaughn, he had coming to him for a long-ass time. I tried to tell you, he’s North Haven trash and leaves nothing but shit wherever he goes. You shouldn’t involve yourself with someone like that.”

“Fuck you,” I growl. “And stay the fuck away from my *boyfriend*.”

I can see the second my words hit their intended target because Carter rolls his eyes and shuts the door. I don’t know who the he thinks he is, but I’m not going to stand by while he goes and assaults people under some delusion that I belong to him.

I’m walking back to my car when my phone vibrates in my pocket. Savannah’s name flashes across the screen.

“Hey Sav,” I answer. “How’s New York?”

“Incredible, as expected, but I have a favor to ask. Can you pick me up from the airport tonight? Grayson apparently has a thing and can’t.”

“Yeah, no problem. Just send me the flight number so I can track it.”

She sighs in relief. “Thank you so much. Is everything all right? You sound stressed.”

I get in my car and run my fingers through my hair. “I don’t know. Carter managed to send a text to Knox from my number to get him alone. Then he and a bunch of guys jumped him.”

“Carter did?” The shock in her voice is evident. She had no idea.

“Mmhm. I just can’t figure out how he got that text to look like it came from my phone.”

“Honestly? He probably got Wyatt to help him. That kid can do virtually anything with a computer.” Wyatt. Shit. I didn’t even think about that. “So, you and Knox?”

Taking a deep breath, I smile involuntarily. “Yeah. Me and Knox.”

KNOX

THE THUNDEROUS SOUND OF PEOPLE CHEERING THREATENS TO MAKE MY EARS bleed. It's so loud in here I can hardly concentrate, and yet, it's exhilarating. Despite my injuries from the shitheads who attacked me last night, Cal determined me fit to fight and wouldn't give me a pass. He said he already had too much money bet on me that he couldn't afford to lose. *Fucking prick.*

From the second this fight started, I could tell my opponent thought he had this in the bag. The bruises on my face and chest made me look weak, but that's far from the truth. I may be a little sore, sure, but I have more pent-up aggression inside of me than ever before.

If Carter's dad wasn't the district attorney, I'd never let him get away with the shit he pulled. It's one thing to swing at me. That I can understand and even respect. The one thing I can't respect, however, is having his friends hold me still so I have no chance to fight back. That's a pussy move, and one that he should pay for—but I know I'd be the one to go to jail while he gets a slap on the wrist. That's what privilege and entitlement does for you around here.

A fist comes flying at my face, but I dodge it just in time. The second one he throws, I catch in my hand and quickly knee him in the stomach. One of the great things about these fights is that there are no rules. You fight until someone stops moving, doing whatever it takes to make sure that doesn't happen to you. It's simple, and gritty, and raw.

The two of us go at it for what feels like hours, and I have to hand it to him—he's relentless. No matter how hard I swing, he always seems to bounce back. He reminds me of myself, with the drive to win and the frustration to use as fuel to get him there. Unfortunately for him, I've got far

more experience and much better training. Bottom line, I'm better.

He gets two good hits to my face before I realize I need to end this. If we go any longer, I'll risk getting tired—and if I lose this fight, there's no telling what Cal will do to me. It's not something I'm willing to find out.

Using all the strength I have, I sucker punch him in the stomach, then swing my leg to roundhouse kick him in the head. He goes down like a paperweight—heavy, motionless, out cold. The buzzer sounds, and the crowd goes wild, celebrating my win.

The referee announces my victory, and I climb out of the ring. Grayson hands me a water bottle as I thank him through gasping breaths. I nod to all the people congratulating me as I leave the arena, and the two of us head up to Cal's office.

The second we walk in the door, he's already on the phone. He gives me a bright smile, finishing up his conversation and hanging up. I collapse down on the leather couch. I may be getting blood all over his precious furniture, but after a fight like that, I don't give a fuck.

"Vaughn! My boy!" he greets me. "That was some fight out there tonight. You put on a good show."

I'm still panting heavily but it's starting to slow down. "He put up a good defense. That guy would make a good addition to your team. He's relentless."

He nods. "Yeah, it's too bad he's gone. Jackson could have made a champion out of that one."

"Gone?" My brows furrow. "Where did he go?"

"Knox, he died. The blow you landed to his head snapped his neck." His words come out with such carelessness that I almost don't believe him. "That's one of the risks you take when you get in the Death Ring."

He keeps talking, but the ringing in my ears becomes so loud I can't hear a word of it. He's dead. He's dead, and it's my fault. I killed him. Within seconds, I'm lunging across the room to the garbage can and emptying the contents of my stomach into it.

I'm a murderer. A kid with his whole life ahead of him is gone now. I'm a fucking murderer.

I TOSS AND TURN in my bed, trying to get even a wink of sleep with no

luck. Images of the kid I fought tonight plague my mind and refuse to go anywhere. He was a good fighter. Hell, he even seemed like someone I could be friends with. His refusal to quit was something I admired, but it doesn't matter now. His death is on my hands.

Looking over at the clock, the numbers stare back at me.

3:17 a.m.

I give in and call the only person I can think of to make me feel even the slightest bit better right now. The phone rings four times before finally she answers.

"Knox?" she asks sleepily. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," I lie. "I just can't sleep."

"It's three in the morning."

Ugh, fuck. "You're right. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have called. Go back to sleep."

"No," she replies in a rush. "It's fine. I don't mind." I can hear her shuffle, probably getting comfortable again with the phone pressed to her ear.

"So, what's going on?"

"A few things on my mind. That's all."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I sigh, knowing I can't. "No. I just need a distraction. What'd you do tonight?"

"I went and picked Savannah up from the airport. Apparently, Grayson was busy with something and couldn't. The two of us grabbed dinner before going home."

I hadn't even considered the fact that Grayson constantly needs to lie to Savannah about what he's doing when he's training or at the ring. To be honest, his personal life is never really something I took into account.

Is that what my life is going to come to? Lying to Delaney while I go potentially kill more people at night? The thought alone is enough to send a chill right through me. I never wanted to get into this mess, and now, all I want is to get the fuck out of it.

Delaney is calm, patient even. She stays on the phone with me despite sounding half asleep, talking about how Tessa got grounded once again because their dad saw a hickey on her neck, and how her sister Ainsley is going to be coming home in a few weeks for spring break. Listening to her voice, no matter what it's saying, is like my own personal brand of Xanax. It soothes me, relieving the tension in my chest and making me feel like things

are going to be okay.

We stay on the phone long after she stops talking, and I let the sound of her breathing lull me to sleep.

THE HARDEST PART OF dealing with something as serious as this is knowing that Zayn can read me like a book, yet still having to lie to him anyway. Since I got to school this morning, he's watched me like a hawk. I think he first assumed it had something to do with Delaney, but the way I kissed her goodbye before we left today ruled that out. Still, he hasn't straight up asked, and even when he does, he won't get the truth.

"I'm really craving a milkshake," he tells me. "You down?"

I nod. "Yeah, that sounds pretty good, actually."

A part of me considers texting Delaney and asking if she wants to meet us there, but she was saying something about having a girl's night with Savannah. Apparently, Laney wants to hear all about her trip to New York so she can decide what college she wants to go to. While a part of me is seriously jealous and wants her with me at all times, I don't want to be overbearing.

Zayn and I head out, only to find a man in a very expensive looking suit standing at the curb. There's something familiar about him that I just can't put my finger on, but the way he presents himself screams power. I walk up to him hesitantly, looking him over for any visible weapons.

"Can I help you?"

He takes off his sunglasses. "Are you Knox?"

"That depends on who's asking." I stand up straight, showing that I'll take no bullshit.

The man extends his hand toward me. "Tristan Callahan. I'm Delaney's father."

I look down at his hand but make no move to take it in my own. I've heard enough about this piece of shit to know this visit is going to be anything but a pleasant one, and that the chances of Delaney knowing he's here are slim to none. Zayn scoffs behind me and fails at hiding his amusement.

"What can I do for you, *Tristan*?"

He narrows his eyes at my blatant disrespect. “It’s come to my attention that you and my daughter have become something of an item.”

“Damn. Word spreads fast around here.”

“Yes, well, no offense to you, but a relationship between you and Delaney is not one I can support. You may be a delinquent, but you seem smart enough to understand that the two of you are from two completely different upbringings. Under no circumstances do the two of you belong together.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s a good thing your opinion doesn’t mean shit then, isn’t it? In case you haven’t noticed, *your daughter* is eighteen years old, and a fully consenting adult.”

He turns around and reaches into his car, pulling out a briefcase. “I didn’t think you’d listen to me without some compensation, so I’m prepared to offer you cash. All you need to do for twenty-five thousand dollars is simple—stay far away from Delaney.”

Opening the briefcase, the sight of so many twenty-dollar bills makes my head spin. I look back up at her father, wondering how someone could be so judgmental that they’re willing to spend this amount of money to get rid of their daughter’s boyfriend. It’s sickening, but damn—what I could do with that.

“What would I tell her?”

He shrugs. “That you’ve had a change of heart. That you don’t want a girlfriend. That you realized you’re gay. Tell her anything you want, just stay away from her. Delaney is smart and has the whole world at her feet. She doesn’t need someone like you coming in and ruining that for her.”

I nod slowly before grabbing the briefcase from him. “I understand your concern.”

“I was hoping you would.” He straightens his suit jacket and walks around to the driver’s side. “Thank you for not making this harder than it needs to be. You’re a good man.”

As he pulls away, I stick my hand up and flip off the car. Zayn comes to stand next to me and looks down at the briefcase in my hand.

“So, that’s it? No more Delaney?”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “Fuck no, but now I’ve got his money *and* his daughter.”

The two of us get in the car, and I slip my phone out of my pocket.

Knox: Hey babe. We're going to the diner. Want to join us?

DELANEY

I WALK DOWN THE CROWDED HALLWAY, REFUSING TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE asshole following behind me. Savannah meets me at our locker, and I quickly switch out my books. She knows exactly what I'm doing, and not once has she tried to stop me.

"Come on," Carter pleads. "I said I was sorry. You can't ignore me forever."

Sav scoffs. "You literally jumped her boyfriend. I think she can."

"Technically, I jumped a guy I've hated for years. Her dating him had nothing to do with it."

Finally, I snap—slamming the locker closed and turning to face him. "Bullshit. Don't give me that. You two coexisted for years without anything like this happening, but the second he gets something that *you* wanted, you go all Rambo on him." Wyatt tries to conceal his amusement, which only brings my attention to him. "What the fuck are you laughing at? You're on my shit list, too."

"Me? What'd I do?"

My brows raise. "Like he would be able to spoof my number *by himself*. You're just as guilty as he is."

"Ouch." Jace puts a hand on Wyatt's shoulder. "That sucks, man."

He shoves him off. "Shut up."

Without giving them another second of my time, I turn around and walk to class. What Carter did was ridiculous and uncalled for. He's going to need to do a hell of a lot more than apologize to get back in my good graces—if it's even possible at all.

BY THE TIME THAT school lets out, I'm exhausted. If it wasn't for the essay I need to have written by tomorrow, I'd take a nap as soon as I get to Knox's house. Unfortunately, that's not an option.

I grab my bag from the locker and make sure my laptop is in it. Once I have everything I need, I head outside and across the street. Knox told me to meet him behind the school, but as soon as I turn the corner, I hesitate. Standing with Knox is none other than his ex, Hailey.

A part of me considers turning around, maybe going back to my car and sending him a text to meet me there, but something compels me to stay. Knox is *my* boyfriend and if I want to be near him, no one should keep me from doing exactly that.

I take a deep breath and walk toward them, smiling as his eyes land on me. He looks slightly uncomfortable, but manages to mask it.

"Hey," I greet him.

He grins and pulls me close. "Hey, you. Everything good?"

I nod. "Carter was a bit of a pain in the ass, but what else is new." The way his body tenses is evident, and I know a change in conversation is needed. I turn to Hailey, who is watching me skeptically. "I don't think we've met. I'm Delaney."

"Yeah," she sneers, looking me up and down. "I know who you are."

"Hails," Knox warns, and the nickname reminds me of how much history they share together. "Be nice."

She rolls her eyes. "Whatever. I'll see you tomorrow."

With that, she flounces away, leaving us alone together. There's a weird tension in the air, but I don't think it's because of us. He's mentioned before that Hailey is a total train wreck. That she tends to get herself into messes and drag those closest to her down as well.

"Well, she seems pleasant."

He snorts. "Oh yeah, she's a real dream."

The two of us walk back over to Haven Grace Prep, where my car waits in the parking lot. Since the day that we took a drive up the coast, I've learned to trust Knox's driving completely. Despite the fact that he tested the theory of 0 to 60 in 2.5, I've never felt safer. We put the top down and I stood up, letting the wind blow through my hair. It was liberating.

I hand him the keys and climb in the passenger side. Maybe I'll be able to

squeeze a nap in before I need to focus on my grueling essay.

THINKING I'D BE ABLE to concentrate while even in the vicinity of Knox is a pipe dream. Between the way he keeps kissing me, or takes his shirt off because it's too warm in here, it's fundamentally impossible. He grabs a beer from the fridge and brings me a bottle of water.

"How's it going?"

I groan softly. "It's not. You're horribly distracting."

He smirks. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"That's debatable. If I don't ace this essay, I could fall out of the running for valedictorian."

"Do you even have competition?"

I nod. "Byron. He's like a quarter of a point behind me."

"Byron?" he mocks. "He sounds like the kind of kid with his pants pulled up to his chest."

"He is," I tell him, not able to hold back from giggling.

Knox comes closer and places a soft kiss to my lips. "Then you're bound to win."

"How do you figure?"

"You're *much* more fun to look at."

He pushes the computer from my lap and gently grabs my face, using his other hand on my back to pull me in closer. It's slow and sweet, with his mouth claiming my own. The way he makes me forget the world around me is dangerous. Still, I'll never forgive myself if I don't graduate as valedictorian. I've worked too hard and come too far to lose it now.

I press my hand to his chest and break the kiss. "No. Nope," I tell him, and his head drops in defeat. "I need to get this essay done. All making out and other activities will have to wait."

He bites his lip in an attempt to conceal his grin. "Other activities?"

As his brows bounce suggestively, I roll my eyes. "Shut up. You know what I mean."

"I don't. Please, demonstrate."

"You're impossible," I deadpan.

Throwing his head back, laughter bellows out of him. "All right, fine. I'm

getting in the shower. Get your work done.”

With one last kiss, he retreats to the bathroom, leaving me alone to focus for once—though that’s no easier now that I’m thinking about his toned, dripping wet body. *Ugh, no.*

I’m a third of the way through when I realize I need to write down a few notes. I look in my bag but have no luck. I must have left my notebook in my locker. My eyes scan the room for any kind of paper when they land on a book sitting on Knox’s desk. However, as I split it open to find an empty page, I realize it’s not your typical notebook.

I flip through the pages, finding beautiful drawings all in pencil. The texture, the detail, the veracity—they’re stunning. It isn’t until I get further into it that my breath gets taken away. What started as sketches of scenery, like beaches and fields, becomes drawings of me. Sleeping in bed, smiling down at the ground, and even reading a book—I’ve become his muse.

“What are you doing?”

Startled, I drop the book and watch as it falls to the floor. “I-I was looking for a piece of scrap paper.”

He stalks toward me slowly, his eyes never leaving mine until he bends down and picks it up. “Did you find what you were looking for?”

I shake my head. “I found better. Those are incredible. I had no idea you were so talented.”

“It’s a cheap hobby that passes the time. I started because I wanted to start tattooing, but I don’t know if that will ever happen.”

“Why not?”

He shrugs. “Apprenticeships are expensive and take a lot of time where you make shit money.”

I don’t know what to say, being as I’ve never been in that place. I’ve always had the ability to do anything and go anywhere that I wanted. Growing up with wealthy parents is never something I’ve taken for granted, but I’ve also never fully grasped the privilege of always having everything I need, or at least having the ability to get it.

“One day, you’ll do it. I know you will.”

Chuckling, he looks down with his arms wrapped around me. “You always have so much faith in me.”

I smile, until I realize something about him is different. When I figure out what it is, my grin widens.

“You wear glasses?”

The cocky look on his face falls right off the minute he realizes he didn't take them off. "Shit."

I grab his hands, stopping him from removing them. "Wait, don't. You look cute."

"You're a bad liar."

"I'm not lying," I try, but the small chuckle gives me away. "You look so much less like a badass."

He rolls his eyes playfully before tickling me. "Hello. My name is Knoxley Vaughnwinkle." His voice is nasally, like he's doing his best nerd impersonation. "It's nice to meet you today."

I laugh like a little kid with her favorite person. "Please tell me that's your actual name."

"Fuck no, thank God."

"That's a shame. Knoxley Vaughnwinkle sounds like my kind of guy."

A fire burns in his eyes as he stares me down and pulls me against him. "I'm your kind of guy. No one else. Just me."

It's not a question, but a fact—one I don't need to confirm. Instead of answering him, I reach up and pull the glasses off his face and put them on my own.

"What do you think? Librarian chic?"

He licks his lips and his fingers dig into my back. "You're so fucking sexy."

Not giving me a chance to respond, he covers my mouth with his and kisses me in a way that screams his every desire—and who am I to refuse? I may have an essay to finish, but when it comes to him, I'm completely defenseless. He has me—hook, line, and sinker.

THE WEEK FINALLY ENDS, after what felt like an eternity, and I spend my Friday night in the best possible way—lounging around Knox's house with Tessa and all his idiotic friends. It's relaxed, unlike the parties they normally throw on the weekends, but it seems everyone needed a night to just chill.

I'm sitting on the couch with Knox's head in my lap as he laughs at the ridiculous dance Gage is doing. It's like a mix between the Sprinkler and

something from Fortnite. Regardless of what it is, I'm pretty sure he's doing it wrong.

Taking his empty can of beer, Knox throws it at Gage. "And you wonder why you're single."

"No, I'm single because how could I give all this," he skims his body with his hands, "to one girl? It's just wrong to deny the rest of the female population my exquisiteness."

"Sure, buddy. You keep telling yourself that."

Everyone snickers at Gage's expense, but he doesn't care. He takes all the empty beer cans from the floor and starts stacking them into a tower. I run my fingers through Knox's hair and he mewls at the contact.

"Don't stop. That feels good."

"You're so demanding," I tease.

Glancing up at me, he winks, and I swear it makes my stomach flutter. "I'll show you demanding later."

Zayn takes out a blunt and lights it. I watch as he inhales, holding it in before filling the air with smoke. After another hit, he passes it to Stone, who does the same.

"I love when we get the good shit," he all but moans before handing it to Easton.

"Thank you, Mr. Callahan."

That gets my attention. Tessa and I share a look that shows neither of us know what's going on. Finally, Tess turns to Easton.

"Why are you thanking my dad for the weed?"

Despite the way that Zayn is silently trying to tell him to shut the fuck up, Easton blows their secret wide open. "Because, he paid Knox twenty-five g's to stay away from Delaney." He takes another hit of the blunt and chuckles. "I can't wait until that fucker finds out he spent all that money for nothing."

Hearing that my dad tried to pay Knox to break up with me sparks a fire inside that I didn't know I had. I sit up straight, bumping Knox's head off to the side. Who the fuck does he think he is? It would be one thing if I was a child, or if Knox was genuinely hazardous, but he's not. The only reason my dad doesn't want me dating him is because he's not rich and the son of some wealthy fucking businessman. He wants me with someone more like him. Someone like Carter.

Knox gets up and storms out of the room, leaving me to follow him. I shut his bedroom door behind me so we're alone.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

He sighs. “Tell you what? That your dad paid me more money than I’ve ever seen in my life to stay away from you? That he’s clearly aware of the one thing you and I refuse to acknowledge?”

My brows furrow. “What are we refusing to acknowledge?”

“That I’m no fucking good for you, Delaney. You deserve so much better than me and my fucked-up life. If you knew what was good for you, you’d leave and never look back.”

“Okay, no. You don’t get to do that! You don’t get to act like you’re somehow less than I am. Like you’re not the best thing to ever happen to me. I won’t let you.”

He comes closer and puts one hand on my cheek. “It’s the truth, whether you want to believe that or not.”

“So, what? You’re just going to listen to my prick of a father? When were you going to tell me you were ditching me for cash?” I can feel the tears start to build.

“A few weeks ago, I would have. I would’ve taken his money and gone without a second thought.” He rests his forehead on mine. “But then I went and caught feelings—like a goddamn amateur. So, no, Bambi, I’m not going anywhere.”

Relief washes over me, and I press my face against his chest, breathing in his cologne. The scent of him calms me with ease, like magic. I’d stay here forever if it was an option.

“You’re not mad at me for taking his money?”

I snort and shake my head. “I’m mad at you for not taking more.”

Knox’s phone rings in his pocket, and I pull away as he takes it out. I watch the way his demeanor changes when he sees who it is, but before I can look, he hits ignore and puts it away.

“Is everything all right?”

He shakes whatever thoughts he was having from his mind and nods. “Yeah. Let’s go back out there, before they leave me with no weed.”

The two of us make our way back to the living room and retake our places on the couch. As Knox settles his head back in my lap, Gage hands him the blunt. I never thought I’d enjoy watching someone smoke, but the way he does it looks so fucking hot.

“Do you trust me?” he asks, a question I’ve heard a few times now.

I scrunch my nose up teasingly. “Maybe a bit.”

Hitting the blunt once more, he inhales deeply. Then, he uses his free hand to pull me down by the back of my neck, bringing my lips to his and releasing all the smoke into my mouth. I breathe it in as his tongue tangles with my own. It's erotic, and sensual, and sexy as hell.

Everyone may have been right—Knox Vaughn is dangerous. A giant red flag, warning others to stay away, but red always has been my favorite color.

KNOX

I PULL MY HOOD UP, WALKING TO THE MORE HIDDEN SIDE OF THE SCHOOL. Rain pours down harshly as the thunder rumbles. The shitty weather matches my mood.

Grayson looks up at me as I approach, concern etched across his face. “Dude, what the fuck? You missed the fight on Saturday, and Cal is fucking pissed. Apparently, he lost a hundred grand because you were considered a forfeit.”

My eyes roll. “Like he doesn’t have plenty more where that came from.”

Grabbing me by my sweatshirt, Gray catches me off guard and pins me up against the brick wall. “What the hell is wrong with you? Weren’t *you* the one who said these guys aren’t the people to mess with?”

I shove him off me. “I fucking killed someone, shithead! A kid with his whole damn life ahead of him! I took that away!”

“He knew what he was risking when he got into the ring.”

A humorless laugh emits from my mouth. “Knew what he was risking,” I mumble. “That doesn’t fucking make it okay! You may be all right with having a body count on your hands. You may have yourself convinced you did the right thing, but not me.” Taking a step away, I shake my head. “Worry about yourself, Pretty Boy. Don’t worry about me.”

He doesn’t try to stop me as I leave him standing there. Since the last fight I was in, where I took someone out of this world, I haven’t been back. Hell, I haven’t even gone to training. It’s a risky move, but I can’t find it in me to care.

Tyler Cayman. That’s the name of the kid who lost his life because of me. He was twenty and a student at North Haven University. According to what I

could find on social media, he was trying to make enough money to buy his girlfriend an engagement ring. He had been taking MMA classes for a few years and must have thought that was the best way to make a quick buck. Unfortunately, the fight was rigged against him from the get-go.

After Delaney's dad handed me twenty-five thousand dollars in cash, the first thing I did was anonymously donate half of it to provide Tyler's family with enough money to give him a proper funeral. Cal, as usual, covered it up—put his body in an alley somewhere and made it look like he was jumped and got killed when he fought back, but I know the truth. The truth is, his death is on my hands, and that will never go away.

I PULL UP TO Delaney's house on my motorcycle and make sure to rev the engine a bit. It may be a little too cold to ride comfortably, but I want as much noise as possible. I climb off and rest my helmet on the seat.

As I walk in the door of the oversized house, there doesn't seem to be a person in sight. However, I know from the car parked outside, her father is in here somewhere. I play with the lighter in my hand before resting it on the banister and making my way upstairs.

The second I step into Delaney's room, her eyes widen.

"What are you doing?"

I walk up and pull her into my arms, kissing her immediately. "I missed you."

She gives me a knowing look. "If my dad finds you here, he'll probably kill you."

"Please. There's only one Callahan that scares me, and it isn't your dad."

"Oh? Who is it then?"

I could tell her the truth, but vulnerability is *not* my strong suit. "CBP, definitely."

"Tessa?" she snorts.

"Hell, yeah. She's fucking intimidating. I don't know how Easton handles her."

Delaney laughs, lying down on the bed beside me. "What does that stand for, anyway? CBP?"

My head tips to the side as I look at her. "If you tell her, she'll off me,

and you'll be left single." She pretends to lock her lips closed and throw away the key. "Cute but psycho."

Collapsing onto her back, she giggles. "Oh my God, that's the best. But you're right, she would definitely strangle you."

I roll to my side and press myself up against her. "Exactly, and then who would make you feel good?"

She doesn't answer, but then again, she's rendered speechless the second I press my lips to her neck. Moving her head to give me better access, she lets out a breathy hum that goes straight to my cock. I slide my hand down her stomach until it slips underneath the waistband of her skirt.

"You're soaked already," I whisper.

"I've been thinking about you all damn day."

My mouth moves to her ear, and I nibble on it lightly. "That's exactly what I like to hear."

I waste no time with slipping my middle finger inside her. Her warmth encases the digit immediately, and fuck what I wouldn't give to be inside her right now. The sounds she's letting out are like something straight from wet dreams and I don't hesitate to swallow each one down. She arches her hips up and grinds into my hand, taking what she needs from me unapologetically.

Right when she's about to come undone, the door flies open and her father bursts through, his face a deep shade of red.

"Dad!" Delaney gasps. "Haven't you heard of knocking?"

That only angers him further. "I don't need to knock! This is *my* damn house!" He fixates his attention on me. "And you! You need to get out, *now*!"

I go to open my mouth, when Delaney shocks the hell out of both of us. "No."

"Excuse me?"

"I said, *no*. Knox is my boyfriend, and I'm eighteen years old." She stands up and fixes her skirt as she walks toward him. "What are you going to do? Threaten to send me to boarding school like you do with Tessa every time she disobeys you?" She scoffs. "You wouldn't dare. You need the publicity of me graduating valedictorian from Haven Grace. Don't think you have me fooled."

Tristan glares at his daughter. "What has gotten into you?"

She shrugs confidently. "I learned that life isn't always about money and high social classes. Knox may not be rich, but he's better than every one of the douchebags at my school." Glancing back at me for a second, she smiles.

“Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

I get up to follow her out the door when her dad steps in my way. “A word, son?”

The word is like poison on his tongue, but still, I promise Delaney I’ll meet her outside. Once she’s gone, he stands tall—trying to intimidate me.

“I thought we had a deal.”

“No, I said I understood, and I agree with you. She deserves someone *far* better than me. But I’m a selfish prick, and if I’m the one she wants, there’s no way in hell I’m turning her down.”

I go to walk past him, but he grips my arm to stop me. “Delaney is a sweet girl. She doesn’t need to be pulled down into the muck by the likes of you.”

A smirk spreads across my face as I pull myself from his grasp. “You’re right, she is sweet.” I bring my hand up to my lips, taking the finger that was just inside of his precious daughter and sucking it into my mouth—moaning quietly at the taste of her that still lingers. “The fucking sweetest.”

He’s stunned into an angry silence, and I grin arrogantly as I make my way down the stairs and out the front door. *Checkmate, Mr. Callahan.*

DELANEY STAYS AT MY place for a few days to avoid going home, not that I mind it. If it were up to me, she’d never leave my damn side. Unfortunately, she still insists on going to school—even when I’d rather spend the day tangled together between the sheets.

We’re in the middle of watching a movie when someone knocks on the door. The two of us share a confused look, knowing we’re not expecting anyone, but it wouldn’t be the first time my friends randomly show up. I get off the couch and go to see who it is. However, as soon as I open it, there’s no one there. Instead, an orange envelope lies on top of the doormat.

I look around but don’t see anyone before I pick it up. I hook a finger in the flap and pull out what’s inside. As soon as I see it, my heart drops. Pictures of Delaney at school. Pictures of Delaney with Savannah at the diner. Pictures of Delaney with me. At the bottom of the pile is a note.

Such a beauty. I’d hate for her to see the same fate as Mr. Montgomery.

I THROW THE DOORS open, storming through the office and over to Cal. The second I'm close enough, I throw the pictures at his feet.

"You think this is fucking funny?" I spit. "You stay the fuck away from her, or, I swear to God, the only one meeting the same fate as that child-beating shithead will be you."

Cal laughs like there's something hilarious about him threatening my girlfriend. "I've always admired the fire in you, Vaughn, but your choices have needed some work. Like your decision to not show up to last week's fight."

"There are plenty of other guys who can fill my place."

"Perhaps, but none of them are indebted to me."

I shake my head. "I don't care. I'm not taking another life because of this shit. I'm out."

He chuckles humorlessly. "You'll fight, or poor Delaney will pay the price."

Fury boils inside of me and I lunge at him, but his goons move faster. They grab me by my arms, holding me back. Cal pulls a gun from his waistband and cocks it as he points it at my forehead.

"I said I'm out!" I yell.

"You'll be out when I say you're out, you piece of shit. You think you can just get away with deciding when you do and don't want to be *in this*?" He picks up one of the pictures from the floor, rubbing his finger over Delaney's face. "If you miss so much as one more fight, I'll put a bullet in her fucking head and make you watch."

He gives me a look, daring me to say another word, but I won't. I don't doubt for a second that he would make true on his word. With a nod at his guys, he walks out of the room and they drop me—my knees going weak as I collapse to the floor.

Fuck.

DELANEY

NEVER IN A MILLION YEARS DID I EVER THINK MY FATHER WOULD LOOK AT ME the same way he does Tessa. His obvious disdain for her was always something that made me uncomfortable. However, the minute I found out he tried to pay Knox to stay away from me, I understood exactly why Tess hates him as much as she does.

It's one thing to want what's best for your kids, but what he did is despicable. He didn't even give Knox a chance—judging him on his home life without so much as a conversation. I don't know what was said after I walked out and left them alone the other day, but whatever it was definitely struck a nerve.

Tessa, of course, has been loving this. For once, she isn't the sole focus of his controlling tendencies. We stick together and stand our ground. If he wants Knox out of my life, he's going to have to do a lot more than bribe him.

I WALK UP TO the familiar house and knock on the door. Thankfully, Knox had something to do tonight, which gives me the perfect opportunity to get what I'm looking for. Zayn opens the door, a confused look gracing his face when he sees me.

“Delaney?”

“Hey,” I greet him as I push my way inside.

He rubs the back of his neck. “Knox isn't here.”

“I know. I came here for you.”

His eyes widen. “Uh, Bambi, you’re gorgeous and all but—”

I shake my head and cut him off. “Oh my God, no. Not what I meant.” He relaxes in an instant and I chuckle. “Also, if he heard you calling me that nickname, he might kill you.”

“You’re probably right. So, what’d you need?”

“Knox’s birthday is coming up.”

He smirks. “How’d you figure that one out? I know damn well he didn’t tell you.”

“I may have looked at his driver’s license.” I wave him off dismissively. “That’s not the point. I know what I want to get him, but I need your help with it.” Grabbing his wrist, I pull him toward the door. “Oh, and we’re throwing him a party.”

I GET DONE WITH Zayn and head back to Knox’s house, hoping he isn’t back yet. Unfortunately, luck isn’t on my side. The second that I walk in the door, he comes out of his room and sighs in relief when he sees me.

“Thank fuck,” he murmurs, so low I almost don’t hear it. “Where were you?”

“I had something to do. Why are you so worried? Is everything okay?”

He wraps his arms around me and pulls me close. “Yeah, sorry. I don’t know where my head’s at.”

Everything in me says that I should question it further. I can feel the way his heart is pounding inside his chest. But with his fingers lacing into my hair and his breathing calming down, I get lost in the feel of him. Whatever he was worried about, it’s fine now.

WHEN I TOLD ZAYN that we were throwing a party for Knox, I *did not* mean a massive blowout where I can’t even hear myself think. The only thing birthday about it is the custom banner that Tessa helped me hang. If it wasn’t for that, this would just look like Z went a little overboard with his usual parties.

The minute Knox walks in the door, people shout “Happy Birthday!” so loud I’m pretty sure the walls rattle. He chuckles, but his eyes instantly look around for me. Once our gazes lock, he genuinely smiles.

“I take it I have you to thank for this?”

I shrug. “I may have had *something* to do with it.” Kissing him softly, my fingers intertwine with his. “Happy Birthday.”

It’s obvious celebrating the day he was born isn’t something he’s used to. The few hours I spent with Zayn, he told me about how Knox never liked his birthday. That he always said it did nothing but leave him disappointed, so he pretended like the day wasn’t a thing. However, I couldn’t let that happen.

“Happy Birthday, shit brick,” Stone tells him, shaking a small baggie of white powder in his face.

Knox grabs it from him with a grin stretched across his face. “You always know how to make me happy.”

I look to Tessa, wondering if him doing coke is a normal thing, but she doesn’t seem surprised. Still, the thought of anything harder than pot puts an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. From what I’ve heard of the stuff, coke is dangerous and can cause any multitude of issues.

“Tess, come help me with something.” Thankfully, no one bats an eye as the two of us walk away and into the bathroom. Once we’re behind closed doors, I turn to her. “Since when does Knox do coke?”

“Uh, for as long as I’ve known him.” She shrugs. “It’s not a constant thing. I think he just does it every once in a while.”

“Isn’t that stuff like highly addictive?”

“Anything can become addictive if you do it enough.”

“Tess,” I deadpan.

She sighs and runs her fingers through her hair. “Look, if it makes you feel any better, I haven’t seen him do it in weeks.”

“It doesn’t.”

Hearing a commotion, Tessa and I bolt out of the room. Knox is pacing around the house while his friends watch with concerned looks on their faces.

“Where the fuck did she go?” he mutters, fear lacing his tone.

“Knox?” At the sound of my voice, his head whips toward me. He exhales in relief and comes closer, grabbing my face and kissing me like it’s the first time in months. “What’s going on?”

Everyone goes back to enjoying the party while he wraps his arms around me tightly. “I didn’t know where you went.”

“I was in the bathroom with Tessa.”

The guys and my sister all watch us carefully. I don’t know if they’re so confused because they’ve never seen Knox like this with a girl, or because, like me, they don’t understand why he freaked out.

“Just—don’t leave my side, okay?”

I nod. “Okay. Okay, I won’t.”

The same way it did the other day, my gut tells me to ask more questions. However, it’s his birthday, and the last thing I want to do is ruin it with heavy talk. Getting down to the bottom of it can wait until tomorrow.

THE NIGHT IS ALMOST over when I finally get a minute alone with my boyfriend. He’s sitting on the back deck, smoking a cigarette and looking unfairly hot while doing it. I take the spot next to him and rest my head on his shoulder.

“Everything okay?”

I hum, taking a sip of the wine cooler Tessa gave me. “Yeah, just can’t wait to get back to your place and cuddle.”

He snorts. “Is that all you think we’re going to do? Cuddle?” I lift my head to glance at him, and he grins. “It’s my birthday, Bambi.” He waggles his brows.

“Oh, so *now* you’re all about birthday celebrations?”

His mood becomes serious. “I wasn’t against them. I just never had a reason to be glad I was born, until now.”

It’s not his words that take my breath away, it’s the sincerity in his eyes when he says them. Everyone may think he’s the devil reincarnated, but not me. I know the hidden truth.

IM PULLED OUT OF a deep sleep by the sound of Knox’s voice, panicked and fearful. The darkness fills the room, and he thrashes around as I flick on the light.

“No! Stop!” he shouts.

“Knox?” I try but it’s useless.

“Don’t touch her!”

“Knox!”

His eyes snap open, and he takes in a deep breath. I watch him carefully as I wait for him to calm down. He sits up and rests his head in his hands, not saying a word. I slot myself against his back and wrap my arms around him from behind.

“I’m sorry I woke you,” he says, like he has something to apologize for.

I press a kiss to his skin, right over the rose. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. It was just a nightmare.”

This time, I don’t ignore the urge to dig deeper. “Do they happen often?”

He shrugs. “I guess.”

“Is that why you don’t sleep?”

Grabbing my hands, he turns around in my hold. “What’s with the interrogation?”

“I woke up in the middle of the night to my boyfriend screaming. I think I have the right to be concerned.”

“You shouldn’t be,” he whispers, kissing me quickly before standing up. “I’m okay, really.”

Leaving the room for what I can only assume is to use the restroom or get a drink, I stay on the bed and wait for him to return. He’s the king of downplaying things, and I don’t think this is much different. There’s something more than he’s letting on—a reason why he keeps freaking out when he doesn’t know where I am for more than half a second. And I can’t help unless I know what’s getting to him. Until he decides to talk about it, I have no business being here.

I get up, grabbing the few things I have scattered around his room and putting them in my bag. When I’m halfway done, Knox comes back in. His demeanor changes when he sees me.

“You’re leaving?”

I nod. “I don’t know what’s going on with you, but I’m your girlfriend. Lying to me about it isn’t going to help anything.” I pick up a T-shirt from the floor that happens to be his and put it on. “You keep asking if I trust you. Well, give me a reason to. Trust is a give and take.”

When he doesn’t say anything in response, I grab my bag and go to walk out of the room. However, just before I get through the door, he stops me.

“They started a little more than a month ago.” Sitting down on his bed, he keeps his eyes trained on the floor. “The same thing, over and over—like I

can't escape it."

"Have you tried talking to anyone about it? Like a doctor or something?" The way he looks up at me, with brows raised sarcastically, confirms what I already assumed. "Yeah, okay. Stupid question."

I put my bag back on the chair and walk back over to the bed, standing in front of him as he gently rubs his hands against my legs.

"The insomnia isn't because of the nightmares though. Sometimes, I just can't sleep."

"Well, the cocaine probably doesn't help with that."

He nods slowly. "It just helps take the edge off sometimes. I don't make a habit out of it."

I chuckle involuntarily. "Said every drug addict ever."

"Really?"

The look on his face is enough to make me feel like an ass. "No, but I don't like it. Your friends may not give a shit, but I care too much about you to sit back and watch."

He rolls his eyes. "I did just fine before I had you to look after me, and I'll be fine after you're gone."

His words hit like a punch to the gut, and I pull back from him. No part of me had even thought about the fact that this relationship has an end date. Then again, how could it not? I'll be going away to college, and he'll probably stay here. I'd be naive to think we could make something like long-distance work.

"Is that what I am to you? Just something to pass the time until I go off to school?"

"What? No. Don't be stupid."

I cross my arms in front of my chest. "Then why would you even be thinking about when I'm gone?"

"Because you will be!" he roars. "I don't *like* it, but the fact of the matter is you're going to go off to some prestigious university and find your Prince Charming—and I'll be left here. Without you."

"Yeah, that's one possibility, but it's not the only one."

His brows furrow, and a dry laugh leaves his mouth. "Please, enlighten me."

"You could come with me."

"Follow you like a little fucking puppy? No thanks."

I throw up my arms exasperatedly. "No, you dense prick. You could stop

fucking around at school and actually do your work. You could get your grades up, take the SATs, and go to college—instead of letting life trample all over you.”

“I’d never get into the places you’re looking at.”

“Maybe not, but there are tons of schools you *could* get in that are near the ones I’m considering.”

“That’s a whole lot of work for some chick. Why would I do that?”

My shoulders sag in defeat. “Because this *chick* happens to be falling in love with you.”

The confession is not one I expected to make, but that doesn’t make it any less true. Knox’s eyes widen, and for a second, I start to regret not keeping it to myself. After a minute of being completely silent, the vulnerability in his eyes is clear as day.

“Don’t say it if you don’t mean it,” he pleads.

My whole body relaxes, and I place myself in his lap. “I’ve never meant anything more.”

KNOX

I LIE AWAKE IN BED, NOT ABLE TO FALL BACK ASLEEP IF MY LIFE DEPENDED ON it. The nightmare I had plays through my mind on a loop. It was the same memory, only with a sick twist. As I stood there, staring at Grayson, everything changed. Instead, it was Cal hovering over the dead body, and it was Delaney lying at his feet. I don't think I've ever been so relieved to wake up in my life.

No part of me wanted to tell Delaney anything about where my head's been at. The last thing I need is another reason why I'm not good enough for her. However, as she went to leave, especially in the middle of the night, I knew I'd do anything to get her to stay. I've been going to training and even fought the other night to make up for the one I missed, but I don't know where Cal's head is at. For all I know, he could hurt Delaney just to get back at me.

I think back on the conversation she and I had before she fell back asleep—the confession she made that basically killed me and brought me back to life all in the same breath. Once, while drunk, Hailey told me something similar. My reaction was to kick her out of my house and not talk to her for over a week, until she swore it was just alcohol-induced stupidity and she didn't mean it. However, hearing it slip from Delaney's lips was something entirely different. I *wanted* her to mean it, hoped and fucking prayed that she wouldn't take it back.

Her idea for me to go away to college with her is a far-fetched one. My grades could be worse, but they're not good by any means. Still, I can't help but think what life would be like if that were possible. Our own place. Movie nights on the couch. Her helping me study and me getting a stable job after I

graduate. It's never been something I allowed myself to think about, but what if it isn't such a hopeless dream?

HALFWAY THROUGH THE MORNING, after Delaney cooked us both breakfast, the two of us are hanging out in my bedroom when she gets up and excuses herself. I don't think much of it, being too sucked into the video I'm watching on my phone, but as she comes back, I stop. She's wearing a silk robe I didn't even know she had and holding a wrapped present.

"I was going to give you this yesterday, but then you probably wouldn't have come to the party," she explains.

I take the box from her and place it on my lap, noting how heavy it is. She stays standing the whole time and watches me intently. I can tell she's nervous by the way her gaze refuses to meet mine.

As I pull off the wrapping paper, the plain box gives nothing away. It isn't until I open it, however, that the whole world manages to get a little brighter. Inside is a top-of-the-line tattoo gun, with all the necessary needles and inks to go with it. This thing must have put her back at least a few grand. I look up at her with nothing but pure astonishment.

"You listened."

She smiles. "I listen to everything you say."

I get up, grabbing her face and kissing her in a way that shows my gratitude. I'll never be able to repay her for this, but fuck if I'm not going to make sure she knows how much I appreciate it.

I pull her in close and breathe in her intoxicating scent. "You're incredible. Thank you."

She hums but still looks nervous as she backs away. "That was only the first part of your present." Her hand presses on my chest, and I fall back onto my bed.

"What's the second?"

Her fingers slowly untie the silk belt, and she allows the robe to slide off her shoulders, pooling on the floor. She stands there in black lingerie, looking sinful as hell and making me question what I did to deserve such a fucking temptress. However, nothing could prepare me for the words that come out of her mouth.

“I want to be your first victim. I want you to tattoo me.”

My face splits into a wide grin. “Jesus Christ. Corruption looks so fucking good on you.”

AFTER SETTING EVERYTHING UP, which may have been delayed by my need to take full advantage of Delaney’s outfit, I sketch out the tattoo she wants. It’s a pair of angel wings, delicate and petite—just like her. I couldn’t think of anything more fitting if I tried.

I clean the spot right beneath her collarbone and place the stencil. She stays perfectly still on my bed as she looks at it in the mirror. Once she nods, I get everything ready to permanently mark her flawless skin.

“Is it going to hurt?”

I attach the needle and pour the ink into the ink-cap. “Well, it doesn’t tickle.” Ready to start, I turn toward her and stop. “Do you trust me?”

The corners of her mouth raise, despite her nervousness. “For the most part.”

I smirk, and the buzzing of the gun fills the air as I start the machine. Delaney braces for impact, flinching only slightly when the needle touches her for the first time. She hisses in pain, but I keep my attention solely focused on what I’m doing. The last thing I want is for her first tattoo to come out looking like shit.

“So, this may be the wrong time to bring this up, but there’s this gala my parents throw every year. It benefits a bunch of different charities, though it’s really just a way for my dad to make himself look good. My older sister will be coming for it, and my whole family is going to be there, and I totally understand if you say no. I know it’s not your scene. It’s not even really my scene, but—”

Pausing for only a second, I kiss her quickly to cut her off. “You’re rambling, babe.”

She sighs. “Will you come with me?”

Admittedly, the last thing I want to do is spend a perfectly good night sucking up to a bunch of assholes who think they’re better than everyone else simply because they have money. However, the fact that Delaney wants to introduce me to the rest of her family is not lost on me. And besides, it could

be another way to piss off her dad—which is something I have come to truly enjoy.

“When is it?”

“Next weekend,” she answers shyly.

I can’t help but laugh. “Damn, Bambi. Way to give me notice.”

“Shit, you’re right. Forget I asked.”

Shaking my head, I force her gaze to meet my own. “Of course, I’ll be there.”

I finish up the tattoo, adding a little white ink to highlight it in all the right places. By the time that I’m done and turn off the machine, she sighs in relief. I help her up and she goes over to the full-length mirror on my door. In a way that I didn’t know was possible, she looks even hotter with ink embedded into her skin. Her face lights up as she checks it out and then turns to me.

“What do you think?”

Pulling off the gloves and chucking them into the garbage can, I pin her against the wall. “I *think* you’re the best thing in my life, and you’re fucking gorgeous.”

THE NEXT DAY, I’M just stepping out of the shower when Delaney comes back from her run to the store. I had insisted on going with her, but she refused. Something about not wanting me to stop her from whatever she was planning on doing. It didn’t sound very safe, and her words did nothing to put me at ease, but I let it go. Hearing her walk back through the door, however, all the tension leaves my body.

“Have fun?” I ask.

She looks me up and down, noticing I’m only in a towel. “I’m having much more fun *now*.”

I chuckle softly. There’s no secret that I’ve turned her into a sex-addicted little monster. She’s completely insatiable, not that I’m complaining. I’d spend every second of my life inside of her if I could. Unfortunately, she swears that having a life that only ever consists of each other is unhealthy. I disagree.

Delaney pulls a pill bottle from her pocket and hands it to me. “They’re sleeping pills. My doctor said to take one every night, but to make sure you

have a full eight hours to sleep. After about two weeks, your body should get back into the routine of sleeping on a normal schedule.”

“How did you get these?”

She shrugs. “I may have lied and told him I have insomnia. He did a couple tests but there’s really no way for him to tell. He just has to take my word for it.”

“You...” I look down at the pills in disbelief. “You did all that, for me?”

She rolls her eyes, coming closer and wrapping her arms around my waist. “When are you going to get it through that thick skull of yours? I’d do *anything* for you.”

DELANEY

WALKING INTO THE BOUTIQUE WITH TESSA, I'VE NEVER BEEN MORE EXCITED, yet more nervous, for one of these galas. I had hoped Knox would agree to come with me, but I honestly thought he was going to tell me no. A high-class soiree like that is the bane of his existence. While I know it's nothing like his usual scene, I'm so glad he'll be by my side.

"I still can't believe you got him to agree," Tess says in disbelief.

I chuckle softly. "What can I say? I can be quite persuasive."

"Okay, there are just some things in this world that I *don't* need to know."

Smacking her arm lightly, we walk up to the counter. Annabel, the sales rep who has been working here for years now, is too focused on her phone to notice we're here. My sister fakes a cough to get her attention and laughs as the poor girl jumps.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't hear you come in."

I give her a sweet smile. "It's okay. We're here for—"

"Dress fittings for the annual gala, of course," she cuts me off. "Right this way."

As we step into the room, the two dresses hanging on the wall are breathtaking. Every year, our parents have the stylist pick out what we're going to wear, and she never disappoints. Unsurprisingly, it's the exact same dress for both of us, only in different colors. Hers is a sparkly black while mine is more of a silky, pale pink. It's an accurate play on our personalities, that's for sure.

We both get changed and stand on the platforms, allowing the two seamstresses take their measurements and pin the places that need to be adjusted. As she has me turn, Tess glances over at me and her eyes widen.

“Is that a tattoo?” she balks.

“Maybe.”

“Maybe nothing. You got a fucking tattoo! When?”

I shrug. “Knox did it over the weekend.”

Her jaw drops. “You let that boy come near you with a needle?”

“Well, yeah.” My eyes roll. “I got him the whole set-up for his birthday, and I was the first person he used it on. You know, before he started doing touchups on himself.”

I can’t help but laugh at the memory. I had come back into the room to see him adding ink to the spots on his arm that faded a little too much for his liking. His bottom lip was pulled between his teeth and his brows furrowed as he concentrated on what he was doing. It was hot as hell.

“Who are you and what have you done with my sister?” She shakes her head. “I can’t believe you let him do that.”

“Let who do what?” A voice I never expected to see here sounds from the door, and I turn my head to find our older sister, Ainsley.

Her long, blonde hair is a stark difference to mine and Tessa’s. As usual, her makeup is done perfectly, and her outfit is stylish yet modern. Ainsley has always been the one to take full advantage of our parents’ money, especially after leaving for college and being given her trust fund early—a present for never doing anything wrong in her life.

“Oh my God, you’re home early!”

She smiles brightly and comes over to give me a hug. “Look at you two, all grown up and gorgeous.” Turning to Tess, she gives her a teasing grin. “I hear you’ve been giving Dad a hard time.”

Tessa giggles. “Don’t I always?”

“One day you’re going to realize it pays off to be on his good side.”

“No, it pays off for *you* to be on his good side. Me? Well, I was doomed from the start. And besides, what’s the fun in that?”

Ainsley masks her disapproval, knowing getting through to Tessa has always been a lost cause. “And what about you?” she asks me. “Are you at least staying out of trouble?”

I go to open my mouth when Tess snorts. “No. She’s dating the worst of them all.”

“Tess!”

“What? It’s true. Easton could beat Knox out for Dad’s approval any day of the week.”

Ainsley's brows raise. "You're dating someone?"

"Not just someone," Tessa continues to overshare. "A tattooed, drug-doing delinquent with a criminal record."

I narrow my eyes at my twin. "Seriously? Must you?"

She laughs. "I wouldn't be me if I didn't."

Shaking my head, I focus back on Ainsley. "His name is Knox, and he's good to me—despite all the things Tess just mentioned. He's coming to the gala this weekend. You'll get to meet him."

"Do I get to give him that cliché *you hurt my sister and I'll kill you* speech, too?"

I try to ignore the face Tessa makes at even the idea of Ainsley threatening Knox. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know how that one will go, but hopefully, for the sake of appeasing my sister, I can get him to at least act intimidated.

"I wouldn't expect anything less."

We get done and take off the dresses, careful not to get pricked by any of the pins. Once we're finished putting our clothes back on, we wave goodbye to Annabel and head out the door. I pull my sunglasses from my head and put them over my eyes.

"So, are you two heading back to school, or do you want to go get lunch?"

It only takes one look for Tessa and me to answer in unison. "Lunch."

As we're walking down the street and toward one of my favorite Italian places, Tess smirks.

"Hey Ains, did you hear Delaney got a tattoo?"

THE NEXT DAY, I'M going through what seems like boyfriend withdrawals. Since it was Ainsley's first night home, Dad insisted on all of us spending the night together as a family. Thankfully, both my sisters kept their mouth shut about my new tattoo. If I don't cover it with some kind of heavy make up for Saturday, however, he's going to see it. The black ink sticks out against my pale skin.

Knox and I texted all yesterday evening, but he took his sleeping pill at nine, and I haven't heard from him since.

“Going over to see Easton?” I ask Tessa as we get out of the car at school, and she nods. “I’ll come with you.”

“Aw, look at you. Missing your boyfriend and what not.”

“Shut up.”

The two of us walk across the street, ignoring the looks we get from our fellow students. They should be used to this by now. I’ve been doing it for over a month now, and Tessa has been doing it all year. This stupid rivalry between the two schools is a little out of hand.

As we walk up to the guys, Knox and Zayn are noticeably absent. Easton, Gage, and Stone all seem to be in some intense conversation. Tessa and I glance at each other before approaching them.

“Okay, what’s got you three gossiping like teenage girls?”

Easton pulls Tessa close and kisses her. “Knox is at school.”

Tess’s brows furrow. “Babe, Knox is always at school.”

He shakes his head. “No, like he’s actually participating in school. He’s been going to class and doing his homework. Stone asked him to skip first this morning, and he said no. He never says no.”

I can’t help but smile as I drop my gaze to the ground. Still, I can feel my sister’s eyes on me.

“Is that so? Well, good for him. Maybe he’s not such a lost cause after all.”

They change the subject, but my mind stays on Knox. After our conversation, the night he woke up screaming, it hasn’t been brought up again. I thought he had just brushed it from his mind, but apparently, I was wrong. *Very wrong.*

The warning bell rings, making Tessa and I say goodbye and head back to Haven Grace Prep. As we’re crossing the street, she nudges me with her elbow.

“Look at you, taming the monster.”

KNOX

THEY SAY GETTING ANYTHING DISTINCTIVE ABOUT A SIGNIFICANT OTHER IS bad luck. A name. A portrait. A date. It's all practically a guarantee that your relationship is fucking doomed. And still, when Delaney came to me with an idea, I couldn't resist. Permanently branding this girl has become my new favorite hobby.

I push the hair away from behind her ear, tracing over the K stencil in white ink. It's small, and with the lightness of her skin tone, you can hardly notice it, but we'll know it's there.

"You know this is a horrible omen, right?" I tell her. "Like it's pretty much telling the universe to make us fail."

She rolls her eyes. "Says the guy choosing to put it on his ring finger."

I chuckle. As soon as she mentioned getting each other's initials in white ink, I immediately knew where I wanted mine. I may not be able to exchange the sentiment she did the other night, but there's one thing I'm sure of, and that's her. Her initial will be the first claim she has on that finger, but certainly not the last.

"And, done." Holding up my phone, I take a picture so she can see it.

A bright smile spreads across her face. "It's perfect."

I switch out the needle and hand her a pair of gloves. She watches carefully as I explain to her how to use the machine. I place the stencil of the D she wrote in her handwriting on the inside of my finger. As she brings the tattoo gun toward me, I see it again—that fire in her eyes. I can't look away as I watch her brand me for life.

TUXEDOS HAVE NEVER BEEN my favorite thing. To be honest, I'd rather wear literally anything else. How it clings to my body. The way the tie feels like a noose around my neck. They didn't get the name "penguin suit" for nothing. However, if this is what it takes to make Delaney happy, so be it.

"Okay, hold still," Grayson says, adjusting my tie.

I stand in the middle of his bedroom, noticing it's about half the size of my whole house. When I was trying to figure out what I'm supposed to wear to something like this, I figured what better person to ask than his rich boy ass? He told me anything less than a tuxedo wouldn't even be allowed in the door. Thankfully for me, him and I are about the same size so he was able to lend me his.

"Thanks again for this," I tell him.

"Don't worry about it. What are friends for?"

I snort. "I told you, Pretty Boy, w—"

He waves me off dismissively. "Yeah, yeah. I know. We're not friends. I have to be at least somewhat winning you over, though."

Side-eyeing him, I can't hide my amusement. "You're becoming easier to tolerate."

Once he's done, I turn to check myself out in the mirror. It's weird, looking like this. The last time I was anything close to this dressed up, I was twelve, and it was for my grandfather's funeral. My nerves were a lot easier to control then.

I've never really been afraid of much, except maybe the man who could put a bullet in my head without even flinching. However, knowing I'll be meeting the rest of Delaney's family tonight, I feel like I'm going to throw up. Her dad already hates me, and while his opinion isn't one I'm too bothered about, the idea of the rest of her family feeling the same way doesn't sit well. If enough people say it, Delaney may realize the truth—she's way too good for me.

"Wow," Savannah says as she comes in the room. "Look at you! You clean up nice."

"Watch it," Grayson growls, and she laughs in response.

"Easy, caveman." Looking me over again, she purses her lips. "Ah, I've got it."

She goes into the other room and comes back with a comb. I hold my

hand up to stop her from coming near me.

“No fucking way. I draw the line at screwing with my hair.”

The two of them chuckle, and Savannah sighs in defeat as she tosses the comb onto the dresser. I take a deep breath, trying to get a hold of myself before going over to Delaney’s, but it’s no use. I must look as nervous as I feel, because Savannah can’t contain herself.

“Oh my God. I never thought I’d see you this worked up over a girl.”

I roll my eyes playfully. “That’s enough out of you. Hayworth, get a muzzle on her.”

“Are you kidding? She’ll kick my ass.”

Sav grins, and as she does, Grayson looks at her like she hung the damn moon. Even being around the two of them is like living in a goddamn chick flick. If I don’t get out of here, there’s no telling what sappy ass thing they’ll do next.

“Alright, I better go.”

“Good luck!” Savannah shouts as I head out the door and down the stairs, ignoring the squeal that leaves her mouth the second I’m gone.

No part of me wants to know what Grayson did to cause that noise.

Walking across the street to Delaney’s house, my heart is pounding inside of my chest. When she asked me to come with her, I never thought I’d feel like *this*. It’s a silent alarm, telling me just how much this girl truly means to me—something frightening enough all on its own.

The second that my girlfriend opens the door, however, all thoughts and fears dissipate. Beautiful doesn’t even begin to describe her. She’s angelic. Perfect to a fault. If I could imagine my ideal woman, it wouldn’t even come close to her. She’s something else.

The light pink dress hugs her body like a second skin, showing off all her flawless curves. Her hair is down and curled, with her makeup professionally done. The diamond necklace probably costs more than my house, but damn does it look good on her.

“Wow,” I breathe, letting my eyes graze over her once more. “You look... Wow.”

She giggles at my lack of the ability to speak right now. “Thanks. Let me get my clutch and we’ll go.”

After disappearing into the house for a second, she comes back out with a small bag that matches the color of her dress. She hands me her keys, and the two of us walk toward her car. I know she mentioned her dad usually rents a

limo for tonight, but there was no chance of him allowing me in it with her, so she opted to drive there instead.

As I pull out of the driveway, I follow the directions coming through the GPS. Delaney reaches across the car and laces her fingers with mine. It's a simple move, but one that helps drastically in calming me down.

"You look really good," she tells me.

I glance over at her and snicker. "Me? There aren't enough words to describe how you look right now." When she smiles down at the ground, I change the subject. "So, what should I know about the people I'm meeting tonight?"

"Well, my older sister, Ainsley, she's going to try to sound threatening."

"Threatening?"

She nods. "The whole *hurt my sister and I'll kill you* thing. Just try to act intimidated even though I know you won't be."

"Got it," I chuckle.

"Tessa will be there, but Easton refused to come. He's going to be at Stone's party so you're on your own there."

"You mean, CBP isn't going to threaten me, too?"

Delaney smirks. "Does she need to?"

Laughter bubbles out of me. "Touché. Okay, who else?"

"My Aunt Geneviève still treats me like I'm nine, so ignore the way she talks to Tessa and me. My Aunt Franchesca and Uncle Toby don't talk much. They probably won't say anything more than a polite hello to either of us. And lastly, my Uncle Dom. He's the best, you'll love him."

"He's your favorite, I'm guessing?"

She nods. "He's the fun uncle. The one who buys us all the best presents for Christmas and has been sneaking Tessa alcohol since we were sixteen."

Sounds like my kind of guy. "So, not everyone in your family has a stick up their ass?"

Swatting my arm, she smiles and shakes her head. "No. That's pretty much just my dad, and maybe my sister. She's always been the one to idolize him."

The car ride goes quiet, and I can tell she has a lot on her mind. I do, too. It's no secret to either of us that we're from two totally different worlds—hell, even our schools are completely against each other—but somehow, we work.

Just as I pull up to the valet, Delaney squeezes my hand and turns to me.

“Promise me one thing?” The fear in her eyes is enough to get my full attention. “That you won’t run.”

I lean across the center console, placing my hand on her cheek and kissing her softly. “I promise.”

THE GALA ISN’T NEARLY as bad as I thought it would be. There’s free drinks, delicious food, and even Delaney’s father appears in a good enough mood to not kill me tonight. Ainsley, poor fucking woman for having a name like that, does her best to try to scare me with her empty threats, while Tessa stands behind her trying not to laugh at my attempt of looking scared.

I’m on the dance floor with Delaney, swaying back and forth with my girl in my arms, and life doesn’t get better than this. For once, I don’t care about the differences between us or feel like she might realize how much better off she’d be without me. All that matters is the way her body molds against mine right now.

Three little words sit at the forefront of my mind, perching themselves on my tongue and threatening to jump out if I so much as open my mouth. Maybe that wouldn’t be a bad thing. I’ve been around her enough to know the feeling is mutual. It’s clear in the way we are together. However, just as I’m about to let them slip out, she gasps.

“Uncle Dom is here,” she says excitedly, grabbing my hand and pulling me with her. “Come on, you’re going to love him.”

I allow her to drag me, focused entirely on how eager she is to show me off—like I’m not the train wreck I constantly feel like I am. As we get closer to the man I’m guessing is her uncle, there is something horrifyingly familiar about the back of his head. When he turns around, my blood runs ice cold.

“Knox, this is my Uncle Dom,” she introduces. “Uncle Dom, this is my boyfriend, Knox Vaughn.”

He puts out his hand with a look that sends chills down my spine. “Dominic Callahan. Nice to meet you.”

All the pieces fall together like a fucking puzzle as the familiar icy blue eyes pierce into my soul. The same ones that show pride every time I win a fight. The ones that have glared at me when I didn’t do as he said. Cal isn’t short for Calvin or Callum, like I thought. It’s short for Callahan.

Dominic Callahan.

KNOX

I NEVER UNDERSTOOD HOW GRAYSON FELT SO STRONGLY FOR SAVANNAH THAT he would literally kill to protect her. There was nothing in my life that was important enough to risk everything for. But lying here, watching Delaney sleep soundly next to me, I know one thing for sure. I'd slaughter the whole damn world to keep her safe.

The second I learned Cal is Delaney's uncle, two things became crystal clear. One, that he's fucking certifiable, willing to hurt his own niece to get what he wants. And two, how easy it would be for him to do it if needed.

Sliding down until I'm lying beside her, I roll over and wrap my arm around Delaney. Instinctively, she moves closer into me. I know what I need to do, but fuck is it going to hurt like hell.

SHE LOUNGES OUT ACROSS the couch, with her feet on my lap, looking like she doesn't have a care in the world. I swallow down the lump in my throat. If I don't do this now, who knows what could happen.

"Bambi, we need to talk."

Her eyes meet mine, and the smile falls off her perfect face. "Okay?"

I slide her feet off my lap. "I don't think we should see each other anymore."

At first, she laughs—like this is some kind of sick joke. Trust me, I wish it was. However, when she sees I don't have the same humorous look on my face as she does, she stops.

“That’s not funny.”

“I’m not trying to be.”

She sits up with a lurch. “Where is this coming from? We were fine. We... The gala.”

“Laney,” I sigh, but she’s already tearing up.

“You promised.”

Looking at her, watching as her heart shatters, I feel it too. The pain in my chest is worse than anything I’ve felt in my life. Worse than when my dad left. Worse than any fight I’ve been in. It’s excruciating, but this is what’s best for her—even if she doesn’t know it. She’s going to need someone to hate for this, and that someone might as well be me.

“You deserve better than me.”

She shakes her head. “Don’t give me that shit. That’s for *me* to decide, not you.”

“You do, you just don’t want to believe it.”

Wiping the tears from her face, she gets up and storms into my bedroom—stuffing her clothes into a bag. I lean against the doorway. Watching her is a cruel punishment, one that I should look away from, but I can’t. As she finishes, she turns to me. The devastation on her face is sure to haunt me in my sleep.

“Knox, don’t do this,” she pleads one last time. “I love you.”

Hearing those words, the honesty in them—they hit their target dead on. The last piece of me that was holding on snaps. I’m falling into a deep abyss, pieces of me floating around, never to be put back together again.

I drop my head. “You can’t love someone like me. The things I’ve done—things I still continue to do—they’re unforgivable.”

“I don’t care. I love you.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“But I do.” Stepping closer, she places her hand on my cheek. “I love you, Knox.”

My jaw clamps down to keep from repeating the words that are threatening to break out. There’s only one way to make this stick, and it’s sure to destroy us both. I grab her wrist and remove her touch.

“I don’t love you, Delaney,” I lie through gritted teeth, my face becoming stone to mask my emotions. “And I never will.”

She rips her wrist from my grasp like it burned her and pushes past me. The last thing I hear is the door slam before I collapse onto the floor, the pain

of heartbreak all consuming. *She's gone.*

THE ALCOHOL COURSING THROUGH my veins is comparable to putting a Band-Aid on a gaping wound—the effort is there but it's a pointless one. Even the pot I smoked did nothing to dull the constant ache inside my chest. My phone lies on the coffee table, with texts from Zayn left unread and calls unanswered. Three days have passed since I dropped an atomic bomb on my own life, and I still can't even breathe normally.

A pounding on the front door pulls me from my wallowing in self-pity.

"It's open," I shout, not wanting to get up.

Grayson steps inside, and his tough demeanor changes once he sees the state I'm in. "You look like shit."

"Thanks, fuckhead. Is that all you needed? You can go now."

"No, I can't." He looks me over and pulls the half-empty bottle of liquor from my grasp. "You've missed training the past two days. Cal isn't happy."

"Shit," I grumble.

I try to stand but end up on the ground, landing on my side with a thud. Grayson mutters a curse under his breath and comes to help me as I laugh. Once I'm on my feet and find my balance, I shove him away.

"Tell Delaney's precious fucking uncle that I'll make it up and to calm the hell down."

Confusion overtakes his expression. "What are you talking about? What does Delaney's uncle have to do with anything?"

"*Cal* is Dominic fucking Callahan." His jaw drops. "Yeah, I learned that when Laney introduced us at the gala on Saturday."

"Holy shit."

"I'm surprised you didn't know. Haven't you two been close since you were younger?"

He shakes his head. "We were for a few years, but our parents were never like that. And then I moved away for a while." I watch as it all clicks into place for him and he sighs. "So *that's* why you broke up with her."

"I needed to get her out of harm's way. Her being far away from me is the only way to do that."

"You really think he would hurt his own niece, though?"

“He’s already threatened her life,” I explain. “I can’t risk that. I’d never be able to live with myself if something happened to her because of me.”

He leans against the wall with his arms crossed in front of his chest. “Shit, man. I had no idea.”

Knowing his girlfriend is Delaney’s best friend, the urge to ask him a million questions is so strong it’s suffocating, but the answers won’t help any. I grab a bottle of water from the fridge and chug half of it, knowing I need to sober up. Once I’m done, I allow myself to ask one.

“Is she okay?”

Gray looks at me and the look on his face already tells me she’s not. He shrugs. “She’s upset. I think it’s mainly because she doesn’t understand, but she’ll get there. I’d probably avoid Savannah at all costs, though, if I were you.”

I wince. “She’s ready to kill me, isn’t she?”

Chuckling, he nods. “That’s putting it nicely. I’m pretty sure what she has in mind is a little less humane.”

“Fucking great.”

“Don’t worry about it now.” He takes a step toward me and puts out his hand. “Come on. Let’s go get some food in your system. Soak up some of that alcohol.”

I MARCH UP THE stairs and straight into Cal’s office. After spending the afternoon with Grayson yesterday, I only became angrier. The rage inside of me has been building for the last twenty-four hours, and the fight tonight is the perfect place to let it out. But first...

“Are you out of your goddamn mind?” I shout as soon as I walk through the door.

He smirks. “Well, it’s good to see you, too, boy.”

“You are one twisted prick. You’re *that* fucked up that you would threaten to hurt your own niece?”

The devious chuckle that comes out of him should intimidate me, but it doesn’t. “You stupid son of a bitch. I’d snuff out my own mother if it meant getting ahead. How do you think I got where I am today?”

He’s being sincere. This man spares no fucks for anyone else. A sick part

of me can admire that level of self-preservation: no one can hurt you if you don't allow yourself to care. However, I don't think I'd ever stoop as low as threatening my own flesh and blood.

“Yeah, well, joke's on you. I broke up with Delaney after the gala.”

His brows raise. “That doesn't mean you don't care for her.”

Closing myself off the best way I know how, I smirk. “I don't have the capacity to care about anyone. She was fun for a bit, but nothing more than a good fuck.”

I watch as he tries to get a read on me. Finally, laughter bellows out of him. “There may just be hope for you, yet.” He takes out two cigars and lights one before handing the other and a lighter to me. “I was surprised to see you with Delaney in the first place. Tessa seems more your speed.”

“Tessa is a fucking psychopath.”

He grins. “I know. That's why she's my favorite. She's got some spunk in her, that one. Not like Delaney. She's a weak little shit—takes after her mother.”

Listening him talk about her that way makes me want to level him, but I need to play my cards right. No part of him can see that every second without that girl by my side is an agonizing one. It's the only way to protect her from the one man who might have the ability to hurt her worse than me.

DELANEY

MY ALARM GOES OFF, PULLING ME FROM THE ONLY PLACE I'M STILL ABLE TO be with Knox—my dreams. It's pathetic, I know, to still want someone who broke my heart into so many tiny pieces. Honestly though, I blame myself more than I blame him. Everyone warned me what kind of guy he is and I didn't listen. I brought this on myself.

Getting dressed and ready for school, I don't even bother to do anything with my hair other than throwing it into a messy bun. Once I'm done, I go downstairs to the kitchen.

"Good morning, Sunshine," Tessa greets me, being overly nice like she has been for the past week.

"It's way too early for this," I groan, but she doesn't care.

She comes over and places a to-go cup on the counter in front of me. "I made you coffee."

"Okay, *this* is why God gave me a twin. Thank you."

"Glad I'm good for something," she quips as the doorbell rings. "That's Sav. Let's go. You don't want to be late."

If it weren't for Tess and Savannah, I probably would have ended up not going to school at all. No part of me was motivated to do anything except sit on my bed and try to make sense of where the hell we went wrong. Valedictorian would have been out the window, but at the time, I didn't care.

What's confused me the most is Knox's absence from just about everything. Easton told Tessa that he hasn't been at school since the Friday before the gala, and all Zayn's heard from him was that he needed some time. No matter how much I wrack my brain, I can't figure it out. *He* dumped *me*, and yet he's acting like he has something to mourn the loss of.

The ride to school is filled with my sister and my best friend fawning over me like a broken child who needs put back together, when really, I'd rather they just leave me alone. Having to listen to them repeat the same thing Knox said when he ended us—it's infuriating.

"Feel like having breakfast during first?" Sav questions as we walk around the school to meet Grayson and the rest of the guys.

I shake my head. "I'm not hungry."

She sighs. "You haven't been hungry for over a week. Are you at least eating *something* every day?"

Rolling my eyes, I'm about to answer her when a familiar car catches my eye. Only, it's not the driver that has my stomach churning, it's who's in the passenger seat. As Stone goes to turn into the parking lot of NHH, Knox's gaze meets mine, and I'm completely frozen. A part of me expects to see some remorse, maybe even a little pain, but there's nothing. His eyes are as cold and empty as the arctic.

He looks away and down at his lap, and I'm right back to where I was a week ago.

"Delaney?" Savannah presses the subject.

"Yes," I snap. "Okay? Yes, I've been eating. Just get off my back already!"

Ignoring the shocked looks on my friends' faces, I walk away and into the school. I shouldn't be taking it out on her. I know she's just trying to help. But what she and Tessa aren't realizing is there *is* no way to help. Not with this.

I'M SITTING IN THE courtyard, despite the fact that it's only March. Luckily, my sweatshirt is enough to keep me warm. The sound of the birds starting to chirp and the sun shining, it's peaceful.

"This seat taken?" Grayson asks.

I give him a sad smile and he sits down next to me. "If you're going to lecture me for yelling at Savannah, don't bother. I already feel like an ass for it."

He shakes his head. "Nah, I'm not worried about that. Even she knows how overbearing she can be sometimes."

“She’s just trying to help.”

“Yeah, but it’s not really helping, is it?”

I bite my lip to try to hold back the tears, but it’s no use. Grayson wraps his arm around me and pulls me in close, comforting me as I break down for what must be the millionth time since last weekend. I don’t want to cry while at school, but I didn’t want Knox to break up with me either so it is what it is.

“You...”

“I swear to God, if you say I deserve better than him, I will punch you straight in the jugular.”

He chuckles. “I was going to say you are going to be okay, but I think I’ll just leave it at I’m here if you need me.”

“Sorry,” I giggle halfheartedly. “I’ve just heard enough of the clichés. *You deserve better than him. You don’t need him. He’s no good for you.* I’m just tired of hearing it.”

“Is there anything you aren’t tired of hearing?”

Thinking for a second, I get an idea. “You’re friends with him, aren’t you?”

He tilts his head from side to side. “Friends might be a bit of a stretch, but we’re all right. Why?”

“I just can’t seem to figure out why he did it. How he went from tattooing our initials on each other to breaking up with me a few days later. No matter what I do, it doesn’t make sense.”

His eyes widen. “I’m sorry, you did what now?” I turn and point to behind my ear, where the K is permanently inked into my skin. “Wow. That’s...wow.”

“He has a D on the inside of his ring finger.”

“Laney, that’s intense.”

I sigh. “I know. Don’t tell Savannah. She’ll start looking up removal places, and I’m not sure I’m ready for that.”

“Fair enough.” He gets up and holds out his hand. “But can you please come inside? I’ll try to figure out what I can about Knox if you do.”

It’s too tempting of an offer to pass up on, being as Tessa is a vault and won’t tell me a thing. She said that it’s not healthy for me to want to know, and all she’s heard is that Knox won’t let them even say my name. Therefore, I’ll take what I can get.

THE WEEK PASSES AS slow as the last one, and by the time Friday comes, I'm no less of a train wreck than I have been. All of Grayson's efforts have come up with exactly what Knox said originally—that we're just not compatible. It's a cop-out, if you ask me. Total bullshit.

As I walk down the stairs, the sound of Tessa talking to someone catches my attention. I stay where I am and listen in, hearing her talk to Easton, I'm guessing, about a party they're going to tonight. It only takes a second before I'm running back up the stairs and jumping in the shower.

Within a half hour, I'm dressed and ready to go. I race down the steps just as Tess is about to walk out the door. Her eyes widen when she sees me, until she puts the pieces together.

"No, absolutely not."

"Either I'm coming with you, or I'm showing up on my own. Regardless, I'm going."

She groans. "Delaney, it's not a good idea."

"None of this has ever been a *good idea*. You've said that from the get-go."

"Yeah but," she pauses. "He's...different. None of us know what's gotten into him lately."

I'm not sure exactly what she's insinuating, but I know it's meant to deter me from going. Whatever it is, I'll handle it. He doesn't get to control my life. Not anymore.

"Let's go," I tell her, slipping past her and out the door.

She exhales and mumbles something about making a big mistake, but follows behind anyway.

THE MUSIC BOOMING THROUGH the house sends a buzz through my body. In a way, it helps me let go. All the times I've been at these things, my eyes have always been on Knox, but not tonight. Now that I look around, I notice all the other guys here and how some of their eyes stay trained on me. What's that saying? The best way to get over someone is to get under someone else?

Tessa watches as I smile at someone who winks at me, and her eyes roll. She grabs my wrist and pulls me with her into the kitchen and over to where

Easton is.

“I need a fucking shot,” she demands, slamming it back as soon as she gets her hand on one. “Thank you.”

“Laney,” Zayn says, clearly surprised to see me. “How’ve you been?”

“Good,” I lie. “What about you?”

He shrugs. “Same shit, different day.”

Subtly, he takes out his phone and starts sending a text to whom I can only assume is Knox. *Perfect*. I want him to know I’m here. I want him to watch as I move on—find someone else who’s “no good for me.” If he feels only a fraction of the pain I’ve felt the past couple weeks, I’ll consider tonight a success.

I walk around the counter and grab a beer from the fridge, but the second I pull it out, the door is roughly pushed closed and the bottle is ripped from my hand. Knox slams the beer onto the counter and turns to me with a fiery look in his eyes.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Struggling to ignore the way his cologne fills my senses, I do my best to stay strong. “Well, I was about to drink a beer before you so rudely interrupted.”

“No,” he growls. “What do you think you’re doing *here*? You don’t belong here.”

“Really? We’re back to that now?” He stays firm, making me scoff. “Well, last I checked, this isn’t your house.” I turn my attention to Zayn. “Are you going to kick me out?”

He raises both hands in surrender. “No way. Don’t pull me into that mess. I’m staying out of this one.”

I smile sweetly, grabbing the beer once again, popping it open, and bringing it to my lips. As I take a sip, I wink at Knox and walk past him. He throws his hands up in the air at Zayn, and I can’t help but laugh just a bit.

IF I THOUGHT HE was possessive on the night of my birthday, he’s fucking homicidal now. I can feel his eyes burning into the side of my head all night. I do my best to avoid looking his way, but the times I cave, he’s staring right at me with a deep scowl on his face.

“So, where are you looking to go for college?” the guy I’ve been talking to asks. Casey, or Cody—something with a C.

“I’m not sure. I was thinking maybe Columbia or Brown. I haven’t decided yet.”

His eyes widen. “Wow, Ivy League. Nice.” He looks around. “Do you want to step outside? Somewhere a little more private.”

I don’t. There’s nothing really appealing about his golden-boy vibe. I guess only the bad boys do it for me. Still, I know nothing will piss Knox off more than me going anywhere with this kid.

“Sure.”

He leads the two of us through the house and out onto the back deck. It’s beautiful out here at night, lit up by the moonlight and some Tiki torches Z lights for the people who can’t fit inside the house. Right now, though, it’s just him and me.

“Now that I can hear myself think,” whatever-his-name-is jokes.

I chuckle softly and lean against the railing. He comes closer and places his hands on either side of me. Just when he starts going in for a kiss, he’s ripped backward and slammed against the house. All I can see is the back of Knox’s shirt as he holds the guy in place with an arm to his throat.

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll get the fuck out of here and *never* go near her again. Do you understand me?”

He nods, looking scared enough to piss his pants, and I roll my eyes. The second Knox releases him, the kid takes off. *Fucking wuss.*

“Satisfied?”

His breathing is labored, and for the first time in a while, I see something more than an empty abyss in his eyes. “I don’t know what game you’re trying to play, but cut it the fuck out. Go home, Delaney.”

“No,” I hold my ground. “Not until you tell me what happened. We were *fine*—happy, even—and then you ended it, just like that. No warning. No explanation. Just squashed our relationship like a bug on the floor. Your life is completely unchanged while mine has been a fucking mess.” I’m getting emotional, which is what I wanted to avoid, but there’s no hope for that. I wrap my arms around myself. “Do I even cross your mind at all?”

He stays motionless, refusing to say anything. I exhale as I realize standing here with him is a lost cause. He’s never going to give me anything more than he already has.

“Whatever,” I mutter, walking around him and toward the house.

“No.” His voice sounds gravelly and I stop but don’t turn around. “You don’t *cross my mind*; you fucking live in it. It’s like you’ve taken up residence at the forefront of my brain.” He comes behind me until I can feel him pressed against my back. “There’s no getting rid of you. No drug that could ease the pain that came when I pushed you away. Believe me, you think I’m doing all right, but that couldn’t be further from the truth.”

“Then why?”

He rests his forehead against me and breathes in the smell of my hair. “It’s in your best interest. I’m doing this for *you*.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Do you trust me?”

The question alone stings more than anything he’s said all night. “I did.”

He swallows so hard I can hear it. “Then go home. Go to Savannah’s. Go *anywhere*, but stay away from here. Stay away from me, because fuck, Bambi, you’re too perfect to get pulled down into my mess.”

His words resonate in my brain, but no part of me accepts them. A tear escapes and slides down my cheek.

“I don’t want to. I only want *you*. Just let me love you—demons and all.”

For a second, his silence makes me think he actually might consider it, until every hope gets shot out of the sky with two simple words.

“I can’t.”

He steps away and the warmth goes with him, leaving me cold and alone. I turn around in hopes to find him still standing there, but he’s gone—along with the last part of me that was left unbroken.

KNOX

I SIT ON THE BENCH, WAITING FOR JACKSON TO COME IN AND HELP ME WARM up. Grayson is fucking around and hitting the punching bag while I sit, staring at the D that's been embedded into my skin. I knew it was a bad idea, but I didn't think the universe would be so quick to fuck me for it.

Seeing her last night at that party tested my patience in more ways than I thought possible. When Zayn texted me, telling me she was there, I assumed he was playing some sick joke or something. What I didn't expect was for her to go and deliberately flirt with someone right where I could see her. It was an effort to get a rise out of me, that much is clear. I know the faces she makes when she's intrigued or turned on, and the way she looked at him wasn't even close.

When Z and I watched her walk outside with him, he couldn't contain his laughter. I, however, had a sudden urge to shove Christian's face into the fucking pavement. He knows better than to go after what's mine, and what Delaney and I had is no secret to anyone. Therefore, I make no apologies for nearly choking him out. One shithead down, a million and six to go.

"Vaughn, you ready?" Jackson's voice booms into the room.

Standing up, I spare one last glance at the tattoo before he wraps both my hands. Usually, I dread coming here all the damn time. It's one thing to fight because you have some shit you need to sort out. It's another to be forced to do it. Tonight, however, I have plenty of pent-up aggression to take out on my undeserving opponent.

I CLIMB INTO THE ring, checking out the guy I'm up against this time. He's big, almost twice my size—which is probably why more than half this place bet that he's going to kick my ass, but you know what they say: the bigger they are, the harder they fall.

As soon as the bell sounds, he comes charging at me with full force. I jump out of the way, and when he bounces off the ropes, my fist connects with his face. I can feel his nose snapping against my knuckles. Blood immediately starts gushing, fueling his wrath.

The two of us move around, throwing our own punches while dodging the other's. When he lands one good hit to my jaw, my fury only grows.

"Picture your opponent as someone you hate. Someone you can't stand. Someone you want to hurt."

I replay Jackson's advice, feeling when it clicks. I close my eyes, which is a risky move on its own, and start pummeling hits into his face. In my mind, it's not some husky-looking guy I'm fighting—it's Cal. The one forcing me to be here. The reason I lost the only girl I've ever felt anything for. The girl who gave me hope. Nothing can stop me now.

Going into a blind rage, the next thing I know, I'm being pulled off the guy, who lies motionless on the ground. His blood covers every inch of my hands, along with most of my clothing. The crowd cheers in a sick and twisted way, but my eyes widen in horror as I realize he's not breathing.

I jump out of the ring and push my way out of the arena, not even waiting for the ref to announce me as the winner. Grayson follows closely. Once we step into the bathroom, he locks the door behind us.

Turning on the shower, I don't even get undressed before stepping into the stream. Gray helps take the tape off my hands and then leaves me alone to shower.

"I'll put your clothes on the bench."

He doesn't wait for my answer, mainly because he knows I won't be giving him one. He's been through this with me enough to know how it goes. He'll stay outside the door, making sure no one comes in, and wait for me to get done.

When I'm cleaned up and dressed in a fresh pair of sweats, I nod to Grayson, and the two of us head up to Cal's office. It's my least favorite part of the night. Having to watch the smug look on his face as he counts all the money he made—it makes me want to knock his teeth out.

"There's my boy!" he shouts as soon as I step in the room. "How are you

feeling? Looks like he got a couple good hits in there.”

“I’m fine.”

“Fine,” he repeats with a laugh. “You should be better than fine. You just took down someone twice your weight!”

I try to keep my cool, but it’s hard when all I want to do is get the fuck out of here. “Can I just get my money so I can go?”

“Not until you do the honors.” He grabs the Sharpie from his desk and hands it to me.

Okay, I lied before. *This* is my least favorite part of the night. I open the marker and walk over to the chart, feeling disgusted at the tallies next to everyone’s name. It’s a cruel and revolting way that Cal keeps track of all the lives taken in The Death Trap. Each one of the three tally marks next to my name make me feel like a monster.

My hand is like lead as it draws another mark with the others. Once I’m finished, I slam the Sharpie onto the desk and grab the money from Cal before running out the door. I barely make it to the garbage can before I’m hurling the contents of my stomach into it. Every life I take is another demon that haunts me. Another guarantee that I’m going to hell. And another reason Delaney is better off far as fuck away.

I WAKE IN THE morning, not realizing where I am until I take in the familiar room. A throbbing pain shoots through my head as I start to sit up. *What the hell happened last night and how did I end up here?* As if she could hear my thoughts, the door opens and Hailey walks through it.

“Oh, you’re awake,” she says.

I wince at the sound of her voice. “What am I doing here?”

She eyes me intently. “You don’t know?” I shake my head. “You showed up last night, drunk and high, rambling some nonsense about being a murderer.”

Her words make me choke on air, but as soon as I start coughing, I feel like I’m going to throw up again. I rush into her en suite bathroom and vomit into the toilet. She follows behind me and sighs as she leans in the doorway.

“Yeah, there was a lot of *that*, too. I’m guessing you had a bad batch of coke.”

I slouch against the bathtub, taking slow, deep breaths. Hailey grabs a washcloth and runs it under cold water before handing it to me. It feels good against my heated skin and makes me feel a little less disgusting.

“My head is fucking pounding.”

“There’s some medicine in the cabinet. I’ll go get you some water.”

As she leaves me alone, I try to recall what happened last night. The last thing I remember is demanding Grayson drop me off at some sketchy bar downtown. He had asked if I wanted him to come with me, but I refused. I just wanted to be alone.

“Here.”

I thank her quietly and take the bottle of water, swallowing down the pills and savoring the way the cold feels on my throat. It takes a minute for me to feel like I can move without the room spinning, but once I do, I get up and walk back into Hailey’s bedroom.

Looking around for my clothes, I find them draped over the chair. It’s then that it dawns on me and I feel even sicker than I did before.

“We didn’t...”

She follows my line of sight and chuckles. “No, definitely not. You started whining about feeling constrained or some shit, and took off your clothes. I picked them up so none got misplaced.”

I exhale in relief. *Well, at least there’s that.*

Hailey watches as I get dressed, and as soon as I’m done, I give her the best smile I can manage.

“Thanks for dealing with my ass.”

She laughs softly. “I’ve been doing it for how long? I’m used to it now.”

“Well still, thank you.”

I grab my phone off the desk and head for the door.

“Wait,” she calls. “Do you really have to leave so soon? We could hang out, like old times.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Getting up from her bed, she comes closer. “Why not?” Her hand rests against my chest. “I know you and the Virgin Mary broke up, so there’s no reason why we can’t go back to being us.”

“Hails, there are plenty of reasons,” I tell her.

“Like what?”

I move back to put some distance between us and her hand falls to her side. “A lot, but the biggest one is because that *Virgin Mary* is the best thing

to ever come into my fucked-up life, and I'm nowhere near over her yet."

I PULL INTO THE parking lot and shut off my motorcycle, climbing off and leaving the helmet on the handlebars. The guys are in the same place they usually are, but there's something different this time. As soon as I approach, they all look at me with disgust on their faces.

"What's going on?" I ask.

Zayn shakes his head. "Not fucking cool, Knox."

Shit, they fucking know. "Listen, I can explain. It's not my—"

"Save it," he snaps. "I don't know what the fuck happened between you two, but she didn't deserve that."

"She? Wait, what the hell are you talking about?"

"You know what!" Easton shoves me. "How many people did you send that picture to? Was it just our entire school or did you include HGP in the blast, too?"

Picture? What picture? As soon as I realize what they're talking about, everything goes completely still. The calm before the storm. The only picture I have of Delaney that's anything less than completely innocent is the one I took of my dick in her mouth—the one I was supposed to show Stone for the bet but kept to myself and paid him instead.

"You're messing with me," I say. Zayn takes out his phone and hands it to me. There it is in all its fucking glory. "I didn't send this."

"Really?" Gage questions sarcastically. "That's what you're going with?"

I toss the phone back to Z. "I swear, I didn't fucking send it! You really think I would do that shit? Hell, I paid Stone fifty bucks so that I didn't have to show it to *him*. Why the fuck would I send it around?"

They all exchange looks before Zayn sighs. "Well, if you didn't, who did?"

It only takes me a second to realize who could be responsible—the only person who has had access to my phone recently. Immediately, I storm through the doors of the school and toward her locker.

"Hailey!" I roar.

She turns to me with an arrogant grin on her face. "Oh, hey, babe. What's up?"

“What the *hell* did you do?”

“What do you mean?”

I slam my fists against the metal locker, making her flinch and caging her in. “Don’t play fucking coy with me. It’s not cute. I’m talking about the picture of Delaney.”

“Oh, that.” She smirks. “Looks like she’s not such a Virgin Mary after all.”

Everything in me wants to deck her, and if she wasn’t a girl, I wouldn’t hesitate. Unfortunately, I can’t. Not personally, anyway. Thankfully, though, I know of a psychotic and *protective* Callahan who will be more than happy to give this bitch what she deserves.

“You are a disturbed little cunt, and I can’t fucking wait until you get what’s coming.”

With that, I force myself to walk away and head straight for the front doors.

“Where are you going?” Zayn calls out, not bothering to stop me.

“To try and fix this shit.”

DELANEY

ALL WEEKEND, I CAN'T SEEM TO GET KNOX OUT OF MY HEAD—NOT THAT that's anything unusual. The way he acted at the party Friday night proved that things between us are far from over. Now, if only I could understand why he's so insistent on pushing me away. If I can figure that out, maybe there's hope for us after all.

AFTER GETTING READY IN the morning, I jump in my car and head to school. It took a lot of convincing, but I finally got Tess and Savannah to realize I don't need to be tended to every second of the day. Besides, seven in the morning is way too early to deal with both of them treating me like their doll.

My phone dings inside my purse, but I brush it off. I'll check it later. Right now, I just want to enjoy the small amount of time I have to myself. I listen to music, check my makeup, and try to get a handle on my mood before I end up breaking down again.

Maybe it's pathetic that it's been over two weeks and I'm still torn up about this, but I can't help it. I thought what he and I had was real. For the first time in my life, I had someone to call mine, and I genuinely fell in love with him for everything he is—despite the fact that he thinks he's some kind of scary monster. He was, and still is, my favorite person.

I pull into the parking lot and take a deep breath, grabbing my books from the passenger seat. There are barely any free spaces left, which means I'm

about to be running late, so I don't have time to mess around. I get out of my car and head inside.

The second I walk through the doors, everyone's eyes are on me. My brows furrow at the sudden silence. The only sounds are shared whispers.

Suddenly, a guy I've never met before comes up to me and whistles, checking me out and glancing between me and his phone.

"Damn, what would it take for me to get some of that?" he questions, biting his lip.

"Excuse me?"

Just when I'm about to ask what the hell he's talking about, Carter comes out of nowhere. He slams the kid up against a locker and rips the phone from his hand.

"Say one more word to her and I swear, I'll break your fucking face."

The device in his hand shatters as he spikes it onto the ground, and my eyes widen. However, before I even have a second to process what happened, Tessa and Savannah come on either side of me, looping their arms with mine and pulling me away.

"Don't worry," Sav tells me. "We're going to take care of this."

"Take care of what?"

The two of them share a look as they lead us into an empty classroom. When we're finally alone, Tessa shuts and locks the door. Then, she turns to me.

"You haven't seen it?"

"Seen what?" I snap at my sister. I'm getting really annoyed with never knowing anything.

She sighs and nods at Savannah, who takes out her phone and hands it to me. The picture on it is clearly of me, but I never knew it existed. I'm on my knees in Knox's bedroom, with my eyes shut and his dick in my mouth. *He didn't.*

It all hits me like a ton of bricks, and my chest tightens to the point where it becomes hard to breathe. There's only one person who could have taken that picture, meaning there's only one place it could have come from. *But why?*

"H-how many people have seen this?"

Tessa looks like she's ready to lose her shit while Savannah rubs her hand on my back. I know my sister isn't going to answer me, so I look to my best friend. She gives me a sad smile.

“We think it was sent out to everyone at both schools.”

The room spins and I think I’m about to be sick. “Everyone?” I gasp out.

Tess throws her water bottle across the room. “I swear to God, I’m going to fucking kill him.”

It’s only then I realize hundreds of my peers have seen me, *like that*. The only thing I can’t wrap my head around is what would motivate him to do this? On Friday, he made it sound like he was trying to protect me, but this is the total opposite. This is an emotional annihilation.

A commotion in the hallway pulls my attention to the door, and it only takes a second before I hear Knox’s voice. My entire body goes completely still, listening to what sounds like an argument between Grayson, Carter, and my ex. Despite Savannah pleading for me to stay in here, I open the door and step into the hallway.

“I didn’t fucking send it!” Knox shouts, Carter up in his face.

“No? So that *isn’t* your fucking dick? You’re not the one who took the picture? Is *that* what you’re saying?”

Being the arrogant little shit he is, he smirks. “Jealous, Trayland?”

Carter goes to hit him but Knox jumps back and dodges it. When he does, his eyes meet mine.

“Delaney!” he yells.

Grayson and Carter turn to me in shock, but my attention stays focused on the guy who has caused my heart to break in ways I didn’t even think possible.

“You need to leave.”

He tries to come closer, but Grayson puts his hand out to stop him. “Leave does not mean go over there.”

Knox gives him a nasty look but switches back to me. “You have to believe I didn’t send that. I would *never*.”

“Don’t give me that shit. You took the picture for some reason. What was it? An insurance plan? A joke between you and your friends?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It fucking does!” I shriek. “Why the fuck did you take the picture, Knox? Tell me.”

He drops his gaze and rubs the back of his neck. “Stone and I had a bet going,” he tells me, and I stagger slightly, the betrayal cutting deep. “But I swear, I didn’t show it to him! I kept it to myself.”

“Until now.”

“No. This wasn’t my doing. Hailey... she got ahold of my phone last night and—”

“Hailey?” I hiss. “You’ve got to be kidding me! So, you said all that bullshit about this break-up being for me, and then you went and hook up with your crazy ex-girlfriend? You are a piece of fucking work.”

He shakes his head. “Nothing happened. I was just drunk and high, and I crashed at her house. Come on. You have to know me better than that.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Pretty sure I never knew you at all.”

“Bambi,” he breathes.

The anger inside of me bubbles over, and I start to walk toward him. “No! I’m not your fucking *Bambi*. I’m not your girlfriend. I’m not even your friend.” I shove my index finger into the center of his chest. “You wanted to end us, right? Well, congratulations. Now I’m fully on board.”

I go to walk away when he grabs my wrist. “Delaney, please.”

The pain in his eyes is evident, the first sign of it I’ve seen since he took a torch to our relationship. Only this time, I don’t care. I yank myself from his grasp and turn to Carter and Grayson.

“Get him out of here.”

Ignoring his pleads and shouts for Gray and Carter to get his hands off him, I go straight back into the empty classroom. I used to think Knox Vaughn was the best thing in my life, but now he’s nothing but dead to me.

I SIT ON TOP of the picnic table in the courtyard, not wanting to be in the cafeteria where everyone is still talking about the picture of the year. It’s not every day that racy photos get sent around school, and certainly not of their potential valedictorian. Therefore, the further I can be from *that* gossip, the better.

“Mind if I join you?” Carter asks, taking the seat next to me as I scoot over. “How are you doing?”

I shrug. “As good as can be expected, I guess.”

He nods thoughtfully. “Well, I got Wyatt to send out a text that cleared everyone’s message history when they opened it. So, unless they saved the picture, it’s gone. And he’s going to be keeping an eye on it for the next few weeks.”

The effort is appreciated, but the damage is already done. Still, he's trying.

"Thank you," I tell him.

"I also really need to apologize."

I shake my head. "You don't. It's okay."

"I do. Jumping Knox like that, while it was well-deserved on his part, it was out of line. You were right. I was jealous."

"No, really?" The sarcasm drips from my lips.

He chuckles and nudges me with his elbow. "My feelings for you have never been a secret, but I don't think I've ever straight out said it." He turns his head to look at me. "I like you, Delaney. A lot."

The honesty is sweet, and while a part of me wonders what my life would be like if I had originally chosen Carter instead of Knox, the timing couldn't be more off. I may be ready to leave Knox in the past, but I'm definitely not ready to move on just yet.

"You're sweet, Carter, but I'm not—"

He holds his hands up. "You're not ready, I know. I can respect that."

The corners of my mouth raise. "You can?"

"Of course, but I hated when you were mad at me. So, are we good?"

I exhale. "Yeah, we're good."

The two of us spend all of lunch just goofing around, Carter doing his best to make me laugh. It's nice to be around him and not feel like I'm doing something wrong for once. Thoughts of Knox still manage to plague my mind, but I do my best to push them away.

By the time that the bell rings, I'm somehow feeling a little better. However, I know the second I go back into school, the stares and whispers will bring me right back to my problems. Carter must sense my hesitation, because he comes over and drapes his arm over my shoulders.

"Just stick with me. I won't let anything happen to you."

I smile up at him, knowing it's probably a horrible idea, but one I'm not in the position to turn down. Not right now.

KNOX

THREE WEEKS. TWENTY-ONE DAYS. FIVE HUNDRED AND FOUR HOURS. THAT'S how much time has gone by since I last heard from Delaney. Since the wounded look on her face and the words she yelled sliced right through me. No matter what I do, I can't get her out of my head.

Every morning, I wake up and hope to find a text from her in my phone. One I'd fight like hell to not answer, but it would still be something to let me know I'm on her mind. I find myself trying to catch a glance of her before I get to school, and when I do, I imagine the times when I was the reason for that perfect smile.

The worst, however, are the nights I dream she's still in my arms. That we're still happy together, before everything got so fucked up. When I wake, there's a split second when I think it's real—until the truth slaps me across the face.

Will I ever get over her? No, probably not. But do I still think this needs to be done? You're damn fucking right I do.

I'll set myself on fire before I ever let Cal lay a finger on her.

I DRIVE TO SCHOOL, the world looking a little less bright every day. As I pull into the parking lot, the urge to leave is strong. I can't bring myself to care about school. But I need to stay. If I went home every time I felt like it, I'd never graduate.

Walking up to my friends, I watch as Zayn pushes Easton's phone down

and away from me. The looks on their faces show that they're up to something. Whatever it is, we're not leaving here until they let me in on the damn secret.

"What's up?"

Stone plays it off well. "Not much, fucker. What's up with you?"

I shake my head. "You idiots are hiding something. What the fuck is it?"

"Knox, maybe it's better if you don't push this one," Zayn warns, but I don't listen.

"Someone better start fucking talking before I make you talk."

Easton sighs and hands me his phone. "Trayland posted a picture of Delaney."

I look down at the photo, feeling as pain rips right through me. There's nothing revealing or provocative about it. It's just a picture of Laney reading a book with the caption *Sunday chills* underneath it. However, it's enough to tell me that they spent yesterday together—and that stings.

"Hey, losers," Tessa greets us as she comes around the corner.

I arch a brow as I look at her. "What's going on between your sister and Carter Trayland?"

"No." She shakes her head. "That was part of the agreement. I didn't kick your ass for letting Hailey get ahold of that picture, but I will *not* talk to you about Delaney. No fucking way."

"Tess," I groan, but it's pointless.

"If you want to know something, go ask her."

"You know I can't do that."

She smirks. "Exactly."

The day that picture got sent around, Tessa showed up at my house and genuinely made me fear for my life. She gave the nickname CBP a whole new meaning as she stood there with an actual fucking Molotov cocktail, ready to burn my house to the damn ground with me inside. Thankfully, I was able to get through to her before she lit the thing.

When she managed to track down Hailey, however, there was nothing anyone could say to stop her from beating that girl to a pulp. My ex is good at fighting, don't get me wrong, but she didn't stand a chance against Tessa. A lesson was clearly learned that day—mess with Delaney, and you'll have her sister to answer to.

"Just tell me this, are they dating?"

She shrugs. "You'll have to ask her."

My jaw ticks, and to avoid the risk of flipping out on the wrong people, I mutter a few obscenities before storming away. *Fucking Carter.*

TRAINING IS SOMETHING I always used to dread, until the need for an outlet for my rage became greater than my conscience. Now, it's a welcomed part of my day. Sometimes I even come here when I'm not ordered to, just to give myself something to focus on. Every minute my mind is distracted by what punch I'm throwing or the target I'm hitting is a minute it's not overanalyzing every single move Delaney makes.

"Great work," Jackson tells me. "Go take five and hydrate."

I give him a fist bump before heading over to the bench where Grayson is sitting, messing around on his phone. As soon as I sit down, he glances over at me and his brows furrow.

"What's got you so fired up today?"

Chugging half a bottle of water, I wait until I'm done to answer him. "A certain douchebag."

He chuckles. "Ah, so you've become acquainted with Carter's social media."

"Yeah, it's real fucking funny, asshole," I growl. "You've got to give me something, because nothing is worse than what's going through my mind."

The unsure look on his face makes me wonder if he's going to tell me anything at all, but after a moment, he clicks off his phone and puts it next to him.

"All right, what do you want to know?"

I feel like a fucking teenage girl as I get excited at the idea of finally getting some answers. "What's going on between them?"

"*That* I don't know."

"Are they dating?"

He shakes his head and relief rushes through me. "Not yet, at least. Though I'm pretty sure that's all Delaney's doing."

It's been over a month since our split, and the fact that she hasn't moved on yet tells me she wasn't lying when she said she loved me. I don't know whether that makes me feel better or worse.

"Why? She just doesn't like him like that?"

Grayson shrugs. "I don't know."

I throw my head back and groan. "What the hell *do* you know?"

"Honestly? Not a whole lot. They joke around at school and hang out on the weekends. The only thing I'm sure about is Carter isn't playing around. He hasn't so much as looked at another girl since having Delaney's attention."

Fucking great. It's only a matter of time before that shithead wins her over and I'm left to deal with the consequences of seeing them together—all while still doing what I can to protect her. The problem is I can't protect her from Carter Trayland. I just hope I don't have to.

I NAVIGATE THE CROWDED hallways, wondering why the fuck everyone is gathered around the front of the school. It's the end of the day, so it's not unusual for people to be itching to get out of here, but normally they're all headed out the back doors. It isn't until I hear someone whisper something about Haven Grace Prep that I actually pay attention.

As soon as I push open the doors to step outside, the music being played by the band across the street gets louder. I push my way through all the students trying to get a glance at what's going on. Thankfully, no one tries to stop me. Once I get to the front, my friends turn to me with fear in their eyes.

"Knox, you really shouldn't see this." Zayn tells me, blocking my view.

I shove him out of the way and the sight in front of me stops me dead in my tracks. There's a stage set up in front of the school, with Sound the Sirens jamming out on it, but that's not what gets me. It's Carter standing on the stage with them as they play a perfectly in tune love song. Delaney stands front and center, watching him with a disbelieving smile on her face. When the music ends, Carter takes the microphone from Harland Storm, their lead singer, and in front of everyone, he focuses on Laney.

"Delaney Callahan, will you go to prom with me?"

She giggles, nodding her head yes and setting my whole world ablaze in a single moment.

"Knox." Z tries again by pulling at my arm.

"Get the fuck off me."

Carter must sense my eyes on him, because he looks over at me for a

second and grins deviously. He hops off the stage and walks toward the love of my life. I watch in slow motion as he places his hands on her cheeks and kisses her.

Every bit of rage I've ever felt pales in comparison to this. An angry red haze covers everything in my sight and I'm ready to lose it. Within seconds, I'm halfway across the street and ready to kill him with my bare fucking hands. My friends scramble to get a hold on me regardless of how much I fight them on it.

"Let me fucking go!" I roar, turning everyone's attention turn to me—including Delaney's.

Confusion and concern grace her face as she takes a step away from Carter and toward me, but I'm too focused on Zayn trying to push me back. Stone, Easton, and Gage all struggle to keep me held back while Zayn attempts to get through to me.

Doesn't he realize there's nothing he can say that will stop me?

"I swear to God, I'll kill you all if you don't get your fucking hands off me!"

"Listen to yourself," Z says with disgust.

"He fucking kissed my girl!"

He shakes his head. "She's not yours anymore, man. She's not."

It all happens so quick. Gage's hold on my right arm slips, and my vision blurs as I deck Zayn right in the face. Everyone around gasps, including those across the street. He stretches out his jaw and narrows his eyes on me.

"Did that make you feel better, scumbag?"

"Fuck you!" I spit.

Carter tries to grab Delaney's hand but she pulls it away, keeping her gaze on me. Meanwhile, Zayn gets even further in my face.

"Go ahead! Hit me again. Get it all out."

"I will if you don't get out of my way."

"For what?" he shouts. "So you can get arrested for attacking the DA's golden-boy son? Fuck that, you'll thank me for this shit later."

My breathing is so fast, so labored, I know I'm bordering on hyperventilation. I close my eyes for a couple seconds, and when I open them again, they meet Delaney's. She's so close, yet so far, as we stand with no more than thirty feet between us—and for a minute, she's mine again. Only, she's not. It's my mind playing tricks on me, like this is some great fucking game and I'm the pawn.

Carter gives Grayson a pleading look, and he nods at Tessa and Savannah. I can do nothing but watch as her sister and her best friend pull her away and back into the school—leaving me in pieces once again.

I turn around and remove myself from the grasp of my friends, taking off running. Fuck knows driving my motorcycle isn't a good idea right now, but I need to get out of here before I do something *else* I'll regret.

DELANEY

I SIT ON THE KITCHEN ISLAND, IGNORING THE PARTY GOING ON AROUND ME. Jace is doing body shots off Paige. The music is so loud that the bass vibrates the floor. And there's enough alcohol being passed around to drown in. Yet, I can't seem to get my mind to focus on anything but Knox.

The last thing I expected after being asked to prom in one of the most epic ways possible was for Carter to kiss me. We've been hanging out and getting to know each other for weeks, but never has he made a single move. I figured he was waiting for me to tell him it was okay. Realistically, though, that was never going to happen.

Carter is great, and in an ideal world he would be the perfect guy for me. He's sweet, and funny, and a great listener when I need someone to talk to, but the spark just isn't there. At least not for me, anyway. Not the way it was with *him*.

Three weeks have passed since the harrowing betrayal that left me the laughing stock of the entire school, and every day he's been on my mind. Whether it's when I'm reading my favorite book, watching a romantic comedy, or even getting out of the shower and catching my reflection in the mirror, seeing the masterfully drawn angel wings that are inked into my skin.

They say that time heals all wounds, but I'm starting to think that's not true. No amount of time away from him could wipe his memory from my mind or cure the pain that his absence brings.

"You're quiet tonight," Carter tells me, leaning against the counter next to me.

"Aren't I always?"

He shakes his head. "Not lately, no."

“Oh.” I look down at the drink in my hands.

“This is about Knox, isn’t it? How he acted yesterday after I asked you to prom.”

I don’t bother lying to him. He’d know if I was anyway. One thing Tessa has told me since we were little is that I’m like an open book. If there was ever something we needed to get away with, I was to leave the talking to her.

“He just looked so...devastated.”

Carter blows out a long exhale before pushing off the counter and putting out his hand. “All right, I didn’t want to do this, but come with me.”

I accept his help and hop down. Then, he grabs his keys and leads me out the door.

“Where are we going?”

“To show you the kind of guy that you’re in love with.”

KNOX

KICK. SWING. SWING. UPPERCUT. KICK.

All my extra training and the focus I've been putting into this must be paying off, because my opponent doesn't stand a fucking chance. He puts up a good fight, even managing to get a couple hits in, but the second I decide to end this shit, he's done for.

The crowd goes wild as I land an uppercut to his jaw and then a right hook that knocks him on his ass. He falls like a dead weight, out cold and unmoving. The guys carrying him off give a signal up to Cal, who stands in the window of his office. I've been doing this long enough now to know what each one means, and thankfully, this one is making it out of here alive but probably not undamaged.

"Fuck, yes!" Jackson congratulates me as I climb out of the ring. "That's what I'm talking about!"

A familiar face catches my eye, and in an instant, all the anger I just let out comes back tenfold. *Carter fucking Trayland*. I push my way past Jackson and storm toward him.

"You've got a lot of fucking nerve. What the hell do you think you're doing here?"

He stands up straight, unintimidated. "Just getting a glimpse at the piece of shit you really are."

I chuckle dryly. "You don't know anything about me."

"I know enough, and now, so does she." The look on his face is enough to get my full attention—arrogant, cocky, *evil*.

"She?"

"Knox?"

My eyes widen in horror at the sound of her voice. Standing just a little ways behind Carter, Delaney looks at me with pure fear etched across her face.

No. No, no, no. She can't be here.

"Laney, you have to go. You have to leave, now."

She narrows her eyes. "Will you seriously stop with that?" she snaps. "I can't be near you or your friends. I can't be at Zayn's parties. I can't be at your school. It's getting really old."

"Be at all those places! Move into Zayn's house and glue yourself to Stone's side if that's what you want! But you *can't* be here!"

Paulo, one of Cal's many goons, walks up to us, looking every inch the bodyguard, with muscles bulging out of his black T-shirt. "Boss wants to see you."

"Who the hell is Boss?" Delaney questions indignantly.

Shit. "Okay, tell him I'll be right there." I turn to Carter. "You have to get her out of here, *now!*"

Paulo shakes his head. "No, you *and* the girl."

Dread courses through my entire body. *He knows.* Everything I've done for the last month, every effort I've made and all the pain I've put both of us through, is rendered pointless in the blink of an eye. Now, there's no telling what will happen.

I take a deep breath, wondering how in the world I'm going to get her *and me* out of this one. A part of me considers running, but it's guaranteed Paulo is armed and he'll hold us at gunpoint to get Cal what he wants.

"You have no idea what you've done," I tell the dipshit who brought her here. "Come on, Delaney."

Carter steps in front of me, blocking my way. "She's not going anywhere with you."

"Yeah? Are you going to fucking tell *him* that?" I shout. "He'll put bullet in all our damn heads!"

"Okay, someone better tell me what is going on, and now."

Focusing my attention on her, I instantly soften. "There's so much you don't know. So much I tried to protect you from."

"He's getting impatient," Paulo says.

I roll my eyes, shoving my way past Carter and taking Delaney's hand in my own. The two of us follow Paulo out of the arena and up the stairs. Just as we reach the door, he positions himself outside it. I turn to Delaney and

gently touch her cheeks.

"I am so sorry."

Closing my eyes, I press a kiss to her forehead. She gives me a confused look as I pull away but I don't give her an explanation. She's about to learn for herself.

I open the door and the two of us walk through. Cal turns around from the window with a snide grin on his face.

Delaney's breath hitches. "Uncle Dom?"

"Hi, beautiful." He puts his arms out for a hug and instinctively, I put my hand out to stop her from going to him. His expression turns to a glare. "Let me hug my niece."

"Not fucking happening. She's not leaving my side."

He smirks. "So, she was more than a good fuck after all."

"You said that about me?" she questions, clearly hurt.

Cal lets out a deep laugh. "Oh, don't hold it against him, doll. He was just trying to protect you."

"Protect me from what?"

"Me...or him, depending on how you look at it."

My jaw is locked so tight my teeth could cut through steel right now. "Don't."

Delaney is getting impatient as she smacks my hand away. "Can someone please explain to me what's going on? What is this place?"

He leans against his desk and lights a cigar. "You see, darling, I'm in the business of providing services. People who need a willing target to take out their anger on. People who want to see a fight. Gamblers who need a little thrill with their bets." He levels me with a look. "Even messes that need to be cleaned up."

"Is that what you were doing down there?" she asks me. "Taking your anger out on that guy?"

I go to answer her, but Cal obviously isn't going to let me. "No, Knox is in much deeper than that."

"Shut up," I hiss through gritted teeth.

"Delaney, come over here."

Stepping in front of her, I'm ready to snap. "Over my dead body."

He pulls out a gun and cocks it, pointing it straight at me. Delaney shrieks but I don't even flinch. I've stared down the barrel of his pistol enough times to be numb to it.

“Delaney, *now*,” he demands, keeping his eyes on me. I watch as she hesitantly walks around me and over to her uncle. “Easy, boy. You don’t want to end up like the ones you’ve killed, do you?”

“Y-you’ve killed people?”

Cal hums, seeming prideful despite Laney’s obvious horror. “Four. Well, five if you include the first one, but I don’t. Not for him, anyway.”

She looks between me and her uncle, unsure who will give her the answers she’s looking for. “But why?”

“Because I did him a favor, and covering up a murder doesn’t come for free.” She’s stunned into silence as he turns his full attention back to her and rubs the tip of the gun down her cheek. “You’ve always been a pretty little thing. I could get a lot of money for you, in the right market of course.”

The urge to vomit rolls over me as I realize his intentions. “You lay a finger on her and, I swear to God, I’ll bring this whole fucking place to the ground.”

“He’s got jokes, doesn’t he? Acting like he’s in charge here.” Delaney swallows, afraid to say anything at all. “Maybe I should trade him for you. He’s nothing but a pain in the fucking ass, anyway. But you, I’ve got a lot of men who would *love* some time with a girl like you.”

“You sick son of a bitch!” I charge forward, only to end up with a gun pressed against the center of my chest.

Cal stares me down, daring me to tempt him. “One more move and I’ll kill you right here, right now.” He looks Delaney up and down. “Who would protect your sweet little Bambi then?”

I watch a tear escape from her eye as she fears for not her life, but mine. Little does she know, I’d gladly trade my life for hers. It’s not even a question.

A commotion from outside the door grabs all our attention, distracting Cal for only a second, but that’s all the time I need. I turn my body and grab his wrist with one hand while my other grabs the slider of the gun, preventing it from firing. I bend his arm and use my elbow to hit him in the face. His hand releases on impact, which gives me possession. I immediately flip the gun around and slam the butt of the pistol into his head. He falls to the ground, unconscious, and I lean over my knees, head swimming with relief.

“Let’s go.”

I shove the gun under my waistband and grab Laney’s hand to pull her out of there. As soon as I open the door, I see Paulo’s body motionless on the

floor. I whip around and cover her mouth as she lets out a muffled scream.

“Is he d-dead?”

Stepping over him, I help her over as well. “We don’t have time to ask questions. We have to get the hell out of here, and fast.”

The two of us rush down the steps and out the door. The car I borrowed from Stone stays parked where I left it. As soon as we get in, I turn it on and peel out of the parking lot—checking the rear-view mirror every few seconds to see if someone is following us.

“What the hell happened back there?” she half-shrieeks, half-sobs.

“I may have just put the world’s biggest target on both our heads.” I grab my phone from the center console and dial Grayson. The second he answers, I don’t give him a chance to talk. “Meet me at Zayn’s and bring your girlfriend. We have a major fucking problem.”

KNOX

I POUND ON THE DOOR, GLANCING AROUND FOR ANY SIGN OF SOMEONE watching us. Zayn opens it with a confused look on his face. I push past him and pull Delaney with me. Once we're inside, I slam it shut and lock it before peeking out the window.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I vent.

"What's wrong with him?" Z asks Laney.

She shakes her head, her arms wrapped around her petite body. I sit down on the couch and rest my head in my hands. This can't be happening.

Why the fuck did Carter bring her there? I had this shit under control. Maybe it wasn't ideal, but it was fucking handled. Now, it's a massive disaster.

The way Cal spoke to Delaney, like he wanted to use her as some kind of prostitute, it made me see red. If I didn't think the sound of gunfire would've had his goons swarming in, I would have shot him when I had the chance. He can do anything he wants to me, but I'll die before letting him touch her.

"You want to tell me what's wrong?" Zayn watches me carefully.

With my knee bouncing, I give him a look, one that screams I'm in trouble, and I watch as his eyes widen. A knock at the door has me ready to attack until I hear Pretty Boy's voice come from the other side. I open it and usher him and Savannah in quickly, only to lock it again.

"Grayson?" Delaney wonders out loud. "What the hell does he have to do with this?"

The two of us ignore her entirely as he turns to me. "You said we have a problem?"

I nod rapidly. "I fucking hit him."

“You did *what*?” he balks. “What the hell made you think *that* was a good idea?”

“I had no choice! He had me and Delaney at fucking gunpoint. If it wasn’t for someone taking out Paulo outside the door, we probably both would have died.”

Zayn chokes on air. “Okay, I need a beer.”

Grayson nods toward Delaney. “How much does she know?”

“Enough to ask questions.”

“Gray, what’s going on?” Savannah’s voice is calm, concerned even.

Delaney places a hand on her hip. “That’s what I’d like to know. What the fuck was that place? And why was my uncle there?”

I sit down on the couch, watching Grayson take the seat next to me. He’s made one thing very clear, one thing I can respect—we’re in this together.

“An underground fight club of sorts,” I answer. “And he was there because he owns the place.”

She takes a breath. “A-and you kill people there?”

“Wait, you’ve *killed* people?” Savannah’s disbelief is evident, but I don’t pay her much mind.

“Not intentionally. The fights I was in, they were the kill-or-be-killed type. Sometimes, it happened.”

“How many?”

I swallow harshly and look away. “Four.”

A strangled whine comes from deep in her throat before she composes herself. “In that room, he said five, ‘if you include the first.’ Who was the first, Knox?”

My eyes find Grayson’s and I raise my brows at him. The next words are his and his alone.

“Savannah’s dad.”

“I’m coming!” I shout. *Jesus fucking Christ.*

I pull the door open with a scowl on my face, but as soon as I take in the sight in front of me, it’s gone—along with my high. Grayson Hayworth—Pretty Boy, as I like to call him—is standing on my porch. His clothes are stained a deep red, blood covering almost every inch of him. Fury radiates

from his body in waves as he grips at his brown hair.

“What the fuck happened to you?”

He shakes his head. “I need your help.”

“All right, let’s just take a minute to relax.”

“I don’t have time to fucking relax, Vaughn. Are you going to help me or not?”

I raise my hands in surrender. “Okay, fine. What do you need? Other than a goddamn shower.”

Turning around, he starts walking toward his car. “You need to help me find Craig Montgomery.”

Montgomery? Savannah’s dad? It all falls into place. The shouts I’ve heard coming from that house. The police and EMS that crowded the street earlier. The blood covering practically every inch of Grayson. Her dad beats her.

“Are you coming or not?” he questions impatiently.

I reach behind me and shut the door. This can only end in disaster.

I sit in the passenger seat while Grayson flies down the road. He’s completely erratic, though I can’t say I blame him. I just hope he knows what he’s doing.

“All right. Why don’t you just calm down a little before you kill us both?”

“Calm down?” He barks incredulously. “He beat her so bad it ruptured her fucking spleen! He would have murdered her if I hadn’t stopped him, and you want me to calm down?”

Drifting around corners, I grip the oh-shit handle on the ceiling. I know the more I say, the angrier he’ll get. Whatever mission he’s on, there is nothing that will deter him from it. Hopefully, he’s thinking with a clear head.

As we pull up behind the rusted Buick, my eyes land on a shadow in the distance. There’s no denying it’s him. I’ve seen his drunk ass stumble out of his house so many times over the years, I’d know that silhouette anywhere.

“You were right, he’s fucking here.” Grayson gets out of the car and slams the door behind him. “Aye, asshole! You and I need to talk.”

I scramble for the door and follow behind. Craig glances back at Grayson for a second, only to laugh.

“I should have known you’d come to find me,” he slurs as we approach. “You never did know how to go the fuck away. Even as a boy, you were so annoying—following Savannah around like a lost little puppy.”

Grayson stops only a few feet behind him but I can tell his restraints are about to snap. “She’s in the fucking hospital. She needed surgery because of you!”

“No. She needed surgery because she’s a nosy little bitch who doesn’t know how to mind her own damn business.”

He’s never going to own up to what he’s done wrong. That man is narcissistic to a fault. He’ll sooner quit drinking before he stops justifying his actions. Grayson is battling a lost cause, but I can somewhat appreciate the effort.

“Listen to me, you prick. You’re going to stay the fuck away from her. If you don’t, you’ll have me to answer to.”

“Oh,” he feigns terror. “I’m shaking in my boots.” Getting up in Grayson’s face, he sneers, and I can smell the alcohol coming off him. “You can’t protect her from me. You’re nothing but a child.”

“Yeah?” he responds, squaring his shoulders. “Fucking try me.”

Craig laughs, stumbling backward a bit and pretending to surrender. “Enjoy your girlfriend while you have her, because next time I get my chance, she might not be so lucky.” He turns around and starts to walk away. “But don’t worry. I’ll make sure she knows to tell your dear old dad that you say hello.”

Gray stiffens and I watch as his eyes glaze over. He bends down, grabbing the large rock at his feet, and charges at Craig.

“Grayson, don’t!” I shout, but it’s too late.

He slams the rock into his head so hard his skull completely caves in, and Craig falls onto the ground motionless while the blood flows out.

“What the fuck did you do?” I shout, looking between Grayson and the body lying on the ground. “Hayworth!”

He doesn’t answer me. His eyes don’t even look in my direction. They stay completely trained and focused, watching the blood pool. I don’t need to check for a pulse to know there is no more life in Mr. Montgomery. He’s dead. He’s dead, and I’m in the middle of the crime scene.

“I had to protect her,” Grayson mutters.

Looking at him as if he’s gone crazy, I grab him by the shoulders and force his gaze to meet mine. “Yeah? And how the fuck are you going to do that from prison, tough guy?”

As if in shock, he takes a few steps away and sits down, staring up at the night sky. What’s scary is that he doesn’t even seem remorseful or even the

slightest bit panicked. It's like he knew what he needed to do, and he did it. Simple as that.

Grayson pauses to swallow. "There were cameras, so we were completely fucked—until Knox called a contact he knew from being offered a spot in higher level fights at The Underground."

I look at Laney. "Your uncle. He wanted repayment, of course. Nothing comes for free, especially not with that man. He blackmailed us into fighting. It's a rigged system. He supplies his own fighters with the best training possible and then he capitalizes on it."

"Oh my God," Delaney whispers, tears flowing down her face.

Savannah looks like she's about to throw up. She looks around for Zayn. "Do you mind if I..." She points upstairs.

Zayn shakes his head. "No, for sure. It's all yours."

She spares one last glance at Grayson before covering her mouth and running up the stairs. Gray exhales then gets up to follow her. Meanwhile, Delaney's murderous glare is on me.

"Go ahead, Bambi. Lay it on me."

She wipes her face with the back of her hand. "Who even are you?"

My shoulders sag. "The same person I've always been."

"No," she says firmly. "No, I don't believe that. The Knox that spent a whole day taking care of me when I was sick cannot be the same one who *kills people*."

The day she's referring to is a fond memory, one I've held onto and flashed back to a lot since I ended the only real relationship I've ever had. She came down with a stomach bug, and despite the fact that I can't handle puke, I let her lay with her head in my lap for hours while I rubbed a cool washcloth against her face. But, those days are gone now—especially now.

"You make it sound like I did it intentionally. This wasn't a choice. I was *forced* to fight. When I didn't..." My voice fades out, knowing I really shouldn't tell her this.

"When you didn't *what*?"

I shake my head. "Nothing."

"No!" She steps closer. "No more fucking secrets."

Taking a deep breath, it's clear there isn't anything she'll let me leave out. "When I didn't—when I tried to stop—he threatened to hurt you."

The pain on her face is evident as she realizes the man she considered her favorite uncle is actually a total piece of shit. Although, I know nothing can compare to how much it hurts to learn he was willing to hurt his own flesh and blood.

"Laney, I swear. I never meant to hurt anyone."

She gives me a look that puts me right in my place. "Not even Mr. Montgomery?"

I know what she's trying to do. She wants me to apologize for what happened to him, but I can't. I won't.

"I didn't touch him, but what do you think Grayson should have done? He was going to kill her! His actions had already destroyed Grayson's family and got his dad murdered. He did what he needed to protect Savannah. Your friend, remember?"

"And that justifies killing people?" she sobs.

I shake my head. "It didn't, not at first, anyway. Not until you came barreling into my life like a fucking freight train, giving me no choice in the matter. After that, it made perfect sense. I swear to God, Delaney, I'm no monster like Cal, but I'd kill a hundred Mr. Montgomerys if that's what it took to keep you safe. You'll get no apology from me for that, and I wouldn't expect one from Grayson either."

Her eyes widen slightly, but my words at least calm her raging temper. However, when she starts walking toward the door, I panic.

"Where are you going?"

She sighs dejectedly. "I need a minute. I need some *space*."

I give her a pleading look. "Can you please just do that here? I'll leave you alone, I promise. It's just, if something happens to you, I won't be able to live with myself."

Thankfully, and to my utmost relief, she nods and goes upstairs instead of outside. Once she's gone, I go into the kitchen, where Zayn silently hands me a beer. I nod and take a swig.

"Do you hate me?"

He chuckles and shakes his head. "Nah, I've known you too long to be able to hate you. But Christ, you always manage to get yourself in a world of shit."

DELANEY

I FEEL LIKE I'M IN THE TWILIGHT ZONE. EVERYTHING I THOUGHT WAS REAL, isn't. People I thought were good, aren't. Relationships I thought were solid, are tainted with lies and betrayal. If this is what love is like, I'm not sure I want any part of it.

Going upstairs, I find Grayson standing outside a locked door, his head resting against it as he knocks.

"Savi, please." *No answer.* "Sav." *Still nothing.* "Savannah Jade, can you please just let me know you're okay?"

"Would you be?" I snap, and he turns to face me. "If you found out that she killed one of your parents, regardless of the reason, would you be *okay*?" When he goes to answer, I shake my head. "Just go downstairs, Grayson. I've got this."

He looks pained as he places his hand against the door. "I love you, Savi."

With that, he walks away and leaves me alone with my best friend. I step in front of the room and tap quietly.

"Sav, it's me. Grayson went downstairs. Let me in."

It takes a few seconds, but finally, I hear the lock on the door click. I step inside, feeling my heart break as I find the girl who's normally the strongest person I know in a broken mess on the floor. There may be a lot of things going through my mind right now, and I might have no idea how I'm going to handle Knox, not to mention my sociopathic uncle, but right here—in this room—the only thing that matters is her.

"Oh, Savi," I weep, dropping down and wrapping her tightly in my arms. "I'm so sorry."

Sobs rip through her body while her head rests on her shoulder. There's nothing I can say, nothing I can do that will make this better, so instead, I run my fingers through her hair and hum her favorite song. Finally, when she starts to calm down, she giggles.

"You're a horrible singer."

I can't help but laugh. "Says the girl who can't carry a single note."

She gets up with a heavy sigh, walking over to the mirror and cleaning the smeared mascara off her face. It doesn't do much, but she looks a little less like a trash panda. When she's done, the two of us sit on the bed.

"Can we go back to the times of playing hide and seek?"

I pull a face. "When you used to scare me for sport? No, thank you."

She chuckles. "It wasn't my fault you scared so easily. Besides, those days were so much simpler—when we were too young to know how scary the world is."

"Yeah, you're right. Those were better times." I nudge her with my elbow. "Are you okay?"

Shrugging, she looks down at her hands. "I don't know. I mean, it's not even what he did that bothers me. It's the fact that he lied about it. Is that fucked up? Does it make me a horrible person because I don't hate him for killing my father?"

"No," I assure her, because I honestly don't believe it does. "You went through years of intense trauma brought on by your dad. I don't think you're required to feel any kind of sympathy or guilt for what happened to him."

She thinks about it for a second then rolls her eyes. "I don't know. This is just all sorts of fucked up."

I chuckle dryly. "I know what you mean."

As if she didn't realize it before, her eyes soften as she looks at me. "How are you holding up?"

It's a loaded question, really. "As good as I can be after finding out my uncle is a psychopath and my ex-boyfriend is a killer."

The second the words register in my brain, I hear how insane they sound, and I can't help but laugh. It starts as a snicker, and I slap my hand over my mouth to try to keep it in. Still, it only grows from there. The next thing I know, I'm in full blown hysterics while Sav watches me like some bizarre circus attraction.

"Laney?"

I only laugh harder. It's as if I can't control it. I mean, I may have

actually lost my mind.

“It’s just—” I try to calm myself down, taking deep breaths. “Everyone warned me he was bat-shit crazy, and I didn’t listen. Instead, I went and fell in love with him.”

In seconds, the laughter turns to sobs and the amusement turns to grief. Now, it’s Sav’s turn to hold me—and she does, without hesitation.

There isn’t a single part of me that isn’t conflicted. The logical side wants me to run for the fucking hills, leaving Knox in this godforsaken town and never looking back. The bigger side, however, the side that loves him, wants to believe every word that comes out of his mouth like it’s etched in gold and declared as law.

When I finally get a handle on myself, Savannah releases me, and the two of us lie on the bed. All the events of tonight are catching up to me, and while I know I should talk to Knox, I’m not going to be able to make sense of anything until I get some rest.

Sav and I stare up at the dark ceiling, the sound of our breathing the only thing filling the room.

“Are you going to forgive Knox?” she questions.

“I don’t know. Are you going to forgive Grayson?”

She only thinks for a second before letting out a sigh. “Yeah. He’s my Gray. I can’t imagine a world where I don’t. And honestly, what can I really say? He lost his father because of my dad, and then my dad was threatening me.”

It makes sense, and honestly, it’s a little relieving. If the two of them couldn’t make it through this, I’d feel like there’s no point in even attempting it with Knox. The two of them together has always been the one guaranteed thing in my life.

“Are you going to tell him?”

“Tomorrow,” she whispers. “Let him sweat it out for the night.”

An amused smile spreads across my face. “You’ve always been best at making him grovel.”

THE NEXT MORNING, I wake to the sound of my phone ringing. Tessa’s name flashes across the screen, reminding me of everything that’s happened

within the last twelve hours. I sit up and run my fingers through my hair before answering.

“Hey, Tess.”

“Delaney?” She sounds panicked.

I roll my eyes at her overprotective tendencies. “I know I’m not home, but I’m all right. It’s a lot to explain, and I still need to figure it all out, but I promise you’ll be—”

“Laney! Whatever he says, don’t listen to him!”

“Shut up!” Another voice comes through the phone—one that makes my heart drop.

“Tessa!” I scream. “Oh my God, Tess.”

A deep chuckle sounds in my ear. “Not such a badass now, are you, *Laney*?”

My chest gets tight as tears stream down my cheeks. “She has nothing to do with this. Let her go.”

“Now, now, you little bitch,” Uncle Dom sneers. “You don’t call the shots here. I do. And if you don’t want anything to happen to your precious sister, you and your boyfriend will come to The Underground by no later than noon.” I glance at the clock. It’s 10:15. “I don’t think I need to give you details on what will happen if you try any shit, do I?”

The line goes dead, along with any hope that my life will ever be normal again. Savannah looks at me, the fear in her eyes matching my own. In an instant, the two of us jump out of bed and run down the stairs. Grayson, Knox, and Zayn are all in the living room, and the second they see our faces, they jump to their feet.

“Delaney?” Knox’s brows furrow. “What’s wrong?”

“Uncle Dom. He ha—” I swallow down the lump in my throat. “He has Tessa.”

KNOX

I LIE AWAKE ON THE COUCH, WATCHING AS THE SUN RISES OUTSIDE AND THE darkness turns to light. No part of me slept a wink, but I didn't expect to. If I'm asleep, my guard is down, and that's one thing I won't allow to happen right now. I can't.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that Cal is out for blood right now, and not just any blood—mine and Delaney's. He's not a man who's used to being told no. Hell, for as long as I've known him, he's never been one to take no for an answer. It's yes, or yes sir. There is no other option.

I've spent the last few hours running every situation through my mind, and it all comes back to one solution—the only way I can keep Delaney safe. I have to turn myself in and use what I know to take Cal down with me. It's a long shot—a Hail Mary by all means—but it's all I've got. It's that or kill him, and I don't think another life on my tally board, her uncle's especially, is something Delaney wants.

Delaney. My heart. My soul. My reason for fucking existing. I never thought I'd find someone who could make me feel things I can't even explain. And I sure as hell never thought that someone would come in the form of an innocent, doe-eyed, trust-fund baby—but she's yet to do one thing that doesn't surprise me.

There's an age-old saying that you can't love someone else until you learn to love yourself, but that's bullshit. I've hated myself for as long as I can remember, convinced that I was the reason my dad left and why my mom is never around. The darkness is something I've gotten used to—something I've learned to find comfort in, even. But Delaney? Fuck, I love her so much it numbs the feeling of hating myself.

ZAYN WAKES UP SHORTLY before ten. He comes downstairs looking like something out of *The Walking Dead*. I smirk at him as he rubs his eye with his fist.

“Damn, lack of beauty sleep really fucks you up,” I quip, and he flips me off.

“Coffee,” he grumbles, walking into the kitchen.

Grayson stirs from his place on the floor. He didn’t fall asleep until four in the morning, after going upstairs and checking to make sure Savannah was okay. When he saw that she was sleeping, he decided to try to get some rest. Lucky him. I’m starting to think sleep isn’t a luxury I have anymore.

“What time is it?”

I look down at my phone. “Ten.”

“Savannah?”

“Still upstairs. Neither of them have come down yet.”

He groans and throws his arm over his eyes. A few minutes later, Zayn comes out with a full pot of coffee and three mugs. I chuckle, finding as much humor in it as I can at the moment.

“You’re such a good little housewife.”

The corners of his mouth raise. “Fuck off.”

We all get a cup, letting the caffeine save our sanity. The three of us stay quiet, but it’s clear the same thing is on all our minds. *What happens now?* I wish I knew.

“I take it we don’t have training with Jackson today?”

I snort. “Nothing gets by you, does it, Pretty Boy?”

Zayn must be able to sense that I’m using sarcasm to cover up the fact that I’m internally freaking out, because he tosses me his pack of cigarettes. “We’ll figure something out. I just think we should wait for the princesses to wake up. You do one more thing behind their backs, they’ll kill you both.”

The two of us chuckle, knowing he has a point. Meanwhile, I peek out the window and look for any sign of someone knowing where we are. I’m just about to sigh in relief when a noise comes from above us and the next thing I know, Delaney and Savannah are rushing down the stairs. Laney has a look on her face that I’ve never seen before. It’s more than fear—it’s pure, unadulterated terror.

“Delaney?” I ask. “What’s wrong?”

She looks as she's about to cry. "Uncle Dom. He ha...he has Tessa."

"*He what?*" The three of us shout in unison.

Laney starts to hyperventilate, breaking down right in front of my face. It's my worst nightmare—her being in a situation that I can't fix right away. Tessa is strong, a wild little savage, but she's no match for Cal. Especially not when she trusts him like a niece should be able to trust her uncle.

I lunge over the couch to get to her. As soon as I'm close enough, I scoop her into my arms. Her head rests against my chest as the panic attack obliterates every inch of her body. Savannah seems shaken up, but in much better shape than Delaney. Still, Grayson pulls her close as soon as he can, tucking her against his side.

"Delaney, breathe," I try, but she's in physical pain and grasping at her chest. "Listen to me. I need you to follow my breathing. Okay? Breathe with me."

I start to take slow, deep breaths, in through my nose and out through my mouth. If it wasn't for my mom having these sometimes, I probably would have no idea what to do—but thankfully, I have some experience. After a few moments, her breathing starts to calm and her body relaxes a bit.

"Listen to me. We're going to save Tess, okay?" She looks into my eyes and nods. "Now, I need you to tell me exactly what he said."

Just as she tries to answer, she breaks down again. I look to Savannah in hopes that she heard it, too.

"He said that you two need to go to The Underground by noon and not to try anything." Grayson and I nod and stand up in an instant, but just as we head for the door, she stops us. "Not you and Grayson. You and Delaney."

It immediately feels like I got hit with a truck. "No."

"Knox." Zayn goes to grab my arm but I pull it away.

"No! Fuck no!" I shout. "I'm not putting her in danger like that. No fucking way."

My best friend puts his hands on my shoulders. "You have to. Do you hear me? You. Have. To." He glances at Delaney, who looks as if her whole world is crumbling. "God knows what he'll do if you don't."

It hurts, knowing he's right and wishing like hell he wasn't. There's only one thing worse than seeing Laney the way she looks right now, and that's putting her in a room with that man again. I can only imagine what he has planned, especially after last night. But I know that if something happens to Tessa, she'll never be the same.

I exhale, walking over to Delaney and crouching down in front of her. “What do you say, Bambi?” I put my hand out, and she looks at it for a second. Finally, she puts her hand in mine and I help her up. “That’s my girl.”

AFTER ALMOST AN HOUR of Grayson and I teaching Delaney all the self-defense moves we can, the two of us get in the car and start heading toward The Underground. She stays quiet for the most part, but I can see her shaking. I reach over and put comforting hand on her knee.

“Can I ask you something?” she questions when we’re less than two miles away.

“Anything.”

Pulling her bottom lip between her teeth, she hesitates—as if she’s afraid of the answer. “When you broke up with me...”

I glance at her and then find her hand with my own. “It was because I realized who Cal is, and the kind of access he had to you, when you introduced us at the gala. God, it killed me to push you away like that. Every day without you was my own personal hell, but I had to protect you. I needed to make him think that you weren’t important to me. Otherwise, he would use you as leverage every chance he got.”

“So, it wasn’t because you lost interest in me?”

“Not even a little. Fuck, Bambi, I’ve always been so fucking gone for you.”

She doesn’t say anything else, but I don’t expect her to as I pull down the hidden dirt road. When the trees open, I see two of Cal’s men standing at the door. Delaney’s breathing starts to speed up again, and I know I need to get that under control before getting out of this car.

“Laney,” I say as I put it in park. “You have to realize, they feed on fear, baby. So, the stronger you look, the better off you are. Okay?”

She nods. “But what’s to keep him from killing us all once we’re inside?”

Honestly? Nothing, but I’m not about to tell her that. Instead, I place my hands on her face.

“I’m not going to let anything hurt you. Do you hear me? Nothing.”

“But who’s going to keep something from happening to *you*?”

Not knowing what exactly we're walking into, the last thing I'm going to do is lie to her. So, I ask the only question I need an answer to.

"Do you trust me?"

She blinks then brings her hands up to cover my own. "Wholeheartedly."

The feelings that come from her answer are like something from out of this world. My entire body tingles as I lean in and press my lips to hers for the first time in far too long. Her breath hitches, but it doesn't stop her from kissing me back. Does she forgive me for all the messed-up shit I've done? I'm not sure. But am I going to enjoy this moment anyway? You're damn right.

When we finally pull away, I pray to God that isn't the last time I get to do that.

The two of us get out of the car, and she waits for me before walking up to the door. Javier has a snide look on his face as he pats us both down. Then he opens the door and lets us inside. Delaney grips my hand tightly while the two of us walk down the long hallway toward the arena, following the lights. As soon as we step through the door, Laney whimpers slightly.

Cal is standing in the middle of ring with Tessa tied to a chair. It looks like she must have been putting up a fight or pissing him off, because she's in anything but good shape. A part of me wants to roll my eyes at how typical it is of her, but the bigger part is too focused on how to get the three of us out of here alive.

"Well, look who decided to join us after all," Cal says, and Tess looks at us with her mouth duct-taped shut and fear in her eyes.

She tries to scream something, but Cal turns around and backhands her across the face. Delaney screams, making a move to run toward her sister, but my grip on her hand keeps her from going anywhere. She struggles against me, but as soon as her eyes meet mine, she stops.

"All right, you got me here," I tell him. "Let the girls leave. This is between you and me."

He starts to laugh, making the two goons with him laugh, too. "The boy thinks he's some sort of comedian." His eyes find mine, and there's something sinister in them. "What do you think, that I'm just going to let them walk out of here? I can't do that. You all know too much."

I swallow harshly as everything starts to make perfect sense. "What happened to Ashton?"

"What?" The question catches him off guard.

“You needed me to replace Ashton because he ‘met an unfortunate fate,’ but you didn’t say what happened to him.”

Cal smirks. “Just figuring that out now, are you?” He holds his gun up and points it at me, pretending to shoot. “He was a lot like you. Wanted to stop fighting. Didn’t like the amount of people who were dying by his hands.” He snickers. “The only way out of this is in a fucking body bag.”

Shit. He didn’t lure us here to get what he feels is owed to him. He did it so he can kill us all, and I led Delaney right into his trap. My blood runs freezing cold, the reality setting in. If he wants to kill me, so be it, but he’s going to have to go through me to get to her. I just hope to hell I can get her out of here, even if it isn’t with me.

“Listen, you don’t want to do that,” I tell him. “There’s a guy. He’s completely in love with her and the son of the district attorney. He’s obsessed. I guarantee you he won’t stop searching until he finds out the truth about what happened to her. And he was there last night.”

“Just another name on my checklist.”

I give him an incredulous look. “The DA’s prized son? You really think that’ll be easy to get away with?” I carefully move so that Delaney is behind me. “It would be so much simpler to keep her alive. Tessa, too. You know your brother. Is he just going to accept that both his daughters died?”

It looks like I have his attention as he raises a brow. “All right, wise-guy. What brilliant idea do you have in mind?”

“Take me.” A gasp sounds from behind me, but I do my best to ignore it. “You can use me for whatever you want. Keep me locked in a cage if you have to and tell everyone I died, but let them go.”

“Knox, don’t do this,” Laney pleads.

“How do I know they won’t say anything?”

I shrug, defeated. “Because who are people going to believe? Two girls who have been known to get in to trouble lately, or an established businessman? You cover your tracks like a fucking professional. Are you really afraid of them bringing you down?” He seems to be genuinely considering the idea, so I go in for the kill. “Their deaths will only create more problems for you. This way, you win.”

It takes a very slow minute, but as he nods at one of his guys, I exhale in relief and turn to face Delaney. Her face is soaked with tears, and no matter how many I wipe away, more only replace them.

“Please, don’t.”

I press a kiss to her forehead. "I have to, baby. I have to." Another kiss to her lips. "I want you to go, and I want you to be brilliant. You were always meant for amazing things, Bambi. Go become a doctor and cure cancer, or solve world hunger. You're going to be so great, I know it."

She shakes her head. "I can't leave you here."

"You can, and you will. It's the only way."

"I don't want to. I love you."

Hearing her say those words, even after all I've done, is like music to my ears, but fuck does it sting. "I—"

The radio Cal has sounds with some sort of alarm, cutting me off. "Hey boss, we got company out here."

My eyes widen. *No. No! Fuck!* Within seconds, Cal pulls his gun back out and points it at Delaney and me. I shield her with my body, but if he shoots, it could go right through me and hit her.

"What the fuck did you do?" he rages.

I raise my hands in surrender. "Nothing. I swear. I didn't tell a soul."

His lip curls into a snarl, and he turns to the two men with him. "Go handle that, now!" The goons run off for the entrance while Cal stays completely focused on me. "You think I'm fucking stupid, boy? Do you not know who you're up against? I've killed a hundred little fuckers like you—cocky bastards who think they stand a chance against me."

"Whoever is out there, they're not here because of me."

Nothing I say can get through to him again, that much is clear. "Delaney, get out from behind Knox. Let me see that pretty face."

"Don't," I mutter under my breath, and she listens.

"Delaney!" Cal yells, cocking the gun and putting it at Tessa's head. "Fucking now!" She tries to stay strong, but I can see she's breaking as she steps into view. "That's better. Step away from your boyfriend. I don't want him trying anything heroic."

The further she gets from me, the more my chest tightens. Cal is clearly getting enjoyment out of this drama because he watches me with a devilish smirk. The sick piece of shit is probably getting off on this, watching his own nieces fear for their lives. He's a soulless prick—devoid of any real emotions.

"You almost had me fooled," he says, shaking his head. "What was that? Just a distraction until your backup arrived?"

"Cal, I promise you. I had *nothing* to do with whatever is going on outside. My plan can still work." I try taking a subtle step toward Delaney,

but he points his gun at me—a silent order not to move. I raise my hands. “Just let the girls go. You can still get away with all this.”

“No, he can’t.” Jackson appears out of fucking nowhere on the other side of Delaney, holding a gun pointed straight at Cal. “Dominic Callahan, put the gun down!” It’s then that we both notice the badge hanging around his neck. *He’s a cop?*

Cal throws his head back laughing, with his gun still pointed at me. *Good. Better than the alternative.* “I should have known you were a fucking pig.”

“It’s over, Cal. Just put the gun down, and I won’t be forced to shoot you.”

Focusing all his attention on me, Cal narrows his eyes. “This is all *your* fault. I help you, and *this* is how you repay me?” He grunts. “I should kill you. Take you out with me just for the hell of it.” His expression changes to one that sends a chill down my spine. “But given how much you fought to protect her, I think it’ll be more painful if I take her instead.”

“Don’t!”

It all happens in slow motion. Cal turns his gun toward Delaney, and I immediately start rushing her way as he pulls the trigger. The second his gun fires, Jackson empties his entire clip, but my only focus is to save Laney. The impact of the bullet in my chest is almost a relief, knowing I made it, but the pain is excruciating, and I fall heavily at her feet, unable to control my own momentum.

“No!” she screams. My shirt feels wet, but warm, though I feel really cold. “Knox? Knox!” I try to respond, but I can’t make my mouth shape the words. The faint sound of Jackson calling for help meets my ears as everything starts to become hazy. “Please, Knox! Knox!”

But the pain is too much to bear, and I let myself slip under, knowing she’s safe.

DELANEY

THERE ARE SOME THINGS IN LIFE THAT NOTHING CAN EVER PREPARE YOU FOR. How hard parenting *actually* is. The first time you lose your mom or dad. And watching the life leave the eyes of the man you love. There's no cure for it. No way to rid yourself of the traumatic memory. It's like your world moves to the next chapter and you can't go back no matter how much you want to. Everything just goes forward.

The sound of Tessa's heart monitor is a constant reminder of hearing Knox flat-lining so many times I lost count. I sat in the corner of the ambulance, watching them send electric shocks through his body with an unmatched panic. And when they pulled him into the hospital, all I could do was stare at the amount of blood he left behind.

"Laney?" My sister's voice pulls me from my thoughts. When she sees the look on my face, she sighs—knowing exactly what I was thinking about. "I love you."

I give her a sad smile but don't answer. Not because I don't love her, but because the last person I said those words to never got the chance to say them back. There isn't a thing in the world I wouldn't sacrifice to hear it come from his voice, all deep and sulky. He'd probably make it sound indignant—like it's a bad thing to open up to someone and let them in that way.

A knock at the door gets our attention. "Mind if I come in?"

The doctor is young, probably fresh out of residency, but thorough to a fault. Since the second we got here, he insisted on having us both checked out. I got a clear bill of health, pending a psychiatric evaluation, but Tessa is going to end up being in here for at least a day or so for observation.

"I just want to make sure you're not feeling any pain," he tells Tess, since

her head has been throbbing.

“No, I’m okay, but is there something you can give Delaney? I’m worried about her.”

I want to scream, to tell her I’m fine and that I just need time, but I can’t find it in me to say a single word. My mouth opens, but nothing comes out. It’s been that way for two hours now and shows no signs of getting better.

He gives me a sympathetic look and nods. “I’ll call psych and see what we can do.”

GRAYSON AND ZAYN SIT across the room, texting Wyatt about deleting the evidence of Mr. Montgomery’s murder from Cal’s computer—now that there’s an open investigation. If anyone can do it, it’s him. Easton is next to Tessa in bed and Savannah is running her fingers through my hair. No one knows what to say, so instead, they all stay quiet—which may even be worse.

The doctors and nurses start to whisper, and as I glance out the glass door, I see their eyes widen. It isn’t until I get up and walk toward the hall that I see why.

A surgeon, covered in so much blood it’s alarming, asks the nurse at the desk a question. She nods and points at me, giving me a sad smile as he comes my way. Half of me is screaming to run—with him looking like that, after nine hours, it can’t be good—but my feet won’t move. They’re planted in place, practically cemented to the floor.

“Miss Callahan?” I nod slowly. “I’m Dr. Garrison. I was the surgeon operating on Mr. Vaughn.” He looks at me, expecting an answer he isn’t going to get. Finally, he continues. “As you know, he had a gunshot wound to the chest. The bullet had punctured his aorta, and the amount of blood loss was substantial.” I take a deep breath as I wait to hear the words I know will kill me inside. “With that being said, we were able to repair the damage and get his heart beating again. However, given the amount of blood loss and the amount of trauma, we’re still very much in a wait and see stage.”

My hand flies up to cover my mouth as sobs wrack through me. “He—he’s alive?”

“He is.”

In that moment, my legs give out and I fall to the ground. Savannah

rushes to my side, wrapping her arms around me and pulling me into her chest. As I look back into the room, my eyes meet Zayn's—finding the same tears in his as well. *He's alive.*

THE SECOND THEY WHEEL him into the ICU, with a tube down his throat to breathe for him and more monitors than I've ever seen, I'm instantly by his side. The nurses try to work around me, getting him hooked up to everything they need and situated, but it becomes too difficult.

"Sweetheart, why don't you go wait with your sister, and we'll come get you as soon as he's done."

I nod reluctantly, stepping out of the room and into the hall. The second I turn toward Tessa's room, however, a familiar face stops me in my tracks.

Carter stands there with a bouquet of flowers in his hand, sporting a weak smile. I take a deep breath before walking over to him.

"Hey. What are you doing here?"

He shrugs. "My dad told me what happened. I was worried about you."

It's sweet, really, but he deserves someone who can reciprocate his feelings.

"Carter," I start but he cuts me off.

"You're choosing Knox, I know," he says. "I get it. I can't really compete with someone who actually took a bullet for you. I just wanted to make sure you're all right." His arms wrap around me for a gentle hug. "He's a really lucky guy, Delaney. I hope it all works out for you."

"Thanks."

With that, he leaves the flowers on the counter and walks away—only looking back once to smile at me before stepping into the elevator. *I hope it all works out, too.*

THE CHAIR NEXT TO Knox's bedside is hardly what I would consider comfortable, but no part of me intends on leaving. The beeping of his heart monitor is the only thing that assures me he's still with us. Otherwise, he's as lifeless as he was when they pulled him out of the ambulance.

“How’s our guy today?” Z asks as he comes into the room.

I shrug. “No improvement, but nothing negative either. Same as yesterday.”

And the day before. And the day before that.

Knox has been in a coma for almost a week with no change. The doctors keep reminding me that his body went through a lot, and that there’s still a good chance he’ll wake up, but every day I go without hearing his voice sends me slipping deeper into my fear and grief.

“Has his mom been by today?”

“Not yet.” I look down and check the time on my phone. “She said her shift finishes at three. She’s coming straight from the diner.”

Zayn nods, walking over to Knox. “Hey, buddy. Why don’t you try waking your lazy ass up today, okay?”

I chuckle, knowing he’s only playing around. Z has been a shoulder to lean on through all of this. All the guys have, really. With my parents flipping out, rightfully so, my dad put his differences with the “delinquents” aside for the sake of his daughters. Easton has been picking Tessa up for school in the mornings, since she can’t seem to be alone, and he’s actually allowed in the house when she has instances where the nightmares just won’t stop.

Meanwhile, Grayson and Savannah have been bringing me all my schoolwork. If Knox wakes up and finds out I lost valedictorian because I was too busy sitting with him, he’ll be so mad at me. Therefore, I spend my days doing all my studying by his bedside. It’s a difficult schedule, but I make it work. I’ll always make it work.

MY PHONE BUZZES ON the counter—three texts from Zayn, coming in one after another. I wrap my hair in a towel and pull on my robe as I open them.

Zayn: Delaney.

Zayn: You need to get here.

Zayn: NOW!

“Shit!”

Dread fills my stomach. *This is it.*

AS I RUN THROUGH the hospital and into the elevator, all possible worst-case scenarios run through my head. I'm too late. He died without me. He needs another surgery. The doctors and his mother want to take him off life support.

My finger slams into the button and then repeatedly jabs at the one to close the doors. I'm a nervous wreck the whole time, watching the numbers rise on the screen. When it finally opens to the ICU floor, I book it out of the elevator and through the double doors.

It only takes seconds before I get from the elevator to Knox's door, but when I do, I can't believe it. Two gorgeous blue eyes stare back at me, the corner of his mouth turned up in a smirk. I can't even acknowledge all the guys in the room. It's just him and me.

"Hey, Bambi." Tears come so quickly it becomes hard to see. Knox looks to both Gage and Stone, who are sitting on the sides of his bed. "You fuckers are great and all, but if you don't move so my girl can get over here, we're going to have some issues."

Everyone chuckles as they both jump up. Our gazes stay locked as I walk over to the side of his bed and place my hand in his. *He's really here. He's really awake.*

The second I'm close enough, he grasps the back of my neck and pulls me in, molding his mouth over my own in a well-needed and long-overdue kiss. Gage makes some obnoxious whooping sound, only to get smacked by someone else, judging by the sound and the whining that comes after. By the time we pull away, I've passed through fear and elation and now I'm just pissed.

"You almost died on me."

"Yeah."

I turn to Zayn and throw pack of wet wipes at him. "You asshole! You made it sound like he was fucking dying!"

He laughs. "He told me to get you here as soon as possible. I figured you'd like the surprise."

Looking back at Knox, I glare playfully. "Did you know about this?"

“I may have.” He gives me his best innocent grin.

I roll my eyes. “You’re the worst.”

“I warned you to stay away.”

“Fuck you.”

He smiles brightly. “I love you, too.”

My breath hitches, and everything in me comes alive. In just four short words, every ounce of heartache becomes completely worth it. All the trouble. All the chaos. All the pain. I’d do it all over again in a heartbeat just to get back here.

As I carefully lie in his arms, I think of all we went through. People were right. Knox Vaughn is trouble. His hands are tainted—dyed permanently red with the blood of the lives he’s taken—and yet, I’d trust them with my own.

What can I say? Golden boys just don’t do it for me.

EPILOGUE

DELANEY

I STAND IN FRONT OF THE MIRROR IN MY ROOM, PLACING THE CAP PERFECTLY on top of my head. The tassel hangs on the right side and reminds me of what's to come. Savannah comes to stand beside me, her gown matching mine, while Tessa sits on my bed.

"I can't believe they're making me repeat half my senior year before they'll give me my diploma!" she whines.

Sav and I share a look, one that silently says she's leaving this to me. I chuckle and turn around to face my sister.

"Well, what did you expect? You didn't show up for more than half of senior year."

"Uh, hello? Lived through a super traumatic event and all?"

"Uh, hello? What about all the days before that?"

She groans and flops onto her back. "Ugh. This is going to suck. I don't even know any juniors."

"I do." Sav chimes in. "Lennon Bradwell. She dances with me, and she's incredible. I'll make sure to introduce you this summer."

It doesn't fix Tessa's mood, but it definitely makes a dent. I grab the notecards from my dresser, looking over my speech. If there was ever something to be nervous about, it's this.

THE GYMNASIUM IS FILLED with excited students itching to graduate. The girls are all in white, the guys in red. Savannah rests against Grayson

with his arms wrapped around her, making me wish my boyfriend was in here with me.

Carter and Jace are being obnoxious, as usual, goofing off and talking about how kick-ass college is going to be. Of course they decided to go together. I don't think the two of them could stand being apart. Savannah and I are almost the same way, except she'll be at Juilliard in New York, and I'll be attending Brown University in Rhode Island. At least we'll both be on the same coast, just a train ride away.

THE WALK TO OUR seats goes off without a hitch, and after a few key speakers, it's finally time for my speech. My nerves are all over the place as Principal Hyland starts off my introduction.

"Our valedictorian this year is someone who has overcome many obstacles and still has managed to shine. It is with great pleasure that I introduce Delaney Callahan."

Our whole class cheers, with my friends of course being the loudest. Even Tessa stands in the audience, screaming my name. I smile as I stand, walking up to the podium and taking my place.

"Thank you, Principal Hyland," I tell him, then turn my attention to everyone else. "Parents, faculty, and fellow graduates, I stand before you today, young, determined, and ready to take on the world. I could tell you all about the last four years, but instead, I believe it's more important to talk about what's next. Now, I'm not going to give life-changing advice. One, because the highest GPA doesn't mean I know any more than you do. And two, because I know most of you won't listen to it anyway."

Many of the people in the audience chuckle as I pause for a breath.

"Wherever we're headed, whether it be university, an internship, or in some cases, a year abroad, we're all going to face the same challenges. We're going to learn. We're going to mess up. And we're going to fail. It's important, however, that we don't let that failure define us, but rather shape how we react to it. Embrace the mess-ups, and learn from the downfalls—because they're bound to happen, a lot. It's only embarrassing if you don't learn from your mistakes. Take a break when your brain feels too full, because mental exhaustion is *actually* a thing. And finally—"

My eyes find Knox in the back of the crowd and he smirks at me.

“Never, under any circumstances, let anyone tell you that you don’t belong.”

He throws his head back, laughing as the hidden joke is well received. I look around at all the people I’ve spent the last four years with, and swallow down the lump in my throat.

“Thanks for the memories, HGP. It’s been real.”

All my fellow students stand, applauding me while I shake the principal’s hand and get my diploma. He moves the tassel from the right side to the left, and that’s when I know I did it. I made it through this crazy thing called high school, and so much more.

AS CAPS FLY IN the air, and everyone walks around hugging all their friends, I have eyes for only one person. Knox leans against the fence and looks like sex on legs. The minute his eyes meet mine, he rushes forward.

Picking me up, he spins the two of us around. “I’m so fucking proud of you.”

He puts me down, and I give him a sad smile. “You’re not upset you don’t get to walk at graduation?”

“Nah,” he shrugs. “I don’t need all that traditional crap.”

After Knox’s surgery, it took him a while to recover, and by the time he was ready to go back to school, he was too far behind. He would’ve had to repeat part of his senior year, like Tessa, but instead, he opted to get his GED—something my father absolutely refuses to let Tess settle for. Plus, there was the issue of being charged with manslaughter...

I knock on the door, feeling anxious just being here. If it wasn’t absolutely necessary, I wouldn’t be. As soon as the door opens, Carter looks everything like the friend I’ve come to adore—no judgement or malice in his eyes.

“Hey.”

His face shows his concern. “Is everything okay?”

“Not exactly,” I murmur. “Can I come in?”

Nodding, he opens the door further and steps aside. The two of us go to sit on the couch and when it comes time to tell him why I'm there, my nerves get the better of me. Twenty years to life, Delaney.

"So, how's Vaughn doing?"

I sigh heavily. "He's okay, I guess. It's a lot of trauma, emotionally and physically, but the doctors say he'll make a full recovery."

"Good," he replies, genuinely meaning it. "I heard my dad talking to one of his colleagues about everything that happened. That's intense."

"Yeah." I take a deep breath. "It's funny you mention it though, because that's why I'm here."

"Oh?" His expression almost sends me running out the door, but I'll never know if I don't ask.

I look down, messing with my sleeve. "I was wondering if you could talk to your dad about a plea deal."

He throws his head back. It's crazy, I know—asking him to do help someone he's hated for years. Thankfully, Wyatt was able to get rid of the video before anyone in the FBI found it, but Jackson has personally witnessed the deaths of the men in the ring. If Knox gets found guilty, the four charges of manslaughter could put him away for a long time. I don't know what I'll do if that happens.

"Delaney, he's killed people."

"I know, and I'm not asking for him to get off with a slap on the wrist." I explain. "But Carter, my life was being threatened."

He takes a moment to think about it, and I can tell he doesn't want to, but he reluctantly agrees. "I'll see what I can do."

By the grace of God, whatever Carter said to Mr. Trayland worked and Knox was offered a plea deal—four months of house arrest and fifty hours of community service. Leaving that courthouse, Knox shook Carter's hand with an utmost respect—the long feud now completely behind them.

"Congratulations, Delaney." Jackson says as he approaches, and his presence surprises me. I know Knox mentioned inviting him, but I never thought he'd actually come.

Since everything went down, Knox and Jackson have become close.

Jackson was a key part in helping Knox get his strength back, and he still trains with him today. At first, Knox was hesitant to let anyone that was associated with Cal in his life, but after we learned that it was Jackson who killed Paulo, he came around.

Apparently, Paulo had strict orders that day to not let either of us out of that room alive. Jackson overheard and tried to get him away from the door, allowing us to leave safely. Unfortunately, it only took seconds for Paulo to blow Jackson's cover wide open. When Paulo went for his gun, Jackson had no choice but to take his life.

"Thank you."

He looks to Knox. "I can't stay, but we're still on for tomorrow?"

"Yep. 7 a.m."

Jackson nods, and after congratulating me one more time, he disappears into the crowd. For a second, I think I'm finally going to get a minute alone with my boyfriend, but luck isn't on my side. The next thing I know, I'm being swarmed by all my friends and family.

TWO MONTHS LATER

The music fills the club, pulsing neon lights keeping time with the beat. Savannah sits on my left with Tessa and Lennon on my right. The four of us are at the bar, thanks to the flawless fake IDs Carter hooked us up with. He even got Knox one, since the one he had before didn't have a chance at getting him in here. Though since we walked in the door, Knox and Grayson have been immersed in their own bromance conversation.

"I don't want you to leave tomorrow," Tess whines, resting her head on my shoulder.

I chuckle softly. "I know, but you'll be okay. Besides, you can come visit any time you want."

"You better be available whenever I want," she quips. "You're supposed to be my ride or die, and you're leaving me."

Savannah leans against the bar and looks past me. "Are you actually sad because Delaney is leaving, or because you broke up with Easton?"

"You broke up with Easton?" Lennon gasps.

Tessa rolls her eyes. “He’s going away to college, and I’m not stupid or naive enough to think we can make the whole long-distance thing work.”

I tilt my head from side to side. In theory, it makes sense, though I can’t say I’m not the slightest bit disappointed. They may have had their ups and downs, but they were cute together. Still, once Tess’s mind is made up about something, there’s no changing it—ever.

“Well, good.” Lennon nudges Tess with her elbow. “You can be single with me this year.”

Sav points at her with a drink in her hand. “*You’re* only single because your dad won’t let a boy within fifty feet of you without threatening to rip his head off.”

She thinks about it for a second and then shrugs with a smile. “Weeds out all the pussies.”

“Speaking of pussies...” Tessa bites her lip as she eyes an older guy from across the bar. “Mine needs a change of pace. Excuse me.”

She slides off the stool and walks away, instantly getting the man’s attention. I roll my eyes at her crudeness, and Lennon’s brows furrow. “She does know we weren’t talking about vaginas, right?”

“She doesn’t care,” Savannah and I answer at once.

And yeah, I’m really going to miss this.

THE CONDO IS SPACIOUS, giving me more than enough room. It’s in a prime location right by the school, and the fact that it’s already been furnished the way I wanted is a huge benefit. Knox carries up the last box before putting it down and looking around.

“I can’t believe you got me to move across the country with you.”

I giggle. “Would you really have let me leave without you?”

“No, not a fucking chance.”

“Exactly.”

The two of us spend a few hours unpacking boxes and talking about how great it will be to live together. However, when I notice the sun starting to set, I grab his hand and pull him toward the door.

“Laney, what are you doing?”

I shrug. “I want to go for a walk.”

“Now?” he questions. “Can I at least eat first?”

“Nope. It won’t take long, I promise.”

As if he’s lost all ability to tell me no, he allows me to drag him down the stairs and out onto the street. I try to find our way by memory, since looking at my phone would only ruin the surprise, and thankfully, I find it.

“Why are you in such a rush?”

I turn to him and try to conceal my excitement. “Do you trust me?”

His eyes narrow. “Isn’t that my line?”

“Just answer it. Do you trust me?”

He pulls me close and kisses me just long enough to take my breath away. “With my life.”

“Okay, good. Come with me.”

Squeezing his hand, the two of us walk into the tattoo parlor not far from our condo. Knox looks confused as he scans the room, taking in the place. Finally, he gives in.

“We’re getting more ink?”

I shake my head just as a guy with a buzzed head comes over to greet us. “You must be Delaney.”

“I am, and this is Knox.”

He extends his hand, and my boyfriend takes it with a hesitant smile. “I’m Chris. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Yeah, you too.” His brows furrow as he looks between the two of us. “I’m sorry, how do you two know each other?”

“She got in touch with me a couple weeks ago. Told me you were looking for an apprenticeship.”

“Y-yeah, definitely, but I’m not sure I can afford it.”

Chris snickers. “It’s already been taken care of.”

Confused, he glances over at me, and I shrug. “My dad may have covered it. A thank you for saving his daughter’s life and all.”

I watch as realization crosses his face and excitement takes over. “You’ve got to be shitting me.”

“So, I take it you’re interested then?”

Knox nods rapidly. “Yes, abso-fucking-lutely.”

“Great. I’ll see you Monday morning at noon. Don’t be late.”

He thanks him, and after the two of us say goodbye, we walk outside and step onto the sidewalk. As I go to walk away, I’m pulled back and spun right into Knox’s arms. He looks down at me with nothing but respect and

adoration in his eyes.

“You are a remarkable woman, Bambi,” he breathes. “I still think you could find someone far better than me, but I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life making sure you never want to look.”

THE REBEL

I don't play by the rules.
Never have, never will.

The second our eyes met from across the club,
I could feel a shift in the air—an overwhelming pull drawing me in.
One mind-blowing night is all it was, or so I thought.

Repeating my senior year may not have been the plan,
But finding out my one-night stand is my new teacher—
That's something I never saw coming.

His gaze bores into me with the same intensity.
That body, those hands, I remember every touch.
I should stay away, but I don't want to.

This time, all bets are off.
I'll let him think he's in control,
Until I bring him to his knees.

Passion and fire,
Forbidden and wrong.
Like I said, I don't play by the rules.

Tessa Callahan's Story.

Coming June 18, 2020

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Okay, so, when I sat down to write *The Sinner*, I never imagined the response to this series would be THIS incredible. I'm just a girl who likes to write books and enjoys sharing them with the world, and to see all of the heartwarming reviews and comments about my work is the best feeling. Therefore, the first person I have to thank is you. Yes, you—the reader. Without you, there wouldn't be someone to read my books. Sharing my words is as amazing as it is nerve-wracking, and the only reason I can write full time is because of you. So, from the bottom of my heart, THANK YOU!

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If you've enjoyed reading this book, please consider leaving a review. And again, THANK YOU!

xoxo, Kels

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kelsey Clayton is an internationally selling author of Contemporary Romance novels. She lives in a small town in Delaware with her husband, two kids, and dog.

She is an avid reader of fall hard romance. She believes that books are the best escape you can find, and that if you feel a range of emotions while reading her stories - she succeeded. She loves writing and is only getting started on this life long journey.

Kelsey likes to keep things in her life simple. Her ideal night is one with sweatpants, a fluffy blanket, cheese fries, and wine. She holds her friends and family close to her heart and would do just about anything to make them happy.



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