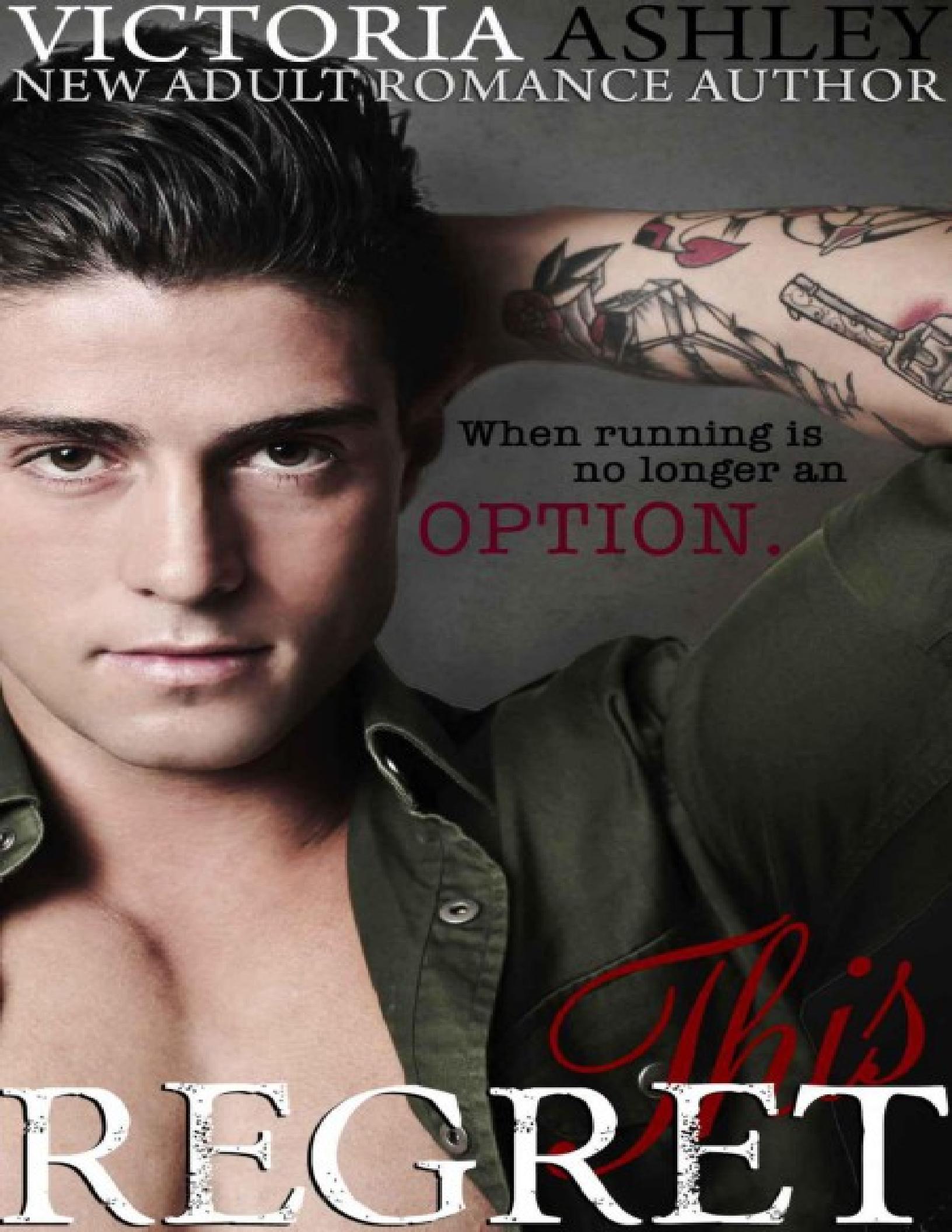


VICTORIA ASHLEY
NEW ADULT ROMANCE AUTHOR



When running is
no longer an
OPTION.

This
REGRET

This Regret

By Victoria Ashley

Prologue

Phoenix

The blast of a .38-caliber revolver sends me crashing to my knees, landing in the road, with gravel digging deep into the flesh of my knees.

My hands grip the gritty ground, as if my life depends on it, making my fingers bleed. Who knows, at this point, maybe it does.

Even with my eyes closed, I can feel the world spinning around me, my body threatening to give up and lose what control I have left. Tears stream down my horror-stricken face and a silent scream is threatening to form in my throat. It hurts. It hurts like hell.

That's when I hear it. A bloodcurdling scream that makes my blood run cold. Except, it's not my screaming that is roaring through my ears as I expected.

It's the screaming of a woman. A very angry, hysterical woman.

The only thing I can decipher is, "Call 911. Somebody fucking call 911. There's blood everywhere."

I can hear bodies shuffling nearby, some of them even tripping over me to get away, but I can only process one thought. *He's gone. Please don't let him be gone.*

With force, I am yanked to my feet, a large hand smacking me across the face, causing blood to taste on my tongue.

I try to focus, but my vision is too blurred to make any sense of who has control of my body and at this point, I'm not so sure it even matters.

"This is your fault," the deep voice growls as I spit blood onto his filthy boots. Narrowing his eyes, he wraps my hair securely around his hand and yanks my head back, hard, while his other hand tightens around my throat, squeezing. "You're going to pay for this if it's the last thing I do, you stupid bitch."

He lets go of my neck and shoves me down to the ground so my face is pressed into the gravel, his boot crushing into the back of my skull. Dirt and rocks dig into my left eye, making it even harder to see through the tears. I desperately look for the man that hasn't only crushed then stolen my heart

just to crush it again, but has also replaced a part of me that I thought was long ago lost.

Realizing that my search is pointless, I just lay there defeated, feeling half-alive, but mostly dead. “Go ahead,” I whisper. “See if you can hurt me anymore than you already have. I dare you.” My body’s trembling, but I look him dead in the eye anyways. I’m not scared of dying. Not after losing the biggest part of me, my heart. “Losing him will be my last regret.” I shift so that I’m looking at the deep scars that cover his face. They make me sick. He makes me sick. “That and not killing you when I had the chance.”

Chapter One Phoenix

7 weeks earlier . . .

Stretching, I roll over, to rub my hand over the empty sheet next to me. My hand stops and my body freezes, as I feel, not the silkiness of my new sheet, but the flesh of a rock hard chest. I run my hand along it, trailing it down the smooth, warm flesh of defined abs, until my hand rests on a penis. Not only is it a penis, but it’s a hard, naked one.

Cursing to myself, I sit up leaning my head against the back of the headboard. I tug on my wild hair while shifting my gaze over to the naked man next to me. My eyes go wide with confusion and my stomach fills up with butterflies.

Kades sprawled out on my brand new satin sheets, sweat dripping over the ridges of his defined muscles, staining the silver of my clean bed.

I blink my eyes a few times, before my eyes fully come into focus enough to see my mind isn’t playing tricks on me. He really is here, nude and in my bed.

I exhale, my heart racing with adrenaline, before elbowing him in the side in an attempt to wake him up.

“Wake up,” I grumble.

He lets out a grunt, but doesn’t even bother with opening his eyes. Instead, he just pushes his morning boner down and mumbles something inaudible to my ears.

“Dammit, Kade.” I elbow him again, but harder this time being sure he gets the message. “Get up!”

His eyes shoot open and he sits up with a confused look on his face. When his eyes focus on me, he waves his arm in front of him and mumbles

something under his breath before lying back down and closing his eyes again.

Confused and aggravated with his presence, I kick him off the bed. He lands on the ground with a big thump, causing him to wake up and cover his morning boner.

“Fuck!” he screams.

Looks like the message is loud and clear.

I lean over the bed and toss a pillow at his head as he grips a handful of his blond curls with his free hand. His expression is cute, making me laugh as he reaches for the pillow and yawns. “What the hell are you doing here?”

He presses the pillow to his crotch and stands up. His thin lips curl into a small smile before he runs a hand over his bare chest. “Oh shit.” He shakes his head in an attempt to wake up. “I almost forgot I came here last night.” He pauses to stretch and I watch him in curiosity, waiting for an explanation. My eyes can’t help but to wander down to my pillow that is still pressed firmly against his penis and for some reason I find myself wishing I can take the pillow back. *Now that, is definitely something worth seeing.*

“I lost my keys last night. It was late and I was tired. All I could find were your keys. Plus, your place is closer.”

I nervously chew on the inside of my lip as I give his body one last look of admiration. I always figured he was in good shape, but I never imagined . . . this.

Holy . . . hell!

I reach up to wipe the sleep from out of my eyes and turn my head away to face the wall. I’m afraid if I keep looking at him that my anger will somehow fade and I don’t want him thinking that it’s okay for him to go out and get drunk and crawl into my bed in the middle of the night. He’s lucky I’m a deep sleeper or else I would’ve thought someone was breaking in last night and he would’ve gotten more than just a kick to the ribs.

“Maybe you should take my pillow off your balls and get dressed,” I say, trying to sound angrier than I seem to feel.

I hear some shuffling behind me as Kade starts getting dressed. “If you insist. Most women don’t, to be honest.”

I give him a couple of minutes before I continue our conversation.

“Okay, now that explains why you’re here in my house.” I turn around slowly being sure that he’s really dressed, before taking my hand away from

my eyes. Then, I slip on my silk robe and look up at him, while pointing down at the sweaty spot on my bed. The sad part is, it's not even that warm in here. "What I want to know is, why the hell you were in my bed . . . naked. You're lucky that I didn't wake up and kick your ass. Who just crawls into bed with someone, Kade? Most people would consider that a little on the creepy side."

He finishes buttoning up the last button on his crisp white dress shirt, before leaning against the front of my dresser and running a hand through his tousled hair. He looks so cool and collective, as if me kicking him out of my bed naked is a normal thing. *Maybe he's used to this kind of treatment.*

"Apparently, I do and when the person is sexy." He stops to roll up his sleeves before continuing. "It's not creepy. Besides, Zoe was asleep on the couch. There was no way I was going to kick her off the couch and get kicked in the nuts again. That girl is like a fucking ninja." He adjusts the crotch of his jeans and smiles. "So, I came up here to sleep and it got hot. I was drunk and forgot I was here." He shrugs his shoulders. "No biggie."

I roll my eyes as a soft giggle comes from my closet.

Dammit, Zoe!

Mom said her and dad needed a night to themselves, so I offered to take my younger sister for the night. Apparently, it wasn't the best decision and really bad timing.

Kade and I both look at each other before he reaches for the door handle and yanks the closet door open.

Zoe comes tumbling out of the closet, landing on her face onto the floor next to Kade's feet.

She looks up, face red, before she scrambles to her feet and laughs. "How did I get in there? Oh yeah, I was drunk and forgot where I was. Always, the perfect excuse." She laughs again as I walk over and push her toward the bedroom door.

"What did I tell you about hiding in my closet, Zoe? You're too old for that crap now." I reach for the door handle and pull the door open before shoving her outside into the hallway. "Next time mom calls me in the middle of the night for a babysitter, you're sleeping outside on the porch."

Kade stands against my dresser with his arms crossed over his chest as Zoe gives him the middle finger. Zoe has hated Kade ever since he first made fun of her for a crush that she had when she was twelve. Clearly, the hate hasn't faded and her and Kade fight every time that he comes around.

“Nice to see you too, brat. By the way, your hair looks lovely in the morning, Annie.”

Zoe reaches up to flatten out her messy red curls. “Go suck . . .”

I close the door behind her before she can finish the insult. It’s way too early for their arguing and I’m going to need at least two cappuccinos before dealing with their bickering. “Go downstairs and I’ll cook you breakfast when I get down there,” I yell loud enough to drown out her shouting. “Give me a minute to wake up before I have to deal with this crap.”

“Fine,” she mumbles, clearly unhappy with me for shoving her out into the hallway. “It better be a good breakfast after having to witness that.” She lets out a grunt before I hear her heavy footsteps walking down the hallway toward the kitchen.

I turn back around to face Kade and my body instantly gets heated just from the way he’s looking at me. My eyes trail over his slender body, stopping on the bulge in his jeans and it’s hard to fight the fact that it’s making my heartbeat quicken. We’ve been friends for over twelve years, but I have never thought of him in a sexual way before. Not until . . . now, that is.

Looking me in the eye, Kade walks over to stand in front of me before cupping my face in his hands. His hands are big and warm on my face and the feel of his touch makes my body flush even more. “Why is your face red?” he questions with a smirk. “Did you like something that you saw?”

I clear my throat and swallow hard, trying not to give away what I’m feeling. *Who wouldn’t like what I just saw? That question is ridiculous.* “Why would you ask that?”

He runs his finger over my lips, giving me chills before resting his hand on my neck. “Your face is red.” His eyes focus on my thin tank top as he slowly runs his tongue over his lips, before bringing his lust filled eyes up to meet mine. “And your nipples are hard. I’m pretty sure it’s not cold in here, Phoenix.”

I take a step back and pull my robe closed, turning my eyes away to meet the black carpet. He wasn’t supposed to see that. As a matter of fact, I didn’t even notice until he pointed it out.

Shit! That’s not embarrassing at all.

I shake my head and laugh in an attempt to change the subject. “So . . . what time are we supposed to be at work again? I think I will just drive

myself to-

He presses his lips against mine, stopping me midsentence. My pulse races and my legs become weak, causing me to have to wrap my arm around his neck just to keep from falling over. Somehow, the feel of his lips against mine feels natural, almost as if we've both been holding back for a while. That's pretty confusing.

By the time his lips leave mine, my body is craving for more and I can't help but to run my tongue over my lips, savoring the taste of his mouth. It's a good thing I like Whiskey, because from the taste of it, I would say he did some drowning in it last night.

He runs his tongue over his lips as well and looks me in the eye. "I've been holding that back for years now." He squeezes my arms and bites his bottom lip and it's crazy sexy the way he's looking at me. "I have some things I have to do. I'll see you at work tonight."

I stand there and watch as he walks away, grabs for my keys and tosses them to me. I catch them and clutch them to my chest. "Yeah and be prepared to work this time, Romeo." I pause to swallow. "I'll see you then."

After Kade is gone, I fall onto my bed face first not believing I just let him kiss me.

What the hell was I thinking? What makes it worse, is I think I actually liked it.

Feeling confused and anxious, I scramble to my feet and get dressed faster than I have ever gotten dressed in my entire twenty-three years. Then I take a few breaths to compose myself before meeting Zoe in the kitchen to cook her breakfast.

Zoe looks up from sitting on the edge of the kitchen table, her legs dangling off the edge, and shoves a roll into her mouth. She spits it out and snickers as she notices my pissed off face. "Why was that jerk in your bed naked? I knew I should've woken you up last night when I saw him stumble in like a moron. You do know he's a moron, right?"

I try to hide the smile that is threatening to form on my lips. As hard as I try, my lips just won't seem to cooperate. Apparently, a part of me appreciates the moron. "You heard him, Zoe." I reach for a roll and slap some butter on it, while trying not to laugh. "He got locked out of his apartment. It was safer for him to just come here."

Zoe throws her half-eaten roll at me and jumps off the table landing on her feet in front of me. "You fell for that crap?" She laughs as if it's the

funniest thing she's ever heard. "If he had his car keys to get here, then don't you think his house keys are on the same ring? Duh!" She slaps my forehead and tilts her head, making fun of me.

Zoe does have a valid point. Even though she has issues with reading and writing, she is quite observant for a fourteen-year-old and a lot smarter than people think.

I shove my roll into my mouth while I chew things over. "It doesn't really matter." I place the rest of my roll down onto the granite countertop and walk over to the fridge. "It's my business and not yours. You're too young to worry about what Kade was doing in my bed. You need to worry about nail polish and boy bands."

Zoe watches me as I start pulling out the eggs, bacon and bagels. "Screw boy bands," she huffs. "You told me before that Kade only sticks around because he used to be friends with Adric and—"

I put my hand up to stop her. "Don't even say it, Zoe."

"But, it's true. Wouldn't it be weird to date him? They were practically best friends from what you've told me."

I take a deep breath and close my eyes. I still don't like talking about the past and I especially don't want to think about the point Zoe is making. It's not as if Kade and I are even seeing each other.

"We're not dating." I pause to give her a forced smile. "There is nothing wrong with being close friends. Now go watch T.V or something and leave me alone." I shoo her away with my hand. "Go!"

She rolls her eyes and reaches under the counter for a skillet. I jump as she slams it down onto the stove and turns back around to face me.

"Whatever. Isn't he too old anyway? Adric was at least five years older than you were, so I'm guessing his friends are too. That's weird. That makes him almost thirty. That's old and creepy. His balls are probably—"

"Zoe!" I look away from pulling the bacon apart and stare at the back of her unruly, red curls. Sometimes she makes me just want to knock her upside the head. Hell, I even dream about it sometimes. It sucks having to be the mature one.

"Kade is only two years older than I am. That was his brother that was . . ." I take a deep breath, pushing the painful memory from my mind. "Never mind. Let's just make it through breakfast without choking each other and discussing Kade's balls," I say sternly.

“Well, whatever. He’s still a jerk,” she says, getting in the last word. She always has to get in the last word. If she doesn’t, then I am pretty sure the world will end and crumble at all of our feet. What a shame that would be.

“What time is mom coming again?”

She shrugs her shoulders over dramatically and pulls open the shades letting the bright early sun in. “Whenever she feels like it. I don’t really care as long as I don’t have to listen to her and dad fight all day. It’s been getting worse and I’m losing my sanity.”

I can’t tell . . .

* * *

I arrive at *Spinner’s Bar and Grill* just five minutes before my shift starts. My mother was late as usual with picking up Zoe, and I almost took out a car, trying to make it on time.

Dale, the owner, is waiting for me as soon as I open the door and walk inside. His eyes look heavy and his dark hair is standing up in all directions, as if he’s been pulling on it all morning and I almost have to stop myself from laughing.

I look around the big, empty bar and notice none of the signs are lit up and he didn’t even bother with plugging in the dartboards.

“Looks like somebody’s had another rough day.”

He tosses me a towel and looks at me with wide, crazy eyes. “What took you so long? I almost thought you weren’t going to show up.”

I walk behind the bar as Dale holds the waist high door open for me. My gaze sets on a huge mess of empty beer bottles and glasses that scatter all across the bar top. “I had Zoe. I got here as soon as I could.” I reach for the trashcan and pull it along with me as I start throwing the empty bottles in the trash, each one clunking together causing Dale to jump and blink as he watches me. “What happened here? Did you get bored and throw a party with yourself? This place is a mess.”

Dale throws his head back and grunts. “Ha! I wish. Trust me, I could use a few drinks. Saline didn’t show up for work, again. That damn . . . I won’t even finish that sentence.” He scratches his head and punches something into the register. “There was a lunch rush and I was the only one here. I tried calling Saline, Kade and Jen, but no one would answer their damn phones. What the hell is the point of cell phones nowadays, if no one knows how to answer the damn things? They’re a waste of money if you ask me.”

I toss the last beer bottle into the trashcan and push it back into its original spot. “Why didn’t you call me?”

“I almost did, but I kind of figured you’d be watching your sister. It’s become pretty routine for you over the last few weeks.” He looks up with desperation in his eyes and grips the bar top. “Please tell me Kade is coming in tonight. We have a baseball team coming in for dinner around six thirty. I can’t have him messing things up”

My stomach knots up at the thought of Kade. “I don’t see any reason why he wouldn’t show up.” I offer a weak smile, trying to keep my nerves together. “Relax, Dale.”

He snorts and shakes his head in shame. “That boy always has some crap going on. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but he’s been leaving at random times and leaving Jen and Saline to work by themselves. That crap has to stop or he’ll be gone. I don’t care if he’s my son.” He sits down onto a barstool and points a finger at me. “You’re management now. You need to start putting your foot down. We’re going to have to start looking for more staff soon. I’m not joking either. I’m fed up with their games.”

I hate whenever he goes on his stupid rampages. He used to be such a nice guy, but that changed about eight years ago and now he’s just uptight and angry. I guess many people’s lives changed eight years ago, after . . . that day.

“Okay, Dale. I’ll have a talk with the staff tomorrow night. I’ll set up a meeting and let them all know they have to show up or else they can hit the road.” I toss my towel at Dale and smile. “Now go home. I can handle it from here.”

Dale grasps the towel and the veins in his temple throb. It almost looks scary, as if they’re about to pop out of his head. “Are you sure you can handle it?” He stands up and pushes the barstool back in. “If Kade doesn’t show up then you’ll be by yourself and I can’t come back tonight. I have . . . I just have shit to do.”

I nervously chew on the inside of my lip, while trying to decide if Kade would leave me hanging. He’s usually good about showing up for our shifts and I hadn’t even noticed he was ditching his other ones. “Yeah, he’ll show up. Now go home. You look like hell.”

Dale looks up as I start wiping down the bar. He looks almost relieved as he nods his head. “That’s what my wife tells me.”

I look up again and smile at him. “What? That you look like hell?” The thought makes me laugh.

He chuckles and grabs for his keys. “Nope.” He looks back at me before reaching the door to leave. “Both.”

“I bet. I would send you to someone else’s home if I had to deal with you daily as well.”

He laughs and reaches for the handle. “I don’t blame you.”

I shake my head and laugh as he walks out the door leaving me alone in the silence of the big bar. There’s usually an hour in between the shift change where you are pretty much lucky to see one or two customers. I don’t mind it though because it gives me the necessary time to get things set up the way I like them. From the looks of the messy tables and misplaced product, I have a lot of work to do.

Seven o’clock rolls around and here I am, by myself, taking care of the whole baseball team along with a few other stragglers that are hanging around the joint.

My heart’s racing and I begin to sweat as I struggle to keep up with the orders. My arm accidentally knocks into one of the seven drinks I’m currently working on, causing me to let out a deep breath to calm myself.

“It’s okay. You can handle this.” I have to remind myself. “Just breathe.”

“You look hot when you’re all wet and sweaty.”

I look up to see Kade standing on the other side of the bar. His messy curls hang loosely, brushing against the top of his baby blue eyes that are looking at me with amusement. It might be cute to most girls, but right now, I just want to smack him.

He gives me a carefree smile before letting himself behind the bar and reaching for the drink ticket to help me catch up. “Sorry I’m late.”

I look away from pouring one of the cocktails and give Kade a forced tight-lipped grin. Unfortunately, he finds it to be cute, so he just smiles. *Jerk.*

I wipe an arm over my sweaty forehead, being careful not to drip over any of the glasses. “Don’t smile at me.” I grab for another glass and start on the next one. “You were supposed to be here at six. Did you forget? I’ve been working my ass off here.”

He leans over the bar and smiles at the two cougars that have just now appeared in front of us. “I’ll be right with you, ladies.” He winks at them

and they both smile in satisfaction, swooning over his usual charm.

The women whisper to each other, before the taller brown-haired woman responds. “Take your time. We’re not going anywhere, honey.”

Kade turns his attention back to me and helps me carry the drinks over to the table of drunken men that have been shouting at each other about their game for over the last forty-five minutes. Apparently, they lost the game, it was Andy’s fault for twisting his ankle, and Andy doesn’t seem to think his fall caused the other team to get a home run. I’m not sure that I agree.

“Are you shitting me? Did you see how fast I got back up?” Andy argues. “Let’s see your fat ass get back up that fast. You can barely walk on your feet even without having a twisted ankle.” He yanks the bigger guy’s hat off.

“Oh, fuck you, Andy.” He snatches his hat back and the others jump in to settle the argument.

Ignoring their banter, I head back to the bar with Kade following closely at my heels. As soon as we get far enough away, I hear him talking behind me.

“I was helping my friend Jack work on his car.” He leans in closer so I can hear him better. “He’s a shitty mechanic. I’m sorry. I’ll make it up to you.”

He pushes open the door behind the bar for the both of us, and the women waiting at the bar instantly fight for his attention.

“I’ll take sex on the beach,” one of the women requests. “Actually, make that for the both of us,” she says, pointing to her friend with a look on her face that makes even me embarrassed by her desperation.

Kade looks me in the eye with a look that makes my heart jump out of my chest and my mouth suddenly go dry. Then he turns his attention away to help the eager women.

I watch him as I wipe down the bar and I can’t seem to pull my eyes away. His faded jeans are hanging perfectly on his slim waist and his black V-neck shirt is form fitting enough to show off his sculpted chest and arms. No wonder women all go crazy over him. I always tell myself I won’t be one of those girls and now look at me, I’m practically drooling over him. It’s ridiculous. He’s only . . . Kade.

I turn my attention away from him so I can focus on making a list of liquor that needs to be refilled.

I look up from the paper, peeking, as a figure sits down in the barstool in front of me.

Before he even speaks, his heavy breathing gives him away.

“There’s my favorite bartender in all of Alba, Texas.”

I bring my eyes back down to the list I have just started and shake my head. Martin has been a regular for the last two years and it’s almost impossible to keep him away for a day. “When you say favorite bartender, you do mean the only one left that will serve you, right?”

Martin laughs and slams his wallet down next to him. Everything inside of it is bulging out and looks as if it’s about to fall apart. I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s full of all of his bar receipts that he’s accumulated over the years. Some paid and well some . . . I’m still waiting on. *That son of a . . .*

“You’ve got a point.” He pauses to nod at Kade while digging in his wallet to pull out a five-dollar bill. “That’s not the reason why, though.” He slams it down next to him on the bar. “You’re pretty and you have a smart ass mouth. What’s not to love?”

My lips twist up into a smile as Martin leans over the bar either trying to get a look at the list I’m making, or just trying to see my breasts. Either way, I should smack that wrinkly grin off his face.

I cover the paper with my hand and then shove it into my pocket.

“You’re such a distraction. Doesn’t your wife ever wonder where you are?” I turn around to grab him a bottle of beer before twisting the top off and setting it down in front of him. “Plus, aren’t you too old to be here every day? All of this drinking is going to make you croak on me.” I slap his fluffy chest and smirk. “Then what would I do?”

He pulls his hat off his balding head and places it over his knee. “You’re shitting me, right? That old broad can hardly remember her own name. What makes you think she can remember me?” He sips on his beer and slaps his round belly. “I won’t be croaking anytime soon and I won’t be stopping until this baby has had enough.”

“Ah ha. I see.” I turn to walk away so I can get back to concentrating on making my list. “Now I see why no one else will serve you.” I flash him a hard look and point at him. “You’re what people call an old, angry fart.”

He tilts his beer back and smiles as he presses it against his lips, the bottle almost getting lost in his crazy beard. “Just get back to work,” he growls.

I lean against the bar, wave my arm at Martin and study what I have off the short list so far. Two . . .

I jump when I feel Kade's hand wrap around my waist and pull me against the firmness of his body.

"You didn't think I forgot about our kiss, did you?" He presses his face into my neck before running the fullness of his lips under my chin, his warm breath giving me chills. "I would like to do a lot more to you than that." His husky voice is full of want, making it hard to concentrate.

I lean my neck back and moan getting lost in the moment. Then realization of the situation sets in, causing me to jerk my neck away. I open my eyes to see Martin watching us and I have to fight myself to shake off the pleasure that Kade's touch is bringing.

Before I can let myself further enjoy the feel of his touch, I wriggle my way out of his grip and turn around to face him. I need to be tougher and keep my head on straight. "We have a lot of work to do, Kade."

My eyes focus on the hardness in his jeans before his hand pushes down on it and he runs his tongue over his lips. "You like to torture me. You have been doing it for years." He smiles and reaches for a towel. "Okay. Let's get to work then. We'll play some more later." He winks.

I swallow hard as I watch him take control of the bar. Then, I lean in and speak next to his ear to be sure he can hear me over the soft music. "I would take it easy if I were you, buddy. No one said we were doing anything later."

He smiles as if he thinks I'm only joking. "My place or yours?" He pushes a beer across the bar top and some guy reaches out to catch it. "I'm not letting you get away so easily."

I have a feeling that you won't. I'm guessing that's not a good thing either.

Chapter Two Kellan

The tattoo gun buzzes beneath my fingertips, giving me a sensation unlike anything else can bring. I run the tip of the gun along the smooth lines of the angel I drew up just less than an hour ago; its wings wrapping around my forearm and the angel in a crouching position, weeping. One arm rests on her forehead, while the other one rests on the ground beside

her. The ground that is threatening to fall from beneath her and crumble her world to pieces. A feeling that has haunted me for years.

At the moment, I just need a distraction and the feel of the needle in my hand always takes my mind away from things, but the feel of the needle digging in my flesh, is even better, making me feel more alive, giving me the breath, I cannot seem to catch.

I can feel Tyler's presence even before he opens his mouth to speak. Not to mention the fact he's chewing with his mouth open, leaving trails of crumbs forming on the ground by my foot breaking my concentration. Nothing new there.

"What's up, man?" He watches me intently while pulling his beanie off and shaking his hands through his shoulder length hair. "Having another bad day?"

I hold the tattoo gun out in front of me and nod my head, showing him, that once again, he is right. He's figured me out pretty well in the last six months and I only have myself to blame for that. "I guess you can say that."

He takes a seat in his worn out leather chair, spins it around a few times and then twirls back around to face me. "You're going to run out of room someday, then what?" He shoves the rest of the sandwich in his mouth and quickly chews before speaking again. "You need to find another distraction, my man."

I shrug my shoulders before tilting my head up so I can see him. "I have other distractions."

He runs his arm over his mouth and leans forward in his chair, his arms out in front of him. "Oh yeah? Like what?" he challenges.

I set the tattoo gun down on the tray beside me, and pull off my rubber gloves, before looking over at him. "Just stuff . . ." I flip my arms over, looking for an empty spot in between the various tattoos that cover both of my arms. I point at the tiny space right by my left armpit. "I guess I'll have a little bit of time to figure out what else."

He's silent for a moment as his eyes study me, looking as if he's got something more to say.

"What was that call about earlier?" he finally asks.

The thought of it causes my blood to boil and I have to fight the urge to throw something across the shop. "It was nothing important," I say, my voice as steady as I can keep it. "It was just . . . someone from my past."

I look up, my jaw clenched, before pushing the drawer to my desk closed and looking up to face Tyler, neither one of us speaking. I have nothing more to say about it.

The neon Open sign on the door flickers, catching both of our attention for a moment, before finally staying lit.

“Where did you buy that shitty sign from again?” I question trying to change the subject. “That thing’s been pissing me off. I’m about ten seconds away from breaking it.”

Tyler looks my way and nods his head, before walking over to take a seat in the stool in front of me. “From that crappy little pawnshop down the street.” He twirls his keys around his finger, the familiar sound working me back up, causing my heart to pound heavily in my chest. “So you’ve told everyone that you’re back, then?”

I look away and run my hand through my hair, pushing the old thought from my mind. I really don’t care to discuss the subject and I wish I could forget about it all together. “Nah. It’s been a long time.” I pause to swallow, trying to keep my cool. “Trust me, no one is looking for me. If I see them, I see them.”

Tyler twirls the keys around his finger once more before he tosses the set of keys to me. I reach out to catch them. “Maybe this will help keep your mind off things.”

I hold the keys out in front of me, eyebrows raised as I stare at him. “The keys to your Chopper?” I question examining them. “I have my own bike, man.” I toss them back and he catches them. “Thanks for the effort, but I’m cool.”

“No.” He shakes his head and brings his eyes up to meet mine, the look on his face telling me he’s about to ask for my help again. “I need your help. You’re the best I know when it comes to motorcycles. She’s been making strange noises lately. Can you check her out, man?”

The keys come flying back at me and I reach out to snatch them right as they’re about to smack me in the face. He is right, though. Even I have to admit it. I do need a way to keep my mind off shit. “Sure man, I don’t have shit going on tonight. Where is it?”

“I already have her parked in your garage, man.”

My lips turn up into a small smile as I shove the keys into my pocket. *That smart dick.* “What made you think I would even do it?”

Tyler stands and walks over to me, placing his hand on my shoulder. He points to his chest with his free hand, “Because it’s me, man. The coolest motherfucker you know.”

I look at him from the corner of my eye and reach for a bandage. “You still owe me. When I need something big, you better fucking come running.”

“You know it.” He pops his knuckles. “That’s pretty sick, man.” Tyler’s eyes widen as he leans in and checks out my half-finished angel. “She looks kind of broken though. That’s some sad shit.”

A tight smile forms on my lips as I examine it myself. It practically covers my whole forearm, connecting itself to the smoke that trails around my arm just above her wings. “Just as I intended her to be. She’s not quite finished though.”

“It’s going to be sick as shit when you do.” Tyler walks back over to his desk and pulls open the drawer before tossing handfuls of ink into a box. “I’ll be at my place doing a few tattoos if you want to come through later.”

“Yeah. We’ll see.” I walk around the small tattoo shop and start flipping off the signs. “I have a few things to take care of first.”

“Sure, man.” He walks over and bumps his fist against mine before heading for the door. “Be careful with my baby.”

I nod my head before he walks outside, leaving me alone to finish closing. Not that it takes much work. I grab for my leather jacket, flip off the last light and lock the door behind me.

The night air is refreshingly cool as I walk around the brick building to the back parking lot. It’s probably not cool enough for my jacket, but when riding, it only seems natural.

As I approach my Harley, my lips twist into a wicked smile and I straddle her. Running my hands up the handles, I shift to the right, the hard gravel crunching under my boots as I steady myself. If anything else can come close to the feeling the tattoo gun brings me, it’s riding hard and fast.

My moment is rudely interrupted by shouts coming from the parking lot of the bar next door and from the sound of the woman’s voice, I can tell she has been crying. That is all it takes to get my full attention.

“Don’t touch me. Don’t fucking touch me,” she screams.

I get off my bike just in time to see the man grab the woman’s face and slam her into the side of the brick wall. “Shut the fuck up, Maxine.” He

leans in so his face is right in front of hers. “People can hear you. Don’t be such a bitch.”

As much as I know I shouldn’t get involved with some bullshit like this again, there is something inside of me that can’t help but to rescue the damn damsel in distress.

Fuck me!

I walk over to the bar, my boots crunching in the gravel, but neither one of them seem to take notice of me approaching.

They continue to fight, the asshole pressing his luck even further. “You’re not going anywhere, Maxine. No one else wants you, so you might as well stop fighting me.

The woman presses her hand into his chest and gives him a hard shove, but her tiny arms are barely enough to even make an impact. “Go screw yourself, Nathan.”

The guy swings his arm back and is just about to hit her when I interrupt his tough guy moment.

“Hit the woman one more time and I am going to fuck your world up and make you wish that you never even laid eyes on her.”

The woman’s eyes desperately scan me looking for help as she scoots across the wall in an attempt to get away from the asshole in front of her.

The guy slowly turns around and pushes his sweaty hair off his face, clearly drunk as he stumbles, almost tripping over his feet. His eyes widen as he checks out my athletic build. What can I say; I have a lot of frustration to get out.

“There is nothing going on here.” He grabs for the woman’s arm as she tries walking away. “And if there was it would be none of your damn business.”

I press my hand to my forehead, trying to cool the anger that is threatening to explode. I really can’t stand it when a man touches a woman with force. He’s pressing every one of my buttons and tonight really isn’t a good night to fuck with me.

“I just made it my business.” I reach out and grab the woman’s arm, pulling her out of his grip. Then, I press my arm into his chest and slam him into the building just as he did to the girl. “It’s not nice to hit a woman. Didn’t your mother ever fucking teach you that?”

The guy struggles to push away from the building, but soon realizes that his small build has nothing on my six foot two frame. “I’m just trying to get

her home, that's all. She's had a little too much to drink and she gets crazy."

The woman reaches up to wipe a drop of blood off her upper lip. He must've slapped her around before I came outside and that makes my blood boil even more. "He's full of shit. I broke up with his loser ass last week and he can't handle it," she hisses. "I'm not going anywhere with him."

I press my elbow into the guy's neck and place my face just inches away from his to be sure he gets the message. "You see that beautiful woman over there?" He turns his head to look at her before struggling to nod, looking everywhere but at me. "If you ever fucking touch her again, I will find out and I can assure you that after I'm through with you no woman that beautiful will ever even look your way again. Do you understand me?" I shove him into the wall again when he doesn't respond. "I have a really bad temper and sometimes I can't control it. Trust me, you don't want it to get to that point."

The man mumbles something before pushing my arm away. "I get it. Shit." His eyes wander over to the beautiful redhead beside me. She's standing there in her pretty black dress, her long slender legs trembling as she runs her fingers through her wild hair in an attempt to get out the knots.

"I might not be around when you realize how bad you fucked up," he growls. "Don't ruin your last chance, Maxine."

The frightened woman stands up straighter as if suddenly gaining a little bit of confidence and the look in her eyes is pure hatred. "I've already realized a long time ago how I fucked up. That's why I'm gone now, Nathan."

I stand there with my arms crossed over my chest as he turns, makes a grunting sound and stumbles back into the bar without even giving Maxine a second glance.

I look back over at her before I start heading back to my bike. "Well, are you coming?"

She stares at me for a moment as if she's trying to figure out if I'm dangerous or not. She must decide I'm not because she finally falls into step behind me, her heels pounding heavily against the blacktop.

She stands in front of me as I run my hand over my bike. "What is your name?" she questions, her emerald eyes searching mine. "

Throwing one leg over my bike, I grab for my helmet and look off to the right. "Kellan." I toss her the helmet and watch as she catches it and looks

down at her hands. Then she looks back up with a look of gratefulness in her eyes.

“I’ll take you anywhere you want to go,” I promise her.

She takes a moment before placing the helmet over her head, flattening out her red curls, before grabbing my arm and swinging one leg over the bike and cozying up behind me. “Anywhere?” she questions.

I rev up the engine, causing her to wrap her slender arms around my waist for support. “Anywhere.”

I feel her heavy breathing in my ear before I feel her tiny fingers playing with the back of my hair. “Would your place be out of the question?” Her voice comes out shaky as if she’s afraid of my response. “I’d rather not go home right away.”

I take a moment to push my hair out of my face before giving her the answer she is seeking, even though I know that it’s a bad idea. “I said anywhere.” I pause to rev the engine one more time. “I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it.”

I take off, causing her body to jerk backwards as her fingers dig into my waist to hold on.

I can feel her grip tighten on my waist as I pull out of the parking lot and into the dark night and it feels nice knowing she feels safe with me. No woman should ever have to go through what she went through tonight and probably numerous other nights with that jerk. She deserves so much more but unfortunately, I won’t be the one to show her that.

We pull up to my place and I park in front of the garage. Looking up at the big white house in front of me reminds me of how lonely it can feel in such a big house. Really, I don’t need all of the space, but it is the only house that reminds me of home. This is the closest that I have been to Alba in eight years and the rush that it gives me is unmistakable.

I help Maxine off my bike and steady her to her feet. I look down at her towering heels and can’t understand how someone with such long, skinny legs can manage to spend hours in those damn things without screaming. I have to admit they do look sexy though. Especially with that tight dress that is threatening to expose her curvy bottom at any moment.

The wind whips around us, causing Maxine’s hair to fly around and hit her in the face. She peeks at me through her hair and reaches for my hand. Her fingers are tiny compared to mine, making me feel more masculine. “Thank you.” She takes a step so she’s standing right in front of me. “You

didn't have to save me. It was my fault for agreeing to meet up with that douche in the first place."

I reach up, brush a strand of hair out of her face and I can tell by the look in her eye that she wants me. I pull my hand away trying to avoid letting her down. I never take advantage of a broken woman, giving them hope I can heal them. "It isn't your fault. No man should ever treat a woman that way."

I push away from my bike and slide the helmet off her head. I have to admit she looks hot in it and it's taking everything in me not to fuck out my frustration on her.

She smiles and pushes my jacket out of the way before running her hand along my chest. "I'll admit, you coming to my rescue has me completely turned on." She stretches on her toes to the tip of her heels to kiss my cheek and says in a seductive voice, "I need something to keep my mind off things," she trails kisses down to my neck, "I think you'll make the perfect distraction.

I grip the back of her neck and pull her face close to mine. Her breathing is heavy as she looks up at me. "This isn't a good idea. I'm not what you think I am. Trust me."

She looks me in the eye and I can tell that in this moment, she doesn't care. "He cheated on me more than once." Her nostrils flare as she turns away. "Do you know what it's like for woman to know that her boyfriend has cheated on her not once or twice, but three times within two years? Am I so ugly that no man wants me?"

"Hell no. You're beautiful." I look away, jaw clenched, before I turn back around and grip her tiny waist, pulling her body against mine. Maybe I'll make an exception for her tonight. "Are you sure you can handle it? I like to fuck, not make love and I can't promise that it won't hurt. I can't give you anything more than this. Just physical pleasure to numb the pain."

She reaches her hand in my jacket and pushes the button for the garage door. We both look over as the door rises, waiting for our entrance. "I've been hurting for a long time. Hurting is all that I know now," she breathes. "I just want to feel sexy again. I need this."

I reach my arms around her, running my hands down her ass, before picking her up so she can wrap her legs around me. Her slender legs tighten around my waist, squeezing me as if her life depends on it.

Damn those legs are strong.

I can already feel my arousal as she presses her firm breasts in my face and tugs on my hair to make me look up at her. “I have a lot of steam to blow off. This is your only warning,” I breathe, as I walk into the garage and press her into the wall. I rub my hands up her face. “I need to grab a condom first.”

A small smile forms on her pink lips as she reaches into her small clutch bag and pulls out a condom. “A woman with a crushed spirit should always come prepared.”

I grab the condom out of her hand before bending forward and pressing my mouth against her neck with force. She lets out a small moan before leaning into me, her body rubbing mine as if she’s been waiting for a moment like this for years.

I put my arms down and allow her to pull my jacket off and toss it on the ground beside us. “You want me to fuck you right here?” I question while gripping her ass tighter, running my fingers under the hem of her dress.

She runs her tongue over her lips before biting on the bottom one, playing with it between her teeth and that is the only answer I need.

I don’t hesitate before setting her down, her back pressed against the wall and her dress riding up in the front exposing her black panties.

She watches me with hunger in her eyes as I pull my t-shirt off and toss it over Tyler’s bike. Then, I grip the bottom of her dress and wrap it in my hand, pulling her to me.

She lets out a gasp and reaches for the buckle of my studded belt. “I really want you to take me.” Her fingers work fast on undoing my belt before she starts working on my jeans. “Screw, Nathan. This is going to be the best night of my shitty life.”

I look down at her, my chest heaving up and down as I grip her neck and make her look me in the eye. “You think it will feel good . . . having me inside of you?” I press my erection against her stomach and she grips it with her hand, running her slim fingers over the fabric of my briefs. “I promise you when I’m done, you will never have to question your beauty again because you’re going to feel every inch of your worth.”

Her breath comes out ragged as she pulls my briefs down, her eyes landing on my rock hard cock. Her eyes fill with lust and a little bit of shock, and I can tell she wasn’t expecting the beast that is looking back at

her. She swallows hard, while bringing her eyes back up to meet mine.
“How am I supposed to work with . . . that?”

I shrug my shoulders before picking her up, a surprised gasp escaping her lips, as I set her on the bed of my truck. “That’s for me to figure out.”

Her legs willfully spread as she slowly pulls her dress up, exposing the lips that are playing peekaboo with her tiny thong.

I grip her hips with force and pull her down to the edge of the truck bed so her ass is barely hanging on the surface. Then, I bend down and run my tongue up the length of her inner thigh stopping right by her panty line.

I can tell by the soft moan that escapes her lips that my mouth being so close to her pussy is pure torture for her. I’m not going to give her what she’s expecting though. I can’t. That has always been a deal breaker, which causes every single woman that I have been with to grow attached to me. I won’t do this to her. This is just meant as a distraction to the both of us.

I close my teeth around her delicious thigh, giving it a playful bite before pulling away and working my mouth up her belly, my hands pulling her dress up on the way. When the dress reaches her head, I pull it off her and throw it over the edge of the truck.

Before she can even register her dress hitting the floor, I already have her thong squeezed in my hands, ripping them from her toned body. Her legs tremble as she plays with my chest and throws her head back. “Oh damn!” She bites down on her bottom lip. “I think I’m going to like it rough.”

A soft rumble comes from my throat as I quirk an eyebrow and grip both of her wrists in my hand, pulling her up to meet my abdomen. “Take my briefs all the way off.”

She slides my briefs all the way down to my knees, her breasts brushing against my cock and by this point, I just need to release this frustration that has been building for the last week.

I yank her legs, pulling her towards me so my cock is resting above her belly. With one hand gripping her neck, I rip the wrapper open with my teeth before slipping the condom on and pulling her hips up to meet my stiffness.

She plays with her tits, squeezing her nipple in her fingers as I run my fingers over her wet slit before squeezing my cock into her tightness. I slowly thrust in and out a few times, loosening it up to make room before

giving her my full on, ass gripping thrust that is sure to make her remember this moment for a very long time.

She screams out while wrapping her legs around my waist causing me to thrust harder, rolling my hips in and out, giving her the pleasure that she deserves.

Her ninja tight grip on my bicep hardens as I grip the back of her neck, wrapping my fingers in her crazy hair and pounding in her with as much force as I can.

I can already feel the tension that has been building up all week start to subside. It always does with sex. Some people say that working out and exercise is a way to deal with stress, but sex is the only thing that has ever worked for me.

Without pulling out, I grip both of her hips and flip her over so her ass is facing the ceiling. I reach down with one hand and rub my finger over her wet clit while pounding into her with fast, consistent thrusts, tugging her hair with my free hand. “Tell me how I feel inside of you,” I demand.

She lets out a whimper as I slow my pace and wrap my arm around her waist, pulling her up so my chest is pressed against her back. “You feel good inside of me. So good.”

I bend down so my lips are hovering over her ear before I whisper, “Do you feel beautiful now?”

Her neck stretches back as she attempts to look at me. “Yes! Oh fuck!”

I quicken my pace while moving my fingers up and down her wetness, knowing that at any moment, she’s about to clamp around my cock and release her juices.

I am right. As soon as I give her one last thrust, she screams and her legs begin to shake as she struggles to not fall over. “Oh shit! I can’t handle this,” she whines.

I support her body with mine and force myself to finish before pushing her shoulders down and pulling out. Even with a condom, I still like to take precautions.

She rolls over on her back before looking up at the ceiling, with hooded eyes “Wow!” She takes a few deep breaths. “That was . . . just . . . wow. That’s all that I can say.”

I smile at her before looking over to see we forgot to close the garage door. “Looks like the neighbors got a good show.” I bend over and reach for her dress. “Here. Let’s get you dressed so we can get you home.”

She gives me a thankful look while slipping her dress over her head and adjusting it to cover her thighs. She blushes. “Please don’t think I’m a slut or anything.” She watches me as I get dressed. “I don’t usually do things like this, but when you’re stuck in a messed up relation for so long-“

“You don’t need to explain.” I cut in. “I know more than anyone else what sex can do in the hardest of times. Come on.”

She follows me back to my bike and I click the remote, closing the door behind us.

Chapter Three Phoenix

The bar has been awfully quiet for the last hour, so I take that as my cue to sit down and have that employee meeting, I unfortunately, promised Dale I would have. As much as I hate being the bad guy, business comes first and I have to step up and take charge before we all end up jobless.

“There will be no more calling in to work or not showing up unless there is a very good reason and I mean a very, very good reason.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I hear about three different forms of groans coming from the table in front of me. I don’t let it discourage me though. I stand up straight and as Dale would call it, put my foot down. “The next person that does it is fired. I’m sorry, but Dale isn’t playing it nice anymore and neither am I.”

The hand that has been swirling around Saline’s cocktail glass for the last five minutes stops as she looks up and rolls her eyes. “Please, tell me you’re joking.” She flicks the black straw in her glass with a look of disgust, her overly plump lips twisting up into something unnatural and very unattractive. “This place is becoming such a bore. This is crap! I can’t help it if I have other important things to take care of.”

This is exactly the kind of response I expected from her. So, I took the time to prepare a good comeback. “Look,-“

“Nobody cares Saline,” Jen jumps in, ruining my perfectly prepared speech. “This place isn’t meant to be for your entertainment. It’s your job and because of you, we’re all in the doghouse.

The girls sit next to each other, both of them giving the other a dirty look as if they’re ready to go at it.

“Come on.” Kade looks up from his phone and flashes a cocky grin that would’ve had no effect on me before yesterday. But now, it’s almost enough

to make my mouth water. “Calm down, ladies. No one is in the doghouse.” His eyes meet mine, giving me that same flirtatious look he has been giving me since I found him in my bed the other morning. It’s so distracting and drives me mad. “Don’t worry so much, Phoenix, he’s not going to make you fire anyone. He’s just being a dick.”

Kade’s white t-shirt clings to his firm chest as he shoves both of his hands into his back pocket. I let it distract me for a moment before I manage to pull myself together.

I shake it off and laugh under my breath. These people are really underestimating Dale, but his patience is running thin these days. “You guys are not getting it. He’s serious this time. Trust me, this is not a game.”

A worried look crosses Jen’s face as she grabs her bottle of beer and presses it to her lips, taking a gulp. She sighs in frustration before setting it down in front of her and pressing her hand to her forehead. “You guys need to stop messing things up. I work my butt off to take care of my family and I will not lose my job because you two keep messing up the schedule. I have a son to take care of. I can’t . . .”

Jen’s words trail off and we all look over to see a sassy looking black-haired woman, with killer legs, wearing a small lacy red dress. She brushes her long, wavy hair out of her face, exposing her big green eyes, while looking around the table. “Everyone sure looks motivated.”

Jen sits with her hand still pressed to her forehead, looking as if she’s ready to explode. Saline is twirling one finger in her hair, bending her straw with the other hand, and Kade is texting on his phone.

I’m not sure any one of them know what the word even means.

“Um . . . who the hell is this?” Saline’s mouth curves up into a grimace, as she looks the intruder up and down, her eyes stopping on her black stilettos. “This is a meeting, dear. The strippers are in the next town over. So-

I hold my hand up stopping her blabbermouth before she can manage to run the new girl off.

The new girl just raises an eyebrow and smirks, obviously not letting Saline get to her.

“This here is Luna.” I pause as everyone gives me confused looks. “I hired her this morning.”

If they weren’t taking me serious before, from the look on their shocked faces, they are now.

Saline shoves her drink across the table before jumping to her feet and giving me a death glare that would probably cause most girls to run away screaming. “Are you kidding me? We don’t need any more bartenders, it’s slow enough as it is.” She turns to face Luna again. “You can leave. We won’t be needing you.”

Sometimes I wish I had a muzzle for this girl. She never knows when to shut up and take her place. Now, I have to put her in it. “You only have yourselves to blame.” My eyes meet Saline’s as she places her hands on her hips. She looks extremely pissed, but I don’t care at the moment. “You’ve called in nine times this month and today is only the twenty fifth. You screw up again, Saline, and you’re gone. You have one more chance.” I look beside me and point my thumb at Luna. “Plus, Luna has some great ideas to get more business in. She’s staying.”

A snicker comes from Saline’s mouth as she leans in close to Jen. “I’m sure,” she mumbles. “What, those huge tits?”

Luna takes a step so she’s standing at my side. She looks down at her boobs, proudly, before looking back up and shrugging her shoulders. “I’ve already rounded up about fifty people to come in tonight for sex toy bingo.” She gives Saline a menacing look before turning to me with confidence. “The party starts in less than an hour. I brought all of the game cards and equipment needed for the game.”

One mention of the word sex and suddenly everyone figure’s out what motivation means. If I would’ve known that, then I would’ve brought up sex ages ago. Even Saline looks a little curious, now that her she-devil face is gone.

Jen sits up straight and looks up from peeling the label from her bottle. “What is sex toy bingo? I’ve never heard of it.”

Luna raises an eyebrow before pulling a vibrator out from behind her back. “You get a bingo and you win one of these bad boys. Every woman needs a best friend. Trust me, I have plenty.”

Everyone, including Kade, seems to look satisfied with this answer. Even I have to admit it sounds interesting and it never hurts to try new things.

“That’s a crazy idea . . . but I like it,” I say unsure. “I’m sure this will be the most excitement this bar has had in years.”

For the first time in a long time, everyone seems to look a bit enthusiastic about being at work and I can’t help but to feel a twinge of

excitement.

Kade looks at me and lifts his eyebrows. “I think it’s a great fucking idea.” He pushes away from the table he’s been leaning on and walks over to Luna. “Do you need me to grab the crap for this sex bingo?”

Nodding, Luna starts talking while walking toward the backdoor with Kade following closely at her heel.

“Alrighty then.” Saline snatches her glass from the table and brushes past me, but not without stopping to growl at me. Something she does very well. “I can see you know how to pick them. I’ll be setting up the bar.”

It’s an hour later and as Luna promised, the bar is full of customers. I’m guessing none of them are from town because I barely recognize any of the faces.

Luna stands at the front of the bar with a microphone and a box of vibrators sitting next to her feet, while Kade and Saline are working the bar.

The crowd seems to be crawling with hyperactive women that are eager to get the game started, none of them seeming to want to sit still.

“Are you, horny women ready?” Luna asks into the microphone, while running her hand over a vibrator and licking her lips.

A few people scream, but lack the expected enthusiasm.

Luna holds the huge pink love machine above her head and waves it back and forth. “I’m going to ask you again. Are you, horny women ready? These vibrators need some homes and from the looks of it, some of you might just have a good room for one of these bad boys.”

Kade is looking calm, taking care of a group of women that are trying to hurry to get drinks before the game begins. He jumps back, almost dropping a glass, when one of the women in front of him screams and throws her arm up.

“Hell yeah, baby!” She waves one arm in the air while sipping on her drink with the other.

This seems to get a little more attention and I can feel the excitement around me. A room full of crazy, sex deprived women that can’t wait to get their hands on a toy of their own. This has to be about the best game ever. How could it not be?

Luna screams back and starts naming off letters and numbers, but in my attempt to talk to Jen and keep my eye on things, I can barely keep up.

“Wait. What did she just say?” I scream loud enough, being sure, Jen can hear me.

Jen leans over my board and points at the last spot called out. “B 25.” She laughs as a girl with a stick figure, bumps into her spilling her drink. “Man, it’s crazy in here tonight.” She places a chip on her card and speaks again without looking back up. “Nathan’s been acting strange lately.”

That isn’t surprising. He’s been acting strange for the whole two years they have been together. Then after Jen gave birth to Jax, he started acting even stranger, if that’s even possible. He claims his job keeps him traveling and that’s why he’s never home and is stressed out a lot, but I think it’s bullshit.

“What now, Jen?” I bring my eyes over to meet hers. I’m so tired of her always being hurt and stressed and I wish I could just drag her away from Nathan and toss her into the arms of a good guy. One that doesn’t make me want to punch him in the face. “What’s he doing?”

She places another chip on her board as Luna continues screaming out one after another, barely stopping to breathe. “Well, he didn’t come home until two thirty in the morning and he had bruises on his chest.” She pauses and lets out a deep breath. “When I asked him about it, he freaked out and got pissed.”

I place my hand to my forehead and try to choose my words wisely. “He’s an ass, Jen.”

Okay, so not so wisely, but I can’t help it anymore. She deserves so much better.

“Phoenix!”

“What! He doesn’t deserve you. He’s never treated you right. He lies all of the time and is hardly ever home.”

Jen looks up, her nostrils flared, as she runs a hand through her short blond bob. “We have a baby together, Phoenix. I have to make things work for Jax. He’s my life now.”

No matter what I say, it’s never enough to convince her otherwise. Maybe it’s not my place to be telling her, but I know a dick when I see one. Trust me, not all dicks are useful.

“I understand that. That’s the reason why you should leave. Jax shouldn’t have to grow up watching his parents unhappy. It’s better to leave while he is still young enough to not understand what is going on.” I grab Jen’s hand and look her in the eye and it only takes one look into those baby blues to see all of her pain. I know, because they resemble what mine used to look like before I decided to not look back anymore and only think for

the future. "You and I are going to take a day away soon and hang out. Just the two of us. You need to get away for a bit. If you won't leave him for good, then just leave him for a day and breathe a little. Don't even think about telling me no."

A small smile crosses Jen's face before she turns away and grabs for another chip and twirls it around in her fingers. "Okay, I could use a day out." She pokes me in the arm before placing her next chip. "But, it's not to get away from Nathan. It's for my own pleasure."

I throw a chip on my board and look across the room at Kade wondering how he's holding up with all of these crazy women. He glances my way and smiles, giving me goose bumps "Sure, I'll take that. As long as your ass in mine for the day."

One very happy, overly excited woman screams bingo and starts bouncing up and down. Luna calls her up to claim her prize before continuing with the game.

The woman looks at her vibrator excitedly, holding it out for the other women to see and from the look on her face, you would think she just won the lottery.

"Now I have one less reason to need my husband," she shouts, making most of the women shout back in agreement.

It only takes a few more minutes before I hear bingo again and when I do, it's coming from right next to me. "Bingo!" Jen shouts. She grabs my arm and pulls me to my feet, almost causing me to trip. "This one right here has a bingo."

My eyes widen as I look down at my card to see she's right. I have been so busy daydreaming for the last twenty minutes that I haven't even been paying attention. Lucky me, I guess.

All eyes are on me as I make my way up to Luna and she hands me a package with a purple vibrator, similar to the pink one that she held up earlier.

"Enjoy. I have that same model at home. It works wonders, trust me," she whispers before grabbing another one from out of the box while pushing her lips out into a pout. "Okay, ladies. This is the last one so you better step up your game. These batteries are super charged and ready to do their job."

A few boos come from the audience as I make my way through the herd of people, everyone eyeing me as if they're about to jump me and steal my

prize. I hurry through them and back over to mine and Jen's table. Now, getting beat up over a vibrator would be quite the story to tell to my grandkids someday. If I were to have any.

"I hate you." I nudge her in the side before placing my gift on the table. "Did you see their eyes? They were about to take down over this." I hold the vibrator up and laugh. "I have to pee. Do you need to go?"

Jen picks up the package and scans it with curious eyes. "Wow! This looks complicated." She shakes her head. "No. I'm fine and I'm sure you'll be safe to go alone."

I push my way through the crowd and shut myself inside the quietness of the bathroom and into one of the stalls.

Afterwards, I am leaning over the sink with my hands still in the water when I feel a hand grab my wrist and pull me away from the sink.

I fall into Kade's chest with my hand twisted in between our bodies. "Do you really think you'll be needing that toy?" he questions, raising an eyebrow. "Then again, I can always use it on you."

I can feel my cheeks turning red as I push away from his chest and lean against the sink. "You're pretty confident that I want you, aren't you?"

He runs his tongue over his lips before bringing his lips down to meet the sensitive spot below my ear. He trails kisses down my neck and then, with slight force his lips come crashing into mine as I squeeze his hard chest in my hand.

When he pulls away, I can feel his hands caressing my ass before he presses his body against mine, poking me with his erection. It feels thick and warm against my stomach, making me want to do very naughty things. "Yeah," he breathes, "I guess you could say that."

We both pull away and try to look as if we weren't just about to rip each other's clothes off when someone pushes their way through the door. Not, that I would've let that happen, but you know . . .

An extra thick woman sporting way too much makeup and clothes that should fit a woman three times smaller than her walks in and throws her hand to her hip. "Hey guy, this is the women's restroom."

Kade bites his bottom lip and gives me that 'I'll be back for more look' before turning on his heels to face the woman.

The look on the woman's face changes from annoyance to lust in a split second. "Never mind, handsome; you can stay." She smiles, revealing her half-blackened teeth. "It can be our secret."

Someone has their eye on a different kind of toy and lucky for Kade, he's pretty much the only man here.

"I can't." He frowns and heads for the door. "So much work to do." His eyes meet mine before he walks out, closing the door behind him.

The woman looks me up and down before placing her hand against one of the stall doors. "Is that all yours?" she questions, with a hungry look in her eyes that says she will jump at the chance to sink her teeth into him.

I grab for a paper towel, dry my hands off and toss it into the trash. "Nope and I'm pretty sure he's looking for a date this weekend for his dad's company picnic."

She runs her hand along the stall door and plays with her hair, trying to be cute. "Really? Thanks for the tip."

"No problem," I say and open the door.

When I walk back out to meet Jen, Kade is busy behind the bar again. I flash him a playful smile while helping Jen clean up the bingo mess.

The crowd of people has died down some, now that the game is finally over, and a group of women are filing out the door at this instant.

"Did you have fun with my gift while I was gone?" I give Jen a questioning look.

The look on Jen's face says it all. "I really need to get me one of these. As much as Nathan and I have sex, hell, I should have two."

A vibrator comes flying at our heads and I quickly reach out to grab it before it can smack Jen in the back of the head.

"I always bring extras." She smiles and gives me a playful wink.

"Sweet," I say eyeing it.

Luna takes a seat next to us and places her drink on the table. "I would say the night was successful."

I hand the vibrator to Jen and she grabs it with both hands before handing it back. "You know I can't really take one of these home. Nathan would have a fit."

Looks like her purse is about to gain a gift, because I'm not letting her leave without it. I shove it into her purse and snap it closed. "Just leave it in your trunk." I smile. "Nathan will never have to know."

It's silent for a moment before Jen finally says, "Okay fine, you talked me into it. It's your ass if I get caught though."

I glance around the room and stop on the woman from earlier. She's leaning over the bar with her shirt riding up her back exposing a majority of

it, as she reaches for Kade's hand and pulls him closer to her. A laugh escapes my lips as Kade looks over at me with eyes desperate for me to save him. You want to hang out in the women's bathroom, then you get the baggage that comes along with it.

Tossing an armful of empty bottles into the trash beside me, I shake my head, smiling, and turn behind me to thank Luna. "Yes, sex toy bingo was a brilliant idea. Kade and Saline should have no reason to complain about tip money tonight and I will be sure to pay you cash for the night, thank you again."

Luna stands up and walks over to different table to help with the trash. Waving her hand she says, "No rush, just pay me tomorrow."

After the bar is cleared out, I'm leaning over the register counting money, when I feel someone breathing on my neck. Instantaneously, I know it must be Kade.

I turn around to say, "You just never give . . ."

My words trail off when I see Saline giving me a confused look. "Am I free to go now? I have crap to do."

Looking back down at the register, I dismiss her for the night and continue counting. "Yeah that's fine, see you on Friday."

After counting the money three times, I come to the conclusion that someone had to have messed up somewhere. There's no way the drawer can be off by almost fifty dollars, but since everyone is already gone for the night, I'll have to talk to them later and figure it out.

I stash the money into the safe, grab my jacket and head out for the night.

I lock up the bar and am taken by surprise when I turn around to see Kade leaning against his truck.

He's looking down at the ground, his blond curls hanging over his face. "What are you still doing here? I thought you had to meet Jack?"

His head shoots up as I walk over to stand in front of him. Without speaking, he grabs my waist and pulls me against him.

"I was wanting to do this one more time." He runs his hand over my cheek before slowly leaning in and pressing his lips against mine.

I find myself falling into him, my hands exploring his tight stomach, making it hard for my mind to work right. I know there was something important on my mind a few minutes ago, but not so much now. Just Kade's lips caressing mine as if it's perfectly natural.

Finally, his lips leave mine and a smile stretches across my face as I open my eyes. “You need to stop acting as if I like it when you kiss me. Also, stop molesting me at work before someone thinks something is going on. I’m the manager and your father owns it. Not a good look.”

“You love it and who cares what they think?” His hand runs down his stomach before it pushes down his erection, straining to break free. “If only I didn’t already have plans tonight.” He squeezes my ass and pulls me against him, pressing his lips against my neck before pulling away again. A smirk pulls up on one side of his face. “Oh yeah, don’t be surprised if you find me in your bed tomorrow night and no worries, I’ll be sure to be naked again.”

I turn and start heading to my Sebring as he opens the door to his truck.

I look back and grin at him, dangling my keys from my ring finger. “I don’t think so stud, you already gave me my key back.” I jump into my car and shut the door behind me.

I have to be crazy to be falling for Kade after all of these years.

Chapter Four

Phoenix

One of us had the brilliant idea of sitting down and having a family lunch with our grandmother, Claire. So here we are, sitting around the kitchen table at my mother’s house, awkwardness overpowering the happy feeling I should be having for making a delicious meal.

“Pass the salt.”

Twirling my fork in the middle of my spaghetti, I reach my arm out and scoop the salt across the table and in front of my mother.

She brings her hazel eyes up to meet mine for a split second and that’s all it takes to know that she’s hiding something. She’s been acting strange for the past few weeks and to be honest, I haven’t seen my father around pretty much at all.

I clear my throat breaking the silence, before this awkward family moment can get any more painful. “Where’s dad? I haven’t seen him all week. Is something up?”

Two sets of hazel eyes land on me, but neither, my mom nor my sister are quick to speak.

“Okay then. Forget I asked,” I mumble, looking over at my grandmother who has her head buried in a glass of Jack. I’m surprised to see she hasn’t

drowned in it yet.

My grandmother shrugs her shoulders, while spinning the ice around in her glass causing liquor to spill over the edges and onto the table. “He’s probably at some cheap motel with some cheap hussy.” She dips her finger in her glass and splashes her drink in my mother’s direction. “It’s a wonder this marriage has lasted as long as it has.”

My mother’s head shoots up, but she doesn’t even bother with looking at my grandmother. You can tell she’s trying as hard as she can to keep her anger under control, but I have a feeling it won’t last long. They’ve never had a good relationship and it’s easy to see why. I’d be lucky to even remember one happy family moment that included the both of them.

“Did anybody ask for your two cents, mother? Why don’t you go pour a fifth glass of Jack so you can pretend to be somewhere else like you have my entire life.” Her voice comes out smooth, but her eyes are shooting daggers in my grandmother’s direction.

If this family dinner was pushing towards awkward before, then it’s definitely crossing that awkward line now.

With lipstick stained teeth, my grandmother smiles and holds her glass of Jack out in front of her. “Trust me dear, I could’ve never gotten through your teenage years without him. You should be thanking me for drinking or else you would’ve been living on the streets by the time you hit fifteen. You were always an ungrateful child.”

“Hey! What the hell, you two?” I stand up and push my chair against the table, causing everyone to look my way. Right now, I need to keep my cool. These two have no control. I can’t believe they can’t even pretend to get along for Zoe’s sake. “You two need to grow up and act like adults. This is supposed to be a nice family lunch.”

When I look beside me, Zoe is sitting with one hand on her forehead, while playing with a noodle with the other. She looks bored, as if she’s used to this behavior and has learned to block them out.

No wonder she never wants to be around. Our family is pure hell and it has been ever since the death of my brother Adric. Honestly, I don’t think anyone truly ever figured out how to cope with him being gone.

My parents became distant, leaving me to pretty much care for Zoe and myself. I shut myself inside my own little world and refused to trust anybody again and Zoe, well . . . she was too young to remember Adric.

“Haven’t you learned yet?” my mother asks. “You can’t just throw the words nice and family around and expect us to all function right. I knew we shouldn’t have invited that sorry excuse for a grandmother over.”

With a startling look of calm in her eyes, my grandmother sets her glass down in front of her and leans over the table while holding her gray streaked hair out of her face.

Looks like shit’s about to get real.

“You have room to talk,” she bites out. “You have one child that overdosed on drugs, one that can’t read and another one that doesn’t like to talk about feelings. When you learn how to be a good mother, then you can judge me. Hear me, dear?”

My heart stops at the mention of Adric and Zoe and I have to fight with everything in me to keep from losing my head. This woman is pushing my buttons right now and as much as I want to strangle her, someone has to be an example for poor Zoe and it definitely won’t be either of them.

“How dare you!” My mother stands up and gets in my grandmother’s face. “Don’t you ever speak of my children that way again, you old bitch.”

Zoe jumps up from her chair and throws her plate of spaghetti across the room before gripping the edge of the table, her nails digging into the wood. “Ugh!”

My mother jumps as the plate shatters against the wall behind her and it looks as if she’s about to scream, but doesn’t. She just closes her eyes and flinches.

“I hate you, Claire. You’re just a drunk old woman that no one likes. You’re the worst grandmother ever and—”

“Zoe!” My mother screams while pounding her fist against the table. “Shut up and sit down.”

Throwing my hands up, I shout loud enough to get everyone’s attention. “You all just shut up!” I take a deep breath and attempt to keep my composure. It sure as hell sucks trying to be the big one all of the time. I’m sick of it. These people drive me insane.

“No!” Zoe screams. “I will not shut up.” She starts crying, while gripping the table tighter. “The only time you jerks want to mention my brother is in hatred. I don’t even know anything about him, but I do know one thing, right?” Her eyes are bulging out and her red curls are matted to her pale face. “He was a drug addict and I can see why. You people are unbearable to even be around and you make me wish I was dead.”

She turns around to leave and I reach out and try to catch her arm.
“Zoe.”

It’s no use, though. She storms away from the table and yanks the sliding door open, slamming her fist into it before closing it with so much force both my grandmother and mother jump.

I can’t believe this is even happening right now. Our family has always been a bit dysfunctional, but this is just crazy, even for them.

Looking around the kitchen table, I can’t help but to feel this heaviness in my chest at my grandmother’s words and suddenly, I don’t care if I snap out. How dare she talk that way about Adric and Zoe? Adric, my dead brother that I didn’t even get to say bye to. Screw that shit. I could kick this woman’s ass right now. She can say whatever she wants about me, but not them. I will not allow it.

I turn my eyes to meet my grandmother’s. Her eyes almost look regretful, but that would be too much emotion to expect from that vile woman.

“Don’t you ever say anything bad about Zoe or Adric again.” I push my chair out of the way and get in her face. “You have no right to say what you did. If you have anything bad to say, then say it about me and me only,” I say, jabbing a finger in my chest. “How can you even speak about Adric that way? You evil-“

“Phoenix,” my mother calls out. “Let’s just calm down.”

I shake my head and back away before I can really lose control and hurt someone. “I really don’t want to hear anything that either one of you have to say. I have to go find Zoe now and pick up the pieces you two shattered.”

I walk around the side of the house to find Zoe sitting on the ground with her knees to her chest and her back pressed against the side of the garage. From the looks of the half-smoked cigarette dangling between her lips, she doesn’t even notice me walking her way.

The wet grass tickles my toes as I approach her and the sky is filled with clouds, looking as if it’s about to rain again. Perfect weather for a crappy moment like this.

“Zoe.”

The cigarette falls to the ground by her feet as she looks up at me, her face moist with fresh tears. As much as I’d like to yell at her for having a cigarette, I can’t. Not after looking into those broken eyes full of pain. It hurts my heart.

“What do you want? Can’t you see I’m out here being stupid? You know like everyone thinks that I am,” she mumbles.

I crouch down in front of her and pull her in for a hug, but she pushes me away. “Zoe, stop it.” I pull her in again and this time I am successful enough to at least wrap my arms around her, with her arms pinned in between us. “That’s not true, Zoe. No one thinks you’re stupid.” I run my hand over the back of her curls as she leans into my shoulder. “You’re a hell of a lot smarter than me when it comes to certain things. Don’t listen to her. Don’t let her win, Zoe. She doesn’t know shit about you.”

She falls farther into me, finally giving in, as a sob escapes her throat. When she does, it is filled with so much pain that I can almost feel my heart shattering into a million pieces. I hate seeing her this way. If Adric were here, then he could fix this. Just as he always did for me. He’s not, so I have to do my best, even if it’s not enough.

“It’s so hard for me. I don’t know if I can do it anymore,” she whispers in a raspy voice. “I just want to run away from everyone and everything. You have no idea how it feels. Why did I get stuck with this family?”

Tears sting my eyelids as I pull her tighter against my chest and run my hands through her hair. “I do,” I whisper, holding back the tears. “More than you will ever know, Zoe.”

“Then how did you do it?” She pulls away, resting her head against the garage, while running her fingers through the wet grass. “How did you deal with being around our family after . . . you know, Adric?” She swallows hard while wiping at her face.

My eyes are burning, my throat is dry, and now I’m the one that feels like running. I can’t talk about that. I just can’t.

Losing Adric was the worst moment of my entire life and there will never be any words to describe the pain that I felt and still do. Not only was he my brother, but he was my best friend, my protector and the person I knew would always be there for me. He did everything for me. When I was scared, he was the one that crawled into my bed until I fell asleep. When I fell off my bike, he was the one that made me laugh and forget everything. When I got my first heartbreak, he was the one telling me I was too good for that loser. It was always him.

With only being fifteen, getting over his death and the feeling of abandonment was a tough struggle. I felt as if the whole world was falling in on me and everyday was a fight to keep breathing. It crushed my world.

Not only did I lose my brother that day, but to top it off, I lost someone that was like a second brother to me as well. I expected him to be there because my brother no longer was. Expected his shoulder to cry on and to be able to ask him the questions I didn't know, but . . . he was gone too. Without them, I felt alone and my family wasn't strong enough to be there for me, so I did the best with what I had left.

I stand up, smash the cigarette into the ground, and force a smile. "I had to be strong, Zoe." I grab her hand and pull her to her feet. "Now let's go show that old hag to the front door."

The twisted look on Zoe's face makes me laugh. Her eyebrows raise up and her freckled forehead scrunches up. "I'll show her alright."

Her pace quickens and her fists clench at her sides, as we get closer to the door. She's just a little too determined right now. It's a little scary.

"Zoe," I say, stopping her.

She turns around and exhales. "What?"

Pushing her behind me with my hip, I reach for the sliding door. I shove her shoulder and put on a serious face. "Don't think we won't be discussing that cigarette with mom later."

She throws her arms up in frustration, her eyes wide with worry. "Come on, Phoenix!"

* * *

I can't hold back the laughter as the frisbee flies through the air and smacks Kade in the back of the head, making a loud thud.

He spins around to face me and takes a step forward, grabbing me by the hips, but I laugh, pushing him away. "That deserves a spanking," he whispers, biting his lip. "I told you I wasn't ready yet."

I place my hand on his chest and give him a shove. "Oh, was that what you said?" *Sucker.*

"I knew it. I fucking knew it, guys."

Oh crap! Looks like someone is a little earlier than expected.

Pulling away from Kade, I twist my head to the right to see Jen walking down the bike path with Jax snuggled in her arms.

"He was just getting me back for hitting him in the head with the frisbee, but never mind that." I reach out and scoop Jax right out of Jen's tight grip. "About time you brought my little guy to see me. I was about to come kidnap you." I poke Jax in the nose and smile as he giggles. "He's getting too big, Jen. Make it stop."

Jax will be turning one in just a few months and it's hard to believe how much he has grown in the last few weeks. I have been friends with Jen since we were old enough to walk and you had better believe this little boy is spoiled. It's almost as if the little cutie is mine. I just wish I could see him more often.

He looks up at me with those big brown eyes and smacks me right in the face with his plastic set of keys. "Ouch," I say, making a sad face at Jax. "You're just lucky that you're so cute and loveable."

Kade laughs while tossing the frisbee to Jen. "Good job, little guy." He holds his hand up in front of Jax waiting for a high-five that never comes. "No love?"

Jen snaps her arm out with a quickness that only a new mother can have, and pinches his arm. "Don't teach him that violence is okay."

He grabs his arm and gives her a clueless look. "You just pinched me," he points out. "Isn't that condoning violence?"

Jax laughs in that cute little baby voice and throws his arms out at Kade.

When Kade makes a sad face and grabs his arm in pain, Jax laughs again and bounces up and down in my arms.

"Now look." Jen tosses the frisbee up before catching it again. "Now he thinks it's cute when someone gets hurt. Great job, moron."

"He's fine, Jen. Don't get your panties in a bunch . . ."

Their conversation trials off as I look around the park, my eyes scanning for the place with the most shade. It's a hot June afternoon and I don't want little Jax to be uncomfortable for even a minute. I don't get to see Jax very often anymore and I want him to know he's safe and taken care of when I do.

I take a seat under a tree and place Jax on my lap, while looking up to see Kade and Jen throwing the frisbee to each other still arguing about who is right. "I missed you, little guy." I hold him up in the air and place my nose against his. "I haven't seen you in almost two whole weeks. You better stop being too busy for me."

"Y'all better start talking," Jen yells out. "Don't think that I didn't see Kade stick his hands up your shorts the other day at work. That was just wrong." She turns to face Kade before tossing him the frisbee again. "You dirty boy."

"It's nothing, Jen." I give Kade a dirty look as he smirks proudly. If I was close enough, I would slap him upside the head. "It's all in fun. Right,

Kade? We're only friends."

"Just friends, huh?" He lifts a brow, pretending to act clueless before flashing Jen a charming smile. "Yeah, Jen. What's wrong with two adults that have known each other practically their whole lives having a little fun? I can't help it if I'm so irresistible."

Jen takes her eyes away from Kade right as the frisbee smacks her in the shoulder. "Yeah, whatever," she replies, while grabbing her shoulder and giving Kade a dirty look. "I would be careful though before someone gets hurt."

"We'll be fine, mother." I laugh. "Thanks for the advice. I don't know what I would have done without you."

"I ask myself the same thing," she mutters.

An hour of fun, and a lost frisbee later, Nathan pulls up in his Jeep and steps out. Without bothering to say hi to anyone, he leans against the side of his Jeep and motions for Jen to join him.

Kade takes a seat next to me as we both watch Jen jog over to stand in front of Nathan.

"I've always hated that guy," Kade growls. "He's lucky Jen loves him or else I would've kicked his ass about five different times by now."

Watching them from across the grass, I can't help but to wonder what he's saying to her. I can't hear anything, but from the look on his face, he doesn't look the least bit happy.

I hand Jax over to Kade and get ready to stand up, but Kade grabs my wrist to stop me. "Whoa. Don't go over there and make it worse." He studies Nathan's face while gripping my thigh. "If he does anything then I should be the one to go over there. Just give them a minute."

Thinking about it for a minute, I realize he's right. I don't even know what they're talking about and I really have no reason to go over there and start a dramatic scene. For all I know, they're not even fighting. Maybe he's just worried about Jax.

"Fine."

While I have Kade alone for a minute, I somehow decide this is the perfect time to ask the question I've wanted to ask for years. So, I take a deep breath and blurt it out before I can stop myself. "Do you ever wonder about Kellan? It's been eight years, Kade."

His jaw clenches as he turns his head away. "Every fucking day." He turns back to face me, his eyes hard with hate and pain. "He made his

choice though. He decided to leave us. If he cared, then he would be here.”

“Yeah.” I swallow back the lump in my throat at the memory of that day. Just hours after the news of Adric’s death, we got a phone call from Dale, telling us they found Kellan’s car smashed up on the side of the road but there was no sign of him. We haven’t heard from him since and it’s been killing me every day. “You’re probably right.”

“I am right,” he mutters.

A few minutes later, Nathan is back in his Jeep and speeding off and away from the park.

“What was that all about?” I ask as Jen walks back over and reaches for Jax.

She rubs her hand over Jax’s head before kissing his cheek. “Oh it was nothing. Apparently, he made dinner and was wondering if I was going to come home to eat it before it gets cold. I must’ve left my cellphone in my Jeep.” She smiles at Kade and me before grabbing Jax’s diaper bag. “I’ll see you guys this weekend for the company picnic.”

Kade gives Jax a high five and slaps Jen on the butt, causing her to jump. “Okay. He better have prepared something fucking great to interrupt our game of frisbee. I was kicking your ass.”

Jen laughs. “You lost the frisbee, remember, genius? So really, I won.” She leans in so I can give both her and Jax a hug. “Bye, sweetie.”

“Okay, bye,” I say unsure, getting a weird feeling in the pit of my stomach. “Enjoy your dinner.”

As soon as Jen is out of sight, Kade grabs me by my ass and pulls my body against his. “I have somewhere I want to take you.” He kisses my neck, before bringing his lips up to meet mine.

I let out a moan as he sucks my bottom lip in between his teeth and softly nibbles it. It doesn’t take long before I find my hands caressing his chest getting lost in him again.

“Oh yeah?” I question while pushing my hands under his shirt and over his hard nipples. “Are you finally going to ask me out on a date?” I tease.

He picks me up, with my chest pressed against his and sets me up against the tree. “Nope.” He trails kisses up my neck while running his hands over my inner thigh teasing me. “Even better than that. A tattoo shop.” His hand stops on my crotch, running his fingers over the thin fabric of my leggings, while biting my ear. “You’ve been wanting a tattoo for as

long as I can remember. I found a cool little place about fifteen minutes out of town and I heard they do the best work.”

Leaning my neck back, I reach out grabbing his erection that has been poking me for the last five minutes. “Does the idea of me getting a tattoo turn you on or something? I would be careful with that thing and where you point it.” I give it a little tap and giggle.

He presses his forehead against mine while biting his bottom lip. “Mm . . . I love it when you grab me like that. Maybe next time we can be naked.”

“Who said it’s that easy to get me in bed?” I reach up and unbutton the top of his black shirt. “I don’t just give my goods up to anyone. They have to be really special.” I place my hand on his and press it harder against me, rubbing it over my moist crotch, his fingers becoming desperate. “I think I will take that tattoo though.”

I pull away, slap his chest and start heading for his truck.

“Next time you do that, I’m going to fuck you where we are and you’re going to wish you gave in sooner.”

He runs to catch up with me.

I lean against his silver truck and brush my hair behind my ear. “Slow down there, buddy. I’m not so sure I like the idea of sleeping with my friend. This is only supposed to be a little bit of fun. Having sex gets complicated.”

He leans over me with his hand on the side of his truck. “Maybe with time we won’t be friends.” He pulls the passenger door open and places his hand on my butt, giving me a boost inside. Then he closes the door and leans into the window. “I’m already starting to like you just a little bit more than before.”

Surprisingly, so am I . . .

Chapter Five

Phoenix

I can’t believe I just agreed to run off and get a tattoo. My leg is starting to bounce from the nerves that are flowing through my body and I can’t seem to stop fidgeting.

Kade must be able to tell because I see a tiny smirk he’s been trying with little effort to hide.

Yes, I’ve been wanting a tattoo since I was like . . . twelve, but I definitely wasn’t expecting today to be the day that I would finally break

down and get it. I guess a part of me knows I've been kind of putting it off because of Adric. The one thing in life Adric said he was going to do was open his own shop and give some badass tattoos. Even though I always laughed when he said it, I always believed it was true and he would always be the one giving me my first tattoo. Sadly, I was wrong.

After Kade has finally had enough of my crazy leg, his hand reaches over and grips my thigh, stopping it from its nervous bounce. "Somebody seems nervous." He runs his fingers up my thigh before lightly running his fingertips over my crotch, causing me to squirm. "Or should I say excited?"

I pick his hand up with a scowl on my face before setting it down on his own lap. "You're making me nervous, dammit." I press my head against the back of the seat trying my hardest not to laugh. "But excited? Not so much."

I look over and the stunned look on his face says, that's something he's never heard from a girl's lips before.

He places his hand over his heart with a small smirk on his face. "Ouch. That hurts a little."

He pulls the truck up to the tattoo shop, parks and kills the engine. He unbuckles his seatbelt and leans over to unbuckle mine. "You may say you're not excited, but from the feel of something else, I would say you are." His warm breath tickles my neck as he brushes his lips over my ear. "You can't argue the fact that I make you wet." My face flushes and I clench in all the right places.

Wow, I've known Kade since he was a little boy and he has always been persistent when he really wants something. Now grown, he hasn't changed much and is still a pain in the ass.

"Kade, stop messing with me." I can't help but laugh as I push him away because the look on his face is priceless when he realizes I'm getting serious. "You're becoming a pain in the ass. Didn't anyone teach you to keep your hands to yourself?" A slow smile spreads across my face. "Dirt ball." He quirks his head to the side and spins his keys around his pointer finger.

"Oh, I definitely can be a pain in the ass, a big one, and you of all people know I've never been able to keep my hands to myself."

"Did you really just say that?" I question, still focusing on the first thing that came out of his filthy mouth.

He shrugs his shoulders. “What?” he asks. “I didn’t say I wanted to be. I just said that I could.”

“Sure,” I say trying not to smile, but it’s impossible to stay mad at Kade. “Well keep it to yourself because that, my friend, will never be happening. Especially after seeing that thing.” I give the crotch of his jeans a tap and he looks up with a proud smile.

Before he can respond, I push the door open and jump out of the truck, my feet landing heavily on the cement.

I glance up, my eyes pausing on the sign that’s hanging on the front of the brick building. It reads: *Adi’s Attic*.

“Adi’s Attic.” The name rolls off my tongue with an intensity that lights a fire in my chest. Pain and excitement flow through my body, making it hard to know whether I should laugh or cry.

Adi was my brother’s nickname as a child and I haven’t heard or spoken that name since the day he died. The nickname started when he met his best friend and partner in crime, Kellan Haze.

Kellan looked at him and said ‘Adi, my man, I just saved your ass’ and it stuck. From that day forward, he was known as Adi Winters and the two became inseparable.

My parents hated the name and Kellan as well, but that didn’t stop him from coming over every single day. Those were the best days of my life. Those boys took care of me, protected me. They were everything to me, my best friends.

Ugh! They’re not supposed to be gone, but here, with me. We were a team. I would give anything to have them both back. Every part of me misses them and a big piece of me is missing without them.

Waiting for Kade, I nervously rub my hands over the front of my tank top to wipe the sweat off, my eyes never moving from the sign.

I hear the slamming of the truck door before hearing his familiar grunt. “Shit. Not good timing.”

I pull my eyes away and turn behind me to see Kade running toward me, holding his phone out in front of him. “I hate to have to do this shit, but do you mind if I make a quick run and come right back? I promise, it won’t take long.”

I take a deep breath while watching him type on his phone. I am nervous as hell, but I’ve been wanting this for years and what better place to

get it done than a shop with a name that reminds me of him. I guess it's the next best thing since he can't be the one to actually give it to me.

"I'll be fine, Kade." I assure him. "I'll just take a look around and try to find the design I want. No big deal, really. Go, run along," I tease.

He furrows his brow, looking up from his phone. "Are you sure? You're not going to make me pay for this later are you?" he questions with a sly grin. "You're not gonna want to start without me, though." He winks. "Trust me."

I laugh as he takes a step back. "Why is that because you think I need you? We're not kids anymore, I don't need the big bad Kade around to hold my hand and laugh at me. I'm a big girl, I think I can handle it on my own." I smile and place my hands on my hips, trying to convince myself and it almost works.

He looks from my lips to my eyes biting his bottom lip, before pointing at his face. He says, "When that needle starts digging into that smooth, sexy flesh of yours, you'll need a distraction. That beautiful, is why I'm here, not to hold your damn hand; although, I'd gladly hold something else." He slowly skims down my body, a low growl rumbles through his chest.

"Sorry, but gotta run but I'll be back, ten minutes tops."

Rolling my eyes, I place my hand on his chest and give him a little shove to get going. "You're right about one thing, you are a huge distraction. I'm not saying that's a good thing either. If you're referring to your dick that you'd be holding, then be my guest," I tease. "Have to run, there's a tattoo I should be picking out."

Before I can turn to walk away, he grabs my wrist and pulls me to him. "I'll make sure it's a good thing." He grins and starts walking backwards until finally he jumps in the truck and drives away, leaving me alone.

Too bad he couldn't have tripped. That cocky son of a bitch.

Exhaling, I turn around and my eyes land on a guy leaning against the wall of the brick building. He has brown shoulder length hair, tattoos everywhere, including his neck and a lip ring that curls around his bottom lip. Despite the warm weather, he's also wearing a beanie. He has this sexy, bad boy look about him. Actually, I can see Jen jumping all over him, if she wasn't with that prick Nathan.

He pulls his foot up against the building he's leaning on, takes a cigarette from his pocket and places it between his lips before lighting it. Taking a puff from his cigarette, he pushes his hair out of his face and leans

his head back catching sight of me. “Are you here for a tattoo?” I nod and he continues. “Do you have an appointment?” He shoves a hand in his pocket, waiting for my response.

I shake my head and give him a nervous smile, just now realizing I didn’t even bother to think of that before showing up. Maybe I won’t be getting that tattoo after all.

“No I don’t, I’m sorry. Do I need one?” My eyes scan the street curb for any parked cars. When I see it’s empty, I turn back around to face him with a smile. “I can make one and come back at a later time if you’re too busy.” I pause as he laughs. “What’s so funny? I’ve never gotten a tattoo before. I really didn’t even bother to think about an appointment.”

His eyes shoot up to meet mine before he takes another drag. He looks amused by my answer. “No shit, you’re a first timer? Damn, my boy will love you then. He’ll love popping your cherry.” My cheeks turn red and he takes notice. Looking me over, he reaches for the door and holds it open with a smirk on his face. “Go ahead sweetie and take a look around. He’ll find you in a few.”

“Okay, thanks . . . I think.” I step into the tattoo shop, my eyes widening with curiosity as I take in my surroundings. The name fits the place perfectly because to my surprise it resembles an actual attic.

The place is small. The front must be their version of a lobby, housing a glass display with a register and a small desk to the side. I assume that’s for sketching. To the right of the door sit four plastic chairs and a table piled high with tattoo magazines. To the left is a bathroom door covered in graffiti. In the back sits, a tattoo station on each side and all four walls seem to be covered with tattoo designs.

I walk over to one of the walls, my eyes searching through the pictures. Some of them are real photos while others are just sketches and drawings. So far, I like what I see and can tell why Kade has heard they have such a good reputation.

“Welcome to Adi’s Attic,” a deep voice comes from behind me. “Can I help you find something?”

Without glancing back, I run my hand along the pictures on the wall in search of something beautiful and feminine. If I’m going through with this tattoo then it has to be perfect. I won’t accept anything less. Adric took tattooing seriously, to him it was an art and he probably would’ve kicked my butt if I didn’t as well.

“Um . . . I’m looking for something, I just don’t know what yet. Something . . .” I stop to turn around and my breath catches, “Beautiful,” I manage to whisper the last word and release a small moan. I didn’t mean to but it just came out that way.

When my eyes meet his, my heart starts pounding and I can’t pull away, hell I can’t even speak. He’s got to be the sexiest man I have ever laid eyes on. He has thick dark hair, beautiful amber eyes lined with thick black lashes and a pouty bottom lip that I want to suck into my mouth. As my eyes continue downward, he has an athletic build that says he obviously works out. He’s wearing a black V-neck shirt showing tattoo covered arms and jeans that sit low on his hips.

I lick my lips unconsciously and look back up to meet his eyes. I suddenly feel a sadness looking back at them. Those light amber eyes look so broken and pained. They’re dark and beautiful, staring at me with an intensity that makes my knees go weak and my body want to surrender to his every command.

If a sexy distraction is what I need, then it looks like Kade doesn’t need to worry. This guy has it covered just fine. Something he definitely won’t be too thrilled about since he always has to be the male attention in any room.

The guy’s forehead scrunches up as he studies me with a look that feels strangely familiar, but new all at the same time. It almost looks as if he has something he wants to say, but doesn’t. Instead, he nods his head and then turns to face the other direction. “Something beautiful shouldn’t be too hard for you to find.”

He walks away, his black boots making an intense, angry thud against the hardwood flooring.

My eyes slowly trail up the legs of his faded jeans, landing on his nice ass before finally moving up to his snug shirt, revealing his sculpted back. Maybe being left alone isn’t such a bad thing after all.

I watch as he leans over the glass display, pressing both of his hands against the glass. He stays like that for a moment, not making a sound, and possibly not even breathing, before finally he reaches behind it and pulls out a binder. He just stares at it, not making a sound, as if he’s not sure he wants to show it to me.

I clear my throat breaking the awkward silence. Maybe he’s got other things going on, because he definitely doesn’t give off that ‘I’d be happy to

tattoo you' vibe. "If you don't have time to fit me in today then I can just come back. I'm in no hurry." He squeezes the bridge of his nose and clenches his jaw, probably not even realizing how deeply I am watching him. "I'll just come back--"

"It's not a problem," he cuts in. His voice comes out sounding as if me being here is causing him physical pain. That same pain as the look in his eyes and somehow I wonder if today just isn't a good day for him. Personal issues maybe? A fight with his girlfriend or maybe the loss of someone close to him. Whatever it is has him hurting bad.

I should just leave and assume today just isn't the day for a tattoo. "I'm not even sure what I want anyways. My friend kind of talked me into coming today. I'll just come back."

"Stay. I said it's not a problem and I meant it." He walks over so he's standing right in front of me. His eyes land on mine for a second time and I find myself trying to figure out where I've seen that look before. Those eyes are so familiar yet I can't place them.

Before I can finish my search, he pulls his eyes away and pushes the binder into my arms. "You'll find the form to fill out in the back folder. Go ahead and look through the tattoos, get your I.D out and fill out the paperwork. I'll be back in a few."

Running a hand through his disheveled hair, he turns around and shoves the glass door open, leaving me alone in the shop.

"Now I wish Kade was here," I mumble, feeling a bit down all of a sudden, just unable to get past this guy's attitude.

I take a seat in one of the chairs and set my purse down next to me. "This so better be worth it." I dig through the mess in my purse, finding my wallet at the very bottom, hidden under makeup, papers, candy and pretty much anything else you can find. It never fails to be this way, but yet, I refuse to clean this damn thing out.

After filling out the form and setting my I.D on top, I open the binder and start looking through the tattoos. I'm surprised to see that every single tattoo in the binder has something to do with beautiful peacock feathers of some sort. There are so many different sketches of them with beautiful colors and designs. It's like this binder was made specifically for me and I can't help to feel a bit emotional as I look though them.

I always said as a teenager that a peacock was going to be my first tattoo. Everyone laughed at me except for Adric. He said it was brilliant

because a peacock was beautiful and bold just like me. It always made me smile. It was as if Adric was the only person that ever truly got me. Man, I really miss him.

“Did you find something beautiful yet?”

His voice startles me and I throw my hand over my heart. “Shit, you scared me. Could you give me a little warning next time?” I stand up and close the binder.

His eyes land on my cheek and he smiles, but it doesn’t meet his eyes; although it’s enough to show off a sexy set of dimples that I hadn’t noticed before. “I have a way of scaring people.” He reaches out, placing his hand on my cheek and brushes his thumb beside my mouth causing my eyes to close and my breath to quicken. “Somebody’s a messy eater. Let’s go.”

Just like that he’s gone and embarrassment courses through my body as I watch him walk toward the back. He stops at the station off to the left and takes a seat on his stool in front of the tattoo chair. He starts digging through his drawer and pauses to look up. “Bring that binder over here so I can see what you picked.” He seems so sure I would pick something from there instead of off one of the walls. Surprisingly, he’s right.

Running my hand over my cheek to be sure there isn’t any spaghetti left, I bend over and reach for the binder and the rest of the crap needed to get started. I turn and head over to the station he’s at and take a seat in the black leather chair.

He reaches out his hand. “Let me see your I.D.”

I place it in his hand and lean back into the chair, opening the binder again to take a second look. My nerves are really starting to kick in now. “I haven’t really decided for sure which tattoo I want.”

I flip the page and my eyes set on a peacock with blue, green and purple feathers. The peacock has its neck curved, with its tail fanned out behind its body, proudly showing off the beautiful feathers. “Wow! That’s really beautiful.”

He leans over my shoulder to look. “Where do you want it? Your shoulder? Your leg? Your side? Do you have a certain spot?” His eyes meet mine and I nod causing him to scowl before looking back down at the tattoo. “I can tell you now it’s going to hurt like a bitch no matter where you put it. That’s not a very small tattoo. It’s pretty big for a virgin. Are you sure that you can handle it?”

“How do you know I’m a virgin?” I shut the binder and set it down on the table as he arches an eyebrow. “Never mind, forget I asked. I’m sure I can handle it.” I snatch my I.D back and shove it in my purse. Aggravated, I point to my left ribcage, right below my breast. “Just do it here, please.”

“Okay, as long as you keep in mind I’ve already warned you of the pain I’m about to cause.”

He turns around and pulls the kit and ink out of the drawer, along with a pair of black latex gloves that he pulls onto his hands. It takes him a few minutes to set up all the inks, open the needle and load the gun with the first ink.

In the meantime, I can’t help but to keep checking the time wondering when the hell Kade is going to show up. Maybe I do need him after all. I mean this guy is hot, sexy, gorgeous and every other word you can find to describe something so damn beautiful, but he’s not a very pleasant person to converse with and he has my nerves running wild like a loose electrical wire.

“Take your shirt off,” he demands.

My body clenches, catching me off guard. “Excuse me?” I look up at him as he is getting some paper towels in his hands. “Usually when a man wants me to take my shirt off, he asks a little nicer.”

“That’s because he wants it off for a different reason than I do.” He plays with the tattoo gun a bit, tightening a few things before messing with the pedal by his foot. “Can we just get this done please?” He looks defeated and lifeless refusing to look up at me.

I can’t help it, but I’m starting to get a little angry now. I don’t really understand why he is so angry with the world. Some people would’ve killed to be doing what he’s doing now. Adric only dreamt of being in this guy’s position. “Can you stop being so rude please?” I plaster on a fake smile just to piss him off.

He squeezes his eyes shut and takes a deep breath as if just now realizing what he’s doing. “Listen, I’m sorry. I have a lot on my mind. Will you please take your shirt off?”

I take a deep breath, sit up and pull my shirt over my head, while thinking to myself how lucky I am that I wore my new lacy bra instead of that old comfortable one that looks hideous on me. “That’s better. All you had to do was ask nicely.”

My eyes land on his and this time he doesn't pull them away. He rolls closer so we're face to face. Then his hand reaches out, his fingertips brushing mine as he grabs my shirt out of my hand and tosses it behind him on the glass display, his eyes never leaving mine. "That works for me. Usually I don't have to ask." He pulls some kind of lever on the chair so it's lying flat like a bed now. "Lie down and roll over on your side."

He's getting awfully demanding now, almost making me feel as if he really thinks that he's about to pop my cherry. *Who is this guy?* "You're pretty demanding for not even knowing me," I grumble.

He looks down at me as if he knows something I don't. That look like he can see through my soul. It makes my heartbeat quicken and I can't seem to stop my eyes from searching his whole body, trying to figure him out. From the way his chest is moving against his tight shirt, his heart has to be beating just as fast as mine.

The more that I study him, the more he feels so familiar. Those beautiful eyes, gorgeous full lips, perfectly arched eyebrows and deep set dimples. I know them all, each one. I used to study them by day and dream about them by night. I can't be wrong.

I scoot forward on the edge of the chair so our faces are almost touching. I can feel his heavy breathing on my face as he looks me dead in the eye. That's when I notice the scar on his face. It wasn't there before, but still somehow, I know that my body can't be lying to me. "Wait a minute, I know you." I reach up and run my finger over the scar through his eyebrow, unable to fight the need to touch him, to see if maybe my mind is just deceiving me. "No. It can't be," I whisper mostly to myself while studying him. "Is it really you?"

His nose flares and he stands up and takes a step back, but doesn't say a word to confirm my suspicion.

I stand up as well and we both must be in a daze, because we both stand there, not moving until I hear Kade's voice from behind me causing me to turn.

"Hey, looks like I made it in . . . "

His words trail off as his eyes land on me and then the man that seems to be taking my breath away at the moment. He walks forward, his jaw clenching and before I can see it coming, he swings out and punches the guy in the jaw, his fist connecting hard.

"What the fuck, Kade!" I scream in utter shock.

The guy just stands there, his eyes darken, never leaving Kade's. He clenches his jaw and tightens his fist by his side. His voice comes out tight. "It's nice to see you too little brother."

Holy shit . . . it is him.

Chapter Six

Kellan

The world is spinning around me and pain is coursing through my jaw, but the only thing I can seem to think of is the look in my baby brother's eyes when he noticed who the hell I was. The pain I have put on him is more than any brother should have to handle and I don't even deserve to be in the same room with him. I can honestly say I deserved that punch.

Seeing him for the first time in eight years is exactly what I imagined, maybe worse. He's standing there straight and tall and pissed off as all hell. Looking into those baby blues, cold as ice and full of hatred, it hurts to see how different he is and that I have missed so much over the years. He's no longer that scrawny little seventeen year old kid with the unruly blond curls that were too powerful for his tiny head, or skinny little twig legs I used to make fun of. Now he's almost as big as I am, standing six foot one, with eyes so intense it looks as if he can rip a whole army apart. Who knows, maybe he thinks he can. He looks like a man and it saddens me I didn't help him to get there.

When I first saw Phoenix walk in, I wasn't positive it was her, but one look into those eyes and I knew it had to be. I'd know those eyes anywhere, they were just like Adric's. My heart stopped at the thought, but after seeing the confirmation on her I.D, my whole world just crumbled at my feet. The whole past came rushing to me in a flood of emotions and I felt as if I was fighting to breathe underwater. Even worse though, was seeing my baby brother walk in, sporting that short lived smile on his face and damn, I think I just died a little.

I have been back for six months. Six whole fucking months and I haven't even been able to get up enough courage to see my family. Seeing them like this was the last thing on my list of shit to do. It's been eight long years since I have set eyes on either one of them and seeing them now is like ripping open an old wound.

As much as I have missed my baby brother, it's her that I can't tear my eyes away from. She's standing there, staring off as in pain or shock.

Similar to receiving news that someone close died.

I always knew she was going to be beautiful, but damn, she blows my mind. She's no longer that sweet, lanky fifteen year old girl I used to protect. No, now she's blossomed into a full grown woman, taking my breath away. She's standing opposite of me about five foot five, petite, but with curves sexy enough to make a man's mouth water and wish he could taste every last bit of her skin against his tongue. Her wavy brown hair falls against her smooth skin, barely brushing her breast. Those big gray eyes, lined with long thick lashes could pierce your soul. I follow down that perfect little nose until my eyes stop on those plump, pink lips, causing me to swallow. She's standing there in those low riding jeans and a black lacy bra. Fuck, what a beautiful set of breasts. I can almost see the tops of her nipples and all I can think about is running my tongue across them, getting a taste. She has a belly button ring and the perfect round bottom I want to squeeze and to top it off, long slender legs that would look more amazing wrapped around me. All I can imagine is what it would be like to have her naked body rubbing against mine as I pound into her, releasing some of this built up aggression. Still, my eyes look back to those big gray eyes, full of hurt, not to mention she's Adric's little sister. The girl I always promised to protect. I shouldn't be having these thoughts about her. I'm a fucked up man. She definitely needs protecting, protection from me.

I take a step back as Phoenix speaks, breaking the silence of this hell we've entered. "Kellan," she chokes out, her pained voice barely a whisper. She lets out a breath and her legs slightly tremble. "I can't believe it's actually you. After all of this time, it can't be." Placing her hands to her face, she slowly turns away from my view and mumbles under her breath. "This is really happening . . ."

I try to focus on her words, but Kade breaks my concentration by shoving me backwards and into the station.

I catch myself and try to reason with him. "Kade. I'm sorry." He shoves me again and I get up just to be shoved for a third time. "Dammit, Kade, stop. You're fucking pushing it now," I bite out, fighting with everything in me to keep my cool.

"Fuck!" He rubs his hand up the side of his face before pulling his hair, then he leans over the tattoo chair and grips the edge until his knuckles turn white. "You have a lot of nerve showing up so close to home and without any word that you're back." He squeezes the chair tighter. "What the fuck,

Kellan,” he growls, his veins popping out of his arms and neck. “You could’ve been dead for all of these years. We didn’t know shit. You kept us in the dark.” He sucks in a burst of air before releasing the chair and grabbing his face. “Your family, Kellan, you’re not supposed to shut out family. The ones that have loved you and looked up to you.” His voice breaks, almost as if holding back tears, as he looks up at me. “How could you just walk away?”

Seeing him this way is waking an anger inside of me I’ve tried to keep repressed for a while and all I want to do is break something, but I know I have to stay calm.

Taking a step forward, I reach out to grab his shoulder. “Kade. I—”

He jerks his shoulder away, avoiding my touch. “Don’t touch me. I can’t be that close to you. I don’t even know what to say right now.” He stumbles on his words while standing back up and taking a few steps back. “This is beyond fucked up.”

“It’s a long story, Kade; you will never understand, and I don’t expect you to.” I swallow hard and look up to see Tyler enter the room.

“What the fuck’s going on in here? What did I miss?” He looks around at everybody, eyes suspicious as they land back on me. “Is everything cool, man?

The hard look on his face tells me he has my back if needed and as much as I appreciate it, it still lights a fire inside of me to even think about him hurting my family. Tyler’s been the closest thing to me since I’ve returned six months ago, but he doesn’t know about my past and I want to keep it that way. This is my mess to fix.

“Just give us a minute.” My words come out harsher than intended, but with Tyler being as close as we are, I know he understands the importance.

“Yeah, okay then.” His eyes scan the room once more before he turns and heads for the door. He pauses and looks back one last time. “I’ll be outside if you need me.” With that, he opens the door and walks out, leaving the three of us alone again.

Kade’s eyes are still burning a hole through me and it almost looks as if he’s fighting the urge to punch me again. He definitely gets his temper from me and hopefully his will power as well.

A sniffle comes from Phoenix’s direction, and instinctively, my hand reaches out to comfort her. Something I have done numerous times in the past when Adric wasn’t around to take care of her.

“Phoenix.” The word barely pushes past my lips, as I strain not to reach out and touch her. “Look at me.”

My hand gets pushed away from its hovering spot as Kade steps in between us. “Don’t touch her, Kellan, you’ve done enough damage. While you were only thinking of yourself, I was here picking up the pieces you left behind.”

I take a step back and rub both of my hands over my face. “I’m aware that I messed up, but I can’t take it back now and I had a good reason to leave. Trust me, Kade, it was for everyone’s own good, but explaining it would make no sense. I can’t undo the past, so would you cut me a little fucking slack.” I close my eyes and exhale. “You can hate me all you want, but what’s done is done, dammit. Can we please move on now?”

Phoenix finally makes a move, reaching for her pink tank top. She looks in my direction, her hands shaking, but it’s hard to make out if she’s looking at me or looking past me. “I need to go. I just.” Her breathing comes out in short, quick bursts as if she’s about to have a panic attack. “I just have to get out of here.” She throws her shirt on and pulls her fingers through her hair. “This cannot be happening. Do you know how many years I have waited for this moment; how many times I have dreamt of it and imagined being able to see you?” She takes a step forward. “To touch you.” Her hand reaches out, but stops right before it can touch my face. “I needed you,” she whispers. My heart sinks as a tear rolls down her red and blotchy face.

Kade flinches as he tilts his head up to the ceiling and mutters a string of curse words before wiping sweat off his forehead. “We’re leaving. I’ve had enough of this shit.”

He reaches over and grabs for Phoenix’s purse, shoving it into her arms and I can’t help but to wonder what their relationship is. He’d always had a crush on her when they were younger, but every time he would attempt to hook up with her, she would just laugh in his face and say she had another man in mind. Maybe the chase is finally over; although he would never be enough for her.

“You don’t have to leave,” I sigh, somewhat wishing they would stay even though I know it’s a horrible idea.

“No thanks, we’re good.” He gives me a dirty look and reaches for Phoenix’s arm. “Don’t even bother with coming to see us. You’re not welcome there anymore.”

The words sting, but I know he's right. I left at the hardest time in their lives. Just vanished without so much as a goodbye. I made sure no one would be able to find me. I had to, though, it was the only option.

"You think I wanted to leave?" I slam my hands into the station in front of me before swinging my arm across it, knocking everything to the floor. "If that's what you believe then maybe you're right. I should just stay away."

Phoenix flares her nostrils, looking as if she has something to say, as another tear rolls down her cheek. A tear that I wish I could just reach over and wipe away like old times.

Instead, I lower my head to my hands and lean against the station. "I'm sorry," I say defeated.

"Bye, Kellan," Phoenix whispers. "I just. I just have to go. I can't stay here any longer."

By the time I look up again, they are already out the door, walking over to a silver truck.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" I reach for Adric's binder and sling it across the room into the glass display. Grabbing the drawer full of ink and equipment, I throw it across the room towards Tyler's station against the wall, causing ink to splatter. Still full of anger, I turn and punch the mirror above my station, shattering it to the floor.

Tyler walks in wide eyed and throws his hands on the top of his head. "What the hell, Kellan?"

Ignoring him, I reach for my leather jacket and run out the door for my motorcycle: my only escape.

* * *

I pull my bike into the driveway and push down the stand. Throwing my leg over the bike, I pull my helmet off and sling it down onto the blacktop. The hurt and anger that is burning through me right now is almost enough to set the world on fire and leave it in a pile of ashes.

How the hell did they just come out of nowhere and mess everything up? Things were going fine. I was getting by fine all by myself. They just had to walk through that door and kill the little bit of me that was left, leaving my world in shambles.

Reaching in my pocket, I push the button on the garage door, watching as it slowly opens, wishing with everything in me I could just turn back

time and make everything right. That won't happen though, because that would make me a dreamer, hoping for the impossible.

Knowing there's no use in going back, I get ready to step inside the garage, but am surprised when I see two shadows approaching from the side of the house. Even though I know it's impossible that Kade and Phoenix have found me, I still can't help that little part of me that wished it were true.

"Hey guys. . . "

My words trail off as two ugly as shit men round the corner, one holding a chained wallet in his hand and the other licking the spit from off his crusted lips. I would recognize those assholes from anywhere. How could you miss a six foot five beast with long, black stringy hair and so many scars you can barely recognize a human face under all that shit? Not to mention his little sidekick, a short, fat fuck with his stomach hanging so low to the ground you would think his knees would get stuck in his gut when he walks. I always knew it would only be a matter of time before they found out I was back. Again, I just didn't expect it. I guess today is just full of surprises.

"What do you two sorry fuckers want?"

I stand up straight as they both launch at me, the short fat one fighting to keep his pants up.

"Whoa now boys." I throw my arms up in surrender as they corner me inside of the garage. "I didn't realize you missed me that bad."

I can smell the heavy stench of Whiskey and weed that linger from their dirty clothing and I know they're not in any kind of mood to take my crap.

Larry, the giant, grabs for shrimp dick Kenny's wallet and wraps the chain around my neck as Kenny holds my arms back, pulling tightly.

"What are you doing back, huh?" Spit flies in my face as he leans in close and pulls the chain. It's hard to breathe, but I'm not letting these two jerk offs leave happy. "You know you're not allowed anywhere near here. You didn't think we wouldn't find out, did you?" Thank fucks sake that damn tattoo shop is so close to our new favorite bar. "Guess we're pretty damn lucky, right?"

They both laugh as I cough, gasping for air. "Fuck you," I choke out.

I must've pissed them off more because Kenny twists my arms into an uncomfortable position before kicking my legs out so I'm down on my

knees now, my head being forced backwards by Kenny's elbow. "Cape sends a message."

A fist connects hard against my right eye sending me backwards, the chain digging even deeper into my neck, before a knee slams into my abdomen, causing me to spit out a little blood. It hurts like hell, but I won't give them the pleasure of knowing.

"Would anyone else like to take a swing at me today? I don't think I've had enough," I choke out as the chain unwraps from my neck, causing Larry to push me to the ground so I'm lying flat on my back, the heel of my boots digging into my spine.

He leans in close and smiles, revealing his blackened teeth and I flinch at the foul smell that lingers on his breath. "You have three weeks to leave or you'll be getting another visit and next time you won't be so lucky. You're lucky you're even getting that and that's only because Cape wants to see you suffer for a little bit. You know how that brings him pleasure." He winks and gives me one last shove, before turning to leave. "Enjoy your time, mother fucker."

I roll over, cough a few times and spit as they hold the wallet up, and laugh to each other. "Anything else that bastard wants to say that he couldn't come say himself?" I growl out, pushing myself back to my feet and spitting out more blood.

Larry laughs sadistically, turns back around, grabs me by the jacket and slams me against the wall. "You think this shit is funny, don't ya, you stupid fuck?" He turns around as if he's about to walk away, but then stops when Kenny pushes his elbow into my neck, holding me against the wall. "Oh. He has plenty more to say." He spins around and swings his fist, connecting it hard against my jaw. The same damn spot that Kade packed a good punch at just about twenty minutes ago.

Fuck! I'm going to be sore tomorrow.

"Come on Kenny. Let's get the hell out of here before we kill this shit head."

"Next time you're going to wish you had." I bend over, my hands to my knees and spit a few times from the blood pooling in my mouth. I watch the assholes walk down the street and hop into a tiny Mazda, beat to hell and back.

Seeing them two is a sure sign I'm going to get my ass killed. I should've been smarter and stayed away like I promised. A promise made

before the two most important people waltzed back into my life. How can I leave now? I can't, not after seeing her and as selfish as it may be, I won't. At least not yet.

I have barely been inside long enough to strip down to my briefs and get an ice pack, when the doorbell rings, causing Rayne, my chocolate colored beauty, to growl. She's standing at full alert, her pink lips back, exposing her sharp canines and staring over at the door.

"Down, girl. Shh, take it easy."

I pull the icepack from my face and stand up, placing my hand on Rayne's collar. "It's okay, girl. Stay here and let me see who our visitor is."

She lets out a whimper and plops back down to the ground while watching my every movement. She's had my back since I found her two years ago, injured. Someone abused her and left her to die. She's really protective, but I have trained her well enough for her to know her place. Most people take one look at this well-muscled Pitt and make a run for it. Deep inside, though, she's a softy, just a big ol' teddy bear.

Running my hand over my chest and stretching, I look through the shades to see Maxine standing there in a long black jacket and a pair of red heels, looking seductive and ready to pounce.

Usually, I would welcome a little surprise visit like this, especially after the day I've just had, but right now, I'm just not feeling it. Even sex can't fix this disastrous day. Even if it could, after getting a look at Phoenix only half naked, I knew Maxine wouldn't compare. I'm in deep shit after seeing her that way.

Exhaling, I reach for the door and pull it open, my eyes landing on her breast that are popping out of the top of her jacket. "I see you remembered where I live," I say calmly.

Twirling one of her red curls, she leans into the doorframe while unbuttoning the top buttons of her jacket, exposing more of her plump breasts. "How could I forget?" Her head turns up, her eyes meet my bruised face, and she suddenly looks terrified. "Holy shit! What happened?" She takes a step forward and reaches for my face. "Was it Nathan? Did he-"

I push her hand away and huff, while placing the icepack back to my face. This girl is crazy if she thinks that pussy could have caused this kind of damage. "No sweetheart, it would take more than that scared little pussy to throw me around," I say sarcastically.

I turn and walk through the house with Maxine's heels echoing off the hardwood floor behind me. Rayne gets ready to stand up and growl, but I place my hand up, stopping her as I plop back down onto the leather couch and throw my icepack on the coffee table.

Maxine stops dead in her tracks when she notices Rayne for the first time. "Whoa, is your dog going to bite me?" She takes a step back, almost tripping over her own shoes.

"No, she's fine." I snap my fingers and point down the hallway. "Go lay down, Rayne."

Rayne scrambles to her feet, panting, before taking off down the hallway and turning right into her bedroom.

Pain is shooting through my face again and throbbing almost as if I can feel the bruise spreading over my eye and its beginning to swell shut. It hurts like hell. I just want to take some painkillers and go to sleep, but now I have to deal with this shit.

Maxine is standing here in front of me practically naked as she gets down on her knees in front of me, but all I can think about is what Phoenix and Kade are doing.

"It looks like it hurts." She runs her hands up my thighs slowly, kneading as she goes. She leans in to run her tongue over my abs, her warm breath causing my dick to get hard. "Let me make it feel better."

Something inside of me wants to push her away, but yet, for some reason I don't. There's no denying the fact that my cock could use some play time and as she said, she wants to make it feel better. *So why not let her?*

She runs her hands over my briefs before placing her fingers under the band so she can pull them down. I lift up allowing her to pull them down, my cock springing free. She grabs it in her hand and looks up at me with hooded eyes, licking her lips. It looks so big in her tiny hands and I'm wondering what she expects to do with it. Most girls take one look at its size and shy away, but she looks un-phased.

"It's so big and hard for me." She moans. "I want it in my mouth. Deep in my throat, baby." She starts stroking her hand up and down my length with one hand and she sits back to unbutton the rest of her jacket with the other. She lets go long enough to slide it off, then takes hold of it again. I lean back, resting my head against the back of the couch. She runs her tongue along the length of my shaft, then swirls it around the head of my

cock. She then wraps her warm lips around it, sucking it half way in before swirling her mouth around it.

A deep growl sounds in my chest as I grab the back of her head and slowly move it up and down at a steady pace before pushing my hips up, hitting her in the back of the throat. I can feel her spit dripping down my balls.

“You like the way my dick tastes in your mouth?” I pull her head back and she suctions until it pops free. She slowly runs her tongue over her lips as if savoring the taste.

“It tastes so fucking good. The best dick I’ve ever tasted.” She grips my thighs before placing her mouth back over my cock, sucking, and moaning so hard it almost makes me lose my control for a minute.

I hold back knowing she won’t be able to handle it. She can barely even fit half of it in her tiny mouth and I’m lucky she’s even giving it a shot.

Wrapping her hair around my hand, I stand up and pull her head back slowly, before pushing my way back into her mouth again, this time causing her to choke a little, but she seems to like it.

She picks up pace and after about ten minutes of her sucking and swirling her tongue around my cock, I finally feel a tug on my balls. I can’t help but to push up with my hips.

“I’m about to blow,” I warn her, giving her one chance to stop. She sucks harder and that’s all it takes before I feel the pulsing through my dick, emptying my load in her mouth. She sucks one last time, up the shaft of my dick, licking me clean at the head, like a pro.

I moan, it’s such a turn on. “I guess you really did like the taste,” I say, raising an eyebrow as she stands up and wipes her mouth off.

“It was delicious.” She runs her hands up my chest and leans in, pressing her lips against my neck. “I want you, inside of me, I need more.”

Although I’m thankful for what she just did, I just can’t bring myself to have sex with her. Maybe I’m just tired or maybe it’s the throbbing pain in my face. Who knows, but I have a feeling it’s neither. Whatever the reason, it won’t be happening tonight.

I reach for my briefs and look back at her, waiting for me to give her approval. I place my hand on her chin and pull it up so she’s looking me in the eye.

“I can’t tonight. It’s not a good night.”

A look of disappointment takes over her soft features.

"That's okay." She smiles trying to hide the rejection. "Maybe another time."

I reach out and extend my hand to help her up. She takes my hand and puts on her jacket before buttoning it back up. Then she places her hand on my cheek, reaches in and kisses me by the mouth. Giving me one last look, she turns heading for the door but pauses, looking over her shoulder.

"You're going to make someone extremely happy one day." She smiles but it doesn't reach her eyes. "She'll be one lucky girl. You try to be tough, but I see how you treat me and I'm not even your girl, your one of the good guys and that's a rare find. If you change your mind, my number's on the table." She reaches for the handle and opens the door.

Yeah, she might've been right eight years ago, but not so much now. That person died along with my best friend.

She starts to walk out the door. I smile at her while leaning against the side of the couch. "Take care, Maxine."

The door closes behind her and I almost want to punch something at the first thought that runs through my head. What if Phoenix is doing the same thing to Kade right now?

Dammit, I'm fucked.

Chapter Seven

Phoenix

It's been two days since stepping foot into that tattoo shop and still, I can't seem to get the image of Kellan out of my mind. Seeing him was like walking off the deep end of a pool and not knowing how to swim. It felt as if I were suffocating, drowning in my own emotions with no escape route. I wasn't sure if I should've been angry, sad, confused or happy; therefore, I settled for all of the above.

As soon as I set sight on those amber colored eyes and that dimpled smile, I knew there was something familiar there, like coming home. To be honest I had given up hope years ago, thinking I would never see that face again. That's the one thing that keeps me from being angry, though I know I should be. I know he's alive and that means something. It's really amazing how eight years really changes someone. I almost didn't recognize him.

He's no longer that charming twenty year old with the spiky hair, clean shave, and fancy clothing I used to daydream about. Now he's sexy as hell, manly, muscled and inked with eyes that scream pain. I remember that scar

through his eyebrow and the unfamiliarity of it. It was what was missing all those years ago. It leaves me with so many unanswered questions, such as, what has he been through over the years or where has he been? I wonder what kind of person he was or who he's been with. Could he have changed that drastically, from the boy that used to protect me and make me laugh at my lowest? Is he still that boy that used to stand up for Adric and take blame for his wrong doings? Who is this new Kellan and do I want to find out? Will I even get that chance, or will he run again?

I still remember the day he disappeared, also the day that Adric died. My parents got a phone call from Dale saying Kellan's car was found smashed up on the side of the road about three blocks away from my house and he was nowhere to be found. The cops, his parents, family and friends searched for him for days without any luck. No one knew if he was dead or alive. Hell, he could've taken off and bled to death somewhere with no one to help him.

I took off running the streets, barely keeping my sanity while searching for Kellan with the belief that if anyone could find him, it would be me. I searched everywhere that I could think of: The park, their secret place in the woods, the school, the old hangout spot. You name it, I went and looked. When every place came up empty, I had a nervous breakdown. Rumor was he couldn't handle living without Adric and went crazy, crashing his car to take his own life or some shit. They were like brothers. The thing is, I didn't just lose one that day, but two best friends. I had already lost Adric and I couldn't cope with losing them both. I was dead inside, hollowed out. I just wanted to be lost and never found.

Kade eventually found me in the woods at their favorite place. I was broken and a total mess, crying my eyes out while staring up at the tree house Adric built when I was nine. He somehow pulled me out of the trance I was in. After that, he became my rock and my best friend, helping me to stay strong. It wasn't the same as having Adric and Kellan, but he was all I had left. Him and Jen, but I was different.

Now, after eight years, here Kellan is, close to town, owning a tattoo shop named after my brother, and yet he couldn't even contact us. The thought alone feels like a knife to the chest at the hands of the one you love. *Doesn't he understand the hand we were dealt or the hell I've walked through?*

The thought still shocks me and as far as I can tell, Kade feels the same way. He was a total wreck when we walked out of that shop. He wouldn't even speak to me on our way back to my house. He just kept muttering under his breath and gripping the steering wheel so tight I thought it was going to break, but never taking his eyes away from the road. I haven't seen or spoken to him since and I really have no idea what to say to him. We're at the park setting up for Dale's company picnic and Kade should be arriving any minute. That's if he plans on even coming at all.

"Phoenix, pass me the damn tablecloth."

I'm pulled from my thoughts at the sound of Saline's voice. "Excuse me?" I look up from the ground and blink a few times trying to rejoin reality.

Saline brushes past me, bumping me out of the way and reaches for a red tablecloth, spreading it out and waving it up and down in the air. She looks pretty pissed off for some reason and I'm guessing it's my fault. "Never mind, I'll just do it myself. Why don't you go 'not help' somewhere else. I'm trying to get this shit done." She looks me in the eye and sneers before pulling a piece of platinum blond hair off her face. "Can't you see how hot is out here?"

"Someone's a little pissy." I reach for the end of the tablecloth and help flatten it over the table. Wouldn't want to upset the princess even more. Then again, why wouldn't I? "Sorry, I was just thinking," I mutter. "Let me take care of this. Why don't you take a break and go get something to drink." My eyes trail her glistening body and I smile, somewhat enjoying her breaking a sweat. "You're looking a little sweaty. Maybe you should pour some of it on your head to cool off. You wouldn't want to stink up those designer shorts, now would ya?"

"Fuck off. I'm not in a good mood. I hate these stupid picnics." Rolling her eyes like the cold-hearted bitch she is, she turns on the heels of her cowgirl boots, the heels digging into the dirt, as she waves her arm and walks away.

Well, that solves one of my problems. Now, if only the rest were so easy.

I spend the next ten minutes focusing on getting the tables covered and set up. Right when I'm down to the last one, a strong wind comes and blows the tablecloth out of my arms right as I spread it out to place over the table. "Dammit!" Figures, right when I'm almost done, that's my luck. I run

around chasing it, until it plasters itself against someone's body. From the looks of the Puma shoes, I would say that it's . . .

"Jen." I laugh as I reach out and pull it away from her face to find her smiling underneath. "Where have you been?"

She grabs the end of the tablecloth and helps me cover the table and secure it down. "I've been over there by the food. You know like fifteen feet away from you. What's with everyone today? Luna is helping Saline with the decorations, they've been arguing for like ten minutes, and you haven't even said anything. You've been over here daydreaming. It's very unlike you not taking a stand."

She takes off walking back over to the table that is covered in a variety of food and I follow in suit behind her.

The first thing I notice is the fantastic smell, before my eyes land on two trays of Mrs. Watson's homemade fried chicken. Mmm . . . Today might just be a good day after all. "It smells so damn good over here, Jen. How can you work over here without eating all of the food?" I reach for a chicken leg, but Jen slaps my hand away. What the . . . what was that for?

"Nope, not on my watch." She smiles apologetically. "Dale said to keep you away from the chicken until everyone starts eating. I made a promise. Now back off."

"You're joking, right?" I push her with my hip and reach for another piece of chicken but this time she pinches my arm. She must be taking this watchdog thing serious because it really hurt. "Ouch!" I rub my arm while scrunching my forehead at her. "Tell him to stop being such a jerk. I just want a snack. He acts like I'm going to eat it all."

"Because you will and he knows it. You act as if you've never been to one of these things before."

"When have I eaten all of the chicken? There are plenty other people here that eat chicken. How does he know who's eating what?"

"Are you serious right now? People have eyes, Phoenix," she says while dicing up a tomato. "Every time someone looks in your direction at one of these events, you have a piece of fried chicken hanging between your lips. Hell, you even stole a piece of chicken off Mrs. Henderson's plate once when she wasn't looking."

She saw that? I guess I'm not as slick as I think I am.

"It was only the skin," I point out. "She shouldn't have taken the last piece and then left it sitting there untouched for over ten minutes. Yes, I

counted the time and I'm not ashamed. Plus, I don't even think she noticed."

"Oh, she noticed. Trust me." Kade's tired voice jumps in from behind, causing Jen to snicker.

I spin around to see Kade standing behind me rubbing his eyes. His hair is standing up in all directions looking as if he hasn't slept in weeks. Damn, he looks terrible. I guess we both can't seem to function at the moment.

It makes my heart ache seeing him this way. I haven't seen him this messed up since that day, eight years ago, when we both sat in the woods for hours crying and staring into space, wondering how the world could be so cruel.

My mouth opens but then closes because I can't seem to form any words. What do I say to him? I mean what can I say? Should I say anything at all or pretend it never happened? Neither one of us could've been prepared for what we discovered two days ago. Kades never been much for talking about his feelings, he finds other ways to deal with it; therefore, making this moment really awkward for the both of us.

"Kade," I clear my throat. Are you-

"It's all good." He attempts a smile, but you can barely even call it that and the emptiness in his eyes says otherwise. "Never been better," he says, but I can tell he's lying by the sound of his voice.

He reaches in his pocket and pulls out a cigarette.

"I thought you quit," I say, reaching out to comfort him. I squeeze his arm not really knowing what to do. "Are you sure you're okay? I mean did you tell your parents?"

He shakes his head and huffs. "Hell no. There's no point in telling them and breaking their hearts all over again. You saw him, Phoenix. He has no intention of coming back. If he did then he would have years ago." Holding the cigarette to his mouth, he plays with his lighter, flicking it a few times before lighting it. It's a nervous tick he used to have back when he smoked. "That selfish dick."

"I'm sorry, but who is a selfish dick?" Jen asks. "You both look like hell," she states while looking us over with her intense mommy eyes.

Kade takes a huge drag that seems to go on for minutes before replying. "Don't worry about it," he says giving Jen a hard look. "You don't need to worry about it. It's no one important." He leans over the picnic table and takes another drag, inhaling deeply before putting it out on the bench and

slowly blowing out the smoke, as if it's just relieved all of the stress he's been carrying around.

Jen nods her head and returns to chopping up the vegetables. "Alrighty, then." She waves the smoke off. "If it's not a big deal, then try not to light another one of those by the food. It's gross and some of us don't smoke."

Kade nods. "Right, sorry. It's been a rough day."

Following Jens lead, not knowing what else to do, I grab for a knife to help with the onions. The onions can be used for an excuse to cover up any unwanted tears if they should fall and I need anything possible to take my mind off Kellan. At the moment I wouldn't even care if it meant wrestling pigs. Anything would do.

"Where's Jax?" I question just now realizing I haven't seen him since arriving over an hour ago. "Don't tell me he's not coming." I hold the knife up threatening her. I've lost it, apparently. Maybe having this knife isn't such a good idea after all.

She narrows her eyes and leans back holding her massive knife up, blocking mine. "Mine's bigger so I would be careful where you point that."

I lower my knife. "Shit, you're right. My bad, woman."

I peek behind me to see Kade still leaning over the picnic table lost in thought. He's a total wreck and seems to be lost in his own little world. I'm surprised he even showed up at all.

"He'll be here later. Nathan just had a few things to take care of first." I turn back around and she smiles nervously. "He'll be here," she whispers this time. I almost didn't even catch it.

Kade speaks finally, breaking his moment of silence. "I'm sorry about last night."

I lean against the picnic table and place the knife down beside me. To be honest, I probably can't focus long enough to cut up an onion without managing to cut off one of my fingers anyways.

"What are you sorry about?" I question, not really understanding. "You didn't do anything."

He stands up straight and grabs my shoulders to look me in the eye. It almost looks as if he's about to cry, but is doing a damn good job of hiding it. "I overreacted the other night at the shop. I just lost it." He pauses, lost in thought for a moment before looking over to see that Jen isn't listening. "Maybe I shouldn't have swung at him like I did. At least not with you so close. I would never forgive myself if I accidentally hit you. I promised I

would learn to control my anger a long time ago, but when I saw him I couldn't think. I just couldn't help it. I didn't know how to react. I've had all of this pent up anger and hurt for so long, not knowing where he was, then seeing him standing there just fine, just set off an explosion of emotions and I saw red."

After Kellan disappeared, Kade acted out by getting into countless fistfights at school. After getting suspended a couple of times and almost ending up in the hospital, I made him promise to gain control or I wasn't going to be around him anymore. I couldn't handle it. I had my own shit to deal with and could barely get by as it was without worrying about his wellbeing.

I find my hand reaching over to touch his face before I can stop myself. Jen is probably watching by this point, but my heart is breaking for him. I don't want to see him hurting. He doesn't deserve this. "Don't apologize to me. You had every right to be mad. I wasn't expecting it, sure." I stop to think my words over. "But maybe he deserved it."

Jen drops the knife and wipes her hands off on a towel. "Okay. Y'all need to tell me something. You know I can't take secrets and whispering." She looks at Kade. "Who did you hit? Did you kick his ass? Did he kick yours? What is the deal? Someone tell . . ."

Just then, everything seems to go in slow motion and the words around me fade into whispers as my eyes lock on Kellan. He pushes himself off an expensive looking motorcycle and runs his hands through the thickness of his dark hair. I can't help but to imagine what it would feel like to be able to touch it, to pull it and twirl it in my fingers.

Jen and Kade are still talking, but none of the words seems to be registering. The only thing registering in my head is how undeniably sexy Kellan looks in his faded, ripped up jeans and army green, fitted button down, rolled up to his elbows, showing off even more of his glorious tattoos.

I just stand there staring, lost in my own little world as Kellan's eyes search the park, looking in every direction until finally they land on me. Heat explodes through my whole body and my nerves are shooting off like fireworks. I reach up and touch my chest. My heart is pounding so hard I can hear it.

Those big, beautiful eyes stay zoned in on me as he sets his helmet down on his seat and reaches to tuck a necklace into his shirt. If he'd been

wearing the necklace at the shop, I didn't take notice, but right now, with his shirt undone a few buttons, I'm noticing every last detail. The warm breeze blows through his hair and against the thin fabric of his shirt, revealing the firmness of chest. His facial hair spreads across a perfect jawline, as if he hasn't shaven in days. He has on a studded belt, fitted against his sleek waist, just above the natural bulge in his denims. Damn, he's even traded in his boots for a pair of Converse shoes. I missed that about him.

Holy shit, how can someone be so beautiful?

“Phoenix.”

“Phoenix.”

“Huh?” As hard as I try, I just can't seem to pull my eyes away or pay attention to what is going on around me. Everything is a blur, everything but . . . him. That is, until Jen smacks me upside the head.

“Phoenix! What the hell? I've been asking you to help me with the corn. Wake up,” Jen scorns me. “What are you staring at?”

Taking a deep breath, I pull my eyes away and turn my focus to Jen, but it's too late. She's already leaning over my shoulder, taking in the sight I had to fight to peel my eyes away from.

She raises both brows and lets out a soft whistle. “Now that's a nice piece of ass. Now I understand the distraction. Tall, dark, handsome and a little rough around the edges. Tsk, tsk, tsk, Phoenix, you've been holding out on me. I didn't know you were into bad boys.”

Kade instantly turns his head to see what the two of us are fussing about. “What the fuck is he doing here? He needs to leave. This will not be happening today.”

I reach out and grab Kades arm right as he's about to walk away. “No.” *Oh, God please let him stay.* “Maybe you should just leave it alone. You don't want to cause a scene at your dad's favorite event. You know how he gets about this every year.”

Something must register inside of Kade's head, because suddenly he sits back down. His nostrils flare out and I can see him feeling for another cigarette as his eyes shoot daggers in Kellan's direction.

He's no longer looking at me. He's past that point now.

We all watch as Kellan makes his way through the grass, toward Dale and Nancy, his parents. Dale and Nancy don't seem to notice as they continue to engage in conversation with their friends. Their son is right

behind them and they don't even know, as if he's invisible. For some unknown reason, that hurts. That's how I felt after Adric died.

I can sense the hesitation in Kellan as he stops mid step and stands frozen in place. He reaches up and rubs his face before turning around and looking down at the ground. When his eyes look up and meet mine again, without even realizing it, I nod my head to encourage him to continue.

"What was that all about?" Kade's eyes darken as he looks back toward his brother and starts pacing back and forth. "Have you guys been talking behind my back?"

"Um, no." I could only wish. "Why would we be talking?" Somehow, I feel guilty for him even assuming it.

"Who is that sexy man that has everyone staring?"

Jen sounds agitated now. "Don't keep me in the dark. Something's about to go down. I can feel it."

"Kellan," Kade and I say in unison, causing Jen's mouth to drop open.

What happens next seems to be straight out of a Lifetime movie. Kellan taps Dale on the shoulder, causing all of their friends to stop talking.

Dead-silence.

Dale and Nancy both turn around. A few seconds later, Nancy falls to her knees, arms wrapped around Kellan, holding onto his shirt, sobbing so loud everyone at the park has stopped to stare.

In this moment, there is nothing but silence across the entire park, including the animals. Even they seem to know this moment is sacred.

Dale just stands there looking stunned, as if he doesn't know what to say. Finally, he grabs Kellan's shoulder, squeezes it and grabs his wife's hand to comfort her.

I feel a tear run down my cheek as I watch the long waited reunion unfold before my eyes. I don't want to tear my eyes away from this moment for anything, afraid I'll miss something.

Kellan grabs his mother's face and bends down in front of her, wiping the tears from under her eyes. I can't make out what they're saying, but every part of me is dying to know.

"He's only going to break my mother's heart again." Kade leans his head back and squeezes his eyes closed. "I just know it. Shit!"

Before I can respond, Kade is to his feet and heading over to join his family. I just stand there frozen, wanting to be a part of it, but knowing it's not my place. This is a family moment. The feeling sucks.

Nancy finally makes it back to her feet with Kellan in tow and now has both sons in her arms. I can't see Kellan's face, but I can see Kade's and I can tell that even though he's scared, he's happy to see his family reunited. Who wouldn't be?

"This is the most heartwarming moment of my entire life besides giving birth." She sniffles. "I'm crying like a baby over here. Just look how happy Nancy is. I can't believe he's back."

I am looking. I haven't taken my eyes away. I can't. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" My voice barely comes out, but I'm mainly saying it for myself anyways. "We saw Kellan two days ago. It came as a huge shocker. Trust me, it didn't go over so well."

Jen snaps her attention to me. "What? Where? What happened?"

I take a step forward and run my hand over my forehead. Now I'm the one sweating. "Kade punched him in the face," I say.

"Wow! That kid has a lot of balls. Kellan is definitely well built and way bigger than him. He's changed a lot. He's really, really, really hot and—"

"Okay. You can stop now, I get it," I snap, without meaning to. Jen is my best friend and there's no reason why I should get upset with her for being attracted to him. I have no claim to him, so why does anger course through me at the thought of someone else showing interest in him? Do I even want to evaluate why I'm getting jealous at the thought of him and another woman? Besides, she's in a relationship, not to mention has a kid. Kellan is just an old friend that I had a crush on my entire teenage life. No big deal. "I'm sorry. I'm just a little worried about what's going to happen now, that's all."

"Sure, sweetie." She smirks as if she doesn't believe me. "Now help me finish this crap and get this party started."

* * *

The last hour flew by as I tried with everything in me not to stare at Kellan from across the park. After his reunion with his parents, I haven't had a chance to talk to him or really even see him. He's been staying close to his mother, her not wanting to let him out of her sight. I don't blame her. I feel the same way.

After one round of chicken, potatoes, corn, pie and anything else I could put my hands on, I decided I haven't had enough chicken to get me out of this slump. Chicken is usually my cure for everything.

I walk over to the picnic table that is still covered in food and lean my head over the tin tray that used to be overflowing with chicken. Now all that's there is an old torn up wing with no skin that everyone must've decided they didn't want. *No one ever wants the wings.*

"Dammit!" There goes my day. I close the lid to the tin tray and walk over tossing my plate into one of the trashcans. When I look up, I see Jen standing by Nathan's Jeep, her arms flying around as she rambles on about something. He's such a douche. I really don't understand what she sees in him. He's been nothing but trouble and I bet he's not even going to get out and join the picnic.

Taking a seat at one of the picnic tables, I look around searching for Kellan. I'm tired of trying to avoid looking at him. He's taken up residence in my mind for days.

I can't seem to find him anywhere, but I notice Kade standing by the bathrooms talking with Luna. I haven't seen him notice her before today, not that I can blame him the way she showed up looking just as gorgeous as ever. The girl gives underwear models competition. Who wouldn't notice her silky, black hair that hangs in waves at the small of her back, bright green eyes, and tanned skin? Let's not forget the mile high legs in those tiny white shorts. She has on a strappy turquoise tank, cut low, allowing her breasts to play peek-a-boo and brown leather flip-flops.

She volunteered to set up games and Kade has been helping her ever since. Not that it bothers me, Kade and I are just friends and nothing more. Actually, maybe he can use his seduction tactics on her for a while. I need a break, at least from him. I'm sure it wouldn't bother me. Would it? My mind's a mess. I don't know what I want.

"May I sit down?"

I think my heart may have just stopped. After hearing that voice the other day, it has been stuck in my head repeating itself over and over again, driving me crazy. It's so deep and raspy, oozing sex, and borderline toxic to a woman's will power. Much deeper than I remember.

"Sure," I whisper, looking up to meet Kellan's playful eyes, just now noticing how bruised up his face is.

"Holy shit, Kellan." I panic and reach out to touch his face, but stop myself before I can make an ass out of myself. I pull my arm back. "What in the hell happened to your face?" Something tells me that's not from Kade's hit.

He smiles as if it's nothing. "Don't worry. It didn't hurt . . . much."

He sets a plate down in front of him and swings one leg over the bench so I'm sitting in between his legs, a small space being the only thing separating us. For some reason, my whole body craves to scoot that few inches and close the gap between us. I guess eight years wasn't enough time to wither the feelings I had for him as a kid.

"I see dad is still having his company picnics. It's nice to see that something hasn't changed."

That's not the only thing that hasn't changed. I close my eyes, breathing in the smell of his cologne. Georgio Armani's Auqua Di Gio, I would know that scent anywhere. It has always been Kellan's favorite. That smell did things to me then, and the smell has only gotten sweeter, making it even harder to refrain from burying my face in his neck.

I nod my head but don't say a word. I can't, if I don't already look obvious, I surely will then. If I speak, then it will probably be something I shouldn't say.

He scoots the plate across the table so it's sitting in front of me now. Then he leans over my shoulder and his lips curl into a smile.

I look down to see three chicken thighs with a pile of chicken skin covering the entire plate. I laugh as I look back up at him. "What's this?"

He leans in and picks up a piece of the skin. "It's chicken and a whole shit load of skin." He beams before shoving the piece into his mouth and moaning. Damn, I've missed that smile. We've both always shared the same love for chicken. We used to fight over the skin when we were younger. "I stole a bunch of it when no one was looking. I figured I would be nice and share." His eyes meet mine before he licks his lips, being sure to get every last crumb. "Usually, I don't share."

I swallow hard while staring at his lips. On the bottom one, I can see a little hole that looks as if he has his lip pierced. Suddenly, my skin becomes hot and flushed, picturing the ring brushing over my skin as he kisses down my body. "I should feel special then?"

He opens his mouth to laugh and I think I notice a metal bar in his tongue. I can't be certain though, but it turns me on more, imagining him running it up my thigh and between my legs.

"Something like that."

It's silent for a moment before he leans in and grabs a piece of my hair, twirling it around his finger. When he touches my hair, I catch a glimpse of

a fresh tattoo. An angel I think, but I wonder what it means. Before I can get a better look and ask, he speaks.

“Your hair has gotten so long. I remember when it used to be short. It made you look like a boy.”

I slap him in the arm and choke on the chicken I have just shoved in my mouth. “What! You jerk,” I squeak.

He grabs his arm and looks me in the eye. “I was just joking, woman. Calm down, you’ve definitely always looked like a girl.” He looks down at my breasts before meeting my lips and biting his own. “Now you look like a woman.”

I feel myself blushing as I quickly pull my eyes away. “I guess that’s a good thing. So that’s why so many creeps like to stare now?”

He reaches for another piece of chicken skin and eats it. “I suppose that could be one reason,” he says with a note of seriousness. “But, not the only.”

It’s silent for a moment before he speaks again.

“It’s nice to be able to see you again. I know. I know I have a lot of explaining to do and someday I will, but right now. Right now, I just want to enjoy every moment while I can. Can you understand that, Phoenix?”

I shouldn’t. I should yell and demand for answers, but for some reason, my heart understands and I’m afraid that if I push him he will only disappear again.

“Yeah, I can.” My eyes focus on Kade from across the park as he walks away from Luna and toward where we’re sitting. “I’m not so sure Kade can though.”

His eyes follow mine and I swear I can see a flash of hurt before he shakes it off. “You’re right. He can’t.” He stands up and wipes his hands on his shirt. “Bye, Phoenix. Take care.”

I don’t say anything as he walks away. Instead, I just sit there staring at the chicken on my plate as Kade walks up to me and takes a seat next to me. “What did he want? I’m surprised he’s still here.”

Me too, but I like surprises. Sometimes, at least.

“Nothing much, he just wanted to say hi.”

He clenches his jaw and reaches out for my plate, but I slap his hand. I hate when people touch my food. “Oh no, step away from the chicken. This is the last of it. Touching my chicken is grounds for murder.”

He shakes his head and looks at me funny. “Are you that serious about chicken?”

What you haven’t noticed? “Yeah,” I say matter-of-factly. “It helps calm me down. Is that a problem?”

Awkward silence . . .

“I guess everyone seems to be excited to see Kellan.” He looks over by the game tent where everyone’s playing beer pong and I follow his gaze. “Even Luna kept asking me questions about that son of a bitch. It’s not like he’ll be around long enough to make friends.”

An unwanted pang of jealousy hits me as I watch Luna and Kellan laugh, standing in line to play the next game. “Yeah, I’m sure. He’ll probably be gone before we know it.”

“It’s for the best.” He scoots closer to me and wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me against his body. “He’ll only bring trouble to everyone that loves him if he sticks around too long.” He kisses my neck roughly.

Feeling uncomfortable, I pull away and stand up, not wanting to draw attention to us. Now isn’t the time for flirty little games and I’m really just not in the mood. I don’t want anyone getting the wrong idea. *Especially Kellan.* “I’m going to go see what’s going on with Jen.” I grab my plate of chicken, planning to devour it as soon as I make my escape. “Are your parents okay? I haven’t gotten the chance to talk to them with all of their friends surrounding them.”

Kade looks up at me before placing his attention back to his brother. “They are for now.”

Chapter Eight

Kellan

I probably shouldn’t be here right now. In fact, I know I shouldn’t be here, but I only have a short time left and after getting a taste of being around my family again, I can’t help but to be selfish. Even if it is for just a short time.

The woman in front of me keeps talking, eyeing me up and down with those dirty eyes of hers, but the only thing I can focus on is the woman to my left.

There sits my brother, running his hands over her body, kissing her neck and probably thinking about doing numerous dirty things to her that my mind doesn’t even want to think about.

Adric would be furious with me if he knew I was letting a playboy like Kade feel up his younger sister and did nothing to stop it. If Kade is anything like he was when he was seventeen then she's gonna get hurt. That ass hasn't been faithful to anyone that he has gotten his hands on.

The thought of him touching and fucking her, then going and doing the same to another woman is driving me insane. Before seeing them together with my own eyes, the thought hadn't even occurred to me over the years.

"So you're Dale's son?"

"Yeah," I say, keeping my eyes on Kade, not wanting to miss anything. "Kade's older brother."

She swings her black hair over her shoulder, smacking me in the face. I hope she doesn't think *that's* going to get my attention. At this point, she could be running around naked doing jumping jacks and I wouldn't be able to pull my eyes away from the show in front of me. My instinct to protect Phoenix is just as strong as it was eight years ago. Kade may be my brother, but he's always done just fine on his own. He's never needed me.

"... I can't tell."

I look beside me, realizing I haven't heard a thing this girl has been saying. "Excuse me?"

"You and Kade, I mean." She smiles sweetly, while combing her fingers through her hair. "I can't see the resemblance. You're both sexy as hell, but look so different. You would never guess you guys share the same parents."

Feeling bad for ignoring her, I shake my head and run my hands over my face in an attempt to gain control. "Luna, right?" I force a smile just wanting to hurry up and get the chitchat over with. "We're definitely from the same parents, but Kade takes more of my mom's features and I got dad's darker characteristics." Placing my hands in my pockets, not knowing what else to do, I quickly glance over at Phoenix before turning back to Luna.

Reaching into her purse, she pulls out a cigarette and I can't help but notice a bright pink vibrator sticking up out of the corner. Looks like someone knows how to take care of themselves. "Yeah, it's Luna. Crazy name, right? I was conceived during a lunar eclipse and my mom had a sense of humor. Would you like one?" She starts to pull out another cigarette and shoves her vibrator further into something about the size of a diaper bag. At least that's what it looks like to me. Women and their huge purses.

"No thanks, I'm good." I watch as she places it back into her purse. "I don't smoke. I had asthma as a child and could never stand the smell."

She nods in understanding and faces the other way, placing it to her lips and lighting it. She closes her eyes and takes a quick drag. "I can't stand the smell either, but for some reason it has me . . ." She turns around clearly undressing me with her eyes. "Addicted."

It's not surprising when her eyes land directly on my dick, lingering there for a moment as she runs her tongue over her red lips, eyes glossy, probably imagining all of the dirty things I could do to her.

Clearly knowing her intentions, usually this would be where I take her somewhere private, remind her it's just sex and nothing more, then fuck her senseless. She's not so lucky today. I have too much on my mind.

Particularly, the girl to the left, dressed in that short, gray cotton dress. She has always had beautiful legs.

I watch as Phoenix stands up and grabs her plate before walking away, leaving my brother alone.

"Yeah, well it's a bad addiction. You should consider quitting." I brush past her. "If you will excuse me, Luna, I have words for my brother."

I admit my actions were probably a little rude, but right now, I have my radar set on a certain someone. This conversation is happening whether he likes it or not.

I stride across the grass, my aim set on Kade, avoiding everything else around me. As soon as he notices my approach, he leans his head back and looks up, no doubt not happy to see me.

"What do you want, Kellan?" He motions around the empty picnic table, without bothering to look at me. "Can't you see I'm busy here, trying to avoid you?"

I lean against the edge of the picnic table, cross my arms over my chest, and look down at him. "What's going on with you and Phoenix?"

It's probably not the greatest way to start this conversation, but it will do. I might not get a chance to ask later.

He stops picking at the tablecloth and looks at me. "Are you serious? You came all the way over here to ask about Phoenix? You've been gone for eight years, eight fucking years Kellan and that's the first thing you decide to talk to me about." He laughs sarcastically. "You really have a lot of balls showing up here of all places." He motions around him, waving his arm at the various people having fun with their family and friends, "For

everyone in town here to see you break mom's heart again. Cut the crap, you don't have to play games with me. Stop acting as if you plan on sticking around." He studies my face, waiting for an answer. "You don't, after all. Do you?"

A flood of emotions swarms through me and in this moment, I don't know how to answer. How can I explain my fucked up life? I can't, so I don't answer at all.

He snorts and stands, pushing my chest. "Just as I expected." He pushes past me to walk away. "Oh yeah, and to answer your question," he pauses, standing there

stiff, but doesn't look back. "We're fucking. See ya, bro." He waves a dismissive hand at me and walks away.

That son of a . . .

Rage courses through my veins, my muscles tighten, and suddenly I want to hit something. I grip the edge of the picnic table, pick it up and slam it into the ground, before taking off in search of a much-needed beer. I'm going to end up choking someone today.

* * *

After saying goodbye to my parents and watching Kade speed off in his truck, I notice Phoenix by herself, packing something into the trunk of her little car. Most of the party has already cleared out and the only ones that seem to be left are Phoenix, Jen and myself. It almost seems as if she's lingering around, trying to avoid something, or maybe someone. Who knows? She probably has plans to meet up with Kade when she leaves and the thought of that does not leave me happy.

I make my way over to my bike and lean against it, watching her from across the lot. She doesn't seem to notice I'm still here, so I figure it won't hurt to watch her and make sure she gets out of here safe. It's starting to get dark now and who knows what kind of creeps linger around parks at night.

She gives Jen a hug and waves her off as she jumps into a Jeep and the driver speeds off, barely even giving her time to close the door. She leans against her car and places her face against the window, looking distressed before opening the door and getting inside.

I wait for the car to start but it never does.

Moments later, I hear her cursing loudly, slamming her hands against the steering wheel.

If she's looking for someone to rescue her, then today might just be her lucky day.

Phoenix

After watching Nathan speed off with Jen in the Jeep, I definitely got a feeling in my stomach I don't like. His behavior has been way more off than usual and it's driving me crazy. Every time I ask her about it, she just says he's stressed out from work and is just having a hard time handling it. I guess that could be the problem. I can only hope that is the only thing going on.

Now, I'm supposed to go home, freshen up and meet at Kade's place in thirty minutes. Usually, this wouldn't be a big deal, but after all of our flirting and kissing, this is definitely becoming more complicated than I'd hoped.

Cursing aloud, I slap my hand against the steering wheel to let out all of the frustration I have been keeping in for the last couple of days. I slap it repeatedly while leaning into the back of my seat. "Shit! Shit! I hate this."

First, my parents start going all crazy. They're constantly leaving Zoe at my house to look after. Kade just had to make a move on me, causing me to question my feelings for him and now Kellan showing back up out of nowhere. Along with his return, bringing back all of the old feelings I had for him, but had never returned in the past. Maybe it was because he was too old back then or because I was his best friend's little sister, but eventually I would've been old enough to make my move and hope he felt the same way. Because of his disappearance, I never got that chance and it crushes me to even think about the what ifs.

I'm sitting here, finally starting to calm down. Breathing out my frustration, out of nowhere, someone knocks on the window, startling me and causing me to scream. "Oh crap!"

I look up to see Kellan standing there with a smirk on his face, looking sexy and calm, with his knuckle pressed against the window.

I hadn't even realized he was still around. I had just assumed he left after saying goodbye to his parents. Clearly, my brain's not functioning right at the moment, or else I would've noticed. How could I not?

Rolling down the window, I reach up with my other hand to brush my sweaty hair out of my face. "Kellan, I thought you were gone."

He leans into the window and brushes away a piece of my hair stuck to my lip. "Nah, I was about to leave until I saw you. I just wanted to be sure you got out of here safe."

I turn my head away embarrassed. Out of all the people that should be worried about my safety, it would be Kellan.

"Is something wrong with your car," he questions.

"No," I shake my head, "I just don't have anywhere I want to be at the moment." I have somewhere I'm supposed to be, but I'll leave that part out.

He smiles but doesn't say anything. He reaches over me and places his hand on my keys, turning his head so our faces are almost touching. "I might have somewhere you want to be." He pulls the keys out of the ignition and pulls the car door open. "Let's go."

Confused, I grab for my purse and follow behind him. "What do you mean? You don't have to take me anywhere, Kellan. I'm sure you have—"

He grabs for his helmet and hands it to me, running his fingers through his hair. Mmm, it's so sexy when he does that. "I don't have anywhere to be and neither do you . . . so you say. Why not go somewhere we don't have to be, together."

I stand there for a moment and watch as he swings one leg over his motorcycle and kicks up the stand. When he flashes that dimpled smile, I know there's no turning back. As angry as I should be and not go. I just have to. My body won't allow otherwise.

"Alright," I say unsure. "Am I going to die though? I've never been on one of these before," I tease. My nerves are running wild, but with one look into his calm eyes, the nerves subside.

"I would never let you die." He reaches out his hand and I take it, letting him help me onto the back of his bike. "All you have to do is hold on tight." He grabs my arms, wraps them around his waist, and in that moment all I want to do is bury my face against his back and breathe him in. "Now, don't let go."

He starts the bike, revs the engine and takes off with me clinging to him for dear life.

After about ten minutes of riding, I close my eyes and place my cheek against his muscular back, finally feeling comfortable. My hands somehow seem to wander over his stomach, feeling the stiffness of his abs, my body getting heated in response. Moaning, I lean my head back, feeling free and alive. I didn't realize that being on the back of a motorcycle could feel so

damn good. Maybe, it's just my body being against Kellan's. Whatever it is, I'm going to breathe it all in.

Unconsciously, my hands wander up to his firm chest, my fingers exploring his body through the thin fabric of his shirt. A moan rumbles in his chest before his body stiffens.

Suddenly, realizing my actions, I pull my hands away embarrassed. I clear my throat and loosely wrap them around his waist again for support. "Where are we going?" I place my chin on his shoulder, whispering into his ear.

He turns his head, causing our lips to almost touch. I can feel his breath as he speaks. "Somewhere we can be alone. Just close your eyes and enjoy the ride." He speeds up, causing me to grab him tighter and I swear I feel him straining, to keep from laughing.

When I open my eyes, we are parked in the back of a tall brick building. I can't be for sure, but I believe it's *Adi's Attic*. "Are we at your shop?" I'm now confused.

He gently grabs my arm and helps me down to my feet before getting off himself.

We both just stand there for a few moments before he speaks.

"Yeah, we are. This place helps to calm me down." He reaches over, pulls the helmet off my head, and sets it down. Now turning and heading toward the building, he nods. "Come on."

I follow behind him, stopping once we reach the building. That's when I notice a narrow, rusty ladder leading up to the top of the building. Staring up at it, the height makes me dizzy.

"Whoa!" I stumble back before he reaches for my arm. "We're going up there?" I shake my head back and forth and my legs begin to shake at the thought.

He runs his hand over the front of his shirt and laughs while reaching for my hand again. "What? Are you afraid of heights still?" Smiling, he grabs my hand, interlocking his fingers with mine. My heartbeat skyrockets from his touch and it becomes hard to focus.

"I'll be right behind you. Remember what I said? I would never let you die." Guiding me to the ladder, he stands behind me with his arms on either side of my body. "If you fall I'll be here to catch you." He smirks. "At least I'll try."

I grip his muscled arm and squeeze it. “That's not funny, Kellan.” A part of me wants to laugh, but the bigger part is petrified. I've always been afraid of heights. For that exact reason, when Adric built his tree house, he built it close to the ground. I loved him for that, always keeping my best interests at heart.

With his hands on my waist, he steps onto the bottom step of the ladder, closing the space between our bodies. He leans over my shoulder, his warm breath kissing my neck. “I guess I've gotten a little rusty over the years,” he says teasingly.

Instinctively, my eyes go right to the rusty ladder that just so happens to be the only thing keeping me from plummeting to my death. “I'm going to get you back for this.” I grip the ladder tighter, my knuckles turning white, as Kellan wraps one arm around my waist and gives me a boost to get going.

“Either that, or you're going to thank me later. There's something I want to show you.”

Once we reach the top of the building, he picks me up, placing my feet onto the roof. His arm lingers around my waist for a moment, until he's fully up to his feet. Just as quickly as I was in the safety of his arms, he lets go, leaving me feeling wobbly on my own two legs.

He smiles. “That wasn't so bad, now was it?” He turns to face the front of the building and stretches, placing his arms linked behind his head. His shirt slightly lifts up, revealing the top of his black briefs. Thoughts of sliding them down, followed by the trail of my tongue cloud my thoughts. “It's beautiful and peaceful up here, don't you agree?”

I pull my eyes away from his body, trying to get my mind out of the gutter. “Yeah,” I walk over to stand next to him, “It is beautiful.” My eyes land on his face, watching him intently as he smiles and runs a hand through his hair. “A little scary, but still beautiful.” My stomach knots up, realizing I'm not so sure as to what my comment was referring to.

We both stand here quietly, him watching nothing, me watching him and both of us in complete peace. It reminds me so much of Adric. He was good at finding spots no one else bothered to care about and making them his own. I have a feeling this place is just that to Kellan. A place to make his own and be alone.

He walks over to the edge and reaches for my hand again. “Come on.” His face softens when I deny his invitation. “You know I'll keep you safe. I

just want to show you something.”

Grabbing his hand, I take a deep breath and let him walk me over to the edge. “I can’t believe I’m even up here right now. I feel like vomiting.”

He snickers and steps back. “Not on the Converse shoes, girl. These are new,” he teases, “You ruined my favorite pair. Don’t think I forgot about that.”

I laugh at the memory. I remember it like it was yesterday. Kellan and Adric talked me into going on the stupid Ferris wheel at the carnival and I got so nervous that I puked all over Kellan’s pant legs and his favorite pair of black Converse shoes. It was humiliating. Adric teased me for weeks.

“Oh, get over it, big guy.” I squeeze his hand as he pulls me next to him and points down at a house across the street.

“See that?”

It takes a few minutes and a lot of deep breathing before my eyes can focus.

When they finally do, I see an old man pacing back and forth in a pair of old, loose whitey tighties and a pair of cowboy boots. It looks like he’s arguing with himself while holding a golf club in his hand.

“What is he doing?” I’m trying really hard to hold back my laughter.

“He’s playing golf.” He laughs, letting go of my hand. He leans closer over the edge, in a crouching position. I grab his shirt to be sure he’s safe. “He’s free to do what he wants. No one ever bothers him. He does this like twice a week. He comes out here with his golf clubs and hits imaginary balls. Sometimes, I wonder if he thinks he’s talking to some of his old golfing buddies. I catch him arguing with himself and one time it almost looked as if he were proposing to someone. Most of the time.” He pauses to think. “He looks happy. He doesn’t need anyone.” He turns to face me, stands up and brushes a loose strand of hair off my face, his fingertips lightly brushing my heated face. “Can you imagine what it would be like to not need anyone? To be able to be happy and content by yourself. I mean yeah, he might be crazy, but all of his friends are in here.” He points to his head. “They’re there whenever he wants them to be. He’s in control of his own happiness. He’s never alone Phoenix.” He nods his head toward the ground. “Look now.”

I bring my eyes down to see the old man with his hands behind his back, smiling as if he’s flirting with a woman. He runs his hands through

his white hair, kicks his foot in the dirt and then laughs. Somehow, it makes me both happy and sad at the same time.

“I can’t imagine it.” I say truthfully. “I mean, do you honestly think he’s happy? Does he not have anyone at all in real life?”

He rubs his hands over his face and steps away from the edge, finally letting me breathe again. “I don’t think he does. Sometimes when I need fresh air during the workday, I stand outside against the building and just watch everything around me. I’ve never once seen anyone pull into that driveway.”

My heart breaks for the old man. I can imagine my life being like that and I hate it. No one deserves to be alone.

“So . . . now that you’ve shown me what you wanted to show me, are we done up here? I would really like to breathe again before I pass out or puke.” I look down at his shoes. “We wouldn’t want that now would we?”

Grabbing my arm, he laughs and pulls me into his arms for a hug. Catching me off guard, my body trembles from his strong touch. “I’ve missed you, Phoenix.” He squeezes me while rocking us back and forth. “You’ve always had a way of making me laugh.” He pulls back and walks away. “Let’s get you back to your car.”

He's missed me? The thought almost causes my heart to burst with happiness. So many years I have spent wondering if our friendship had meant anything at all to him. I guess he really did mean what he said all those years ago, when he said I meant just as much to him as I did to Adric. So, the question is . . . why would he leave?

He steps down onto the ladder first before helping me down so that I’m trapped between him and the ladder. The smell of his cologne is intoxicating, causing me to close my eyes and inhale deeply. I hear him laughing as soon as we reach the bottom and he helps me to the ground.

“What?” I turn to face him, nervously, while eying him up. “What are you laughing at?”

He nudges me in the side before messing up my hair. Something he used to always do to me in the past. “Were you sniffing my cologne?” he asks happily as if it made his day.

I huff before slapping him on the chest. “Don’t laugh at me. I can’t help it that you smell so . . . good.” My voice comes out soft and full of want. Again, I just couldn’t stop it.

I look up at him and his eyes go dark. Then, without warning, he turns around and heads to his motorcycle. “We should hurry up and get you back. I have an early morning.” He reaches for the helmet, hands it to me and grabs my waist helping me onto the back. His eyes linger down to my legs and that’s when I notice my dress is riding so high that my thong is practically on display. He tightens his lips and jumps onto the bike. “You might want to hold that down on the ride back.”

“Yeah, thanks.” I grab my dress and hold it down while slipping one arm around his waist.

He starts the bike and reaches back to grab my other arm. “Hold on tight. I told you I wouldn’t let you fall and I meant it.”

Squeezing his body tight, I lean into him and close my eyes as he drives off.

I keep them closed until we pull back up into the parking lot of the park.

The sight before me causes my heart to go crazy. Kade is standing there, his arms crossed over his chest while leaning against my car. This can’t be good. I forgot all about meeting him.

When his eyes meet mine, he looks extremely pissed. He just looks at me, but doesn’t say a word.

Kellan stays on the bike, but grabs my arm to help me off and to my feet. Then he reaches over and slides the helmet off my head. He looks me in the eye and his lip twitches. “You two have fun.” He nods his head at Kade before turning back to his bike. “See ya, bro.”

Kade doesn’t say anything at all. He just stands there, staring as if he’s about to rip his head off.

Kellan revs the engine and takes off.

We’re both silent until Kellan is completely out of sight.

Then Kade turns to me and lowers his head, looking me in the eye. “So, you were with Kellan of all people?”

I reach out to touch his arm, feeling guilty. It’s not like anything happened with Kellan and it’s not like Kade and I are even dating. Somehow, I still feel like crap. We’re supposed to be friends.

“I’m sorry. I lost track of time.”

It was an honest answer, at least. Being with Kellan had made me forget everything. Almost.

He pushes away from my car and looks down at his phone. “Well, I was hoping to hang out tonight and maybe watch a movie like old times, but . . .

"He holds his phone up. "Now, I have somewhere I have to be."

He turns to walk away, but then stops. "Maybe we can continue this tomorrow. I've wanted to get you alone. It just seems like something or someone always seems to come up. "

Leaning against my car, I reach for my purse to realize it isn't there and that Kellan still has my keys. "Dammit!"

Kade stops and turns around. "What's wrong?"

I place my hand to my head and laugh, embarrassed. "Kellan has my keys. I left my purse hanging on his bike."

Kade laughs before reaching into his pocket. "It's a good thing I have another copy of your house key." He holds a set of keys out and nods his head for me to join him. "I'll take you home. We'll work on getting your keys and purse back tomorrow, since no one seems to have Kellan's number."

"You sneaky dick," I grumble. "Just how many keys do you have?" He doesn't answer so I follow him to his truck and hop in. "I'm sorry, I really didn't mean to forget."

He brushes his hand over my thigh and bites his bottom lip. Even though it still confuses me, I get butterflies from his touch. "I know. It's hard to believe you would ditch me on purpose. You're too good for *that*."

"Right," I say, not knowing if he means for blowing him off or for Kellan.

"Thanks again." He closes the door and I lean into the seat just wanting to disappear. I feel horrible.

Chapter Nine Phoenix

After Kade interrogated me, then dropped me off last night, I spent the whole night tossing and turning, not able to get Kellan off my mind. There are so many things I don't understand and as much as I want to know the answers, I can't bring myself to ask the questions. That will always be a problem when it comes to Kellan. He's the only one that has ever made me nervous when it comes to feeling someone out to see what's on their mind. That's exactly why I never told him years ago that I had the biggest crush on him. Also being the reason why I spent most of my time following him and Adric around. I was a love-struck teenager hoping to be swept away by my prince charming, even if he was too old and always had girlfriends that

looked like Barbie. He's always been gorgeous, so of course, why would he settle for less?

It still breaks my heart to think about those days, but I refuse to get stuck in the past again. That point, is exactly why I must move on and try to forget about the way being around him makes me feel. It's amazing the way he can still take my breath away, with one look into those eyes and a flash of that dimpled smile. It scares me, though. That's exactly the reason that as soon as I get my purse, phone and keys back, I'm going to stay as far away from him as possible. He obviously has a new life, and well, so do I.

I spent the whole afternoon pacing around my apartment, pretending to listen to my mother talk about her problems, but to be honest, I was thinking of all of the different ways to show up at the tattoo shop to retrieve my things. I had so many different scenarios in my head and different conversations planned out, that in the end, I decided to just let Kade deal with it. He said he would, but I have yet to hear from him.

It was a struggle to not just show up and demand for answers along with my things, so I put up a huge fight, until finally, it was time to leave for work. The good thing about that is, I'm stuck here now. Stuck working and stuck without my car. So, as far as I'm concerned, I've managed to make it through the day and keep my sanity as well. Now, it's just a matter of making it through my shift.

"Excuse me."

"Ma'am."

"Ma'am."

"I'm sorry, excuse me?" Looking up from the bar, I realize I've spent the last twenty minutes scrubbing the same spot and ignoring everything else around me. Maybe I didn't manage to keep my sanity, after all.

A good looking guy in about his mid-twenties, short blond hair and a brown plaid shirt stares back at me from the other side of the bar. A smile pulls up on his thin lips as he leans over the bar and pulls out a stack of money. "If you're done daydreaming, then I would like another drink please."

Shaking myself back to reality, I quickly drop the towel and scurry over to grab a fresh glass. "Yeah sure, sorry." Placing it down beside me, I scoop it full with ice and grab for our top shelf Whiskey. This guy has been spending tons of money on himself and his friends tonight. If I want to

make enough tips to pay my rent on time, then I need to get my head in the game.

Pouring a little extra Whiskey into the glass to make up for my absence, I top it off with coke and place it down in front of him. “Sorry about that,” I apologize again, this time with a smile. “Next time just throw something at me. I’m a little off my game tonight.” We both laugh as I set his dirty glass into the sink.

His eyes look me over, stopping on my breasts, while he stirs his drink with his straw. Somehow, that makes me regret wearing this tiny white tank top. Men like this is exactly why we need company t-shirts made. The look in his eye does nothing but make me feel dirty. “I don’t see how your game can ever be off, sweetheart.” He opens his wad of money and pulls out a twenty-dollar bill. He holds it out in front of me, waving it in my face, before slapping it down onto the bar top. “Keep the change, babe. I’ve been enjoying the view.”

Reaching for the money, I look up to see his friends looking my direction, laughing as he slowly backs away, staring at my breasts. For some reason, this pisses me off. Hasn’t this moron ever seen boobs before? I don’t really see anything funny. Damn rich pricks just wanting to cause a scene.

About thirty minutes later, the business picks up, kicking my ass. I’m running around like crazy, barely even getting a minute to breathe. That’s when I realize Saline is over twenty minutes late for her shift. I should have known that tonight of all nights, she would be a pain and not show up.

“Gosh, freakin’, dammit.”

I grab the cordless phone and punch in Saline’s number. I’m not surprised when it goes straight to voice mail. At this point, I could rip this girl’s head off. She always does this because she only thinks of herself. I should have fired her at the meeting. She’s never going to change.

Feeling pissed off and annoyed, I dial Dale’s number to see if maybe she called in. He informs me that he hasn’t heard from her, but he will call the others to save me time from being on the phone.

Ten minutes later, I receive a phone call saying Jen has Jax so she can’t come in. Luna is at her second job and neither Kade nor Saline will pick up their phones. It’s absolutely ridiculous and Saline will no longer have a job here. I’ve had enough of her petty games.

After dealing with that crap, I turn behind me to a group of three women taking a seat at the bar. Luckily, I know two of them, so they should understand my situation.

Placing her purse on the bar beside her, looking cute in her little pink cotton dress, Michelle takes a seat and smiles when she notices me. Her golden hair is hanging long and straight tonight, making her look classy. “Hey, girl. Busy night, I see.”

“You can say that.” I reach for the glasses and set them down in front of me. “How are you ladies tonight? Have you come to watch me suffer?” I tease.

Laura leans over the bar and half laughs, half snorts. “You know I can’t pass up the opportunity.” She points beside her at a younger looking girl. She has long black hair with purple streaks throughout it, pulled into a low ponytail hanging over her shoulder. She looks as if she’s been crying, but is trying to cover it up. “This is our friend Jamie. She’s had kind of a rough night.” She leans in and whispers. “Her boyfriend’s a dick.”

Jamie elbows Laura in the side causing her to almost fall off her stool. “Shut up, Laura. I’m sitting right here. I have fucking ears, you know.” Her eyes meet mine and she fakes a smile, putting on a brave face. “I’ll take a Vodka and lemonade.” She holds up two fingers. “Make that with two shots. A double please.”

I nod my head and look between Michelle and Laura. “What about you two? I don’t have time for some sissified drinks at the moment, so please order something quick and easy to make,” I plead.

Michelle throws her head back and sighs, gripping onto the bar. “Don’t do this to me, Phoenix. You know what I usually get.”

“Exactly, which is why I’m asking you nicely. I’m by myself tonight and I’m slammed. I already have customers riding my ass.”

“Hey, you. Can I get another drink over here?” *Exactly my point.*

I turn my head to the right, to see a guy from the rich guy’s crew, standing at the bar with an impatient look on his chubby face. He looks pissed off, as if he’s about ready to toss his drink at me or jump over the bar and make his own drink. It makes me want to go and flick his man boobs.

Holding up my finger, I say, “Give me a minute.” Then I turn my attention back to the girls. “Please, work with me.”

Michelle looks over toward the impatient douche and gives him a dirty look. “Fine. Just give me a Vodka and cranberry.”

I nod my head and look at Laura while scooping up the ice. “What will it be, sweetie?”

Shoving her phone into her purse, she looks at man boobs and scowls. “I’ll take the same, but—“

“Can you hurry the hell up? I don’t have all night,” the jerk says, slapping some money down onto the bar top. “My guys are waiting on me, sweet tits, so why don’t you bring that fine little ass over here and give me what I want,” he slurs.

I get ready to lose my cool, when out of nowhere, a hand grips the guy’s shoulder, causing his eyes to go wide in surprise. Thank goodness, because I was about to shove my boot up this moron’s ass.

He spins around to see who grabbed him, looking like he’s ready to fight. My eyes leave the idiotic man, to see who has risked a fight at my expense, landing on the guy towering over him and my heart starts going wild in my chest. Kellan is standing there, with his messy hair falling over his face, as he looks down at the guy.

The guy pulls from Kellan’s grasp, trying to swing, but is stopped midair by Kellan’s hand. His forehead creases, with the slightest smile playing out on the edge of his mouth, as if amused. “Not a good idea bud. Since you’ve been drinking, I have the advantage.”

Tonight he’s wearing a charcoal gray, fitted, graphic tee, revealing the outline of his muscles. The short length of the sleeve stops just below his shoulder, showing off those sexy tattoos. My eyes trail down, catching sight of both full sleeve tattoos. It’s like staring at a work of art, each showing a magnitude of depth and beauty, like each is its own story waiting to be told.

He’s wearing a thick, brown, leather cuff buttoned around his left wrist. His faded jeans hang low on his hip, ending, front tucked just slightly beneath the tongue of his heavy black boots.

Without realizing it, I fan myself off, beginning to feel heat spread throughout my body. I’m ogling him like a damn love-struck teenager again. Some things never change.

“Day-um! That’s one fine specimen,” Michelle says while leaning over Jamie to get a better look. “Move it, girl.”

I stand there frozen and unable to say anything. All I can do is stare and swallow, while mentally slapping myself out of it. *Get a hold of yourself, Phoenix, before he really starts to think you’re an idiot.*

What the hell is he even doing here? I wasn't expecting to see him around again. Seeing him here is working me up and making me think of the things I'm trying to forget, dammit. *Not cool.*

Kellan places his hand back on the guy's shoulder and squeezes, before giving him a pat on the back, slightly too hard to be considered friendly. "You see the lady is busy, so, I'll offer you a onetime tip. Have some fucking respect when speaking to women." His voice is deep, angry like, causing the guy to look away, toward his friends that seem to be ignoring him. Kellan smiles at this and slaps his back so hard that the guy slams against the bar and knocks over his empty glass. "I'm here to help. Now, how can I help you, sweet tits?"

The stunned guy watches as Kellan walks behind the bar, past me and over to stand in front of him. He obviously wasn't expecting someone to hear him and stand up for me and neither was I. "Any day now. You're not the only person in the bar, as you can see."

What does he think he's doing back here, now?

I stand there watching the two of them, waiting for the guy to say something, afraid of a fight breaking out.

When the guy doesn't respond, Kellan grabs the guy's empty glass. "Alright, then. Don't worry bud, I'll figure it out," he says sarcastically. He sticks his nose into the glass and takes a whiff, before reaching for a fresh glass and pouring him a beer. Surprisingly, he is dead on with his pick.

The girls are talking amongst themselves, creaming over the new eye candy, so I quickly slip away and rush over to stand next to Kellan.

"What are you doing here?" I ask a little harsher than intended. I can't help it, though. I'm shocked as all hell to see him and especially, here at the bar.

I stare hungrily at the sexiness of the lip ring that he now has in, imagining what it would feel like, to nibble on it, kiss it and run my tongue over it.

He takes notice and flashes me a charming smile before shoving the beer into the guy's hand and snatching his money. "It's nice to see you too." He cocks an eyebrow while looking out the corner of his eye at me. "Try not to look too thrilled. This isn't Disneyland."

I run my hands through my hair, watching him ring up the drink and place the change down onto the bar. The guy waves his arm above the

money and quickly takes off, leaving the cash there. Looks like I'm not the only one a little shook up by Kellan's sudden appearance.

Kellan grabs the money and opens my hand, placing it into my palm and closing it. Then he walks away to help a group of people. "Go take a breather and I'll take care of the bar for a bit."

I glance back at the girls, which are now watching my every move. I glare at them before walking over to stand next to Kellan. "What are you doing here and how did you know how to ring that up?" I hold my hand out with the money and then look back up to watch him throw some drinks together. "Also, what is this? This is your tip money. You made that drink."

He laughs and I can't help but to notice the women that he's helping blush. Those women can go suck it. Actually, no, they can't. *Shit! What does it matter?*

"I came to bring you this. I thought you might need it." He pulls my phone out of his pocket and leans over me, sliding it into the pocket of my khaki shorts. "I saw you needed a little rescuing," he whispers against my ear before motioning around the busy bar. "It's a good thing I spent a lot of time bartending before opening my shop."

"How did—"

"Hey, gorgeous," a cute little blond interrupts us. "Make that four shots of Tequila." She raises an eyebrow, looking him up and down, with those desperate eyes that I want to poke out, slowly, one by one. Can't she see we're busy talking? *Rude . . . take a deep breath.*

"Sure thing," Kellan replies, reaching for a fourth shot glass.

My eyes wander down his back until they land on his tight ass, accented perfectly by those fitted jeans. It's hypnotizing. Just like everything else on that body of his.

"Damn, Phoenix. Can we get those drinks, sometime before closing preferably," Laura complains while tapping her fingers in front of her. "You can drool over the hunk later."

I see Kellan smile from the corner of my eye and it makes my stomach do somersaults. "Shut up," I mouth before looking beside me at Kellan. "Thanks for coming to the rescue then, I guess. I just wasn't expecting it, that's all."

His eyes land on my lips for a moment, until finally, I spin on the heel of my boots and head back over to my pain in the ass friends.

Aggravated, I dump the melted ice into the sink and refill all of the glasses before pouring them their drinks. “See, told you I was busy tonight. Give me a damn break.”

“Mmm-hmm, sure.” Michelle grabs for her drink and sticks the straw in her mouth. “Busy staring at that boy’s fine backside.” She smiles and playfully bites the straw. “Grr. I’d like to bite that. I bet everything on that boy’s body tastes just as good as it looks, delicious.”

“Is he single?” Jamie asks while eye raping him. “If he’s not yours, then I’ll have that for dessert, please.”

No, you won’t, hussy. “It’s not like that, okay,” I mutter. “He’s an old friend.”

Laura and Michelle both look at me at the same time. I have known both of them since preschool and they pretty much know everyone I know. Might as well tell them the shocking news.

“You remember Kellan Haze, ladies?”

Michelle spits her drink over the bar and nearly drops her glass. “Kade’s hot older brother? You’re shitting me, right? There’s no way.”

I shake my head and run my fingers through my hair. “I’m not, trust me.” I look up from the bar to see Laura’s eyes wide with shock.

“Surprised, girl?”

“Umm, hell to the yeah,” Laura squeaks. “What the heck? This is crazy.” She looks over in Kellan’s direction and a huge smile spreads across her face. “You guys are going to finally end up together,” she says a little too loud. “He’s gorgeous now. You have to take that for a ride.”

“Laura, shut it.” I shake my head and place my hand over her mouth to keep her quiet. She tries biting me so I let go. “We are not ending up together.”

“Who is this *we* that you ladies are talking about?” Kellan’s voice comes from right behind me, startling me.

Crap! He needs to stop creeping up on people.

All three of the girls stare at him in awe and I can’t blame them. Even I know, he’s the sexiest thing to step foot in this bar and possibly in all of Texas.

“You ladies care to answer my question since Phoenix seems to be at a loss for words tonight.” He leans against the bar sexily while crossing his feet in front of him, his eyes searching mine. “I overheard you wanting to

take something for a . . . ride,” he says while pulling his lip ring between his teeth.

Oh damn, please stop that. I grab for my escape towel and anxiously start wiping down the bar top. “No, they don’t.” I give them a hard look to keep them quiet while scrubbing an already clean spot on the bar. “We weren’t talking about anything or anyone important, trust me.”

He shrugs his shoulders before slowly licking his finger and running it under my eye, the coolness of his saliva giving me chills. “I see that someone still refuses to buy waterproof mascara. You should be a little more careful when wiping at the sweat.” He pulls his hand away and wipes it on the front of his shirt. “Well ladies, enjoy ‘not’ talking about anything important.” He looks me in the eye and exhales, while taking a step back. “Or anyone important.”

My heart aches as he walks away and I feel sick to my stomach. Maybe he knows we were talking about him. He couldn’t possibly believe he’s no one important to me. *Could he?* The thought makes my stomach turn.

“Wow, Phoenix. Way to go.” Michelle brushes her hair out of her face while clicking her tongue. “Now you scared the hottie away. How do you expect to get a date-“

“You’re pushing it, Michelle,” I say defensively. “That was in the past. We are both different people now. I don’t even know him anymore. Just drop it, okay.”

Laura sips on her drink and her eyes wander over to Kellan, who is now helping Martin. I can see the lust in her big brown eyes and it sucks to think that other women want him.

The right side of her mouth curves into a smile as she looks over at me. “Oh please, Phoenix. A man like that can’t be anything but good. Don’t think I don’t remember the way he treated you in the past. He was your guardian angel, always there to protect you. Somehow, I don’t think things will be much different now. You saw him handle man boobs.”

I turn my attention away from her to get a peek at Kellan. He’s still standing there talking to Martin, but his eyes are on me, watching me closely. Even when he notices me looking, his eyes don’t shy away. He has no shame at being caught staring at me. I can’t seem to turn away either. I’ve only had him back for a few days and already, I’m addicted.

* * *

By the end of my shift, I am exhausted and just ready to get home and crash. The girls hung around for a couple of hours, talking about Jamie's fight with her boyfriend and ever so slyly, bringing up Kellan every chance they got. To be honest, I was happy to see them leave. I couldn't take any more worrying if Kellan was going to creep up and hear our conversation anymore. It was exhausting.

I was glad to see Kellan ended up being a great bartender, after all. He seemed to be very experienced with making drinks and he even showed me a few new ones. I could get used to having someone that actually wants to work help out around here. Too bad, it would never work out. He'll probably never step foot into this bar again.

While in the office counting down the cash, I notice that the drawer is over by almost a hundred dollars. I count it for a second time just to come up with the same exact amount.

Standing up, I push my way through the door to see Kellan standing in front of the jukebox. He has one hand out in front of him, against the jukebox, while the other is scanning through the music selection.

I want to say something, but there's just something about the way he's standing there, with his hair hanging over his scruffy face and his shoulder blades protruding against the thin fabric of his shirt, that is too beautiful to interrupt. Watching him has my heart hammering in my chest.

Finally, he picks a song and *Simple Man* by Lynyrd Skynyrd starts playing over the speaker. He takes a step back, closes his eyes, and bites his bottom lip, looking lost in the moment.

My heart aches as I watch him. He takes a deep breath before bending forward, placing both of his hands on the jukebox and squeezing, head hanging low, clenching his jaw.

This was one of Adric's favorite songs. I used to sit there in the attic next to him, while he played this song and sang it aloud. He would always tell me to be sure to find a simple man and I never really understood what he meant by that. I'm still not so sure I understand now, but it still eats at my heart every time I hear this song.

"Fuck! This damn song." He pounds his fist against the jukebox before taking a step back and slowly rubbing his hands over his face. That's always been his way of covering his emotions and hiding. It always broke my heart to see him that way. Apparently, from the way my heart is faltering and my stomach is knotting up, it still does.

I swallow the lump in my throat and walk over to stand next to him. Holding out the money, I ask, “Is this your tip money?”

He swallows and takes a step closer to me, as if just now noticing me in the room. “It’s yours. I don’t want it.” He places his hands to my shoulders and rubs his thumbs over them, while breathing heavily. “I helped out tonight because I wanted to, not because I need the money.”

Pulling away from him, I shake my head and shove the money into his chest. “I can’t keep this money, Kellan. You worked your ass off tonight.” He pushes my hand back, but I don’t budge. I won’t. “Take the money. You deserve it.”

He finally holds his hand out and allows me to place it in his hand. “You’re still just as stubborn as ever. Do you know that?” He shoves the money into his pocket and smiles, as if he knows something I don’t. Then he walks away and into the office.

“Wait a minute. What was that smile for?” I follow behind him and watch as he wraps the money up and writes down the numbers for the night. “Are you seriously going to do everything for me?”

He looks up giving me a serious look. “I would if I could, Phoenix.” His eyes darken before he finally looks away. “I’m taking you to your car. I’ll be ready in a few.”

“My mother is supposed to pick me up when I call her.” I walk around and help as he starts turning off the lights and games. “I just need my keys and my purse.”

He brushes past me and heads for the door. “Don’t call your mom. I’m taking you for a ride.” He smiles, holds the door open and waits for me to follow him outside. “Do you usually do this alone at night?”

I shrug my shoulders as I stick the key into the lock and turn. “Yeah, usually. Once in a while someone else is here, but most of the time it’s just me.”

He leans his head back and sucks his bottom lip in frustration. “I’m gonna have to put a stop to that shit. What the hell are they thinking, leaving a beautiful . . .” He takes a deep breath and exhales. “They shouldn’t be leaving you alone at two in the morning to close up a bar. You could easily get robbed or hurt.”

My heartbeat pounds in my ears as I try to hide the blush that is creeping over my face. If I heard him correctly, then he was calling me beautiful. I would’ve given anything in the past to hear that from his lips.

“So . . .” I look around the parking lot in search of his motorcycle, but all I see is a big, black, Chevy Silverado truck, rocky ridge style. “Is this beauty yours?” I point my thumb toward the truck and smile.

He rubs his hands together before placing his hand on the small of my back and walking me to it. “Hell yeah, it is. You know how I always wanted a lifted truck.” He opens the truck door and before I can say anything, he has his hand on my ass, boosting me up and into the truck. “Watch your head, sweet tits,” he teases.

I slap his arm and surprisingly it hurts my hand. “What the hell are you packing under there?”

He glances down to the natural bulge in his jeans and smiles mischievously. “It’s a secret,” he whispers. “A huge one. So big that I can never tell you. It’s mind blowing and orgasmic.” He lifts an eyebrow and closes the door to his truck.

“Ha! Very funny, smart ass.” I lean my head against the cold, leather seat and squirm from his words. That’s a secret I would kill to know. Even though it’s kind of disturbing, I find myself wondering if it’s bigger than Kade’s. I’m dirtier than I thought I was.

I try not to look at him as he gets in and shuts the door behind him. “You’re still a smart ass I see, so maybe you haven’t changed much over the years.”

His hand grips the steering wheel and tightens as he puts the key into the ignition and turns. “I don’t know about that, Phoenix. It’s a little too soon to judge, don’t you think.”

Exhaling, I turn the other way to face the window. There are so many things I want to say and so many questions to ask, but I can’t. Not just yet, at least. As much as I know I should stay away, I can’t deny the fact he makes me want to do exactly the opposite.

We’re driving for a good ten minutes before finally, I realize we’re nowhere near where my car is parked. “Umm, where are we going? My car is at the park, remember?”

He looks distressed and his hands are shaking on the steering wheel. That’s when I take a closer look and see we are outside the woods of our secret hangout.

He parks the truck and turns off the ignition. I try to speak, but I can’t. This place brings nothing but heartache for me. I can’t be here right now. I can’t. The bad memories of that day will forever overpower the good ones.

“I had to come here.” He swallows hard and stares out into the blackness of the night. “Just one last time, at least. I’ve missed this place and everything that’s happened here.”

Panic sets in and my breathing is almost uncontrollable. All I can picture is me, sitting alone in the woods, staring off like a zombie with tear streaked eyes. The feeling numbs me, taking over my body and my mind, causing my throat to close and my chest to tighten.

“What’s wrong?” Kellan leans over and quickly unbuckles my seat belt. “Are you having some kind of panic attack? Breathe.” I feel his arms wrap around my waist before I am pulled out of my seat and into the comfort of his lap, his eyes searching mine. “Can you breathe?”

No, especially not now. Thanks a lot.

I just stare at him as he places his hands on either side of my face before running his hand down my neck, gently brushing over my bare skin and placing it over my heart. Boths of our breath quickens as he brings his eyes up to meet mine and keeps them there for what seems like an eternity.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize that being here would have such an effect on you. I figured you’ve been coming here over the years. It’s always been your favorite place.”

I pull my eyes away and take a deep breath through my nose and exhale. He pulls his hand away from my heart when he notices my breathing beginning to slow down. “I’m such a jerk, Phoenix. I should have asked you first. I just had to see it and I didn’t want to come alone. It wouldn’t feel right.”

Squeezing my eyes shut, I lower my head and place it in my hands. “No. No, you’re not a jerk,” I manage to breathe. “You couldn’t have known. How could you?” You’ve only been gone for eight years without even a single phone call to check on us. “It’s okay.”

I shift in his lap, taking notice of his crotch digging into my backside. It’s not hard, but for some odd reason just the feel of it makes me hot and I start to sweat. All I can think about is pulling it out and wrapping my lips around it, stroking my hand up and down the length of his shaft. Obviously, my thoughts are out of control when I’m around him. “I just . . .” I shift a little more feeling uncomfortable.

He stops me from squirming, wraps his arms around me and pulls my head down to his shoulder. I take a deep breath, breathing him in and

savoring this moment that I may never get again. Somehow being in his arms gives me a feeling of safety that I never thought I'd feel again.

"You don't need to explain. You don't owe me any explanations. We'll leave and I'll take you to your car."

After seeing it again for the first time in eight years, a small part of me almost wants to stay. As much as it hurts, I'm drawn to it. That seems to be a problem for me these days.

"No."

Kellan looks down at me and rubs his thumb over my cheek, causing my legs to tremble. "Are you sure? You're shaking. We can leave right now. I don't need to come back. It's part of the past now, an old memory."

I place my hand behind him, trailing it up his neck, before playing with the back of his hair. *Oh, how I love his hair.* "We can sit here for a few minutes." I force a smile, feeling somewhat better. "I just can't go in. Can you understand that?" My eyes search his, pleading for him to not ask any more questions. I just want to enjoy this moment, as if nothing else matters.

"Of course. We don't have to go inside."

I get ready to push my way out of his lap, but he wraps his arm tighter around me and pulls me against the firmness of his chest. His lips brush the top of my hair before stopping next to my ear and he whispers, "Just stay here, close to me. I want to feel like I'm protecting you. That was always my job."

My heartbeat quickens and I start shaking once again, causing Kellan's arm to tighten protectively around me. "I'm sorry, Kellan."

He brushes my hair behind my ear and leans his head over my shoulder, his lips against my cheek. "For what? You haven't done anything wrong."

Yeah, I did. I'm keeping him from the one place he has probably wanted to see for years. The same place I have been avoiding. "I didn't mean to ruin your night."

He laughs softly, his warm breath tickling my ear. "You didn't ruin my night," he breathes. "Trust me, Phoenix." He unwraps his arm from around me and shifts in his seat. His hands grip my hips, causing the stiffness of his penis to dig into my crotch. It's definitely hard now, making my whole body shake with pleasure and my thighs to get moist. It feels big and thick against my body and he doesn't seem ashamed to show it. A part of me almost thinks he's enjoying this. That makes me want to panic even more

and I swear if he moves one more time I'm going to have a damn orgasm just from my thoughts.

After adjusting me to the position he wants, he wraps his arms back around my waist and pulls me backwards so my back is pressed against his chest. "Just close your eyes and relax. Think of the good times."

He turns up the music and I find my eyes closing, and a smile tugging at my lips when I hear the most beautiful song ever. *Your Guardian Angel* by The Red Jumpsuit Apparatus. Somehow, this song always manages to take my breath away. I gasp as I get lost in the lyrics.

I feel Kellan's breath against my ear before he whispers, "Beautiful, isn't it?"

Spilling the truth, I admit, "This song is the most beautiful song in the world to me. I would kill to have a man sing this to me and propose. I would fall in love for the rest of my life."

His breath quickens, but he doesn't say anything else. Just holds me tighter as we listen to the lyrics.

We sit there in silence for at least thirty minutes, who knows, maybe even longer, before he finally drives me to my car.

Right as I'm about to get out, he stops me and hands me my purse. I take it and grip it in my hand. "Thanks."

He leans across me and opens the truck door before turning to face me and cupping my right cheek in his hand. He leans in close to my face and clenches his jaw. "If you need me for anything, anything at all, get ahold of me. I don't care what time of day it is. Do you hear me?"

I nod my head while trying with everything in me to keep from leaning forward and pressing my lips against his. They look so soft and inviting and I want nothing more than to get a taste. Just one taste of him and maybe I could die a happy woman.

"Okay, good." He leans in closer almost as if he's about to kiss me. His eyes trail down to my lips and I can feel his heart hammering against my arm, until suddenly he turns away, leaving my insides cold and my body wanting him. "Have a good night."

I swallow hard and wipe my sweaty palms over my shorts. "You too, Kellan. Be safe."

I step down and carefully make my way out of his truck and down to the ground before shutting the door behind me. He waits for me to safely get into my car and start it before nodding and driving away.

Sitting there in my car, I grip the steering wheel and lean my head against the back of the seat. This boy has no idea what he's doing to me and all of the things I want to be doing to him. No one makes me feel this way. No one but him. It's always been him.

When I get home, I spend the next hour, tossing and turning in bed and am just about to finally fall asleep when my phone goes off from a text message. I reach over to the table and grab my phone, expecting it to be Kade. My heart instantly reacts to the name that flashes across my screen. Surprisingly, it's not Kade, but the last person I ever expected it to be. *He put his name get in my phone?*

Kellan: Oh, by the way . . . I programmed my number in case you miss me.

Phoenix: Like I said, still a smart ass. Goodnight, Kellan.

Kellan: Goodnight. Oh, and I left you a gift in your purse. Now go to sleep and dream of me ;) You'll be sure to have . . . happy dreams.

A pathetic smile spreads across my face as I set my phone back down and close my eyes. I knew that jerk would find a way to slip his tip money in my purse. Now, I will be thinking of him all night and fantasizing about the dreams I only hope to have.

So much for getting sleep . . .

Chapter Ten

Phoenix

I am woken from my light sleep by a screeching noise coming from somewhere within my small apartment. The sound is absolutely awful.

“What the hell is that? Make it stop!”

Throwing the sheet off me, I jump up and slide my fingers through my hair, searching the room around me. It only takes a few seconds before I hear it again. It almost sounds as if someone is dragging a suitcase over tile flooring, but instead of using the wheels, they're using only half a damn wheel and that half a wheel is broken, unfortunately.

Is someone seriously in my house right now? The sun hasn't even come up and it can't be any later than four in the morning. Please tell me this is a dream inside of a dream and I'm going to wake up five hours from now happy and peaceful. I only managed to fall asleep about an hour ago and even then, I wasn't even quite asleep. This is really going to put a damper on my day.

“Zoe, help me with these bags.”

Okay, no. That is definitely my mother’s voice and in my house. Not exactly what I want to be hearing right now, and bags. *What bags?*

I throw my robe on in a panic and hastily make my way down the hallway and into the kitchen. The bright light hurts, causing me to throw my hand over my face and blink a few times to adjust. The little glimpse I did get was just enough to see my mother and my sister along with bags and suitcases full of their belongings.

“Whoa, guys. What is all this noise about?” I pull my hand away from my eyes and weakly lean against the counter for support, still half-asleep. This cannot be a good thing and now, I’m not so sure I even want to know what they’re doing here this early in the morning for. “It’s like four a.m.” I grab one of the bags and hold it up, examining the picture of some young, cute boy on it. Definitely has to be Zoe’s bag, filled with her clothes, I’m guessing. “What is all this? Please tell me this isn’t what I think it is,” I whisper.

My mother and Zoe both just stand there staring off in some kind of zombie like state, until finally, Zoe yanks the bag out of my hand and makes her way past me. “I’m going to sleep on the couch. It is way too early for this crap and I can’t stand to look at her anymore. She’s ruined my life. I cannot believe this is happening.”

“Zoe!” My mother reaches out for her arm even though she’s too far away and already making her way over to the couch. “I didn’t mean for this to happen,” she says weakly.

My heart races like crazy and I feel sick to my stomach as I watch my mother, waiting for her to say something to explain this mess. When she just stands there, I get very impatient and damn scared to be honest.

“Mom, what is going on?”

A tear escapes her eye and she quickly reaches up to brush it away. She’s always hated showing her weakness, so she usually puts up a front, but something tells me, it won’t be so easy this time. Hiding her face, she finally speaks, “Your father is seeing someone else, Phoenix. We’re through, done, it’s over. He asked me to leave, so here we are.” Those big hazel eyes fill with tears this time and within seconds, she is on the ground, with one hand gripping the countertop and the other one hanging between her knees as she sobs. “What am I’m going to do? Thirty years. It’s been

thirty years since I have been alone. I can't. I just can't. I need him, Phoenix. I love him so much.”

Dammit, that Bastard. This is definitely worse than I imagined. I push away from the counter and kneel down in front of her, placing my hand on her shoulder for comfort. This would have to be the first time she's needed my comforting and I was hoping this day would never come. “What the hell is wrong with him? How long has this been going on? How did you . . .” I stop, realizing, that as distant as my father has been for the last five or nine years, who knows how long it's been going on. Could be one year or it could be nine. All I know is that he's an ass. “Just never mind that. He's a son of a bitch and a piece of shit for doing this to you. You don't deserve this-“

“Don't say that about your father, Phoenix. He's a good man.” She looks up with tear stained eyes and wipes at her blotchy face. “He tried giving it a second chance. That's why Zoe has been spending so much time here. He tried, so don't blame him.”

“Are you shitting me, mom! He's a good man? Why are you and Zoe here with all of your belongings if he's a good man? Tell me that. He should be the one to leave.” I stand up and slam my fist down on the counter top pissed off that my dad would do such a thing to his family. Family is everything. “Don't defend him. He hasn't been good in years and even you know that.”

“Phoenix! Watch your language.” Her voice comes out shaky as she looks up at me with wet eyes. “He owns that house, okay. I haven't worked in over eight years and you know that. I couldn't work after Adric died. I just couldn't function right anymore. I missed my baby-”

“Mom stop,” I cut in, not able to handle this confession. I can't listen to it. Why bring up Adric now after eight years. No one in this house talks about him and that is how I have made it through the years. Silence has been the key. I start walking away to the living room as fast as I can, kicking a bag out of my way. “Please don't bring up my brother right now. Hasn't there been enough tears shed already? Don't choose right now to bring him up, dammit. Just don't.”

My mother follows behind me, her red hair matted to her face with tears, she no longer seems determined to hide. “You need to know I loved Adric with everything in me. I still love him. He was my baby boy. My first born-“

“Stop it, please.” Tears well up in my eyes and my whole body’s shaking with nerves. I grab onto the couch, my nails digging in, to hold back my emotion. “You guys are welcome here as long as you want, but please... stop.”

She doesn’t stop though. She doesn’t know how, ever. “He was so good to everyone, so sweet and caring. My handsome baby boy. You look so much like your brother. Those gray eyes and dark hair, easily tanned skin and healthy glow like your father.” She grabs my face and looks me in the eye. “Sometimes it’s hard to look at you without it hurting. Do you get that?” Tears stream down my face as I squeeze my eyes closed, licking away the salty tears that are dripping over my lips.

“You were everything to Adric. He worried about you so much. Protecting you seemed to be the most important thing to him. Even when it came to your father and me. Him and that damn, Kellan kid always acting as if we weren’t good enough. Do you know how that makes me feel to know that I have failed him? Look at me.” She squeezes my face and shakes it, until I finally open my eyes to look at her. “I abandoned you after we found him in the attic. I should have been there for you. I should have comforted you, but I couldn’t, not after seeing my baby boy that way. You reminded me too much of him and I couldn’t take it. Even after you ran off.” She pauses to choke back a sob. “I didn’t even look for you. I just couldn’t find it in me.”

Not able to stand here and listen anymore, I pull my face away and start reaching for the bags. I had no idea she hadn’t even looked for me that day, and that day stings more now, that I know the truth. “Let’s get these bags put aside somewhere. You can take my room and Zoe can take the couch.” I stop to swallow the lump in my throat and to catch my breath. “I’ll sleep here on the floor. I have plenty of blankets so it should be nice and soft—“

“You don’t have to do that,” my mother’s guilty voice cuts in. “We’ll only be here for a few days and then we’ll leave.”

Zoe jumps up from the couch with a panicked look on her freckled face. “Where else would we go? We have nowhere but here. I’m not sleeping outside because you screwed up. Dad left you, not me.”

“Zoe, shut up!” I place my hand on her shoulder and push her back down on the couch. “Don’t speak to mom that way. It’s not her fault that dad’s an ass. Now lay back down and keep out of it.”

She crosses her arms over her chest and slams her head against the back of the cushion. “How am I supposed to stay out of it when you guys are in my new room? Nice try. Why don’t you guys take it somewhere else so I don’t have to be around her.”

“Yeah, and why don’t you learn to . . .” My mother’s words trail off as she turns to face the wall and covers her mouth. “I’m sorry, Zoe. Let’s just get some sleep. We both need it.”

“No! What was that mother? What were you about to say?” Zoe jumps to her feet, grabs a picture frame from the coffee table, and tosses it across the room. The picture shatters causing all of us to stop and stare.

I think it hit us all at the same time. It’s the only picture I have of him. It was taken a week before he died. He was leaning against his motorcycle with his legs crossed in front of him, holding up the rock-on hand symbol. He had just gotten his first motorcycle that day. It was a piece of junk he bought off someone that was moving out of town and planned to fix it up. He was still in the process when he . . . died. Now that I think about it, I haven’t seen that bike since the first day he got it. I wonder what ever happened to it.

“I’m sorry,” Zoe whispers, looking over at the broken pieces of glass. “I didn’t mean to. I’m just really tired and angry and—“

“Zoe.”

“I will clean it up. Please don’t be mad. I wasn’t thinking and—“

“Zoe, stop.” I hold my arms up to stop her. “Everyone’s a little upset at the moment. Just go back to sleep and I will clean this mess up.” I turn to face my mother, which is now holding a shaky hand to her mouth. “Go and take my room. You need sleep more than I do. I will put these bags somewhere and when you wake up, you can take any space in my room that you need and put your things in there. Zoe can put her things in the dining room. We will work this out. We can. We can do this without him, okay.”

My mother nods and her eyes stray over to Zoe that is still set on ignoring her. “Yeah, we can do this, Zoe. We can manage here. I wasn’t going to say what you thought I was going to say.”

I can tell my mother is lying. I can always tell when she lies. In the heat of the moment, she was going to get on Zoe’s case about her learning disabilities and it angers me. It really does, but everyone’s emotions are running wild right now. I can’t blame either one of them for their actions and I won’t.

Zoe pulls her hair to the side of her shoulder and reaches for the red blanket I keep on the back of the couch for her. "Just go to sleep . . . mother. I don't want to talk anymore."

I take a few deep breaths as my head begins to spin and my legs get weak. Anxiety is a predator and right now, I'm its prey. As hard as I try, anxiety will always be a huge part of my life. I have learned to control it for the most part, but even the strongest have their meltdowns. Right now, definitely calls for a meltdown. I have no idea how I'm going to manage to take care of my mother and sister without working every minute of every day. It's going to be a struggle, but if I can get through losing the biggest part of me, then I can and will get through this.

My mother glances around the room a few times before she nods at me, smiles and heads down the hallway to my room.

Looks like I need to make a trip to blow off a little steam. Actually, make that a lot of steam.

* * *

I pull my car up to *Haze Ranch*, making my way down the extremely long driveway. The house looks lifeless as I drive past it and take a quick look around. The huge rectangular windows stand unlit against the huge white house and are opaque because of the old curtains hanging against them. The only noise around me seems to be from the distant horses and cattle. The old wooden porch wraps all the way around the house, leading to a great view of the Ranch, now a dim shade of orange and pink from the sun peaking over the trees. I almost want to stop and make my way up the steps to take in the beautiful view, but decide against it. I have something else in mind to relieve this tension.

I drive for another few minutes past the bunkhouse, huge red barn, and the beginning of the wooden fence I know stretches for miles. Cattle are nowhere in sight, probably down by the creek bank.

Finally, I park my car by the large oak tree that holds the worn rope swing. It's old and hasn't been used in ages. I drive a distance past the old meadow we used to play in when we were kids. It's also far enough away that no one will be able to hear my gunfire. Well, at least it won't bother them as much. As much as I know I probably shouldn't be doing this so early in the morning, I really feel as if I don't have a choice. With everything going on with my family and the Haze boys, I just can't seem to think straight.

Killing the ignition, I reach under my seat and grab my pistol, before releasing the trunk latch. I step out of the car and adjust my cutoffs and t-shirt, placing my pistol under the band of my shorts. Heading over to my trunk, I stop and inhale, breathing in the fresh air before raising it open. Reaching in, I grab for my box of bullets.

I make my way to the place we used to use for bonfires. It's a burned area surrounded by a couple logs. Sometimes it's still used by some of the ranch hands on late night stakeouts. I look around to see there are some cans left by the latest occupants. *Perfect, that should work.* I set the cans up on top of the log facing the woods.

Backing away from the log, I reach for my Ruger Sr45 Semi-Automatic Pistol. I love the way it feels in my hands, lightweight but powerful, already making some of the tension die down.

It's been at least a few months since I've been able to shoot and a certain excitement courses through me, just thinking about relieving this damn stress. Right now, I feel like a crazy person off my pills and my anxiety is at an all-time high. Trust me, no one wants to deal with a stressed out Phoenix. I've never been good with words. This is my way of getting things off my chest.

Taking a deep breath, I check the chamber. I always keep it loaded in case of an emergency, but check the safety regularly. I hold down the pistol, grip in hand and take the safety off. Raising the pistol in the web of my left hand, I overlay my left with the right hand, placing my index finger over the trigger.

Spreading my legs shoulder length apart, I steady the gun and aim, slightly holding my finger over the trigger until I am dead on with the first aluminum can and squeeze the trigger, firing my weapon. The first shot hits straight through the middle, almost splitting it in half.

I instantly feel a bit of relief and can't seem to help the smile that is spreading over my face. "Hell yeah!" I scream. Hopping up and down like an excited toddler, I laugh, feeling my shoulders relax, before setting my eyes back on the target.

I turn my aim slightly more to the right and aim for the second can, nailing it with my first try, sending the can spiraling through the air in pieces. "That's for leaving when I needed you the most."

Aiming for the third can, I miss the first time before finally shooting the top off. "That's for looking sexier than all hell and walking back into my

life.”

I get ready to aim for the fourth one, until I hear footsteps behind me and turn around to see Kade strolling through the grass shirtless, wearing a pair of blue plaid pajama pants. He looks confused as he wipes at his eyes.

All of the stress that I just relieved comes flooding back and the pressure of anxiety starts building. I have no idea how long he’s been standing there and no idea just how much he has just heard.

“Kade, what are you doing up? It’s barely six o’clock.” I lower the pistol and brush my hair out of my face. “Don’t you have to work the late shift tonight?”

He walks over to stand next to me and stretches before reaching for my pistol. “It’s kind of hard to sleep through gunfire. Especially when you know the one firing the gun is so hot.” Without giving it too much thought, he turns and aims at the fourth can, shattering it on the first try, before aiming it at the last one, taking that down as well. “Man, that does feel good. It’s been a while since I’ve been out here.” He puts on the safety before shoving the pistol into the front of his pajamas, bringing my attention down to notice there’s no way he’s wearing any boxers under those things. The package is nice and visible, the whole shape of his penis pressing against the thin fabric, swaying whenever he moves. A certain excitement courses through me, making me feel dirty. “You look sexy as hell right now and all I can think about is trailing kisses over every inch of your body,” he says softly, his eyes focusing on my legs, then my breasts.

My body stiffens and my breath comes out heavily from his words. As much as my mind won’t stay off Kellan, there’s still a part of my body that reacts to Kade.

Shit! This can’t be a good thing. Now I feel like some kind of slut even though I’m not sleeping with either. Hell, I’ve only kissed Kade, not Kellan and I probably will never get the chance anyway.

“Yeah, well I’m pretty sweaty at the moment. I doubt you want that all over your lips,” I say nervously.

He takes a step closer so his body is brushing against mine. “I’m sure everything on your body taste good.” He leans in pressing his nose into my neck, breathing slowly. “Even your sweat.” His arms wrap around my waist, before reaching down to caress my ass. “Why don’t you come to the pool house so we can play around a little and then get some more sleep. It’s

early, but there are so many things I want to do to that sexy little body of yours, just not out here in the open.”

What fun is there in that? If I were to agree to have sex with Kade, then this would be the kind of place I’d want to do it. As dirty as it sounds, doing it out in the open has always been a fantasy of mine and extremely turns me on. I place my hands against his chest. “I’m really not up to it, Kade. I’m really stressed out at the moment. I just wanted a little alone time to blow off some steam.”

He presses his forehead to mine before speaking. “I can help you blow off some steam. I’m pretty good with that.” His lips crush mine, sucking and tugging on my bottom lip, begging for entrance as his hand snakes around my thigh, searching its way up my shorts.

I let myself get lost in the moment for a few seconds before his finger slips under my panties, running over the wetness that I hadn’t even realized was there. Clearly, my body wants him but nothing about this moment feels right. It’s all too confusing, this is the furthest he’s gotten to slipping a finger in me, and I’m not sure that it’s right. I wriggle my way out of his grip, claiming my lips back as well. “Kellan, not now,” I breathe.

The look on his face is almost as if I just slapped him. He huffs before running a hand through his curls and taking a step back. “Is that what’s been going on?”

“What are you talking about?” I ask a little confused. Is he really that upset I don’t want to make out with him right now? That’s pretty shitty.

He snickers while shaking his head and pursing his lips. “You really have no idea what you just called me do you?”

I lift an eyebrow, getting frustrated with his attitude. “Well, I’m going to say your name. I don’t remember me calling you anything else or anything bad for that matter. What is your deal, Kade?”

“Ah . . . now you get my name right, Luna.” He smiles and pulls my pistol out of the waistband of his pants. “Oh, I’m sorry. I meant Phoenix. How does it feel?” He holds out the pistol for me to grab it. “You’ve always had a thing for my brother. It was pretty clear back then and pretty clear right now.”

Reaching for my pistol, I lean my head back and exhale. I can’t believe I slipped and called him Kellan. This day is definitely not going much better than it was a couple of hours ago. “I’m sorry, Kade. Like I said, I have a lot on my mind. Of course, your brother is one of those things. He

just showed back up after eight years. It's kind of hard not to think about it, or why he left in the first place. You can't be mad about that."

He laughs as if I've missed something. "It's pretty easy to see why he left. He took the easy way out so he wouldn't have to deal with the both of us or people talking about Adric's death over the next years in this crappy little town. It was his escape. Can't you see that? He's no good. I have no respect for him. He doesn't care about us and probably never has. I gave up on him a few years after he left." He stops to look me in the eye. "Maybe you should finally give up and open your pretty little eyes. If he wanted you, then he would've stuck around back then. I'm going back to sleep. I'll see you tomorrow for my father's Fourth of July Party. That's if you're actually coming this year."

My heart twists up into a painful ball of nerves at the mention of that day. Tomorrow will mark eight years since Adric passed. Eight long, painful years. I still remember that day like it was yesterday.

My parents and I were heading home from the fireworks and I was furious that Adric and Kellan hadn't shown up to watch them with me. They always watched them with me. Watching them alone, with my parents just didn't feel right and I couldn't wait to get home to yell at him for blowing me off.

We were driving through the neighborhood one block away from home when we noticed flashing lights coming from our street. My mother shook her head and turned back to speak to me. "See what happens when kids aren't safe while using fireworks? I hope that's not at our house. I'm going to have a talk with Adric to be sure he's being safe."

I just laughed at her comment and placed my face against the window. "Yeah, sure, mom. I'm sure Adric knows what he's doing. He's twenty. He's smarter than you think."

My mother rolled her eyes and patted my leg. "Not 'til tomorrow. He's still my baby and they're still dangerous. You know how boys can be."

"Whatever . . ."

My words trailed off as soon as we hit our street. An ambulance along with a couple police cars were parked right in front of our house, with two ambulance drivers carrying a stretcher toward the door.

"What the hell is going on?" My father's voice came out as a whisper and I could tell he was just as worried as I felt.

"Just stop the car, Ethan. Stop right fucking now."

My father slammed on the brakes, causing my mother to fall forward, almost hitting her head on the windshield. “Calm down, Elaine. I’m sure there’s been some kind of misunderstanding . . .”

Before my father could finish, I was out the door, running down the sidewalk to my house. Something was wrong. Something terrible was wrong and I could feel it. The boys would never stand me up, especially on my favorite day of the year.

“Phoenix!” My mother screamed from behind me, but I ignored her and kept on running.

I ignored everyone, including the police officer that held me back from going inside. I didn’t want to look at him. I didn’t want to hear bad news. I just wanted to see my brother. They wouldn’t just let me go and see my brother.

“You can’t go in there,” a voice said, but I ignored it, shaking and fighting my way out of the man’s grasp until I broke free. “Get back here, child.”

I took off running through the hallway, pushing a few people out of the way before making my way to the steps, leading up to Adric’s room, the attic.

Someone grabbed my arm to try to stop me again, but I punched the hand repeatedly until it let go, allowing me to make my way up the second set of stairs that led to the attic. The problem was, I wasn’t ready for the sight in front of me. I wasn’t ready to see Adric that way.

The once, tan, handsome, funny brother I always knew was now, pale and lifeless with purple lips. He lay on the floor next to his favorite drawing chair, his dark hair covering most of his face and his arms tucked beside his body in a comfortable position. It looked as if someone had took care of him since he’d fallen there, and someone definitely touched his room. The whole room was trashed, everything broken and thrown everywhere. He was wearing his favorite Puma sweatshirt and his face was lying against the hood, comfortably inside. All I could think about was reaching for him and shaking him to wake him up, but I couldn’t.

My legs instantly gave out on me as I started screaming. I don’t even remember what I was saying. I just know that I was screaming so loud, as soon as my parents reached the attic, they already knew he was dead.

Shaking myself back to reality, I swallow hard and twist the bottom of my shirt between my fingers. “You know that I won’t be there tomorrow,” I

say as Kade turns around to leave. He should know this by now. I haven't gone to see the fireworks since that night, eight years ago. There's no point. That night has a different meaning to me now. One that hurts way too much. "Have fun with your family, though and give my apologies to Dale and Nancy."

Kade grunts while turning back around to face me. "Just come for once, please. You're one of the only few that never show up. It breaks my mother's heart not to see you there. Can't you just show up? Just for a few minutes at least and say hi." He sounds defeated as his eyes plead with me to give up and agree. "Please. Just do this to make my mother feel better. Now that Kellan's back, she's been a little on edge with worry. It would make her happy."

As much as it hurts to celebrate tomorrow, he's right. It wouldn't hurt for me to at least show up for a few minutes and say hi to everyone. It doesn't mean I have to stay the whole night and watch the fireworks or anything. I'll do it for Nancy because I know she's had it tough.

"Fine, I'll stop by for Nancy, but I'm not staying for the fireworks. I can't, Kade."

"That's all I ask. I'm sorry for getting upset with you, Phoenix." He clenches his jaw and scratches his nose. "I guess it's been hard on all of us, having Kellan reappear. I'll let my mother know to expect you tomorrow. She'll be thrilled. Trust me, she loves you."

He gets ready to turn away, the hurt look on his face makes me feel guilty and for some reason I feel the need to explain Kellan to him. "There's nothing going on with me and Kellan if you must know. It's just nice to see him again. He was a big part of my life. Of Adric's life. We've only hung out a couple of times. It's just nice to see him again. He was a big part of mine and Adric's life. He was important to Adric, which makes him important to me."

Kade forces a smile I know he doesn't feel. "It's cool, sexy girl. I'll just see you tomorrow around two."

I catch myself laughing as he turns away. I always hate when he calls me that and he knows it. "See ya, dick lick."

He turns around and walks backwards while biting his bottom lip. "Stop thinking about my dick. You'll never get it," he teases. "As much as I know that you want it . . . in your mouth."

"I'll try my hardest. It's going to be really tough though," I say sarcastically as he walks away, leaving me alone.

So much for relieving stress here.

I get home to find the house quiet and dark. Looks like the girls are still sleeping. It seems like they had quite a rough night, so I don't expect to hear from them for hours. Maybe I can get some cleaning done without waking them.

By the time two rolls around Zoe finally sits up from the couch, stretching as she watches me dust the TV. "Hey," she mumbles.

"Hey," I mumble back before throwing the duster at her. "Did you get enough sleep?"

She exhales before throwing her feet onto the coffee table. "Not really. It took me forever to fall asleep and when I did, I was somewhere between being awake and asleep. I hate when that happens."

I walk over and plop down next to her on the brown suede couch, throwing my feet next to hers on the coffee table. "I can imagine. What happened with mom and dad? I mean, I know they separated, but how did it go down?"

We both sit there in silence before finally she speaks again. "I don't really want to think about it. I just remember them yelling at like one in the morning, screaming back and forth about how their relationship hasn't been good in years. I tried staying in my room until I heard dad say he was seeing someone else and he needed mom to leave, that he couldn't sneak around anymore and sleep next to her every night." She pauses for a second, squeezing her eyes closed, no doubt, trying to hide her tears. "I came running out of my room and just started throwing stuff at him, until finally he told me I was free to join my mom on the streets. He's a jerk and I just couldn't take it any longer. I would've went anyways. There's no way that I would stick around with him and this new woman. Screw that!"

Even though I know she hates when I comfort her, I throw my arm around her anyway and pull her against my chest. "I kind of had a feeling something was going on. You know you and mom are welcome to stay here as long as you want, right? I would never let you stay on the streets, no matter how angry you make me sometimes." I smile as she pushes her way out of my arms.

"Yeah, yeah, thanks. Now, enough with the mushy crap." A small smile forms on her lips as she jumps to her feet. "I'm leaving for a bit. Dana is on

her way to pick me up.”

I stand up and follow her to the kitchen as she walks over to search through her cute boy bag full of clothes. “Okay, and where are you guys going?”

She tilts her head to the side and looks me in the eye with a smirk. “Okay, mother dearest. Don’t start acting like that now. I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself. I’ve been doing it longer than you think.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I examine her as she picks out a pair of cut off shorts and a white shirt that’s been ripped off at the belly. “Is someone dressing to impress,” I ask teasingly. “More is less you know. You are only fourteen,” I say glancing at her choice of attire.

Her head snaps over in my direction and her face instantly turns a deep shade of red. “No! I’m just hanging out with Dana and Micah. Micah is a player and trust me, I don’t like him.”

Throwing my hands up, I tilt my head and smile. This girl isn’t fooling me. I remember those days when I used to try to impress Kellan. “Alright, girlie. Just try to be back before nine. I don’t want mom worrying. I’m just going to be here relaxing and trying to get my shit together before tomorrow. I can’t believe I agreed to go.” I lean over the counter and slide both of my hands through my hair. “I can’t change my mind now.”

Dropping her clothes on the floor and jumping up on the counter, Zoe lifts both eyebrows giving me her full attention. “Whoa, where is this place that you agreed on going to? You’re not going to the Haze’s Ranch are you?”

Feeling stupid for agreeing myself, I stand straight up and exhale. “Yeah, I am. I’m doing it for Nancy, okay. Kellan’s back and she’s having a rough time. I guess she wants it to feel like old times, I don’t know. I kind of feel like I-“

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” She jumps off the counter landing in front of me with a look of shock on her face. *Shit.* I guess I kind of forgot to mention the little detail about Kellan showing back up out of nowhere. *Oops.* “Back that up a bit. Kellan Haze? As in Kade’s brother?” Her voice heightens with a squeak. “I thought he was dead.”

“No one ever said he was dead, okay. It was just a rumor.” Feeling angry, I have to take a second to collect myself before speaking again. “Kellan would have never taken his own life. People didn’t know him like I did. I don’t know where he’s been and trust me, I want so badly to ask. He’s

back and maybe that should be good enough . . . for now.” I take a deep breath and turn to face the other way so Zoe can’t see just how shook up I am. The last thing I want to talk about at the moment is him. I exhale for relief and take a second to regroup before facing her again. “Just go and have fun. I’m going to pick out some movies and have a lazy day by myself. Now, go have fun and get out of my hair.” I smile at her playfully at an attempt to lighten the mood.

She rolls her eyes and reaches for her clothes. “Fine. I’ll see you later.”

“Yup! See ya.”

Man, I’m screwed.

Chapter Eleven

Phoenix

With less than an hour left before the party begins, my mind feels as if it’s on speed. A whirlwind of thoughts are blowing through my mind, threatening to break down my sanity and I’m finding it hard to get a grip on reality.

After spending most of the morning and afternoon, might I add, checking my phone in hopes to hear from Kellan, I finally shoved my phone into my purse and hid it inside the oven to keep myself from checking it. *Out of sight, out of mind right?* Oddly, the oven seemed to be the only rational hiding spot at the time. As I said before, I just can’t seem to think straight when it comes to the sexy bad boy covered in tattoos. He always had a way of leaving me feeling twitterpated. He does something to me I’ve never been able to explain.

“Nope, this won’t do either.” I throw the little red and white strapless dress down on the floor of my closet, as I shuffle through the endless selection of my wardrobe, topping off the huge pile I’ve already formed. For my closest being lined from wall to wall with clothes, I feel like I have nothing to wear. Not only have I gone through my whole closet trying to figure out what to wear today, I’ve also gone through my mother’s clothes as well. I have no idea why I suddenly care so much about my clothing choice. It’s not as if I expect Kellan to actually show up or anything. That would be asking for some kind of miracle. Truthfully, I shouldn’t even be showing up today. If I can’t find the courage to visit my brother’s grave, a party just seems wrong.

Cursing under my breath, I kick the pile of clothes and shove them to the back of my walk in closet. My foot gets caught on the strap of a dress, almost causing me to trip. I catch myself against the wall before shaking my foot attempting to free it from the dress. I stumble out of the closet, slamming my closet door closed. I turn in the direction of my dresser, yanking open my drawers and pulling everything out piece by piece, throwing it on the floor around me. “I can’t believe I’m actually going through with this.” Tossing the contents of the drawers around me in madness, I finally cave in, burying my face into the palm of my hands. It’s just not right to celebrate today. I can’t do this. *Why did I ever let Kade persuade me into going?* Part of me knows the real reason. As selfish as it sounds, a part of me hopes Kellan will somehow show up. I don’t care if it’s only for a minute. I just want to see him again as a reminder that him being back is real or maybe just to show me that he hasn’t left again. I’m not quite sure, but my heart wants what it wants.

Pulling myself together, I look in my dresser, realizing it’s now empty. I look around the room. It looks like a tornado came through. Shuffling through the items on the floor, I decide on a thin teal shirt that hangs slightly off my right shoulder and a white skirt that settles right below my ass. As hot as it is, everyone should be lucky I’m wearing any clothes at all. That’s my opinion at least. I top off the outfit with my favorite Tony Lama boots before pinning my hair into a loose bun right behind my ear and crawling into my bed. All I want to do is bury myself in the mess of blankets and cozy up in my satin sheets.

The peacefulness doesn’t last long though, before my mom is poking her head into my bedroom door. Her face looks paler than the usual and her eyes appear to be red and puffy. My guess is when she left this morning, she went to go see my father. I don’t see why she won’t just give herself time. Why hurt herself even more knowing the wounds are so fresh?

She smiles weakly before opening the door and stepping inside. She looks around as if she doesn’t know what to say or why she’s even in here to begin with. I suppose she could even be checking out my mess. *Who knows?* “Hey,” she says, finally finding her words. “Is something wrong?”

I sit up and swing my legs over the edge of the bed, motioning for her to take a seat. As crappy as I feel, at the moment, her problems are far greater than mine and I want to be stronger for her than she was for me. “Hey,” I reply with a nod. “Everything’s fine. I just had a little fight with my

wardrobe.” I force a smile in an attempt to lighten the mood, but it does nothing to break through her pain. She takes a seat next to me, but sits stiffly while looking up toward the ceiling. “So . . . is Zoe over her little tantrum now? It will probably take her a few days to get over it, but you know she doesn’t really blame you for his mistakes, right? She’s just young and doesn’t think before she speaks.”

My mom nods her head and takes a deep breath before bringing her eyes down to meet mine. “I know. All kids go through this stage.”

Shifting to get comfortable, I raise my eyebrow in curiosity. “What stage?”

She smiles sadly and places her hand on her chin, before cupping it over her mouth. “Hating me. Adric’s was when he was nine. I told him he was too young to shave and that he didn’t have any hair to shave yet. He didn’t talk to me for two whole months because he said I didn’t understand his needs as a boy.” She laughs weakly at the memory. “Don’t ask. He was quite advanced for a nine year old. Yours was when you were fifteen. I was too worried about working things out to keep your father around instead of comforting you and Zoe. You wouldn’t even look at me for weeks and—“

“I didn’t hate you,” I breathe, cutting her off. I didn’t hate her. I hated myself and blamed myself for going to the fireworks with my parents instead of staying behind and waiting on him. “I was going through a hard time and I just wanted to be left alone. Even if you had tried, I probably would’ve pushed you away anyways. With Adric and Kellan both being gone . . .” I stand up and start pacing around the room. I hate this subject and try to avoid it at all cost. “I didn’t want anyone else, okay.”

It’s silent for a moment before either of us attempt to speak again and when my mother finally says, “That broke my world apart. It killed me, but I never showed it.” It breaks my world apart and all I want to do is get out of here. To run off like I did as a teenager, but I don’t because, I’m not a teenager anymore and someday I need to stop running.

I turn away from her and wipe a hand over my forehead, wiping away the sweat that is starting to form. I never know the right thing to say. All I can do is apologize for hurting her, but I can’t take back the truth I felt in my heart. “I’m sorry. I was young and those boys were always there for me. I was attached to their hips and everyone in town knew it, even them and they didn’t care because that was where they wanted me and now Kellan is

back,” I squeak before covering my mouth and turning to face the wall. “Just never mind. You get it.”

My mom walks over, grips my shoulder and spins me around to face her. “What did you just say?” Her eyes widen as she waits for a response. She’s always felt that Kellan knows something about Adric that we don’t. That maybe he was somehow involved in Adric’s death. That to me, is just ridiculous. “He’s back? Have you talked to him? Does he know anything? Not that he would say if he did. We all know that he was a lying, deceiving-“

“Don’t you speak of him that way.” I yank my shoulder away from her and look her in the eye, breathing heavily. Maybe my instinct to protect him is just as strong as his is to protect me. I don’t know, but suddenly, I feel as if I could tear these walls down and set fire to the world. Her words sting like hell and shatter my heart. She didn’t know him. She doesn’t know him. “You don’t know shit about him. All you know are the lies. The ones he made up to protect Adric.” I take a step closer, looking directly at her to be sure she understands my words. “You didn’t know that, did you? About ninety percent of the time that Kellan was in trouble for something, it was because he stood up for Adric and took the blame. He was a good friend and a hell of a good person.”

She looks at me as if I’m some kind of alien and I speak a different language. “What makes you so sure of that?” Her bottom lip shakes in anger, not wanting to believe me. She would never believe that Adric could do any wrong. To her, he was an angel and I hate to be doing this right now. I’m not even sure why I am.

“I was there. In case you forgot, I was always there. Now please excuse me while I get ready for this party.” I point at my bedroom door and exhale, feeling like total crap for snapping out on her. “Please, just go. I need to calm down and get ready and I can’t with you insulting someone so important to me. It’s not right and I won’t stand for it. Please just go.”

“You want me to leave?” She questions me, looking a bit shook up. Her eyes soften and suddenly I feel like total crap for saying anything at all.

I nod and fidget with my skirt. “Just my room. You’re welcome here as long as you want and you know that. That’s what family is for. I just need to be alone right now.”

“Okay, I can respect that.” She turns to leave, but then stops. “By the way. I heard your phone ringing from inside the oven. I’m not too sure, but

you might want it back before Zoe gets home and starts baking the casserole.”

I laugh, feeling ridiculous for putting it there in the first place. “Thanks. I kind of needed to get away from that for a while as well. It’s been a tough week.” I smile weakly as she nods her head and sucks in her bottom lip, trying not to smile.

“Understandable. I’m going to grab a few things from the house and I’ll be back later.”

“Okay.” I walk over and place my hand on the door. “Just do yourself a favor and don’t go by dad’s when he is home. Not now at least.”

She exhales and steps out into the hall. “It was that obvious, I guess. Thanks for the advice, but I can’t make any promises.”

I know exactly what she means. Sometimes the heart can make a person do stupid things. “Just be careful mom, I’ll see you later.”

She smiles and walks away without another word. As soon as she’s out of sight, I close my door and get ready to lay down, before remembering my phone is still in the oven. “Shit.” I hurry down the hall, through the house to see no one is home, that I can see at least. I grab my purse out of the oven, make my way back to my room, and throw myself face first onto my bed.

Reaching into my purse, I pull out my phone, roll over on my back and check my missed calls. My heart races with anticipation, but quickly slows down when I see I have a missed call from both Kade and Jen, but no Kellan.

The only thing that seems better than burying myself into the comfort of these blankets right now, would be to bury myself into the warmth of Kellan’s strong arms. The scent of his cologne still burns in the back of my mind. I can imagine the taste of him on the tip of my tongue. A pleasantly sweet taste. Just the thought of his naked body, perfectly defined muscles flexing above me, as he buries himself inside me, causes my whole body to shake with pleasure. I close my eyes and picture his tongue running down the seam of my body. I can feel the tingle through my body, imagining his lip ring brushing against my skin. Whenever I see him, my body craves to be near him like metal to a magnet. I want to touch him, to have him and to make him mine.

Before I can stop myself, my mind fills with endless thoughts of Kellan thrusting inside of me. I feel a wetness pool in my underwear. My hand

slowly creeps its way down my stomach, to my legs, and finally up skirt as my legs spread apart. Just the thought of Kellan alone has my sex slick and ready. It surprises me to realize just how turned on I am. With just the simple brush of my finger over my clit, my muscles clench and I'm on the verge of an orgasm without even skin to skin contact. "Mmm, Kellan," I moan quietly.

Running my fingers under the band of my panties, I slide them over my bottom and down my legs, removing them and tossing onto the floor. I run my finger over the wetness, imagining Kellan being the one to touch me. This turns me on even more and I bite my lip so hard it almost bleeds. "Why do you do this to me? Ah!" I pull my hand away and place both hands over my face, breathing heavily. Touching myself has never made me feel this way before and the thought scares me. If he can do this to me when he's not even around, just imagine if he was here.

Shit! Now I really need to finish this off or I'll be miserable the rest of the day. Reaching into the bedside table, I pull out my battery-operated boyfriend I obtained at sex toy bingo and with shaking hands, press the power button. The vibrator has ten different settings and I know that as turned on as I am, I only need the lowest setting, but if it were Kellan then I could only imagine it being rough, so I turn on the highest speed. I've only had sex with one guy before and to be honest, he was too gentle and caring and I could use a little roughness. I close my eyes and place the vibrator between my legs as thoughts of Kellan, gripping my waist and pounding into me invades my thoughts. Within seconds, my muscles are clenching and tightening around the vibrator with the most intense orgasm I have ever had.

I throw the vibrator down next to me and close my legs while running my hands over my face and smiling. "Oh shit! That's what I've been missing out on." Either this vibrator works miracles or Kellan has some kind of special power over my body that works wonders. Whatever it is felt amazing.

I jump, feeling nervous as my phone goes off next to me. "Crap!" I reach for the phone and suddenly feel dirty when I see the name that pops up. Perfect timing to make me feel like shit.

Kade: Don't ditch me. The party starts in twenty minutes and I'll be looking for you.

Phoenix: Trust me, I'll be there. I keep my word.

* * *

I arrive at the Ranch a little later than expected and as I park my car in the clutter of vehicles, I can see most of the party guests have already arrived. I can imagine that Kade is becoming a little nervous by this point and when he sent me about five text messages to be sure I was still coming, I did nothing to ease his mind. I couldn't. The truth was, I turned around at least three different times in an attempt to change my mind, but the guilt finally won over and I knew I didn't have a choice.

Nervously, I pull the keys from the ignition and run my sweaty palms over the cloth of the seat to wipe them off. Sitting here, in this driveway on this particular day, I can't help but to look around for Kellan. As selfish as it seems, I kind of feel as if him being here would somehow make it more bearable.

I step out of my car and take a deep breath, breathing in the fresh air. Although it is hot as hell outside, breathing in the fresh Ranch air helps to calm me down a bit. This place has always helped soothe me in the past. Maybe a part of it had to do with the fact I knew this was where Kellan grew up and although he wasn't always here when I was, I knew he would be coming back. It gave me a feeling of peace, until he ruined that.

Without realizing it, I'm searching through the mess of vehicles in search of Kellan's truck or motorcycle. Either one will do. I just want him here. A sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach takes over, making me feel nauseous when I realize I'm being a silly little girl again with dreams that will never come true. He's not showing up today. Why would he? He's probably already long gone now that we've found his little shop. He obviously left for a reason, so why would he stick around, knowing we could show up to see him anytime we want? The thought causes my heart to ache.

"Did you get lost?" Kade's voice comes from over my right shoulder, making me jump. These brothers are so damn good at making me nervous. "Kellan's not here, if that's who you're looking for. I doubt that son of a bitch will have enough balls to show up."

I swallow hard and close my eyes as he snakes his arm around my waist, pulling my body against his. I can already feel my heart quicken, just by being so close to him. I'm definitely a horrible person for having feelings for the both of them. *What the hell is wrong with me?* "I wasn't looking for Kellan," I lie, trying to sound convincing. "I was looking for

Jen. I told her I'd just meet her here instead of her picking me up. Is she here yet?"

He walks around so he's standing in front of me and his eyes trail down my body, checking me out. When his eyes land back on my face, he snickers with amusement. "Ah, I see. Jen's Jeep is right next to your car." He points behind me, making me feel like a fool. "You must have missed it when you squeezed in between that and Saline's BMW." He gives me a suspicious look before placing his hand on my cheek and sucking in his bottom lip. "You look really fucking hot today, so I'll let it slide . . . this time. You know I won't be able to resist you in front of everyone, right?"

The look in his baby blues is almost enough to make me want to give into him. They are so full of want and passion for me, that I can feel my body just gravitating towards his, until finally, my body is completely pressed against his, the stiffness in his jeans pressing into my stomach. *Why does he always have to have a boner?* It makes him even harder to resist. "Um . . . we should probably get inside before others come out looking for us." I smile innocently, but he must take this as an invitation. "I'm sure your mom is looking for you."

He snorts and runs his hands under my shirt. "You smell so damn good. I don't remember you wearing perfume. Is it new, because now I have to taste it." He leans in, running his nose along my neck, before pressing his lips under my ear. "I wish I could taste you somewhere else."

"Okay, that's just gross," Jen interrupts. I've been inside looking for you and y'all have been out here getting it on in the open. That's so dirty. Y'all could at least wait until the guest leave."

I place my hand against Kade's chest and give him a little shove in an attempt to break free, but it doesn't work. He just tightens his hold. "We weren't getting it on, Jen." I struggle before pulling away from Kade. He rakes his fingers through his curls before leaning against some random truck, crossing his arms over his chest. He's watching me as I walk over to Jen and grab her arm. He looks a bit disappointed, but is trying to hide it behind a smirk. "Let's get this over with. See you inside," I call back to Kade.

"Sure thing," she mouths as we walk away, leaving Kade leaning against the truck, watching us.

"For your information, we were close to getting it on, Jen. You ruined it, so thanks," he calls after us.

“My pleasure,” Jen yells back before laughing and gripping my arm with her mommy grip. “I’m on to you, missy.”

As we walk up the wooden steps of the porch, I get a bad feeling about what exactly she’s on to me about. Most of the party takes place out back, where the stage and band is set up as well as the food. The quickest way around is through the house. From what I remember, everyone dances and eats at the picnic tables set up, before the night show of fireworks. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

She stands there watching me as I reach for the old brass knob. Just as I’m about to push in the lever, she stops me. “You need to be a little more careful. You’ve been acting strange lately and don’t think I don’t notice the fact that you’re pining over Kellan again. I can see that distant look in your eyes whenever I talk to you. It’s dangerous for you to fall for both brothers. Are you crazy?”

Is this girl freaking psychic, or what? We haven’t even spoken of Kellan since that day at the company picnic. I made it a point not to, because I wanted to avoid these kinds of situations and assumptions.

“I’m not. What the hell Jen.” I glance behind me, being sure Kade is out of earshot before speaking. “I’m not falling for the Haze brother’s, okay. I barely even speak to Kellan, and Kade and I are just having a little fun. I don’t have feelings for either, so drop it,” I warn.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk.” She waves a finger in my face and smiles as if she knows I’m lying. Of course she would. We’ve been friends for as long as I can remember. “My best friend is trying to fool me, but I’m a little smarter than that. I mean, I can see why you would fall for Kade, because he’s always around, but Kellan has been gone for years and can disappear again in a moment’s notice. Just be careful.”

Sometimes, I wish this girl didn’t know me so well. She’s had me figured out since the second grade. “Yes, mother. I will try to be more careful, even though, there is nothing to be careful about. You happy?”

She shrugs her shoulders and pushes open the door. “For now. We’ll just see for how long.”

“You drive me nuts, woman,” I mutter. “That’s why it’s so much more peaceful at home, in my bed.” At least it used to be, before my mom and Zoe moved in. Looks like I need to find a new place to be alone at. “I almost stayed home today.”

Once we get inside, Jen starts tugging on the sleeve of her red shirt and I can't help but to notice. "I would've picked your butt up if you even tried staying home," she says, but I'm not listening. I'm too preoccupied.

I silently stare at her arm while she's not looking, trying to figure out if my eyes are deceiving me. There appears to be finger shaped bruises on her arm and I have a feeling they are from Nate.

With ninja speed, I reach over and yank her shirt sleeve up, wanting to kick the shit out of Nate. Only a coward put's his hand on a woman. She doesn't even have to tell me, I already know it has to be from him. "What the hell is this shit, Jen?" I pull her out of everyone's view and into the hallway. "How did you get those bruises?"

Jen laughs nervously as she pulls her sleeve back down to cover the bruises on her bicep. "It's nothing, okay. I almost fell down the stairs and Nate had to grab my arm to catch me." She narrows her eyes and flares her nostrils at me. "You're not suggesting my boyfriend abuses me, are you? That's just crazy. I'm smart enough to leave an abusive relationship. He may be a liar and possibly a cheater, I don't know, but he's not abusive."

"So let me get this straight. You fell more than once then? You know, because there is more than one bruise imprint. It looks as if he had to catch you multiple times." I look her in the eye to let her know she can trust me. I would never do anything to hurt her. "You can tell me the truth. I am always here for you. Always."

"Yeah, I know," she whispers. "Just trust me. I'm not stupid."

"Hey, girls. Hurry up. I've been waiting on you two."

We both look over to see Luna step into the hallway with a smile. She's decked out in an American flag mini dress, with blue stilettos. It looks as if she literally just wrapped a flag around her. Somehow, she even makes that look hot. *Damn her! That lucky bitch.*

"This moron with chewing tobacco shoved in his mouth, looking like a damn chipmunk won't stop asking me on a date," she complains. "I need your assistance."

Jen must find this as her time to make an escape because she takes off, speed walking over to where Luna is. "That would be Travis. I would be glad to assist you." She looks back at me and exhales. "I'll be in here with Luna. She needs me. We all know how persistent Travis is. I might just have to knee him in the balls again. How can I resist that?"

Luna may be new to town, but she is pretty damn good at making friends and drawing people in. That girl has mad skills. Not that she needs them to draw Travis' attention.

"We'll continue our talk later," I warn Jen. "It's not over yet."

"Sure sweetie," she mutters. "We do have a lot to discuss." She smirks as I join them. "Let's just have fun for now. I'm starving."

By things to discuss, I know she means the boys and me so I just let it go for now. We'll have our time later and I will get it out of her.

I spend the first hour, making small chat with friends and family, everyone seeming to be in complete shock that I decided to make an appearance at the party. I don't blame them. I'm surprised myself, so I can only imagine how they feel.

I make it a point to speak to Nancy, to show her I kept my word and showed up. When I find her alone, I approach her. "Hi, Nancy. Thanks for having me. Everything is great. I love the band." It's a band of some kids around town just out of high school. They've played at the bar a few times.

"It's so nice of you to show up." She wraps her arms around me, squeezing me in a hug. "Just remember that you're still welcome here as often as you like. Some things have changed." She looks sad now as she squeezes my shoulder and gives me a sympathetic smile. "Not all of them. You're still like family to us."

I nod and look into her blue eyes. They're just like Kade's and I remember them so well. This woman had always been like a second mom to me growing up, but over the last eight years, I have only seen her at gatherings and occasionally at the bar. Looking into them now, makes me feel horrible for shutting her out. It wasn't intentional. "Thank you, Mrs. Haze. I'm glad to be here."

From the smile that spreads across her face, I can tell I really did make her day just by showing up. Somehow, that makes me smile a real smile for the first time today. "You can still call me Nancy." She laughs. "Mrs. makes me feel old. I have a lot of guest to tend to, but just know that I'm happy you can be a part of our party this year. I've missed you dear. Now go and have a good time."

Watching her walk away, I get the feeling I've made myself present for as long as I needed to and maybe now is a safe time to escape. I don't think I can bring myself to see the fireworks. Jen has been busy keeping up with the kids and Kade seems to be keeping occupied with a group of older

women that can't seem to keep their hands to themselves. I'm kind of thankful for them keeping him busy. I really don't know how to act around him right now.

I walk back inside, away from the party guests, into the huge hallway and press my back against the burgundy painted walls in relief. The loud chattering that once filled my ears dies down and my heart has finally slowed down enough for me to calm down. For a moment, I almost thought I was going to break down into some kind of anxiety attack in the presence of so many people, while waiting for the moment to speak with Nancy. Luckily, it came just in time.

Taking a deep breath, I push myself away from the wall and get ready to make my move towards the door, when out of nowhere, it swings open to none other than Kellan Haze.

He steps through the door, his eyes instantly landing on mine. They show no emotion as he closes the door behind him and shakes his hair out of his face. He looks a little stunned, but hides his emotions well.

My heart races against my chest as my eyes move from head to toe, taking in the perfection of all that is Kellan. He's dressed in a black tank, revealing his sleeve tattoos, with a pair of dark denims that hang to his slender waistline, topped off with a studded belt. He's even wearing his Converse shoes tonight and matched with his tattoos, that makes him even sexier. I should turn away, but I can't. I'm drawn to him like a moth to a flame.

His full lips slightly part and his chest moves up and down as his eyes take in my body, demanding every bit of my attention as he makes his way towards the staircase, that leads up to his father's office. His stare has me in some kind of daze, as if his eyes are telling me something he isn't.

I stand there, breathing heavily, watching him as he makes his way up the stairs, his eyes still glued to mine. I'm not sure why, but my body finally moves, making its way to the stairs as he rounds the corner, leaving my body wanting more of him.

My fingers brush the polished wood of the railing, as I slowly make my way up to the top. The door to his father's office is open and when I take the step that has me standing in the opening, I see Kellan standing with his back facing me. I can see the muscles in his back tense as he leans over the desk and grips the edge in his hands.

“Kellan.” I take a step inside and watch him, waiting for his next move. My heart is going crazy and my breathing is becoming uncontrollable. I have no idea why I followed him up here or if he even wanted me to. *Maybe he wants to be alone.*

He stands up straight and turns around to face me. “I’m surprised you’re here,” he says, breaking the silence. “I have spent the last two hours trying to decide if I should come here. I don’t want to be here, you know. I don’t want to celebrate this day, but . . .” he breathes heavily as he turns to face the window. Then as quickly as he turned away, he turns to face me again, making my heart stop. “I was hoping to get to see you.”

His words shock me and as he pulls his eyes down to meet mine, there’s a look in his eyes I’ve never seen before. It makes me wish I had a lifetime to stand here and figure it out, without him running away. “Don’t you think it’s time we both make a new memory for this day? Sometimes, if a good memory is almost as powerful as the bad, then it can ease the pain of the bad. That’s what I want to do with you. For you.”

“I don’t know . . .” My words trail off as he takes a step toward me, his nostrils flared and his jaw clenched as he pulls me into the office, shutting the door. He turns me, facing the closed door and walks again until my back is pressed against the desk. “I can’t think of anything good enough to make this day any better,” I whisper, unable to breathe. Him being this close is almost too much to handle.

A look of hurt flashes in his eyes before he grabs my waist with force and pulls me to him so we’re only a breath apart from kissing. “I almost hate myself for what I’m about to do to you.”

I swallow hard as my eyes connect with his. They are so full of a passion I’ve never seen before and he’s breathing so hard, I’m afraid he’ll have some kind of asthma attack like when we were kids. “What,” I swallow hard losing myself. “What are you about to do to me?”

He runs his hand up my side from being cupped around my waist, stopping right beneath my breast, then over my heart, and the pain in his eyes deepens. His breath comes out in heavy bursts and I can feel his heart beating fast against my chest. “Make you fall in love with me.”

I gasp as he presses his lips against mine; his lips searching mine as if he’s been holding back for years. His lips are soft and smooth and the feel of his lip ring is foreign against my skin, making my body feel as if it’s on fire. He runs his tongue over my lips before sucking in the bottom one,

nibbling and tugging, begging for entrance I instantly grant. In this moment, I feel as if I could die in his arms, as his tongue smoothly rolls around with mine, both of us breathing each other in.

His hands cup just under my ass, picking me up, setting me on the edge of the desk. This causes both of us to gasp and before I know it, one hand slowly trails its way up my thigh, underneath my skirt, until my panties are twisted around his strong fingers. “I love the way you taste and I want to pleasure you in ways you have never known,” he breathes into my ear, making me wet. “Running my tongue along every inch of your body has been flooding my thoughts for days and I promise you I would do things you never even imagined.”

He leans back in claiming my lips again and as he presses his body between mine, spreading my legs wider, I can feel the stiffness of his penis digging into my body. It causes my body to tremble under his touch as he runs his fingers up the inside of my thigh, inching its way closer to my pussy. All I have to do to feel his fingers inside me, is move just a little to the left and the anticipation is killing me. I want him inside me. My body is screaming for his touch.

Pulling away from the kiss, he bites his bottom lip while thrusting his hip further between my legs so his stiffness is rubbing my swollen clit, making me moan. “If only I could do these things without a guilty conscience but I can’t.” He pulls away suddenly looking terrified. “Shit! What the hell am I doing? You’re Adric’s little sister and I’m no good for you. For anyone.”

I sit there fighting to catch my breath as I watch him run his hands over his face before running his fingers through his hair, tugging it.

“That’s all I’ll ever be to you, isn’t it? Adric’s little sister,” I say stiffly. “I’m not a child anymore and I have taken more pain than you know. You think you’ve been hurting over the years, well fuck you Kellan because I’ve been hurting worse.” I stand up from the desk and pull my skirt down. I’m in so much heartache right now, especially after getting to feel those lips on mine, just to take the feeling away and never give it again. It hurts like hell, but I refuse to show it. “Oh and don’t ever kiss me again. I don’t think your brother would like his lips to be where yours has been.”

The look on his face is as if I’ve just slapped him. Kade had given me the same look when I called him by his brother’s name. I don’t even know

why I just said what I said. Maybe I want to hurt him just as bad as he has hurt me over the years.

He rubs a hand over his mouth and looks me in the eye. “You’re right. I don’t think he would like that either.” He stares me in the eyes while walking over to stand in front of me. His eyes trail down to my lips as he speaks again. “But I think I fucking hate his lips on yours more.”

Before I can speak, his lips crush mine again as he backs me up against the wall. This time he doesn’t even ask for entrance, he just takes it. He places his hand on my chin and pushes my head back, causing me to gasp as he slips his tongue into my mouth. His tongue hungrily caresses mine and this time, I feel the coolness of the steel in his mouth as he swirls his tongue around mine, before sucking it into his mouth. “Fuck the rules and fuck what Kade wants. Here’s to making this day better. Today, you’re mine.”

I look at his mouth as he runs his tongue over his lip and looks me in the eye. “Kellan, you don’t have to—”

“Come with me,” he breathes. “I have places I want to take you.”

His Adams apple bobs as he looks at me waiting for a response. “What about the party and your family?”

“Screw the party, Phoenix. This day is about you and being sure you never have to suffer on this day again. Give me a chance to change your mind.”

He looks at me pleadingly and I can’t help but to give in. A part of me doesn’t even care where he’s taking me as long as I’m with him. “Okay, take me anywhere you want.”

I hope this is the right decision or I’m in for a world of hurt.

Chapter Twelve

Phoenix

I follow him down the stairs and back into the hallway. Just as we reach the door, Jen comes in view from the kitchen.

She looks at Kellan, who is just about to reach for the door knob, before she turns her attention to me. “Going somewhere?” She looks behind her as if she’s looking to see if she’s alone. Then she turns back around and stares at me, waiting for a response. “Well?”

I look at Kellan and he angles his head towards the door. “I’ll be outside.”

I watch him walk out the door, before I turn to face Jen. “I can’t stay here, Jen. I didn’t even want to be here in the first place. I just have . . . I have to go.”

She laughs as if I just said something silly. “So you just run off with Kellan like when you were a kid? You weren’t even going to say anything were you? How is going off with Kellan any better than being here with your friends?”

She really doesn’t get it. With Kellan, I just feel safe. I’ve always felt that way around him and that hasn’t changed. I feel as if I should be with him right now. He gives me a feeling I haven’t felt in years. He was the closest person that my brother had besides me. If I can’t be around my brother, then Kellan is the next best thing. I want to feel alive like I used to. “It’s hard to explain,” I swallow as I reach for the door. “I’ll call you later. Tell everyone I said bye.”

Before she can respond, I am out the door looking for Kellan. I spot him right away, standing against his truck with the passenger door already open and waiting on me. With me wearing this skirt, a part of me is happy to be seeing the truck instead of his motorcycle.

When he notices me, he tilts his head and holds out his hand. “Come.”

I walk over to him and grab his hand as he helps me up and into the truck, before shutting the door behind me. I start to feel really nervous as I watch him jog in front of the truck and over to his side to get in. I never expected to be back in this truck again and the feeling has me on some kind of high. Maybe it’s just being in Kellan’s presence. I haven’t quite figured it out.

After he’s in the truck, he closes the door behind him and turns the keys, starting up the engine. The keys were in the truck the whole time, meaning he never expected to stay for long. *What was his reasoning for keeping his keys ready?*

I clear my throat, breaking the uncomfortable silence. “So . . . you weren’t planning on staying very long were you? Were you just going to swing by to say hi?”

He answers, keeping his eyes on the road. “I was only coming so I could take something with me. Something important to me. I found it rather quickly. Quicker than I expected.”

My mind races as I realize that something has to be me. He didn’t go anywhere else in the house and he didn’t have much time alone to grab

anything to take with him. *Is he playing games with me?* Yes, he kissed me, but that doesn't mean he wants me or that I'm important to him.

"Why did you kiss me?" My voice comes out slightly shaky as I study his profile. He's so beautiful. His strong jaw line is covered in a short stubble that I just want to be rubbed all over my body. Everything about him is sexy and masculine.

He glances my way, but only for a quick second before he speaks. "I don't know, because I wanted to, I guess."

That's his answer, because he wanted to? That answer isn't exactly what I was looking for. "You just wanted to for no particular—"

"Look Phoenix. I couldn't help myself. You were standing there looking as sexy as homemade sin and the only thing I could picture was tasting every part of your body, including those gorgeous lips of yours. I wanted to, so I did. It was a mistake and I shouldn't have done that to you. It won't happen again, okay?" He's breathing heavily and his hands are gripping the steering wheel a little too tightly. "I'm sorry for kissing you."

"Yeah, well I'm sorry for asking." He thinks it was a mistake to kiss me. *Am I really that bad?* I thought he was supposed to make me feel better about today, not worse. "Maybe you should just take me back to the party so I can get my car and go home."

His hand reaches out and grabs mine, interlocking our fingers. The look in his eyes scream pain, as he attempts to look at me and still pay attention to the road. "I'm not taking you back to the party. I want to spend this day with you. You said you would give me a chance. If I remember correctly, you keep your promises, as do I."

I feel foolish now for even feeling just a little bit of excitement. Of course, he is only doing this because of my brother. I'm sure he feels some kind of guilt that he didn't take care of his best friend's sister after he was gone. I guess this is his way of making up for it. As much as it stings, I guess I should be thankful he's here at all.

"You're right. I do keep my word and I will keep it now," I whisper. "Just don't hurt me. I can't take anymore hurt right now."

His jaw clenches at my words. He releases my hand and places both of his hands back on the steering wheel. "I'm trying my best," he says stiffly.

Ten minutes later, we pull up at the cemetery. I instantly get a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach and every part of me wants to run. Sure, I have come here, but no one else knows. It's my secret. I've sat at his grave,

plenty of times actually. Just never with someone else. I enjoy this moment alone, my serenity. It's my time to pretend it's just the two of us again like old times. Sometimes I sit and talk to Adric for hours on end, telling him everything or nothing at all. It's my only way to cope with him not being here. My mother has tried getting me to come here with her and Zoe, but I always refuse. They don't understand the connection that me and Adric had. No one but Kellan understands that.

I choke back a sob as my emotions start to take over, overwhelming me. I rarely let anyone see me cry. *I won't let it happen. I won't let it happen.* I repeat in my head in hopes that my body will listen. Usually, my body is pretty good at listening to my mind, but around Kellan, I lose all control.

“Are you ready?” He waits for me to nod before opening the door and getting out of the truck.

I get out as well, closing my eyes, in an attempt to prepare myself. The grass is a bright green and it smells freshly cut. It makes me yearn to take these boots off and let it squish between my toes. I used to love rolling around in the grass as a kid. I remember watching Adric and Kellan play toss with a football and I would sit out on the sidelines, lying flat on my belly, while reading a book or just laughing at them being two goofy boys. Occasionally, they would pull me in to play catch and laugh at me whenever I ran after the ball. I ran like the wind, but always missed. Sometimes I even tried to run so fast to show off, that my legs would buckle and then I would look like a total idiot, face planting into the grass. Those were the good old times. For them at least.

I look out into the clear blue sky that stretches on for miles. It is a beautiful day to come visit my brother and I wish I would have come on the fourth every year. I just couldn't seem to find it in me. This day was always too dark for me.

The grass is perfectly trimmed as if someone just cut it within the last two days or so. That makes me smile. Last time I came here, the grass looked a little unkempt as if someone either rushed through the maintenance or skipped it all together. It made me sad and angry. My brother's home should be just as beautiful as he was.

Without responding to Kellan's earlier question, I slowly walk down the pathway towards the middle of Adric's row. I have been coming here for so long, that finding him is no longer a mission. I could walk it in my sleep. I

can hear Kellan's footsteps traipsing through the grass behind me and oddly, it gives me a feeling of peace.

I approach the white marble headstone and a single tear rolls down my cheek as I look at the deep carvings. On the top is a music note because music was his passion. He would play me the guitar whenever I was sad. It always helped to bring a smile to my face. *Oh how much I miss that about him.*

The headstone reads:

Forever Young

Adric Tyler Winters

Loving son and brother

Forever in our hearts

We will always hear you sing

July 5th 1985 – July 4th 2005

I drop down to my knees and reach out, running my fingers over the carving. My heart feels so heavy just thinking about him being here, six feet under instead of up here with us. I want to break down and cry so bad, but I'm trying with everything in me to hold it together.

I feel the warmth of Kellan's hand on my shoulder before I feel him kneel down beside me. He pulls a guitar pick from his pocket and lays it on the grave stone. "Hey buddy. I know it's been a long time since I've been to see you and for that I'm sorry. I just want you to know, not a damn day goes by that I don't think of you. You may not be here, but you're never forgotten." He clears his throat as if he's trying to hold back his own tears.

After a moment, he turns to me. "Remember that time when me and Adric went to that boys house," he stops to think. "What was his name?"

"Travis," I say with a small laugh.

"That's right, Travis. We went to his house and threatened to throw him in the pool for being mean to you because we knew he was so afraid of water. We were holding him above the water and he was squeaking like a little mouse, crying for us to put him down. He told you that he was sorry and that you were the most beautiful girl in the world. Adric finally agreed to let him down. We were never going to throw him in the water anyways. We were only trying to scare him and we did a hell of a good job." He stops to laugh and I find myself laughing with him at the memory, when he continues. "Come to find out, Adric was just as scared of the deep end as Travis and when he fell in, I had to jump in and save him."

“Oh my goodness.” I cover my mouth and try so hard not to burst out in laughter. “Poor Adric. I had never seen him so scared in my life. Then he got so embarrassed that you had to save him that he ended up ignoring us for days.”

“Exactly! I remember that day like it was yesterday.” He places his elbow on his knees and turns to face me with a smile. “There was also this one time that I never told you about.” He stops and laughs aloud. “It was the funniest thing I’d ever seen.”

I elbow him in the side, urging him to go on. “Well tell me. Don’t keep me hanging.”

His face turns beet red and suddenly he looks embarrassed. “I don’t know if I can. It’s too embarrassing.”

I position myself in the grass on my butt to get more comfortable. He’s really making me wonder now and I can’t take the anticipation anymore. “Is this something that happened to you or him? You’re pretty red,” I say with a grin. “Are you the one embarrassed?” I nudge him in the side almost causing him to tip over.

He balances himself and grabs my arm pulling me to him so we’re face to face. “When have I ever been embarrassed?” He challenges. “I don’t get embarrassed. I am what I am and I don’t care how foolish I look.”

My smile broadens but I don’t answer him. This makes him even more curious than I am at the moment. “What are you cooking up in that head of yours? You better spill it, girl.”

“I don’t know if I should. I kind of never told you about this.” I blush at the thought and my whole body gets hot. This is a memory that is ingrained in my mind forever. “Maybe I should just keep it a secret. My dark little secret.”

“Oh no you don’t.” He runs his hands along my sides, until his hands are squeezing my hips. “I know how to get it out of you. Are you still ticklish?” he asks with a boyish grin. It’s a grin that I used to love in the past. Seeing it now only makes the memories stronger.

“You wouldn’t dare, Kellan,” I scream. “Don’t!”

He digs his fingers into my hips, ribs, armpits and any other place that he knows I’m ticklish at. Before I know it, I’m on the ground squirming with him on top of me. “I love watching you squirm.” He stops and places his hands on either side of my hips. “Especially with you underneath me.”

I take a deep breath and attempt to catch my breath. If I get tickled too hard, I sometimes laugh so hard I pass out. I won't let him get me this time. I'm not a dorky kid anymore. "Why, because you have the advantage on a little girl," I say teasingly. "That's not fair and you know it. I hate you for doing this to me," I groan.

He positions himself so that his legs are around me and he's sitting on his knees, holding my hands above my head. "Hey, it's not my fault you're a little girl. I thought you'd be over this tickling stage by now."

I bring my legs up trying to buck him off, but he leans down and brings his lips under my ear. "I'm strong. A lot stronger than you remember so you might want to give in now," he breathes, running his lips over my neck, causing me to let out a small moan. "I have a lot of tricks up my sleeve."

When he tricks me and his fingers end back up in my ribs, I burst out laughing in his face. "Okay! I give up. You win." I sit up as he releases my arms. "You always win, you jerk wad."

He smiles and crosses his arms over his chest, but stays sitting on top of me. "I love it when you see it my way."

"You can get off me now," I snarl at him. "You're kind of heavy, you know."

He scrunches his forehead together and taps his chin as if in deep thought. "Nah, I think I'll stay here until you tell me this little secret of yours. You know, just to be safe."

I can't help the smile that spreads across my face, as I picture the image in my head. "Oh man. This is hilarious." I turn my head sideways and laugh one last time.

He narrows his eyes at me and tilts his head. "Any day now would be nice, smart ass."

He spreads my legs so his butt is situated between my legs now. Then he pulls me toward him so our faces are close to touching. "You have my full attention."

Looking in his eyes, I almost forget what I was going to say for a moment. "Um . . . I saw." I stop to swallow when his eyes focus on my lips. *I need to get it together.* "Remember that time when your parents were out of town and you had the whole house to yourself because Kade was staying at a friend's?"

He nods, turning red now. He must know where this story is leading. He has to. "Adric drove me to the Ranch and asked me to go in and check on

you because you weren't answering the phone. The door was unlocked and I knew how much you loved relaxing in the pool and hot tub, so I walked through the house and poked my head through the pool room door. I found you naked, floating in the pool on a raft, with a beer in the cup holder. I think you were sleeping because your chin looked wet as if you were drooling."

He snickers and picks his ass up, placing it in the grass. His legs are still on top of mine, but I'm free to move as I please now. "That was you?" He laughs as if he finds it just as funny as I did. "You should be the one embarrassed. I remember hearing little footsteps running through the house as if someone was about to get murdered. You ran off like a maniac. I woke up laughing, finding it funny that my nakedness made such an impact on an innocent bystander." He picks a piece of grass and flicks it at my nose. "For the record, I still do that. All of it except now, it's Jack instead of beer."

I feel my face flush at the thought and suddenly, I am embarrassed as shit. "Okay." I push him before lying on my back, lacing my fingers on the back of my head, and looking up at the clouds. "Now tell me the story about Adric. I want to know more."

He sucks in his lip ring before lying down beside me and placing his hands beneath his head, mirroring me. "There was this time that we went to Riley's house looking for him. His mom told us he would be home any minute." He stops when he notices me smiling.

"You mean, horny Mrs. Sexton?"

"Hey, do you want the story or not?" he asks with a playful grin.

I cover my mouth and laugh. "I'm sorry. Please continue."

He looks over toward Adric's grave. "I love you man. Sorry for this." He puts his fist in the air as if giving Adric a fist pound. That was always their thing in the past. Every time they greeted or departed, it was always with a fist pound. My eyes water as he turns his head up to the sky.

"Well anyways. We went inside with the false pretense that Riley would be home soon. She kept serving us snacks and sips of wine, until finally she started hitting on Adric. He just sat there, red faced and stunned as she started giving him a lap dance, shredding her clothes. I had to save him from her when she started stripping his damn clothes off. We had to run out the door with his pants half up and half down. He had nightmares for days."

I roll over in a fetal position and laugh harder than I've laughed in years, tears streaming down my face. I had no idea that Adric was a victim

of Mrs. Sexton's cradle robbing sex games. Riley stopped taking his friends home when they hit puberty. Everyone knows her and everyone stays away from her. She is built like a beast just ready to tear some innocent man apart and sink her teeth into him. I don't even remember the last time she's been on a date. She's pretty intimidating.

"Holy crap! That's why he woke up screaming 'someone tame the wild beast'. I always wondered about that."

We both just lay there sharing stories and laughing until it starts getting dark. I have no idea how long we have been here, but it has to be well past seven by now.

I sit up and scoot towards the head stone of Adric's grave. I place my hand on the music note and lay my head down on the grass, approximately where his head and chest lies six feet under. I know it sounds crazy, but I used to lay my head on his chest at night listening to him tell stories when mom and dad were fighting. "Adi, what I wouldn't give to have you here with me. To see your smile and hear your laugh. I miss listening to you play the guitar while I fall asleep. You will always be the biggest part of me because you helped me grow and turn into the person that I am today. You helped me through the roughest of times and even put my happiness before yours. I remember you staying home from parties to take me trick or treating or when I got a bit older, dragging me along to them and telling everyone that if they served me alcohol that you would hurt them. You sacrificed so much for me and I would sacrifice my world just to have you back. You never did have much of a childhood and I know that now. Take care up there. I love you."

I stand up and look beside me at Kellan. He looks a little shaken up and his eyes are wet. He leans in and runs his finger under my eye, wiping away the fallen tear. "It's okay to cry and it's okay to miss him. I miss him every single day and not a day goes by that I don't wish I could change the past. There are a lot of things I would do differently. Trust me, you have no idea. All we can do is keep the good memories alive. Like we did today. As long as his memories are alive, then he's still here with us. It's when we stop remembering that he's gone. Let's not let that happen."

I nod my head and bury my face in the comfort of his chest. That's when I let it go. Everything that I have been holding in for years. The pain, the hurt and the guilt that I have forced upon myself. I cry so hard that my

body is convulsing and I can barely stand on my feet, but Kellan just grips me tighter and presses his lips into my hair.

“It’s okay, baby girl. It’s okay to let it out.” I feel a tear fall on the top of my head and that’s when I know that I’m not alone. Kellan has just as much love for Adric that I do. The feeling makes me happy. So happy that I find myself smiling through the tears.

I pull away from his chest and I can see that I managed to leave mascara marks on the top of his chest. I can imagine it’s all over his shirt as well, but can’t tell because of the dark color. I must look like a total mess. “Are you ready? We should go.” I wipe at my eyes and he gives me a small smile.

“Yeah, sure. Can I take you one more place? I have something I want to share with you tonight, but you have to trust me.”

He looks into my eyes and I match his stare. There’s something there that tells me I’ll be okay. Something in his eyes asking me to trust him. “Yes.” Is all I say. It’s all I can say.

Once we get a little closer, I figure out pretty quickly where he is taking me. It makes me nervous at the thought of going back up there, but it also makes me happy. It’s his special spot and this will be the second time he’s taken me here.

“On the roof again?” I ask nervously as he pulls the truck into the back.

He pulls the keys out the ignition and tosses them to me. “You can say when we leave. Whenever you get uncomfortable and want to leave, I will take you anywhere you want to go.” He gives me a serious look and my heart melts for him. He looks so caring and protective.

I nod my head and open the door of the truck. “I can deal with that.”

Again, I find myself standing before the long, rusty ladder and my stomach does somersaults warning me of how much I hate heights. “Ugh! I feel sick.”

He presses his body behind mine and pushes me up to the ladder. “It’s okay. I’ll be right behind you the whole time.”

Putting my trust in someone else for the first time in forever, I grip the ladder and place my foot onto the first step. Our bodies only part for a second before his chest is pressed behind my back and his hands are on either side of my waist, waiting for me to take the next step.

We stay this way until we are both safely on the small roof. Then he moves around in front of me and grabs my hand. “Come on. You’ll be safe over here.”

When I look up to see where he is taking me, I notice that there's a black blanket spread out in the corner with what appears to be a bucket of chicken and a guitar on display in the middle. It's then I realize that I haven't eaten a thing all day.

He gives me a little shove toward the blanket and walks over to stand by the edge of the rooftop. "I figured you'd be hungry since I stole you away from the party so soon. I asked Tyler to pick up a bucket of chicken and bring it up here, so it should be fresh." He turns around to smile at me. "Go ahead and eat. You must be feeling agitated by now, not getting to stuff your face today."

I grab a chicken wing out of the bucket, because they suck, and throw it at Kellan. He's always made fun of me for stuffing my face. He knows as well as everyone that I stuff my face and eat more than three hundred pound men do. "Ha, you ass-wipe, and I thought you were being sweet."

He looks down at the chicken wing that fell next to his foot and laughs. "This is me being sweet. Don't you like it?"

"Sure," I say while shoving a chicken leg in my mouth. "As long as I get my chicken, then that's all that matters."

He takes one last look over the edge of the roof before he walks over and takes a seat next to me. He flashes me a heart-stopping smile before snatching my chicken leg from me and taking a huge bite. "Okay, I can only be sweet for so long and it was past that point."

I look him in the eye while reaching in the bucket for another leg. We both just stare at each other, both of us eating our chicken before finally he breaks the stare. "Okay, you win. My eyes sting like a bitch." He tosses the chicken leg down and reaches for the black and silver acoustic guitar. It has the word Gibson ingrained into the body of the guitar and it instantly makes me think of Adric. He had an old Gibson guitar that my grandfather gave him before he passed away from cancer. It was old and beat up, but Adric loved that thing to death.

I smile at the memory and wonder what the hell Kellan is doing with a guitar. He can't play. At least he couldn't the last time I saw him. "What are you doing with that thing?" I question as he positions himself up against the corner of the wall. "I thought you gave up that dream years ago," I tease.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a guitar pick, similar to the one he left on Adric's headstone, placing it in between his teeth as he messes with the strings. Adric used to do the same thing and he said he was tuning

it, whatever that means. Then he pulls it out of his mouth and smiles. "You should never give up on your dreams, no matter how farfetched they seem. Besides, I was never that bad. I think I was actually kind of good."

This makes me laugh so hard that chicken shoots out of my mouth and onto the side of Kellan's face. His eyes go wide before he reaches up and pulls the meat from his cheek.

I cover my mouth and try not to laugh. "I'm sorry," I say while chewing what I have left. "I didn't mean to."

He raises an eyebrow and looks down at the piece of chicken before putting it in his mouth and eating it. He shrugs and starts playing with the pick. "Still taste pretty good."

Somehow, him eating the food from my mouth turns me on. I don't know why, but it does. Maybe it's the simple fact that he didn't care it came out of my mouth. My heart pounds heavily in my chest as our eyes meet. I expect him to pull his eyes away but he doesn't. Instead, he starts strumming away at his guitar while still looking me in the eye.

He begins playing a familiar tune. One I would know anywhere. I can barely breathe as the chords play through my ears. He starts to hum the lyrics I've heard a thousand times. Last time I heard him, he couldn't play a note and now he's playing Adric's song. The lullaby that has put me to sleep countless times. I've wanted to hear this for so long. Just one more time, I've thought to myself on many occasions. Here I am and I swear his voice even sounds like Adric. That sweet, sweet melody. I bet if I wanted to, I could picture him sitting at the end of my bed, working those chords like a second nature, washing away all the bad from home. A single tear runs down my face. Kellan Haze just became even more beautiful and I would have never thought that was possible.

It's getting darker now and the fireworks are starting up, so I'm not surprised when I hear the first set shoot off into the sky behind Kellan. An array of colors explodes behind him in the black sky, making it a memory I'll never forget. He may disappear again but this moment will be locked away forever.

I stop eating and push the bucket of chicken away, before sitting next to Kellan and watching him. He looks so undeniably gorgeous as his eyes take on a look of passion and his fingers continue to smoothly strum the guitar. It looks so natural in his arms and it makes me want him even more.

Everything in me wants to reach out and touch him, to feel him under my fingertips, but I don't. He said so himself that it was a mistake.

So, I keep to myself as I close my eyes just enjoying this moment for what it is.

Chapter Thirteen

Kellan

As I start the song, the fireworks begin, bursting with colors, causing Phoenix to look up toward the sky. She almost looks as if she wants to make a mad dash for it and go inside to hide, but as her eyes meet mine, she suddenly relaxes. Something in her eyes tells me she's been just as fucked up as I have over the years on account of this day, so seeing her relax, allows me to breathe again. I was afraid she would want to leave right away and at the moment, I just want to be here, with this guitar in my hands and her beside me.

I haven't told her this, but I haven't watched fireworks in over eight years. The memory of that night haunts me too greatly to want to remember this day. I will always feel responsible for his death. I should have made it to him sooner. I should have been able to stop him, but I couldn't. I was too late and the events that followed will always consume my soul and be too much to put on anyone else. It's my burden to carry and no matter how heavy it is, I will continue to carry it alone.

I can tell it took her by surprise to hear Adric's song coming from me. I've worked on it for years in hopes one day I could give a small piece of him back to her, to keep him alive. He should be remembered for the amazing person he was. Those girls were everything to him. He practically raised them for the crappy parents he had. He never really had a childhood. He would have given up any dream he had to give them theirs.

I see a small smile form on Phoenix's lips as her eyes close and her hands go up to meet the top of her hair. She pauses for a moment before running her hands through the silkiness of her hair and pulling it out of its bun, shaking her head. Her hair falls around her in beautiful brown waves and I can see her lips part as she takes a deep breath and exhales. In this moment, she is the most beautiful thing I have ever laid eyes on and all I can think about is pulling her into my arms and breathing in the scent of her sweet perfume. The thought fucks with me, making me mad. I shouldn't want her like this. I'm not the romantic type and never want to be. I have

nothing to give her, but physical pleasure. That's all I'm good for. I'm broken and hollow, nothing left but a shell of a man. The day Adric took his last breath, a part of me died with the mistakes that I've made. A part I can never get back because it was buried right along with him.

I will never be what she wants or needs, but I love how playing the guitar can make her look so at peace. Adric used to play the guitar for her before he died and I will always remember the smile it brought to her face. No matter how upset she was, it always made her happy. I sucked back then at playing, and she would always laugh at me and tell me I should find a different hobby, because playing the guitar was doing nothing for my image. It's a good thing I've had a lot of free time on my hands over the years because playing has helped bring a little peace to my life over the years when I was alone and pissed off at every living, breathing being.

I find myself staring at her, unable to turn away. She draws me in with little or no effort. Her chest is moving up and down and the black bra she's wearing underneath her shirt becomes visible every time she inhales, pressing against the thin fabric of her shirt. My eyes trail over to her tan shoulder that is hanging out of her shirt and I get an urge to run my lips over the little freckles that run down her skin, getting lost under the sleeve. My fingers speed up as I take in the sight of her slightly parted legs, getting a glimpse of her dark laced panties. All I can imagine is what she tastes like and suddenly, my whole rhythm is off and the song turns to crap. She's got me all kinds of fucked up right now.

She opens her eyes and looks as if she's about to speak, until I lay my guitar down beside me. This guitar is my most prized possession. I'll guard it with my life. The day I found Adric, it was by his side. He always said if something happened to me to take it because it was his grandfathers and it should be appreciated like he appreciated it. I took it and had it completely restored.

I focus my attention on her, zoning in on what I want. She stares at me silently as I steady my weight on my knees and reach over, pulling her up by her hand. Placing my hand behind her neck and pulling her body closer so she's face to face with me, our bodies are flush on our knees.

I look deep into her eyes and I can feel her breath quicken against my face, making me want her even more. I want to feel her breath, ragged and calling out my name, as I push deep inside her, touching her places I shouldn't. The want is clear on my face. I know it and so does she.

She looks a little lost as she struggles to find words and I find it to be so damn cute. "When did you learn to play like that, it was beautiful. Why did you stop?"

I don't know. Maybe because she stuns me and makes me feel things I have been fighting for so long not to feel or maybe she's just too beautiful. I can't seem to concentrate on anything else but her and that damn scent that comes from her every time she moves. Whatever the reason, it sucks and I'm losing my will power and everything I've stood for. I'm tired of fighting it.

Biting my bottom lip and sucking in my ring, I yank her body closer to mine with so much desperation that she must think I'm crazy because there wasn't but a sliver of space to begin with, but I don't care. I have to taste her, to feel her against my skin. I press my lips against the smooth skin of her exposed shoulder and take a deep breath before running my lips up her neck, stopping just under her ear. *Holy shit, she smells delicious.*

She gasps and her body stiffens under my touch. I almost think she's going to get up and make a run for it, but she doesn't. Instead, she reminds me of how stupid I am being and I instantly hate myself for doing this to her. "I thought you said this was a mistake," she breathes.

Fuck my life! This is a mistake because by doing this, I might be hurting us both, but I can't think rational when I'm around her. I find my eyes retreating to her legs again, and the way they tremble turns me on like I've never been turned on before. My cock is throbbing so hard it almost hurts and I feel like my zipper is about to burst at the seam. The only way to make this go away is by burying myself to the hilt in between those thighs and fucking her hard, until she comes all over my dick.

Yanking my shirt over my head, I throw it down beside me and grip her thighs, pulling her as close as I can get her. "I don't give a shit if this is a mistake anymore. What the fuck do I know?" Breathing heavily, I run my hands up the length of her legs, spreading them wider, causing her whole body to shake. "I have to be inside you, Phoenix. I can't take this torture anymore but there is one thing I need to know. Have you slept with my brother?"

Her eyes slowly trail down my body, landing on the defined muscles that lead down to my jeans. I can tell just by the look in her eye how much she wants me inside her. I don't even need her to say anything, I just need to know my brother's never gotten a taste.

When she shakes her head, giving me the confirmation that my brother is a lying dick, an excitement courses through me and I can hardly even keep from nutting right here and now. I know by doing this I'm probably fucking us both, especially after kissing her. Whenever I kiss a girl, they always seem to fall in love with me. I basically stopped allowing girls to kiss me, omitting that form of intimacy altogether. Why I slipped up with her, I have no idea. Probably because all the rules go out the window when it comes to her. "That's all I need to hear."

Before she can process my words, I push her skirt up her legs and yank her panties to the side, exposing her beautiful body. I can see her chest rise and fall with every breath she takes, letting me know she doesn't dislike what I'm about to do to her. Hell, she probably wants it just as much as I do. I want her so badly right now, I'm almost tempted to skip any foreplay and slip inside her, but I feel as if she deserves better. That and I can't help but to want a taste what I do to her.

I'm so wound up, I tear her panties from her body. Laying her back, I bend over and allow my tongue to trail up the inside of her thigh. I can already see her juices dripping and all I want to do is lick her clean. She smells of cupcakes and I can only imagine her pussy tastes even sweeter. Tossing her panties down beside us, I look her in the eye and my words make her whole body jerk. "I need to taste you and I won't stop until I've had enough. I fucking love cupcakes."

Grabbing her thighs, I push her legs towards her breasts. I slowly trail my tongue up the wetness of her pussy, torturing her clit with the tip of my barbell, before slipping my tongue deep inside, getting a better taste. She moans and her whole body shakes with pleasure as I spread her moistness to her clit and slip a finger into her tightness. I swirl my tongue around before sucking her clit into my mouth. I am right, she tastes so fucking sweet and the thought of any other man tasting her angers me. Grabbing her hips, I rotate completely, leaving her straddling my face. I suck and lick while moving my finger in and out in a slow, consistent motion, never losing rhythm. I know how much rhythm means to a woman's sexual needs and I will be fucked if I don't give her the greatest pleasure she's ever known. It doesn't take long before I feel her already starting to clamp down around my finger. It doesn't surprise me though. If I'm good at one thing, it's definitely using my tongue. I slowly run my tongue in between her lips before sucking her lips into my mouth and then her clit. When I feel her

starting to clamp again, I run my tongue over her thigh before softly biting down on it.

Her body jerks as she clamps around my finger and screams. It's so fucking tight, it feels as if it's going to break my finger. Right before she comes, I pull my finger out replacing it with my tongue. I want to taste her when she comes. "Oh fuck me!" Her breathing comes out in heavy bursts as she continues to scream and moan above me. "Oh shit, Kellan!" I can feel her juices on my tongue. I swallow leaving nothing behind. She runs her hands through her hair before biting her bottom lip.

Her screams make my cock hurt and I need to release it before it busts the zipper of my jeans. I snake my arm around her waist before laying her down on the blanket with my body pressed between her wet thighs. I kiss her, wanting her to taste herself on my lips. I place my lips to her ear and whisper. "You like the way my tongue feels, tasting you? Does it make you want more?"

She moans and leans her head back, pressing it into the blanket. Watching her shake while running her hand up the length of her thigh makes me want another taste. I sit up on my knees and grab her hips, bringing her hips up to meet my face. I run my tongue along her thighs and over her wetness, licking up the juices. "You taste so fucking good, Phoenix. Now I want to bury my cock deep inside you while you scream my name," I say, running my tongue over my lips and trying to catch my breath. "Do you think you can handle it, because once I start, I won't be able to stop."

I have never felt this desperate to be inside a woman and waiting for her to answer is killing me. I want her to touch me, to give me a sign it's okay to take her. When she reaches out and pulls my jeans down my thighs, her eyes desperately searching mine, I take that as her answer.

Her hands tremble as she reaches for my cock and pulls it free from my boxers. "Holy shit, Kellan." Her eyes widen as she takes in the sight of my rock hard dick. I can't remember ever being this hard for someone and the feeling of her hand around my cock makes me even harder.

She slowly runs her hand up the length of my dick, stroking it before playing with the head of it in her tiny fingers and looking me in the eye. "You have the sexiest dick I've ever seen. Is everything on your body so damn perfect?"

I think of the scar through my eyebrow that haunts me every time I look in the mirror, reminding me of that fucked up day and my blood boils.

Anger courses through me and suddenly, I want to fuck her harder than I've ever fucked a woman before. My anger always gets the best of me and that's another reason I'm so damaged.

Without warning, I grab her hips and flip her over, causing a small moan to escape her lips. "Not as perfect as you are." Running my hands up the roundness of her ass, I grip her cheeks, spreading them apart as I slide into the wetness of her tightness and push as deep as it will allow me.

"Oh fuck!" She screams and I can feel the wetness between her legs thicken. "Kellan," she whimpers.

I place my hands back on her hips and grip tightly as I start out slow and deep, getting a feel for her pussy. My cock has been known to hurt, so I want to see what she can handle before I give her my all. "Oh shit, it feels so good being inside you." I push into her, rolling my hips in and out. I cup her breasts in my hands and I pull her body up to meet mine. With her back pressed against my chest, I grab the bottom of her shirt, pulling it up and over her head. "I'm about to fuck you deep and hard so don't be afraid to scream." I lean in and run my tongue up the side of her neck before sucking in her earlobe. "I love it loud."

Pushing her back down on the palm of her hands, I slam into her, burying myself deep before bending over her, yanking her head to the side and running my tongue across her mouth. She moans against my lips, causing me to go harder and deeper. "Yeah, you fucking like me inside you?" I suck in her bottom lip while reaching around with my other hand and playing with her clit. "Tell me how much you like it, Phoenix. I want to hear you say it."

Her body trembles from my touch and I have to catch her from collapsing. "I like it so fucking much, Kellan." I pull her face closer to mine and rub my lip ring over her bottom lip. She lets out a cry of pleasure before opening her mouth and licking my bottom lip then sucking the ring into her mouth.

I'm so fucking hot right now that all I want to do is make her scream again, to feel her pussy clamp tight around my dick. I push her down flat on her stomach before placing my body weight above her with my left leg bent at the knee, pressed against her side. I pump into her slow and deep being sure to give her intense pleasure. She moans beneath me as I move in and

out while running my tongue up her back, to her neck, teasing her with my barbell. She seems to like the feel of it against her skin and it's so fucking hot.

"Kellan," she moans, making my heart jump. "You feel so good inside me. I want you deeper. Please," she begs.

Hearing her sound so desperate to have me in her makes me lose it. Placing my hands on her hips, with my toes digging into the blanket, I thrust into her hard and fast while breathing into her ear. "You want me deep, baby?" I thrust deep inside her, filling her completely and stop. "Is that deep enough, huh?" I pull out and thrust again, pushing as deep as I can go while wrapping her hair in my hand and kissing her neck.

She screams and I have to stop myself from coming. I refuse to get off before she does. This is about giving her the only thing I know how. I never want her to forget me. Even when I'm gone.

Without pulling out, I bring myself to my knees, then rest on my heels, while bringing her body with mine so she's riding me. I run my hands along her hips, then up her sides, admiring her body. She's so beautiful. I want this moment forever. I want to feel myself inside her while I take in her fucking beauty.

She starts moving up and down on my cock as I reach up and undo her bra. She stops to let me slide her bra off before she slowly and teasingly moves up, sliding my dick all the way out of her pussy before slowly riding her way back down. "I love your pussy. It feels so damn good. It's the best I've ever had."

I reach around her, cupping her left breast in my hand, teasing her nipple with my fingers. "Kellan," she says breathless. "I'm about to come. I'm about to explode with you buried deep inside me. I always imagined you feeling this good."

Oh shit! She's imagined me fucking her? I can't hold in much longer. It's so hot me thinking about her imagining my dick pounding into her. *Fuck it!* I need this moment just as much as she does.

I pick her up off my dick and place my hand on her chin so she'll turn around and face me. "I want to look at you while you come." I look into her eyes as I guide her down to my lap so her legs are wrapped around my waist. "Look at me while I pleasure you, Phoenix. I want to see how I make you feel. I want to taste it on your lips."

She wraps her arms around my neck and places her forehead to mine, looking deep into my eyes. I grab her hips and lift her, bringing her down to meet the head of my dick. I rub the head along her wetness before burying it deep inside her, making her moan against my lips.

“I’m going to make you come now,” I whisper.

I thrust in and out slowly, playing with her clit from the tip of my thumb, my other hand wrapped around the back of her head, holding her close to me. It feels so good having her in my arms and a part of me wants this moment to last. She feels so warm and safe, like home. Looking into her eyes, we both moan and I can feel her tightening around me as her body trembles under my touch in an orgasm.

She breaths heavily against my lips and I take her bottom lip in my mouth as I thrust back into her causing her body to shake in pleasure.

“Mmm . . . you love my dick, don’t you?” She nods and I am so hot right now, that I’m doing things I would never do. First, I’m having sex without a damn condom and second, I’m about to . . . “Are you on birth control?”

She nods while looking me in the eye and biting her bottom lip. “Fuck! I’m about to come deep inside of you.” I rub my hand over her face while rolling my hips in and out of her. “I’ve never done this before but I can’t imagine not feeling this pleasure to its fullest. I want you to feel all of me.”

I crush my lips against hers, pulling her bottom lip into my mouth and sucking as I bust my load as deep inside her as I can. Holy shit it feels amazing, being deep inside her and letting go. I almost feel free as if I can have more of these moments, but it’s all just bullshit that will never happen. The thought of my load inside her is enough to have me temporary high. I never imagined it would feel so damn good.

She sits on me panting and rubbing her hands though her hair, as she stays zoned in on my eyes like she’s admiring the sight of them and wants to memorize them. I love that, because I’m doing the same to her. A moment like this can never happen again. I messed up big by letting my desire get the best of me.

We sit like that for a few minutes, neither one of us attempting to make the first move to separate our bodies. Feeling the heated skin of her breasts against my chest is almost enough to make me come again. She’s so sexy and tastes so damn good. She’s everything I’d want if I was good enough to deserve happiness, but I’m not, so I’ll have to be more careful with her for now on.

The sky is dark and silent now. Somewhere in the middle of our own show, the fireworks stopped and either one of us paid attention enough to know. She's looking around the sky as if she's afraid they'll start again or as if they never stopped. When I said I wanted to change this day for her, I didn't mean this way. I might have just fucked her up even more.

"I'm sorry, Phoenix." I brush a strand of hair behind her ear and then lift her up so I can pull out of her. "I didn't mean to let things get this far. I should have been more careful with you and what you needed today, but I'm fucked up. Doing things right, just isn't my thing."

Her eyes search mine before she cups my face and brings her lips down and just before touching mine she stops and exhales. I thought maybe she was going to kiss me again, but she doesn't and I find myself wishing she would. "It's not your fault. I wanted it just as bad as you did. I've wanted you for as long as I've known you, Kellan. I couldn't stop myself either."

Her words linger in the air and guilt takes over, making me feel like total shit. I had no idea she liked me over the years. Back then, she was just too young to even think about being attracted to. Yes, she was always pretty and I worried about guys going after her and hurting her, but that's it. Being Adric's best friend, it was part of my responsibility to take care of her and to worry, so it came naturally to be pissed when she went on dates. She was fifteen and I was twenty the last time we saw each other. She was starting to grow up and the guys were all over her, but for some reason, she always pushed them away. Now, it all makes sense. It was because of me.

"As much as I don't want to," I look into her eyes and hate myself for what I just did. But I can't deny that it was the best moment of my miserable existence. "I should get you home before I lose all control again and take you right here again," I say stiffly, suddenly not knowing how to act. Do I let her know how much I still want her, or do I push her away so she doesn't get hurt? Either way, it hurts to not be able to give her what she wants or needs because I'm fucked up in the head. So what if she liked me back then. I'm a different person now and once she gets to know me again, she'll only hate me. Who could love me after what I did?

I reach for her bra and shirt and help her get dressed. Once we reach the edge of the roof, I help her down the ladder and over to my truck. I place my hand under her ass to give her a boost. Upon touch, I feel skin on skin contact and I remember her torn underwear now reside in my pocket. Just a little something for me to always remember one piece of heaven in my own

personal hell. My fingers brush against her bareness, making us both stop and take a deep breath. I'm not ready to let her go just yet and feeling her this way makes me want to prolong it. "Where do you live?" She sits in the passenger seat and closes her legs together before handing me my keys.

"My car's at the Ranch," she says confused. "You don't need to take me home, Kellan. You can drop me off there."

Like hell I will. I can't do that. My protective instinct won't let me drop her off to Kade, just waiting for his chance to have her the way I did earlier. I refuse to place her in his hands. Even though I know I can't have her, as selfish as it may be, I don't want him to have her either. Pondering, I think of an excuse to take her home instead.

"People are probably still at the party and I know you don't want to get sucked into that again. Let me take you home and I will be sure you get wherever you need to be tomorrow. I promise."

She's quiet for a second as if she's thinking things over before she finally responds. "1349 Rodeo Drive. My mom and sister are staying with me for a bit so don't be surprised if you see two nut jobs running around."

"Is everything okay?" I ask, curious as to why Phoenix has this responsibility now and hoping it's not too much for her to take on. It's about time her mother learns to grow up and rely on herself instead of her kids.

Elaine and Ethan should have been over years ago. That's why Adric was always stressed out. He constantly worried about what he would have to do to take care of his family after his dad quit talking shit and actually left them behind. Ethan never gave a crap about his family and I tried my hardest to protect Phoenix from the truth so she wouldn't hurt as much as Adric did. Adric had dreams of opening his own tattoo shop one day and forming a band to share his love for music with the world. Music for him wasn't just something to pass the time like most people, it was his escape. He poured his heart and soul into his lyrics. I still have that old worn out notebook packed full of songs he carried everywhere. I always said if I got good enough, I was going to record them and make a tribute to him. He never would get excited, as if that dream would come crashing down if he were left to take on all of the responsibility. It had him on edge and now Phoenix might be stuck carrying that same weight.

She looks up from playing with her hair and forces a smile. "I guess. It's nothing I can't handle and it's only temporary."

“Okay, but if you need anything you let me know.” I place my hand on her chin and look into her eyes. “I mean that. You don’t have to handle everything by yourself.”

She pushes my hand away and pokes at my nipple. “Just get in the truck, you worry too much. You’re just like Adric, you know that?” She flicks my nipple and I look down at her hand and grin.

“I knew you always liked my nipples.”

“Oh, shut up!” She smiles and this time it isn’t forced. I love seeing her smile. It makes me smile and for once, I see shades of color in this fucked up life of black and gray.

When we pull up in front of her tiny apartment building, there’s a tall, slender girl with wild, red curls sitting on the porch of what I assume is her apartment. She has her legs propped up on a chair that is tipped over sitting across from her and she’s looking down into her lap as if she’s trying to concentrate on something.

“Holy shit, is that Zoe? She is almost grown up now.”

Phoenix laughs as she reaches for the door and pushes it open. “You have no idea. This girl is a handful. Just ask . . . never mind.” She smiles and her eyes land on my lips. I want to kiss her so bad, but I don’t know if I should. “Thanks for the ride, Kellan. Both of them,” she teases, while pulling her eyes away from my lips.

Fuck it! I’m just one big mistake after another so why stop now? I tangle my fingers into the back of her hair and crush my lips against hers, opening her mouth with my tongue. I feel my arousal as soon as her tongue collides with mine and I have the urge to pull her into my lap and slide into her right here. Just as I’m about to grab her hip and pull her to me, I open my eyes to see a little red spitfire with her arms crossed over her chest and her eyes focused dead on me. “Well well, look what the cat drug in and who’s this? Have you finally told Kade to take a hike? If he’s replacing him, then I’ll let him stay.”

Phoenix pulls away, wiping her hand over her wet lips. “Shit, Zoe!” She runs her hands through her hair while trying to catch her breath. “It’s a long story, Zoe,” she says, “And I’m tired so go inside and I’ll be inside in a minute.”

A set of big hazel eyes set on me again and I can’t help but to smile. I remember those eyes and that wild crazy hair and it reminds me of happier

times. Zoe was only six the last time I saw her, but she was always following me around the house. I just can't get over how much she's grown.

"Little Zoe," I say teasingly, as Phoenix steps out of the truck and adjusts her little skirt. "My little tail has grown up."

Her lip curls up and she gives me a confused look, dropping her notebook into the seat of my truck. "Excuse me, weirdo," she mumbles. "I'm no one's little tail, whatever the hell that means?"

She's damn adorable and feisty, standing there looking like she wants to hit me. She didn't get Adric's laid back nature, that's for sure but she definitely takes after Adric's take crap off no one attitude and the thought makes me laugh. I miss my bro so much and being here with his family makes me feel closer to him "It's been a long time. Trust me. Eight years to be exact, but you used to follow me around everywhere like I had a tail."

She looks even more confused as she focuses her attention on Phoenix. "Okay, who is this cute weirdo? If he wasn't cute and I didn't like those awesome tattoos, I would kick him where it counts."

Phoenix looks so nervous; it makes me want to kiss her to relax her again. It seemed to help earlier at least. "Kellan," she whispers sounding pained. "Kade's brother."

Zoe snickers and her face lights up. "What! The guy you refuse to talk about? Oh this is some good—"

Phoenix places her hand over Zoe's mouth, silencing her. Now I'm really curious about what's been said about me.

I jump out of the truck, run over to Zoe and throw my arm around her shoulder surprising her. "Looks like we have a lot to catch up on. There's no way you can't know about me. Like I said, you were my tail." She grabs her notebook and I guide her away from Phoenix.

Phoenix combs her fingers through her hair looking nervous as she leans against my truck, but I can't help it. I want to know what she's been telling Zoe over the years. She's had to of told her something for her to know my name. That's a good sign. *I think.*

"We can chat as long as you tell me some things about Phoenix I don't know," Zoe says with a devious grin. "She's good at keeping secrets and it pisses me off."

"What are you guys saying over there?" Phoenix grumbles. "Isn't it about time you go to bed, Zoe?"

Zoe turns to argue with her sister, so I reach over and grab Zoe's notebook as it falls to the ground. I pick it up, scanning it, thinking maybe Zoe is like her brother and likes to write songs or something. Instead, I find a bunch of scribbles and words that are mostly misspelled.

I feel the notebook get snatched out of my hand and I look up to see Zoe scowling at me. "That's mine. Nosy much?" She scrunches her nose and huffs.

She looks so embarrassed and I feel bad for learning her secret. No one knew this about Adric, but he used to have a hard time spelling when I first met him as well. He kept it a secret, but slowly taught himself through music and poetry. I was amazed at the results and he was an inspiration to me that you can do whatever you set your mind to.

"Come here." I wave Zoe over and out of Phoenix's earshot. "I have a secret to tell you."

She looks hesitant at first, but comes over anyways, looking me in the eye. "What?"

I point at the notebook and look behind me to be sure Phoenix isn't listening. "What nobody knows, is that Adric had a hard time spelling." I pause and look down to be sure she's listening. "He learned through music and poetry. I'm going to make the same deal with you I made with him."

She looks at me with a little hope in her eyes, probably a bit relieved that she's not the only one that needed help. "What kind of deal?"

I did a lot of embarrassing crap as a teenager and I have Adric to thank for that. I made a promise to Adric that if he could pull his end off, I would do anything he asked me to no matter how stupid and ridiculous it was.

"Next time I come over, I want you to sit down and write a poem. I want you to practice while I'm gone. If you get every word spelled correctly, I will do anything you want me to do. As long as it's not robbing a bank. Those days are behind me," I tease, making her laugh.

"Are you serious?" she questions unsure. "Anything I want you to do? Anything at all?"

I nod my head and lean against my truck. "Absolutely, I'm not messing with you. I keep my word."

She looks down at the notebook in her hand and smiles. "Oh, this is going to be fun." She pats my arm as if I'm going to be sorry later. If she's anything like Adric, I'm a little scared. "I already have ideas flowing. Weird how that works. See ya, big guy."

She takes off, skipping inside and Phoenix gives me a confused look as she watches Zoe disappear inside. “What was that about?”

I push myself away from the truck and push my hair out of my face. “It’s our little secret.” My eyes meet hers and my heart skips a beat. *Dammit . . . why does she do this to me?* I swallow hard and stand up straight. “Call me if you need me,” I say.

She nods her head and smiles weakly. “You suck and by the way, thanks for tonight.” I smile and she starts walking up the porch. “Goodnight, Kellan.”

“Goodnight, beautiful.” I see her blush as she turns away and closes herself inside. I quickly run over and jump into my truck, taking off. A panic surges through me as thoughts of me and Phoenix take over my mind. I can’t believe I let myself break the rules and have sex with her bareback. Not to mention the fact I busted my load inside her without even much thought. I never rely on a girl’s word that she is on birth control. That’s exactly how guys end up with unwanted kids and stuck with a woman. Hell, I was about take her again here in my truck if I had the opportunity. I can’t let myself be so careless with her. I need to gain my control back before it’s too late. This girl is something else and she throws me all off balance.

When I get home, Maxine is sitting on the porch waiting. I pull into the drive and look out the window at her, hating myself. She’s dressed in a pair of short white shorts and a red spaghetti strap shirt looking damn sexy. She’s sitting with her legs crossed and when she notices my truck she uncrosses them and looks up with a smile.

A part of me wants to turn the truck around and just leave, but I need to handle this before it goes too far.

Letting out a deep breath, I click the garage remote and step out of the truck as Maxine stands, making her way to me. “I thought your sexy ass would never get home,” she purrs. She places her lips against my neck as she works her way up to my face. “You have no idea how bad I need you right now. I want to feel you inside me,” she says breathless.

Gripping her wrists in my hands, I pull her hands away and push them down at her sides, looking her in the eye. “I can’t help you, Maxine. I need you to go home.”

She looks stunned as she reaches for my chest and caresses it. “Did you have a rough day? That’s fine. We can help each other out then. I can take care of your every need.”

“No.” The thought of her hands on me angers me. Right now, I can’t think of anyone touching me but Phoenix. This woman, as beautiful as she may be, just doesn’t compare. I can’t handle her hands on me right now. “Go home, Maxine. I’m not sleeping with you.”

She just stands there as I jump back into my truck, drive it into the garage and close the door behind me.

“Shit!” I pound my fist into the steering wheel, causing the horn to sound. I’m so fucking angry and confused right now and I can’t get the image of Phoenix’s body wrapped up in my arms out of my head. She’s all I can picture.

I storm through the house, knocking random things down around me. One night with this damn girl and already I can’t function and touch anyone else. Sex is supposed to be my release. Why the hell can’t I relieve this shit with Maxine then? I know the answer to that question. Ever since Phoenix walked through that door of the shop, I haven’t been able to picture myself being close to anyone but her. I’m losing my shit.

Chapter Fourteen

Phoenix

The steaming water drips down my face, running over my heated, red flesh, but I can’t seem to shake the chill running deep within me.

Goosebumps prickle my ignited skin as thoughts of Kellan breeze through my mind, burning me to my core. My skin tingles as if it remembers every touch. Running my hands over my face, I lean against the back wall of the shower, taking deep breaths, as I close my eyes. I’m trying to block out images of his face and the way his skin caused electrical sparks when brushed against mine, making it feel raw and heated to the touch.

His lips were soft and smooth, yet his kisses were rough and firm, consuming me, shattering my soul. The way his tongue ran over my lips and down my body, hungrily tasting me in my most secret places, as if he was a starving man, leaves me with a need. A need to once again look into his eyes as he pushes himself inside me, filling me deep, branding the memory to forever stay in my mind, making it impossible for anything else to compare. Being with him was better than I could have ever imagined. Everything about him is even more beautiful now than before and I have a want for him that runs so deep I can barely talk around him, let alone breathe. One look stuns me, leaving me reeling for several minutes after.

The thoughts of that roof top tryst take over every part of me, keeping me up at night, making it hard to function during the day and making me want to fall asleep just to dream about him.

“What am I doing? This is ridiculous.” I slap my hands beside me into the wall as I tilt my face up, trying to wash away my thoughts. I am drained and beyond frustrated in more ways than one and I only have myself to blame for letting things go too far. He said so himself we were a mistake. Yet he gave his body to me and the moment we shared felt like pure bliss, making me feel complete again for the first time in years.

Focusing on my breathing pattern, I watch my chest rise and fall while fighting to gain control. I take one last deep breath before pushing myself away from the wall and reaching over to turn the water off, letting the remainder wash over my skin before stepping out. I need to get out of here and to Jen’s before I give myself a nervous breakdown. My nerves are already shot today, due to Adric’s birthday, but having to deal with all the other screwed up things right now is proving to be one of the hardest things I’ve had to deal with since Adric’s death. I promised myself I’d be strong and there’s no time to break these promises.

I quickly dry off and wrap the towel around me before making my way down the empty hall and to my room. The house seems to be empty. It’s so quiet and peaceful compared to what it’s been the last couple days. My mom and Zoe must be at the store picking up something for Adric’s grave. This is the one day of the year I know for a fact they go and visit him. I usually wait until late at night when the world is sleeping, before I make my appearance. I always thought going alone would hurt less, if there were no one to see my tears. Last night changed my mind and opened it to new possibilities. Having Kellan there somehow made it more bearable.

I open the door and step into the coziness of my room, which I haven’t slept in for days, softly closing the door behind me. The beautiful blues and silvers making up my room, remind me so much of Adric. They were his favorite colors. That’s why I chose these colors for my room. He used to sing me to sleep, sitting on the edge of my bed. It helps to ease the pain sometimes and comfort me on a bad day, like a piece of him is still here.

Looking up from the shagginess of my silver rug, I fall backwards into the door, almost dropping my towel to the floor, when I notice who’s sitting on my bed.

“Oh shit! Don’t do that to me.” I place my hand over my heart and rest my head against the back of the door, scolding myself for being so damn jumpy.

Kade is lying on his back in my bed with his hands pressed to his face. He props himself up on his elbow and motions for me to come over to the bed when he notices my jumpy reaction. “Why do you look so shaken up? I’m not even naked yet,” he says with a playful smirk. “Come here.”

Oh no. This is not on my list of things to do today. I know I have to tell Kade about Kellan, but not now. Not today dammit. *Why didn’t I make sure I took away all of his stupid spare keys?* This is going to sting for the both of us. We’ve been friends for too long and even though we never really made things between us clear, there was a small thing happening with us and even I can’t deny that.

I grip my towel, holding it over my body as I take a seat on the edge of the bed, keeping a safe distance. I turn beside me to look at him as he sits straight up, undressing me with his eyes. He looks tense, as if he has something he wants to say, but doesn’t know how to say it; therefore, I decide it’s best for me to break the silence before it gets too unbearable. “Kade. What are you doing here? I’m about to leave with Jen soon. Why didn’t you call first?”

He looks me in the eyes and my stomach drops like I’m going downhill on a roller-coaster, except this isn’t quite as fun and I forgot my nausea pills. He bore’s into me, marking me in his mind. My nerves are going wild now and I can’t seem to sit still as I stare back at those baby blues. *What the hell is he thinking? Does he know already?*

“Did you forget something at my house yesterday when you ran off?” He pulls the spare key out I had made for him after that day I left my keys on Kellan’s bike. “It’s pretty big and kind of hard to forget about, Phoenix. Why did you run off without saying anything to me? I looked for you for hours, thinking you were somewhere within the crowd. That was an asshole move to make.”

I pull my eyes away from his and pull my towel tighter, clamping each end, squeezing it between my fingers. *How the hell do I answer that?* There’s really no easy way to bring up this matter. I clear my throat and lay flat on my back, preparing to let him down easily before things become too complicated for either of us to handle. “I left with Kellan.” I swallow hard as his jaw muscles tighten into hard steel and his nostrils flare as he looks

down at me. He looks extremely pissed, like he owns me and I can't make my own decisions. I'm not a little girl anymore.

"Look Kade, I had to get away from the party. I couldn't handle it. You know how I feel about that. You can't judge me for leaving when I got the chance." My voice is loud, the anger in me taking over, blinding me and I don't care if he notices. "I never wanted to go in the first place. You made me feel guilty, so I went. I gave it a shot and you're sitting here judging me because of who I left with? Oh, come on Kade. You'll never get it. Kellan does and yesterday, I needed that. If you can't handle that . . . then I don't know what else to say."

His eyes are distant, his face creased in anger. He just stares at me, not saying anything. *Did I render him speechless for once?* I probably shouldn't have added the last part, but I couldn't help it. Kellan hasn't left my mind and I have a feeling he never will. It's impossible not to bring him up, no matter the situation or the consequences.

He lets out a dark chuckle, his eyes darkening to a shade of midnight blue. "So Kellan was your escape? I kind of figured that, but Jen refused to enlighten me on any details." He shakes his head and presses his hand to his forehead, taking a deep breath and slowly blowing it out. "Where did you go? You must have had a late night since you didn't bother picking up your car."

Why did he have to come here? I'm trying to push the memories out of my mind so I can get back to reality and out of this stupid dream world I've been living in, even though it's pointless. Now he's sitting here in front of me, forcing me to remind myself of the hurt I'm getting myself into. *Man, this is not cool.* I don't want to talk about this right now, but it doesn't look like I have much of a choice. "We went to see Adric, okay. Is that what you want to hear? We spent the whole night talking about Adric and old memories and it felt good. It felt so good remembering those days. I miss those days so damn much, Kade." I stand up with my back facing the bed, choking back the tears that are threatening to form. Visiting Adric with Kellan was the happiest I've been in years. I loved that feeling and I don't want to lose it, but I know eventually he'll be gone and I'll be a total wreck left to pick up the pieces of my heart left behind.

I feel a hand on my shoulder, soft and warm against my skin, before I'm spun around, face to face with Kade. His face presses against mine, his cheek resting against my lips as we both breathe heavily. "I'm sorry

Phoenix. I'm sorry I don't understand like he does, but what I do understand and he doesn't, is what you've been through over the years when he was too coward to be here." He turns his face slightly so his lips rest against the corner of mine, causing my heartbeat to quicken. "I've always been here, you just didn't realize it until he was gone. It's time for you to realize I'm not going anywhere."

Both of his hands cup my face as he crushes his lips against mine, wrapping his hand in the back of my hair. Lost in the moment, he turns us around so my back is facing the bed. Pushing me backwards until I'm lying on the bed, he spreads my legs and presses his body in the opening, our lips still touching.

His warm tongue slips through my parted lips causing him to moan and slide his hand up the towel, snaking beneath me to cup my bare ass.

Panic sets in and my heart is pounding so fast it hurts. Not in a good way either. *This is so wrong. So so wrong.* Kade's lips can never fill the void of Kellan's, no matter how good they feel against me. Whether I'm Kellan's or not, my heart doesn't sit with Kade. I need to push this back into the friend zone, where it should have stayed to begin with.

"Stop!" I place my hands on his chest and give him a light shove as I pull my face away from his and cover my face with my hands. "I can't do this, Kade."

He sits up and runs his hands through his curls, biting his bottom lip and grunting. "What is with you? You were all up for being with me before my brother showed back up. What is the deal, Phoenix? I want you bad. So fucking badly, I can't even explain the feeling." He runs his hand up my thigh again, brushing his hand over the wetness he's causing, before slipping a finger inside. He shoves his finger further, leaning above me, as I let a small moan slip. "You can't deny what I do to you," he whispers against my lips. "You want this just as bad as I do. I can feel how wet you get when I touch you. Once you let me in, you will see how good it feels to have me inside you."

"I said . . . I can't." I push him, but harder this time, pulling away from him and scrambling to my feet, gripping my towel to cover myself. He's right, his touch does something to me. That's why I'm so screwed up and I refuse to be weak and give myself to two men. I'm not up for playing these kind of games with him. "I can't because I had sex with your brother last night and he's all I can think about. He's all I've ever thought about." The

words spill out before I can even think. The secret is out now, no matter who it hurts.

His jaw clenches, his fists tightening at his sides before he jumps to his feet and backs me into the wall with his hands planted on either sides of my face as he leans in close. “Are you stupid, Phoenix? You gave yourself to someone that abandoned you. Someone you haven’t seen in eight years. He just shows up out of nowhere and you throw yourself all over him and fuck him.” His voice shakes as he punches the wall with his fist, causing me to jump. “Fuck! I hate that asshole even more. Why the fuck did he come back? Things could have been good between us. Do you get what you’re throwing away? Throwing away for **someone** that is only going to hurt you in the end?”

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My blood runs cold as he reminds me of the hurt I am sure will come. I'm not sure I can handle it when it does, but right now, seeing him while I can is enough to numb me from the thoughts. "I wasn't throwing myself all over him, Kade." I try to push his arms down so I can get away, but he's too strong, keeping me blocked in. He stares me in the eye with a satisfied grin and that pisses me off more. "Dammit! Don't you talk to me like this. You act as if you wouldn't have hurt me in the end. Don't think I don't know your history with women. When was the last time you were faithful to someone, huh? Answer me." I push his chest and lean my head against the wall, defeated. This is draining what little energy I have and I hate to waste it on such crap.

He huffs, dropping his arms to his sides and leaning into my ear. "Since I've been trying to get with you, Phoenix. I've turned numerous girls down for you and this is what I get." He pulls away, shakes his head and walks toward the door. A part of my heart breaks as he walks away. I didn't realize how serious he was about this. I thought it was all in fun. I never meant to hurt him.

Stopping, he stands frozen at the door. "When he hurts you don't, I repeat, don't come crawling to me. I warned you. Why, because that's what friends do. So, goodbye . . . friend. Have a great fucking life and do me a favor." He turns around as he reaches for the door handle. The look on his face is of pure rage and hate. "Tell my brother to fuck off." He walks out slamming the door behind him so hard the walls shake.

Swallowing hard, I bury my face in the palm of my hands and stand there, frozen in place. I just hurt someone that I care about. I have no idea what I've gotten myself into with these boys, but I know it can't be good. I'm so damn confused I could scream. In fact, maybe that's just what I'll do, and I do. I scream because I'm pissed at myself for not being able to gain control of my thoughts and pissed at myself for being so weak when it comes to Kellan. From now on, I need to be stronger.

* * *

I drive myself to Jen's house in a daze, feeling more like a zombie than an actual person. The streets, cars and houses all blur around me as I focus my vision on the road directly in front of me, pissed off at the world for my screw-ups. As emotional as I am at the moment, I probably shouldn't even be driving. This isn't safe, but then again, what the hell is anymore?

Pulling into her driveway and killing the engine, I rest my face against the side window and close my eyes in thought. The heated glass, from baking in the sunlight, warms my cheek. The heaviness of today is finally starting to weigh on me now that I'm fully awake and ready to start my day. I can't stop thinking about how Adric should be here celebrating his twenty eighth birthday today. He should be strumming away at his old guitar, putting on a show for everyone to see. He was too young to die. As much as I want that to happen, it never will and it kills me more than anything does. He deserves to be here and sometimes his addiction pisses me off. I still don't understand why, when he always seemed so happy and eager to live. Why did he need those damn pills? Everyone loved him and surrounded themselves with him every second they could. How could he need something to alter his state of mind? I didn't even know about the drugs until that day.

After pulling myself together, I step out into the brightness of the sun and slowly walk through the long grass leading up to Jen's small porch that houses mine and Adric's old porch swing. It's old and worn out. The brown cushions are ripped in various places and the wood is dull and weathered, but it was ours. My mother wanted to get rid of it years ago, but I refused to give it up, so when Jen moved into her house I asked her to take it with her. The porch of my apartment building is too small or else I would have taken it home with me. It's more of a covering than a porch.

Jen pushes open the screen door and walks outside just as I run my hands over the seat and sit down on my side of the swing. I always sat on the left while Adric sat on the right. My eyes blur as I run my hand over the empty seat next to me and let the tears spill. My whole body is shaking and my sobs come out as if they're being choked out of me. I can barely breathe.

"I miss you so much. I can't do this without you, Adi. Why can't you come back? I would give up my life if I knew it would give you one more day on this earth. You were the greatest person I knew and I loved you more than anything. I still do. Everyone is different without you around to lighten the mood." I feel Jen's hand squeeze my shoulder and the tears come out in thick puddles now, soaking the seat beneath me. Having her comfort, makes me feel more vulnerable and I just want to let it all out.

"That's it, Phoenix. Let it out sweetie. He's listening." She kneels down in front of me and places her head on mine, her lips against the back of my

head as she soothes me. “I’ve been waiting for this day for years. It’s not healthy keeping it all in. He wouldn’t have wanted you harboring that kind of internal pain.”

She rubs circles on my back and we stay like this for a while, both of us in silence as I stare down at the seat Adric used to read his poetry to me from. It’s so easy to picture the image in my head. The wind blowing through his dark hair as he sat there with that huge Adric smile he used to wear so well. The one that made everyone stop and remember there was something to be grateful for. The one that made you wish you could look at that smile forever. He lived to make people happy. He had a smile that could light up the world. He just had a little rough side. A dark side that he never showed me. Even with the dark, he was and still is the best person I know. I wish I could see him one last time. One chance to tell him goodbye. He didn’t give me a chance to tell him I love him. If I could have him back to me just one time, I would never ask for anything again.

“I was worried about you yesterday. I’m sorry I gave you a hard time. I just didn’t know how else to handle it at the moment.”

I tilt my head and look up into her caring eyes. She’s always been so genuine having my best interest at heart and I love her for that. She’s been the best friend a person could ask for. “I know,” I whisper. “You don’t need to say anything, Jen. Your mommy instincts have always been the best part of you and I know you only have my best interests at heart.”

I sit up, allowing her to take a seat next to me on the swing. We both stare out over the railing of the porch and look up toward the sky, taking in the sight of the big, beautiful clouds. We both spent a lot of time outside on this swing as well. Whenever Jen would stay the night and Adric was busy with Kellan, Jen and I would sit outside for hours having our famous girl talks. This swing holds so many shared secrets between everyone. If this swing had lips, we’d all be in a world of deep shit.

“You know, I never thought I would be able to handle these two days being back to back. It’s killed me for years, leaving me emotionally crippled, unable to do anything but crawl up in bed for two days, unresponsive. Some years even completely drunk to numb the pain for a while. Yesterday when I left with Kellan . . .” I pause to swallow and tilt my head to look at Jen. She looks back, waiting for me to continue. “We went to the cemetery and it was a beautiful experience. We laughed, cried, and spoke of old memories and I felt more alive than I have in years. He’s the

only reason I'm able to be here today instead of curled up in bed. He's made me realize that by pushing back memories of my brother, that I'm killing what I have left of him. Why couldn't I see that before, Jen? What is wrong with me? Adric would be ashamed."

She smiles small and runs her hand over the bar above her. "Nothing is wrong with you. Everyone handles grief in different ways and you just had a hard time finding the best way for you. Kellan was a big part of Adric's life, of course he's able to ease some of that pain you're feeling. As much as I hate to say it, because I'm afraid of him hurting you, your brother would be so happy to see you two finding your way together. Just be careful. It's never safe having two brothers want you. It always leaves one getting hurt and not to mention, yourself."

A knot forms in my stomach as I remember Kellan's words. Kellan doesn't want me. At least not like I want him. He had sexual needs he took care of and that's all it was. He's probably planning his trip back to wherever he came from as we speak. Maybe that's for the best. That way no one has to hurt, except me. "That's the thing. Kellan doesn't want me. Not like that at least." I breathe. "We just had a little fun and that's all it was. It's over now. An act of—"

Jen turns all the way around so her knees are facing me now. She holds her arm up in front of her and her eyes widen. "Whoa, whoa wait. Back that up a minute, girlie." Her eyes turn curious as she stifles a smile. "What kind of fun are we talking about here? Like sex on a pool table fun, or pin the tail on the donkey kind of fun?"

My face flushes a deep shade of red as I realize what I just let slip. *Shit! I can't keep this a secret now.* Besides, I'm sure Kade will be quick to spread the news due to his hate and anger anyhow. She might as well hear it from me first. "We had sex," I say barely loud enough for her to hear. "On the roof of his tattoo shop."

I'm not the only one blushing now. Her whole face is red and her hand is working fast to fan her face off. "Oh my goodness. You lucky bitch," she screams. "I can't breathe and I'm not even the one that had sex with him. What is that saying? That sounds hot. The roof? It was good wasn't it? Wait, don't even tell me. It just has to be, right? Look at the boy. He's a walking orgasm. All a girl has to do is look at him and she gets her rocks off."

I can't help but to laugh as I watch her squirming in her seat, wiping at her sweaty forehead. I don't blame her. It's hot as hell out here and so is Kellan. It's bound to make anyone sweat. He is sex on a stick and he has the power to make any girl give in to his every want and need. That's what worries me. "I'm going to keep that my little secret, but I think you can guess for yourself." I smirk, making her shake her head and bite down on her lip. "Do I need to get your vibrator? I'll give you a little private time with your girlie bits if you need it. I don't mind."

We both burst out laughing and it feels good to let it all out. We haven't laughed like this in years. Not since before she got with Nate. He's kind of ruined everything over the last couple years. It makes me despise him.

Once the laughter stops and we catch our breath, her face takes on a serious look. "I think Nate found the vibrator. When I went grocery shopping this morning, I noticed the plastic looked a little torn as if someone was trying to take it out and mess with it. He's going to be pissed if he found it, Phoenix. He already complains about our sex life or the lack of, should I say. This is going to be like a blow to the face to him."

Rolling my eyes, I throw my legs up and cross them over her lap. "He doesn't deserve to get laid. He needs a good wake up call, Jen. Maybe what he needs is a blow to the face." I smile mischievously and raise an eyebrow as I pop my knuckles for show. "I'd be happy to knock some sense into him."

Both of our heads jolt up as we hear the sound of screeching tires. *Just lovely.*

Speaking of the devil, here he is now. Of course, he would have the worse timing. He always does. Everything about him is just bad. A bad seed is what he is. Just when we were letting loose and enjoying each other's company.

His rusted up Jeep comes to a screeching halt at the end of the driveway and then the driver side door swings open to an angry looking Nate.

"Oh crap! I think you should go." Jen pushes my legs down, jumps to her feet in a panic, and grabs my arm, pulling me up to mine. "I know you're going to be hard headed, but don't. Trust me, I'll call you later."

I watch her, watching him and the fear is visible in her eyes, making her whole body tense up as he stumbles out of the Jeep almost falling to his face in the grass. The asshole is clearly drunk and it's barely two in the afternoon, not to mention he's driving! The selfish asshole could kill

someone. I wish he had fallen on his face. I would have paid to see that crap. *What is with this dip-shit anyways? I have no idea what she's ever seen in him.*

Leaning into her ear, I whisper, “I don’t think so. He’s drunk and he looks like he’s about to hold up a bank or some shit. I’m not going anywhere so don’t even try that crap with me.”

Slamming the door behind him, he takes long strides though the grass, stops in front of us, and tilts his head to the side, tossing his cigarette down beside him. “What the fuck Jen? Don’t you have cleaning or some shit to do?” He twists his foot into the cigarette, putting it out as he exhales the smoke. “Get your ass inside and say goodbye to your friend. I told you I don’t want people over at my house unless I give you permission.”

“Excuse me?” I ask, being sure my ears heard him correctly. Jen takes a step back as if she’s about to obey his command, but I reach out grabbing her arm to stop her. Who does this son of a bitch think he is talking to her that way? I always knew there was something off about him. *Damn psycho, douche bag.* “I don’t know what makes you think you have the right to speak to her that way, but if I were you . . . I’d leave. You’ve clearly had too much to drink and it’s clouding your judgment.”

He looks at me in silence as he takes a step onto the first step, challenging me. He looks possessed as if this is the kind of thing that turns him on; belittling women. Laughing, he rubs his hand over his freshly shaven head and wriggles his brows at me. “Is that right?” He looks past me at Jen and smiles. “What do you say, Jen? Do you want me out of here?”

He takes another step so he’s on the second step now, causing me to instinctively throw my arm up and grab onto the porch post, separating the two before he gets too close. Jax is right inside that house and I refuse to leave him alone with the two of them.

“Answer me, woman!”

We both stare at Jen waiting for her to say something. I’m not sure why, because it doesn’t matter what she says. I want this asshole gone and I’ll make sure it happens. “Phoenix. You should just leave.” She forces a smile and reaches for my arm to pull it down. “Everything will be fine. I just need to get him inside so he can rest. He just needs a little food in his system. Like I said, I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“No, I’m good.” I grab onto the railing again and look into her eyes, letting her know how worried I am. “I’m not going anywhere until he’s

gone. You have a child right inside and he does not need to be around this. Even if that's what you choose to do, he doesn't deserve it." I turn back around to face Nate and he grins as if he's won. "Leave," I growl.

His face instantly turns to hatred as he steps up to stand right in front of me and places his finger to my forehead, his nail digging into my skin. It hurts, but I refuse to back down and show this coward any fear. "I'm not going anywhere, you—"

"Stop it, dammit!" Jen pushes her way in between us and slaps Nate's hand out of the way. "Phoenix, please!" Her eyes plead with me to listen, but I can't. I fear for her life. She's my best friend. I would never forgive myself if I left here and something happened to her. I don't know how far he would take it. You watch Lifetime movies about this sort of thing all the time. I won't cave in on this one. I won't, no matter how bad she wants me to.

"I'm not going anywhere, Jen. Didn't you hear me the first time?" *Is this girl freaking nuts?* She must not be as smart as I thought, if she thinks I'm falling for this crap. I've heard of too many women falling victim of domestic violence, thanks to my mother and her movies. I'm not stupid. I know abusive behavior when I see it. "Now go inside and lock the door, Jen."

Nate reaches around me and grips Jen's arm, pulling her into his chest. "You listen to that bitch and get inside. You heard her." He shoves me backwards as I reach for his arm. "I'm taking her inside with me and you better get the fuck off my property before I show you the things I can do. Just mind your own damn business. That's how little girls like you get hurt," he slurs.

Reaching for the screen door, he slings it open shoving Jen inside by her hair. I catch a glimpse of Jen's hands reaching for her hair, as she stumbles over the threshold, letting a small screech escape her lips.

Anger courses through me and I start shaking. I can't even believe what is happening right here in front of my face. How long has this crap been going on? I will cut this ugly piece of shit's dick off and store it on the mantle before letting him hurt her or Jax.

Following close behind them, I reach for the back of Nate's muscle shirt, stretching it backwards in my fist. I yank as hard as I can in an attempt to get him off her, but it's no use. "You sorry bastard! You're nothing but a waste of space. Don't you dare touch her."

Swinging his arm backwards, he slaps me across the face, sending me flying into the wall. The impact must have been enough to wake little Jax, because the room is filled with his screams and now . . . I want to scream.

He's sitting there in the middle of the living room floor, reaching out his arms for someone to hold him, his face red and wet with tears, clearly showing he's scared.

"It's okay, baby boy. Mommas right here," Jen cries out from in Nate's arms.

"Shut the fuck up!" Nate pushes Jen down onto the hardwood floor as she reaches her arms out for Jax. She lands face first onto the floor, her arms stretched out in front of her. "I can't handle all of this fucking noise. All I hear is waaaah wah waaaah. Now shut up for once," he says, covering his ears and leaning against the wall like a psychotic maniac losing his grip on reality.

Pushing myself to my feet, I run past Nate and over to where Jen's lying on the floor. She has blood running down her nose, probably from the impact of her face slamming into the floor. At this point, I could kill this son of a bitch. Jax is still screaming in the middle of the living room and Jen is now standing here in my arms with blood running down her face. *This is bullshit. This shouldn't be happening right now.*

I turn to face Nate, while holding my arms out, blocking Jen behind me as I start walking backwards toward Jax. Nate pushes away from the wall as if he's about to come after us. "Don't you fucking do it, Nate. Just leave. You're not wanted here. You need some serious help. You have anger problems and a drinking issue that needs to be dealt with"

Nate lets out a sadistic laugh as Jen bends down and reaches for Jax. We all just stand here in silence, waiting for Nate to speak. *He's so damn creepy.* I need to find a way to get him out of here before he hurts anyone else.

"I need help?" He rubs his hands over his head really fast and hard before turning around and repeatedly slamming his fists into the wall, leaving dents and holes. "I'll. Show. You. Who. Needs . . ." He talks while punching his fist into the wall in between each word. *This guy is really losing it.*

"You need to leave before he hurts you, Phoenix," Jen cries into my ear while gripping my arm. "Please do this for me. I don't want any of this on you. You have enough to take on."

“No!” I shake her arm off and reach into my pocket for my phone. “I’m not letting this scumbag hurt you anymore. This isn’t right.” My hand shakes as I scroll through my contacts before he sees what I’m doing. I find the number that I’m looking for and press the call button. Nate is still facing the wall, punching it, while slurring nonsense. If I’m going to get us any help, then it’s now.

When I see that the call timer is counting the call, I lock the screen and shove my phone back into my pocket, praying that I made the right decision. Luckily, I get my phone back into place right as he spins around and slaps himself in the face.

“What is wrong with me, huh?” He tilts his head to look at us. “You do this to me. Do you know that? You do this to me.” He slaps himself in the face again before taking a step forward and peeking his head around us to look at Jax. “Where’s my little boy? Come to daddy, Jax.” He holds his arms out and belches, while walking toward us.

“I don’t think so.” I put my hand on his chest, stopping him before he can reach them. “Don’t touch either one of them, you sick fuck.”

He looks down at my hand on his chest before bringing his eyes up to meet mine. His jaw twitches as he reaches up and grips my mouth, pulling my face to his. He blows his foul breath into my face and smiles. “Get the fuck out of my way.” He shoves my face, pushing me out of the way and reaching out for Jax.

“No! Don’t touch my baby,” Jen screams while walking backwards to get away from him. “You’ve had too much to drink. Let me make you some food and take care of you. You look tired, baby.” She reaches her arm out and Nate grabs it, pulling her and Jax into his reach.

“Shut the fuck up and give me my son.”

I start to panic at the thought of Nate hurting little Jax, so I do the only thing I can. I reach for the lamp on the nearby table and swing it into the side of Nate’s head, causing him to fall to the floor.

“Fuck you, Nate!” I reach my arm out for Jen to grab it. “Come on, Jen. We need to get out of here right now.”

We both look down at Nate as Jen rubs the back of Jax’s head to comfort him. “It’s okay baby.”

“You stupid bitch!” Nate reaches up to touch the side of his head and pulls his hand away to see blood. “You just made a huge mistake. Jen, you can thank your friend for what I’m about to do now.”

I push Jen toward the door and we both take off running as Nate scrambles to his feet. Right as we reach the door, he grabs on to the back of my shirt and pulls me backwards hard causing me to land on the ground. Jen stops to check on me and I wave my arm at her to go, while grabbing a hold of Nate's pant leg. "Get out, dammit! I'm fine."

Nate leans over me and grips my face in his hands, crushing it between his fingers and spits. "Stay out of Jen's life. She is mine. I own her."

The screen door swings open, causing all of us to stop and stare. Nate looks horrified as he looks up at Kellan towering over us.

As soon as I see him standing there, relief floods my body. His fists are clenched at his sides and his eyes are black from the dilation of his pupils as he takes in the sight in front of him. I somehow know he will stop at nothing to protect us. In this moment, I love him for that.

Kellan pushes Nate out of his way, causing him to land on his ass and reaches down to pick me up. His jaw clenches as he looks me in the eye and rubs his hand over my face. His touch is so soft and caring, but protective at the same time. "Are you okay?"

I nod my head and swallow.

"Are you serious?" Nate laughs, but I can tell he's nervous. "This asshole again." He gains his balance back, standing to his feet again.

"Ladies, get outside." Looking straight at Nate as if he's about to kill him, Kellan screams, "Now! I will take care of this."

Jen looks at Nate with tears staining her face before walking outside with me following right behind her. As soon as we're out the door, she breaks down in more tears. "Oh shit! What is Kellan going to do to him? This is all my fault. I should have told you a long time ago. I was scared. I was so scared."

I pull her and Jax into my arms and squeeze them close to me in a hug before walking her down the stairs and over to Kellan's truck. "I'm not even going to stand here and pretend like I'm not mad at you for not telling me. I am furious, trust me." I take deep breaths, inhaling through my nose while looking out into the empty street. "You could have gotten you and Jax both killed. Do you get that?" My voice comes out harsher than I meant it but it's out of sheer terror. I pull her back into my arms and rub the back of her head. This woman has no idea how broken I would be if something were to happen to her and Jax. I love them to death. They're my family.

She just nods her head and cries into my arms. She doesn't say anything and I don't expect her to. How can she?

Minutes later, the door to the house bursts open to Nate flying to the porch on his face. Kellan steps out behind him and walks over to stand above him. He crouches down next to his head and grabs his chin, pulling back and twisting it to face him. "If you ever put your hands on anyone again you'll regret it. I don't care if it's Jen, Phoenix, your child or anyone else. I will fucking kill you. That's a promise. You think I'm bull shitting, just try me and see. I will kill, for my family especially and I don't break a promise." He stops and yanks his head back further, causing Nate to growl. "Do you fucking hear me, you piece of shit? Your days of abusing women are over!"

Nate spits blood onto the porch but doesn't respond.

Kellan turns in our direction and raises his chin to us. "Get inside my truck and turn the other way." His jaw stays clenched as he watches me open the door and push Jen and Jax into the back of the truck before I jump in myself.

Jen's breathing quickens once I close the door behind us. "Shh! It's okay." I try to comfort her as I watch Kellan drag Nate over to his Jeep and throw him into the driver seat. I'm not really sure what is happening, but I can see Kellan leaning into the Jeep as if he's having some private words with Nate. I shouldn't be watching, but I can't pull my eyes away. I see Kellan's muscles flexing, but I can't see anything else.

I don't allow Jen to look up again until Nate's Jeep is started and he's hauling ass out of the driveway. I am happier than hell to see Nate gone. The only thing I'm worried about now, is him coming back to hurt them when they're alone.

We stay seated in the truck until Kellan walks over and opens the door for us. He instantly reaches inside and pulls me out, setting me down on my feet. He runs his hands over my face, examining me, while breathing heavily. "Are you hurt? Did that asshole hurt you?"

I shake my head and force a smile. I hurt a little, but he doesn't need to know. Right now, my concern is with Jen and Jax. "No, I'm fine."

He runs his hands over my face one last time before gripping my hair in his hands and leaning in, crushing his lips against mine. He kisses me long and deep before turning his head sideways and pulling away from the kiss. When he does, my heart stops. "Okay, good."

He exhales before looking past me and walking back over to the open door. Jen is still inside holding Jax while crying. Taking notice of Jen's bloody nose, he yanks his shirt over his head and grabs a bottle of water out of the front seat, pouring it onto his shirt. "Don't worry, Jen. I won't let that piece of shit hurt you again." He presses his wet shirt to Jen's face and brushes a piece of hair out of her face. "I can promise you that."

Jen looks up with wet eyes and stares at Kellan as he takes care of her. She doesn't say anything, but I can tell she's thankful for him helping her.

Seeing him take care of my best friend like this, makes my heart swell. He's everything any girl could ever want. Right now, I want him more than ever. I want him so much it hurts.

"Thank you, Kellan," she manages. "I don't know what else to say."

Kellan turns to look at me, but doesn't stop cleaning Jen's face. "You know I would never let anyone hurt you, ever." He looks angry as he shakes his head. "I could kill that son of a bitch."

Jen's hand reaches out and grabs Kellan's shirt, causing him to turn back and look at Jen again. "I've got it, Kellan. Thank you for helping."

Kellan looks at Jax, who is now calm and sleeping in his mom's arms, before walking away from the truck and pulling me along with him. "I have Tyler on his way here. He's bringing a new set of locks for the doors. That piece of shit is not getting back into this house." He looks over at the truck as if he's trying to be sure Jen isn't listening to what he's about to say, then he turns back around. "I saw Nate over a week ago at that bar next to the shop. He was pushing some woman around and I had to step in and help her. He's been doing this to others as well as Jen. I had no idea until today who he was."

Of course. That doesn't surprise me one bit. I always knew there was something off about him. *That jerk.* I just don't understand how Jen has dealt with all of this alone. "He's an asshole. I've always hated him. I can't even believe this happened. She's denied it for years, although I always had my suspicions." I shake my head. "I'll let Jen know once she calms down." *Great! More salt to rub on the wound.*

"They always do," he breathes. "Trust me. You just have to know the signs and help them. They won't help themselves because they're too blinded by love and by the image of who their loved ones used to be. I took care of him that night at the bar and made sure Maxine was safe." He turns his eyes away and looks at the ground. He almost looks ashamed.

This makes me really nervous for some reason. *What does he mean by 'he made sure she was safe?'* Jealously courses through me at the thought of him comforting another woman. I feel so stupid right now. I should be worrying about Jen, not myself. So I smile and lean in to kiss his cheek. "Thank you. Thank you for coming as quickly as you did."

He looks me in the eye and sucks in his bottom lip, cupping my face in his hands and pressing his forehead to mine. Him touching me makes my stomach fill up with butterflies. He looks as if he has something he wants to say, but instead he pulls away as Tyler pulls up on his motorcycle.

We both watch as Tyler quickly jumps off his bike and drops his helmet into the grass before running over to Kellan. "What's going on, bro? I got here as fast as I could."

Kellan reaches out and grips Tyler's shoulder. "Everything's fine now. Did you bring the set of locks? I need you to do me a favor and help me change the locks on this house. We have an asshole situation to deal with and I need to make sure my friend and her son are safe."

Tyler's eyes go dark and suddenly he looks pissed. "Do I need to fuck someone up, man? You know how I feel about that shit."

Jen finally steps out of the truck and her eyes land on Tyler. She looks a little shaken up, as he looks her up and down, then turns to face Kellan. "The situation is taken care of for now. If you want to help out in another way you can," Kellan says.

I'm not really sure what that means, but I hope to find out. I want Jen to feel as safe as possible.

Tyler nods his head and then turns to face Jen. He walks over to her and Jax and stops right in front of her. Reaching for her hand, he takes it in his and looks her in the eye. "I'm here to help you in any way I can. I know you don't know me, but I've seen enough women get hurt and it kills me. I'm going to change the locks on your door and if you don't mind, I'd like to stay here for a while to be sure he doesn't come back." Jen just stares at him with a tear running down her face. She doesn't know what to say or maybe, she's just going to decline the offer. For her sake, I hope she doesn't. "Is that okay with you?" He reaches out and places his hand on her chin, tilting her head up to look at him. "I promise it will be okay."

She nods her head and starts sobbing. Tyler doesn't hesitate with pulling her face into his chest and rubbing the back of her head. He may not know

her, but somehow I get the feeling, he'll care about anything his friend cares about. Tyler too, is a protector.

Kellan breaks my concentration, causing me to pull my eyes away from Jen and Tyler. "Go and take care of your friend and we'll take care of everything else."

I get ready to walk away but he grabs my arm to stop me. He just stands there looking in my eyes, but doesn't say anything. I get lost in his stare until he speaks again. "Never mind. Just take care of Jen." He smiles and I return his smile before walking away, and grabbing for Jen's arm.

She follows beside me, but stops to look back at Tyler as him and Kellan watch us walking away.

We really have to find a way to thank those boys later. For now, I need to take care of my family.

Chapter Fifteen

Phoenix

Shortly after changing the locks, Kellan left, saying he had a client waiting on a tattoo he promised to get done by today. I could tell he didn't want to leave and him walking out that door almost seemed like torture to him. He stood there hesitating for way too long, staring at me with this strange look in his eyes. Tyler gave him the nod and he finally left after telling him to take care of us girls and Jax.

A huge part of me wished he would've turned back around and kissed me again, but I knew that first kiss was only out of worry. Anyone else would've done the same if they were really worried about someone they cared about getting hurt. Although I know he cares about me, it hurts that it's not in the same way I care about him. Sometimes though, a girl just needs to be kissed senseless. The cycle with us seems like it will never change. It will always be me chasing him and him running away. Sucks for me and tears me apart.

When I saw him walk through Jen's door, I could've sworn that I'd died. My heart completely stopped and my breath caught in my throat, making me feel faint. Seeing him for the first time after sharing such an intimate moment with him did nothing but work me up and play with my emotions. Even with everything going on, my want for him heated me to the core and chilled me at the same time. That moment we shared on the roof was hot and even if he didn't feel it, it had some passionate moments.

Not just sex. It almost felt like more at times. He had to have felt it too. The way he looked into my eyes as he pushed deep inside me almost made me feel like he wanted what I did. *There I go again wishing for the impossible.*

About an hour or so after Kellan left, I pulled Jen aside to be sure she felt comfortable being left alone with Tyler. She peeked over her shoulder at Tyler bouncing Jax on his knee and her eyes lit up. Now that I think about it, I never saw Nate do that kind of stuff with Jax and I think that alone was enough to show Jen how sweet and caring Tyler must be. She just leaned into the door frame and crossed her arms over her chest as she watched Jax laugh and play with Tyler. "Yeah," she said. "We'll be fine." Seeing her happy made my heart melt. She has been dealt a shitty hand in life and never complains like most people would. She deserves a happy ending.

I was glad for Tyler's presence because I really had no choice but to leave. Dale called me in a panic needing me to cover the closing shift. I can't complain, it's my job as manager to cover all uncovered shifts. On the bright side, Saline is finally gone. As much as I shouldn't accuse without proof, if I had to guess, she was probably the reason I was finding money missing from the drawer over the last few months. I never trusted her, so to be honest, I'm glad she screwed up enough to get fired. If it weren't for Tyler being so kind and offering to stay the night at Jen's, I don't know what I would have done. If Tyler is anything like Kellan, then I have no worries that he'll keep her safe from Nate if he is stupid enough to come back tonight.

When I walk in the door of my apartment, Zoe is sitting on her knees, hunched over the coffee table. She looks really zoned in on whatever it is she's doing. I look around but don't see mom anywhere and to be honest, I'm kind of relieved. I walk over to stand behind Zoe. "You seem to be concentrating really hard." I half smile, while trying to get a peek. "Are you drawing something?"

She looks up from the pad of paper and her eyes are red and puffy. She gives me a hard look, eying me up and down before turning her attention back to the paper and wiping at her face. "No, I'm not." She tears off the top sheet of paper and wads it up in her hands before throwing it across the room at my waste basket like a basketball, missing the goal. "I'm trying to write a stupid poem and it's making me mad. I can't seem to do anything right. I don't know why Kellan thinks this will help me." She pauses to lean her head against the seat cushion, looking forlorn. "I don't know. I mean . . .

I guess it's helping a little bit, but it's still making me mad. Nothing sounds good. My life sucks. Why couldn't I get the smart gene like you or the artistic ability like Adric? I have nothing going for me."

I set my keys down on the table before taking a seat on the couch, leaning close to her shoulder. Zoe has always been really hard on herself and I hate her thought process. It hurts to see her this way and sometimes I just don't know what to say. "Zoe, there is nothing wrong with your life. You're young, pretty, smart and determined. You have a lot of things going for you. A lot more than some girls out there. Trust me, things aren't as bad as they seem." *I think.*

She laughs sarcastically as she pushes herself to her feet and grabs her notebook. "That's a funny joke. Should I laugh now or later? You can stop trying to play the good mom, ya know. I'm old enough to handle the truth now. I am what I am and I've come to terms with it." Closing the notebook, she tucks the pen behind her ear and rolls her eyes. "If I didn't have a point, to prove something to someone, I wouldn't even be trying to write this stupid poem. You don't need to feed me crap I will choke on. I'm almost fifteen. I may be young, but I'm not blind. I know I'm none of those things. I'm not like you, Phoenix and I don't expect to ever be."

"Excuse me. What do I have to do with anything? You don't need to be like me. Everyone is different Zoe." Since *when did this little girl get so damn dark inside?* Every day she gets a little angrier at the world and it scares me. "You must be blind if you can't see all of those good things about yourself. You better get your head out of your ass before you end up making some stupid decision like . . . smoking for example. You need to quit that crap, Zoe. You can be anything you want to be if you would actually give a crap and try."

"Whatever. Just leave me alone. I don't need some stupid lecture from you." Taking a deep breath, she turns for the front door and stops right before walking outside. "Can I have your room tonight? Mom has it every night and I could use some privacy to concentrate. I'm sure mom will be up all night rambling and crying to herself anyways. I think she broke into grandma's stash. She's losing it and I'm going insane just by watching her lose it. I need my own room."

That's just what I need to hear. Mom drinking again is not a good idea. I still remember those nights of finding her on the floor next to the couch with puke all over her face. She thinks I was too young to remember at the

time, but I wasn't and no matter how hard she tried to convince me it was my imagination, I knew it wasn't. I think I even remember Kellan and Adric carrying her upstairs late one night when my dad didn't come home. It was not a pretty sight.

I huff at the thought. "Yeah, that's fine. I have to work all night anyways so I won't be back until after two sometime. Just let mom know when she wakes up that I'll be gone all night and I said it was fine for you to take the room tonight."

I watch her as she nods her head and opens the door. "Where are you going?"

"Just out with a few friends. I'll be back in a few hours. I already told mom earlier and she was okay with it."

"If you say so. Just stay out of trouble," I mumble and she just rolls her eyes and walks out the door closing it behind her.

Leaning my head against the couch cushion, I look around the house and take in the mess. There are soda cans, candy wrappers and dishes sitting around my once spotless apartment. I hate a messy place. It drives me mad. It's only been a few days and already this house looks like crap.

I stand up and start on the mess. Might as well before it gets too bad. Plus, it would help to keep my mind busy until I have to leave for work.

An hour later, I am out the door and headed to the bar. I'm so deep in thought, I don't even realize until I get there, that it's Kade's night to work. He gives me a hard look as soon as I walk through the door and I instantly regret coming in.

Just great...this ought to be fun.

Kellan

When I got that call from Phoenix, I thought it was weird because she never calls, but when all I heard was screaming and yelling in the background I about lost my shit. I couldn't get out of this shop fast enough. Thoughts of someone possibly hurting her made my blood boil and had my adrenaline pumping like mad. There is no doubt in my mind that I wouldn't fuck someone's world up for laying a hand on that woman. Just the thought alone lights a fire in my chest. I dropped that tattoo gun down without a second thought, telling Tyler I had some shit to resolve. My client wasn't

too happy, but I could have cared less at the moment. I never stop in the middle of an appointment, but with this, I had no choice.

There was only one problem. I didn't know where she was and she clearly couldn't talk. I only had one choice, to call in a favor to an old friend. I know this guy that is a whiz at computers and shit. It may seem stalkerish to have him track the location of her number but desperate times call for desperate measures.

When I got there and saw her down on the ground, it took everything in me not to chop that son of a bitch's balls off and shove them down his throat. A man should never lay his hands on a woman and knowing I've caught this same douche in the act more than once made it worse. I hate to see the ones I care about hurt and the look on her face when I walked through that door about killed me. I wanted nothing more than to pull her in my arms and comfort her. What good would that do though? Having her close can only hurt her more. *Damn! Shit! I'm in a bad position.*

"That feels good," the feisty blond moans from below me, sounding as if I've just hit the spot, bringing her to climax. She runs her hand up the inside of her thigh and leans her head back looking completely satisfied. "I like it hard and deep. Don't stop." Her voice comes out breathy as she arches her back, exposing even more of her over inflated breast. Someone's a little desperate for my attention and unfortunately, desperate is far from sexy.

Scowling, I pull my head out of the damn clouds and focus my attention in front of me. I spread her long, slender legs wider and lean in to get a better look at the cherry blossom covering the inside of her thigh. "Be still if you don't want a shitty tattoo permanently stained on your skin." Even with this chick constantly moving around in her seat, I have to admit the work is still coming along beautifully. *What can I say, I'm good at what I do.* "We're almost done here and then we'll get you on your way," I say stiffly, while holding her wandering leg still so I can focus.

Disbelief crosses her soft pale features, no doubt confused as to why I haven't taken her right here in this chair, giving into her obvious desire to have me. Maybe she's used to getting what her little heart desires. I can see why because her beauty is enough to stun the average male. Her eyes trail from my lips, down to the tattoo gun in my hand. "I get the feeling someone's trying to get rid of me. Not in the mood for games today?" Her

eyes lock on mine, and suddenly the blues don't seem so bright anymore. It's as if me not wanting her has crushed her whole ego.

Yeah, so maybe I do want to get rid of her. What she doesn't get is, her looking at me this way is doing nothing but bringing back memories of me burying myself deep inside Phoenix on the roof last night. I swear I could close my eyes, flip this chick over and take her right here in this chair, but I would only be imaging it were Phoenix. That's not exactly fair to anyone. Not that I usually play fair. Not anymore.

"Look. No disrespect, but I have places I'd like to be. Being here right now is keeping me from that. I appreciate your business as well as the new clientele you've brought me over the months, but I'm in no mood to be here and I have a lot of shit on my mind."

I bring the needle back down to meet her thigh and she moans while trying to hide the pain. I know these games all too well. Many girls come in here and act as if getting a tattoo feels good, in an attempt to get Tyler or myself turned on. In the past, something like this might have worked. In fact, it would have worked; however, not now. Not after getting a taste of the sweet perfection that taste and smell of cupcakes. Now every time I look at a cupcake, I'll probably get a fuckin' boner.

"Well gorgeous, from the look on your face, I would say it has something to do with a woman," she says while peeking up at me and gripping the chair. "If any girl is making you feel like what I think you're feeling." She pauses to look down at my dick and when she does, her lips curl up into a playful smirk. "Then she's not worth your time or your pleasure."

I set the gun down, clean the tattoo, smear a layer of ointment over it and cover it before spinning in my chair and pulling the gloves off. "Something like that. It's complicated as shit." I turn back around and look her in the eye, causing her to get a spark of hope. "And trust me, she is very worth it."

I get ready to stand up, but she reaches for my shirt, fistings it, and pulls me into the chair so my hands are resting on either sides of her thighs. She bends down and brushes her lips against my ear while running her hand up the back of my shirt. "If she's causing you pain then she's not worth it." She licks my ear before cupping my face and pulling it closer to hers. "I'm all yours if you want. I can do plenty of things to keep your mind off of her." She growls the last word then brushes her bottom lip over my chin stopping

right below my mouth. I can feel her warm breath on my lips and if she breathes any heavier, our lips will be touching. *Hell no. I'm not having that.*

I turn my face away from hers and grip her waist, pulling her up to her feet as I back away. She looks at me, waiting on my next move, but I just turn around and walk toward the display. “I’m good. Like I said, I have places to be,” I say stiffly.

Adjusting her little jean shorts to cover her panties, she shakes her head and reaches on the ground for her purse. “Alright then.” She plops her purse down onto the display and starts digging through it, while looking as if she’s just been played. “What do I still owe you?”

At this point, I could care less. I just want to get out of here before I lose my mind and break something a hell of a lot bigger than the mirror I smashed last week.

Why can’t I stop thinking about her? She’s fucking destroying me. Earlier before I left, she said she had to work tonight. I can’t help but to wonder if her and my brother share the same shift. If he knows what happened with us, I wouldn’t be surprised if he tries to get into her pants just to win her back over. Just the thought of him taking her in the back and fucking her has me going crazy. *Man, I’m all kinds of fucked up.*

“I don’t know. Just give me thirty. We’ll get you on your way and we’ll call it even.”

She pulls the money out of her wallet and slams it down on the counter while placing a cigarette between her plump lips. Then she looks up and pulls the cigarette out with a small smile. “Well at least I get a discount out of this. Although, I would’ve liked something *else* better. You’ll be seeing more of me in the future. No one’s as good with their hands as you are.”

Silently, I grab the cash and shove it into the drawer before walking her over to the door. “Good to know. Did you lock your doors?”

She gives me a questionable look while digging for her keys. “Yeah, why?”

“Just being cautious.” I push the door open for her and lean against it as I watch her walk over to her car being sure she makes it there safely. As soon as she drives off, I quickly shut down the shop and lock the door behind me.

I have my Harley tonight and all I want to do is hurry and lock up so I can jump on, take her for a ride and feel the wind against my face.

Once outside, I ride heated and angered, the cool air giving me a bit of release. I ride for a good hour before I finally pull into my drive and park it outside of the garage. Riding did little to ease my mind. Not like it usually does.

I step into the house to find Rayne standing right inside waiting on me. I kneel down in front of her and run my hands over her head, rubbing behind her ear over the jagged scar that was left there by her previous owners. The scar runs at least a good seven inches long. It takes a lot for me to swallow my anger every time I feel it. She didn't deserve the treatment she got. It's all bullshit. "Is my girl hungry?" She wags her tail and places her paw on my knee. "Come on girl."

She follows behind me to the kitchen and sits down in front of her bowl as I open a can of her favorite food and fill her dish up with fresh water. "There you go." I pat her head and then walk over to take a seat on the nearest bar stool.

Burying my head in my hands, I sit there feeling restless. My leg is bouncing, my pulse is racing and my head feels cloudy as shit. "Fuck!" I slam my fist down onto the granite counter-top before throwing my keys across the room. *I can't do this.* I can't sit still while wondering what is going on at the bar.

A few minutes later, my thoughts leave me naked and standing in the shower with my hands pressed against the wall. I pull one hand away to rub over my face as the cool water beats against my head, running down to my chest and legs. As soon as my eyes close, images of me and Phoenix naked on the roof of my shop consume my thoughts. Her flawless body pressed against mine, our lips caressing each other as I taste her tongue in my mouth and damn . . . she tastes so good. Everywhere. I should have known better than to get a taste. Now my body won't only want it, but crave it.

Without looking down, I can feel my thoughts have aroused me. *Of course.* This girl doesn't even have to be around and she still gets me stiffer than any other girl.

Grabbing my shaft, I start to stroke myself, running my hand up and down its length. While stroking myself, I picture the curviness of her plump ass as I spread her cheeks, burying myself deep between those thighs. Her soft lips as they hungrily sucked mine as if she never wanted to let go. The way her sex tasted against my tongue as I pleasured her. All of these things run through my mind until I feel a tug on my balls, and I release myself

right here in the shower, my cum mixing with the water and slipping down the drain. My shoulders slump and my breathing comes out heavy as I rub both hands over my face and lean against the wall. This girl is doing something to me and I don't know what the hell I'm going to do about it.

* * *

I pull my truck up to the bar and park it in the nearest spot, while hating myself for not being stronger. I sit there for a minute before pulling my keys out of the ignition and resting my head against the seat, exhaling. I knew there would be no way I would make it through the night without making an appearance at the bar to check up on things. I was fighting a losing battle and with this one, I'm afraid I might always lose.

When I get out of the truck, I slam the door behind me, and look up to see Martin making his way out of the bar. With a nod, he turns and heads my direction while shaking his head. He stops in front of me and places both hands on my shoulders, forcing a smile. I have a feeling the talk is coming. "How ya doing, old man?" I ask while slapping him on the back in greeting.

"Oh, you know. The wife is a pain. The kids are still spending my money. I'm an old grumpy bastard. Pretty much the same old shit but a different day." I smile and nod my head as he watches me intently, just waiting to start it up. The smile has left his face and is now replaced with all seriousness. I have known this man pretty much my whole life, but no one but Adric knows. "I can't believe you risked coming back? What was the point of me doing all this work of keeping my eye out over the years when you were going to just come and stir things up again anyways? This is not good, kid. You didn't tell me you were here when we talked on the phone last week. Come on now."

Damn this old man. I've been paying him for years to keep his eye out for Kade and Phoenix since I couldn't be here to keep them safe. I had no other choice. Being in contact with my family would've resulted in someone getting hurt. I should've thought things through before doing what I did, but in the heat of the moment, I could've killed a son of a bitch for letting Adric get his hands on those pills.

Before leaving town, I found Martin and he hooked me up with a ride. He made sure I made it to Chicago with no trace and even found me a roommate that needed help around his shop. It was all cash pay and I

managed to save up a shit ton of money before making my way back close to home and opening up *Adi's Attic*.

The problem is, I never told him I was coming or that I was even close to home. A big problem on his end is he failed to mention the relationship between my brother and Phoenix. It should've been stopped a long time ago, but I won't bother him with the details now. I need to get inside that bar, now.

I lean my weight against the side of my truck and cross my arms in front of me in frustration. "It wasn't planned, Martin. I needed to be close to home so I opened a tattoo shop about fifteen minutes out of town, expecting no one would even notice. Well, I was wrong. My bad. Guess I'm not as smart as I should be, old man."

He lets out a deep chuckle and shifts his weight to his good leg. "Hell, who is? Just do me a favor and don't get into some shit you can't get out of. I'm getting too old to be spending my nights at a damn bar. I don't know how much longer I can be around to help. The old lady has been riding me lately about staying home."

The old man's right. He shouldn't be doing this anymore. With me being gone for so long, I didn't even think of how the old man has been aging and probably getting old and frail by now. His health doesn't look to be doing any better either. "I know. I'll make sure things stay good. Just go and relax. You've done enough." I grip his shoulder and squeeze. "Thanks for everything. I should get inside."

I get ready to walk away, but he reaches out his arm to stop me. "Wait."

I stop and turn around to face him. He's breathing heavily as if he's fighting to catch his breath. Maybe he really should lay off the late night drinking. "It's pretty tense in there. Kade is one hotheaded son of a bitch. Just like his older brother. Just watch your back and don't make things worse."

I nod my head and walk away from the old man, leaving him standing by my truck. If Kades in there hotheaded and pissed off, then there's a chance he might be giving Phoenix some shit. I'm not letting that crap go down. Not while I'm here.

I yank the heavy metal door of the side entrance open and step into the dim bar. The place is quiet, not too busy for it being a band night. There's a group of men playing a game of pool, a small group by one of the dart boards, and a few ladies chatting at the bar.

I take a quick glance around the room to see if I can spot Phoenix but all I see is Kade, behind the bar playing with his phone. It takes him a few minutes before he looks up, spotting me, as I take a seat in one of the stools. As soon as he notices me, he slams his phone onto the register and leans above it, gripping the counter. “Are you shitting me? You just can’t stay away can you?” He turns to face me, his face red in anger. I guess I’ll never make a good impression with my little bro again. Not that I can blame him. I hate *myself* most of the time. “Don’t you have some tattoos or some shit to give? Whatever you’ve been doing for the last eight years. You should go.”

I stare at him while pulling out my wallet and digging through it for cash. I grab a twenty and place it on the bar. “Two shots of Jack, my man.”

His lip curls up into a half smirk, as he looks me in the eye. Then without a word, he walks away and pours the two shots. He tosses the empty bottle into the trash and then slams the glasses down in front of me. I pull one shot in front of me and push the other in front of him. He looks hesitant but finally grabs the shot slamming it back as I slam mine. He only eyes me as he grabs the twenty and walks away. “I’m keeping the change.”

“Yeah, well I figured you would. You always had a thing for stealing my change around the house.”

“Yeah, well you were never very good at hiding it. What can I say?”

I run my finger over the rim of the glass while leaning over the bar. The women beside me look over and smile. Out of respect, I greet them. “Hey Ladies.” I have no interest in talking with them though. I turn my attention back to Kade. “You plan on hating me forever?”

Opening another bottle of Jack, he slams it down before grabbing two more shot glasses and filling them up. “There’s a huge chance in that, big bro. It’s kind of hard to get over eight years. Some just aren’t as forgiving as Phoenix seems to be.” He sets a glass down in front of me and raises the other one in the air. “Here’s to you fucking Phoenix over in more ways than one.”

I watch him as he tilts the glass back and swallows the shot. Then I hold mine up with a smirk. “And here’s to making her scream my name.” I slam it back and run my tongue over my ring. “In more ways than one.”

I shouldn’t have said that, but I’m beyond pissed. She doesn’t belong to him. I will never allow it and he needs to know it.

Just then, Phoenix walks out, her color instantly draining from her face as she tries to focus on what one of her customers is saying. For my sake, I

hope she doesn't try to focus too hard, because he looks just her type.

Damn she's so beautiful . . .

Chapter Sixteen

Phoenix

I can almost *feel* the color drain from my face as my eyes instantly seek out Kellan, who just so happens to be sitting on a bar stool across from where Kade is standing. *Damn he makes that bar stool look hot, as weird as it sounds.* The way his right leg is hiked up on the foot railing, bent at the knee, his jeans fitting just right, hugging those sexy thighs of his. *Oh, how I want to dig my nails into their thickness and trail kisses down that perfect body of his.* Then that black shirt, so fit and snug, revealing the curves of his defined chest that I didn't even bother running my hands up. I could kick my own ass. *Ugh! Why?* I swear this is torture.

Seeing him here, right now, is not what I expected. A part of me wishes he would pull me into the back office and do dirty things to me on top of that desk. I clench my legs at the thought. A girl can dream, which brings me back to the present. He really seemed like he had things he had to get done earlier.

Now that I see him sitting here with a change of clothing, looking sexy as hell, I can't help but to wonder if he truly was finishing up a tattoo today. I'm sure he could have any girl he wanted. Maybe he was with some girl and he changed to get her smell off his clothing. It wouldn't surprise me, but the thought somehow infuriates me. I will rip a girl's nipples off for touching him. I really need to stop this before I drive myself crazy. He's a free man. Just because we had sex, does not mean I have any claim to him. I need to remind myself this before I get hurt.

I can feel the tension in the room thicken as both the boys look my direction and suddenly, I feel as if I can't even breathe. *This cannot be good. Not good at all.*

“Hey, baby. “It’s been a long time.”

It takes a minute for my mind to register someone is talking to me and even when it does, I still keep my eyes in front of me as I reach out and grip the edge of the table. “Yeah, you need another beer,” I ask in a whisper. “I’ll be right back.”

“No, wait . . .”

I take off without even paying attention to what just came out of my mouth or his mouth, actually. I can't even think straight. I feel like I'm drunk, yet all I've had is water. *Is the water here spiked? No, it has to just be him.* I need to see why he's here. It can't be for me, unless something happened to Jen. She hasn't responded to me in a while, actually. *Crap!*

As I approach, Kellan stares at me from his stool while playing with the empty glass in front of him. His eyes are dark, fierce and almost tormented as he fights some kind of internal battle, never taking his eyes away from mine. It's as if he's trying to read my mind to figure something out.

I stop right in front of him and look between the two men. They both look as if they're waiting on something, so I decide to break the awkward silence. I can't take it. Focusing my attention on Kellan, I ask, "Have you talked to Jen? She hasn't answered my texts in a while. I'm beginning to worry. Is she all right?"

The tension in the room deepens as Kade eyes his older brother waiting on a response. He looks pissed. I guess I sort of forgot to mention to him what happened with Nate. With all of the hate Kade's been spitting at me tonight, I guess it kind of slipped my mind.

Standing, Kellan pushes the bar stool behind him and reaches out as if he's about to touch my lips, but then stops, leaning his arm on top of the bar instead. His eyes linger over to Kade before he turns back to me. "I talked to Tyler on the way here and he said Jen and Jax have been sound asleep for the last hour. You don't need to worry. I can promise you Nate will not be coming back and if he does, Tyler will take care of him. They're safe, trust me."

"Are you sure of that?" Kade puts in his two cents, clearly pissed off that he wasn't included. "I'm not so sure we can trust you," he admits. He looks to me as if I'm the one that said it in the first place. "Right, Phoenix?"

I get ready to answer, until a voice I recognize so well interrupts. A voice I used to love hearing in the middle of the night, when I woke up full of sweat, wanting to run off to the Ranch. A voice that used to make me smile and laugh, even when inside I didn't feel it. A voice I told myself I would be okay with never hearing again. Aiden Lane, my first and only serious boyfriend. The one I gave myself to.

"Phoenix." I feel a hand on my shoulder, soft and gentle. He was always so gentle with me as if I was made of glass and would shatter with one

wrong move. That made me feel so vulnerable and weak. Back then, I was weak.

“Aiden,” I whisper in surprise.

The look on the boys’ faces when I whisper that name is almost enough to kill. I know Kade remembers him, but Kellan, I’m not so sure of. I know for a fact he has no idea he’s my ex.

Pools of emotions swarm through me as I turn around and set my eyes on his charmingly handsome face. He’s standing there smiling as if seeing me is the best part of his day. It always had been.

His bright emerald eyes light up as his beautiful smile broadens. His chestnut hair is short, spiked slightly in the front in a sexy carefree way that makes me remember what it was like running my fingers through it at night. He’s wearing a mint green polo that looks beautiful against his tanned skin, paired off with a pair of pale blue jeans that rest perfectly against his pair of white Vans. He’s just as delicious as I remember and seeing him almost makes it feel as if he never left. The day he left, I was heartbroken. I cried for weeks.

He holds his arms out for me as he did in the past, knowing I would fall into them every time. I go to them without question and he hugs me tightly, rocking me back and forth. “I was hoping I could still find you here.” He pulls away and grabs my arms. “How have you been? Do you have a minute?” He looks beside him at Kade and nods his head. “Kade. Good to see you.” Then he turns to Kellan, who is standing there with a blank expression. He hesitates for a moment before finally speaking. “Aiden.” He holds out his hand for Kellan to shake and he takes it, squeezing tightly with hard eyes.

“Kellan. A friend of Phoenix’s,” he says stiffly while shaking his hand. “Are you from around here, Aiden?”

I pull Kellan’s hand away from Aiden’s and laugh nervously. That shake didn’t seem too friendly. “Aiden used to live here, but he moved about a year ago for his job. It involved a lot of traveling.”

“Actually, I just moved back. That’s why I’m here.” Aiden reaches over and brushes a piece of hair behind my ear. Somehow, that gets me nervous. It feels just a little too intimate and I’m already completely confused as it is. “I was hoping I could get a moment alone with you.” He turns to the boys and flashes them a smile. “If you boys don’t mind, of course. I don’t mean to me rude.”

Kade snickers before running his tongue over his teeth with a look of disgust. For some reason, he always hated Aiden. “Of course not, old friend. I have some ladies to tend to anyways.” He looks at me harshly. “Excuse me while I do my job.” Then he walks over to, no doubt, charm the women that have been staring at both him and Kellan this whole time.

I tilt my head and bite my tongue. That asshole. There’s not one damn person in this whole bar that needs a drink. I know how to do my job. I could reach out and punch him in the throat. I bet those girls would get a kick out of that.

Pulling out the stool, Kellan plops his butt back down on it and gives us a nod as if saying he’s cool with it. Then he reaches behind the bar and pulls out a bottle of Whiskey.

I clear my throat and focus on Aiden. “Sure, Aiden. Sorry,” I whisper embarrassed. “Let’s go over here where it’s quiet.”

I lead him over to a table in the back corner of the room. The whole time we’re walking, my heart is pounding against my ribcage. When he left, we were madly in love. We only broke it off because of his need to travel. Seeing him now, I can’t help but to wonder where we would be if he never left or if I had gone with him when he asked. I couldn’t. I wouldn’t leave Adric. Alba is where my heart will always be.

“So . . . Aiden. Wow, you look really good.” *And he does.* I smile up at him before leaning in to give him another hug. I don’t know why I feel the need to do this, but I do. With him, I know I always can. With Kellan, not so much. I want to touch him, but I’m afraid. Afraid he won’t want me to or that he will want me to. I can’t figure it out. With Aiden, it was always easy.

His arms tighten around me as his lips meet the back of my head, soft and gentle. “It feels so good to hold you, baby. I’ve missed touching you so much.”

I pull away nervously and lean against the table behind me. I almost miss it, but somehow catch myself before looking like an idiot. *Thank goodness.* I look over toward the bar, unable to fight the urge to see if Kellans still here and watching. He’s still in the same spot, his eyes focused directly on us, looking on edge as he tilts back the bottle of Whiskey. He’s definitely watching. That makes me nervous. “So you’re back,” I say changing the subject. “What are you doing back? Not that it’s a bad thing. It’s just . . . I thought you said you would never move back to this crappy town.”

He lets out a chuckle and rubs his hands together. It was always a nervous habit of his. It used to drive me nuts. “You want the truth?” He looks down to meet my eyes and I look up nervously, unsure of the answer.

“The truth is always a good place to start.” Wish I had the nerve to tell Kellan that. “Is your mom sick again?”

He reaches out and grabs my hand, his thumb rubbing mine. “No, she’s fine. I missed you.” He swallows and places his other hand on top of mine and squeezes it. “Business didn’t go quite the way I planned and it made me realize I was stupid to leave in the first place. I loved you. Hell, I still do, Phoenix.”

“Umm . . .” I swallow and look over toward the bar again and notice Kellan beginning to stand up. He’s probably about to leave and I didn’t even get a chance to be close to him. *I’m a fool for even caring.* “I wasn’t expecting this, Aiden. I don’t know what to say.”

“I know I should have called first. There were so many times I wanted to call or text, but I didn’t know how to start.” He reaches out to run a finger over my lips and his touch is so gentle it tickles. “Let me take you out on a date. We can start over and—“

Before I can process what he is saying or even think of how I am going to respond, I feel a hand grip my waist and suddenly, I’m pressed into a stiff body. A rough hand cups around my cheek as a set of lips roughly take mine, sucking and nibbling. *He tastes so good . . .*

It doesn’t take me seeing his face or hearing his voice to know it’s him. It’s all there in the taste of his mouth and the way he makes my body tremble with one touch. His lips take mine, his body claiming me as he holds me closely against him. The feeling is so intoxicating I can’t even breathe.

Finally, our lips part and Kellan is standing above me, holding my face as he looks down into my eyes. “I’m going outside to make a call. I’m not going anywhere.” He looks beside us at a stunned Aiden and grips my waist tighter, running his lips up my neck. “I’ll be right back.” He gives him a warning look before kissing my lips again, but gently this time, tasting me and breathing heavily as if he’s just run a marathon.

When he’s done, he looks over at Kade who is angrily slamming down glasses, preparing some drinks for the girls in front of him. Kade keeps his eyes on Kellan as he walks out the door, looking as if he’s ready to smash his face in.

My mind is spinning or maybe it's just the room. I can't tell right now.
What the hell just happened?

"So you have a boyfriend," Aiden asks through tight lips. "It would have been nice if you told me in the first place and saved me from embarrassment."

"No," I breathe. "He's not my boyfriend." *I could only wish.* I reach up and touch my lips without thinking. "He's an old friend. It's complicated."

Aiden reaches in his pocket and pulls out his keys. "I can tell. Well, once you get over this complication, my number's the same as before. Give me a call. I should get going."

He turns to leave, but I reach out and grab his hand, stopping him. "Wait." I look at him, wishing I could want him like he wants me, but I just don't feel it anymore. I guess sometimes distance doesn't make the heart grow fonder. Sometimes the wives tales are wrong. All I can think about is Kellan. He occupies every spot in my brain, destroying me bit by bit, leaving no room for anyone else. "I'm sorry, Aiden. It was nice seeing you."

His hand slips from mine and he walks away. Walks away as I stand there stunned, still touching my lips, while leaning against the table for support. Since when did things become so complicated?

I'm standing here alone, lost in thought when I hear someone trying to get my attention by the pool table.

"Yo, Phoenix. Wake up. We could use another round of beer over here."

I shake my head and try to stand, but I get dizzy for a moment and have to catch myself. Looking around the bar, the faces start to blur and my breathing quickens. *Damn anxiety!* It always hits at the wrong times. I close my eyes and rub my hands over my face while taking long, deep breaths in an attempt to calm down and get a grip. "I'll be right there," I barely get out because my voice cracks. "Just give me a minute."

I stand there for I don't know how long, gripping the edge of the table and trying to clear my thoughts, before I finally feel somewhat normal. I release the table and walk over toward the pool table, but when I get there, all of the bottles are full. "You guys are good?" I ask James, one of the regulars.

He positions his pool stick and nods his head. "Yeah, are you okay? Maybe you need a break. You spend too much time here," he says while squeezing my arm. "Why don't you let that other dude up there fill in for

you? He's the one that brought us our drinks. There's no reason to have three of you here right now." He knocks a ball into the right pocket and looks up as I stand there staring like an idiot. "And where's that band? Isn't it band night?"

Ah, shit! He's right. It is band night. I almost forgot. "Sorry about that," I apologize. "I just needed a moment to myself. The band should be here soon."

James smiles and elbows his friend in the side to get his attention. "Your turn, dumbass." He takes a sip of his beer and smiles. "No worries, beautiful." Then he sets it down and gets back to his game.

Kade is just hanging up the phone as I make my way up to the bar. He looks at me and grips his curls in his hand before leaning over the bar. "Well, looks like we're shit out of luck for music tonight. The band obviously has van troubles. Those little shits better not be lying."

Dale hates the bar going without a band on band night. He says it gives the bar a bad rep when we promise something we can't deliver. Very true. I don't blame him. His business is so successful because of that kind of thinking. "Well, what about Blindside? Can they fill in for the night?"

Kade looks up, his eyes settle behind me and he smiles. "Nah, they can't, but maybe my big bro here can." He smirks. "You know how to play guitar, right?" He laughs under his breath and tosses me a towel to help clean. "Maybe you can save the night. Be everyone's fucking hero, for once."

What is he doing? He knows Kellan can't sing for crap. He always did, just messing around when we were younger, but even he admitted he sucked. He's doing this on purpose to challenge Kellan. He knows Kellan will never say no to a challenge.

"Kade, no. It's fine. We don't need a band. It's not even busy tonight," I say a little too desperate to protect Kellan. I turn to Kellan but he just walks back out the door without a word.

"Damn you, Kade. Why do you have to be such an ass?"

"It's just my thing, you know. I was always the asshole brother and Kellan was always the kind, protective one. Let him be the damn hero again. Are you worried he can't take the heat?"

I shake my head and lean over the bar, covering my mouth with my right hand. When I look up again, I see Kellan walk in with his guitar in hand. *Oh, how he looks so sexy with that thing.* Too bad, he's going to

embarrass himself. He can't hold a tune for crap and people don't just want to see a band to hear them play music. They want to hear them pour their heart and soul into the lyrics as well.

I grab Kellan's arm as he walks over toward the stage. "Kellan, you don't have to do this. Kade is just trying to work your nerves. You know that."

Kellan smiles as if he could care less. "It's cool. I've kind of wanted to play lately anyways." He grabs my chin and tilts it up. "I see you still worry as much as you used to. Don't stress over it. You're too tense." He leans in and runs his lips over my neck and whispers, "You need a long, deep massage. Playing will help work my fingers first."

Then he walks away, leaving me standing there on weak legs.

Kade leans over the bar with a cocky smile. "This should be good. Good thing I cleaned my ears today." He motions me behind the bar with his head. "I could use a little help back here, now that your boyfriends are preoccupied with other things."

I flash him a dirty look. "Ha! Very funny, dick." We both smile, although I know his is only because he's counting on Kellan to make a fool of himself. Not that it really matters. Kellan is never embarrassed. He's not afraid of who he is or what people think of him. That's one reason I've always been so drawn to him.

Cleaning up the mess, I sneak a peek in Kellan's direction as he sets up the microphone and stool, turning all the equipment on.

"Kade," I whisper, looking back at him. He stops what he's doing to meet my gaze. "I'm sorry about how things went down. What you and I had was just for fun, right?" I ask hopeful. I can't stand things being so tense between us.

He clenches his jaw and glances over at the stage. "I guess you'll never know." He shoves his hands in his pocket and leans his hip against the bar. "The question is, would it have mattered?"

I never stopped to ask myself that before. The question kind of throws me off. "I don't know," I whisper. "We've always just been friends. I never expected you to kiss me that day or for me to find you naked in my bed, Kade. I don't know how to answer that."

He steps closer to me, so his front side is pressed against part of my ass. Then he leans over me and reaches for a lime and whispers, "You liked it. Admit it."

My eyes linger over to the stage. Kellan is sitting on the stool, messing with the strings on his guitar, but his eyes are zoned in on Kade. I can't really read his expression, but it doesn't look good.

I scoot my way across the bar so I'm free from Kade's body. This causes Kade to laugh. "What? Is Kellan your boyfriend now? Is he going to get jealous if I do this?"

Kade leans in as if he's about to kiss my neck, but Kellan's words stop him, causing him to look toward the stage.

"The song I'm about to play," he pauses, looks up to the ceiling, and points, "Is for you brother. Your memory will live on. Not a day goes by I don't fucking miss you, my best friend."

Everyone in the bar goes silent as Kellan begins to strum away at his guitar to Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Simple Man*. Even Kade watches intently, knowing how much this song meant to Adric. He used to play it all the time at parties and events around town. Everyone knows it's his signature.

Now Kellan is sitting here in front of me, playing it as if he's been playing it for as long as he's been breathing. I swear this man is going to make me cry. First, he played it on the Jukebox, ripping my heart out and now he's playing it with his own damn hands. Absolutely beautiful is putting it mildly. There are no words to describe the way I'm feeling.

As soon as the lyrics leave his lips, I want to die. A slow painful death, because it has to hurt less than the pain this renders in my heart. I stand here speechless, grasping onto the bar as his voice fills the bar. It's so beautiful, raw and full of pain. He sings from his heart and you can tell that heart's been beaten to hell and back.

His eyes are closed, his mouth close to the microphone as he sings his heart out, his fingers dominating the guitar. He tilts his head and opens his eyes, seeking me out and his voice gets so deep and gritty, I can feel the emotions as if they're mine.

My eyes lock with his for a brief moment before his eyes close again and he lifts his foot to rest on the foot railing below him, while his other foot digs into the ground.

I see a shadow from the corner of my eye, as someone takes a seat at the bar, but I can't seem to peel my eyes away long enough to care. I'm too enthralled with Kellan's performance to do anything but stare in wonder. I must look like an idiot, but I don't care. I'm so at peace at the moment, that

I could close my eyes and just pretend everything bad in the world never existed.

“Excuse me. May I get a Vodka and Sprite,” a soft voice asks.

I blindly reach for an empty glass not wanting to look away. I feel glass with the tip of my fingers, but when I go to reach for it, it falls to the floor, breaking at my foot. “Dammit!”

“Is someone a little worked up?” the female voice speaks again, sounding surprisingly concerned. “Yeah, this isn’t a good day for me either.”

I finally look up and my eyes land on a very pretty, sweet looking girl with long burgundy hair and green eyes. Her eyes are the most beautiful shade of deep green that I have ever seen; although, they look sad and distant.

I shake my head and force a smile. “I’m sorry. I’m just a little out of it today.” I scoot the pile of glass out of the way with my foot and start fresh. “I’ll get that drink for you now.”

A sad smile spreads across the girl’s face as she stands up and reaches for my hand. Her hands are clammy, her touch gentle and caring. “You have his eyes, ya know. The resemblance is amazing.” A tear falls down her face so she quickly turns away, releases my hand and grabs for her purse. “I’ll take a rain check on that drink. I should be going.”

“Wait a minute,” I try verbally stopping her, but fail.

She starts to walk away, but then stops to look over at the stage. When Kellan looks her way, she raises her head, smiles and grips her purse tighter before quickly walking out the door.

Kellan watches with flared nostrils, looking broken and pained before his eyes meet mine and then the ground.

Who was that girl? She was obviously friends with Adric and knew Kellan. Could someone else really still be this torn over Adric’s death as Kellan and I are after eight years?

When I look behind me, Kade is leaning against the bar staring off into nowhere. He has a glass in his hand he just keeps wiping down with a towel even though it’s already dry. He sees me watching him from the corner of his eye so he sets the glass down behind him. “I guess someone’s been doing a little practicing.”

I look up at Kellan and notice he’s watching us. His eyes are intense as he sings the last note, causing my stomach to twist into knots. Knots I’m

not so sure I can undo later. “Yeah, so it appears.”

Everyone in the bar starts clapping, screaming and whistling as Kellan sets his guitar down and stands up. Even with all the attention on him, his attention seems to be on me as he jumps off the stage and heads over toward the bar.

Kade and I both just stand there and watch, stunned speechless from the pained expression on Kellan’s face. He looks as if his best friend has just died. It may not be fresh, but the pain clearly still is, like when someone rips open an old wound.

“Kellan, that was amazing,” I say, swallowing back my wild emotions. “I had no idea you could sing like that.”

“Yeah, that wasn’t total shit, I guess,” Kade mumbles. “It still wasn’t as good as Adric, but it’s a shit ton better than that howling you used to do when we were kids.”

I expect Kellan to flip out and give Kade a piece of his mind, but instead, he smiles and takes a seat at the bar. “Oh, I still howl. My howling’s just gotten better.” He looks up at Kade with a look of confidence. “Most women don’t complain.”

I swallow the lump in my throat and start wiping down the bar to keep busy. The last thing I want to think about is him with other women.

* * *

Come closing time, Kellan sticks around to help, even though Kade is trying everything he can to get rid of him. Finally, Kade just gives up and decides to keep his distance on the other side of the bar. Kellan is a hard one to get rid of if he doesn’t want to leave. He’s always been that way.

Just when we’re about to turn off the lights and lock up, Kade tosses his phone down in front of him and runs his tongue over his teeth. “Well, I’m sure you two can manage to finish up here. You don’t need me. I have to get going.” He gives Kellan a stone cold look as if he doesn’t trust him being here, before swiping up his phone, glancing over at me and heading out the door without another word.

I look over at Kellan briefly before making my way over to turn off the lights. “Thanks for sticking around.” I switch off the last light and lean against the wall. “And thanks for playing on stage for us. It was . . .”

He slowly walks toward me, his eyes watching my lips. “What?” he whispers. “What was it? Tell me.”

I look into his eyes as he stops right in front of me and grabs my hips, running his hands up my body. Why can't I seem to breathe when he touches me? I'm going to pass out like a damned teenage girl. "It was beautiful, powerful and absolutely stunning. It was all of those things and more."

He smiles, flashing me those sexy dimples before spreading my legs with his knee and pressing his thigh between my legs. Then he presses his body against mine and runs his hands up my arms before cupping my face in his hands. "So are you." He sucks my bottom lip into his mouth and then releases it. "I haven't stopped thinking about touching you. You're doing something to me that I don't understand. I think I want you." He pauses to run his tongue up my lips. "But I feel like I can't have you. Like I shouldn't have you."

"Why can't you," I ask in a whisper. "Why shouldn't you?" I want answers. I need answers.

He runs his finger over my lips, breathing heavily before both of his hands slam into the wall so his arms are on either sides of my waist. His breath is on my lips, teasing me. His stiffness is pressed against my belly and all I want do is scream for him to take me again, here and now. *Please take me!*

He speaks against my lips, giving me goose bumps. "Because of mistakes I've made. Because of who I am now. The worst part of it is . . . I don't want anyone else to have you but me." He bites his bottom lip before sucking the ring into his mouth. He looks torn, as if he has much more to say but knows he shouldn't. "Let me walk you to your car. I have somewhere important to go. Is that okay, Phoenix?"

Catching my breath, I nod my head and let him lead me outside and to my car. He places his hand on the small of my back and opens the door for me to get in. "Remember, if you need anything," his eyes wander over every inch of my face as if he's trying to memorize it, "Call me, okay? Goodnight."

I nod my head. "Yeah, Kellan. I will." I smile as he backs up and closes the door for me. "Goodnight," I whisper.

I sit in the parking lot for a good ten minutes after Kellan's truck is gone. I finally find the courage to head to my next destination. It's technically not Adric's birthday anymore, but we always celebrated it on

the sixth because six was Adric's favorite number. He was weird like that, but I loved him for it.

I make my way through the dark and over to his headstone. Before I even get there, I can already see the flowers that my mother and Zoe must have brought earlier in the day. They are beautiful and almost make me want to cry. The truth is, Adric never wanted anything for his birthday. Every time I would ask him what to get him, he would say, "Just get me some new pencils for my drawings. Those damn things always break on me," and I would laugh and pull a pencil from out of my back pocket because I already knew without asking, what he would say.

I kneel down in front of his headstone and place one hand on the ground between my knees and the other against the marble. "Happy birthday. Well, sort of. I miss you even though I just talked to you the other day." A tear runs down my cheek and I wipe at it with my free hand. "Strange, huh? I guess you already heard, but Kellan told me some pretty funny stuff the last time I was here. I haven't laughed like that in years. Not since . . . you left me. I miss those days. Isn't it funny how we take advantage of it until we no longer have the option to have it anymore?"

I reach in my back pocket and pull out a single pencil, just as I used to back when he was alive to accept them. "I brought you a gift. I thought you might be able to use it up there. I'm sure you're probably still breaking those pencils. You were always so rough and careless with them."

I get ready to place the pencil next to the flowers, when I notice there's already one there. I throw my hand over my mouth and start to bawl. I know exactly who it's from and suddenly I just can't hold it in any longer. I feel as if I'm being ripped apart from the inside and my lungs have burst into flames.

Dropping the pencil next to the one Kellan brought, I lay my head on the ground and close my eyes. "This kills me, Adi. I just wish I could hear your laugh again while you sit there sketching and making fun of me. Those sketches were absolutely beautiful. I wish I could find one of a Peacock, drawn by you. I think I'm finally going to get it done. My first tattoo. I just wish it were a part of you somehow. I'm going to ask Kellan to do it. I know he'll do as good of a job as you would have. I trust that with all my heart. He's just as passionate as you were. We both miss you."

My mind plays through the night. "Kellan sang for you tonight, but I'm sure you heard him. You'd be proud of him, Adi. I just wish I could take the

pain away from him. He really loved you. This girl came into the bar tonight. She was beautiful but didn't look familiar. She knew you though. I wish she would have stayed. She looked like she was in pain too. It makes me wonder just how many people still suffer from your absence. I thought I was the only one after this long, but I guess I was wrong."

I hug the ground and lay there until I can barely keep my eyes open. That's when I finally call it a night. A person can only handle so much in a day.

Chapter Seventeen

Phoenix

I pull the blanket back, sit up and look behind me at the couch. The house is almost completely dark, but somehow I can still manage to see the silhouette of my mother's hand dangling off the couch, with the neck of the bottle to her poison in her clutch. As my eyes come into focus, I can see her more clearly. One leg is draped over the cushion, her foot brushing the floor. The bottle of Jack is balancing on the corner of the bottle, almost completely horizontal. The only thing keeping it from spilling out is her fingers around the neck.

My first instinct is to wake her up and yell at her for acting like an adolescent when she has a teenage daughter to care for, but I fight a battle within myself, telling me to take it easy on her. Plus, I'd rather not deal with a drunken mother at four in the morning anyhow. I've seen her in far worse conditions than just a bottle of jack almost empty, next to her head. *At least it wasn't a tequila night.* This is mild compared to what I was used to as a kid, so maybe she's learned to deal with her stress better over the years. At least, I hope so for Zoe's sake.

It's been a few days now since Adric's birthday and the hours seem to drag on, slowly tearing my sanity down bit by bit. My home life has become hectic, making me wish I could just sleep the whole time and pretend I'm somewhere else. Somewhere I can actually manage to think without worrying about my mom and Zoe constantly fighting. It's becoming so unbearable, that Zoe spends most of her time running the streets doing only God knows what with her friends and not coming home 'til late hours of the night. The bad part is, my mom doesn't even bother questioning her anymore. She's barely fifteen. Actually, she won't even turn fifteen for another five weeks. It kills me to think she doesn't give a crap. I'm scared

she will end up pregnant, in jail, or worse . . . like Adric. I swallow hard at that horrible thought. I can't ever lose her, too.

Work life hasn't been much better either. Kade is still giving me the cold shoulder and when he isn't, he's putting his energy into trying to make me jealous by bringing random girls into the bar and throwing himself all over them. However, it doesn't make me jealous, it just pisses me the hell off. I don't get the point. I understand he's mad, but him trying to upset me on purpose is low, even for him. I didn't do what I did with Kellan because I wanted to hurt Kade. I did it because I couldn't stop myself. I would never do something to hurt someone on purpose. Besides, it's not like Kellan and I have even spoken in days and probably won't either. What we had was just one night of heated passion and now it's done. Squashed. Like I wish my phone was.

In fact, my cell phone has become more of a torture device than a way of communication, keeping my hopes up over that one phone call I'm sure to never receive. Every time it pings, my heart goes wild only to drop to my stomach when I realize it's Jen or someone else but him. Some days I even find myself hiding my phone in random spots so I won't check it every damn hour and sometimes I even forget where I hid it. Who does that? Why I do this to myself, I'll never figure out.

I find it pretty pathetic I have to stoop to that level. I've never had to be one of those girls crazy over waiting on a call from a guy. The truth is, I could really use some support and Kellan has always had a way to make me forget things, even if just for a moment. Right now, it's not even just about me wanting him physically, which I do and very badly at that. It's about me wanting him emotionally. I need his support. I need to talk to him. He is the only one who understands exactly as I do.

I've already made my decision and I plan on going to that damn tattoo shop today. It's settled. I'm going to tell him whether or not he wants to see me, I still want him to do one last thing for me. That's give me my first and only tattoo. I will only get inked by him. I can't let anyone else permanently leave their mark on my body. It has to mean something to me. After that, he never has to see me again. As much as it hurts, I can't push him into wanting me like I do him. I have to let him go.

Knowing there's no possible way I can fall back to sleep, I push the blanket aside and push myself to my feet. I stand in front of the couch and look down at my mother. The pitiful look on her face makes my heart ache.

She looks so torn and weak with black streaks that very noticeably cover her pale cheeks. Big dark circles that sit under her eyes alter her beauty that was once present. She was beautiful at one time. You know how they say life can take its toll on your body when drugs or alcohol consumes you? Well, she is that proof. I hate seeing her this way. She looks much older than she really is. You would guess she were more around the age of sixty than forty-nine. I wish she would take my advice and get the help she needs before it's too late.

I brush a strand of soft, thin hair behind her ear and bend down, pulling the blanket over her before grabbing the bottle of Jack from her limp hand. There is no empty glass present, meaning she drank straight from the bottle. She only does that when she is on a panic from her thoughts of dad and needs to smother them quickly. Standing, I bring the almost empty, black labeled bottle into the kitchen and pour it down the drain, tossing the glass in the trash.

My mom has gone through so much heartache over the years and although she hasn't always handled them the correct way, I know deep down she cares. She really needs to find a better way to cope with her problems or Zoe will follow in her footsteps, which is why I just hope Zoe knows as well. She needs to know she has a mother that loves her. Every child should know that feeling.

After cleaning the house, I take a quick shower, throw on a towel and sit outside on the front porch since everyone is still sleeping. I sit there with my head back, the breeze blowing through my wet hair, as I stare into the dark sky, waiting for sunrise. It's so peaceful; here by myself, feeling free as I close my eyes and just breathe. I sit here lost in thought, peeling at the chair's old paint underneath me, until the sound of a motorcycle distracts me. I get an instant sinking feeling in my gut as the sound gets closer, until finally it's right in front of my house. At least, I hope. I haven't found the courage to find out yet.

I look over and my heart jumps right out of my chest at the sight of Kellan. He wears a pair of faded jeans, an old white tee and leather jacket, unzipped that falls perfectly just below his waist.

He slides the helmet from his head, pushes his thick hair from his face, looks at me, and kills the engine. It takes a minute for my brain to connect with my body, but when it does, I scramble to my feet, gripping the towel and lean against the door.

After days of no communication, he just shows up out of nowhere at six in the morning, looking sexy as can be. It confuses the crap out of me and almost makes me want to hit him for getting my emotions all haywire. He's the only one who does that to me.

"Kellan," I say in surprise, looking him over as he steps onto the porch. "What are you doing here? Is everything okay?" I can't help but to think something must be wrong. Like maybe, this is goodbye. Maybe he's already all packed up and ready to get back to his old life. I don't want that and it breaks my heart. "What's the backpack for?" *Please don't say you're leaving. Not yet.*

His eyes meet mine and keep their hold as he reaches around and grabs his backpack, pulling it off. "I couldn't sleep." He unzips the backpack and pulls out some pizza crust. "I thought maybe you'd want to cook breakfast with me." He smiles and slides his fingers through the top loop, holding it up in front of me. "I brought all your favorite toppings. You have to say yes now."

I can't help the blush that creeps over my face, staining my cheeks red. I can't believe he remembered. It was so long ago. Once when I was fourteen, he caught me in the kitchen at six in the morning making a pizza. I thought he was going to laugh, but instead he jumped up on the counter and helped me put the toppings on. Then we ate it together and sat around talking for hours until everyone else finally woke up and broke up the fun. That day, I fell more in love with him than I already had been. Now, he's going to make me fall again, but harder this time and I'm afraid I might break something that will never fully recover. Now that I've had a taste of what it's like to be in those arms, I'm screwed. How can I ever get past that?

I smile and lower my eyes to my towel, noticing my right thigh is almost fully exposed and when I look up, I see his eyes have lowered to my towel as well. The hooded look in his eyes sends a surge of excitement through me. I have to fight the urge to reach out, press my lips against his, and slide his hand under my towel to feel his touch again. *Damn, this sucks.* I have to play it cool though. "I could go for a pizza. You better have some bacon in that bag," I threaten. "And chicken."

His eyes light up as he takes a step forward and places his hand under my chin. He brings my eyes up to meet his smoldering ones. They're so beautiful, my soul aches. "I know what you like and trust me . . . I have it,"

he says huskily. He runs his fingers up the flap of the towel that is barely covering my thigh and smiles. “Now come on and stop trying to seduce me. You’ll still get the pizza either way.”

I reach out with both hands and shove his stiff chest. “Shut up, smart ass. Who says I would ever try to seduce you? *The Kellan Haze* that every girl loves.”

He smirks, obviously amused by my answer, holds the door open for me to walk in, and then he follows in suit behind me. His eyes flick over to the couch, then my new bed on the floor but he doesn’t say anything. He just looks over at me and grabs my hand, pulling me into the kitchen.

He sets the backpack down on the counter, grabs me by the hips, picks me up, and sets me down next to the backpack. “This time I’ll do the messy part and you can just toss the toppings on like I did.” His hands linger on my waist, making my insides go mad. I look down at his arms, causing him to be aware of where his hands are still holding me. He lets go and grabs the backpack, unzipping it the rest of the way.

“Sure,” I breathe. I can’t help but stare at the way the muscles in his arm flex every time he pulls something out of the bag. *Damn, why must he be so delicious?* “I think I can manage that.” I grab the bottom of the towel between my fingers, while still watching him. “Shouldn’t I get dressed first?”

“Nah, stay like that.” He sucks his bottom lip into his mouth and starts removing the wrapper from the crust. “I like you this way. Natural is sexy as hell on you.” He smirks, leans in close to my neck and whispers, “And you smell like cupcakes. You know how much I love cupcakes.”

Mmm . . . that mouth of his! It’s been nothing but torture over the years. I should hate him for it, but I don’t. I can’t. “So, it was always you sneaking the last cupcake? I kind of figured. Kellan always gets what he wants,” I tease.

He lets out an agitated laugh and grips the counter. “If that were true . . .” He turns to look me in the eye and the intensity makes my leg quiver. “Then I would have you, Phoenix.”

I sit there, not saying a thing, as I look him in the eye. I don’t know what to say. How does a girl respond to such a thing without sounding too desperate? Hell, what am I saying? I think I am desperate. “And if you wanted me, Kellan . . . I would be yours.”

He drops the bag of shredded cheese on the counter and walks over to stand between my legs. His hands grip my thighs and he pulls me to him with desperation. His eyes meet mine for a split second before his face is brushing against my neck, his breath warm against my cool skin. His touch chills me to the bone. I can hear him breathing in my scent as he runs his nose along my skin, stopping just under my ear. “It’s not that simple. Trust me. You deserve much more than I can give you.” His hands reach up to wrap in the back of my hair. His shoulders flex as his fist tightens. “I’m no good for you.” He kisses my neck, his lips lingering for a moment. “No good for anyone.” He brushes his lip ring up the front of my neck, teasing me, before kissing my chin and then my forehead. “Now let me give you something I am good for. Let me cook you breakfast. I think I’m pretty damn good at that.”

This man is driving me mad. Why does he have to tease me? Can’t he see just how unfair this is to me? I’m a grown woman now. I can make my own decision.

Placing my hands on his chest, I push him away so I can get a good look at his face. “I think I can be the judge of whether or not you’re good for me. How do you know what’s good for me? I’m not a child anymore, Kellan. I’m a woman now and trust me, I want you.”

His eyes become dark as he stares at me, his jaw clenching tightly. He doesn’t say a thing. He just stands there looking into my eyes. After a moment, he finally speaks. “On second thought . . . maybe you should get dressed. I’ll go ahead and start the pizza.”

He turns so his back is facing me and runs his hands over his face, blowing out his breath. I grind my jaw, jump off the counter and leave the kitchen feeling like an ass. What must I do to get through to him? Whack him upside the head with a sign that says ‘take me, I’m yours,’ because if that’s what he wants, then I’ll run and grab my favorite markers and draw that shit up right now. I’m losing my grip here.

By the time I am dressed and walking back into the kitchen, he has most of the pizza already put together. The sauce, the cheese and the ham. He smiles and steps away from the counter. “I left your favorite part for you.”

“Okay.” I walk over to the pizza, reach for the bag of bacon, and sprinkle a crap load on top before reaching for the bag of shredded chicken and adding that on top as well. He definitely knows me better than any other man ever could.

I get a whiff of the deliciousness in front of me and suddenly, I am starving. “This smells so good right now.”

“Does it?” He smiles. “Cause all I can smell is fucking cupcakes.” He grabs the pizza from my hand and shoves it into the oven. *At least I didn’t hide my phone there last night. That would be embarrassing.* “What are you doing today?”

Why? Are you going to volunteer to hang out with me? That would be fan-fucking-tastic. I run my fingers through my messy hair and shake my head, hoping not to look too desperate. “Nothing really. Well, actually. I did sort of have something in mind.” I look up, reading his expression.

“Oh yeah. What’s that?” He looks nervous now as if he’s afraid of my answer. He swallows hard and runs a hand through his hair. “Does it involve that Aiden guy? He seems boring if you ask me. I’m much more fun.” He grins while shoving a handful of cheese in his mouth. “Trust me on that.”

“Not exactly, I was planning on-”

Zoe appears in the doorway and clears her throat to get our attention. “Are you serious? It’s early as crap.” She sniffs the air while stretching her arms above her head and squinting. “Is that pizza I smell?” she asks with a confusing but hopeful look.

“Yeah, smells amazing, right?” Kellan picks up a piece of chicken and tosses it at Zoe’s shoulder, making her smile. “Do you have something for me yet?”

Zoe’s eyes go wide as she rubs her hands together. “Oh yeah! You’re damn straight I do.” Bending down, she grabs the piece of chicken from the floor and pops it into her mouth, chewing. “Mmm . . . that is pretty good. I’ll be right back.” She takes off running out of the kitchen with a huge smile.

All right, then. It’s a good thing I mopped. Now that, is definitely one thing she got from Adric. That boy would eat anything no matter where it’d been.

A few minutes later, Zoe rushes back into the kitchen with a piece of paper. She holds it out to Kellan. “If you laugh, I will kick you where it counts. I’ve spent the last four days putting this crap together.”

She shoves it into his chest, and he grabs it nodding at her. “Writing a poem isn’t easy. I would never laugh, Zoe.”

Zoe plasters on a smile. “I don’t know about that. After you hear what you have to do for me, you might laugh.” She holds her thumb and index finger a couple inches apart. “Maybe just a little bit. Or at least Phoenix might get a laugh out of this. I know I will.”

“Is there something I should know about?” I look at them questionably. “First you hid secrets with Adric and now my little sister. When do I ever get to get in on these little secrets?”

Kellan nudges me in the side and lifts a brow. “I already let you in on a secret. A huge secret, remember?” He winks and turns back to face Zoe, which is now giving me an odd look. I’m pretty sure she just put *that* together. “Read it aloud and like I said, I’ll do anything you tell me to.”

Kellan holds his hand out with the paper between his fingers and Zoe hesitates shortly, but then grabs it. “You really expect me to read it to you both now?”

With his arms crossed over his chest, he nods and leans against the counter. “It will feel good to read it to someone or if you’d rather, you can always sing it. I bet you like to sing, right? Your brother loved singing. It was his passion.”

Zoe’s eyes wander over to me and I see something in there I’ve never seen before. Hope. She clears her throat and looks back over at Kellan. “It’s a poem so I’m not sure how good it will sound with me singing it, but I’ll give it a shot. I sound pretty decent in the shower, I guess.”

My stomach knots up in anticipation as I wait for her voice to fill the kitchen, and when it does, my heart breaks. She has just as much passion in her powerful voice as Adric did. I had no idea she could even sing.

“Is there a place to hide so no one knows, these feelings that are about to show?

The ones that run so deep within me, the ones I don’t want anyone to see.

To run, to hide from everyone, so I don’t have to face a single one.

All you did was feed me lies, and told me things to make me cry.

To you I came with an open heart, and all you did was break my world apart.

I gave you all I had in me, but you were too blind to even see.

I was looking for love, but what I found was hate. I thought you would change, but it was too late to wait.

I was already too sad, and most of the time even mad.

To finally be happy I learned I had to leave, and find true feelings I could actually believe.”

By the time she finishes, I have tears running down my cheeks. I never knew she felt so deeply about anything and hearing these words make me sad. Someone hurt her and I know it doesn't feel good. It never does.

Kellan walks over, grabs the paper from her hand and pulls her in for a hug. He rocks her back and forth and squeezes her tight as if she touched a special place in his heart. “That was better than I could have hoped for. Adric would've been so proud of you.” He pulls away and looks her in the eye. “Don't ever let anyone bring you down and don't ever stop believing you can do anything you want. You have to be stronger than . . .”

His words trail off and he quickly replaces his emotions with a smile. “Let me take a look at this.” He shakes the paper in the air. “I need to be sure you spelled everything right before you think you're sending me off to do something crazy.” He quickly scans the paper and then looks over at me sporting a proud grin. “Alright, tail. You messed up one word, but I'll let that slip this time. Next time I'm here I want you to fix that word and present me with a new poem. If we have a deal, tell me what it'll be.”

She taps her finger against her chin and jumps up onto the table. She looks proud and that makes my heart swell. This could really help her. “How do you feel about nipples?” She grins deviously.

The timer goes off on the oven so I reach behind Kellan in an attempt to take the pizza out, but Kellan shakes his head and reaches for the oven mitt. “I've got it.” He opens the oven and slides the pizza out, setting it on top of the stove. Then he smiles. “I love them, why?”

I have a feeling where this is going and for some reason, the thought turns me on. Man his body does things to me.

“Well . . . you're about to get yours pierced. Both of them.” She rubs her hands together and looks at his chest, then lowers her eyes and nods her head. “I was going to go for something else, you know for my sister's pleasure and all, but-”

“Zoe!” I scream, embarrassed as crap. *Wait . . . What?* “That's enough. Since when did your mind get so dirty?”

She gives me a disgusted look as if I've offended her and stretches her legs. “I'm practically fifteen. Isn't that about how old you were when you first had the hots for this guy?” She tilts her head toward Kellan and points with her thumb. “I was going to do you a favor. Good thing I didn't, prude.”

She shoots daggers at me and then looks at Kellan. “What do you think big guy? Do your nipples already hurt? The way Phoenix has been acting, I think hers do.” She scrunches her forehead and rolls her big eyes at me.

“You little shit.” I try to sound mad, but I can’t help but to laugh. “Man, I miss you being a quiet ten year old. Can we go back to those days? I would seriously do anything.”

Kellan looks at me from the corner of his eye and bites his bottom lip, before facing Zoe again. “I knew you girls talked about me. Anything else I should know about your sister besides her nipples hurting?”

These two are killing me. *What the hell!* “Okay, that’s enough. Can we just eat this pizza? I want to come to your shop today and get a tattoo.” I look to Zoe before reaching into the cabinet for some plates. “I’ll be sure he gets those nips pierced and if he says anything else about my nipples, I’ll be sure he gets something else pierced as well.”

He slices the pizza and washes the slicer. “I would. As long as you’d be the one to kiss it better afterwards.”

As soon as the words leave his mouth, I feel my sex clenching. *Bad timing. Very bad timing.* “Hey! Do you mind?” I point at Zoe. “My little sister doesn’t need to be hearing that kind of talk.”

Zoe jumps from the table and pushes me out of the way to grab a slice of pizza. “Your little sister is big enough to hear that kind of talk. Trust me, I hear a lot worse from my friends at school.”

“Are you serious? You kids are starting early these days. I worry about you,” I mumble before taking a bite of pizza. *Holy hell this is delicious.*

“Well don’t,” Zoe scoffs. “I can take care of myself. She shoves the pizza into her mouth and mumbles, “I want to see those nipples next time you’re here.”

“Alright, tail.” Kellan nods his head and salutes her. “Oh and don’t think you’re stopping there. I want more poems. I don’t care how many times I have to mutilate my body to get them either. I’ll even pierce between my toes.”

Zoe stops and pulls the pizza from her mouth. “Seriously?”

Kellan shrugs. “I guess you’ll have to see.”

This seems to satisfy Zoe because she walks out with the biggest smile I’ve seen from her in a long damn time. Seeing her that way makes me happy.

I turn to Kellan. “Thank you. You didn’t have to do that.”

He smiles and kisses my forehead. "Sure I did." He reaches for his backpack and throws it over his shoulder. "I have to get cleaned up to get to the shop. I'll see you there in a bit?" He grins, already knowing the answer. "We both have some work to get done today."

I smile and nod my head. "Sure thing," I say nervously. "I'll see you in a bit."

* * *

I arrive at the shop and decide to park in the back this time, next to Kellan's motorcycle. On the left side of his bike, Tyler's bike is also parked. I haven't really talked much with Jen lately, but something tells me she's been busy with this guy. Every time I call, she's giggling and acting like a damn school girl. Then she tells me she has to go. I know for a fact, Nate doesn't have that effect on her. It has to be Tyler. Which makes me happy because she deserves someone that will treat her and Jax properly and if Kellan trusts him enough to get him involved, then he must be a good guy.

I step out of my car and close the door. When I look up, there's a guy staring at me from the parking lot next door. He looks as if he's been roughed up a bit and put through the meat grinder. His face is full of scars and bruises and his hair is very thin and straggly. He's tall. Taller than normal and that only makes him appear creepier. He just stares with no shame even though, clearly, I've caught him looking. His intense stare makes me feel sick to my stomach. *What's his deal?*

Shaking off the creepiness, I pull my eyes away from him and make my way around the building, quickly. As soon as I reach the door, I feel my confidence torn away as if someone just ripped off the bandage. *Damn, I'm going to need that back. I can't go in there now.*

Breathing heavily, I lean against the building trying to catch my breath. Somehow knowing Kellan is the one giving me the tattoo works me up more than my first attempt at coming here. It excites me, yet scares the crap out of me knowing there will always be a part of him with me. If he leaves, then I'll be sure to never forget him now.

I glance over when the door opens beside me and a teenage boy full of tattoos and piercings walks out. He stops when he notices me and gently grabs my shoulder with a sly smile. "Hey, girl. Are you okay?"

I look at the kid from the corner of my eye and exhale slowly before forcing a smile. I don't feel okay. I think I need to go to the range again. My

nerves have been too wound up lately. “Yeah, I’m okay. Just a little nervous, that’s all.” That’s partially the truth, anyways.

He lets go of my shoulder and leans against the wall beside me. “That’s understandable.” He leans in and whispers, “Don’t tell anyone . . . but the needle still kind of freaks me out.”

This kid has the most tattoos I have ever seen in my life. I nudge his arm next to mine and laugh. Leaning in, I whisper, “Don’t worry. Your secret is safe with me.”

Somehow, I have managed to lose the nerves and now I can’t stop laughing. We both laugh and then before I know it, his arm is draped around my shoulder.

I get ready to question his pimp skills, but the door swings open, causing both of us to look up. Kellan steps out and slaps the kid upside the head. “Get out of here, Trevor. This woman is too much for you to handle.”

Trevor laughs and straightens up, but he’s nowhere as tall as Kellan is. “I doubt that. Have you seen me handle a woman? You don’t even know the skills I possess.”

I’m laughing so hard right now I can’t even breathe. *Who is this kid?* Now that I think about it, he has Tyler’s deep brown eyes and dark hair. Maybe even his nose.

“Is this Tyler’s little brother,” I question, still laughing at his so called skills.

Trevor smiles and lifts an eyebrow. “That’s right. Tyler gets his good looks from me.” He leans in close and winks at me. “And there’s nothing little about me,” he whispers.

Kellan scowls and grabs the back of Trevor’s neck. “Okay, I’ve heard enough.” He gives him a little shove and kicks him on the butt to get him going. “I think your mom’s looking for you kid.”

Trevor puckers his lips and raises his head to me. “Okay, beautiful. Just remember what you could be missing out on. If you change your mind, you know how to find me.” He spins around on his feet and heads for a beat up Pontiac Grand Prix, jumping inside.

Well, that was exciting. At least the kid helped to ease my nerves. Seeing that creepy guy and getting a tattoo in the same day was almost too much for me to handle. Now, I can’t stop smiling.

Kellan leans in close and looks at my lips as I stand there still smiling. “You like that, huh? The kid is eighteen if you’re interested.” He grins

before pinning me up against the wall, his body pressed against mine. He brushes his lip across my ear and breathes, “I can promise you he can’t handle you like I can. These hands . . .” He grips my waist and rubs his hands up my side, squeezing. “Are talented as shit. Almost as talented as my tongue.”

Okay, I agree. So good, I think I just soaked my panties. I lean my head back on the brick as he runs his tongue from my lobe down my neck before skimming it with his barbell. The cold, wet metal leaves with me a sensation tingling all over my body. “What the fuck, Kellan. You need to stop doing this to me. I want you to take me right here on this wall,” I breathe in total ecstasy, lost in my own world for him.

He laughs against my neck and grabs my arms pinning them behind my head. “That’s the problem. I can’t fucking stop. I am very tempted to lift that skirt of yours and slip inside of you right out here in the open. The thought drives me mad. Do you know how hard it is not to penetrate you right now with my throbbing cock?” He lifts me up and grabs my legs wrapping them around his waist as he glides his hands up my skirt and presses his hip into me. His hands squeeze my bare thighs. I love his filthy mouth and right now I want it on me in all my most private places.

A surge of excitement courses through me and right now, I could care less if he takes me right out in the open. I just want him any way I can have him.

The door opens . . . again.

Stop this torture! What is up with that door? Does everyone have to keep popping out of it?

Tyler joins us outside with a ham sandwich in his hand. He smiles and leans against the opened door while holding his lunch to his mouth. “Dang, man. Don’t stop. I like the look of this.”

Kellan grunts and gently sets me down beside him and pulls my skirt down to cover my thighs. “I’m locking you inside next time.”

Shoving the last bite into his mouth, Tyler grins at Kellan and nods my direction. “I was serious when I said don’t stop, bro. Don’t let a little thing like me watching you kill the mood.”

The boys look at each other and for a moment, I almost think Kellan’s going to snap, but instead he laughs and pats Tyler on the back. “Nah, man. I can’t let you watch. I wouldn’t want to kill your ego.” He places his hand

on the door and motions for us to go inside. “Well, let’s get this nipple show on the road. You ready, Tyler?”

“Yeah, man. I’m always ready. Nipple piercing is my game and I play it well. It’s a legal way to inflict pain mixed with pleasure and I love to watch; although, I would prefer my prey to be female.”

I bet you do. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s gotten his hands on Jen’s by now.

Once we’re inside, Kellan takes off his shirt, looks at me and tosses it to the ground as if he just knows him being shirtless is going to get me wet. He’s absolutely right. His jeans hang low on his waistline, exposing the defined muscles that lead down underneath. They’re so hard, I just want to run my tongue across them, tease them and taste them. *Mmm . . . this man is too yummy for his own good.*

“So you’re seriously going through with this? You’re going to sport those pierced nips? Once I start you can’t back out.”

“Damn right I am, man.” Kellan places his hand on my chin. “You might want to watch this. Zoe might get a kick out of the details. Like I told her, I keep my word.”

My eyes trail down his body, over his flawless abs and I have to try my best not to ravish him right here and now. “Like you said before. I did like your nipples. Now I will love them. I might even let you do mine,” I tease. I smile sweetly, trying my best to look innocent. “I’d be glad to kiss anything you get pierced.” My eyes land on the crotch of his fitted jeans and scope out his obvious bulge.

A low growl sounds in Kellan’s throat as he looks down at me and smiles. “If that’s the case then I may just have to get more than just my nipples pierced and don’t think I won’t take you up on that offer. We will come back to this conversation later.”

I love the sound of that. I can’t deny that tattoos and piercings have always turned me on. I mean, who the hell doesn’t love a man with body art?

“You guys have it bad for each other. It’s plain as damn day, man,” Tyler says while pulling on a pair of black latex gloves as he is looking down at the piercing equipment. “I can seriously feel how bad you two want each other and it’s giving me a damn stiffy. That makes everything in the sack that much better. You better handle that shit.” He peaks up at us.

Kellan and I both look at each other, neither of us giving him any kind of reaction to his comment. Then finally, Kellan plops down in the chair and throws his arms behind his head, interlocking his fingers.

“Let’s just do this shit. My nipples are bleeding just waiting on your ass.” He looks up at Tyler before closing his eyes and smiling.

I step up closer to the chair so I’m standing right behind it now, looking over the back of it and down at Kellan. He looks so calm, laying there relaxing with his hands behind his head and his eyes closed. I wish he could stay like that for a while, so I can take him all in and never forget this moment. He’s so beautiful to me it hurts. I seriously feel an aching in my heart right now just looking at him.

Kellan’s eyelids flutter open and he stares up at me with a half smirk. “Are you going to be ready for that tattoo next? I still remember the one you picked out.”

My eyes shift over to Tyler as he grabs some kind of clamp and places it to Kellan’s right nipple. I look back at Kellan’s face, but he doesn’t even seem to notice his nipple being squeezed, because he’s still staring directly at me as if nothing’s happening. “I’m about as ready as I’ll ever be.” I laugh as Tyler coats up the needle with some clear crap and holds it to Kellan’s nipple.

“Are you ready for bleeding nipples?”

He looks down to my lips and answers Tyler’s question. “Only if you’re ready to kiss them.”

Tyler pushes the needle through and Kellan doesn’t even flinch. *Ouch!* That looked like it hurt.

Kellan just watches me watching him with a cocky smirk that I’d like to lick. He’s not the only one that likes to use his tongue.

Tyler laughs as if he’s getting a kick out of this whole nipple thing. “This looks pretty sweet actually. Maybe I’ll do mine sometime. But I’ll do my own. I don’t want you fondling my nips like I’m doing yours.” He smiles and then gets to work on the left one.

Speaking of fondling nipples, I wouldn’t mind if Kellan was doing that to me right now. Maybe I should go all out and get mine pierced for real. I was just joking at first, but it looks hot. It would be worth it to have him do it.

Standing up, Kellan tilts his head down and looks at his nipples while reaching out to touch one. I have to admit, he just got even hotter and I

didn't even think that was a possibility. "I guess I'm cool enough to sport these for a while." He turns to stand in front of me and I can't help but to notice his chest muscles bounce a bit. "What do you think, Phoenix? Does this do anything for my image?"

I feel my heartbeat quicken as my eyes take in the sight of his sculpted chest, his pierced nipples and the tribal tattoo that runs up his side. *Is he shitting me?* Of course this does something for his image. It makes him look like a damn sex god.

Swallowing hard, I look up to meet his eyes and they bore into mine, silently telling me he wants to take me as bad as I want him to. "I guess you can manage to pull it off," I tease. "I'm sure Zoe will be so proud of you."

Without pulling his eyes away from mine, Kellan shoots out orders to Tyler. "Go check on Jen."

"She's good, man." He holds up his phone as he types out a message. "I'm talking to her now."

Kellan grunts and takes a deep breath. "Do you have any appointments anytime soon?"

"Not 'til around five," he replies.

"Alright then," Kellan responds. "I'll see you then."

Tyler finally gets the hint and stands up grabbing his keys. "I'll see you then, bro." He winks at me. "Take it easy on his nips." Then out the door, he goes.

Kellan walks over, locks the door and turns the open sign off. Then he walks over to the glass display and reaches behind it for that special binder that had all those glorious drawings. At least, that's what I assume it is.

I clear my throat and take a seat in the chair by his station as he stares down at the binder in his hand. "Just do me a favor," I say.

He looks up from the binder and smiles. "What's that?"

"Don't tell anyone if I happen to pass out. I don't need Zoe or Jen having something to laugh at me about. I put up with enough of their crap already." I lean back in the seat and grip the edges with shaky hands.

I feel his hand on mine so I look up. He gives me a reassuring smile that relaxes me, just enough to calm my heartbeat a bit, but then he moves my legs so he can sit next to me in the chair. "This book of drawings is very important. I want you to know . . . I wouldn't let anyone else choose from this book." His eyes meet mine and the emotion behind that stare astounds me. "This book is yours. Everything in here was drawn for you."

Wait! What is he saying? What does that even mean? I feel like I'm going to pass out right now. "What do you mean, it's mine?" I am beginning to feel anxious.

Exhaling through his nose, Kellan opens the binder and pulls one of the drawings out. He places it in my hand and says, "Flip it over and read the back."

Fighting to control my nerves and keep my hand in check, I do what he says and flip the paper over. When I see what's written on the back, tears instantly spring to my eyes and my body seizes up.

Adric Winters- Summer of 2005

For the girl that is more beautiful and colorful than the most beautiful bird in the world, Phoenix. Love you little sis.

I run my fingertips over the paper as little splatters of teardrops drip down, threatening to ruin Adric's beautiful work.

Kellan notices the tear soaked paper and gently tilts my head to the side so I'm looking at him instead. "Look at me." He runs his thumb under my eye, wiping away the wetness. "He loved you so much. He worked hard on these because he knew how much you loved them. He would've done anything for you and Zoe. When he passed . . ." he chokes on his words a bit before gaining composure. "Well, I took his drawings because he always trusted me with them and I didn't want them getting lost. I hoped to get this book to you someday, but I didn't know how. Then when you walked in that day, I just knew you had to see this book. It was the first time I had taken that book out of the display. Even Tyler knows to never touch this book. I told him I'd break his fingers if he does." He places the book in my hands and cups my face with both of his hands. "I would be honored if you still trust me enough to give you this tattoo even though it was drawn by Adric. I promise you with everything in me that I wouldn't even attempt to do this for you unless I was positive I could pull it off and not shame Adric or you." He looks deep into my eyes, stunning me speechless. "I promise you."

I shake my head in his hands and place my hands to cover his as tears continue to stream down my face. "I trust you, Kellan. I always have. I don't doubt for one minute that you would ever do anything to hurt me. Others may doubt you, but I don't. I can't. You're too special to ever give up on."

I say these words because I want him to know that for whatever need he had for leaving when he did, I feel he really did have good reason. As much as I'd like to find out that reason, I just don't have the heart to scare him away. It would kill me if he left again. Sitting here, looking up at him. I know that now. I know that in my heart, if he left me and I never got to see him again, it would rip my heart out.

Pain is clear in his eyes as he looks at me and I can see his emotions tugging him in different directions, confusing him. "I was hoping you'd say that." He stands up and turns away from me. "Give me a few minutes." Then he walks away to the bathroom.

I lay here gripping the binder in my hands, trying my hardest not to cry. I'm so overwhelmed with emotions I just don't know what to do. I'm happy, sad, anxious and scared as shit, all at the same time. I'm a hot mess right now.

A few minutes later, Kellan walks out of the restroom and flashes me a dimpled grin. "Okay, I'm ready. Do you still want it exactly how you did the first time you came in? It's going to hurt there, but it will be worth it."

He takes a seat next to me and his eyes scan mine before resting on my lips. I see the hunger in his eyes as he looks up again waiting on an answer. "I'll promise to take it easy on you."

The husky sound in his voice almost makes me think he means something else but I don't act on it, because I could be wrong. "It's okay. I think I can handle it."

I swallow as he scoots closer and cups my face in his hands. His forehead rests on mine, as he looks me in the eyes. His bottom lip twitches closer to mine, the ring almost brushing my lip. "You're so beautiful it hurts. I never meant to hurt you."

His thumb brushes over my bottom lip and I watch as his eyes burn with need. He tilts his face closer to mine so his lips brush next to my lips. It makes me anxious, reminding me too much of the moment I shared with Kade days ago. Except this . . . this feels good and right and everything it should be.

"I wish I could make you happy." He kisses next to my mouth. "Your smile is the only thing that keeps me going when the darkness takes over." Balling his fist in my hair, he rubs my face with his other hand before leaning in and pressing his lips to mine. His kiss is softer this time.

Comforting. His tongue is soft against my entrance as he licks my lips asking for permission to enter.

I part my lips and drape my arm around his shoulder as I pull him to me, leaning backwards so he's lying on top of me. He supports his body weight on one arm as he rubs my face with his other hand, his lips softly sucking, nibbling and controlling mine. In this moment, I am at total peace with the world. This is my little bit of heaven and I never want to let it go.

I place both my hands on his back, running them up his flesh, digging my fingers in. I don't want to let go. Even with our bodies touching, he still seems too far away. His lips leave mine and I whisper, "You feel so good in my arms." I kiss his neck. "I never want to let go. Please don't make me."

His body stiffens. I've hit some kind of nerve. He moves his face so his lips are next to my ear. "Phoenix. It's not that simple." He gently runs his hand up my thigh and presses his lips to my neck. "I'll stay as long as I can. I can promise you that."

His promise lingers in the air as I squeeze my eyes shut, trying my best not to get emotional. The thought of him leaving kills me. I can't think of that now. Right now, I need to get as close as I can. I need to feel him while I can. Kiss him. Touch him. Taste him. Devour him.

I run my hands down his back and grab his ass through his fitted jeans. *Oh it feels so good in my hands.* He presses his hips between my legs and looks into my eyes. "I want you so bad right now, but I don't know if it's the right time. I want you to come stay with me tonight." His eyes dance in front of me as he waits for me to speak. "Stay with me."

"All right," I breathe. "I'll stay with you."

He smiles and shifts so he's sitting up now. His jaw muscles bounce. "I want you sleeping in a bed. With me. Not on the damn floor. After we leave here, you follow me home." He stands up and grabs the binder. "Are you still up for that tattoo?"

I am, but I'm not. I'm so tired that all I can think about is going home with him and falling asleep while he holds me. Maybe we should do this tattoo another day. A day where we can control our emotions better. Hell, he can't even look at that binder without his hands shaking.

"Can we do the tattoo a different day? I want us both to be in the right mind."

He closes his eyes and lets out a long breath. "I can handle it Phoenix. I would never attempt a tattoo on your body if I didn't think I could."

“It’s not you. It’s me.” I smile and he does too. “I’m just really tired and emotional right now. I didn’t get much sleep last night. As you know, I was up pretty early.”

He stares at me for a long moment before reaching for his shirt and keys. “Let’s go back to my house now. I’ll let you relax in the hot tub and I’ll make you dinner. You deserve a day of rest. Let me give that to you.”

That sounds so good right now. I can already close my eyes and picture myself there, naked with him holding me. At least, I hope that’s what he plans on doing.

“That sounds perfect.” I reach for my purse. “You lead and I’ll follow.”

Isn’t that the truth?

Chapter Eighteen

Phoenix

I slow my car as Kellan turns his bike into the driveway of a big white house with an attached garage. The door slides open and I see Kellan peek over his shoulder at me before pulling his bike into the garage and parking it next to his truck.

The house is beautiful with side-by-side picture windows and blue shutters, a screened in porch surrounded by some kind of red bushes and a brick path that leads up to the front door. I would have never imagined Kellan living in such a beautiful house if he only plans to stay for a short while. It surprises me.

I pull my car into the driveway and as soon as I kill the engine, Kellan pulls the car door open and grabs my hand. “You’re about to meet Rayne, but don’t worry, she doesn’t bite . . . hard.” The right side of his mouth pulls into a teasing smile as he helps me out of my seat. “Unless I tell her to.”

“Say what?” I pull my hand away from his and grab my purse. “If I get bit by something named Rayne, I’m going to bite you.”

His eyes land on my lips and now he’s fully smiling. “Can I count on that? I wouldn’t want you to make promises you can’t keep.”

“You ass!” I reach out to slap his arm, but he grabs it, wraps his arms around my body and throws me over his shoulder, causing me to squeal. “Hey!”

He slaps my butt and slams my car door shut. “You remember what used to happen when you called me names.” He takes off walking fast to the back of the house, his boots pounding hard against the bricks leading

the way. "That hasn't changed." He pushes the privacy fence open and steps through it and into the back yard.

"Oh no! Kellan no!" I place my hands on his butt for support, while I lift my neck enough to see a pool come into view. "No! I'm sorry. I won't do it again. Please put me down," I plead as we come to stand right next to the large underground pool.

His chest rumbles from below me as he laughs, clearly determined to toss me into the water anyway. "That's what you always said." He grabs my purse, drops it to the ground by his feet and walks us over the edge of the pool.

Once we hit the water, he pulls me into his arms protectively and kisses me as we sink to the bottom. The water is cold on impact but I recover from the initial shock. The chlorine is burning my nose, but his lips make it all worthwhile. His fingers tangle through my hair and he grabs my thighs one by one with his other hand, wrapping them around his waist. The next thing my mind registers is us breaking the surface, his lips still attached to mine.

Somehow, we end up pressed against the edge of the pool, with both of us fighting to catch our breath as our lips separate.

Kellan smiles and I can't help but to notice how sexy he looks wet. His hair is darker and slicked back with little droplets of water clinging to his long lashes. Each time he blinks, they fall to his cheek before running down his face and landing on his full lips. He runs a hand over his face and shakes his head. "I figured I'd throw myself in and keep you company this time. I guess I'm becoming a softie." He grabs my neck, leans in and slowly runs his tongue up the tip of my nose. "You have a little water here." He sucks in his bottom lip and smiles before running his tongue over the spot next to my lips. "And here." A groan rumbles in his chest as he bites his lip, leans in and looks me dead in the eyes. "And here." His tongue teasingly runs over my mouth, tasting me, before he sucks in my bottom lip and nibbles it. "Best water I've ever tasted," he somehow manages to say while still sucking on my lip.

I can't take this anymore. This is going to be hard. Really hard. I want him so bad, but I'm tired of this teasing. He's too in control of it. It's driving me mad.

I pull my lip away from his glorious mouth, smile and close my eyes. Placing my hand against his chest, I brush my fingertips over his defined abs, protruding from the wet shirt now stuck to his body, until I reach the

end of my journey at the band of his wet jeans. Cupping his shaft in my grasp, I place my lips to his ear, grabbing the lobe between my teeth allowing my hot warm to caress his ear. “No one said I wanted to get wet, Kellan.” I place the tip of my tongue to his ear and stroke his hardness through his jeans, hoping to have the same affect on him, he has on me. “You get me wet against my will and you’ve been doing it for far too long.”

He watches me with a slight grin as I reach for his jacket and yank it open, sliding it down his arms, scratching my nails down his tattooed flesh on the way. I turn us around so his back is scraping the concrete of the pool and I push his chest until his back presses completely against it. “You’re so hard, Kellan,” I purr in his ear, still stroking him. “Do you like getting me wet?”

He wraps my hair around his hand and roughly pulls my head to the side, giving him the access to my neck he needs. He bites my shoulder and skims his teeth up my neck, toying with me and turning me on. “If I said I liked it, I’d be lying,” he growls against my neck. “I fucking love it,” he whispers. He takes control and flips us around, pressing my back against the pool and rips my shirt open.

A moan escapes my parted lips as he reaches behind me and unhooks my bra, pulling both items down my arms and dropping them into the pool. He looks into my eyes before trailing down until his sight reaches my exposed breasts and smirks. “You do realize I’m going to fuck you so hard, you’re never going to forget my name. When someone else is offering to pleasure you, it’s me you’ll think of.” He places my arms out to the side, on the ledge of the pool, to hold my weight as he reaches between our wet bodies with his other hand and runs his fingers over my swollen clit. Even through the fabric, I feel myself already threatening to release. “My dick is so fucking hard for you it hurts,” he whispers next to my lips. “You’re the only one that does this to me. The only way to get rid of the pain is by burying me deep between those thighs of yours while you scream out my name. I want it loud. So fucking loud it hurts my ears. Can you handle that?”

I nod my head and grab his hair, tugging it. *Oh shit!* I’m going to come even before we start. Why can’t I control myself with him?

“Good.” He kisses me hard as he slides my panties to the side, shoving his finger inside of me. He moves it in and out, slowly, moaning each time he pushes it in deeper. “I love your fuckin’ pussy. Do you like that, baby?”

You're so tight, just the feel of your pussy around my finger makes me want to cum. Do you like making me cum?"

Holy fuck, yes! That dirty mouth does things to me. Makes me feel like a bad, bad girl. "Yes," I whisper against his hair. Yes to everything you'll give me. "Don't stop touching me. Don't stop. Shit!"

He slides his hand down my arm and cups my left breast in his hand, pulling it up and placing it in his mouth. His teeth softly tug my nipple as his tongue swirls around it, tasting it and driving me wild. Feeling his tongue on me makes me want it everywhere on my body. His tongue has some kind of magical spell over me I can't break free of.

"You taste so good, baby. I'm addicted after just a few tastes. I can't help myself when I'm around you." He releases my nipple and lifts my body, trailing kisses down my stomach, stopping right above the waist of my skirt. He peers up at me. "I hope you don't mind me getting another taste, because my body is going through serious withdrawals without it. I want to taste every inch of your body; slowly, teasingly, not wasting one bit of it."

My breath hitches in my throat and for a moment, I'm stunned speechless. "I'm yours to do whatever you want with. Even if just for tonight. I want you to want me as badly as I want you. I want you to want me so bad it fucking hurts."

His grip on my thighs tighten. He swallows hard and lifts me above the water, setting me on the edge of the pool. His eyes take on a smoldering look as he places his hands between my thighs, spreads them wide open and leans in running the tip of his barbell up my wet laced panties. I arch my back and moan as his tongue, licks, flicks and teases the hell out of me. My body jerks with pleasure when he hits my sensitive spot and I feel him smile against my sex before gripping my panties and slowly pulling them down my legs, his mouth trailing little kisses on the way.

When he reaches the bottom, he tosses my panties behind him and looks down at my naked flesh, admiring the sight before him. "Mmm . . . your pussy does things to me, I can't even begin to explain. I haven't stopped thinking about it since that night on the roof. I know I shouldn't want you like this, but one taste of you and I was hooked. I'm going to taste you as if I've just been given my first meal after being left without food for weeks, starved. I'm going to savor every last drop. Etch it deep into my memory

and when I'm done, you're never going to be able to touch another man without thinking of me. Tonight, you're mine."

Oh my goodness! What in the world is he doing to me? Is he trying to ruin me for good? Take away my chance at happiness with any other man, even though I can't have him. 'Cause that's exactly what he's doing. Being here with him already makes me not want to ever touch another man. After this, he'll destroy me.

Before I can even think of a response, his head is buried between my thighs, his tongue working its magic on my aching sex. My hands grip onto his thick hair, pulling his brown locks as I hold his head in place. I scream as he devours me. It feels so good, I can't hold it in. He licks, rubs and nibbles while his finger slides in and out of me touching my sweet spot, giving me an unknown pleasure that sends heat surging through my toes and up my legs. The mixture of sensations has me lost in a world of bliss.

As good as it feels to have him touch me, it just isn't enough. I want him naked, on top of me, our naked flesh rubbing together. I want to dig my nails into his back while he looks me in the eye and buries himself deep inside me. "Kellan," I whimper. "I want you to take me inside. I want you fully naked, on top of me, fucking me rough. I want you to stop this teasing and give it to me."

He runs his tongue up my sex one last time before pulling his finger out of me and sucking my wetness from his finger. His eyes come up to meet mine and without saying anything, he places his hands on the edge of the pool and pulls himself out of the water. He grabs my hand, pulls me to my feet and then grabs my ass, picking me up. On reflex, I wrap my legs around his waist. Our wet bodies collide, my bare breasts pressed against the fabric of his wet shirt and I can feel the studs in his nipples into my puckered ones. The sensation of the metal causing friction against mine is driving me wild. I just want that damn shirt off.

We reach the back door and Kellan stops to dig in his pocket for keys. It takes him a second to get his hand into his wet pants, but finally he comes out with a set of keys, shoving the key into the lock as if he can't bear to go another second without him being inside of me. His desperation gets me so hot I can barely breathe. I reach my hand down between us and work on his belt the best I can manage.

"Oh, fuck! You're making me want you so bad." He kicks the back door open and slams his lips against mine, our bodies falling against the back

door and then somehow into a bar of some sort. At least I think that's what it is. "You're so beautiful. Do you know what you do to me?" he whispers against my lips. He rubs his hands over my head, pulling my hair back tightly as he rubs it and looks me in the eye. "You make me wish we were both different people. That maybe I could be something more than I am."

My heart aches as I look into those dark, damaged eyes. I see the real Kellan wanting to come out and break past all pain he's holding inside. I wish I were enough to do that for him, like he is for me. "You are to me. You always have been. You're my hero. My dream guy that protects me through the bad and has a way of healing my heart where no one else has. You will always be that guy to me no matter what you've done over the years. I can promise you that."

His jaw clenches as he looks me in the eyes. He gets ready to speak, but stops when a growl sounds from below us. "Go lay down, Rayne."

I lean my head over his shoulder and look down at a massive brown pit baring her teeth at me. My heart jumps out of my chest as I throw my arms around Kellan. "Is she really going to bite me?"

He snaps his fingers and points toward the door. "Go to your room."

Suddenly, the huge pit doesn't look so big and tough under Kellan's demand. She wags her nub of a tail, shakes her head and takes off running down the hall, obeying her master. *Thank goodness. I don't feel like dying tonight.*

Kellan cups my face and presses his lips against mine for a quick kiss. "Hell no. I would never let anything hurt you. Do you get that? I will always do everything in my power to keep you safe." He presses his forehead to mine. "Look at me, Phoenix." I bring my eyes to meet his and his lips tighten. "I care about you too much to ever let you get hurt. I always have. You were like family to me and that is why this is so damn wrong. Me wanting you this way is wrong in so many ways, but I can't control myself around you." He rubs my face before wrapping both of his arms around me and pressing his face into the crook of my neck. "I love the way you feel in my arms," he whispers. "It's as if you were made for me to hold you. Sometimes I convince myself that it's okay for me to want you. To need you like I do."

"It is," I breathe. "I want you just as bad or maybe even more. You have no idea how I feel about you. I can't stop thinking about you. It's always

been you. I've loved you since I was fourteen." I kiss the top of his head as he rubs his lips along my neck. "That hasn't changed."

His body tenses up and he sets me on the ground. He turns away from me, gripping his hair in his hands. "Dammit, Phoenix! Don't say that to me. Don't make this harder than it already is. There is so much you don't know." He leans his back against the bar and buries his face in his hands. "You're the only woman that has ever made me feel this way."

His words make my heart feel as if it just burst in my chest. My legs feel weak and wobbly, but I walk over to him anyway, pull his hands away and stare into his eyes, pleading with him to open up to me and just take this moment for what it is. "Nothing in this world could make me stop caring about you. I know that now. You taking off for eight years didn't change that so nothing can. Just please, can we take this moment for what it is?" I grab the bottom of his shirt and slowly start peeling it up his body.

His eyes soften and he lifts his arms, allowing me to undress him. We both stand here shirtless, just staring into each other's eyes, until he breaks the stare and kisses my forehead. "I've missed you over the years. I thought about you every day. I worried about you and Kade. I never meant to hurt anyone. I only did what I thought was best for everyone. I promise you that. If I could take back what I did, I would."

An unwanted tear escapes his eye and I quickly reach out, wiping it away with my bottom lip, smearing it up his face. "Make love to me, Kellan. I don't care if it's just for tonight. I want to experience this moment and I swear I can die a happy woman. Just one passionate night with you. It's all I've ever dreamed of."

He stands there, battling a silent war within himself, before gently wrapping his arms around me and lifting my legs to wrap around his waist. I close my eyes as his lips softly take mine and he walks us through the house and into what I assume is his bedroom.

Wrapping one of his arms under my neck, he gently lays me backwards until my body makes contact with a bed. His bed. The thought sends excitement through my body and I can hardly keep from losing it. There has been so many times I have imagined being in his bed and now here I am, him about to make love to me. I love it when he's rough, but somehow I need more with him. I want to feel that connection of our bodies and souls as one.

Placing his knees on either sides of my waist, he sits above me and tangles his fingers through my hair. My hands reach up and slowly caress his chest, down his stomach, taking in every curve of every muscle, branding it into my brain. This is a moment I never want to forget.

His muscles flex above me as he runs his hands along my sides, grabs my skirt and slowly peels it off me, him making his way down the bed along with it. He runs his hands up the inside of my thigh, spreading my legs. I lay here, completely naked with his eyes taking in every inch of my flesh, the passion clear in his eyes.

"I've never done this before. I'm not sure I can be gentle, but for you, I'll try." He leans in and kisses my thigh. "Let me know if I get too rough and I'll try to slow down."

I nod my head, lean up and reach for his pants, pulling him back onto the bed. He sits on his knees and watches me as I pull his belt aside, unbutton his jeans and pull them down under his butt. "I need to see all of you, Kellan. I want every inch of your body touching mine."

He grabs behind my knees, pulling me to the edge of the bed as he stands up. Grabbing the back of my hands, he places them over his jeans, so that my thumbs hook into the waistband of his briefs. "Tonight, my body is yours to do whatever you want with. I will walk around this house naked all night if that keeps you happy. Then, I'll go to bed naked, holding you and wake up naked to cook you breakfast. You have a way of making me want to do things I've never wanted to before."

Oh my, I love this man. I love him so much it hurts. Being with him tonight is only going to hurt me, but I don't care. I want him more than anything in this world. "You're so beautiful, Kellan. Everything about you is perfect to me. Always has been."

Our eyes meet as I peel his boxers down his legs, his hardness breaking free from the confinement of his wet boxers. I kiss the head and run the tip of my tongue in a swirling motion, making him lean his head back and moan. "You don't have to do that," he whispers. "I don't want you to feel dirty."

I run my hands up the ripped muscles that lead down to his prized possession and grab hold of his shaft as I continue licking, making a bead of cum ooze at the opening. I lick it off and it tastes like salt and chlorine, but somehow he makes it taste so damn good. "Nothing about you can ever make me feel dirty. Everything about you makes me feel sexy."

He swallows hard and places my hands on his jeans, silently telling me to pull them all the way off. I grip them in my trembling hands and pull them down, stopping at the top of his boots. I get ready to reach for his boots, but he gently guides me back to the bed and lays my head on a pillow. "You don't have to take my boots off. That's my job. Now your boots." He pauses and smiles. "That's also my job."

He makes me so happy. What I wouldn't give to feel this every day. I lay back and relax as we works on his boots and then pulls mine off, throwing them beside the bed.

Now, we're both naked. Nothing is separating our bodies from each other and there's nothing else in the world that can compare to this moment. He places one knee on the bed before sliding his body up mine so his erection is barely poking my entrance. His stomach is resting against my stomach, as he supports his upper body with his right arm.

His lips softly, passionately, take mine, our tongues tangling as he steals my breath away. I can't breathe, but I would sacrifice every last bit of air in my lungs just to have this moment.

His heartbeat quickens against my chest as he slides one arm under my neck and grips my head in his hand. "Do you want me to grab a condom? I didn't use one last time and I'm sorry for that. I didn't plan any of that to happen. I just had to have you. I wanted to feel you so bad I wasn't thinking straight." His eyes search mine waiting for an answer. "I have never had sex bareback with a girl and I always pull out even with a condom. It's different with you. With you, I want to feel all of you."

I know my answer right away. There is no doubt in my mind that I want the same as him. I want to feel him completely. I take my pills. I'm safe and I've only had sex unprotected one other time besides with him. When I did that with Aiden, I felt guilty afterward. With Kellan, I just wanted more.

I shake my head and bite my bottom lip. "I want to feel all of you as you make love to me. No condom. Not with you."

His eyes take on a look filled with passion as he tightens his grip around my neck and grabs one of my legs, wrapping it around his waist. He looks deep into my eyes and slowly, pushes his hardness inside me, being sure I feel every inch on the way in. We both moan against each other's mouths before his lips claim mine again, both of us breathing heavily as he slowly begins to move in and out.

In this moment, with our lips touching, our bodies connecting as one, I almost feel as if I can cry from the passion that is overwhelming me. This is what true love making feels like. I've never experienced so much passion from anyone in my entire life.

He pulls me up with the arm that's cradling my neck and I wrap my arms around his body, softly scratching my nails up his hard back. He pushes deep into me, still taking it slow. His lips are now brushing next to my lips. "I love how wet I make you. You're always ready for me. The thought of another man making you wet kills me. Does anyone else make you this wet, baby?" He thrusts inside me, stopping before he pulls back, takes it completely out and shoves it back in, slowly. I moan and scratch him harder. "Tell me I'm the only one that makes you wet."

"You are. I've never been so wet for anyone." His thickness fills me, completely, until I feel as if I'm about to break in two. "No one does this to me. Only you. I want you. Every day and every night. I want you as mine, Kellan."

He exhales a long, deep breath before pressing his lips into the crook of my neck and biting me. It hurts, but feels so good at the same time. He grips me harder, while thrusting deeper into me. We move together as one as he transitions to his knees, pulling me up with him so I can place my legs on either sides of his body. He pulls my body as close to his as he can and he tangles his fingers in my hair. "Can you feel me deep inside you, filling you to the max? Gah, you're so tight. If you keep squeezing my dick like that, I won't be able to hold on. I want you to come with me inside of you. Have you done that before?"

I shake my head. I've never been able to. I've only been able to have clitoral orgasms. "Never been able to."

He smiles and changes his rhythm to a slower, almost torturing speed that gets my body shaking. He alters his angle slightly and each time he thrusts, I can feel it hit my wall. The sensation is new. He grabs my head and brings my lips down to meet his as he steadily increases his thrusts, causing my body to seize above him. I can feel myself clenching around his hard dick and all I want to do is scream out in ecstasy.

"That's it. Don't hold back," he says against my lips. "I want to hear you."

My legs shakes against him as he keeps up his motions and I find myself digging my nails into his back, screaming. "Fuck, Kellan! It feels so

good with you inside me."

He smiles and stills for a moment. "Damn, girl. You about snapped my cock off with that one." He kisses my neck and rubs his ring up to my ear. "Now it's my turn. I'm going to release my load deep inside you. I want you to feel it, filling you and coating you." He cups my face and forces me to look at him. "Watch me. I want you to see how you make me feel."

I breathe heavily, trying to catch my breath as he rocks our bodies, thrusting himself deep inside me, while never taking his eyes away from mine. His grip around me tightens as if he can't get me close enough. Then I feel him let go. His dick pulses inside my walls. He sucks in his bottom lip and moans while filling me with his warm semen. The thought sends my body into a frenzy and suddenly, I feel myself clenching around him again as I fall into another mind blowing orgasm.

"Kellan! Oh, you feel so good inside me. It feels amazing."

He smiles against my neck, both of us breathing heavily. "Holy shit! Just the thought of filling you with my cum makes me want to bust another load just sitting here idly. Do you know what you do to me? You do things to me I can't explain."

He rubs his hands over his face before grabbing mine and pulling it to his. He softly presses his lips to mine, before resting his forehead on mine, transferring the sheen of sweat that has perspired during our love making.

It feels so good being here in his arms. I've waited for too long to get this moment, and knowing that it's almost over saddens me. I don't know whether to be happy for this moment or cry. I'm so torn. I definitely don't want him to think something's wrong, so I'll have to keep it together.

I run my finger over his lip, taking in the softness as he reaches out to caress my cheek. "I should get cleaned up now."

The muscles in his jaw bounce as he picks me up, guides me off his penis and sets me on the bed. He stretches out on the bed and runs his hands up his face and then through his hair. "Let me go run you a bath in the hot tub. You can relax a bit while I cook you dinner. You deserve that. I won't disturb you while you're in there."

He stands up and walks away, still naked. *Oh my, his ass looks so firm and sexy.* Everything on him is sexy and perfect. To me at least. I would give anything to get this moment every day. Just with him. I still can't even believe I'm here with him. The feeling is surreal.

I stand up on shaky legs and bend down to reach for my clothes, but quickly remember that my bra and shirt are still in the pool. *Crap!* So much for leaving tomorrow morning like nothing happened.

I get ready to look for something to cover up with when, from the corner of my eye, I notice Kellan's guitar leaning against the wall. My stomach does a happy dance just remembering the sight of him with it. Now, I can't help but to want to touch it. To feel what he feels while holding it.

I walk over to it and pick it up, running my hands over it, admiring it. It's so beautiful. I place the strap around my neck and hold it like I've seen Adric hold it a million times and how Kellan held it a few days ago. An unstoppable smile forms on my lips as I close my eyes and picture Kellan playing it and singing at the bar. His performance stunned me. His passion about brought me to my knees.

Lost in thought, I feel Kellan's arms wrap tightly around me as his lips smile against my neck, and the hardness of his naked body presses against my back. "Damn . . . you look sexy as hell, naked, holding a guitar. What I wouldn't give to see this every day." His hands reach around and he softly rubs his fingers over the strings, making a melody. This excites me and I'm turned on once again.

I lean my neck back as he starts playing a somewhat familiar tune, his fingers gently strumming the guitar, with me in the middle. This is so hot. Both of us naked, him showing me his skills while I hold the guitar. I would have never imagined I'd be so lucky. "I remember what it was like playing for the first time. It was so damn frustrating that I wanted to break this damn thing." He laughs softly, then kisses my shoulder. "Adric kept me together, telling me I could do it if I put my heart into it. It took a while to finally get what he was saying, but, eventually I did."

"You played beautifully," I admit. "The beauty of your passion stole my breath away." I turn my neck and he kisses me on the lips, sighs and pulls away.

I can feel the heat radiating from his body, but his arms no longer hold me. His body just barely brushes mine. Somehow, that makes me feel cold inside.

It's silent for a moment before he speaks. "Do you remember this guitar, Phoenix?"

"No," I hesitate. "Should I?" I don't remember it other than him playing it on the roof and at the bar, but somehow, I don't think he means either.

He takes a deep breath and holds it in for a minute before releasing it. "It was Adric's. After he passed, I had it restored. I took care of it because I knew how much it meant to him." His voice is laced with the pain I feel from his words.

A single tear falls down my face, but I don't even bother with wiping it away. Hearing those words have made me both happy and sad. Kellan has done so much for Adric over the years and this gesture is by far the best. They were like brothers, inseparable. Adric loved him just as much as he loved me and that's another reason I believe Kellan left with good reason. He would never hurt anyone on purpose. He was never selfish; always giving. "I can't believe it. I thought it was missing," I breathe. "I freaked out and looked for it everywhere. This guitar was everything to him. His life line. He wanted nothing more than to have it restored." I stare down at the guitar as more tears flood my cheeks. "You were always so good to him. He loved you so much. He always told me that. You were the brother he never had."

He reaches over me and grabs the guitar, pulling it safely over my head. I turn to look at him as he stares up at the ceiling. His jaw clenches as if he's holding back tears. The thought makes me want to reach out and hold him, to comfort him. "Why don't you go and get cleaned up, relax a bit and I'll have dinner ready when you're done."

He opens his eyes and my heart breaks for him. I can see and feel the pain as if it were mine. "Okay. Thank you, Kellan. For everything." I want him to know, everything he did made a difference in Adric's life. He could never do any wrong in Adric's eyes.

I pull myself together and walk out of the room and into the bathroom around the corner. My eyes widen as I look around the dimly lighted room in surprise. The bathroom is painted black and silver, with designs painted onto the wall. You can tell they were hand painted by Kellan and they are amazingly detailed.

Peeling my eyes away from the walls, I look around the room. The hot tub, big enough for only two people, sits off in the far back of the room, away from the toilet and double sink.

I walk over to the water, running my hands along the wall on the way. Standing above it, I dip my toes in it, testing it before submerging my body,

all the way up to my neck. I could get used to this, but I can't and I won't. It will only hurt more when I have to say goodbye. All I can do is enjoy it right now while I can. So, I close my eyes and let my thoughts consume me.

After resting in the hot tub for a good forty minutes, I step out, dry off and wrap the towel around my body. I make my way over to the door and poke my head out, to ensure Rayne isn't around to eat me for a snack. When I don't see her anywhere in site, I tiptoe down the hallway until I find my way to the kitchen. Right away, my nose fills with the sweet aroma of his homemade cooking.

I poke my head inside, to see Kellan standing in front of the stove, in a pair of black briefs. They are so tight around his perfect ass that the site almost leaves me gasping for air. *Why does he do this? Is he torturing me on purpose?*

My eyes wander down his muscled legs and land on Rayne, laying on the floor next to his feet. She looks up when she notices me, but then quickly lays back down as if she could care less. *Thank goodness for that.*

Watching him cook me dinner turns me on so much, I almost don't even want to disturb him. I could stand here all night, just watching the way his muscles flex every time he moves. I'm almost tempted to walk over to him and peel those briefs off so I can press my naked body to his while he cooks. It's so damn tempting, but I'm spineless when it comes to him.

"Hey," I say softly. "It smells amazing in here."

He turns around, smiles and sets the spatula down. My eyes trail over his hard muscles as he eyes me and makes his way over, placing his lips to mine for a quick kiss. "I hope you're starving, because I made one of your favorite meals." He runs his hands up my arms before ushering me over to the round table. "Sit down." He walks back over to the stove and turns it off. "I want you to eat enough because once we're done, we're spending the rest of the day, naked in my bed. You're mine for tonight."

His words cause goose bumps to arise on my flesh. This man has a way with words that makes me so hot, I can barely control myself.

I watch his firm ass as he reaches above him for two plates and sets them down on the silver marble counter. I can't help but want to be naked with him right now. He did say we were going to spend the rest of the day and night naked. Might as well start now.

I drop my towel and kick it away with my foot, hoping to get his attention. My nerves are running wild, but my body and mouth just can't

stop. "Oh, trust me, I'm starving."

He gets ready to scoop food onto our plates, but stops and looks over at me, his eyes hungrily scanning my body. "Mmm . . . you're so damn sexy." He drops the spatula and walks over to me, placing my hands on his briefs. "From now on, you're going to be the one to undress me. My body is yours to do whatever you want with."

Holy crap! He was telling the truth. He's mine for the night and I'm taking every last ounce I can get from him. I want this man in every way, even if just for the night. Tomorrow, he's back to being free again, the both of us going back to normal. Dang, that feeling hurts.

I look into his eyes and slowly peel his briefs down his legs and he lifts his feet, stepping out of them, his hand firmly holding the back of my neck. "I hope your cooking is just as good as your . . . masterpiece." I bring my attention down to his manhood and smirk.

His eyes follow mine to his partial erection and it rises to full attention. Then he pulls me up so I'm standing straight, grabs my chin and looks me in the eye. "Trust me, nothing is as good as my cock and tonight it's all yours. I'm not putting clothes on until you tell me to." His eyes land on my breasts and he sucks in his bottom lip. "And you're not putting clothes back on until you leave here tomorrow."

He smirks and walks away, back over to the stove, leaving me standing on trembling legs. Taking a deep breath, I smile and take a seat in the closest chair and watch him in all his naked glory.

He fixes our plates, sets food down for Rayne and brings the plates over to the table. The sight in front of me makes my mouth water. Stuffed French toast with whipped cream and strawberries. *He's fucking good.* I swear I love this man. His body isn't the only thing to make my mouth water. He's always been good with his hands. Now, I can see that *does* mean everything he does with his hands.

"Holy crap, Kellan. This is amazing."

He walks over to the fridge and pulls out the orange juice, placing it on the table before he takes a seat. His eyes wander down to my bare crotch and a growl sounds deep inside his chest as he grips my chair and brings it to him. He turns it so I'm facing him, my legs almost over lapping his. Then, before I can blink he wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me into his lap so I'm straddling him. "I know. Now let's eat so I can take you to bed. You're going to need your energy."

He grips my hips before running his hands up my sides, looking me in the eye. Then he surprises me by reaching behind me and grabbing a strawberry covered in whipped cream. He holds it to my bottom lip and rubs it across it, smearing whipped cream on it while licking his own. "Looks so fucking good on you." He pulls me to him and sucks my bottom lip into his mouth, moaning as he cleans my mouth off with his tongue. "I don't know what tastes sweeter." He smiles. "You or the whipped cream."

I moan as his erection rubs against my clit and he pulls my hips closer against his body. Grabbing his hand, I take his index finger and pull it to my mouth. Sucking from the base to the tip, I moan at the juicy, sweet cream that was left from the strawberry. I suck it clean. "You had a little bit left. I guess you're a little messy," I say seductively.

He lifts an eyebrow, sticks his finger into the whipped cream and brushes it over my bottom lip. "Again," he says huskily. I suck it into my mouth, swirling my tongue over it as I move my mouth up and down the length of his finger, showing him what I can do.

He moans and takes a slow deep breath with his eyes closed. Then he opens them, looks me in the eyes and cups my face. "Fucking, shit, we're never going to get through this meal if we keep this up. You have no idea how bad I want to be inside you right now. I want to fuck you while I feed you strawberries and then I want to watch you lick the cream from your lips as if it were my fucking cum."

He runs one hand down between our bodies, teasing my clit, before shoving a finger inside, getting it wet. Then he pulls it out and sucks my wetness from his finger, getting a taste. "Yeah, you're definitely sweeter than the whipped cream." He swallows hard and then reaches for more food. "I'll behave enough to make it through dinner, but I have a feeling, you'll be leaving sore tomorrow."

This should be a night to remember. Even if it kills me later, it will all be worth it. *No regrets.*

Chapter Nineteen

Kellan

I've been awake for the last hour and I have yet to take my eyes away from her naked body, wrapped up in my arms. For some unspoken reason, I feel very protective of her as she holds me tight. Her arm and leg is draped over me as if she never wants to let go . . . and to be honest, I don't think I

want her to. I don't want to give her up to another man and leave, but what choice do I have? I don't know if I could ever leave her now, especially after last night. Just the thought of another man holding her this way will drive me to break a guy's neck.

The night we spent together was special; unforgettable. It was nothing like I thought it would be when I first asked her to stay with me. I wanted to help her and offer her a place to sleep; a place where she could be comfortable. I saw that makeshift bed on the floor and something in me snapped. I hated the thought of her curled up on that hard floor, alone, without the comfort of someone to hold her and keep her warm. I would have offered to stay there and hold her, but that would have been fucking creepy, not to mention her mother and I have never gotten along. Us curled up on the floor with her drunken mother sleeping a few feet away would have just caused unnecessary problems. Call me greedy, but I just couldn't help myself. I want her for myself. Plus, I want more for her. She deserves the best.

I had thought about asking her to stay with me beforehand, but I wasn't sure I would actually go through with it. Not until I saw the look in her eyes at the shop. That look was enough to tear my walls down, to crumble them completely. I knew then and there that I couldn't stand to ever see her suffer. I planned on being sweet to her. Cooking her dinner, letting her relax in the hot tub and just being a good friend while I still can. She deserves it.

She has had to grow up and be the parent just like Adric did, most of her life. Everyone deserves to be taken care of at some point in their life.

Originally, no sex was intended. I tried blocking out my feelings and pushing them away, but again, I couldn't. She has some kind of hold on my heart that doesn't allow me to think straight when it comes to her. All I want to do is be close to her. To be touching her in any way possible. Thanks to my fucking weakness, now I've fucked things up even more. She even said she loved me. *Fuck!* Now, I am going to have to do damage control. I would be lying though, if I said I didn't love hearing it from her. How that messed with my heart. I swear I felt it break apart and shatter in my chest. Did she mean it? I don't know. Did she mean it in the romantic or platonic way? Fuck, I hope the former. I shouldn't, but I do.

She stirs in my arms, but doesn't wake up. I run my hand over her face, just above her cheek, before I lean in and gently kiss her. Seeing her so peaceful, forms something inside me that I can't understand. I have never

slept with a girl in my arms and sure as hell have never had sex with a woman without a condom. Feeling her that way, awoke an uncontrollable desire within me to make me want her as mine and only mine. I can't help but to wonder if anyone else has been inside her that way. Fuck, that thought kills me. I don't want to think about that. I will murder someone.

Shit!

Needing to get up to piss, I try my best to wriggle my way out of her grip without waking her. It's almost afternoon, but I get the feeling she needed the extra sleep. She's tough. She always has been, but even the toughest need rest. I can't even imagine what she's going through with her family and with Kade right now. That little dick better not be giving her a hard time. I love my brother with everything in me and I would do anything to protect him, but something tells me I would do more to protect this woman in my arms. The only woman that has made me feel anything besides the pain that consumes me.

I manage to slip out of bed with just a groan from her and make my way to the bathroom. When I'm done, I go to the kitchen and start on breakfast. Yes, still naked. Like I said. My body is hers to do what she wants with. I would never do this for another woman. With anyone else, I've only ever stayed naked long enough to have sex and get them dressed. I have respect for women, don't get me wrong, but no one has ever made me want more until . . . her.

I walk into my bedroom and set the tray of food on the dresser. I look down at her, barely tangled up in my silk sheets and smile. I want to keep her here as long as I can. I have a feeling, I don't have much time before I get a visit from Cape's inbreeds again. *Those sorry ass, low life mother fuckers are nothing but a waste of space.* I can't even believe they still do that asshole's dirty work. They're the ones that ran me out eight years ago. Cape didn't have enough balls to take me on himself. Always hiding behind his goons. I guess after what I did to his brother, I did sort of sign my death wish. Blood is always thicker than water. As bad as it sounds, that son of a bitch deserved every last bit of it. He should have just told me what I wanted instead of talking down on Adric. He's lucky he's still breathing after the shit he said.

When they realized the thought of them killing me off didn't do shit to break me down, they took it as far as they could. They went and threatened my loved ones. My mother fucking family. No one threatens my family.

There is no doubt in my mind that I would kill for them. I had two options. Stay and watch my family's lives slowly crumble as they picked them off one by one, or get the fuck out of town and never come back. I fought a battle within myself, somewhat believing I could protect them if I stayed, but deep down, I knew it was bullshit. There was no way I could protect them all at the same time. These son of a bitches are smart. They lurk in the shadows until they catch you alone and at a disadvantage. I couldn't risk my family getting hurt because of me. I couldn't even protect Adric and he was only one person. In the end, he let them get to him. No matter how hard I tried to keep him away from Cape and those damn pills he concocted, he still managed to find someone to go between them. Who that person is, I have yet to find out . . . but when I do, I will personally rip them apart limb by mother fucking limb.

Adric had an illness he couldn't control. His head was so fucked up from depression and dealing with his family life, that those pills were his only escape. They became his crutch, his coping mechanism. No one knew what were in the pills, they were a combination of meds and drugs, supposedly for the purpose of making you believe you were happy and everything in the world was fine and fucking dandy, but I think it did the opposite for Adric. I could tell when he was on a high from those pills, because he would get that distant look in his eyes and his hands would shake uncontrollably. He would keep on talking about how fucked up his life was and that he would never amount to anything. He would doubt his music, his art work, even doubt our friendship and that is what hurt the most.

Eventually, I started hiding his stash from him or flushing them down the toilet because I couldn't handle seeing him that way. I even spent most of my time with him to be sure he couldn't set up any plans to meet up with any of Cape's men. Still, somehow he got past me and got more pills. The sad part was, that after he came off his high, he couldn't even remember what he did or said. In my opinion, I think him not being able to remember was enough for him. It took him away for a while. That night that he died was not an accident. He gave himself a choice and made the wrong decision.

"What's that delicious smell?" Phoenix sits up and stretches, while holding the sheet over her breasts with one arm. "Did you cook me breakfast?" She beams and my chest twinges.

I walk over to stand next to the bed and reach for her hand, kissing it. "I guess you can still call it that." I trail kisses up her arm, to her shoulder, then to her neck. I smile against her flushed skin and laugh. "It's pretty much lunch time. I guess I wore you out last night." At least, I hope I wore her out. We only had sex about four times during the middle of the night. She brought it on three out of those four. *Damn, she worked me in.* "Or should I say, you wore me out. You fucking animal."

Tilting her neck, she kisses my head and tangles her hands in my hair. "Well . . . you did say your body was mine for the night," she says in a whisper. "How am I supposed to control myself knowing that? Limitations were not mentioned."

I grab her face and softly press my lips against hers. *Holy hell, those lips are soft.* It's going to take every bit of my energy not to jump on top of her and slip between those sexy thighs. I'm trying to behave. She deserves to be treated with respect. I find myself wanting to be sweet, wanting to take care of her. It's a foreign feeling to me. For a woman that I've slept with, but she's not just any woman to me. She's Phoenix Winters, my best friend's little sister and the girl I grew up protecting. At first, I wanted to treat her like any other girl, having rough sex and then letting us both go our separate ways. Ninety nine percent of the time, I don't want more than one time with a girl. I knew when I touched her, I was in over my head. Instead of getting my fill, she fed my drive. Each time I take her I only want her more. Even me trying to be rough with her, didn't stop me from developing feelings for her. Looking into those big, gray eyes, I know now, just how impossible that was. I want more with her. I want this feeling every night.

I pull my lips away and smile against her mouth. "You should eat up and gain some of that energy back." I rub my hands over the back of her head before pressing my lips to her forehead. "You're so damn beautiful." I look into her eyes and she shyly bites her lip. "Do you know that? I don't want you to ever forget it."

Her eyes watch me as I walk over to the dresser, grab the tray of food and bring it over to set on her lap. She looks down at the tray and smiles. "Steak bagels and hash browns." She looks up at me. "How do you remember all of my favorite meals? That was so long ago, Kellan."

I grab Adric's old guitar and walk over to my side of the bed, tossing the strap around my neck. "Because I cooked them most of the time. I love to

cook and I would never forget those days. They were important to me."

She takes a bite of hash browns and swallows hard. Her eyes get a bit glossy, but she quickly turns away and clears her throat. "Everything about you is important to me. Everything you did in the past left a huge impact on my life. That's why I could never forget you." She sets her plate down and leans over, rubbing her thumb under my eye. I grab it and kiss it. "I waited for you every day for over a year. I didn't want to give up on you. I couldn't. I needed you so bad. Why did . . ." Her words trail off as she turns her head away.

I look into her eyes and cup her face. "I know that I hurt you and I'm sorry for that. I never meant to. But please . . . please don't ask me to explain right now. I wouldn't even know where to start and right now, I just want to be with you while I can. I would never lie to you, so please don't ask me, because I would just have to plead the fifth. I want to tell you someday and hope you understand, but not right now. If you end up hating me, I don't think I could handle it right now."

She grabs my wrists and squeezes. Her eyes are filled with pain and confusion and my heart aches just looking at them. I want to ease that pain, but I can't. I'm so fucked up, she deserves so much better. "I could never hate you, Kellan. I wish you could understand that. I just want you to stay with me. Tell me you'll stay. That you won't take off again. Please, I need to hear it." Her eyes search mine and when I don't answer, she shoves her tray away.

I grab her tray and push it back to her lap. "Please don't do this. I can't tell you I will because it would be a lie, dammit. Can you please just enjoy this moment with me?" I kiss her on the mouth to let her know I care. "Please. Just for right now. You can hate me after you leave."

She lets out a deep breath before biting into her bagel. She looks torn, but answers anyways. "Yeah, I'll do my best."

Half satisfied with her answer, I lean back, close my eyes and play the guitar while she eats. When I open my eyes again, she's looking at me with admiration. She reaches out and runs her hand up the muscles in my arm and looks me in the eyes. I don't turn away, I just stare into her eyes as I play for her. We sit there for a while, both of us silent, just listening to the beautiful music. In this moment, we don't need to say anything. We can both see how much the other cares. At least, I hope she can.

After a few songs, she leans in and kisses me on the cheek. "I need to take a quick shower. I made plans with Jen today and I'm supposed to be there by two." She looks at me, forehead crinkled up and nostrils flared as if she's trying not to cry. "Thanks for last night. I will never forget it."

I sit there, jaw ticking, as she stands up and walks away. I feel like a total dick. I don't know what to say. I hurt her and I know it. I can see it in her eyes. *Shit! I'm so stupid.* I pull the guitar strap over my head and set it on the bed.

The water from the shower starts and I pace across the bedroom, with my hands in my hair. I need to do something to let her know that even though I can't be here that I care about her. I want her to know she means something to me.

I need to make love to her the right way. No roughness. Just sweet, tender, love making. *Fuck! Do I love her? Nah, I can't love her.* Not in that way at least. I just care about her. So bad it fucking hurts to think about losing her or to think about hurting her. To think about my brother or any other man having her just pisses me off.

I walk down the hallway, unable to control myself any longer. I want to give her something sweet to keep with her for always. Something to set me apart from anyone else. I want to give her my heart, but I can't. There is nothing to give, so I'll give her my body, the right away.

The bathroom is filled with steam when I walk in and it's hard to see anything around me. She has to have that water really fucking hot to cause the room to look and feel like this. I walk over and slowly open the glass door to the shower, to see her pulling one of my razors up her leg.

She stops when she notices me standing in front of her. "I'm sorry. I saw that you had some extra razors in the cabinet and I didn't think you'd mind. She looks a little worried as if I'm upset with her for using it. How can she think I can ever be upset with her? "Anything of mine is yours," I say without hesitation. Then I step into the shower, close the door and reach for the razor.

I kneel down in front of her and prop her leg against my shoulder, kissing the shaving cream free, section of her soft leg. Then I carefully run the razor over her skin, finishing what she started. I want to show her that if I could, that I'd take care of her. I would do anything for her if I had a choice.

She runs her fingers through my hair and pulls it a little for me to look up at her. "I've never had anyone else shave my legs for me. It's a good thing I trust you." She smiles.

I reach up and grab her hand with my free one, intertwining my fingers with hers. "Well, I've never shaven anyone's legs, so it's a first for both of us." I kiss her leg again. "How much do you trust me?"

She lets out a nervous laugh and watches as I start on her next leg. "Enough to let you shave my leg with that five blade razor." Her face takes on a serious look as I stand up, tossing the razor down beside me. Our eyes meet and my heart palpitates in my chest. "More than I'm afraid I should."

I wrap one arm around her waist and one around her neck, pulling her as close to me as I can. "Can you trust me when I say, I did what I did to protect you and Kade? I promise to tell you everything before I leave, but not now. Right now, I just want to make love to you."

She lets out a small gasp and nods her head. Our lips meet and I pick her up, wrapping her legs around my waist. I position her so I can slide my way inside her, both of us moaning as I slide deep into her core. I back her against the wall for extra support. I squeeze her body tight as I rock my hips, slowly claiming her body as mine. She slowly moves up and down as I support her body, one arm under her ass and the other around her neck, holding her face to mine. It feels as if I can't get her close enough. I want to hold her tighter, but I'm afraid she won't be able to breathe.

"How does that feel, baby?" I whisper against her lips. "Am I hurting you?"

She shakes her head and the water drips from her lips down to mine. I stick my tongue out, catching it in my mouth before brushing my bottom lip with hers. "It feels good," she moans. "I've never felt this way with a man before. One more time will never be enough."

I kiss her desperately as I push deeper inside, stilling for a moment. "Not even with that Aiden guy?" I ask desperately hoping she says no. I know they have history. She didn't come out and say it, but I can tell. The thought angers me because I'm selfish.

Her arm snakes around my neck and her other hand digs into my back, squeezing me close. "No. Things were different with him. We only had sex three times. We were together for about a year, but every time we had sex, he treated me like a piece of glass and I hated it. You have shown me so

much more in such a short time. You're special, Kellan. You always have been."

Holy shit! They were together for that long and we've already had sex more. Somehow, that makes me fucking ecstatic. I smash into her lips and tug on her bottom lip. "You've just made me so fucking happy."

I press my body against hers, up against the back of the shower wall and run my hand up her throat, making love to her while the steaming water, massages our skins, mingling together. I push into her deep, but gentle, steadily thrusting, causing her to moan in my ear and grip onto me for dear life.

Somewhat the thought of her needing me turns me on more than me fucking her hard and wild and it doesn't take long for me to lose control. I grab her face and press my forehead to hers, both of us fighting to catch our breath. "Look at me. Don't take your eyes away. Are you ready to come? I'm ready. I can't hold back with you."

She nods her head and smiles.

"Okay, baby." I grab her hips and squeeze while thrusting into her a little harder and faster than before. "I want to come inside of you again. Do you like the thought of me busting my load in you?"

She nods again and moans while squeezing her thighs around me. "I love when you talk dirty to me. It makes me want to come every time I hear it."

"That's it, baby. Let it go. I'm going to release inside you now. I'm going to push it in deep and fill you. Remember no other man has been inside you this way. Think of that."

Her legs squeeze me tighter and she screams as her pussy clenches around my dick. Her squeezing around me causes me to lose it and I come along with her, squeezing her against me, my lips crushing hers at the pure bliss that consumes my body as I release a part of me inside her body.

I hold her in my arms for a few moments, not wanting to let go. Our hearts beat together, our breaths ragged against each other's faces as we both smile, sated . . . for now. I can't believe how good it felt making love. I never thought I could handle making love. Sex has always been rough with me. It was my release. Fucking was it for me. Until now. Until . . . her.

Lifting her body, separating us, I let go of her thighs, one by one and she slides down the front of my body, still holding onto my neck. She looks

up at me before bringing her eyes down to my arm. She traces her fingers over the eagle on my bicep and smiles weakly. "You got this for Adric didn't you?" She looks up at me expectantly. "He loved eagles."

I nod my head and hold my arm up so she can look at my forearm. "This too."

She looks down at the weeping angel and tears spring to her eyes. She shakes her head, trying to hide the tears. "What does the angel mean? Why is she sad?"

I exhale, not knowing how to answer. No one knew about Adric's depression and the battles he fought. Not even her. My jaw clenches as I search for the right words. "It just represents his true emotions. A side of him I knew so well. He had some deep shit going on inside his head. To me, this angel is how he felt. I never want to forget anything about him, including those emotions he hid from the world. Now, I'd like to believe this angel has taken that hurt from him and he's free of anything bad in his life. He's up there smiling down on us." I look between our naked bodies. "Well, maybe not now." I look up to the ceiling. "Sorry, bro."

She looks at me confused, her eyes dancing back and forth, looking me in the eyes. "I have a feeling Adric trusted you more than anyone. I just hope one day, you will tell me what went on in that head of his. He should have known better than to take so many pills. He always seemed so happy. I will never understand."

Her body tenses and she reaches for the shower door. "I really have to go. Jen is going to wonder where I am." She gets ready to step out, but stops to look back at me. "You don't have to answer this. I'm not sure I want to know, but will I see you again?"

My heart fucking breaks in a million pieces. Shit! I run my hands over my face and lean into the back of the shower. She knows I'll never lie to her.

When I don't respond, she smiles sadly and steps out of the shower, closing the door behind her. I stand in the shower, head in hands for at least thirty minutes before finally pulling myself together and getting dressed. The water turned to ice about fifteen minutes ago, but I couldn't move.

I feed Rayne, take her for a walk and then head out to the shop. Tyler called me about ten minutes ago, saying there was a client asking specifically for me and even though I wasn't planning on going in today, I never turn down a client. It's against my passion for tattooing. Tattooing is

my biggest release now. After the night with Phoenix, I don't think I can ever think of sex the same way. She's hooked me. I'm ruined.

I arrive at the shop, jump off my Harley and greet Tyler as I walk inside. "Hey, man. Where's this client?"

Tyler looks up from the tattoo he's giving to some middle aged pothead looking dude and nods his head toward the can. "I don't know, man. I think he's taking a shit or something. He's been in there for a while."

I lift my eyebrows at him and take a seat in my chair. Rolling to my station, I grab a pair of black latex gloves and pull them over my hands. Might as well be ready when he comes out. "Alright now, I didn't need that much info and I'm sure he doesn't want his shit aired out there like dirty laundry either. Do you know what he wants?"

"Nah, man. He wouldn't really say much. He came in with two guys, but I think the others left to go to that bar next door. They looked pretty fucking rough. I think their gene pool is a bit shallow if you get my drift. One of them was so fucking ugly . . ."

The bathroom door swings opens and a man with short blond hair comes through with a rod pierced through his cheek, just under his eye. He's wearing a leather jacket, black jeans with a chain hanging from the side, and big ass combat boots. His red eyes bore into mine as he makes his way over to the chair in front of me.

Well fucking shit! What the hell does this dick want? I curl my lip and watch him as he gets comfortable in the chair. It pisses me off because I don't want his nasty ass tainting my stuff. Who knows where all he's been. He probably has some kind of disease even Ajax won't wash off. "Well, look at what the fucking dogs drug in: Cape. What the hell do you want? You know not to show your face in my sanctuary. Why don't you go back to the streets where you belong. Don't you have some more lives to ruin?"

He stares at me with a smug smile. Then he kicks his boots out and crosses his feet, looking relaxed and at home. Like he owns the damn place. That's the problem with Cape; somewhere along the way, he got pretty big into drug dealing and got a big head, making him dangerous. When we were in grade school he wasn't so bad. "Good to see you too, mother fucker," he growls. "Don't look so surprised to see me; although, I should say, I'm surprised as fuck to see you're still around." He reaches over to touch my gun, but I place my hand over it first, snatching it away. "Come

on, man. That's a nice gun you have there. Maybe I can show you mine someday. Sometime sooner rather than later."

I should rip this asshole's throat out. Is he seriously sitting here in my shop, threatening me? If I don't get a grip, I'm going to kill him with my bare hands right here in front of Tyler. I smirk and cross my arms, looking him directly in the eye. "Don't try to threaten me. It doesn't work or scare me. I'm used to your scare tactics by now. The thing is, my life doesn't matter. We've already had this discussion," I growl out, acting cool. "Plus, I still have a few more fucking days." I clench my fists at my sides, trying my best not to break something or show my anger, allowing him the win. "Just tell me what the hell you want and leave."

"Just wanted to say hi to your family, that's all. It's been a while, maybe I should introduce myself . . . friend." He chuckles, knowing that he hit some kind of nerve with me. "And to see how your visit is coming along. It must be nice, getting to spend time with your brother."

I take a deep breath and exhale through my nose.

He huffs and leans into the seat. "It must be nice having a brother that isn't ridden to a wheel chair, with a few crushed bones in his face that will never look the same. It would be a shame if that happened to Kade. You know . . . a brother for a brother."

My breathing picks up as my fists clench tighter at my sides. I tower over him and jab my finger into the side of his skull. "Shut the fuck up! Don't you fucking speak my brother's name?" I push his head with my finger.

He makes a sad face and tilts his head away. "Why not? I should be able to speak it freely. He is one of my employees. What kind of business would I be running if that wasn't allowed?" He smiles at my expression and stands up as the door opens. Larry and Kenny walk in with shit faced grins. "You wanted to know who kept selling those pills to Adric. Well, you were asking the wrong fucking brother, my man. Instead of snooping around my back door, you should have been at our own. You made a costly mistake."

The muscles in my arm twitch as I watch him turn and walk over to his rats. "You expect me to believe that!" I shout.

He stops, smiles and pulls out a piece of paper. He tosses it to the floor, nods at Tyler and his client, who have stopped to stare and then walks out the door.

"Is everything cool, man?" Tyler watches as I walk over to the piece of paper and pick it up.

I turn to him and nod my head. "It's cool. I just need a minute. I walk outside to get fresh air. If I don't, then I'm going to explode from the blood boiling beneath my skin. All I'm seeing right now is red.

"Fuck!" I rub a hand over my face, working my lip ring between my teeth and look down at the faded, wrinkled up piece of paper in my hand. The first thought that runs through my head scares the shit out of me as I open the paper to read. "Are you shitting me?"

I crumble the paper in my hand and place my palms flat against the wall, dipping my head, allowing the anger to consume me. Rational thought escapes me and I slam my fists into the brick wall, repeatedly, while cursing out loud. I continue to punch the wall until my fists are drenched in blood and I can no longer feel my hands. Then I lean my back against the wall and slide down, with my face in my hands. I balance my weight on my heels while taking long, deep breaths. *My brother. My fucking brother.*

The proof is right here in my hands, staring me in the damn face. It's Kade's cell number he's had since he was sixteen. It's written in Kade's sloppy as shit hand writing. What the fuck kind of business did he think he had, working for Cape? I wouldn't be surprised if he still is.

I can't even think right now. I just want to knock some sense into this idiot and choke him the hell out. All this time, I've been racking my brain trying to figure out who had gotten to him, when I turned my back for a moment and the answer was right in front of my face. There was barely a time I wasn't with Adric. I was scared to leave him alone for too long. Kade was one of the few that spent a little time with him when I wasn't around. *That little shit.* Betrayed by my own flesh and blood.

I jump to my feet, shove the paper in my pocket and head straight for my bike. Phoenix told me last night that Kade and Luna work the day shift today. He better be expecting to see his big brother because I have some words for this dick.

Through my rage, I somehow manage to make it to *Spinner's* without killing anyone on the way. I yank the door to the bar open so hard it could have pulled my shoulder out of socket and stride across the bar, my sights set on Kade. He's behind the bar, sweet talking Luna. *Figures.* All he seems to be able to think about is pussy. His dick is all he cares about other than himself, causing people to get hurt.

"You stupid son of a bitch!" I yell, causing everyone to stop and look my way. I'm so pissed, I could care less who's watching.

Kade exhales a deep breath and tosses the towel that's draped over his shoulder, down onto the bar. "Yeah, that's me. How the fuck can I help you? Did Phoenix tell you about last week? My bad." He grabs a beer, takes a swig and slams it down.

Ah, hell! Now my blood is really boiling. I better not hear anything about him doing anything to Phoenix. That is something to settle later. Right now, we need to settle something else.

I stop in front of the bar and slam the piece of paper down onto the top with my hand covering it. I look him in the eye, clenching my jaw. He better have a good answer. "What the fuck is this?" I take my hand away, revealing the number and he gives me a look to kill as he picks up the paper. "What the shit! No games."

His eyes widen for a second before he tosses it into the trash and grabs for his beer again. "It's my damn number." He sets his beer down and stares me in the eye. "Probably from one of the many girls that I have fucked over the years. If you're wondering if that's Phoenix then . . ." He smiles.

I lean across the bar, grab him by the shirt and slam my bloodied fist right into the side of his face. He stumbles backwards as I swing my legs across the bar and jump down in front of him.

Luna takes a step back, but smiles at me as if she finds it sexy. *Of course she does.* Then she leans against the bar and stares at me.

"What the fuck!" Kade grabs his face and looks up, flaring his nostrils. "You damn lunatic."

I grab onto his shirt and slam him into some glasses. "Don't you play stupid with me, Kade. You know damn well who you gave that number to. You never give your number to girls. You're a man whore, remember? You can't handle any kind of commitment aside from where to stick your dick next."

He places his hand on mine and yanks it away from his shirt. Then he shoves me back, causing me to almost trip over a mat. "I don't have to explain shit to you. You're the one that has explaining to do."

A random guy walks over to the bar and holds up his phone. "Should I call the cops?"

I turn to him. "Put your fucking phone away!" Then I turn back to Kade and grab him by the throat, squeezing just enough to get his attention. The

fucking games are over. I lean in close to his face and push his head onto the bar. "You're fucking dealing for Cape," I say loud enough for only him to hear. I slam him again, but harder this time. "It's your fault Adric is dead. You damn piece of shit, I should kill you."

He reaches around and slams his fist into my side and I stumble a bit, letting go of his neck. He quickly grabs his neck and starts fighting for air. "You would kill your own brother over him, wouldn't you? He always was more important."

I look at him at a loss for words. Why the hell would he even think that? I love him more than anything, even though he's a cocky, arrogant son of a bitch. "What the hell, Kade!" Placing my hands on the bar, I bend forward trying to calm down. "What is that supposed to mean? Is that why you did it?"

He flinches as if I've just hit him again. "You think I did it on purpose? I didn't fucking know he would be so stupid about it. I was friends with Adric too, you know. At least I didn't run off like a coward after he died."

The words sting. I knew everyone would think I left because I was being a coward, but hearing it from my own brother hurts. No one knows the real reason. That reason being, if I didn't, Kade would probably be a vegetable right now and Phoenix would probably be dead. No one know's that I beat the shit out of Cape's brother to the get the answers. I knew that low life blood sucking leech, Echo, had the answers I needed. When he refused to give me what I wanted and then laughed in my face, I blew the fuck up and almost killed him. I got lucky I somehow found the strength in me to stop. I left him there, face so bloodied I could barely recognize him. The full effects of what happened didn't really sink in until Cape showed up with a gun pointed to my head.

"Answer me, Kellan. Do you think I'm that low?" Kade places a hand to his bruised face and pushes me again when I don't answer. "Fuck you!"

I grip onto the bar and look down at the floor, closing my eyes. I can't think straight right now. I'm still pissed as hell at him. My breathing picks up and my head feels clouded. "I need a minute to think," I snap. I stand tall and look him in the eyes like a man. "The truth is I want to kill you right now. A life for a life. You should have cared for your friends more than you did, but that's just it; all you think about is yourself. I can't touch you because your blood and killing you would be letting you take the easy route. Instead, I'm going to do nothing and let you live with what you've

done. Your conscience is your biggest enemy. You have to look at Phoenix knowing what you've taken from her." His face goes blank as he processes what I've said. "You're my brother. And so was he, dammit!"

"You boys must have some crazy shit going on." Luna says as if nothing big is happening right now. "If I had to guess, my money would be on Kellan." We both look over and she shrugs. "Just saying, boys." She holds her arms up and backs away. "Please continue. This is making me hot."

Kade turns to Luna and throws something at her. "You pick a great fucking time to finally get hot. I guess I know what to do next time. Fuck some mother fucker off and get my ass kicked a little. Great!" Just like that he's already back to thinking about getting laid.

I can't stand here and listen to this crap. I need to get out of here before I do something I regret. I turn my attention away from Luna and set my sights on Kade. "You get away from Cape and his shit. Don't let me find out you're still involved. You're lucky Phoenix doesn't know you're the cause of her brother's death. She deserves to know."

Kade straightens and walks to stand nose to nose to me. "If you fucking tell her, I will turn that shit around and say it was you." He points his finger in my chest. "You're the one that ran. Who do you think looks guilty?"

Is he serious right now? He's just digging himself deeper. There's no way Phoenix would go for that crap. *Would she? Damn, I'm fucked!* "I slap his finger away and rub my hands over my face. "Just stay away from Cape and stay the fuck away from Phoenix. Don't you fucking touch her. She doesn't want you, Kade. She's made that clear so move on. I will break your fucking arms."

Kade gives me a smug smile, but doesn't say a thing as I turn around to leave. That makes me think he's already touched her. *Dammit!* I won't even get into what he meant earlier about last week. That will drive me to lose my sanity. I just need to leave. I need to be alone to catch my breath. Make an attempt to pull my thoughts together. I need to go to the woods since those assholes won't stay away from my shop. I need to be alone before I kill someone.

Chapter Twenty Phoenix

I step into the bar and get ready to walk past the office, but stop when I notice Dale sitting in the over-sized leather chair. His elbows are on the

desk and his fingers are wrapped in his hair, as he stares down at the cash drawer in front of him.

Cautiously, I take a step inside, not sure if he wants to be bothered. I clear my throat, giving him the heads up that I'm there, before I speak. "Hey, Dale. Is everything all right?"

He inhales a deep breath before shoving the drawer into the safe and spinning the chair around. He gestures to the empty chair against the wall and says, "Come on in."

I glance out the door behind me to see Kade walk by, sporting a bruised left eye. He clenches the muscles in his jaw, turns the other way and keeps walking. Not really sure what that's about, I close the door behind me and plop down into the chair. "You look stressed, Dale. What are you doing hanging out around here?"

The lines around his eyes wrinkle and he lets out a frustrated huff and gives a *tell me about it* look. "I stopped in to check on a few things and decided it best, to stick around until those hooligans out there leave. Apparently, they don't feel the need to stop drinking anytime soon and I don't trust you by yourself with them, but until they do something really stupid, we can't just kick them out. It looks bad and don't want to cause a scene for other customers."

I lean forward in my chair confused. Surely he's not going to stick around all night just for that. "So you plan on staying all night until they leave? I'm sure I'll be okay, Dale. I've dealt with plenty of asses my whole life. I'm sure everything will be fine." I smile but he doesn't return it, so I change the subject. "And what crawled up Kade's ass? He looked really mad just a few minutes ago."

"His ego's a little bruised because someone handed his ass to him earlier." He tries to suppress a chuckle, but fails miserably. He's always told Kade that someday someone was going to give him a good ass whoopin if he didn't cool his cocky attitude. I guess he was right. "And I told him he's staying for a few more hours. I'm not leaving you alone. If it weren't for Kellan spending the day with Nancy, then I would have him here, but his mother needs him more right now."

My heart stops just from the mention of his name. I suck in a deep breath and choke. I actually choke.

Dale leans in as if he's about to slap me on the back. "Are you okay?"

I nod and wave my arms. When I can breathe again, I finally say, "I'm fine. I just choked on some spit. Went down the wrong pipe." I stand up and grab my purse strap, pulling it back over my shoulder. I can't even think right now. I thought he'd be gone. He must be saying his goodbye. "So Kellan is at your place?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady. "It's nice to have him back, right?" I need answers.

His eyes light up and a tiny smile forms on his lips. "Yeah," he breathes. "It's a relief to know my son is safe. I gave up hope years ago we'd ever see him alive." He looks up, his eyes meeting mine. "Nancy couldn't be any happier. I decided to get out of the house for a few to give them some alone time. I couldn't handle her crying, then laughing, then crying again. That woman is something else."

"So is Kellan," I whisper.

Dale looks up from his watch in a hurry and taps it as if it has stopped working. "What was that?"

I smile and place my hand on Dale's shoulder, squeezing. "I said it's nice having Kellan back. I missed him." I walk toward the door and reach for the handle, turning back to look at Dale. "Did you want something else?"

His eyes widen as if he's just remembered something, then he stands up shuffling through some papers. "Yeah. Keep your eye on the staff because the drawer I counted isn't adding up right. If I find out someone's stealing and no one steps up to admit it, I'm getting all new workers. Got it? I'm done with the crap here. We already got rid of Saline, I don't want to have to get rid of anyone else. Oh, and we need to find someone to replace Saline. Get me someone by next week." *Too bad it can't be Kellan.*

I exhale and nod my head. I thought that problem was taken care of when we let Saline go. Who the hell else would be taking money? It started before Luna and there's no way Jen or Kade would steal from Dale. Now I need to figure out who can't count and find a new bartender. *This should be fun.* "Yeah, I'll keep my eye out. I should get out there before Kade freaks out."

He waves me off and sorts through his desk. "Keep Kade on track. He tends to need a little motivation sometimes," he grumbles. "I'll see you later."

I step out of the office, closing the door behind me. The first thought that runs through my mind is Kellan. *He's already saying goodbye to his mother?* This is not a good sign. When I asked him if I'd see him again,

there was a look in his eye that told me, I wouldn't. My heart broke in two right there in front of him. I had to get out of there as fast as I could so he wouldn't see me cry.

After spending the night in his bed, talking, and laughing, with our naked bodies tangled together; I know for a fact, I'm madly, deeply in love with this man. Nothing else can compare to the way he makes me feel. When I think about losing him, I can't breathe, nor do I want to. He is the only one that is able to rip me apart from the inside, and shatter my soul with one look in the eye. I waited far too long to see those eyes again and I never want to go a day without seeing them. I want to believe with everything in me, that by the way he held me close to him last night, kissing me in my sleep every time I stirred in his firm grip, that he feels the same way. The way he held my body against his, his arm pressing my face into the comfort of his chest, felt as if he never wanted to let go. To be honest, I didn't want him to. I wanted to stay that way forever, lost in my emotions for him.

After we showered and he made it clear we could never be more, I snatched up one of his shirts and my skirt and got the hell out of there. I went home, crept inside to be sure not to wake my mom and I changed before heading to Jen's.

It was so hard visiting with Jen and listening to her talk about how much she enjoyed having Tyler around, without me wanting to tell her what happened with Kellan. I couldn't do it though. I don't want her knowing that when I curl back into my shell again, hiding myself off from the world that it's because of Kellan. I don't want her to hate him or Tyler and knowing her, she won't be able to be around Tyler without thinking of how Kellan crushed my heart into a million pieces.

I step behind the bar and Luna is crouched down in front of the cooler, taking count. She peers over her shoulder when she hears me shove my purse into the drawer and lock it. "Hey. I'm taking count right now then I'll be heading out soon." She tilts her head, nodding across the room. "Watch out for those pricks. They're rude as shit. I've already taken my shoe off once and threatened to shove it down that ugly dick's throat."

I laugh at her choice of words and turn my head to get a look. There are three guys by the pool table talking loudly and slamming back beers. They all three have leather jackets with chains hanging from their jeans and big black boots. They definitely look a little on the rough side. After getting a

look at them, I'm almost relieved Kade is staying, even though he hates me right now.

"I wouldn't mind seeing that," I tease. "Sometimes that's what they need.

She stands up, grunts and closes the cooler door. "Last time I checked, their beers were getting low. Would you mind taking over? I'll transfer the tab. I don't think I can handle one more second between them and Kade's vagina hurting."

Knowing she's had it rough with these guys, I agree, so she can hurry up and get out of here. I laugh and pull my hair into a bun. "Yeah, sure. If they leave a tip I will give it to you later."

She glances over at them with disgust and adjusts her tiny blue dress. "I'm sure they won't so don't even bother. Damn shit faced morons. I just need to go. I can't. I'm going to kill someone today."

She stomps her way to the cooler, brushing past Kade, which is carrying a tray of freshly sliced fruit over to the bar.

When he steps behind the bar, he slams the tray down next to him and glares over at the group of guys, his jaw twitching. One of the guys, the one with short blond hair, gives him a look and Kade turns away. "Fuck! Today sucks. I get stuck here because these shit heads decide to hang around, being total asses." He looks up as Dale walks past us and waves on his way out. From the look in his eyes, he's relieved to see his dad leaving. They must have gotten into it about him having to stay longer. "I have places to be, you know. My shift was over a half hour ago."

He keeps glancing over at the guys nervously. I don't get what his deal is. He isn't even the one working their tab. The more I watch him, I start to wonder if one of them gave him the black eye. I kind of hope so. Serves him right, being a jerk. "Is that what happened to your face?" I can't help but allow a small smile to break free, somehow amused that someone can make Kade so jumpy.

He huffs and glares at me as if I've just hit a nerve. "No. And don't even ask who it was. The more I think about it, the more it pisses me off," he growls.

He turns away ignoring me. I'm almost glad for it. All I want to do is get him and these drunks out of here. It will probably be quiet tonight, so it will give me some time to think.

When I look behind me, toward the pool table, I see one of the men staring at me. The same one that made Kade nervous just a few minutes

ago. When we make eye contact, he motions for me to come over by holding up his empty beer.

My stomach twists up into knots as I make my way over, all three of the men now looking at me, watching me intently. As I get closer, I recognize one of them as the strange man I noticed staring at me from the parking lot of the bar next to Kellan's shop. His long hair is tangled and greasy looking. As I get a closer look, I see that I was right about the scars on his face. This guy has had his ass handed to him far worse than Kade did. *Damn, that must have hurt!*

When I stop in front of them, the blond takes a steps closer to me and smiles darkly. He looks down at me with creepy red eyes, probably from a pair of those colored contacts they sell. Why he would want to look like death, I have no clue. It looks ridiculous. He even has a rod of some sort pierced across his cheek, stretching the skin. I can imagine if it weren't for the red eyes and hideous piercing that he might actually look normal and half way decent. More than the two men with him anyways.

"You're a lot prettier than I expected." He presses his beer bottle against my cheek and smiles, slowly revealing his yellowing teeth. "And you smell good as fuck too." He sniffs the air and the hair on my arms stand up in rage.

His guys laugh, but he puts up his hand stopping them. The way they obeyed so quickly, stuns me. *Who is this guy? Is he someone important?*

Is this guy serious? He may be able to control his side kicks, but not me. I knock the bottle away from my face and then snatch it out of his hand. "If you want to keep your arm, I suggest you never do that again." I smile and look over at his two friends to be sure they get the picture as well. "I'll get you all one more beer," I hold up a finger, "and then you're out. I don't tolerate people coming in here giving my staff a hard time and if you touch me again, you're out before you finish."

Before they can respond, I turn around, leaving them all staring at my backside. They better get a good look now, because they won't be getting to stay in here much longer. I can already feel it.

Kade grabs my arm as I walk behind the bar. He looks worried as he studies my eyes. "What did he say to you?"

I yank my arm away and peer over my shoulder to see them watching us, with smug smiles. "Not much, Kade. Just let me do my job so I can get them out of here. You just take care of the group coming in the door."

He turns around and grips the counter, before slamming his fist into it. He takes a long, deep, calming breath before walking over to help the smiling group of college kids that just walked in.

Taking my eyes from the guy smiling at me, I grab a few fresh beers from the cooler and walk back over to the pool table. The blond guy steps aside to let me through. As I approach, I slam the beers down onto the table. "Can I get you anything *else*?" I tighten my lips, hoping they get the hint that I'm pissed and won't be toyed with.

The pierced guy, rubs up against me and leans into my ear as he grabs one of the beers. "I'm not sure yet, but I'll figure it out soon, sweetheart. After seeing you, I don't think I can wait two more days after seeing this beautiful little body," he whispers. I jerk away and he grips my wrist squeezing it, hard. "I promise I will make our time worth it."

I yank my wrist away and slap him hard across the face. My hand stings from the blow. This seems to please him more. He must be one of those freaks that gets off on pain. He smiles and licks his lips. "Get the fuck out!" I grab a beer, toss it across the room and it breaks against an empty table. "Now!"

All three guys laugh as the head douche-bag shoves them toward the exit, with a satisfied grin. He turns back to me one last time and waves his tongue at me as if tasting me with it. "I'll see you soon."

How fucking disgusting! I feel filthy at the gesture. I want to rip that tongue off.

Kade rushes over to me as soon as the door closes behind them. He bends down to pick up the broken beer bottle. "What the fuck did they say to you this time?" He barks out.

I look at him with my chest heaving up and down as I try to calm myself down. They definitely knew how to get under my skin. This is the last thing I need to end this crappy day with. Now I really want to scream. What did he even mean by the crap that came out of his dirty mouth? It made no sense. I have to admit, I'm a little freaked out now.

Not wanting to discuss it with someone that clearly hates me, I choose to brush it off for now. "Nothing! Just something perverted. Those guys are creepy douches."

Kade nods. "Yeah, they seemed like it. I'm glad you made them leave." He gives me one last look before heading behind the bar with most of the broken bottle in hand.

I quickly run to grab the broom and dustpan to clean up the rest of the mess. As I stand here sweeping, I feel a hand encircle my waist, and panic sets in before a soft set of lips press against my neck, soothing my worry. My heartbeat quickens from the feel of the ring, brushing over my skin and I almost stop breathing completely. I'm mush in his arms.

"Kellan," I squeal. I spin around to greet his smiling face and my heart melts. He looks so happy to see me. "I thought you were gone."

Cupping my face in his hands, he leans in and smiles against my lips before kissing me. "You look so damn beautiful right now." He reaches for the broom, gently pulling it from my grasp. "Although, I wish you weren't cleaning up glass." He kisses my forehead and gently guides me out of the way. "I'll finish cleaning this up. If you hurt yourself, I'll be pissed."

I take a step back, watching in admiration as he cleans up my mess. As I stand here searching his heavenly face, I feel overwhelmed. Between the surprise visit from him and dealing with those jerks, I can't control my emotions. They're all over the place.

A tear rolls down my cheek, but I quickly wipe it away before Kellan can see. At least, I thought. Guess I don't have ninja quick speed like Zoe does.

Kellan sets the broom aside and places his forehead to mine, gently breathing against my lips. "Tell me what's wrong, Phoenix." He grabs my face, rubbing his thumb under my eye and I feel so wanted by him. My heart swells. "You look shaken up, baby. Did someone hurt you?" His eyes search mine and in that moment, I know I can't hide anything from him. He knows me too well. He always has.

Afraid I could lose him at any moment, I slide my arms around his waist and hold him as close as I can. I just need this moment. I close my eyes as he runs his nose up my neck, waiting for an answer. "Some guys were just in here and one of them said some things that freaked me out." His body stiffens and he nods telling me to continue. "He said, I was prettier than expected and he can't wait to see me again."

Kellan grips my arms and pushes me backwards to look at my face. "What did this guy look like?" He looks scared for me. That scares me even more. "Tell me everything."

"Well . . ." I say remembering his weird eyes. "He had short blond hair, red contacts and some kind of piercing through his face. He kept looking at

me weird and trying to sniff me. He really freaked me out. He had two guys with him and they were just as strange."

Kellan's jaw muscles tighten into hard steel as he grips the table behind him and picks it up off the ground before slamming it back down. "Fuckin' bastards. I will kill them!"

I place my hand on his back, trying to show him it's fine, but it doesn't do crap to soothe him. He just tightens his hold on the table, breathing through his nose. "It's fine, Kellan. I got rid of them."

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Kellan?" Kade yells from behind the bar, causing everyone to stare. Of course he would have to jump in. "Can't you see she's working?"

Ignoring his brother, Kellan grips my arm and pulls me against his chest, rubbing his hands over my hair. "I'm taking you out of here for the night." He kisses my head as if he's afraid of losing me. "We're leaving right now."

I shake my head and look over at Kade who is watching us with a look to kill. "Kellan, that's unnecessary. I have work to do. Kade is about to leave." I reach for the broom but he stops me. I just look at him like an idiot. I don't know what to say.

He pulls me across the room and over to the bar, trying his best to still be gentle. I know he would never hurt me. He pushes the bar door open and drags me behind it with him. "Kade can handle it. You're coming with me, dammit. Where's your purse?"

Not really sure what the hell is going on, my mind blanks. I can't seem to say anything. This stuns me speechless.

"Never mind. We'll get it later." He pushes past Kade and holds the door open for me. "I'm taking her with me."

"The fuck you are, asshole. She's working tonight," Kade growls.

Pointing a finger at Kade, Kellan pulls me next to him with his free hand and starts walking toward the door. "The fuck she is. You're staying!"

Everyone in the bar is looking now, but none of them seem to want to get involved. Probably smart on their part. I wouldn't jump between these two brothers either . . . or have I already? *Shit!*

Kade watches with guarded eyes, but doesn't say anything as Kellan pulls me outside into the cool night.

Once outside, I pull out of his grip, but he pulls me tighter and tosses me over his shoulder. "Don't even think about fighting me. You're not

staying here tonight. I want you safe, with me."

I get ready to argue, but as soon as he says those last words, I lose all self-will to fight and my body goes limp in his strong arms.

Opening the door to his truck, he carefully places me inside and shuts the door behind him before jogging over to his side and jumping in.

Gripping the steering wheel in both hands, he leans his head back into the seat and starts repeatedly slamming his fist into the horn. It's scary seeing him this way, but also hot in some weird, twisted way. After a minute, he finally stops and reaches over, linking his fingers with mine. "We're going to the shop. I think it's time you get that tattoo. I need this right now." He looks over at me. "Can you handle that?" His eyes plead with mine and there's no way I can ever say no to this man. I will forever surrender to his every command. Just as I thought when I first laid eyes on him at the shop. My body knew right there and then what my heart wanted. Him and every part of him.

Nodding, I smile small and squeeze his hand. He squeezes back and starts the engine. I guess I better get prepared.

* * *

Once at the shop, Kellan sends Tyler packing again and I wonder why. I start to wonder if maybe he can only manage to tattoo me in private. *Is this hard for him? Hurting me.*

I've been sitting at his station for the last twenty minutes and he still seems to be having a hard time getting everything prepared. His hands are shaking and he looks nervous. "Are you okay?" He asks the question without looking at me.

I smile and reach for his bouncing knee. It reminds me of the first day I came here and I couldn't seem to stop my leg from bouncing. It seems like so long ago now. "Are you okay?" I quip back.

He scoots his chair in front of me and reaches for my face, pressing his lips roughly against mine. He pulls away, but keeps our foreheads touching as his eyes meet mine. "I'm only fine if you're fine." His face hardens. "I don't want to hurt you."

His worry for me makes me want to kiss him forever and never stop. *God, I love this man.* "I'll be fine. It's nothing I won't recover from." The tattoo that is. A broken heart caused by him will be a different story for later. "Just do it. I'm tougher than you think, Kellan."

His eyes study mine for a moment before he nods, kisses my cheek and prepares to mark me for life.

Ninety percent into the tattoo and my skin feels on fire. The pain is so intense, I can hardly keep from screaming as the needle scrapes against my skin, etching the colors in its tracks. The only thing keeping me calm the whole time is watching his face as he puts his full concentration into his work. He looks so at peace doing this. A lot more calm than he did when he first showed up at the bar. He keeps stopping once in a while to kiss me and every time he does, my nerves subside just a little bit more. This man is perfect to me.

"I wish Adric was here to see how beautiful you make this peacock look."

An unstoppable smile spreads across my face as I squeeze his knee. "You mean how beautiful the peacock makes me look," I correct. "I'm sure he would be so proud of you for doing such an amazing job. This place is beautiful. Everything about it."

Finishing up the last spot, Kellan sets the gun down and grabs my chin, turning me to look at him. "Not as beautiful as you are. He would be more proud to see the woman you've turned into. Nothing was more important to him than you. Trust me, he told me on many occasions. You were his pride and joy. The only thing he asked of me was to protect you at all cost. He knew you were going to be a beautiful peacock." He smirks, nudging me.

He always did have a way with lightening the mood. That really turns me on and right now I need a distraction from this pain on my rib cage. Not to mention, he looks delicious in that snug white tee and ripped jeans. I want them off. And that damn belt he wears.

I laugh and run my fingers up his unfinished angel tattoo. "Why must you be so funny?" I pull him into my lap, rubbing my hands up the firmness of his chest. He smirks and sucks in his bottom lip, clearly turned on. "And so damn hot?" I kiss his neck, teasingly, hoping he will just take me right here in this chair. I want him so bad, my sex aches.

His hands grip around my waist as he straddles my legs. His brown hair falls over his face, hiding his lascivious eyes and my heart goes wild. "You don't know what you're asking for right now?" He runs his tongue over my bottom lip, tasting me. "You taste fucking amazing. If you keep doing this, I'm going to fuck you right here baby and I don't want to."

My heart sinks. "Why not?"

When he speaks, my heart soars. "Because I don't want to make you feel dirty. I want to make you feel beautiful. You're not just any other girl."

Running my lips up his arm, I remind him of our rooftop experience. He didn't seem to mind then. "What about when we had sex on the roof? What's so different about right here?"

He lets out an exasperated breath and tangles his fingers through his hair. "That was before I'd fallen too far."

His words send my body into shock. *Am I hearing things?* "But . . ." I stop myself not wanting to question him in case I heard wrong. "Take me home then," I breathe.

"To your home or mine?"

I look up and sigh, "To your home."

It's quiet for a second before Kellan whispers, "My home can be your home."

Now my heart is really going crazy. Maybe it's just me. "What do you mean?"

He places his finger to my lip, hushing me before grabbing my hand to help me up. The look on his face is as if he's just said something he didn't expect. If it was unexpected to him just imagine how I feel. "Let's take a look at this beauty and see what you think." He walks me over to the mirror on the back wall between his and Tyler's stations. He holds my arm up and looks down at the tattoo with a look of pride. "Wow! It's stunning. Adric was the most talented person I knew."

Pulling my eyes away from his, I look into the mirror and tears spring to my eyes. It's the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen in my life. The colors really make it pop and Kellan is unbelievably talented with the tattoo gun. I glance up at him teary-eyed. "You *are* the most talented person I know. This is better than I could have ever dreamed of." I place my hand to my mouth and sob. I don't mean to, but I can't help it. Seeing Adric's work on me, done by his best friend and the man I know without a doubt I love, sends my emotions into overdrive. I'm a wreck.

A tear slides down Kellan's cheek and he does nothing to hide it. He just wraps his arms around me and pulls me as close as he possibly can. We both stay like this for as long as we can. This moment is special to the both of us.

* * *

Kellan gives me no option but to go back to his house. He pulls his truck into the garage and quickly shuts it behind him as if he's worried someone is watching us.

"Are you all right?" My voice is soft as I watch him struggle with his seat belt.

He releases his belt and reaches over to unbuckle mine. "I'm fine. I just can't wait to get you inside. I missed you, that's all. I want to be close to you."

He jumps out of the truck and I whisper, "I missed you too." But it's too late for him to hear. He's already on my side of the truck opening the door and pulling me out of the seat.

He holds me against him while struggling with his other hand to stick the key into the lock. "Shit!" he growls. "Stupid key."

I gently take the key from him and slide it into the door. I look up and he's looking down at me with his eyebrows raised. "There we go." I smile.

He kisses me hard, while turning the key to let us in. As soon as we get inside, he pulls away from the kiss and types some code into his alarm system. Then he tosses his keys down and stands in front of me, breathing heavily. "I want you so bad it fucking hurts."

"I want you too."

Rayne runs over to Kellan's side and I half expect her to growl at me again, but instead she nudges my leg with her head as if she wants me to pet her.

Kellan laughs and bends down to pat her head and her butt. "That's a good girl." He kisses the scar behind her ears and smiles. "You know what's precious to daddy, don't you?"

I'm still standing here, just watching them interact. She seems so different from the dog I met last night. She's not quite as intimidating. Then I shake my head out of the daze I'm in and bend down next to him to pet her. "Hi there, Rayne." I smile.

Kellan stands back up and pulls me up with him. "Rayne doesn't usually take to people. Especially females. She must be able to sense how much I care about you."

I swallow hard as he backs me into the counter and kisses my neck. "Now that I have you alone. I'm going to take care of you. I'm going to do everything in my power to please you. You're not going to want anyone else when I'm through with you." If only he knew that was already true.

He picks me up, throws me over his shoulder and carries me into his room. He stops when he reaches the bed and gently lays me down. "Stay right there. I'll be right back."

Five minutes pass, but it feels more like twenty. I'm so anxious for him to come back that I can't sit still. I can hear the water running in the bathroom and I wonder if he's filling the tub. The thought gets me excited. Being in a hot bath with Kellan has always been one of my fantasies. Ever since I found him floating around the pool naked. The thought of his naked body lying in a pool of water, confined to a small space with me completely turns me on. I would picture him walking me naked to the tub and stepping inside, placing me between his legs. Too bad I was too young back then.

I stand up as Kellan walks back into the room, shirtless. His jeans ride low on his waist and his erection is poking hard against his zipper. *Oh how bad I want to release it.*

"You ready to fall in love with me? Because I can't stand the thought of you loving anyone else." Before I can respond, he scoops me up in his arms, presses my body against his chest and carries me into the bathroom.

Once inside he sets me down on the edge of the tub and tangles his fingers through my hair. "My body is yours. It belongs to you. As long as I can have you, you will be the only one to take these jeans off." He places my hands against his tight stomach and runs them down his body, stopping at his belt. "Show me how much you want me."

With my heart beating in my ears, hardly able to focus, I somehow undo his belt, sliding it through the loops and toss it to the ground. I bring my eyes up, looking at him as he watches me unbutton his jeans and slide his pants down his legs. "Oh shit, Kellan. How do you do this to me? I want every part of you. Do you know that? I've never wanted sex before and now I want it every day. What have you done to me? I'll never be the same now."

He grabs my hands, hooks them into his boxers and exhales as I pull them off. "I know. And it's all yours. I'm all yours. I've never given myself to anyone this way." He kisses my forehead and pulls me to my feet. "This is a big step for me. I've never cared about a woman this way. You do something to me and it scares the hell out of me."

He kisses my lips and steps out of his jeans. Then he reaches for my dress and pulls it over my head. "I want to make love to you," he whispers. "I want to make you happy. This is the only way I can show you how I feel."

Within seconds we are both completely naked. He gets ready to pull me into the water, but stops. "Fuck!"

I squeeze his arm as he sets me back on the ground. "What's wrong?"

He steps away from the tub and gently picks me up, wrapping my legs around his waist. "I forgot about the tattoo. You can't go in the water." He looks me in the eye as if he's afraid he hurt me. He kisses my nose when I squeeze him with my legs. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. I just wanted to make you happy."

I grab his neck and pull his face against mine so we're nose to nose. "Shut up and make love to me, Kellan. I know you would never physically hurt me."

With one long look into my eyes, his legs start moving as his lips meet mine. He guides me back onto his bed, lips still pressed together and spreads my legs with his free hand.

I open them freely to let his body lay between them, his hard muscles flexing above me. His head pokes my entrance and my whole body quivers at the brief contact. He takes hold of his shaft and rubs the tip up and down the slickness, spreading the wetness from my pussy to my clit. *Fuck!* He feels so good and it hasn't even made its way inside. All I can think about is having it inside of me. All of it.

Gripping the back of his neck, I rock my hips up until the tip pushes inside of me. He moans against my lips and lets go of himself as he grips my thigh, squeezing it. "Oh shit, you're so tight and wet. I can't wait any longer."

Wrapping his arm behind my neck and gripping my hip with his other hand, he slams his lips against mine and slides all the way in. I can feel him filling me and I cry out and shake in pleasure. He stops for a second, worried that he's hurt me, but I bite his shoulder and dig my nails into his back.

"Don't stop, Kellan."

Realizing he hasn't hurt me, he pulls out all the way before slowly pushing his way back in and sucking on my bottom lip. His speed starts out slow and intimate, both of us holding each other as tightly as we can before it slowly picks up, both of us fighting for air as we moan into each other's mouths. Our bodies continue to glide together, him rocking into me as he slowly kisses me everywhere his mouth can reach, neither of us wanting to let go of the other. He grabs hold of one breast, kissing my nipple. The tip

of his tongue slithers through his lips, touching my sensitized nipple. As he swirls his wet tongue in a circle he looks up at me. Him watching me as he does it is the sexiest thing I've ever seen. As he thrusts, I can see his abs tighten. I can't pull my eyes away.

This feeling is better than any feeling in the world. I could lay beneath this man, in his arms forever and be happy. I love him. I love him so fucking much. Too bad I have some questions for him later. I have a feeling they could change everything.

Chapter Twenty-One

Phoenix

I awaken before Kellan does with my face pressed against his warm skin. At least, I think he's still asleep. I pull my head away from his bare chest and lean up to look at his face. His eyes are still closed and the arm he has wrapped around me is so firm, I couldn't get away from him even if I tried. Not that I would. I could lay like this forever.

Again, we spent the whole night naked, making love and talking in between, any attempt to catch our breath. Of course, he kept bringing me food and demanding me to eat to get my energy up. I did so too, knowing that afterward, we would make love again. The night was so beautiful I barely even worried about the pain from my fresh tattoo. He cleaned it for me a few times and placed some kind of tattoo stuff on it to keep it moist. He took care of me just as he did the other night.

Last night was different though. He didn't want to leave my side for a second. He held onto me as if he would never see me again. Something in witnessing that, caused my heart to ache. I was happy he wanted to be close to me, but worried about what that meant for us. I'm still worried, but I have to keep it together long enough to ask him about that night. I can't wait any longer. He could be gone in the blink of an eye and then I'll never know. It's something that has eaten at me for eight years. I need to know. I need that closure.

Looking around the room, my eyes settle on Adric's old guitar. My fingers lightly brush Kellan's chest as I stare at it. I had no idea what happened to that guitar and it scared me. I felt as if I had lost Adric all together and everything he loved. Then when Kellan said he took it after Adric died.

... Wait a minute.

He said he took both the guitar and binder after Adric died. How was that possible? He left after that and no one ever saw him again. How did he take his stuff after he died? I mean, I assumed he heard the news traveling around town and left, but the rest makes no sense to me. Why haven't I questioned this before?

I push my way out of Kellan's tight grip and slam my back against the headboard, placing my hand over my mouth. The thoughts racing around in my head is causing me to panic. What the hell hasn't he told me?

Kellan jumps up, when he notices my absence and reaches for my face. "What's wrong? Did someone hurt you?" He looks around the room as if he's afraid someone else is in the room with us. When he sees we're alone he relaxes. "Shit! Don't scare me like that, baby. I thought I was going to have to kill someone. Are you okay?"

I shake my head and take a deep breath. "Kellan, we need to talk." I jump out of bed and reach for Kellan's shirt, pulling it on to cover my naked body. I can't be exposed to him right now. It makes me feel too vulnerable.

Kellan watches me in alarm as he sits up and runs his hands through his hair, gripping it between his fingers. "Phoenix . . ."

My eyes land on Adric's guitar and then back on Kellan. His face turns to stone as he sees the question in my stare. He's definitely hiding something from me. The question is, what? "How did you get Adric's guitar after he died? I never saw you come to the house. No one saw you, Kellan. How did you get it? That and the binder. How did you get them?"

Standing up, he walks over to me and rubs his hands up and down my arms, soothing me. "Calm down please. It's hard to explain. You know I will never lie to you so please don't ask. Just don't. I need you to trust me."

I yank my arms away from his and back away, holding my arm out to keep distance between us. "Calm down? Are you kidding me? I'm tired of being left in the dark about my brother. Don't you dare pull the trust card on me! No, this time I will not stop. Tell me how, Kellan. His guitar was missing as soon as I stepped into that room and saw him lying on the ground. The paramedics said he had not been dead long. It was gone. That means you were there. Did you say it backwards? Did you get the guitar before he died? Please tell me I heard wrong and I'm just confused."

He shakes his head, flares his nostrils and leans his head back in guilt. I want with everything in me not to be mad at him right now, but I can't help it. I have to know. I can't keep it in, bottled up, any longer. "No. I got the

guitar, binder *and* motorcycle after he died." He takes a deep breath and reaches for his jeans, sliding them up over his naked body. "After he died," he repeats.

Talk about mind blowing. I think a nuclear bomb just went off inside my head. *What the hell!* Reaching behind me to make sure I'm close to the bed, I sit down and grip the silk sheet between my fingers. Maybe there's a perfectly good reason for him being there. There has to be. He would never hurt Adric. I know this.

"Tell me what happened," I demand. "I need to know, Kellan."

I take a deep breath and when I look back up, Kellan is leaning over his dresser, gripping the top with his hands. The veins in his arms and neck throb angrily as a growl sounds in his chest. I've never seen him so upset and this worries me more. "I was supposed to spend the day with Adric," he starts, "But someone asked me to help them move." He grips the dresser tighter before swinging his arm across the top, grunting as he knocks everything off onto the floor. "I knew I should have listened to my gut, dammit. I should have gotten there in time to stop him. He wouldn't wait. I told him to hold on until I got there, but he wouldn't listen. By the time I got there it was too late . . ."

My heart is pounding so loud I can barely make out what he's saying. *Wait...what is he saying?* I take a deep breath through my nose, exhaling slowly from my mouth. I need to calm down and get the room to stop spinning around me before I pass out. *Breathe and repeat, Phoenix.*

It takes a few seconds to regain control, but when I do, I get it. I get what he's saying. It wasn't an accident. "So you're saying you knew Adric was going to overdose?" I grip the sheet tighter, not believing what I'm hearing. "He did it on purpose." It's more of a statement than a question and it scares the hell out of me. "Why! Why would he do that? Why didn't I know something was wrong? I don't understand. I need to understand!"

Pushing away from the dresser, Kellan stares at me with hurt eyes. He looks as if he wants to come to me, but stops before shoving the dresser over, smashing it into the wall. He drops down in a crouching position with his head in his hands, defeated. "I fucking hate myself every day for not being there. It's my fault because I knew he had a problem and I'll never forgive myself. I should have told someone, but I promised him it was our secret. He didn't want you to have to deal with anything and that's what would happen if anyone knew. He said you were just a kid and needed to do

the shit normal kids do. Don't you worry, though. It's buried so far into my brain, it's suffocating me."

Tears stream down his face as he grips his hair and spreads his knees apart, holding his arms bent at the elbow, between them. "It's my fucking fault! He depended on me to keep his sanity and I let him down. I failed him and in turn his family. My family." His shoulders slump as his body jerks with sobs. He's not just crying now, he's bawling and my heart aches to take away those tears. "I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry. I would take his place if I could. I would save you from all this hurt you've gone through over the last eight years. He was a better person than me. He deserves to be here. Not me."

I find myself crying with him. Not just for Adric but for him as well. I can't stand to see him beat himself up. I want answers, but not like this. Not if it causes him this much pain. I run over to him and grip his face in my hands, pulling him up to his feet. He grips my arms and looks at me through wet eyelashes. "Stop it, Kellan. I can't take seeing you this way. I love you too much. I love you. Please stop," I plead. "Please."

His eyes close and he tilts his head back as more tears fall down his face. His eyes are red and his skin splotchy. I watch him, not moving a muscle. When he opens his eyes, he reaches out and wipes away my tears. "I'll tell you what I can. You deserve to know the truth." He picks me up and carries me to the bed, setting me down on the edge beside him. "This is going to hurt, but it's the truth. Adric had a lot of demons. He hid them the best he knew how and I did my best to protect him. If you hate me after this, then I'll just have to live with it."

I place my hand on his knee and squeeze to show him I'm ready.

"I was helping a friend move when I got a call from Adric. He was hysterical. He was screaming and crying. I tried to calm him down." He takes a deep breath before continuing. "He said he couldn't take it anymore and the baggy full of pills in front of him was getting smaller by the minute. He said he couldn't stop. That they were taking away the pain. He kept repeating it over and over as if he didn't think I got the point. That's how I knew he was already high off the pills."

"I jumped in my car and took off, driving a hell of a lot faster than I should have. I was a good fifteen minutes away, so I tried keeping him on the phone for as long as I could. He announced every pill as he popped another into his mouth. He just kept on going and going and I just kept on

pleading with him to stop. He just ignored my pleas and kept rambling. Stuff about how everyone was better off without him and that he would never amount to anything. He said the pain finally consumed him and he couldn't house it anymore. That he just needed to be free, to be relieved from the pain. When I got just a few blocks away from your house, the last thing I heard was 'tell them I love them, I love you bro' and then I heard the phone drop to the ground. I panicked and I stomped on the gas losing control. My car hit a tree and I blacked out for a few minutes. As soon as I woke up, I jumped out of the car and ran to the house as fast as I could. That's how I got this scar." He touches his eyebrow and closes his eye. It's a line that begins at his forehead and runs through his eyebrow, stopping above his eye socket.

I reach out and trace my fingers over it, both of us gripping onto each other. It hurts so much and I don't want to see him hurt, but I want to hear more. I need to hear more as much as it hurts. I squeeze his leg again and tell him to continue. "Go on," I choke out.

He leans his head back, running his hands down his face. "I burst through the door and ran up to the attic, but it was too late. He was on the ground with the phone lying on the ground beside him. I dropped down to my knees and placed my ear to his chest, only to realize it was silent. There was no heartbeat. His body was already starting to look . . . dead. He didn't look like the Adric I knew. I started balling like a fuckin' baby, shaking him, in denial. He couldn't be gone. I called 911 and held him in my arms, trying to wake him up. When I realized there wasn't a pulse returning to his lifeless body, I freaked out. I knew I had lost him and it killed me. He finally did it, went through with it. He finally took the permanent escape. The pills no longer satisfied and numbed the pain. Then the anger took over and I trashed his room. I was so mad. Mad at him. Mad at myself. Mad at the world. I was furious. I couldn't believe he could do that."

"He must have been working on those pills all day for them to take him that fast and I had no idea what he was even doing. I was fucking oblivious that he spent the whole damn night suffering. I wanted answers. Before I left, I grabbed the most important things to him to keep them safe. He told me if anything ever happened to him to keep his family, his drawings and his guitar safe. I didn't understand at the time what he meant by *if something happened to him*, but right then it all made sense. He had been thinking

about it for a while. The Harley was already over at a friend's house where we were working on it, so I took that when I left as well."

I place both of my hands to my face and sob. I can't imagine what Adric went through his last moments of life. He was alone. No one was there to hold him. I wish I would have stayed home. I should have refused to go without the boys. Especially knowing now that he did it knowingly. He wanted to die and I never saw the signs. He was so good at hiding them. I didn't realize his life was so hard. Sure, my dad was always gone and my mom emotionally checked out, leaving mine and Zoe's well-being in his hands, but I thought he knew that one day he'd be free. He had dreams. Dreams bigger than anyone else I knew.

"Didn't he love us?" I ask softly.

Removing his hands from his face, Kellan leans in close, grabbing my hands and pulling them to his lips so he can look me in the eyes. "What?" he whispers. "Of course he fucking loved you guys. Don't ever question that again. Never, you got that?"

I nod my head and fall into his body. He holds me tight, both of us, quietly taking it all in. Somehow, as hurt as I am, I can't stop there though. I need more and Kellan is the only one with answers.

"Tell me why you left, Kellan."

His body stiffens and he lets go of me, backing away from my touch as if he's ashamed. "I can't do that, Phoenix. Please understand that," he says softly. "I will not put you through that. I will not put that on you. It's mine to bear."

This angers me. I don't understand why he can't just tell me the whole damn truth. Standing up, I search for my clothes, gather them up and walk to the bathroom to change.

When I walk back into the bedroom, Kellan is still sitting on the bed, shirtless with his head in his hands. He tilts his head to look at me when he notices me standing there fully clothed. "Stay," he whispers. "You don't have to leave. I want this to be your home. You deserve so much more than you have right now. Don't go."

I shake my head and back up as he stands, making his way toward me. "No. I'm not going to stay unless you can tell me the full truth. I want all of it. I need to know I can trust you. If you would keep this from me then what else would you keep from me? Why did you leave and why the fuck are you going to leave me again? You don't care about me or Kade do you?"

His jaw hardens and he looks as if I've just slapped him across the face. The look softens my anger, but not enough to give it up. "You don't think I care about you or Kade? You can't be serious. You know me better than that Phoenix. I deserve better than that. I care a lot more than you know." He reaches for my face, but I turn it away. He drops his hands. "I fucking love . . ."

"What Kellan?" I push his chest. "Don't stop there. Are you too much of a coward? Is that why you left? Was Kade right about you? You left us here to rot without you. I fucking needed you. Kade needed you. You're our family. All of us. You left. I loved you. Was that not a good enough reason to stay?" I cry. "You left and I wanted to die along with him because I didn't have either of you."

Before I can get away, his arms are wrapped around me, squeezing me tightly against his body. "You can believe that if you want," he says in defeat. "It's better than the truth. If you knew the truth, you'd never be able to look at me the same way."

I struggle in his arms, but my body is weak from crying. I'm emotionally spent. I feel as if I've just been stabbed in the back and he's slowly twisting the knife through my heart. I have gone too long without the truth and it's all I want. I want to know about the man I love. I want to know why he keeps hurting me. I want to know why he knew about Adric and his drugs, but no one else did. I want to know where Adric got the drugs. Why did this all have to happen?"

"Where did Adric get the drugs, Kellan? Can you at least tell me that?" I'm defeated, knowing I'll probably get nowhere with it, but try regardless. "Please, tell me. That's all I ask. I need to know."

I feel his heart beat quicken against my body and he pulls me even tighter. "I'm sorry. I can't do that to you. Fuck, I can't leave you here alone. You need people you care about to be here. I'm sorry. I would never leave you by choice. Just know that."

"So that's it!" I scream, squirming my way out of his firm grip. "You won't tell me? Fuck you, Kellan!" I look him in the eyes and almost regret what I have to do. "I'm leaving." I grab for my purse and make a run for the door. I don't even care that I might have to walk for a few blocks and then call for a ride. I just need to get out of here. I can't do it. I can't take him hurting me again. He has the power to drain my heart, soul and spirit and he has.

Just as I reach the front door, I feel his hand grip my waist. "Don't leave, dammit. I want you here with me." He pulls me against his chest, slamming his lips to mine. His lips desperately search mine as he tangles his hands through my hair, holding me as if he never wants to let go.

Pulling away from the kiss, I shove him away and reach for the door. "We don't always get what we want. Do we, Kellan?"

He stands there, nostrils flared as he looks me in the eyes. "Phoenix. Don't do this. I'm begging you to stay. I wouldn't do this if I didn't care."

I swallow hard and wipe a hand over my mouth, showing him just how disgusted I am with him at the moment. "You have one last chance. Tell me everything or I walk. Should you choose the latter, I never want to see you again." A tear falls down my cheek and I quickly wipe it away. "Once I'm out that door. I'm done with you. I never want to talk to you or see you again. I've already gone eight years without you, I'm pretty sure I can survive."

I must have hit a nerve with that statement because he looks as if he's about to break. Dammit, this hurts so bad. I can't stand to see him this way. *Please just tell me. Tell me so I can stay.*

"I'm sorry," he whispers. *That's it?*

"I guess I got my answer. I guess you don't care about me enough." With that, I am gone. I'm done with anything that has to do with Kellan. I pull the door open and walk outside, slamming it behind me. I hear things breaking inside as I walk down the steps, but I don't stop. As much as I want to, I can't. He's made his choice and so have I. We're done. I can never look at him the same way knowing he's hiding the most important thing from me. I was so wrong to think he cared. He doesn't. He was right, the old Kellan did die.

* * *

Surprisingly, Kade was pretty fast at picking me up. He tried questioning me, but I kept telling him I didn't want to talk about it. That made the ride back to my car awkwardly silent, but I didn't care. I will talk about it when I feel I can. I just need a little bit of time to work things out.

Afterward, I went home, cried in the shower and then quickly changed before jumping into my car and taking off. I wanted to get out of there before my sister and mom could wake up. Now, I'm at the Ranch with a few cans lined up, my pistol in my hand and tears streaking my face. I think this

occasion definitely calls for blowing off some steam. I need this right now or I'll lose it completely.

With each squeeze of the trigger, a tear trickles down my face, blurring my vision even more. This is doing nothing for me. I can't even see where to aim and in this emotional state, someone could get hurt. *Why? I can't even have this!* This has been my release for so long, but the pain of losing Kellan and finding out the truth about my brother is far too great. I didn't discover my desire of target shooting until well after Adric was gone, but I imagine this wouldn't have helped for that situation either. This was all just crap that I assumed was my own personal therapy. I was wrong.

Setting my pistol down, I drop to my knees in the grass and bawl. I can't hold it in any longer. I let it all out and curl into a ball, burying my face into my arm. The pain of finding out about Adric and losing Kellan reminds me too much of eight years ago. I feel dead inside. I just want to crawl into a hole and die. I don't want to be here anymore. I can't do this alone.

I sit in the grass for a good hour, staring off into nowhere, until I hear Kade approaching. It has to be him. No one else pays attention to me being out here but him. I don't look up though. I don't want to. I can't handle him and his stupid questions right now.

"Will you talk to me now? What did he do to you?" He takes a seat beside me and picks at the grass, reaching for my leg, but I move it. He huffs and throws a piece of grass in front of him. "I told you he's an ass. That son of a bitch. You should have listened to me. He's no good. He proved that to us eight years ago, Phoenix."

As much as Kellan has hurt me, I'm sick of Kade bad mouthing him. Regardless of what Kellan has done, they are still brothers. I could never talk about my family that way and he's really pissing me off. Family should always stick together. I turn to him and yell, "Don't talk that way about him!" As mad as I am, I feel the need to protect him, the one I love. *Who the hell does he think he is?* He hasn't spent any time with Kellan since he's been back. I have. "Kellan has been nothing but good to me. Don't just don't."

More tears fall and I feel like a complete fool as I listen to my own words. Kellan has been so good to me over the years. He always protected me. He is still trying to, although I don't want to be. I just want to know the truth. Someone has to tell me the damn truth.

This is worth a long shot but . . . "Did you know about Adric's drug use and where he got them?"

Kade's eyes go wide, before shaking it off as if it never happened. He clears his throat. "Not a thing. Maybe you should ask Kellan." He stands up. "He's the one that left, not me."

He walks away, leaving me alone to hate myself and drown in my own misery. That's exactly what I do.

Kellan

I can't believe I just let her go. I'm so fucking stupid. I stare at the window, barely breathing as I watch her make her way down the street, no doubt hating my guts. *Shit! What the hell was I thinking?* I messed up. I really messed up. Losing her will be the death of me, but her hating me on top of it, is like pouring acid to my flesh, searing it to the bone.

I pick up the table next to me and toss it across the room, breaking it against the wall. Then I stomp over and push my TV over, the screen shattering at my feet. None of this shit matters to me. She does. It's all replaceable, she isn't. *Why the fuck did I have to mess up?* I grab the couch, flipping it over and into the wall. Nothing else in my life matters except her now. She's the only thing that keeps me sane.

I pace around the living room, kicking at the mess. I need to stop her. Maybe I should just tell her everything. She's going to hate me no matter what now. When she hears about what I did to Echo, that I almost killed a man, she will never look at me the same. She will see a fucking monster. That's not who I am though. I had no choice. He left me without another option.

Flinging the front door open, I run outside into to the street, barefoot. I can't see her anywhere. She must have turned somewhere to make it harder in case I decided to chase her down. She doesn't want to see me. Shit! She really is done. Why am I so fucked up in the head?

I need to find her. I don't have much time before I'll be ran out of town again. Cape has already sent his message loud and clear by showing up at the bar to see Phoenix. He knows what that will do to me. He knows it will leave me with no choice but to do what he says. That son of a bitch has had me in my place since I fucked his brother up.

Shit! I'm going after her. I have to keep her close until I leave. I need her probably more than she needs me. It's either now or never.

I slip on my boots, grab for the first shirt I see and run out to the garage, hitting the garage door button on the way. The door screeches as it slowly opens to Kenny and Larry grinning like fools. *Shit, they always have bad timing.*

"You have got to be kidding me! Not now, mother fuckers." I reach for the door to my truck, but stop as Cape comes around the corner shaking his head.

He grins and runs his hand along my truck as he steps into the garage. "No need to be in such a hurry." He walks over to my fucking bike and laughs. I swear on everything, he better not touch my shit or he'll regret it. "Don't worry, Phoenix is nice and safe," he says pleased with himself. "Trust me, old friend."

"You piece of shit!" I growl as I rush over to him, tossing my keys behind me. "If you fucking touch her-

Cape holds his arm out, placing it to my chest to stop me, just as we get face to face. "Don't worry. She left with Kade." It's kind of pathetic really. Kade is always there to come running when she calls, even knowing you've fucked her." He takes his hand from my chest and pulls out a knife, flipping it around in his hand, before opening it. "I'm sure your brother will keep her safe. He's had his eye on that sweet piece of ass for a long time. He might just get her when you fuck up, as I'm sure you will, if you haven't already. Maybe they can keep each other safe. You know, in case you decide to fuck me over. How does that make you feel? The thought of Kade fucking your woman. Sliding inside the tight little pussy you just enjoyed. To share her. I'm sure *he* won't mind. "

Okay, now he's really pissing me off. He knows my buttons and he's pressing them all. Him and his goons need to leave so I can go. "What. The. Fuck. Do. You. Want?" I growl. "I still have one more day. Now get the fuck out of my way."

He looks at me, smiles and runs his knife down the length of my bike, scratching the paint off. I reach for him and grab his shirt, but Kenny and Larry must have gotten closer since last time I'd checked, because I'm suddenly pulled backwards. "I would watch yourself if I were you. Don't forget who has the power to ruin every last thing you care about, you crazy shit. Don't forget who has all the power here."

Kenny yanks me harder as Cape shoves his boot into the bike, kicking it over. I stand there, breathing heavily, telling myself to keep it cool. If I make one wrong move then he might just go fucking nuts and kill me. Reacting is what fuels him. I can't have that.

"I will be gone tomorrow," I hiss. "But not before. I have something to deal with first. Now let go!" I pull away from Kenny and fix my shirt. Then I turn around, slamming my fist into the side of his head, knocking him to the ground. "Don't ever fucking touch me again." I look up and brush my shirt off.

Cape smiles as if he enjoyed the show before pointing at Larry to help Kenny up. "You're pretty quick. No fucking shit! Echo is definitely a lot slower. Especially now. Now that he's in a fucking wheel chair!" He screams in my face, spit spewing. He turns to his side show freaks and smiles wickedly. "Show this little shit how we do things around here. Things have changed a bit since last time you were here."

Before I can even blink, Cape's fist smashes into my right eye and my arms are being held back by Larry and Kenny so hard, it feels like the bone is snapping. He hits me one more time before I scream, "Fuck off!" I spit blood onto his boot and he punches me again, causing blood to pool in my mouth.

"Is that how you want to play it?" He holds his knife up, twirls it around and slices a hole into both tires of the Harley, before tearing it through the seat and stabbing it repeatedly with a wide smile. With each slice, I only want to kill him more. "Now that!" He smiles bigger and laughs. "Is how we do it around here. If you don't want to see that pretty little slut and your brother meet this knife next, as I slit their throats, then I suggest you pack a bag and leave. Today . . . and when I say today, I mean you have twenty fucking minutes."

I yank one arm free and get just enough reach to pound it into Cape's mouth, causing him to stumble backwards. "I will fucking kill you. Do you fucking hear me?" I get ready to pull my other arm free, but Cape jumps up and holds his knife to my throat, causing me to still. My heart is pounding so loudly, I'm sure it's echoing off the walls of the garage. I'm on fire right now. "You sick bastard," I mutter.

Cape snickers and points the tip at my throat as if I'm afraid to die. The only thing I'm afraid of, is losing them. If I knew me dying would keep them safe, then I'd say fucking do it. "You fucking know it. So what do you

say you run along inside and grab your shit before someone gets hurt. I'd hate to have to kill three people today. I've already had to deal with an asshole today. I'm tired, dammit."

The boys push me forward into Cape and he shoves me into the bike, kicking my legs out from below me. My face hits the front tire before a boot digs into my head. "Okay, I fucking get it!" I stay down on my knees and grip the motorcycle in my hands. I could kill them for doing this to Adric's old bike, but I can't. There's no way that day could ever come. I have to go. I won't risk my family getting hurt. "I will leave." The boot releases my head and I look up at Cape, placing one hand on the ground to stand back up. "If I leave, you won't hurt them, right? You said you wouldn't fucking hurt them."

A smirk pulls up on one side of his face and it makes my blood pump even more. "Nah, I had my fun already. Seeing you fall in love with your best friend's fucking sister and losing her to your brother. Shit, that makes me happy. That's classic! You're lucky you got the time you did. Now, when you leave, you will be suffering even more. That makes me happy as fuck." He points at his face and smiles big. "See. Happy. As. Fuck."

Shit! That asshole is right. I pushed her right back into the arms of my brother and now I have no way of telling her . . . I love her. Now, she will never fucking know, but I couldn't tell her about Kade. I couldn't make her hate him because, whether I like it or not, she needs him. He needs her too in some screwed up way. I hate it, but I'm the one that screwed up. I won't let them suffer.

"Well congratufuckinglations, you're an even bigger piece of shit than the last time I saw you. You should be so fucking proud, man." I push past the boys with a shove, put Rayne in her room, shut the door and go to my room to pack some shit. Only the shit I'll need. I don't care about anything else.

I scribble out a note for Phoenix and shove it into the hole of Adric's guitar before hiding in the closet. After I leave, they'll probably just take a look around for expensive shit and leave. They will probably leave the closet alone. They just want me gone. So I'm giving them what they want in exchange for what I want. My family left alone. The last thing left to do now is text Tyler. I told him this day would come and he never questioned why. He can be trusted.

Hey, bro. Some shit has come up and I have to leave. I can't explain. Make sure Phoenix gets my spare key and tell her to look in the closet for Adric's guitar. I've left a note for her there. Take care of Rayne for me and man . . . thanks for being there for me. Take care of yourself and your new family.

As soon as the message is sent, I slam my phone into the wall, smashing it up completely. Holding my bag over my shoulder, I look around the room one last time before tossing my broken phone into the trash and closing the closet door. The last thing I need them to know is that I left something for Phoenix. I want her to be taken care of when I'm gone. I love her and my family, but they can never find me now. I'm dead to them forever.

Just as I am to myself . . .

Chapter Twenty-Two Phoenix

I sit on the old worn out swing, listening to Jen talk. At least, I pretend to listen; although, I have a feeling I'm not pulling it off that well. It's been two days since my fight with Kellan and I can't seem to concentrate on anything but that. A part of me wonders if I was too harsh on him. I know he's been through a lot, as have I, but him not telling me the truth is the same as lying. In my eyes it is any way. He may have my best interests at heart, but I'm sick of everyone treating me as if I'm breakable. I can handle whatever he has to say. Aiden used to do me the same way. I would never keep something so important to him, from him. I thought he was better than that. I love him, but I don't know if that's enough anymore. You can't have love without trust. They go hand in hand. He'd never even said he loved me back anyways. It was a one way street and I've met the dead end.

Then Kade had to jumble up my emotions even more with his comment the other day. *He's the one that left, not me.* I can't seem to stop thinking about what he meant by that. Was he trying to point out that he thinks Kellan is responsible for the drugs? I don't want to believe that for one second, but it's not looking good on his part, as long as he has secrets.

" . . . you know?" Jen's voice breaks me out of my trance, causing me to look up. "He's really something else, Phoenix."

I'm such a bad friend for not paying attention, but I can't help it. Even if I tried, my mind is just somewhere else. "Sure," I mumble, closing my

eyes and leaning my head back. I just want to fall asleep and not think anymore. I haven't been able to sleep for crap.

Huffing, Jen shoves my leg and sits down next to me. "Okay. I've had enough of this. Tell me what is going on. You have been moping around for the last two days and you called off from work today. You never call off from work. You haven't missed a day in over two years, darlin'. If you wanted to keep whatever is wrong with you a secret, you could have chosen a way that is a little less obvious, don't you think?"

I slowly, but loudly, let out my breath, showing her, I don't want to talk about it. "It's nothing I need to bother you with. You have your own problems and Jax to worry about," I remind her. "Please don't worry about me. You finally got a little bit of freedom from being worried and stressed, you need to enjoy the break."

"Oh, I am so worrying about my best friend. Don't you dare talk me out of it, got it? You had your moment of stubbornness when I asked you to leave and you refused. Now it's my turn." She turns and faces me, grabs my arm and pulls so my head is resting on her lap. "Now tell your big sister what's wrong before I strangle you. You know you can't hide anything from me. I don't know why you even try." She smiles that Jen smile, lightening the mood.

I should have known it would come down to this; her mothering me like always and me, caving in. She always was the mother hen. I kick my flip flops off and lay my back flat on the cushion of the swing. They are so worn that I can feel the wooden slats pressing into my back. Throwing my legs over the armrest of the swing, I let the sunshine beam down on my face and prepare to bare my soul. "I had a huge fight with Kellan the other day and left, telling him I never wanted to see or talk to him again. I half expected him to come after me, but he didn't. I haven't talked to him since and it hurts. I've never felt this way before. I love him, Jen. I don't know what to do. I feel . . . lost . . . empty . . . dead."

Jen squeezes my shoulder and rubs her hand over my forehead, combing her fingers through my hair. "Oh, honey. If you love him that much, then I'm sure it's nothing you can't fix. Did you ever stop and think that maybe he wanted to come after you but was afraid of getting hurt? You know how men are. They can't take having their egos crushed by a woman. They are weaker than us." She smirks. "Kellan is one of the good ones. You and I both have always known that. You can't let someone you have loved

for over ten years just slip through your fingers. You have to be the bigger person. I'm sure he's waiting on you as we speak. I thought you were more headstrong than to just give up so easily."

She really doesn't know Kellan like I do. The old Kellan would have come after me. He wouldn't have just let me walk out the door. He would have held my ass down and sat on me until I gave in. Not that I wanted it to quite play out that way, but him at least trying would have been nice. "Jen, I told him to tell me one simple thing and he couldn't even be honest with me. How can I just get past that? If he cared about me at all, he would have been straight forward with me. He wasn't, so I walked; plain and simple." A tear falls down my face, but I quickly catch it before it can hit her lap. "I can't get past that, Jen. I just can't."

I can feel the muscles in her legs flexing underneath my head as she swings us back and forth. Placing her right arm over the back of the swing and rubbing my hair with the other, she stops. "Sweetie, don't take this the wrong way, but what kind of fairy tale are you living in? You can't just walk away when things get tough. Love is about give and take. I repeat. Give. And. Take. At least you have someone that is willing to give and not just take. You have to choose your battles Phoenix. You know I love you, but you need to think about what you're doing before you do it. Sometimes when you walk away, there is no turning back. Even if you regret it after the fact."

We swing in silence as I take in the information that just came from her mouth. I should have known something wise was going to exit those lips. It always does. She always helps me see the error of my ways when I can't. That's why I love her. One thing bothers me though. What if it is too late? Can I live with that forever? Is this one incident really worth being miserable forever?

She sits me up and grabs my shoulders, looking me in the eyes. I can barely even keep eye contact with her as I strive to focus on not crying at the same time. It's too much work and frankly, I'm just too exhausted to give a damn. "I'm not even going to ask what it was about because I have a feeling you would tell me if you wanted to. What I do know, is that he's always wanted nothing more than to protect you. He would never hurt you on purpose. That man has loved you for a long time. Back then, it was a different kind of love, but still, he loved you nonetheless. I can't see him keeping anything from you, unless he was trying to protect you. I don't want

to see you miserably in love with a man that you're not even going to try with. I saw the way you looked at him that day at the company picnic. What you didn't notice, was how he looked at you and nobody else. You both had it bad and didn't even know it. Kade knew it. I knew it. You two didn't. Maybe you should just trust that he has your best interest at heart and allow yourself to be happy."

"Look at what I had with Nate. Some girls aren't as lucky as you. If I ever get lucky enough to find what you have with Kellan, you would have to shoot me dead to keep me from trying. I would never let an argument keep me away and you shouldn't either. Love is hard Phoenix. It's not always easy like you see in fairy tales. You have to take the good with the bad; the scary with the excitement. If you love him, trust him. If not than you need to set him free, but don't leave him if you can't let him go. Think about that one."

What the hell has is wrong with me? I just stare at her like she has grown a second head right before me. I'm letting it all sink in.

"But . . ." I look towards the road, grabbing my chest as a motorcycle passes by. Excitement, hope, then sadness washes through me as I see an older man with leather and a white beard going about his business on his Harley.

"See!" Jen jumps up. "You have it bad. You better go see him. You never know when it's going to be too late."

I swallow hard, knowing that she's right. I can't take it anymore; I have to go see him. I can't leave things how we did. I will never be able to function right, knowing that Kellan thinks I hate him. I love him too much to let him think otherwise. He has enough pain to bear already. I can't be the one to add to it. "Okay," I whisper. "I'll go see him. I'm just so scared. What if he doesn't want me back? What if he changed his mind?"

She shakes her head. "There's nothing to be scared about. You know none of those things are going to happen. I think deep down you're scared he's going to pull you into his arms and love you. You should be happy. I want that."

Her eyes sparkle and I see a hint of a smile in them. "Is Tyler going to be that for you?" I walk over to the steps, but stop to hear her answer.

Her face turns red and she bites her bottom lip. "I don't know, darling. That's a question that doesn't have an answer. We talk every day, but we haven't even kissed. I can't really tell if there will even be an, *us*, yet. As

much as I'd like to, I can't say. I'm still working on my issues since Nate, and I think he has a little bit of darkness buried away deep inside. We are still feeling each other out, but I wouldn't mind if it happened someday. He shines a little bit of light into the last few years of my darkness. He's sexy and good and he cares about Jax." Her eyes get a little dreamy as she says the last sentence before she mumbles, "So damn good." She waves her arms to scoot me along. "Jax should be waking up now, so I'm going to make him lunch. Call me later, yeah?"

I grin. "I hate you sometimes, but love you so damn much."

"Yeah, love ya too." She lifts an eyebrow and smiles. "Now get the hell off my porch." We both laugh at that and she disappears inside, leaving me nervous as all hell.

Well, here goes nothing.

* * *

I'm not sure where to start, so I start at his house. I'm so nervous, that I barely make it to the door without tripping over my own feet. It's a wonder I'm not dying or turning blue from my lack of breathing. It's so quiet at the door, that I'm pretty positive before I even knock that he's not even home. I knock anyways. I knock, one, two, three times, but no answer. A part of me is relieved as I walk back over to my car. I'm not so sure I'm prepared to be alone with him right now. Maybe the shop would be a better place to talk.

Right as I'm about to open the car to get inside, I look up and spot two of the three men that were at the bar the other night. They're down the street, sitting on the bumper of an old beat up car, looking right at me as if I'm the most interesting thing they've seen all week. I don't get it. *Who the hell are these creeps? Do they live over here?* This is a nice neighborhood and I can't see them living here without someone wanting to call the police on them daily. They are far too rough looking to be considered harmless and just the thought of them makes my skin crawl.

Ignoring them, I jump into my car, slamming the door behind me. They're the last thing I want to worry about at the moment. I pull out of the driveway and head over to the shop. If he's not there, then I guess it just wasn't meant to be today. To be honest, I haven't got a clue what I'm even going to say to him anyways. I'm winging it and I plan on sounding like a total idiot. I always have when it comes to him.

Pulling up to the front of *Adi's Attic*, I shift my car into park and shut off the engine. I sit there for a few minutes, staring over at the brick building,

my heart breaking for poor Adric each time I read the sign. Being here makes my chest ache, remembering mine and Kellan's conversation from the other night, but I swallow the pain and step out into the warm sunny day, making my way to the door.

Just as I open the door, Tyler stands and looks at me as if he's been expecting me and then over to Kellan's station, which is now occupied by some guy in his late thirties, giving some young female a tattoo. There is a sadness in Tyler's eyes I've never seen before. I follow his eyes to the station that is Kellan's and realize his stuff is gone, now replaced by this guy's.

Somehow, seeing that, tells me right away that something's not right. That is where Kellan should be. Not this guy. *Who the hell is this guy in Kellan's place?* "Tyler," I demand. "Tell me what's going on." My voice shakes, but I don't care who notices.

Walking toward me, Tyler pulls me over to the door and places both his hands on my shoulders, trying his best not to make eye contact. He looks like he's in pain. *Why does he look sad?* "I have a message for you." He stops and pulls something out of his pocket. "I'm sorry."

I start to panic. I feel like I'm going to puke on his shoes. *Oh no! I can't puke on his shoes; it will only remind me of Kellan.* "What? A message. What kind of message?" He holds out a key and I grab it, examining it in my hand. "Tell me what's going on, Tyler. What's this?"

His eyes finally meet mine, a sadness overpowering them. "I don't want to have to give you this message. Fuck!" He rubs a hand over his face and looks away for a minute before turning back to meet my gaze. "He's gone, Phoenix."

I shake my head. *No! Not again.*

"He left two days ago. This . . ." he opens my hand with the key in it, "Is a spare key to his house. You need to look in the closet for his guitar. He said he left a message for only you to see. He hid it inside. I don't know what it says, but he made it sound important. Just do it, Okay?"

I grip onto his arms, probably digging my nails into his skin, but he doesn't seem to care. "He's gone," I whisper. I look up at him. "Are you sure? Maybe he hasn't left. I have to go."

He yells after me, as I let go of him and reach for the door. "You won't find him! It's too . . ."

His voice trails off as I let the door close behind me. I know I'm being stupid. I was just at his house. Of course he's not there or he would have answered. Maybe he was in the shower or maybe he was sleeping. I need some kind of hope, even if it is just a little. He can't be gone. Not again.

I pull my car up to his house and jump out, barely having time to throw it into park. I'm surprised my brain could function enough to even do that. Squeezing the key in my hand, I feel my palm starting to hurt, but I only close tighter, welcoming any kind of distraction.

I run up the steps, open the door to the porch and shove the key into the lock. I turn it slowly, not wanting to alert Rayne and have her think someone's trying to break in. The last thing I need is to have her take a chunk out of my butt on the way to find Kellan; although, maybe the pain would be enough to overpower this emotional torture. If not, then I don't know what is.

I slowly open the door and say Kellan's name, to give quick warning before entering. When there's no answer, I shut the door behind me and call his name again; still no answer and no sign of Rayne. The house is a total wreck with things broken all around, even the TV.

My heart starts pounding as I walk through every room in the house, expecting to see Kellan pop up out of nowhere, telling me this is some kind of joke. After searching every room but his, I take a long deep breath before entering his bedroom.

That too, is empty. Leaning against the door, I let it close behind me as I start to cry. *He's gone. He's really gone. Why was I so stupid? Why didn't I just stay like he asked when I had the chance?* Grabbing the closest thing to me, I throw it across the room, choking back a sob. After panting for a moment, I grab some kind of candle or something and toss that too, along with a few other items.

Through blurred vision, I can hardly see, but my hand stops frozen on a picture frame as I grip it in my hands. There's no glass in it, as if it's already been broken once and the glass never replaced. I wipe at my eyes frantically while trying to focus my attention on the two boys in front of me. It's a picture of Kellan and Adric by the pool. Kellan has Adric in a headlock, Adric struggling to look at the camera and they both appear to be laughing.

The tears come even harder now as I take in their beautiful smiles. They looked so happy. *Why couldn't things stay that way? Nothing will ever be the same. Now, I've lost them both, again.*

After staring at the picture for a while, I pull myself together enough to look in the closest for Adric's old guitar. I find it hiding in the back, behind some unpacked boxes that Kellan must have not needed enough to unpack. As I pick it up, and pull it to me, I hear what sounds like something rattling inside of it. Taking a deep breath and holding it, I reach inside the guitar and pull out a piece of paper. I hold it up with trembling hands and read it, my heart racing with adrenaline.

I had to leave, but know I would stay with you forever if I had a choice. I didn't, so I'm gone. I'm sorry we had to say goodbye the way we did. It wasn't the way I had intended. None of this was. Just know that I have done some things I'm not proud of and in turn can't be with you. It's in your best interest, trust me. I want you to take the key Tyler gave you and stay at my place as long as you want; it's yours. Sorry it's a mess. I let my anger get the best of me. You, your mom and Zoe can live here. It's already paid for. One thing you have to know is, letting you walk out that door was the hardest thing, besides losing Adric, I've ever had to deal with. Losing Adric was my biggest regret and losing you is my second. Don't live your life in regret. You're the greatest thing that's ever happened to Adric, Zoe and myself. Stay strong and keep Adric's things safe. I'm giving them to you. What I'm about to say is the hardest thing I'll ever have to do aside from leaving you. Forget about me and move on. Don't waste your time on something I could have never given you in the first place. You deserve the world and I could never give that to you as much as I wish I could. It's time to face my demons now. Goodbye.

xx Kellan Haze xx

I drop the letter and fall to my knees, with my hand pressed to my mouth. The sobs choke out of me as I grip the carpet, fighting to catch my breath. He's never coming back. I ran him off, just like I knew would happen. *I did this. I fucking did this!*

Somehow feeling as if to call him will bring him back, I fish my phone out of my pocket and scroll through my contacts, stopping on his name. I tap the screen and place the phone to my ear, but it doesn't ring. The number has been disconnected. My one and only hope in ever talking to Kellan again is gone, with something as simple as a damn disconnected number, just as the time before when he left. The familiar feeling leaves me feeling sick and helpless.

I need to get out of here. I need to breathe. I'm not even sure of where I'm going until I pull up behind the tattoo shop, shutting off my car.

Numbly, I climb out of my car. I have Adric's guitar strapped around my neck, hanging down my back as I walk over to the rusted up ladder that Kellan had taken me up before. I stare at it, my vision blurring as I take a step forward and grip the bar with one hand. It feels rough against my skin, reminding me that I'm alone with no one to catch me. My whole body shakes and I look up the ladder that seems so high from where I stand. My eyes blur as I step onto the first rung.

Without letting my fear become too strong and break me, I climb up as steady as I can. I can't see with all the tears blurring my vision and halfway up the ladder my foot slips. I begin to panic and cry harder as I hold on by only my two hands. I'm scared. Trying not to look down, I finally get my foot back on the rung of the ladder and continue upward until I get close to the top of the building before climbing over the top. Breathing heavily with watery eyes, I let the tears fall at the realization I could have fallen. It's not so simple without Kellan here guiding me. My heart is racing so fast, it feels as if I've just run a marathon. A flood of relief runs through me and I'm thankful that I made it to the top without plummeting to my death. That would be a horrible way to go. I had to come here. There was no other option. This is all of Kellan I have left. Our spot.

Looking around, I notice the blanket sitting off toward the back in the same spot it had been before. My heart stops and my breath catches in my throat as the overwhelming feeling of the memories on that blanket come to mind. That was the first night I felt as if Kellan saw me as a woman and not just as Adric's sister. The moment I thought we could be something more. I couldn't have been more wrong.

I walk over to it and sit with the guitar in my lap.

I sit there for hours, leaning against the wall crying, my tears soaking the top of my shirt, numb to the world. An empty shell of myself longing for the one thing I'll never have as mine. The one and only thing I've wanted since the first day I laid eyes on Kellan: his love.

I hear my phone go off a few times, but I silence it not wanting to talk to anyone. I can't. I can barely even breathe right now. In this moment, I just want to remember being here with Kellan. This was the first place of his he brought me to and I'll never forget the way my heart rattled in my chest as

he helped me up to the top. I was terrified, yet felt so safe having him next to me.

No one had ever made me feel so safe in my life. Not even Adric. That thought scares the shit out of me. Kellan is irreplaceable. I knew it eight years ago and I know it now. He is it for me; the one that can break me or make me. He is the one I'd rather die than to live without. My one and only, and now, he's gone. He's gone forever.

It's getting darker now, and realizing it's probably time to get going, I stand up, but stop when I hear something from across the street. It must be the old man again. My curiosity gets the best of me. Kellan used to spend time watching this old man. It makes me want to watch also.

Surprisingly, I find myself walking over to the edge of the building and peeking down and across the street. The old man is pacing back and forth in the grass, with his hands moving anxiously at his sides as if he's in a panic. He starts to talk so I lean in closer to see what he's saying, while trying my best to keep steady. Suddenly, all my fear is gone, me focusing on this one man below me. The one that has no one; alone.

"I can't, Mary. I can't go yet. I haven't seen her," he cries. "It's not time. It's not time. Stop it. Don't make me feel guilty. You know I have to see her first."

He looks angry for a second and then drops to his knees with his hands to his chest. "No! Not yet," he chokes out. "Don't do this to me!"

Oh crap! I think he's having a heart attack. I've never had to help anyone before, so it's hard to focus through the fear. I fumble with my phone, call 911 and rush down the ladder as quickly as possible while holding my breath. I run across the street while yelling the address into the phone. Once I get face to face with the old man, I drop to my knees in front of him and grab his hand.

"I called 911. They're on the way. Just hold on. They will get you the help you need." Tears stream down my face as the man struggles to look up at me. "Hold on, please."

He looks up at me. That's when my heart stops. When he reaches out, touches my face and whispers, "Allison. You've come for me." A tear trickles down his wrinkled face and his lips tremble as he speaks as best as he can being short of breath. "My Allison . . . I knew you'd come." He smiles. "I knew I'd see you again." He looks up to the sky. "See, Mary. I

told you she'd come. She's as beautiful as I imagined she would be. Isn't she, Mary?"

I find my body jerking as my cries spill out, turning to sobs. The man falls into my arms and I catch him, in an attempt to hold him up, but I can't. He's too heavy. "Help me!" I scream. "Someone, please!" My cries come out harder as the man goes completely limp in my arms. His lifeless body falling over, next to us in the grass. "Oh God, no! Please no. Someone . . . anyone! Help!"

I jump to my feet and run across the street, ignoring traffic. The car honks and slams on its brakes as I pass, halting it with my hand. "Tyler! I need you! Please!"

The door to the shop bursts open to Tyler. Without hesitation he runs to me and throws his arms around me. "Are you okay?" He pulls away to look at me and I shake my head. "What's wrong?"

I try to talk, but I can't. All I can do is point.

Tyler notices the man lying in the yard and runs across the street screaming, "Call 911!"

I follow behind him and kneel down beside him. "I already did. They're on the way. I don't think he's breathing."

Tyler grabs his wrist and starts checking for a pulse. "There's a pulse, but it's not very strong."

Red and blue lights come into view as a police car followed by an ambulance pulls up in front of the house.

Tyler and I back out of the way as two men jump out of the ambulance carrying a stretcher.

"What's his condition?" One of the men barks out.

"I think he had a heart attack, but he still has a pulse," I cry. "I don't know. I don't know!" I'm in a full on panic, worried about the old man.

Tyler pulls me into his arms and I watch over his shoulder as they put the old man on the stretcher. I can't watch anymore, so I turn away and squeeze my eyes shut. That poor man was alone, just like Adric had been. No one should have to be alone in their last moments of life. *Everyone should have someone.*

I drop down to my knees and Tyler drops down with me, rubbing his hands over my hair. "He was alone," I cry. "I should have been there."

I cry, not knowing who I'm crying over. All I know is that I feel broken. I am broken. I'm shattered. I don't like death. It's a terrible thing for

everyone involved. The ones that have to witness it and the loved ones left behind to cope.

"You did what you could," Tyler soothes me. "It's okay. I got you."

The loud voices around us suddenly die down after about five minutes and someone jumps out of the back of the ambulance and walks over to where Tyler and I are sitting. We both stand up.

The man looks to be in his early twenties, handsome with black hair and blue eyes. He gives me a weak smile and then clears his throat. "Allison, your father didn't make it. His heart finally gave out on him. His cancer has gotten too far out of control and his time was any minute. He stopped forgoing treatment a while ago." He looks at me and my heart stops. "He's been waiting on you for a while. Every time we've come to take him to the hospital, he's always smiled and said he's not going anywhere before seeing his Allison again." A tear runs down the man's face. "Thanks for coming back. He's been suffering for a long time. It was his time to go home."

I shake my head as he places a necklace in my hands. "He wanted me to give this to you."

I cry so hard I can barely breathe. "No!" I shake my head some more and hold out my hand. "I'm not Allison. Who is Allison? There's been some kind of mix up."

The man smiles and grabs my shoulder. "Allison was his daughter. She died five years ago in a car accident on the way here, but his dementia was already too far advanced for him to understand. He's always thought she was still on the way. He's waited all this time to see her again." He looks me in the eye. "You are his Allison now. You gave him what he wanted. You look a lot like her. She was beautiful." He looks as if he's about to break down before he turns away.

It hits me right then and there. Allison was his Kellan. "Was she the love of your life?" I call out to his retreating form.

He stops but doesn't turn around. "She still is and always will be." He takes a step then turns around. "Thank you," he whispers. Then he walks away jumping into the ambulance.

I clutch the necklace to my chest and fall into Tyler's arms, crying over things that even I can't understand. My heart hurts so much. I'm so confused.

I'm so lost. I need Kellan . . .

Chapter Twenty-Three

Phoenix

The ceiling . . . it's such an ugly shade of brown, yet I've been lying in bed staring at it for the last three days, dead inside. Void of any emotions. It's been a week since I've found out Kellan is gone. You know how they say time heals all wounds? Well that's a crock of shit. It doesn't heal anything. You just bleed out slowly from a puncture wound in the center of your heart. I spent the first four days moping around work, messing up orders and pissing off customers; my passion for being a good employee dead along with my heart. How do you continue living normally when your reason for living has disappeared? Dale finally got tired of the complaints and sent me home until I sort my shit out. *Oh Dale . . . can't have anything that's bad for business.*

The next three days I spent in the comfort of my bed, staring at the old man's silver necklace. It's a long dainty chain with a silver inscribed locket. The back reads *My dearest Allison*. At first I couldn't open it because I felt like I was invading some kind of unspoken privacy, but the old man and his daughter have been the only other thing on my mind besides Kellan. I wish I could just shut my mind off, but it's impossible so I finally opened it. On one side is a picture of a little girl around the age of five, smiling big with her two front teeth missing. On the opposite side was the same girl at the age of about eighteen. It must have been a senior portrait. She was beautiful and the man was right; she does resemble me. I cried some more on top of everything else. *Is it too much to ask for some happiness in all this sadness?*

With Zoe staying at her friend's house for the week, it's been just my mother and I. She's been moping around on the couch while I've been holed up in this room, closed off from the world I want nothing to do with at the moment.

The only good thing that's happened over the last week is that my mother has managed to slow down on her drinking and has become more responsive than I have seen her since she's moved in. It seems she's a few years too late, but I guess better late than never. I know I should be making an effort to talk to her, but I'm in no shape to communicate with anyone but the ceiling. We have a good thing going. I just talk and it just listens. No thinking required. It doesn't judge me or the shell I'm living in. Right now, I just want to be alone.

The next morning, I wake up to Zoe standing above me with a disgusted look on her face as she takes me in. She plops down on the end of the messy bed and tosses her notebook down beside her. I cover my face with the blankets in my sorry attempt of an escape. "What the hell died in your bed?"

Yanking the covers back, Zoe's nose twitches as she tosses the blankets off the bed and into a pile, probably giving me a clue to wash them. "This room smells like sweat and feet. Maybe even a dead animal. When was the last time you got out of bed? You better not be turning into mom. I need you, Phoenix. I leave for a week and this is what I come back to."

I run my fingers through my hair realizing just how greasy and gross it feels. It's stuck to my head and slightly matted. I make myself sick. I can only imagine how Zoe views me at the moment. Lying here in Kellan's shirt I'd stolen, boxer shorts and ratty hair with raccoon eyes and I thought our mother was the weak one. At least with her, she tried to stick it out and stayed married for over twenty-eight years. I did this to myself. I am the one that walked out on the most important person to me. What did I have to show for it besides a few crazy nights of sex and me longing over a guy for over ten years? She has great reason to feel as shitty as she does. Me . . . I'm just pathetic; trying to hold onto something that was never truly was mine to begin with.

"Zoe, I don't feel good, okay?" I grab my pillow and smash it over my face in an attempt to drown out her whiny voice. I don't like her seeing me like this. "Don't you have things to go do? I'm sure it's a nice day out. Just let me rest for one more day."

I feel the pillow being pried from my fingers and I fight as hard as I can against her firm grip, but it's no use. I haven't even eaten since my head hit the pillow. Nothing sounds appetizing, not even chicken. I've only gotten up to use the bathroom and not by choice. Yes, I'm gross. Three days without any food or a shower. The only nutrients I've had is bottled water I've piled up next to my bed. I'm weak and I stink. Even I know that. *Maybe I should have just drowned myself in the bottles of water.*

"Dammit, Phoenix! Something's wrong with you. I stopped by *Spinner's* the other day and Jen told me you've taken the last few days off of work. She wouldn't tell me why. A friend of mine, Micah, wanted to take me out to lunch so I asked him to take me to your work so he could meet you." Her tiny hands shove me. "Talk to me, please. You're scaring me."

She frowns as I place my hands over my face to hide the tears that are now falling. I've gone one whole week without crying; just walking around completely numb to my feelings. Knowing that I disappoint even my little sister hurts like hell. I never want to disappoint her. "I'm sorry, Zoe. I really want to meet your friend someday; just not now," I whisper. "Please don't be mad. I just can't right now. I can't."

I feel her arms come around my neck before her face presses against the top of my head. "It's okay, I'm not mad. I don't like to see you like this. You're the strong one, remember? Whatever happened will be okay. I'm not stupid; I know you're not sick. You never get sick and when you do you always fight your way to work no matter who you have to karate chop to get there. You're the strong one." She keeps saying it as if she's trying to remind not only me but herself as well.

I sit there silently, not wanting to admit that she's right. I'm not sick and the whole world knows it. I'm the fifteen year old Phoenix all over again. That devastated little girl that couldn't handle life and manage without my boys by my side. I can only hide for so long before I start hurting the people around me. *I'm not Kellan, I don't want to hurt the ones I love.*

There's hesitation before she says, "I hate to ask you this right now, but where is Kellan?" I hear a smile in her voice and a little hope. "I have something to show him."

She pulls away waiting for an answer, but I don't want to give one. Just the sound of his name is enough to make me want to puke. It feels as if I've just been punched in the stomach and I can't catch my breath. This is exactly why I've been avoiding people. So I can avoid the mention of his name around town. I don't want to have to answer questions. It's like ripping open an old wound. The scar is still there and will always be, but you don't want to have to tell the story of how it got there over and over.

"He's gone," I whisper, my face moist with fresh tears, I can't seem to stop.

Standing up, Zoe grabs her notebook and clutches it to her chest. She looks worried and she should be. "What do you mean, he's gone?"

I bring my knees up to my chest and wrap my arms around them, squeezing. I stare down at the bed to avoid her questioning gaze. "He's never coming back, Zoe. He took off *again.*"

I peek up at her and she quickly turns away as if she's just figured out why I'm such a mess. She looks almost angry . . . disappointed. "Yeah, well

you better get yourself out of bed and get back to the real world. Don't be like mother. People are always going to disappoint you, Phoenix. You only give them the power if you let it change your life." She stomps toward the door and tosses her notebook in the trash before giving me a saddened look. "You're not the only that needed him, you know."

The door slams closed behind her and I just sit there, staring at it as if I expect her to come back in and tell me what she meant. She doesn't, of course.

Needing something to get me out of this slump, I walk over to the trash and dig out her notebook. I know what she and Kellan were working on and I'm curious to see just how far she's taken it. What I find in it, surprises me. There is not only one, but four poems written out.

I find myself flipping to the front and reading the beauty of her words, them making me teary-eyed. It doesn't take long before I smile a real smile for the first time since losing Kellan and finding myself in that old man's yard. Maybe I'm not as lost as I thought. I can't go on this way anymore. There are people that need me. Zoe needs me.

Lifting Kellan's shirt, I run my fingers over the beautiful peacock and feel happiness mixed with sadness. Happiness knowing I have a piece of Adric with me and sadness, knowing I also have a piece of Kellan. The only piece left of them both. I need to be strong, not only for Zoe, but for Adric.

* * *

It's now been twelve days since Kellan left town and I've been finding myself more active with the outside world. Just the other day, I took my mom and Zoe out to dinner and then we stopped by Adric's grave. It was the first time that we've all gone together. I've never seen my mom cry or laugh so much. We sat around for hours sharing stories with Zoe and she was surprised to see how much her and Adric were alike. Being there with them made me happy and made me realize just how much I'd been missing over the years by going by myself. We felt like a family for the first time in forever.

Then, just yesterday, Jen invited me over to have dinner with her, Jax and Tyler. I have to admit, it was cute seeing them together. If I didn't know any better, I would think Tyler was Jax's dad. He is so good with him. They are so natural together and I can tell Jax loves him. I know Jen and Tyler have a thing for each other, but neither of them seem to want to tell the other. The way Tyler looked at Jen made even my heart skip a beat. That

boy has it bad, but I have a feeling he's trying to be as respectful as possible, knowing what Jen's been through over the years. I don't blame him. He's smart for taking it slow and I hope they end up together.

I've been hearing from Kade more and more as the days go on, him wanting me to come to his apartment or meet him at the bar, but I can't. I just don't feel right, knowing what Kade wants from me, so I'm trying to keep my distance and things completely platonic. Even though he says he's happy Kellan finally left, I can see a sadness in his eyes when he thinks I'm not paying attention. I haven't seen or spoken to Nancy since Kellan left, but Kade said she's devastated. I think she keeps to herself a lot. Her son has left again; I can only imagine it hurts for her a hell of a lot more than it does for me. I want to talk to Nancy about it, but I have no idea what to say. No one but Kellan knows that I've told him I love him. Kade and Jen only know so much. I'm not ready to tell anyone else yet. It's something I'll just keep to myself for now.

* * *

Today makes two weeks exactly since Kellan has left. It's taken me a while to make this decision, but as I weave my way through the path of trees, I find myself getting nervous as I get closer and closer to the secret spot that we played at as children. Eight years is long enough. It's time I stop pushing my feelings deep in the banks of my memory and remember the good times just like Kellan said. Adric needs to be remembered instead of shunned away no matter how much it hurts. Maybe the pain would heal if I would let it go instead of harboring it deep inside.

The smell of fresh summer air, leaves and grass hit me hard, making my eyes water. I used to love the smell and I would hang out here for hours just breathing it all in. After the day Kade found me here, I promised myself I'd never come back. I told myself this was our place and if we couldn't all be here to share it, then I didn't want to be a part of it anymore. I was weak. I don't want to be weak anymore. I need to stand on my own.

As soon as the yellow tree house comes into view, a pain aches in my chest. I grab it, taking a deep breath. A mixture of emotions flood through me: sadness, happiness, anxiousness. I don't know how I feel, honestly. I almost feel like running, but my feet feel heavy as if they're stuck in wet cement. *I need to do this. It's been long enough.*

The old worn out rope ladder that dangles at the front, swings side by side catching my attention as I keep walking, getting closer. There's no

wind. It's a calm day and I can't help but to think someone has been here recently. I let hope overpower any rational thoughts, thinking maybe Kellan has been here. Maybe just maybe . . . he didn't leave after all. I haven't been back to his house because I've been too chicken shit to face it. *Is it possible he's been home the whole time?* I never did get the chance to apologize. That could explain him being here without calling me.

I find myself taking quick steps to get closer to the tree house. My legs are shaking so bad I can hardly keep my balance, but I refuse to give in. Hell, if it involves seeing Kellan, I'd crawl there. Everything around me blurs as my attention focuses on the ladder, still swaying as if someone has just pushed it. My adrenaline pumps as I keep on my mission.

I'm standing right in front of it now. Frozen and unable to make my next move. I feel like a total idiot, but I say it anyways, "Kellan."

I hear movement coming from inside the tree-house and my heart starts beating so rapidly, it feels as if it's going to fly right out of my chest. I want to see who's in there so badly, but I'm scared. I'm so scared of what I may or may not find.

A pair of silver sandals attached to a set of long, tan legs step up to the open door, crushing any hopes of it being who I thought it was. My heart takes a crash landing at my feet, breaking all over again. My eyes trail up to see a baby blue dress plastered to a set of slender curves, leading up to the beautiful face I saw at the bar the other night. Her burgundy hair is pulled into a side braid and her exotic green eyes lock on my gray ones.

A small smile forms on her face when she takes notice of me standing below her. "It's just me," she says sweetly. Her eyes stare into mine as if she's trying to remember something in them. "My name is River Holland, I was . . . um." She pauses to swallow.

"A friend of Adric's," I point out before she can answer. I grab onto the rope suddenly feeling weak. *How did she know to come here?* We never took anyone here. She must have been really important to him or Kellan. I clear my throat and force a smile. "I remember you from the bar. You ran away."

Taking a seat on the edge of the entryway, she dangles her legs over the side, clutching something in her hand that is hanging around her neck. It's a small silver chain, but I can't see what's dangling from it due to being gripped inside her hand. She stares down at her hand for a moment before reaching up and unhooking it behind her neck, holding it out for me to see.

It's a silver guitar pick with Adric's name sketched into it. She places it in my hand and smiles.

I look up at her for a second, confused. Adric was very picky about who got his picks. He cherished each and every last one he used. "What is this?" I ask while bringing my eyes back down to my hand. "I mean . . . I know it's Adric's but..."

"Flip it over," she whispers.

Without hesitation, I flip it over and my eyes widen when I read what's sketched onto the other side. "Adric Winters loves River Holland forever and always. My one true love." I cover my mouth as a sob escapes it. I never knew Adric loved anyone. I never even knew he had a girlfriend. Not once did I think to ask. My heart breaks for her.

"Adric was the love of my life. I loved him with everything in me. He gave that to me the night he told me he loved me. I keep it around my neck so it can be close to my heart." I look up and she smiles, but I see sadness in her eyes, confirming she still misses him more than she'd hoped to. "He was my second boyfriend and so far my only love. I haven't found anyone who even comes close to comparing to him and the way he made me feel. He was special."

I rub my thumb over the guitar pick, feeling sad over something he kept from me. I don't understand why he wouldn't tell me he had a girlfriend. "I don't understand," I say softly. "He never mentioned he had a girlfriend. How come I never met you?"

River grabs onto the rope and climbs down to stand next to me. On her way down, I can see a gray tattoo on the back of her neck. It's a heart fully formed, but full of cracks as if one touch would shatter it to pieces. Above it says, *Shattered July 4, 2005 with the death of my beloved*. Below the heart says *Adric Winters*. I gasp as I read it. It's beautiful. It makes me wonder if Kellan is the one that did it. They seemed to know each other. My heart aches. I can't imagine losing the one you love to death. It hurts enough losing Kellan, but at least he's alive somewhere.

"Things weren't as easy as we would have liked. He needed to concentrate on getting his life together and his family's and so did I." She grabs my hand intertwining her fingers with mine. All I can do is stare down at our hands feeling warm and fuzzy inside. "You should have heard the way he talked about you. His little Phoenix. He loved you so much that I always hoped one day I would get to meet you and Zoe and grow to love

you guys as my own sisters. I had some family issues that kept me away most of the time. The times that I could sneak out to be with him were tough. It was usually really late and I never wanted him to drag you out with him."

I squeeze her hand and look into her eyes. They look so pained. "Did you guys date for long?"

She smiles at the memory and closes her eyes before continuing. She exhales a breath and laughs softly. "We dated for about six months. It was the happiest six months of my whole life. We even talked about marriage one day when we were free of all the ties that bound us here. There will never be anyone else like him. I will be alone for the rest of my life. I wouldn't be able to live with the guilt of trying to be with someone else. The only time that I ever truly felt safe. His arms . . ." She lets go of my hands and hugs herself. "They felt so warm and safe around me. When he held me, I almost believed that everything bad in the world melted away. Have you ever felt that?"

I let out a deep breath and hide my hands behind my back so she can't see how badly they are shaking. I just nod my head.

She smiles as if she knows all the answers. "With Kellan, right?"

My head snaps over in her direction. *Why would she even guess him?* She'd never seen us together. "How did you know?" I ask, stunned and insanely interested in what she'll say next.

She grabs onto the rope and runs her hands along it, looking totally relaxed with me. "I saw the way you looked at him that night. I also saw the way he looked at you. Adric looked at me the same way. I will never forget that look. When I saw you looking at each other, I stared at you thinking of how much you reminded me of Adric. I couldn't help myself; I had to meet you." She exhales through her mouth and smiles weakly. "I have to say, Kellan is a hard one to hold down. I've seen many girls in the past try and fail. I wasn't around him all the time, but with him being Adric's best friend, we ended up at a lot of parties together. I had never seen him look at anyone the way he looked at you. There was true love in his eyes. You two belong together. Don't let anyone keep you apart."

I swallow the lump in my throat and shake my head. She's wrong. If he loved me, he'd be here. "If we belonged together, he would still be here. He's not. He took off a couple weeks ago and I have no idea how to even contact him."

Her face turns pained and a tear slides down her cheek. "I know how hard that is. I'm so sorry. I know Kellan and he's facing a lot of demons himself. Cut him a little bit of slack. I'd be willing to bet he'll come back for you. Sometimes love stuns us and it takes us a little while to accept that we truly love someone. It's a scary thing to be that vulnerable to someone else. He may be sorting some things out. Take it from someone that knows from experience; sometimes we need to experience an attempt to living without them before we can accept how much we need them."

I wait for her to say more, but she doesn't. I wonder how much she really knows.

"Were you and Adric together when he passed? I don't remember seeing you at the funeral."

She shakes her head back and forth and nervously plays with her braid. "I don't know what we were at that point. I left a couple weeks before he passed. I left because I had to get out of this town. It was the only way I'd be safe. I asked him to come with me. Actually, I begged him to come with me, but he didn't. He said his family needed him here. When I first left I was afraid to contact anyone from home. I was afraid my father would find me. By the time I got enough courage to call Adric, he never answered. I tried for weeks and then eventually the phone was cut off. I was so scared to come back, but I knew something just didn't feel right. He loved me, I knew that. He would answer if he could."

She wipes at her wet eyes while I listen. "I came to your house when I got back and was greeted by a head full of red curls. I smiled down at the little girl that I knew just had to be Zoe. I asked her if Adric was home. She gave me a blank look, tilted her head and said *Adric is in the ground with flowers. Lots of flowers*. I crashed to the porch on my knees and cried until I couldn't breathe. I knew exactly why he never returned my calls. He was dead. My Adric was dead. Zoe must have thought it was best to just close the door, because the door stayed closed until I left. I ran to the cemetery and found his headstone. I slept next to it for two days before I returned back to my childhood home. The one I wanted so long to get away from, but my dad was the only family I had left since Adric was gone. He beat me and treated me like dirt, but at least I was close to Adric. I would have rather stayed and took the beatings and gotten more time with Adric, but I can't change it now."

By the time, her story is done, I find my arms wrapped around her, comforting her. My heart breaks so much for this woman. The one and only woman Adric ever loved. I don't want to lose her. I don't want her to be alone. "You're not alone," I whisper. "You still have family. A sister."

She pulls away from me and smiles. "I can see why he loved you so much. Thank you."

I smile back as she pulls away. "I can say the same about you. Adric never really showed much interest in many girls. At least, never enough to have a girlfriend. You must be special. I want a chance to get to see why." I open her hand and place the guitar pick in her open palm before closing it. "I hope I'll get a chance to see you again."

She closes her hand tightly around the pick and walks past me. She stops and flashes me one last smile. "I'll be seeing you soon, Phoenix. I'm glad to have finally gotten to meet you."

"Same here," I whisper to her back as she walks away. *Same here.*

* * *

When I get home that night, I grab Zoe's backpack and stuff some clothes into it. For some reason, I just need to feel as close to Kellan as I can at the moment. I need some time to remember the happy moments before I'm ready to completely let go and move on. I've decided to stay at Kellan's house for a few days and see if I can get used to being there. *Why leave his beautiful home sitting there with no one in it?* It deserves company now that Kellans gone and Rayne is staying with Tyler. I'm sure it will be a nice escape.

When I pull into the driveway, my phone goes off, startling me. I struggle to pull it out of my pocket and laugh to myself when I see a message from Aiden asking me to hang out with him tomorrow just as friends. Instead of responding, I shove it into my purse and grab the backpack of clothing, pulling it over my shoulder. Sitting here in the driveway makes me feel anxious. I need to realize I have to do this alone now. As hard as it is, he's gone. He's never coming back no matter what River said. I know Kellan well enough to know when he makes a decision it's final.

Stepping into his bedroom, the smell of oak moss, satinwood and amber hit me hard reminding, me of his intoxicating cologne. The smell is sexy, making me wish he were here, naked with me in his bed. The thought is pure torture. Being here is going to be harder than I thought. *I hate this.*

I toss my clothes aside and fall onto his bed face first. I lay there for hours just doing nothing before finally, I reach over for my purse and pull out my phone. *What do I have to lose?* Maybe hanging out with Aiden won't be such a bad thing. It's just as friends, so I send Aiden a text.

Phoenix: Sure . . . I'm free tomorrow. Just friends?

A few seconds later, he responds back.

Aiden: Perfect. Yes, just as friends so . . . tell your boyfriend to take it easy. I just miss you, that's all.

Phoenix: I don't have a boyfriend. There won't be any problems. I've kind of missed you too.

I slap myself for adding the last part. Sure, I've missed him being around, but it's nothing more than that. The next text comes right away.

Aiden: It's so good hearing that, baby. :) I'll text you in the afternoon with details.

I sigh, wondering if this is the right thing to do. Things can only go up from here. There's no room to go down. I'm already at my lowest.

Phoenix: Sure, talk then.

I drop my phone down beside me and curl up into Kellan's silk sheets, taking in his scent still lingering on the bed. As soon as my head hits the pillow, I'm out like a light.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Phoenix

Staring at my complexion in the mirror, I realize that I've lost some weight over the last couple weeks. The thought scares me, opening my eyes to just how far I've let myself go. I can't let myself drown in my own misery anymore. It's time to push every thought of losing Kellan from my mind. I have to before I lose myself.

Maybe spending the day with Aiden will be a nice distraction. We did always have fun in the past. The only thing different about today is we won't be a couple. Just friends.

Aiden picks me up around four, but I refuse to let him inside when he comes to the front door. No matter what, this is still Kellan's home. I won't disrespect that by letting ex-boyfriends in. Just the thought of it makes me feel guilty for some odd reason.

He takes me to his house where he has prepared us a home cooked meal of steak, fried potatoes, corn on the cob and macaroni and cheese. I have to

admit, the food is damn delicious and I'm actually enjoying his company.

Right now, he's looking at me from across the table with a huge smile, as I shove my cob in my face working on the last few pieces of corn. "I have to admit," he says teasingly, "I always did find it kind of cute when you shoved food in your face as if you were the only person in the room."

I roll my eyes and laugh. I never really thought about it before, but he's right. I must look like a pig when I eat. I set the empty cob down and scoot my plate away. "Is that right? That's actually kind of gross. You have some weird fantasies," I say teasingly and throw my balled up napkin at him.

We both laugh as Aiden stands up to clear the table. I stand up as he reaches for mine and stop him right before he grabs my plate. He brings his eyes down to mine and flashes his perfect smile. "I brought you here as a guest so sit down. Besides, I have a dishwasher. Cleaning up is easy."

"Are you sure?" I'm half way standing, half way sitting while waiting for his confirmation. Somehow, not helping makes me feel bad after all he's done today. "It's not a big deal. I can help."

He places his hand on my shoulder and gently guides me back to my seat. The thing is, if it were Kellan, he would have been rough and sexy about it. Not Aiden though. He's always just been . . . sweet. "Just relax, beautiful. I'll clean this up and then we can head to the bar. Alright?"

Caving in, I lean into my seat and watch as he clears the table. If it were Kellan, we'd be making love on this table.

Shit! There I go again thinking about Kellan. I swear, it's a curse. I just love hurting myself. When I know, what I should be doing is forgetting . . .

Afterward, Aiden drives us over to the bar and we walk inside to find Jen and Kade working.

Jen smiles at me, looks at Aiden and then pretends to go about her business as we find a seat close to the pool table. I try my best not to make eye contact with Kade, but I can't help but to feel his eyes burning into us.

I look over Aiden's shoulder pleading with Jen to come wait on us before Kade has a chance to. The last thing I need is Kade ruining my mood just as I'm starting to feel better about things.

"So what are you drinking tonight?" Aiden leans his head down to look at my face. He knows my attention is somewhere else and I almost feel bad for not thinking about his feelings when he's been nothing but nice all day.

Seeing that Jen is on her way over, I set my gaze on Aiden and sigh in relief. "Probably just beer for now. I don't want to start out with anything

too heavy. It's been a while since I've drank so I'm probably a lightweight."

"Good idea." He beams as Jen walks up beside us smiling.

He jumps to his feet and instantly grabs Jen's arm pulling her in for a hug. Jen stiffens at first, surprised by Aiden's boldness, but then relaxes and hugs him back. I guess she sort of forgot what he was like since he's been gone. He's a damn hugger.

"Aiden. It's . . . ah . . . good to see you," she stammers as they pull apart. "Here with Phoenix." She looks at me questioningly. "What can I get y'all?"

Not noticing Jen's awkwardness, Aiden takes his seat and pulls out his wallet smiling ear to ear. He looks at me waiting for me to place my order first.

"Give me a Miller Lite, Jen. I'm going to take it easy for now." I nod over at Kade who is watching us with an evil grin now. "No shots. I'm not here to get drunk."

"I'll take the same," Aiden confirms. "Just bring me two to save you a trip. I'm pretty thirsty tonight."

Nodding, Jen walks away to grab our drinks.

Eying the pool table behind me, Aiden stands up and grabs my hand. "How about a game of pool? Remember those days?" He looks at me with a smirk.

Of course, I remember those days. The person that wins gets to kiss the other person wherever they want to, no questions asked. I'm not trying to play *that* kind of pool.

I nod my head, reaching for the beer I desperately need at the moment. I smile at Jen. "Thanks, love." Then I turn back to Aiden. "I don't think that's a good idea." I shake my head and take a gulp of my beer. "In fact, it's a horrible idea."

Ignoring my rejection, he pulls me over to the pool table with a smile. "Just relax. Maybe you will change your mind by the time we get to the end."

"This is supposed to be just as friends," I remind him as he racks the balls.

He laughs but doesn't turn to look at me. I watch the back of his head and take another gulp of my beer. For some reason, even though Kellan is gone, the thought of kissing another man makes me feel sick to my stomach. I don't want another man's lips to taint where Kellan's has been. I

like knowing that I can hold on to a piece of him knowing he was the last to touch me there amongst other places.

He hands me a cue stick and leans against the table with a smile that says he's sure of himself. He used to have a way with me. Not now. I won't cave in to him this time. Even if he does look good with his dark fitted jeans, blue shirt and baseball cap. He's very attractive in a clean and preppy kind of way. His skin is too flawless for me. I used to think that was what I wanted; what I needed to be happy because he was so different from Adric and Kellan. I was wrong.

I want Kellan's rough, sexy edge. I want his dark interior and mysterious exterior. I want someone that can take me for a ride into the unknown. I want someone that can keep me on my toes; handle me as if I'm anything but breakable. I guess deep down, I need his bad boy persona. After staring at the beauty of his art, I crave it.

"You break," he says. "You were always good at that."

"If by good, you mean sucked. Then yes. I am good at breaking balls." I laugh at myself and position myself to break the balls. *Too bad I might be breaking his balls tonight as well.*

Just as I'm about to make my move, Aiden comes up behind me, brushing my hair behind my ear, pressing his body against mine. I pull my shoulder up to meet my ear, uncomfortable with him touching me, so he backs away without a word.

Two beers later and one shot of Jack in, the game is almost over and it's down to just the eight ball for him. I stand here staring at the eight ball as if I can control where it goes. *Do I want him to make it?* I can't tell just yet. He's been giving me flirty little smiles all night and I have a feeling, I might let him just for the fun of it.

Kade's been staring at us most the night, giving us dirty looks. I can't tell if he's mad I'm with someone else other than him or someone else other than Kellan. I don't get him, but if he wants to keep making me feel like crap, then why not. I've got quite the buzz going on anyways. The first time I've been slightly happy in over two weeks.

"Steady," I tease. "You're going to miss that. Your arm is shaking."

Aiden turns away from the table to look at me. "That's because I've been wanting to kiss you all night."

I feel my stomach knot up hearing the words actually come from his mouth. I used to love those soft lips. Maybe I could again if I just try. I

shake my head to myself. *Nah, there's no way.* I try to convince myself, but with each drink of beer, he becomes more and more tempting.

"Then take your shot," I dare. "I'll let you, only if you make this shot. This might just be your only chance." I smile at him.

Taking a swig of his beer, he smiles back and prepares for the shot. It seems to go in slow motion as the eight ball slowly sinks into the left corner pocket.

Like a man on a mission, he sets the cue stick down and runs his tongue over his lips, wetting them. He moves closer to me, reaches out to grab my hips but then stops.

Okay. Well that's a little strange. "What's the problem, Aiden? Am I suddenly not kissable," I ask teasingly. "I promise not to bite . . ."

I feel the heat of someone's body behind me, causing me to stiffen. Then my eyes close and my breath hitches as I feel warm breath on the side of my neck. *The smell. Oh God, that smell.* Whoever smells just like Kellan can just take me now. I swear, I'll keep my eyes closed. I'm buzzed enough to pretend. *I think.*

An arm wraps around my waist, resting a hand on my stomach before I feel lips just under my ear. I feel the coolness of metal rubbing against my flesh and my sex clenches with no effort at all. "You are very kissable." Soft lips crush my neck and I gasp. "You are so fucking beautiful I can't go a day without looking at you and the only one you'll be biting is me."

My body trembles under his touch and my legs almost give out on me. *This cannot be happening. It has to be the shot. It's the shot. Am I that drunk?*

I feel the lips again as a hand tightens around my waist, pulling me against a body. My heart flutters. I'm definitely not drunk. Those lips would sober me up enough even if I were in a drunken coma.

"Kellan," I whisper.

A set of firm hands spin me around and my breasts smash into a firm chest as a hand slides up the side of my face before tugging my hair passionately. "I've missed you so damn much, baby." His thumb rubs circles over my cheek as I stare in awe.

How is it possible he has gotten more beautiful than the last time I saw him? His hair is wind-blown and messy from him running his fingers through it and his jaw is lined with the perfect five o'clock shadow. Everything about him from his worn out fitted jeans, snug white shirt with

piercings pressed against the fabric and old Converse shoes turn me on. He's a walking fucking orgasm and I hate him for it. I want to scream at him for hurting me and making me want him all over again.

"What are you doing here?" I find myself pulling away even though I want nothing more than to be in his arms. "Do you think I'm just supposed to forget everything you did to me?"

Aiden takes a step closer to me and places a hand on my arm, protectively. Too bad for him, protecting me from Kellan is the last thing he'll be able to do. "You want me to take you home? We can leave now."

Kellan's hand grabs my waist, pulling me against his body as his other hand presses against Aiden's chest, separating us. "Listen here, *Aiden*. Put your hands on my fucking woman again and I will kill you. Never touch what is mine. Understood?"

I look back and forth as the boys square off, looking each other dead in the eyes. At least, Kellan is looking Aiden in the eyes. Aiden keeps losing contact, looking a bit nervous. I feel bad for him, but so turned on by Kellan at the same time. *Is that bad? Man, this is confusing.*

I get so lost in them, it takes me a second to realize he called me his. *Wait! What?* He takes off leaving me alone, but I'm his. That makes no sense.

I pull Kellan's hand away from Aiden's chest and back away from his grip. He's only going to hurt me again. I know it. I can't let that happen. I won't.

"I'm not yours, Kellan. You left. Remember?" I hate myself for the words that keep spilling from my mouth, but I'm mad and hurt. I told him I loved him and he left. He just left as if what we had meant nothing to him. "You had your chance and now . . . it's too late."

I grab my purse and walk closer to Aiden, grabbing his shirt to pull him along. "Let's go!" I yell. "I can't be here right now. I need to get out of here."

"You can't leave with him!" Kellan runs up beside me and cups my face in his hands, forcing me to look him in the eyes. "I need you to stay with me. Please, don't go. I should have begged you before; I didn't, but I am now. I can't lose you, Phoenix. Please give me one more chance." His eyes soften and I find myself falling to my knees in front of him, his pleas making me weak. *I can't do this.* I can't fight against the one person I love

with all my heart. I just can't. I've seen how my life is without him. I'm miserable.

He drops down on his knees in front of me and scoots closer to me so our bodies are touching and his hands are caressing my face. "I don't want to go another day without holding you. I can't fucking do it and I won't." He swallows hard and dips his head, looking at me through wet lashes. "I have never wanted to spend more than one day with a woman, but I have spent every day wanting to spend one more day with you." He licks his lips, wetting them and my heart stops dead in my chest. "I fucking love you, Phoenix. I love you so much it hurts. Just the thought of breathing is too much for me to take on if it doesn't involve you by my side. From now on, every breath, every beat of my heart and every tear I'll ever shed will be for you. I want to give you everything. You own me. My heart and soul is yours. I can't imagine a world without me being yours. I only left because I thought I was protecting you. I realized being gone that I can only truly protect you being by your side." He smiles and looks down at his jeans. "Besides, I already told you, you'd be the only one to take my clothes off. I sort of really need you now."

We both smile into each other's arms before he leans closer, brushing his lip ring over my bottom lip. My head is still reeling from him confessing his love that I can barely even think straight. "Now tell me, Phoenix. Are you mine now? I won't give up until you are. That, I can promise you." He grabs my chin, looking straight into my eyes, our foreheads touching.

I nod my head, tears streaming down my face, knowing that this man will always be able to break me. I love this man so much it hurts. His grip tightens on my face and he smiles. "I love you too, Kellan. God, I love you so much. Don't ever leave me again. Please! I barely pulled myself out of the depression I was in. I won't be able to next time."

His lips desperately crush mine, as he grabs me, pulling me up to my feet. Holding me firmly against his body, he runs his hand up the back of my neck before tangling his fingers through the bottom of my hair. His kiss deepens and I welcome it with a moan. In this moment it is just the two of us; not Kade, Jen, Aiden and us. It's just us and I can stay like this forever.

His tongue hungrily tangles with mine, tasting every inch of my mouth as if he can't stand the thought of never tasting me again. The feel of his eager tongue turns me on so badly, I have to fight the urge between my legs to orgasm right here in the bar.

Then it doesn't help when I feel his erection pressing against my belly. *Oh shit, I need this man; it's been too long.* Everything about him is everything I've ever needed.

He pulls away, sucking in his bottom lip while smiling down at me. "Mmm, you taste too damn good. I almost can't control myself right now." He presses on his jeans and adjusts them with a smirk that soaks my panties. "I. Love. You," he says in my ear. "I love you, I fucking love you and I'm never leaving you again. Never. Do you understand that?"

Nodding my head, I smile at him and he pulls me in for a hug, kissing the top of my head.

"Oh my goodness, y'all!" Jen's voice squeaks next to us. "That was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." I look up at her and she wipes at her face. "I'm crying. Look at me." She begins fanning her cheeks.

Kellan leans over and kisses her on the cheek. "Thank you for always being there for my girl. You're the best friend anyone could ever ask for." She smiles and her bottom lip quivers. "I can see why Tyler is so worked up over you. You're special."

Jen straightens up and clears her throat as if she was never crying. "He is?" Kellan nods and Jen's face turns red. "I um . . . I should get back to work."

I can't help but to smile as Jen hurries off embarrassed that we noticed she has feelings for the guy. I almost forgot Aiden is standing behind me until I hear him reach for his keys and huff.

"I'm taking off." He nods at Kellan and then turns back to me with a weak smile. "Thanks for dinner and pool. Friends, right?"

I smile back and squeeze his shoulder. "Yeah, friends."

I notice Kellan's jaw stiffen as Aiden leans in to kiss me on the cheek, but out of respect he doesn't interrupt our goodbye. I think he has a feeling Aiden could never come close to comparing to him even if he tried. He knows my heart has been his since the first day I laid eyes on him. Even his brother couldn't take me away. I know for sure my heart is his forever.

"I'm taking you home; to our home." He grabs my hand intertwining his fingers with mine. "Let's go."

I follow beside him, my heart pounding heavily as I watch Kade stare us down the whole way out the door. He almost looks sad; like something is bothering him. I don't let it get to me though. Right now, I am right where I want to be; next to the man I love.

The ride back to Kellan's house seems to be taking forever. All I want to do is be next to him. Being in his truck just doesn't allow the closeness I crave. It's driving me insane.

"You smell so damn good, baby. Do you know how hard it is for me to not take you right here while I'm driving? I want to put you on my lap, pull your skirt up and bury myself deep between those thighs." He grabs my hand and pulls it into his lap, pressing it to his erection. "Feel what you do to me. Only you do this to me. This is all yours."

I feel my breath escape me as my fingers dig into his jeans, stroking his stiffness through the fabric. I'm desperate now. This man; oh how I love that he can be both sweet and dirty at the same time. It turns me on like nothing else in this world. "I would let you take me right here if you wanted," I admit.

He turns his head to me while still trying to watch the road. "Yeah?" He rubs my hand harder, making me squeeze his cock. "I kind of imagined our first night back together being a bit more romantic than me pounding you in the driver seat of my truck." He smiles a deadly, sexy smile and I lose it. I have to have him and I can't think of anything sexier than having Kellan inside me while he's driving.

I smile seductively, while slipping my panties down my legs and tossing them in the backseat. "With you, right now, I want it rough. You do something to me that brings out the animal in me. We have all night to be sweet. I want you." I lean into his ear and run my tongue up it, playfully. "Right here." I suck his ear into my mouth and nibble. "Now."

Before I can even process his movements, the truck comes to a halt and I'm being pulled into Kellan's lap. He guides my hands down to his jeans and says huskily, "Take what is yours, baby."

The zipper of his jeans makes a loud noise as I pull it down and try my best to pull his erection out without causing an accident. He's taking some side streets that no one else seems to be on so truly, I'm not too worried. I just want him inside me and the thought of him controlling this huge truck while inside me turns me on so much I feel my sex already clenching. He lifts slightly so I can work his pants down enough for skin to skin contact.

Placing each knee on the seat next to his hips, I grab his shaft in my hand greedily. Pressing the head to my wet entrance, I rub it back and forth to spread the wetness onto him. We both moan as I guide his cock just beyond the entrance and ease down onto it. "Damn, I've missed the way

your pussy feels clamped around my dick." I go slowly at first, allowing my walls to stretch enough for him to fit. Kellan is bigger than what I was used to with Aiden and I don't want to hurt myself. I can feel it hit against my cervix in this position.

One hand grips the steering wheel as his other hand grips my waist, guiding me up and down on his cock; it stretching me and filling me with intense pleasure. I have no idea how he's still driving, but he's managing. He *is* good with his hands, after all.

His muscles flex as he turns the wheel, causing me to bend down and bite into his arm. *Holy shit, this is so hot.* "Damn, baby. You bite me again and I'm going to lose control. I want to come inside of you, but not yet."

His grip tightens as his hips thrust up to meet my bounce, each stroke going in deep and long. I feel his fingers digging into my hip before he brings his thumb up to his mouth, sucking it and moving down to my thighs, spreading them more and then finally finding my clit. He rubs his saliva coated thumb up and down my sweet spot while biting down on my neck. The sensation is driving me wild. I begin rocking back and forth as he continues to rub my clit. I can feel his dick hitting against my G-spot. "Oh shit, Kellan!" I whimper. "It's coming. I feel it."

He rubs faster, while slowing his thrusts and my whole body shakes on top of his, causing him to growl.

"Mmm, baby. I love feeling you clamp around my dick." He rests his head on my shoulder so he can see what's in front of him. I bring my eyes up to meet the street and it's still just us. This must be a way he takes when he wants to be alone.

"Okay, baby. I'm going to rock you faster and harder now. I'm going to have to pull off to the side for this one." He smirks against my neck before pulling the truck over and switching the gear into park.

He pushes the seat back as far as it goes and grabs my hips with both hands. He grinds his hips back and forth inside me before pulling out and thrusting hard and deep. His thrusts continue to be hard, making me scream. I want this so much. I want this every day. He places his palm against my stomach, rubbing my clit again. The multiple feelings has me completely on edge.

His hand digs into my hips as he moans against my neck. "I'm going to come so deep inside you, it's never going to find its way out. I want me

deep inside you. I want to give you all of me. You're mine." He thrust into me. "This sexy body is mine and I fucking love you, baby. Okay?"

I nod my head and bite my lip as he thrust in one more time, his dick pulsating inside me. I cry out in pleasure as I feel myself clamp around him again. It's the first time I've gotten a clitoral orgasm and a G-spot orgasm simultaneously. I can't even begin to explain the feeling. I dig my fingers into his shoulder as it takes over my body. "Hot damn baby, I've never felt you cum all over my dick like that."

In this moment, I feel as if nothing can touch us. Yes, we have problems to work out, but not tonight. We'll talk in the morning when we're both exhausted from sex all night and can't move. Right now, I just want to love him and let him love me.

Chapter Twenty-Five Kellan

The time I spent away from Phoenix fucking killed me. Literally, I wanted to die from the pain in my chest cavity. I knew as soon as I walked out that door that even if it meant me dying, I'd be back to claim her. I spent two weeks in a hotel in Chicago, going crazy, missing her. There was no way in hell, I was going to spend the rest of my days running from the people I love the most. I'd rather have a little bit of time left living fully than to live a long life alone. I've already seen that tear someone down and it's the last thing I want for her. I stalked around that tiny hotel room, unable to think, eat or sleep. Not a second went by that she didn't consume every part of my world. The truth is, my world no longer exists without her. She is it for me now. I can't go back to the way it was before she walked into that tattoo shop.

With that in mind, I made a decision. A crazy ass one, but it has me here, in my bed, next to the person I want to spend the rest of my days with. I haven't got all the details put together yet, but I swear with everything in me, I will fight to the end to be with my woman. This is where I belong; next to her.

I already made a promise to myself that I'm going to come clean about everything. As much as it scares me that Phoenix might look at me differently, I have no choice if I want a shot at keeping her. I refuse to give her up to another man and I know for a fact that if she leaves me again, she'll end up with that Aiden guy or my asshole brother. Nah, fuck that;

over my dead body. They will have to pry her from my cold, lifeless fingers.

Slipping out from under Phoenix's peaceful body, I dash into the kitchen to cook my beautiful woman some breakfast. I noticed as soon as I laid eyes on her from across the bar that she hadn't been eating well since I'd left. Shit, it took everything in me not to break out in tears. No matter what I do, I'm a fuck-up. There are risks if I leave as well as if I stay. I hate seeing her not put together because of me. She didn't deserve to get hurt because of my idiotic mistakes.

I have a lot of making up to do and later tonight, I plan to make her a home cooked meal by candlelight followed by a romantic massage in the hot tub. Then I want her to curl up in my arms while we talk the whole night, making up for lost time. Call me a pussy, but I don't care. After years of wasting my energy fucking the brains out of every attractive woman throwing themselves on me, it's kind of refreshing to have what me and Phoenix have. She is well worth it and more. She's the only thing that matters. I could care less about myself.

I walk back into the bedroom to find Phoenix standing by the dresser in one of my shirts. It's huge on her, hitting the middle of her thighs. *Holy damn, she looks hot in my clothes.* As much as I want to bend her over my bed right now and slip inside of her, I want to show her how much I love her more. She needs to know. We've lost too much time already. I won't lose anymore. I've learned time is precious.

Sneaking up behind her, I hold the tray aside with one hand while sliding the other around her waist. I will never get used to the way her body feels against mine. I fist the front of her shirt and growl into her ear. "It's a shame you have to be so sexy. I want to be romantic, but you make me want to remove every stitch of clothing with my bare teeth, tasting every inch of you along the way. How am I supposed to control myself around you?" I run my tongue over her neck, teasing her with the flicking motion of my barbell, knowing how much it drives her crazy. "Still tastes like cupcakes. Damn I missed that taste. You do know that's now my favorite food don't you? I need a sugar rush and I know exactly where to get it." I run my finger around to her backside and down the crack of her ass before I stop on the location of all the sweet filling I know is there. Just like always my girl is ready for me.

She squirms in my arms and laughs while I hold her in place, nipping at her neck. "Usually, my desert doesn't fight back. I can usually enjoy it any way I please."

"Kellan, stop it!" she squeals while flipping in my arms to face me and placing her hands on my chest. "Why must you tease me? You know I have to be at work soon. I can't be late, even if I'm with the owner's son."

I nod at the bed and smile. "Get in bed," I demand.

"Kellan, we don't have time." She puts on a pouty face.

"Oh trust me, I would make time, but . . . that's not it. I made you breakfast and I'm not letting you leave this house or bed until you eat."

Smiling, she walks backwards teasing me with her eyes, until her legs meet the bed and she takes a seat. "You didn't have to cook me breakfast, Kellan." She looks at the tray of food eagerly as I set it in her lap. "I have to eat pretty quickly though so I can still have time to shower. Don't be disappointed if I can't finish this huge plate. This is a crap ton of hash browns and bacon. Where do you think I'm supposed to put all of this?" She laughs as I shove a piece of bacon in my mouth.

"Mmm, it's damn delicious too. Now eat, baby. Okay? Let me take care of you."

She looks up from eating her breakfast, giving me a worried look. I hate seeing her look that way. "You do know we need to talk about things later, right? I need to know the whole truth. I promise whatever it is, cannot be bad enough to make me stop loving you."

Deep in my heart, I know she's right. We belong to each other; we always have. She just knew it before I did. She's always had a soft spot for me in her heart. She may take the truth hard, but in the end, I know she'll still be in my arms. I'll make sure of that. "I know; not tonight. I want one more night just to enjoy each other without any bad. Then I promise you I'll explain everything, tomorrow."

She nods her head in agreement and starts back on her breakfast.

Tomorrow is the day I tell her about Cape, Echo and the douchebags; about Adric and Kade. She deserves to know the truth. Tomorrow is also the day I need to figure out how to handle them before they realize I'm back and try to do something stupid.

Shit . . .

* * *

Sitting here, watching her in that tight little red dress as she sets up the bar has me so turned on and happy as shit to know she is mine. It still pisses me off knowing my brother has had his hands on her and I'm afraid I might blow up when I find out just how far they have gone. I plan to have a private little chat with him as soon as I can. It's been a long time coming.

I love Kade and when everything is all said and done, he is still my brother. I'll always have his back; just not when it comes to the woman I love. When it comes to her, he can back the fuck off of. I will hurt anyone over her.

She looks at me from behind the bar, peeking up from wiping down the coolers. "You don't have to hang around being bored while I set up. I probably won't even have any customers for at least another hour." She holds the towel up and laughs. "I'll be working with one of these for most of the morning."

This woman must be crazy if she thinks I'm leaving her alone. *Hell no*. Until I get a handle on things, she's not leaving my side. I can't protect her if I'm not around.

"I'm staying. Watching you is all I need to be happy. I'm not leaving my woman's side until I have to and I don't have any clients since I'm not back at the shop yet officially." I take a seat in a stool and shoot her a playful grin. "How about a beer, beautiful. I'll give you a big tip later."

She raises an eyebrow, grabs a beer and walks over to stand in front of me. "Is this tip going to be the biggest I've ever had?" She holds the beer at a distance, teasing me.

Looking her in the eyes, I grab the beer and bring it to my lips. "Absofuckinlutely." I take a quick swig and smile before licking the taste off my mouth.

Setting my beer down, I lean over the bar and brush my bottom lip over hers, not wanting her to forget for one moment what I do to her. "I could give you that tip right now; bent over that desk in the back."

She smiles against my lips and gets ready to back away, but I stop her by sucking her bottom lip into my mouth, taking her mouth hostage. Her eyes close as a moan escapes her lips, clearly enjoying being held captive. "Mmm . . . very tempting. You've always been hard to resist."

The phone rings, breaking our little moment. *Stupid piece of crap.* "Wait," I mumble, as she pulls her lip away.

"I have to get that. It might be Dale." She tries to go get it, but I wrap my fingers in her hair and smash my lips against hers, getting a taste first.

I suck her lip in one last time before freeing her. "Now you can get it."

She walks away blushing as I sip on my beer, watching her make her way over to grab the phone. She's so damn beautiful; she blows my mind.

"Hello," she says with a giggle. She looks confused for a second as she listens to what the person on the phone is saying. "Wait, Nancy. What's wrong? Why do you sound like that? Where are you?"

Sensing her panic, I jump from the stool and rush behind the bar.

"What?" She begins to shake, while taking notice of me standing behind her. "What do you mean? Is he alright?"

I grab the phone from her hand and place it to my ear, nervous as shit as to why Phoenix is freaking out. "Mom! What's going on? Are you okay?"

There's a bunch of heavy breathing in the phone before she finally responds. "Hospital," she whispers in a strained voice. "Kade is in the hospital and your father and I are out of town. One of the nurses called me, but wouldn't give any information of his condition over the phone and asked if a family member could make it to the hospital. The only thing she said was . . . he . . . oh God. He swallowed a bunch of pills." I hear sobbing before she speaks again. "My baby. I need to know that he's okay. Please, go see your brother."

My heart is pounding so loud, I'm surprised I can even hear what my mother is saying. *No! No. No. No. Not this again. This cannot be happening.* "I'm on my way."

Hanging up the phone, I pull Phoenix into my arms and kiss her on the mouth before kissing her on the forehead. "I have to go. There's an emergency with Kade."

"I'll go-

Before she can finish, two men walk in, taking a seat next to the pool tables. One of them waves and smiles at Phoenix. "Can we get a quick round, Phoenix? We're just in for lunch."

She gives me a frustrated look before squeezing my hand. "Call me as soon as you find out what's going on. Please. I need to know he's okay."

Looking her in the eyes, I get this sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. I hate to fucking leave her, but I have to. *Kade! My little shit brother. Why would he do it? Is it because of Phoenix?* The thought makes me sick, but he's had a thing for her since they were just kids. Love can

make people do stupid things. I know that now. She doesn't want him so I've never felt bad. I never want to give her up, but if it means losing my brother's life, I'll have no choice. I've lost one brother, I will not lose two.

I kiss her one last time, my lips desperately taking her in while I can. I have to be prepared for whatever it is I'll find in that hospital bed.

"I'll call soon. I promise." I pull away and look her in the eyes. "I love you. You know that, right?"

Her face scrunches up and she almost looks as if she's about to cry. "Yeah, I love you too, but you're scaring me." She squeezes my arm. "I never want to lose you; ever."

I force a smile. "I know, baby. Neither do I. We'll talk soon."

I walk away, leaving her behind. *Shit! Mother fucking fuck!* This is not what I expected. This is beyond fucked up. My little brother better be okay. I can't lose him too. I can't go through this shit again.

On the way to the hospital, I'm so panicked I end up running a couple of red lights, not able to think straight. Luckily, there were no cars when I did. After what happened the last time I was put in this situation, you would think I'd learned my lesson and just run my ass there. Clearly, I'm a dumbass when I'm put under pressure.

Pushing my way through the doors, I run up to the first counter I see, yelling Kade's name. "Kade Haze! Where is he?"

The lady behind the desk smiles at me as if everything is all fine and fucking dandy. *Do I look like everything is fine and dandy?* "Well!"

After a few seconds she finally nods her head and points around the corner, still calm as shit. *This damn woman.* "Room 112."

I take off running, almost knocking a nurse down in the process. My eyes scan the numbers on the doors, until finally, I'm standing right outside his door. My heart is pounding so fast I can barely breathe.

Pushing the door open, I step inside to see Kade clothed in a gown hooked up to some IVs. Dark circles sit around his eyes and his skin looks unusually pale while his hair is a crazy mess.

Upon noticing my sudden appearance, his eyes open wide before closing again. Pushing his head into his pillow, he slams it over and over then he growls under his breath, while trying to keep his eyes open. "Oh fuck! You played right into the fucking trap."

What is he talking about? He's obviously in better condition than what I first expected. Still, that doesn't tell me why he did it or if he'll try it again.

I rush to his bedside and look down at him, wanting to kick his ass but protect him at the same time. "Shit, Kade. What were you thinking?" I pull the chair behind me closer to the bed and take a seat as close to him as I can. If he had enough strength, he'd maybe punch me, but I don't give a shit. "Don't you ever do that to me again. I thought you were fucking dead."

A tear slides down my cheek as I take in his features; him lying there looking helpless. He still reminds me of that little boy I left behind; just a little bit older. Seeing the old Kade there breaks me apart, making me realize I hurt more than I thought. *Shit, I love my family. How have I lived eight years without them?*

I'm looking at him waiting on an answer, but he still seems pretty weak. My guess, he's been in here since late last night. Just enough time to start getting his strength back. "I'm sorry, bro. I'm sorry for everything I put you through. If there's anything I can do to make up for it and get you to promise to never do this shit again, I will do it; no questions asked." My heart breaks as I speak, because I know there's a possibility I might have to give the love of my life up. I don't know if I can do it and go on living.

"You're so much better than this. Fuck, man. Everyone loves you. There can't be anything bad enough that you can't get through it; you know this. You have mom, dad, Phoenix . . . me. I know I haven't been here and that I've been a shitty brother, but that's going to change."

His eyes open again and he takes a few deep breaths before attempting to speak again. "How the hell did you find out?" He stops to catch his strength. "I told them not to tell anyone I was here. You have to leave. You're not listening to me; it's a trap." He shakes his head, angry at something.

"I'm not going anywhere. Are you shitting me? Look at you. I can't let this happen again. I'm here to stay." I reach for his arm and squeeze it. "You can't make me walk away again."

He snatches his arm away. Well the best he can, and shakes his head again. "Dammit! I didn't put myself here, Kellan. Would you listen to me? It's Phoenix . . ." He shifts in the bed trying to get comfortable. "You have to fucking go. This was all a damn distraction for them to get you away from Phoenix. I tried to keep this from you so you wouldn't come here. They knew you wouldn't leave her willingly, so they had to come up with another plan to get to her."

My head is spinning so fast, I feel like fucking hurling. *What the shit did he just say?* "What!" I stand up and roar, fists clenched at my side. "What does that mean?" I yell angrily and I can feel my nostrils flare.

He looks up, his expression mirroring mine. "I know everything now. I saw Echo. I know their plan. They know you're back and instead of going after you, they are cutting you off at the heart by taking Phoenix. Now get the hell out of here and get back to Phoenix before they get there first. He has people watching her. They forced those pills down my throat knowing you'd come for me. Go!" He begins pulling at his hair in a panic.

"Fuck!" My legs move as fast as they can towards the door. As my hand grips the door Kade calls out my name.

I turn around. "What?"

"I'm sorry about what happened with Adric. I never meant for him to get hurt. I didn't know he was that bad off. It was easy money and I didn't think about the consequences. Will you not tell Phoenix? I'd rather her hear it from me. I don't want her to hate me. I can't live with that." He seems sincere.

I nod my head. "You have twenty four hours to tell her before I do. Once you're out of here and better. I won't keep anymore secrets from her, no matter what the consequences are."

I open the door and take off running, not giving him a chance to hold me back any longer. I have to get to her. As I rush out of the hospital and through the parking lot, my adrenaline is pumping so hard I can feel the blood coursing through my veins. Right now, I could get shot and not fucking feel it.

This is not fucking good; not fucking good at all. I have to get back before those goons realize my mistake.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Phoenix

"Alright boys," I say while clearing the table of their empty beer bottles. "I'll see you later."

Travis and Rob both smile and wave as they carry their conversation outside, babbling on about some woman they both seem to have the hots for. The only good thing from their visit is that they somehow managed to keep my mind occupied by their endless banter and horrible pool skills. At least somewhat.

Now that they're gone and I'm alone, I can't stop wondering why I haven't heard anything from Kellan yet. He's been gone for at least a good twenty-five minutes. He has to know something by now. He knows how worried I am and he promised to call, text; anything but leave me in the dark. My nerves are going wild with anticipation.

Pacing up and down the bar from the growing feeling of worry in the pit of my stomach, I'm beginning to get restless. I take a seat on a stool and try to keep my cool as I wait to hear from Kellan. I can't take this anymore. I need to know something and Kellan doesn't have a phone anymore. I could try Kade's. There's a chance he has it next to his bed. His phone never leaves his side; it's an attachment. I know because every time I look at him it's glued to his hand.

Just as I'm about to pull out my phone to call, the door opens and a surge of hope runs through me, sending me straight up to my toes. I turn behind me, expecting to see Kellan, but stop dead in my tracks when I see someone I wasn't expecting. *Yeah, definitely wasn't wanting to deal with this shit so early.* Today isn't the day to have to deal with some sick fuck's bullshit. The feeling irks me.

One look into his snake-like eyes makes my blood run cold and my heart stop mid-beat. A lopsided grin creeps up on blond guy's face, the piercing in his cheek stretching the skin, looking as if the barbell is going to break through the thin layer.

In line behind him, walk his two creepy sidekicks with matching grins. This is even worse than I expected. Now, I'm really nervous. They look determined, like they're on some kind of mission and I'm hoping I'm not it.

"It's about damn time those idiots left." The blond guy steps forward, but the two other guys stay in place as if they already know what to do. His eyes meet mine and he licks his lips, slowly, as if he's imagining himself tasting me. *Fucking gross.* "Do you know how long I've been waiting to get to you?" He looks me up and down, his eyes landing on my breasts. "Fuck! It feels like forever and I am not a patient man."

Okay, this is really starting to piss me off. I'm not a piece of meat or a whore that just gives it up to anyone. *Why won't they just go away?* I see them once and now I see them everywhere. I don't like this one bit. I want to run and hide. My gut tells me to run. I could, but then where would it get me? The pressure builds in my head, causing me to panic. Running will get me nowhere.

Reaching in my back pocket for my phone instead, I hold it up and back away, running into a bar stool. I grab it to steady myself, while giving the creeper a death glare. "You need to leave before I call the cops. There is no reason for you guys to come in here and cause trouble so just move along and be on your way."

I turn to walk behind the bar, but a hand wraps around my waist, pulling me back, roughly. My body slams against a stiff body, before a hand comes up to cover my mouth. My phone slips from my hand and he kicks it away with his boot. My heart is beating so fast, I feel as if I can't breathe and I'm going to pass out.

"I'm going to have fun with this one. I like a woman with a little fight in her. It makes it more interesting." A hand slides up my thigh, slightly lifting my dress, caressing my skin. My body shakes under his touch, but he continues up my body and rubs his filthy hands over my breasts. "Look at this Larry; easy access. Isn't it just my lucky fucking day."

I fight against his grip and attempt to scream, but he yanks my head back and runs his slimy hands back down my body, reaching under my dress and digs his nails into my thigh, moving it closer to my panties. I feel his erection on my back, prodding me and it makes me want to rip his penis off. That and vomit. I let a few tears slip before I recover my composure. If I've learned anything from movies; the more I panic the more they enjoy it. From the way these guys look, I have a feeling they will enjoy this anyway.

"I don't know, Cape," the short stub says with amusement. "She may not be as easy access as you think. She looks like she's ready to give you a little hell. She's a feisty one."

I can't handle his touch anymore. I'm about to flip out. While he's distracted, I take this as my moment to attempt my getaway. Not that I'll get far, but I try regardless. I bring my foot up behind me, kicking him between the legs the best I can manage.

He grunts and his grip loosens, but not enough to pull free; just enough to piss him off. "You stupid bitch!"

Yanking me by the arm, he spins me around and slaps me hard, across the face.

The sting causes me to close my eyes and whimper as he slams me against the bar and starts grinding his crotch into my ass. My dress rides up, exposing my panties as he growls next to my ear. He grabs the hem of my dress and jerks it upward, almost tearing the fabric. He sounds his approval

of me perched in the air behind me; taking me in. He cups his grimy hands over my sex and rubs, making me gag. I can't believe I'm bent over this bar about to be raped in front them. I am repulsed as he violates me. *Where is Kellan?*

A few more unwanted tears escape. "Test me again! I dare you to do it! Try me and I will pull my fucking cock out and ram it between your legs. I'll give it to you good. I would love a piece of your sweet little ass" He licks the side of my face. He thrusts against my backside again, causing me to hiss and squeeze my eyes closed. "I bet your little boyfriend wouldn't like that, would he? I bet he thinks his cock is the best. That cocky shithead. Maybe we should let him watch while I cum all in your sweet little pussy. I bet he won't be so arrogant then. "He leans against my ear and laughs. "That's right. That little shit, Kellan. We have a lot to discuss. There's things you need to know, sweetheart."

Grabbing me by the hair, he swings me backwards and into one of the other guy's arms. "Get that bitch into the car as quietly as you can. I'll be out in a minute."

My eyes start to water as I realize what's about to happen. They're taking me somewhere. I'm going to end up on one of those crime shows; my body mutilated and thrown in a ditch or river somewhere. *Where is Kellan?* *What is going on?* I'm so confused and angry that I just want to scream. I try to, but another hand quickly covers my mouth, silencing me. My legs are shaking so badly, the only thing keeping me standing is the firm grip the guy has on me.

These men are strong; a lot stronger than I am. I know no matter how hard I fight, unless someone comes along to save me, I'm screwed. I'm no match for them.

My legs dangle below me as I try to regain my balance, but I'm being drug out the back door and over to the shitty car I saw parked down the street from Kellan's. They have been watching me this whole time, but what I can't figure out is why? *What does Kellan have to do with this?*

Both of the other men have a hold of me, forcing me to comply with whatever they want to do to me. One guy grabs my legs and lifts me up as the other guy opens the back door to the car. Then before I know it, I'm being shoved inside with meat grinder face.

One hand is over my mouth, his other holding my arms still, as his legs wrap around mine, squeezing. *This is ridiculous. I can't move for crap. I*

can't move! I start to panic more as the tears stream down my cheeks. I can't control them anymore. I can't breathe and my chest hurts. *Where are they taking me?*

The short guy jumps in the passenger seat and a few seconds later, blondie is in the driver seat. He leans over the seat to look at me and smiles, a big, disgusting smile that I want to knock off his smug face. Now the anger is setting in. "Thanks for the cooperation, sugar. It'll all be worth it soon enough."

I try to swing my foot up, to kick the back of his seat, but it barely moves an inch, before being pulled back by smelly guy's legs. Not only is this guy ugly as ass, but he smells like a dead animal. Right now, I want to crawl right out of my skin.

Blond guy, looks over the seat and laughs at my attempt before turning back around, starting the car and driving us away from my safety. I watch with wet eyes as *Spinner*'s fades into the distance.

We drive for what seems like hours when in actuality it's for about fifteen minutes according to the calculations in my head. I figured it may ease the panic if I count in my head versus anticipate my death. It didn't do much good with being in the arms of the filth I'm in, even a second feels like hours.

We end up at some old abandoned warehouse that sits off of a dirt road in the middle of nowhere. There isn't another business, street or car in view for at least five miles. Looking around, makes me feel even sicker. I have no idea what they're going to do to me here. There's no one around to help if I were to scream. I'm on my own. I feel like I'm in the middle of a horror film.

When the car engine stops, snake eyes gets out of the car and walks over to open the back door. Leaning in, he grabs me by the hair and pulls me out of filth's arms. My hands shoot up to grab my hair as I scream, feeling little pieces of hair being ripped from my scalp.

He swings me around so we're face to face. "Go ahead!" he yells. "Scream!" He laughs sadistically and looks around with wide eyes. "No one can fucking hear you, sweetheart." He turns to his posse. "Do you hear her anyone? Huh?"

I fall into his chest as he yanks me against him and picks me up, tossing me over his shoulder. Out of instinct, I slam my fist into his back

repeatedly, until he drops me to the ground. I land on my back, the air getting knocked out of my lungs, making my chest ache.

Laughter surrounds me as I slowly open my eyes, focusing on what's above me. Cape, as they call him and his two morons stand above me obviously amused with my struggling as I fight to regain my breath. It hurts to breathe. Maybe I bruised a rib.

"Stop testing me." Squatting, Cape shoves a finger into my forehead, scraping it across my flesh. "I have someone that has been dying to meet you." He nods his head, stands up and starts backing away. "Oh yeah. You ready or what?"

I suck in a deep breath, trying my best not to cry. I don't want these morons to get the pleasure of seeing my tears. I won't let them. Instead, I decide to play the calm role to ease things until I can figure out what the hell is going on. "I don't have much of a choice. Now do I?"

I stare up at him, surprising him with my come back. I guess he was expecting me to cry almost as much as I want to.

He raises a brow and shoves the short guy, almost knocking him off balance. "Pick her ass up and help her inside, idiot."

The thought of these guys touching me, sends me straight up to my feet. Breathing or not, I don't want them helping me. "I can walk." I swing my arm out, stopping Humpty as he reaches for my arm. "Don't touch me," I growl. "I'm not a fucking child, you know."

My reaction sends Cape into a fit of laughter as he walks backwards a few steps before spinning around and reaching for the metal door of the huge old building.

Ugh! He makes me sick. I wish I could rip his heart out.

When Humpty reaches for me again, the taller guy gives him a little shove before slapping him upside the head. "Let her walk by herself. Shit! Are you stupid? If she fucks up again . . ." He smiles at me and licks his disgusting, cracked lips. "Then she's ours."

I find my legs working fast to be sure I don't have to let one of these guys touch me again. My stomach can't handle it. I'm about one touch away from a full blown anxiety attack and vomiting on someone's shoes.

I keep walking fast while wondering, where's Kellan? Is Kade in serious trouble? What the hell did I walk into?

I reach the door, with the two idiots right on my trail. I can almost feel one of them on my backside and it makes my stomach churn at the thought.

Too close; they're too close.

Upon poking my head through the door, I see the room is almost empty besides a few wooden crates and pallets that are scattered throughout the room and what looks to be a card table, surrounded by folding chairs. The building smells of rot and mildew and the cement floor has a wet coating over it as if the room has recently been wet down, the water getting drained into the various floor vents.

The door slams behind me, causing me to jump and cover my mouth. This place creeps me out even more than the men.

Cape looks at me and grins wickedly. "Calm down, sugar. We're not frightened, are we?" He walks over to stand next to me and I stiffen at his closeness. "There's nothing to be scared of . . . yet."

I back away as he reaches for my chin, but he grabs it anyways and brings my face close to his. His breath smells of cheap Tequila and cigarettes making me gag a little. "So, tell me . . . Phoenix. Has your boyfriend ever mentioned me before?" I shake my head, trying to keep from shaking. "Oh what a fucking surprise. He acts as if nothing ever fucking happened. It must be nice to go on living normally." He kicks the crate next to him and growls while squeezing my chin tighter. "As if he didn't ruin my fucking life; after how generous I was to him. That little shit!"

His breath is heavy on my lips as he looks me in the eyes and brings my hips close to his, rubbing his erection against my thin dress. "I'm going to love ruining his life. Yeah!" His fingers dig into my chin as I struggle to pull away. "I started with that dipshit brother of his. You know. . . Kade. You're next, sweet tits."

I shake my head, holding back the tears as his lips press against mine, roughly kissing me as his tongue tries to pry my lips open. He tastes disgusting, as if he's just licked an ashtray. I fight against him enough to get my lips away from his and scream. "Don't kiss me!" I struggle some more in his arms as he grips my ass, working his way down between my legs. "Asshole!" I spit in his face and he slaps me, while cupping my ass tighter and slipping a finger under my panty line.

"Let me feel what Kellan gets to feel. I bet you're tight. We can loosen you up a bit. I'm sure when I'm done with you, these two would love my left overs. They always do." Just then, one of the two doors across the room opens and in walks a beautiful woman with long red hair, pushing a

wheelchair. She takes one look at me in Cape's arms and her face twists into disgust. "I'm not staying for this. I'm done this time." She turns to leave.

Pushing me away, Cape throws me into another set of arms where I'm forced down onto one of the crates, a hand pressing my shoulder down. "Maxine, baby. You know how this works. This is business not pleasure." He grabs the woman by the arm and pulls her to him, grabbing her chin just as he grabbed mine. "Now shut the fuck up and kiss me, yeah? Don't forget your place and that's to please me."

The woman's eyes meet mine as she hesitates. She looks at me for a moment before leaning in and kissing Cape on the mouth. I can't tell for sure, but it almost looked as if she gagged a little upon impact. It makes me wonder what she's doing with someone as awful as this guy. She is actually quite stunning. She doesn't belong here.

Now that I'm out of the creep's arms, I can finally focus on what I heard come out of his mouth. I can finally pull myself together enough to try to get some information. "What did you do to Kade, you sick bastard?" I grip onto the wood, preparing myself for the worst, while looking across the room at the wheelchair. *Who is this guy staring at me? Why won't he stop looking at me?*

His hair is long, blond and unkempt and it looks as if he hasn't shaven in months. Maybe he can't take care of himself. *Can he even use his hands?* He's not moving; he's just staring at me expressionless. I feel sick and I want to run. I can't help but wonder if Cape did this to this poor guy.

My eyes wander around me, scoping out my options as Cape takes in my words. *I have to get out of here.* "Kade!" He laughs and walks over to stand behind the wheelchair. My eyes land on him as he begins to rub the guy's head, lovingly. "This is Echo. My fucking brother! My damn flesh and blood. The boy I looked after as a kid. The boy who wanted to follow in my footsteps. Does it look like he'll be following in anyone's footsteps now?"

He starts coming my way, so I turn away, not wanting to look at his face. I can't look at him. The thought of him makes me sick. I just want to know what he's done to Kade. I can't take this. "Tell me what you did!" I feel him standing right beside me, so I bring my eyes up to look at his waist that is inches from my face. It's then that I notice the handle of a gun, sticking out the top of his jeans. My heart goes crazy thinking of all the possibilities. *Are they all armed or can I get away with this gun?* I'm good

with guns. I can use one. I didn't notice anyone else with guns. Then again, I didn't notice his until now either.

Just as he's about to look back at me, I look up before he can notice me checking out his pistol. He laughs and lifts his pant legs before bending down in front of me with a sneer. "He's dead." He frowns and pats my cheek. "You can thank your little boyfriend for that. Sorry you have to find out this way."

Dead? I couldn't have heard that right. He can't be fucking dead. Is that why I never heard back from Kellan? I'm going to kill this sick jerk! Anger courses through me and without thinking, I reach for Cape's gun as he stands up and face's his brother.

I feel the cool steel in my hand as I clasp it and pull it from his waistband. On instinct, or from what I've seen in the movies, I reach for meat grinder next to me and hold it to his chin as Cape comes at me. "Don't make me use this." Knowing these guys, I don't have to check it to know it's loaded and ready to go. Men like this are always packing. My legs shake, but I try my best to keep steady. Showing weakness with a loaded gun in your hand can backfire in a heartbeat. "Tell me what you did to Kade. He can't be dead. Don't fucking lie to me." I push the barrel further into meat grinder's face and he laughs. The idiot actually laughs. "Tell me!" *Why are they all smiling?*

Cape walks over to me as if he doesn't believe I'd actually shoot him. *The balls of him.* "If you're going to make a threat, you better go through with it. Once you pull that trigger, there's no going back; you have to shoot every last one of us. Can you handle that?" My hands shake as he reaches for the gun and points it at his own head. "Go ahead. Make my fucking day."

My finger hovers over the trigger as sweat drips down my face. I've never taken a life before. *Is this really something I can live with for the rest of my life?* Now, my whole body is shaking. I scream and fall to my knees, dropping the gun down beside me. I can't do it. There's only one way out of this: death.

My heart aches for Kade so bad. *He can't be dead.* Tears fill my eyes and I watch, helplessly as Cape bends down and reaches for the gun. He grips my arm, lifts me to my feet and then slaps me across the face with his gun hand. The hard steel cracks against my cheek, sending a surge of pain through my face and I fall back down on the cement. "Try that again and I

will fucking kill your skinny ass." He leans above me. "Now get up! We have company coming soon. I have plans for the both of you. It's sad, really; you have to pay for someone else's mistake."

He looks around the room and waves the gun. "Someone get a handle on this bitch before I shoot someone."

The short guy grabs my arm and throws me onto a crate, holding my arms still behind me.

Cape smiles at this and points to the woman. "Baby, bring Echo over here." The woman just stands there until Cape screams, "Now!"

She quickly scrambles to the wheelchair and pushes the man across the room and over to Cape, with wide eyes. "Sorry." She looks up at him as if she's afraid of getting hit. "It won't happen again."

He rubs the gun across her cheek and kisses her on the mouth. "Good girl; damn straight it won't." He slaps her on the ass and turns to me. "Push Echo over to his new friend. They need a proper introduction."

The woman does as told and pushes the guy right in front of me so we're face to face and then walks away to stand at a distance.

My eyes can't help but to take in the sight before me. *This guy is the creep's brother.* I would have never guessed. He's sitting there broken, looking helpless just staring into my eyes. I stare back, taking in the light shades of brown, trying to figure out what he's thinking and why he would want to see me. I want to speak to him; to ask him what happened and what I have to do with anything, but I know I wouldn't get an answer so I don't. I just sit there on the verge of tears as he stares at me.

It feels like forever has passed, with us all in silence waiting for this mystery guest he keeps speaking of. No one seems to want to say anything more until he arrives. I'm so anxious, I can't sit still anymore. Another couple of younger kids have appeared from one of the back rooms and now it's the eight of us. Every time a door opens, I pray for it to be Kellan. I want to see Kellan so badly. I need to know him and Kade are safe. *Is this why Kellan left?*

The silence is finally broken by the door being kicked open. I can't see who has just entered, because I'm facing the other direction, but I can hear the sound of boots hitting the cement. The look on Cape's face makes me believe it's exactly who we've all been waiting for.

My body stiffens at the sound of a familiar voice. The one voice I would die to hear at the moment. "Get your fucking hands off her or I will kill you

myself."

My heart starts beating so loudly, I can hardly make out anything else being said. Kellan is here and my body is no longer controllable. I need to see him. I need to make sure I'm really hearing what I think I'm hearing. I start struggling in my seat. "Kellan," I scream, pulling my arms away from the man's grip. "What's going on?"

The guy grabs my arms and yanks me back down, twisting my wrist in a painful position. A small cry escapes me and before I can get all the way back down to my seat, the guy is yanked away from me and slammed into the ground. His head bounces off the cement as Kellan pounds his fist into his face, kneeling above his head. Blood begins to splatter with each hit.

Cape grabs me by the neck and forces me to stand above Kellan. "Enough!" Kellan looks up with flared nostrils, clearly pissed off to see Cape handling me. "This is my place and it's my rules here. Unless you want to see this pretty face smashed into the ground, I suggest you back the fuck up and play my game."

Shaking his head, Kellan holds his hands up and backs away from the bloody guy on the ground. Him and the woman glance at each other with a look of recognition, before he turns back to face Cape. "Alright! Fuck! Just don't hurt her. I'll do whatever you ask."

Cape snorts and laughs loudly. "Yeah, you already proved that. You must have gotten stupid over the years though. You haven't been a man of your word lately and I'm not a patient man. I don't like when people disobey me."

Kellan's eyes meet mine and I can see he is hurting. I'm so confused. None of this is making sense. He takes a step toward us, but stops when Cape pulls me against his chest. I hear Kellan growl as his fists clench at his sides. "Neither am I," Kellan states. "Get your hands off her."

I close my eyes, feeling dirty as Kellan watches Cape run his finger up my leg. Knowing Kellan is watching this is making me sick to my stomach. "Is that what you want me to do?"

I hear what sounds like a crate being broken against the ground before I hear someone being tackled and a bunch of feet moving. I don't dare to open my eyes; afraid of what I'll see in front of me. There's no way Kellan can take on all these men, plus Cape and his gun.

"I'll tell you what. I will stop touching her, caressing her, and fondling her after you two have a little chat and you properly introduce her to your

old friend over there. Then, when you're done, I get to do the same to you."

What does that mean? This is killing me. I open my eyes to see Kellan, on his knees, staring over at Echo, with Cape's two men holding his arms behind his back. The shorter one, presses his boot into his back, while the other one yanks his head to the side.

The sight instantly rips open my heart, causing tears to stream down my face. "Don't hurt him," I cry. "Please, stop."

Cape presses his lips to my ear and Kellan growls softly. "Oh don't worry, sugar. Soon, he won't be able to feel anything; just like my brother over here. I was going to do a brother for brother, but . . . nah. I changed my mind."

The two men drag Kellan over so he's kneeling down in front of Echo. Then Cape pulls me over to stand above him, pressing the barrel of the gun underneath my chin. "Look up, Kellan," he demands.

Kellan brings his eyes up to meet mine, but I can hardly see him through the tears now. He just sits there, looking ashamed and broken. I want to reach out to him, to hold him and comfort him, but I can't. I have a feeling one of us may die. My heart says it will be him.

Even on his knees, before me, he works on soothing me. "I won't let anyone hurt you, okay?" I close my eyes as he continues, "I will die first. You are the only thing that matters to me. Whatever happens today, remember that."

I hear laughter in my ear as Kellan's head gets yanked back, hard. "Well isn't that sweet. He has a heart after all. I guess you finally got tired of using women like dish rags. Is that all you have to say, Romeo? Don't you have a story to tell? Some fucking introductions to do?"

Kellan closes his eyes and spits on the ground before looking back up at me with worried eyes. He's silent for a moment, just staring at me until the short guy knees him in the back, causing him to clear his throat and speak. "I worked hard to keep Adric away from those pills. I knew he was addicted, depressed and lost." He stops and swallows. "When I found him in his room that day, the first thing I did was come here looking for Cape because I knew where they had come from. I got here expecting to find Cape to get my answer. When I got here, Echo was the only one here. He was sitting there with a huge grin on his face as if he knew why I was here. He knew I found out Adric was still getting the pills. I knew Adric didn't get them directly from Cape or his men, but I knew someone was going

between them, supplying Adric when I wasn't around. When I confronted Echo about it and demanded he tell me where Adric had still been getting them, he laughed in my face and talked down on Adric, calling him a piece of shit loser that deserved to die."

His eyes close for a moment, him taking a few deep breaths before continuing. "I lost it, baby. I fucking lost it. Adric was my brother. How could someone laugh in my face about him dying? No one hurts my family. I love them to death and will do anything to protect them. I took it out on Echo and made him pay for his mistakes. I had many talks with Echo beforehand, warning him of Adric's behavior. He ignored that. I had to deal with him. I almost killed a man. Look at him. I'm a fucking monster, driven by pain and anger."

My eyes wander over to Echo, whose eyes are on Kellan, kneeling in front of him. His face looks different from before; almost sad as he stares at Kellan. I don't know what to make of this, but I have a feeling he's here against his own will.

I just look at him sitting there, then to my surprise he moves. He places his hand on the wheel and spins his chair around so he's facing the back wall. *Wait! What?* He's been able to move this whole time and yet he sat there looking at me as if he had no choice. His eyes never left mine. *What was he thinking? What is he thinking?*

"Nothing to say, Echo? You can't even look at the man that put you there. This is your chance to watch him suffer through your pain." Cape kneels down in front of his brother and grabs his face. "You, my brother, are going to watch him suffer. I haven't waited eight years for this shit for you not to watch. Fuck!"

Walking over to where Kellan's still kneeling on the ground, Cape swings his arm back, slamming the gun into the side of Kellan's head. The crack of the blow echoes throughout the building as Kellan falls over on his side, his face hitting the concrete. "Get the fuck up, you pussy bitch!"

I scream at the top of my lungs as Kellan pushes himself to his feet just to get beat back down to the ground. No matter how many times he gets punched or kicked, he still won't seem to stay down. He won't back down; although, he doesn't put up a fight. He just takes the beaten as if he deserves it.

I try to plead with him to stop, but his eyes never meet mine. He does everything he can to keep his eyes out of my view. His face is bloody and

swollen now, his body covered in dirt and dust from the building, the blows coming in smaller dosages now.

The sounds of the punches and impacts of the blows, causes bile to rise in my throat. I turn beside me and vomit on the person holding me back. I get thrown to the ground, the air getting knocked out of me once again.

Kellan's head tilts my direction and suddenly, he's rushing to his feet. "I will fuckin' kill you." Just as he's about to make it to me, he gets shoved against the wall by Cape's two morons.

I feel my head get yanked backwards as someone drags me across the floor by my hair. I'm screaming so loud it hurts my own ears. "Is that what makes you fight? It's her! How does this make you feel, Kellan? Does it hurt watching someone you love get hurt? Huh?" Cape's voice sounds next to my ear. He pulls me up to my feet. "Time for the knife; see how he feels about that."

I watch in horror as the tall guy pulls out a knife, pins Kellan's hand to the wall and stabs it through his hand, causing Kellan to scream out in pain. He bangs his head into the wall behind him while biting his bottom lip. The knife is holding his hand to the wall and blood is pouring down his hand.

My stomach twists into knots as Humpty punches Kellan in the gut one last time. "No! Stop! Please don't hurt him anymore. Please," I cry. "I will do anything you want. Just please leave him alone."

Cape laughs in my ear and turns behind him. "Maxine, get Echo out of here; both of you, now!"

Reaching under my dress, he hooks his index finger under the crotch of my panties and tugs, pulling them down my legs. I squirm in his arms and a sob escapes me.

"Anything, huh," he asks huskily. "I know exactly what I want." He looks over at Kellan as he gets my panties down to my knees and they fall the rest of the way because I'm trying to clamp my legs together. He begins unbuckling his belt and slides his pants and underwear down his legs "I'm going to stand here and fuck your girl and you're going to sit there and watch. I bet she feels so tight and good. Do you want to watch me cum all in what is yours? It doesn't feel good to know someone you care about is at the hands of another, does it? "He begins rubbing his bare erection against my backside and I begin gagging.

Screaming, Kellan fights to break free from the wall, but both men are holding his good arm back. He struggles with his other hand before he rips

his flesh through the knife, hurling his fist into the nearest one's face.

The sight of the blood dripping down Kellan's hand makes me cry even harder, but it's not enough to slow him down. He breaks free of the two guys and charges at Cape. "You son of a bitch! Get your hands off her."

Cape's grip on me releases as he jerks his pants up his hips and attempts to reach for his gun. Kellan tackles him to the ground, punching him in the face while holding him down by the throat. He looks over at me and mouths for me to run.

I shake my head, but he mouths it again. I don't want to leave him. I can't just leave him. Looking around me, I see all of the men keeping a close eye on the fight on the ground. No one knows for sure what to do without Cape barking orders at them.

Hesitating for a moment, I yank my panties up, run for the door and reach for the handle, making my way outside. It only takes a few seconds before I hear footsteps behind me.

The blast of a 38-caliber revolver sends me crashing to my knees, landing in the road, with gravel digging deep into the flesh of my knees.

My hands grip the gritty ground, as if my life depends on it, making my fingers bleed. Who knows, at this point, maybe it does.

Even with my eyes closed, I can feel the world spinning around me, my body threatening to give up and lose what control I have left. Tears stream down my horror-stricken face and a silent scream is threatening to form in my throat. It hurts. It hurts like hell.

That's when I hear it. A bloodcurdling scream that makes my blood run cold. Except, it's not my screaming that is roaring through my ears as I expected.

It's the screaming of a woman. A very angry, hysterical woman.

The only thing I can decipher is, "Call 911. Somebody fucking call 911. There's blood everywhere."

I can hear bodies shuffling nearby, some of them even tripping over me to get away, but I can only process one thought. *He's gone. Please don't let him be gone.*

With force, I am yanked to my feet, a large hand smacking me across the face, causing blood to taste on my tongue.

I try to focus, but my vision is too blurred to make any sense of who has control of my body and at this point, I'm not so sure it even matters.

“This is your fault,” the deep voice growls as I spit blood onto his filthy boots. Narrowing his eyes, he wraps my hair securely around his hand and yanks my head back, hard, while his other hand tightens around my throat, squeezing. “You’re going to pay for this if it’s the last thing I do, you stupid bitch.”

He lets go of my neck and shoves me down to the ground so that my face is pressed into the gravel, his boot crushing into the back of my skull. Dirt and rocks dig into my left eye, making it even harder to see through the tears. I desperately look for the man that hasn’t only crushed then stolen my heart just to crush it again, but has also replaced a part of me that I thought was long ago lost.

Realizing that my search is pointless, I just lay there defeated, feeling half-alive, but mostly dead. “Go ahead,” I whisper. “See if you can hurt me anymore than you already have. I dare you.” My body’s trembling, but I look him dead in the eye anyways. I’m not scared of dying. Not after losing the biggest part of me, my heart. “Losing him will be my last regret.” I shift so that I’m looking at the deep scars that cover his face. They make me sick. He makes me sick. “That and not killing you when I had the chance.”

I close my eyes waiting for his blow, but it doesn’t come. Instead, he is yanked from me and slammed down to the ground, beside me. Scrambling to get away, I crawl backwards with my hands and wipe at my eyes, trying to see what’s going on next to me.

My heart beats wild in my chest and a burst of happiness surges through me when I see it’s Kellan on top of the man, beating the crap out of him. He slams his fist into his face repeatedly while growling out words I can’t understand.

The man seems to look surprised, just lying there taking his beating, without struggle. Kellan grabs him by the hair and puts his face inches from his. “If I ever hear of you coming near my woman or my family again, I will fucking kill you. You will be dead . . . like Cape. My family is everything to me.”

Shoving the guy’s head into the ground, Kellan stands up and walks over to me. He drops to his knees in front of me and cups my face, desperately bringing his lips to mine. “I love you so fuckin’ much. I’m so sorry,” he cries. “I’m sorry for letting them hurt you. I couldn’t let him do that to you. I can’t bear to see another man rubbing his hands on you.” He rubs his bloodied hands over my hair, looking me in the eyes. “I promise if

you can ever forgive me, I will spend the rest of my life making it up to you. I will never leave again and I will make sure no one ever hurts you. I promise, baby I swear I didn't know it was a set up. I would have never left if I had. You have to believe me; I need you to believe me."

I break out in tears, holding onto him as tight as I can. *He's alive.* That's all I can think about. I have no idea what happened in there, but he's alive and in my arms. Just the thought of losing him made me dead inside; completely vacant of all feeling.

He pulls me closer into his arms and we both cry. He's holding me as if he never wants to let go. I never want him to. I want him forever. He's my life; my everything, but . . . I know I'm about to lose him. A man is dead because of him.

"Kellan," I cry into his neck. "I thought you were dead." I wrap my arm tighter around his neck and kiss him as if my life depends on it and it does, trust me it does. "I never want to lose you. I love you more than life. Don't ever scare me again. Do you fucking hear me?" I look into his eyes, taking in his bruised and bloodied face, a sick feeling settling in my stomach. "We have to get you out of here. They're going to come take you to jail. I can't lose you; I won't lose you again. We can run away together; leave the country, whatever it takes to keep us together."

I know I'm being irrational and not thinking, but I can't help it. I won't lose him again. He means everything to me. I stand up and pull him to his feet. I try pulling him away, but he stops me.

He nods his head towards the door of the warehouse as the woman steps out the door and falls to her knees. Leaning in, he grabs my face and presses his lips next to my ear. "I didn't shoot him, Phoenix." He pulls away and looks at the woman crying on the ground. "It was Maxine."

I throw my hands to my face as more tears stream out. I know I should feel relieved, but I'm sad for the woman and very confused. She was here with Cape, not Kellan. I was right when I thought she didn't look as if she wanted to kiss him, but still, why would she shoot her own boyfriend? "I don't understand," I whisper.

"She saved my life. She's the woman I saved from Nate that day at the bar." He pauses and swallows hard. "It was self-defense. She made a decision knowing what the outcome could be. I don't want you to be a part of this though. I have Tyler on his way to pick you up. I called him while I

was looking for you. You're going to leave with him and let us talk to the police.”

I shake my head and grip his arm. “No. I’m not leaving you. I won’t go.” I grab onto him in fear of losing him. “I need to be here. What if someone hurts you?”

He waves his arm around for me to look around us. Maxine is still down on the ground crying and no one else is in sight. They all took off after the gun fire. “I will be okay. I will come home for you. I promise.”

I look into his eyes. “Promise?” I whisper.

He smiles weakly. “I would never lie to you.”

Realizing, I have no choice in the matter, I nod my head and agree. I just hope this isn’t goodbye . . .

Chapter Twenty-Seven Kellan

Three months later . . .

Grabbing her by the hips, I boost her onto the first step of the ladder that leads to our special place and close the distance between our bodies. *Damn, her body still feels good beneath mine.* I want her to always feel safe in my hands. She’s my woman to take care of. We’ve been through a lot together, but each day I love her more than the day before. “Do you think you can handle this?” I whisper into her ear with a smile. “This is much simpler than the things we do in bed.” I lean in closer to her ear. “And far less dangerous.”

Laughing, she reaches back and slaps my arm before looking up the steps to the roof. It’s so dark outside, I’d be surprised if she can even see anything ahead of her, but she keeps staring anyways. “I’m positive I can handle this. If I can handle you in bed,” she smiles, “I can handle anything. I did do this once without you so I’m good with you behind me.” It pains me to hear of the time that I was gone and what it did to her, but it’s done. All I can do is spend the rest of my life making it up to her and that’s what I intend to do.

I press my mouth to her neck and nibble as I push her up the steps, by her ass. She squirms in my arms but doesn’t scream as I bite her. She just maneuvers her hand enough to grab my cock. *Mmm . . . she’s good, but not now.* My dick instantly reacts to her touch, stiffening against my tight

zipper. I take a deep breath and whisper in her ear, “There will be plenty of time for that later. Right now, I just want to see you smile.”

She takes another step, getting closer to the top. My heart races with anticipation the closer we get. “Oh yeah. What is up here that’s going to make me smile?”

“The first spot we had sex,” I answer honestly. “I’m offended I have to remind you. I’ll have to teach you a lesson later.” I love teasing her. “I kind of figured it’s our new special place and since it’s your birthday . . . well . . .”

We reach the top and I give her a quick boost to make sure she’s safe before everyone screams, “Surprise!”

I feel her jump back a bit as she screams, in surprise, but I push her forward as I step onto the roof behind her. Her laugh surrounds me as she takes in the sight before her and my heart swells.

I love this woman with every beat of my heart. She stuck it through with me even after what I put her through. That night, I thought I would lose her forever. Somehow, it only brought us closer. We chose not to speak about what happened with the police after she left with Tyler. Maxine had a lot of dirt on Cape and his men; enough to get her out of any real jail time and put his idiot goons in jail for a long time. We have both moved on from the past and I couldn’t be any happier. That incident will stay in the past forever.

Her hand hovers over her mouth in surprise as she looks around at our closest friends. Jen, Tyler, Zoe, Luna and even Kade decided to join. Kade, I wasn’t too sure about. We have our moments, but it’s far from perfect. We’re not where I’d hoped to be by now, but we’re slowly getting there. We can stand to be in the same room together now and I even catch him laughing at my jokes sometimes. *That hard-ass, always trying to play it off.*

Jen throw her arms around Phoenix and gives her a quick kiss on the cheek. “Happy birthday, love. You look so beautiful tonight.”

I asked her to wear one of her favorite outfits, but nothing too fancy, because I wanted to be sure she’d be comfortable making it up the ladder to the roof. She chose a pink silk low-cut blouse with ruffles and a pair of white skinny jeans. At least, I believe that’s what they’re called. What do I know? I’m a fucking man; a hard man and not a fashion savvy one. I know nothing about fashion, unlike pretty body Kade and I say that with love. The boy has mad style.

Kade walks over and hesitantly wraps his arms around Phoenix and places his face into the crook of her neck, squeezing her. “Happy birthday, gorgeous,” he whispers.

As much as I hate to see them that close, I set my feelings aside for the night and try to make the best of it. This is her night. She’s the fucking queen of my world and she gets whatever she wants tonight. In the end I know her heart is with me and in my bed she will be. Plus, after Kade came clean to her about Adric, she didn’t speak to him for weeks. *Poor Bastard.* That would kill me.

When they pull away from the hug, I lean in and kiss her on the mouth out of instinct. I need to show the world this is the love of my life and I am never giving her up to anyone. Even *if* that someone is still giving me dirty looks, like now.

She kisses me back with a smile. “What is all this? You didn’t have to throw me a party?” She kisses Tyler on the cheek as he gives her a quick hug. Then she turns back to me with a tear in her eye. “This is freakin’ awesome. I love you for doing this.”

Damn her. I almost have to stop myself from crying. She has my heart in the palm of her hand and I’ll let her hold it for as long as she’s willing.

“I love you,” I whisper against her mouth. “Now go enjoy our family and the overflowing buckets chicken.” I place my lips to her ear as she turns away. “Just save some for everyone else.” She slaps me and joins our friends by the food.

Damn! I love it when she’s rough.

There’s a table set up with drinks, food and my personal favorite, cupcakes. There is no party involving Phoenix without cupcakes. *Dammit, now I have to adjust myself from the growing erection in my jeans.*

Cupcakes have changed my life. Soft music is playing from the stereo I brought up earlier. In the corner, is the same blanket we made love on, with Adric’s guitar resting on it exactly as it was that night. What she doesn’t know, is I have a little surprise for her. One that I have been working on for a few weeks now, with the help of Zoe. I’m not very romantic so I have no idea how this will go. I will probably make a fool of myself, but I’d do it over and over for her.

I turn on the white rope lights I set up around the ledge of the building and smile to myself when I notice Phoenix grinning at Jen, Zoe and Luna. Seeing her happy makes me happy. Now she has a little light to chow down

on that chicken leg. I love her more than she loves that damn chicken.
Damn, that's a lot.

"Hey, bro." Tyler comes to stand next to me. "Let me know when to grab the gift and I'll bring it up."

I pat him on the back and give him a hug. I owe so much to this person for helping me out. Tyler is one of the best people I know. I will never forget that. "Thanks, man. You can bring it up in about ten minutes. I'm about to check with Zoe."

I pull Zoe away from the girls and over to a quiet area out of Phoenix's earshot. "Are you ready, tail?"

She laughs and places a hand on my shoulder. "Of course I am. Don't be nervous, big guy. You will do great." She smiles; a real genuine smile and not her usual smart-ass one. She must really know how much this means to me. I love this little girl as if she were my little sister. She has a good heart under all that sass.

Jen notices me and Zoe walk over to the blanket, so she turns off the stereo and guides Phoenix over to sit in front of me as I reach for the guitar. Zoe takes a seat next to me, bouncing with excitement. She takes a second to scowl at Kade from across the roof though. I'm not sure what that's about. They seem to have this love hate relationship that is more hate than love.

Phoenix laughs nervously and looks around as everyone joins us on the blanket. "What is all this?" She looks back at Jen and Luna who are staring at her with huge grins. "Stop looking at me!" She laughs. "I hate all the attention on me."

I swing the strap of the guitar over my neck and set my eyes on hers. "You're the only place my attention has been since I laid eyes on you four months ago. You're my life now; the very air that I breathe," I say seriously, stunning her silent.

Her eyes start watering and she takes on an admiring look as I start strumming away at the guitar, playing one of her all-time favorite songs. *Linger* by The Cranberries.

She watches me with a smile before everyone starts laughing. She used to play this song so much, she wore out the damn disc, driving me and Adric crazy. The other surprise is . . .

"If you, if you could return . . ." Zoe sings the lyrics to the song, silencing everyone's laughter.

The girl's voice is stunning and beautiful. We practiced this song for days straight along with another one of her favorites. The last song though, will be the toughest. My surprise for the one thing she dreams of. The one thing that will melt her heart forever; the ultimate unexpected.

Phoenix transitions to her knees as she reaches for Zoe's hand and squeezes it. She looks back and forth between me and Zoe with tears in her eyes and I know that in this moment, we made her proud. That makes me the happiest man on the planet.

I even see a little something in Kade's eyes as he sits down in the back and stares out into the sky. There's just something peaceful about this night and everyone being together.

Tyler comes creeping up behind Phoenix and sits next to Jen with Phoenix's gift behind his back. She's so into the music that she doesn't even notice. She just keeps her eyes straight ahead, watching us.

I give my guy a head nod as I notice him pull Jen into his lap. Those two aren't fooling anyone. They'll both cave in soon. He whispers something in her ear and they both laugh, forgetting the moment for a second. *Good for you bro. You deserve a good woman.*

Everyone whistles at the end of the first song and Zoe stands up giving a playful bow. I nudge her in the side and she sits back down next to me with a huge smile as I instantly start on the next song we practiced. *Don't Speak* by No Doubt.

Again, Zoe sings the lyrics causing Phoenix to get all teary eyed and zoned in on our performance. Seeing her reaction to this has me so nervous, my fingers are starting to shake. I have no idea if I can pull this next song off. It's way out of my league. I plan to give her gift to her first. Then we'll see if I make a fool of myself.

Phoenix

I can hardly keep the tears from flowing as I watch my baby sister and the love of my life playing my favorite songs from my childhood. Zoe probably has never even heard these songs in her entire life, yet here she is singing them for everyone. The gesture simply amazes me. I had no idea she was this talented.

Her passion reminds me so much of Adric, it's hard to keep my emotions in check. I could just close my eyes and stay like this forever; here

with them, and my closest friends. I'm in complete awe of them both. This is a birthday I'll never forget.

As soon as the song starts dying out, Kellan stands and nods his head at someone behind me. He kisses me on the cheek as he plays the last of the melody. "I have something for you," he whispers. "Close your eyes."

Trying to keep from freaking out with excitement, I close my eyes and wait patiently. My heart is pounding so fast, it almost hurts. He always does this to me. He works me up like no one else in this world has the ability to do.

I feel both of Kellan's hands cup my face before his lips press against mine. He pulls away and a few seconds later he says, "Open your eyes."

I throw a hand over my mouth to hold back the small sob as I look down in front of me to see a guitar almost exactly like his and Adric's; except this one is finished with silver and blue, Adric's favorite colors. Kellan has been teaching me to play guitar lately, but I would have never expected this. *It's amazing.*

Tears blur my vision as I throw my arms around his neck and pull his face to mine. Our eyes meet and my heart melts all over again for this man. Every day feels like the first, even though I have known him for years. "It's the best gift anyone has ever given me. This is so beautiful. Now I really need to step my game up and keep up with you and Zoe."

He kisses me softly and rubs his thumb over my bottom lip. Then he pulls the silver chain with a guitar pick on it from his neck and slides it over my head. It must be the necklace I saw him wearing that day at the park. It's almost exactly like River's.

"This is a necklace Adric gave me about ten years ago when I started practicing guitar with him. I kept losing my picks so he gave it to me as a joke. I want you to have it." He holds the pick between his fingers and rubs it. "You are the best gift anyone has ever given me. I love you with everything in me and I promise on my life and my very last breath, that I will protect you and love you every day for the rest of my life. Not a second has gone by that I haven't pictured you in my arms. To be honest," he starts backing away and messing with his guitar as if he's about to play again, "I can't live without you."

I start following him wondering what he's doing, until I hear it.

Holy shit!

My heart jumps into my throat and my legs shake as Kellan drops down on one knee and starts singing the one song I always said I'd want a man to sing to me before proposing. Having Kellan singing it for me, is the best thing that could ever happen.

Your Guardian Angel by The Red Jumpsuit Apparatus...

His eyes stare into mine the whole time he sings me the song. My heart melts with every note. His voice is smooth as silk and rough at all the right places.

“I can show you I’ll be the one . . .”

I feel a hand on my back, supporting me as I stare down at Kellan with blurry eyes. His love weakens me; brings me to my knees at all the right times. He *is* and always *will* be the best part of me; the one thing I will never let go of. I can’t believe he chose this song. *What is he trying to do to me?*

Letting go of the guitar while still singing the lyrics, he reaches into his pocket and pulls something out. He looks into my eyes and grabs my left hand. We just stare into each other’s eyes until he sings the last note and it turns into humming. I can’t even see through all the tears.

“Phoenix Anne Winters, I love you more than my own life; more than anything this world has to offer me. Just the thought of losing you rips my heart right out of my chest. You will forever be the part of me that keeps me breathing. The reason for my whole existence is to make you happy. Without you, I am nothing but an empty man.” He scoots closer on his knees and pulls me down so we’re both on our knees, face to face.

Oh my god! He isn’t! Is he?

“Marry me, Phoenix. Marry me and I will spend the rest of my life making you happy. Making you happy is what makes me happy. I want you all day and every day. I want you as my wife. No other woman will ever be able to take your place. You are *it* for me.”

Holding my hand up, he slips a beautiful diamond ring onto the tip of my finger, before sliding it all the way on. It’s a large round, yellow diamond that sits perfectly in the center of my finger below the knuckle. The yellow stone is wrapped and nestled in a band of white diamonds that twists outward from each side, enclosing my finger. The setting raises up and around the center diamond, slightly lifting it. It is stunning and by the clarity, expensive. I love that he knows me so well he went with a yellow diamond instead of white. I’ve always been different than the average

person in taste. I look into his eyes and see his are full of tears as well. “Be my wife,” he asks.

Nodding my head, I smile and scream, “Yes!” He pulls us both to our feet and pulls the guitar strap off from around his neck, passing it over to Tyler. I try to look down at the ring as he kisses my hand, but my eyes are so blurry, I can’t see a thing.

I feel Kellan’s lips press against mine before he pulls away and yells, “Fuck yeah! This woman is going to be my wife!” He pulls me back in for a kiss and then we’re broken apart by all of our friends congratulating us and checking out the beauty of Kellan’s promise on my finger.

The feeling is so overwhelming I can’t stop the steady tear flow. The feeling is surreal. Phoenix Haze. I guess some dreams do come true, as cheesy as it sounds.

Tyler slaps Kellan on the back before they give each other a man hug and the girls are all tugging me in different directions.

Through all the hugging and excitement, I notice Kade and Luna off to the side having a little discussion. It looks as if he’s trying to kiss her ear, but she pushes him away and gives him a dirty look. They don’t seem too thrilled with the news. Not that I expect Kade to be.

I’m not sure what’s going on with them two, but ever since I caught them kissing at work and Luna stormed off mad, they’ve been fighting since. Kade is definitely a hard one to tame. I have a feeling Luna is as well.

Zoning back into the celebration, I pull away from the girls and walk over to stand behind my future husband. I wrap my arms around his waist and he turns around, wrapping his arms around me. His touch still gets me weak in the knees. “I love you. Tonight was beautiful. It’s everything I could have ever asked for. Thank you, Kellan.”

He pulls me away from our friends and over to the ledge, looking over to Norman’s house. Sometimes, I still find Kellan watching the house as if he expects the old man to come back. He was pretty torn up when I told him the story. It still eats at me too; although, I’m happy he finally found peace.

Looking me in the eyes, he grabs my hips and pulls me against his front side, brushing his lips against mine. “Are you sure you’re ready to spend the rest of your life with me? You do realize I’m far from perfect, right? I’m nobody’s hero.”

Staring at my future, I tell him the honest truth. The one thing I’ve believed since I was fourteen. “You don’t need to be anyone else’s hero.” I

step up on the tip of my toes and press my lips to his, tugging on his lip ring. "Just mine. Always."

"I'm anything you want me to be . . ."

With my friend's at my side and the love of my life staring me in the face, I realize there is nothing more important to me in this world than being a part of it.

Something I let myself miss out on in the past, after I lost Adric. I still miss him every day, but Kellan and I sit around more often telling stories of the past. It has helped me to cope a lot more than I could have ever imagined. We even go to the woods sometimes, along with Zoe to show her one of Adric's favorite places. It's now one of hers as well.

Plus, it feels good letting Zoe in on her brother's life so she can see just how beautiful he was. It's a feeling I can't explain.

My future is now at Kellan's house, making a home with him. It's the best thing that has ever happened to me. He's perfect to me.

My mom has taken over the apartment, slowed down on her drinking and has taken a job as an accountant at one of the local firms. Zoe is staying with me at Kellan's place, until my mom can get a bigger place. It works out great for us. Zoe and Kellan work together twice a week with her reading and writing skills and I haven't seen her closer with anyone else besides myself. They have a bond that even I can't break up.

Even though Kade is still a little distant with Kellan and still throwing his flirting at me, things are finally falling back into place. Kade even admitted to taking money from the drawer, saying he had no other option at the time and paid every last cent back. After his confession of that, and of dealing to my brother, I couldn't look at him for weeks. It broke my damn heart to hear the truth. *The truth hurts.* I've had to fight hard to be strong and move on. He deserves a second chance though. He didn't know the damage it would cause at the time and that's something I need to understand. It will take a lot, but we will get back to good someday. I just hope that *they* can.

Who knows, I might even see something in the future for Jen and Tyler. I can only hope they can find the same love I have found in Kellan. Things are perfect.

Well, perfect enough for me at least . . . and that's all I could ever hope for.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Victoria Ashley grew up in Rockford, IL and has had a passion for reading for as long as she can remember. After finding a reading app where

it allowed readers to upload their own stories, she gave it a shot and writing became her passion.

She lives for a good romance book with tattooed bad boys that are just highly misunderstood and is not afraid to be caught crying during a good read. When she's not reading or writing about bad boys, you can find her watching her favorites shows such as Sons Of Anarchy, Dexter and True Blood.

She is the author of Wake Up Call and This Regret and is currently working on more works for 2014.

Contact her at: Victoria Ashley-Author on Facebook or Victoria Ashley on Goodreads.com

AUTHORS TO LOOK OUT FOR

Here is a list of a few authors who have really inspired me. I really love their work. Please look out for their work and their future works.

Charisse Reid: Accepted Fate, now available. Also look for Twisting Fate of the Fate series coming in late 2014

Alyssa Rae Taylor: Raising Ryann, now available. Also look for Resisting Ryann of the Bad Boy Reformed series coming soon

Penelope Ward: Gemini and Jake Undone, now available. Also look for My Skylar of the Gemini series coming soon

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