

mona kasten



begin again

a novel



new town. new start. new life.

Contents

About the Book
About the Author
Title
Copyright
Dedication
Begin Again Playlist
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26

Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Epilogue
A Chat with Mona

About the Book

He makes the rules. She breaks them all.

A new start. It's the only thing keeping Allie Harper going, when she packs up her life and moves across the country to Woodhill, Oregon. She's about to start college, desperate to leave the ghosts of her past behind her. Even if that means never talking to her parents again.

Now the hard part—finding an apartment before classes start. Just when it seems she'll have to live out of her car, Allie visits one more place. It's beautiful. With one exception: can she stand being roommates with campus bad boy Kaden White? Sure, Kaden is sexy with his tattoos and careless attitude, but he's also an arrogant jerk. With nowhere else to go, Allie moves in.

The first thing Kaden does is make a set of rules. Either Allie obeys, or she's out:

1. Don't talk about your girl problems.
2. Keep your mouth shut if I bring someone home.
3. We will *NEVER* hook up.

Easy enough, thinks Allie. Who would want to get involved with a brute like Kaden? But the more she gets to know him, the more she sees beyond his gruff façade. He, too, is harboring some painful secrets. For Kaden and Allie, it gets harder and harder to ignore the sparks between them. And the lines between the rules start to blur ...

About the Author

Mona Kasten was born in Germany in 1992. Before devoting herself to writing, she studied Library and Information Science. She lives with her husband, cats, and countless books in northern Germany. She loves all forms of caffeine and taking long walks in the woods. Her favorite days are the ones when she can block out the world and just write. Mona loves to interact with her readers on Twitter @MonaKasten. Her website (in German) is www.monakasten.de

MONA KASTEN

begin again

*Translated from the German by
Toby Axelrod*



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For Christian, my biggest supporter

begin again playlist

Brain – Banks
Waiting Game – Banks
Feel Real – Deptford Goth
Meet you There – Busted
Can't break Thru – Busted
Strong – One Direction
Right Now – One Direction
Ocean Avenue – Yellowcard
Breathing – Yellowcard
Irresistible – Fall Out Boy
The Kids Aren't Alright – Fall Out Boy
Fourth of July – Fall Out Boy
I Wish you Would – Taylor Swift
New Romantics – Taylor Swift
Red – Taylor Swift
Fearless – Taylor Swift
A Beautiful Lie – Thirty Seconds to Mars
Attack – Thirty Seconds to Mars
Jealous – Nick Jonas
Where are Ü Now – Jack Ü, Skrillex, Diplo, Justin Bieber

Chapter 1

White.

I stared at the nameplate by the doorbell. Tilting my head, I lifted my finger, then hesitated. I clenched my hand into a fist. The drama of the last few days rushed through my head all over again.

Weeks of fighting with my parents. One thousand seven hundred miles. A twenty-four-hour drive. It was all behind me now. I'd arrived in Woodshill two nights ago, crashing in a run-down hostel. For the first few hours I'd fought the urge to turn back. But now things were clear.

Because I'd made it. *I was here.*

Actually, things hadn't exactly started out as expected. Of course I'd had a glimpse of my new home from a distance; it was like I already knew the mountains of Oregon, the endless forests, and even the university campus, thanks to the Internet. Yesterday was freshman orientation on campus, and then I went to check out some apartments I'd found online. It turned out to be a waste of time, because they were all complete dumps. But I didn't care. I had arrived in Oregon.

Freedom.

It was the only thing that had kept me going these past few months. Now I could start my own life, do things the way I wanted. The past nineteen years had been so damned suffocating.

To my parents, appearances were everything. My hair was colored to fade into the perfect golden ombré, and I wore only the best labels. Chanel. Hermès. Saint Laurent. I could flash a charming smile practically at the touch of a button. I had to be perfect little daughter—or at least look the part. So that's why my first act as a college student had been to hit up the nearest beauty salon for a drastic cut and color. No more long, blonde tresses: Now my cheeks were framed with unruly brown fringes. For the first time in years, I kept my own natural wave. Mom wouldn't have approved.

Every time my short-cropped hair tickled my cheeks, it reminded me that I was finally allowed to be me. It was my first step toward freedom, and even if it seems silly, I felt like an entirely new person.

Unfortunately even my new style hadn't helped much with the apartment search. Unlike most incoming freshmen, I hadn't applied for a place in the dorms—I wanted to be out on my own.

But the clock was ticking. Only a handful of apartments were still available, and I could write them all off as total disasters.

At the first one, my potential roommate was more interested in my bra size than in my bad habits. Gross. Just the thought of that pervert gives me the creeps. Then there was the young mother who not only wanted a roommate but also a live-in babysitter. Not much better. At apartment number six, I met a couple who were practically going at it during my visit—and asked me to join in. All the other places were either trashed or contaminated with mold. Somehow, I'd thought finding a place would be easier.

Which is probably why I couldn't bring myself to ring the last doorbell of the day. The letters on the nameplate were illuminated from behind, and burned into my retinas.

White.

This was it. There weren't any other available apartments near campus. If I couldn't move in here next week, I'd be out on the street. Everything else seemed to be booked out for the start of the school year.

I needed this place. I didn't even care that I'd be rooming with a guy, because if I didn't get this place, I'd have to find a park bench for the start of the semester, or make a cozy little home in my car. Whatever happened, no way was I going back to Lincoln, Nebraska. Never. I was starting over here, whatever the cost. And if I had to spend a few nights in the open air, so be it. Anything but Nebraska.

I pressed the doorbell and waited, inhaling the warm evening air. I hardly noticed the pressure rising in my chest.

One, two, three ...

Inhale. Exhale. Breathe. I counted to myself and squeezed my eyes shut.

Finally the buzzer sounded to let me in. I took another breath before pushing the door open.

Mr. White—I didn't know his first name at that point—had mentioned in his email that the apartment was on the second floor, left. As I set foot on the stairs, I heard a door open upstairs and then the sound of muffled voices.

"You've got my number," a female voice purred.

Someone cleared his throat. "You know that I ... "

"Nothing serious, I get it. You made that perfectly clear."

Followed by a slurpy sound. *Were they making out in the hallway?* I listened more closely. Before I knew it, footsteps from above were approaching me on the stairway.

A light breeze wafted over me, and I looked up: She passed me on the stairs, the girl who'd left the apartment that I was about to enter. She didn't seem to see me as she floated down the stairs with a blissful, dreamy smile. Considering her reddened cheeks and tousled hair, I could imagine what she'd just been up to.

Oh man.

Frowning, I climbed the last few steps. Mr. White was nowhere to be seen. I walked down the corridor and looked to either side. On my left, a door stood open a crack. That had to be it.

I pushed the door in and hesitated at the threshold.

The hallway was neat, and I could see a few jackets hanging on the wall. Various sneakers, a few work boots, and hiking boots were lined up in a tidy row. Appreciatively, I raised my eyebrows: The shoe collection revealed eclectic interests. I took the plunge, crossing the threshold, and entered the narrow hallway.

"Sorry, dude!" A muted voice bellowed from the room that opened directly onto the hallway. "I've been trying forever to get her out of here without looking like an ass. But some people can't take a hint."

Wow. He sounded like a winner.

The voice got louder. "I know this apartment showing was planned last-minute, but glad it still worked out."

I heard his footsteps as he approached.

"If you've got a girl, too, that's fine. At least as long as—"

Mr. White appeared in the doorway. And it wasn't only his mouth that dropped open.

I gasped, too.

The first thing I noticed was his torso. His naked, taut belly rippling with muscles. Then his tattoos. I tilted my head and looked at the designs inked onto his tanned skin.

Holy mother of God.

He cleared his throat and shook me out of my trance.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

I stared at him open-mouthed. He wasn't much older than I was, maybe a year or two. He had warm, caramel-colored eyes, stubbly cheeks, and brown

hair that was longer on the top and shorter on the sides.

Finally my voice came back. “We had an appointment. I’m here to see the apartment. We emailed,” my words gushed out too fast.

Mr. White cocked his head and glared at me. “A. Harper ... ” he muttered. And then something seemed to click in his head. “Why the hell didn’t you sign your email with your first name? I assumed you were a guy.”

I didn’t feel like explaining to him that I was still getting used to my new identity, hence just the initial. He let his eyes wander over my entire body for a second time; his features darkened, and he shook his head slowly. “No.”

No? I was about to retort when he repeated: “No.”

“What do you mean, ‘no’?” I folded my arms in front of my chest. “I can pull up the email on my phone if you need proof.”

“It must have been a misunderstanding. You’re definitely not moving in here,” he said and turned away. Then he disappeared into who knows where. All I knew was that I hadn’t even seen the damned apartment. “Let yourself out,” he called back over his shoulder.

My mouth dropped open again.

The guy had actually left me standing alone in the hallway without even giving me a chance. Not even one word of my prepared speech. The last forty-eight hours had been filled with so much crap, but this ... this pushed me over the edge.

I blew a fuse and stomped after Mr. White.

“Hey!” I yelled, marching into what looked like a well-lit, cozy living room. The jerk stopped mid-stride and turned to face me, his eyebrows knit in anger as I shouted, “You can’t just throw me out without even showing me the place!”

Something like shock flashed through his warm, brown eyes; it didn’t fit with his cold aura. “See if I can’t.” Now he crossed his arms.

“Well, you can’t. We emailed, dammit! You invited me to check out the apartment, so I should at least be able to see the room and have the chance to convince you that I’d be a good roommate.” I tried not to snarl.

“Like I said, there’s been a misunderstanding. I thought you were a dude. But you’re definitely not.” He gave me another dismissive once-over. “I’m looking for a male roommate. Not a *female*.” He practically spat out the word.

By now, my rage was about to boil over. The other apartment viewings had been bad, but this one took the cake.

“Do you have any idea what I’ve been through the last two days?” I spat, and my pulse skyrocketed. “In one place, a guy was sitting in his kitchen in his underwear—his UNDERWEAR—and asked me my bra size. In three apartments, I was told that sexual favors were part of the rent; in another I was told I’d have to be the nanny; and twice I could barely keep my potential roommates from going at it right in front of me!” By now I was almost yelling, but it didn’t occur to me to lower my voice. The avalanche was flowing full-force at this point. “I saw rooms with walls covered in black mold. I was in apartments so crammed with trash that you couldn’t even see the floor. Sometimes I couldn’t even tell if I was standing on a carpet or a pile of flattened pizza boxes. I was in apartments that smelled so much like pot that I could have gotten high just from breathing the air.” I took another step toward him and drew back my shoulders. “Things have gotten off to a shitty start for me in Woodshill, *dude*. So don’t tell me to just disappear. I want to see the damned room!”

The mistrust on his face had faded into general indifference, as if I were using up his precious time.

“And this is exactly why I don’t want a woman in here,” he said calmly. “I don’t need the endless whining and girly emotional stuff.”

Now adrenaline propelled me with such force that my shoulders shook. Maybe it hadn’t been a good idea to dump my problems on this guy. But sometimes I just couldn’t stop until I got it all out.

“Are you done, or do I have to take any more of this? If the answer is yes, then I’d like to dress for the occasion,” he continued in a flat voice. His indifference only spurred me on.

“Fine,” I hissed, turning my back. Walking out, I could hear a phone ringing: the ringtone was a song by the group Fall Out Boy. Wow, the jerk actually had good taste in music.

Tears burned in my eyes as I faced the door. I didn’t want to go back to Lincoln, back to a life that was so fake and scripted.

My entire personality had been a façade that my mother had manipulated according to her wishes. I’d only realized it about three years ago—when I learned just how far she was willing to go. That day my trust in her was shattered into a thousand pieces. I’d thought my mom would always protect me. But instead she’d just heaped more and more lies on me, until I could barely stand under their weight. After that, nothing was ever the same.

I swallowed hard and tried to banish the negative thoughts.

By now my hands were shaking with frustration. I overheard the jerk's muffled voice as he chatted with someone on the phone. A few second later he cursed loudly.

Again I heard his naked feet flapping on the floor, as he came to the hallway.

"Hey," his voice rang out behind me. I turned to face him.

"What?" I barked, glaring at him.

He had put on a tight navy blue shirt that stretched over his torso. Folding his arms over his chest, he frowned at me. "My other potential roommate just jumped ship," he said, showing me the smartphone in his hand.

"And?" I said, unconcerned, digging into my bag for my car key.

He sighed and tapped his foot so long on the floor that I had no choice but to lift my eyes.

"There will be rules," he started after a moment's hesitation, narrowing his eyes.

"Rules? For what, if I may ask?" I couldn't take any more of this. I was ready to go back to the hostel and immerse myself in self-pity until I had recovered enough to look for new ads. I could really do without the drivel of unfriendly shithheads.

"For you. If you want the room, there will be rules you have to stick to." He moved his arm in a way that looked like an invitation, and turned back toward the living room. As if I would follow, just like that.

"I don't want your fucking room!" I shouted after him.

He poked his head out the door again and drew his hand through his hair. "Listen, I need the money, and I'm sick of showing the place. People keep bailing on me."

"I wonder why." I retorted.

He ignored me. "And you need somewhere to stay. So stop complaining and check out the room."

I opened my mouth to reply but the jerk was already in the living room, not bothering to wait for my response.

What I really wanted was to storm out and slam the door in his face. But instead I paused.

To be honest, this hallway alone was nicer than all the apartments I'd seen—and I'd prefer to begin the semester here than on a park bench. It couldn't hurt to take a look.

“All right.” I stepped into the living room. Now that I’d calmed down, I could see how nicely things were arranged.

“You already know the living room; back there is the kitchen. Here’s the bathroom,” continued the jerk, leading me through the living room. He gestured toward a half-opened door, and I caught a glimpse of pale blue tiles and a large bathtub before we came to one last door.

“This is it. Not too big, but still better than a dorm room.”

He turned the doorknob.

I held my breath and walked in.

The room was tiny. Just big enough for the essentials. But the cream-colored walls and the window that let in the last rays of daylight made up for it. Clearly no one lived here anymore—it was empty except for a desk, a white swivel chair, a small bookshelf, and a bed.

“Don’t worry, Ethan will pick up his bed,” said the jerk with a nod toward the item in question. “You can keep the desk and shelves, if you want.”

I nodded, tearing my eyes away from the bed. The floor of this room, too, was a rich hardwood. My eyes darted to examine every corner to see if there was even the slightest hint of dampness or mold. Everything seemed okay.

I’d be able to study over there. And after the bed was gone, I would get a sofa bed, to save space. I could already imagine the beautiful spread that I would cover it with. And string lights! This room had to have string lights!

Mom had always hated them; she thought they looked cheap.

Oh yes, here I would have string lights! And I would fill the entire room with things that I’d never been allowed to have, because they didn’t meet Mom’s high standards.

Just like this guy would hardly meet her standards—the thought bolted through my mind. She’d probably have a heart attack at first sight. Or throw up. The thought almost made me laugh.

“I’ll take it,” I said. I turned to him and hesitated for a moment, noting his pensive expression.

“You don’t know the rules yet,” he warned me, an amused sparkle in his eyes.

“Shoot,” I said and turned around again. I hadn’t felt this way in any of the other rooms I’d viewed.

Instinctively, I knew I belonged here. Whatever the rules.

Mr. No-way-will-I-live-with-a-female walked slowly toward the desk. He leaned back against it, his arms still crossed in front of him. His pose didn't seem offensive anymore—actually the opposite.

“First of all,” he raised a finger, “don't bother me with your girl stuff. I don't give a shit about your private life. So don't impose your company on me. We won't have any ‘girl's nights’ in my living room. I pick the TV channel, and you don't come crying to me about your problems.”

“I can live with that,” I replied coolly.

“Second,” he continued unmoved, “keep your mouth shut if I hook up with someone. I don't need anyone telling me what to do in my own home.”

“I don't give a shit who you're with,” I shot back, but looked toward the door a bit concerned. True, his room was on the opposite end of the apartment, but who knew how loud he could get? I frowned. Hopefully I wouldn't notice if he was getting it on with someone.

“And finally ... ” He pushed away from the desk and leaned in toward me. He was a few inches taller, and I had to narrow my own eyes to return the scowling look in his caramel-colored eyes. “I don't care how good your legs look in those shorts.”

My cheeks suddenly were burning, but I didn't blink. Two could play at this game.

“There's no way you and I will end up in the sack,” His dark voice swept over me, and his breath tickled my temples. “So don't get your hopes up.”

I felt a tingling sensation in my stomach, and it had nothing to do with hunger. He smelled good—a mixture of spice and mint.

Distracted by his sudden closeness, it took me a few seconds to process what he'd just said.

“I'm sorry if it hurts your ego,” I gathered myself and retorted, “but I got over my need for ‘bad boys’ years ago.” Which was the truth. I had no plans to get into a relationship any time soon, especially with a jerk like him.

He hadn't been counting on that. Surprise flickered in his eyes; he rubbed his face and stepped back.

“In that case, welcome to Casa de White.” He held out his hand. “I'm Kaden.”

For a second it didn't register. Then I opened my eyes wide and hopped in excitement. “Does that mean I can move in?”

Kaden winced. “You're already breaking rule number one.”

I stopped my bouncing and turned down the volume. “Sorry. I’m Allie.” My new name was getting easier and easier to say. *Allie*. Probably because that’s how I’d been introducing myself at all the apartment viewings.

I went for it: Kaden’s hand was warm and rough. I wasn’t prepared for the bolt of lightning that the handshake triggered. It struck me right in the chest.

And I certainly wasn’t ready for the tingling sensation that sparked when Kaden started drawing soft circles with his thumb on my back of my hand. I tore my hand from his grip and shot him an angry look. “What the hell was that?”

“I just wanted to see if you understood rule number three.” Grinning smugly, he dug both hands into the pockets of his pants.

The guy was hot, but not all that. His so-called rules were a joke.

“So, when can I move in?”

Kaden shrugged and turned toward the door. “As soon as you pay the rent and the deposit, the room’s yours.”

I didn’t do my dance of joy until he’d left the room.

Chapter 2

“They. Look. So. Good!” Dawn’s round eyes opened even wider when she saw the star-shaped string of lights in our shopping cart. By now we’d reached the aisle with bedspreads and throws, but I turned up my nose at all the bright flower patterns attacking me from all sides. I brushed my hand over the colorful fabric and turned toward my new friend.

I’d met Dawn at the intro lectures. We’d both gotten there way too early and started chatting while we waited—a stroke of luck, as far as I was concerned. There was no other explanation. Dawn was new here, like me. But she hadn’t moved to get away from her family. In her case, it was an ex-boyfriend. They’d been together six years when he cheated on her. She’d needed to get away, too. Now here we were together at Target to snag stuff for our rooms. The hour-long drive to Portland did us both some good. Besides, it was a way to get to know the area around Woodshill a bit better.

“Take one with flowers,” she said as she disappeared into the next aisle. “Or the pink one!”

At the end of the row I found a crocheted, cream-colored throw with fringes—a perfect match with the pale blue curtains already in my cart.

“How do you like this one?” I called out, holding up the throw for her to see. Dawn came back around the corner, carrying a reading lamp with a rose-colored lampshade.

“Bingo!”

Kaden would lose his shit if I came home with something like that. But then it wasn’t any of his business how I set up my room.

I’d had to spend the entire past week in the hostel before Kaden could finally give me a key. Turned out the previous tenant had needed more time than he thought to pick up his bed. But today was the day: I was moving into my new room. Kaden still seemed a bit wary when he handed me the key this morning. As if he already regretted his decision. But that was his problem, not mine.

Right after that, Dawn and I set out to shop for my first-ever furniture. I’d saved up some money in high school; I always socked away any cash I’d gotten from tutoring or as birthday gifts from relatives. My little stash would

easily cover the cost of everything in my shopping cart. I also had a savings account that Mom had set up, but I only dipped into that in emergencies ... or to pay for essentials—like tuition. After all, it wasn't for nothing that she'd paid into the account for the last few years. It made me sick to think about why she'd given me the money at all. She honestly believed I could be bribed, and that money would make me forget what had happened. She had another thing coming. But even if I couldn't be bought, I could still exact a kind of revenge by using some of Mom's money.

I took a deep breath and pushed the dark thoughts to the back of my mind. Back to shopping.

"Do you need another table?" asked Dawn as we wheeled our shopping cart down the next aisle.

"No, the guy who had the room before me left his desk and shelves there. Kaden said if I don't like the stuff I can get rid of it myself." I rolled my eyes. "Thank goodness he picked up the bed. It looked disgusting."

Dawn raised an eyebrow. "That guy sounds lovely."

"That's not necessarily the first word I'd choose," I replied.

Oh man. Hopefully things would work out okay. I didn't want to give up my room any time soon. The endless search for a place to stay had left me mildly traumatized.

I'd be the perfect tenant. At least, that was my plan.

Kaden wouldn't find any excuse to throw me out.

"I wish I hadn't gotten a place in the dorm," Dawn sighed. "Then we could have rented something together."

"Yeah, that's too bad," I agreed and pushed the cart onward. By now it was nearly full.

"My roommate is a bitch," Dawn continued. "I've only been there two weeks, and she's already brought three different guys over. With each one she brings back, she kicks me out! I've thought about just not leaving, out of protest. But that's also gross—would you want to have to watch your roommate having sex?"

For a second I winced and shook the image of Kaden's naked skin, glistening with sweat, from my mind. "No. I wouldn't want that. Though with us it's a bit different," I added.

Maybe my hesitation was too obvious. Dawn glanced at me searchingly, then a grin spread across her face, deepening the dimples in her cheeks.

"Oh yeah? A bit different?" She egged me on, wiggling her eyebrows.

I responded in kind, raising an eyebrow. “Yup. Because I don’t live in the same room with him and don’t have to get up close and personal.”

In a flash Dawn grabbed one of the pillows from the cart and started beating me with it. I dodged the blows, laughing.

“It’s not funny!” She dropped the pillow back into the cart and buried her face in her hands, groaning. “Really not. She doesn’t seem to have any problems finding new guys to hook up with. I mean, we’re in Woodshill! Who would’ve thought that there were so many hotties running around in a small town?”

I had to agree with her. Right now, at the beginning of the semester, there was a cute guy our age on every street corner—one of the advantages of a university town. Hotties as far as the eye could see.

“How about this,” I suggested, hanging my arm over Dawn’s shoulders.

She peeked through her fingers; her hazelnut-brown eyes twinkled. “I’m listening.”

“Just come over to my place if you have problems with your roommate. It’s probably not the optimal solution—you know the rules my roommate set,” I said, making a face, and Dawn snorted with contempt. I’d told her all about my visit, and of course I didn’t spare any details. She found Kaden’s rules just as stupid as I did. “But we can hole up in my room. At least until the storm has passed.”

By now we’d arrived in the department for candles and picture frames. Without thinking I reached for two huge candles that wafted vanilla and coconut. Another thing we’d never had back home. My Mom thought they smelled cheap. But I found the scent heavenly and was already looking forward to the cozy haven that I would create in my room.

“You’re too good, Allie Harper,” Dawn said. She slapped my shoulder and looked me in the eyes. “Thanks.”

I flushed and looked away. No one had ever said anything like that to me. I’ve always been just the super-bitch. The nasty rich girl from next door. The slut. So I didn’t know how to deal with kind words.

Dawn frowned. She seemed to sense my discomfort and changed the subject. “Wanna check out the things up there? They look nice,” she said, pointing to a high shelf with white, ornately designed picture frames. Standing on tiptoes, I managed reach the top shelf.

“Those are cute,” I said, my mind still elsewhere. “But I don’t have any pictures to put in it.”

It had slipped out. Even I could hear how pathetic it sounded. God, hopefully Dawn wouldn't write me off now as a total loser. After all, it'd been my decision to leave everything behind. The pain I carried inside was heavy enough; I certainly didn't need photos to remind me of my old life.

"What a bunch of crap. Then we'll make one ourselves," Dawn said, grabbing her phone. She stood in front of me so I had to look over her shoulder, and aimed the camera at us.

"Here? Now?" My voice was an octave higher than usual. People walked past, and I felt their eyes on us.

"Yeah, why not?" Dawn replied unconcerned, and smiled broadly at the camera. "And now: Say sexyyy!"

I grinned uncomfortably. My green-gray eyes looked gloomy on the phone screen.

"Screw them!" Dawn jabbed her elbow into my ribs, as other customers stared our way. "Now, say it out loud so everyone in the store can hear it: sexyyy! Come on, Allie!"

It seemed I had no choice. Shaking my head, I grinned and shouted: "SEXYYY!"

And this time the smile was real.

The picture frame was the first decoration that I placed in the room. On the way back, we'd stopped at CVS to print out the photo, and now Dawn and I were smiling down from the windowsill in my room.

Dawn had done the same: Our Target selfie would hang in her room, too. It felt like today we'd laid the foundation for a wonderful friendship.

Dawn made me feel like there really was such a thing. Friendship for its own sake, and not for the sake of getting something from the other person. Without pressure to always do better than the other.

I was proud of us. We'd bought shelves and a big dresser, which fit perfectly behind the door. Since I'd forgotten to measure the room, it was pure luck. We'd already finished assembling the dresser and the second set of white shelves. Now all I needed was to assemble the sofa bed, which looked more complicated. There seemed to be some holes missing underneath, and some of the components didn't fit in the pullout bedframe. One was longer than the other, which must've been a defect. I should have returned it right away, but I didn't feel like dragging the thing down two stories and driving

all the way back to Portland. On top of that, neither Dawn nor I had tools, and without a drill we'd never be able to finish it.

Frustrated, I sank to the floor.

"I'm probably going to have to sleep on this," I moped, pulling the rolled-up rug to my lap and stroking its soft, bright fake-fur as if it were a pet. Preferably a cat.

"Stop it! We'll figure this one out," she growled, kind of reminding me of a Chihuahua. I had to giggle.

Just then I heard the apartment door slam and muffled voices drifting toward us from the hallway. *Oh great*, the jerk was home.

Dawn's eyes opened wide. "Should we ask him if he has a drill?" She'd sat up so quickly that she now looked like a meerkat. I giggled again.

"You just want to check him out."

"And what if I do?" she admitted and practically floated to her feet. She brushed off her shirt, which was covered with wood shavings, and reached back to check her hair, which was twisted into a messy bun. "How do I look?" she asked, giving a little spin.

"I think we both look like we need a shower," I replied, standing up, as well.

We moved to the door and listened for a second. The other voice was also a man's. So Kaden wasn't about to get things on with some woman.

"Do you think it's a violation of the rules to ask him for a drill?" I whispered, as if they could have heard us.

"Jeez! Don't let that douche intimidate you like that," Dawn retorted, stepping back from the door.

I tugged at the hem of my shirt and mulled it over: Of course I didn't want to be intimidated, but this room was important to me. I didn't want to get on Kaden's nerves—especially not on my first day as his roommate.

But before I could give it another moment's thought, Dawn opened the door and burst into the living room.

"Dawn!" I hissed and hurried after her.

Kaden was in the kitchen grabbing a beer from the fridge. Even from the back—or maybe particularly from the back—he was a knockout. He wore midnight-blue jeans that hugged his butt and a close-fitting dark green shirt that stretched over his shoulders and drew my gaze toward his muscular back. Next to Kaden, leaning against the kitchen counter, stood a black-haired

guy. He was tall and kind of lanky. His plaid shirt was loose, its sleeves rolled up to the elbows.

“Hey, you must be that weird roommate!” Dawn stopped in front of the dark-haired guy, who turned toward her in surprise. His inquiring look was remarkably friendly, unlike Kaden’s. “First of all I wanted to tell you that I think your rules are a bunch of crap. I mean, look at you and then look at her.” Dawn gestured toward me—and at that moment I wanted to sink into the floor. Or just disappear altogether. Definitely one of the two. “And I don’t think she has any desire to get it on with you. Besides, it’s awful that you have such a clichéd image of women, painting us all with one brush! How would you even know how we spend our free time? I mean, we could be into wrestling and pro football for all you know.”

Kaden closed the refrigerator door and turned around slowly. He eyed Dawn with a raised eyebrow and watched, bemused, as she berated his friend. It almost looked as if he was smiling.

But not quite.

I slipped behind Dawn and put my hands on her shoulders. Leaning forward, I whispered: “That’s not him.”

She stiffened. “What do you mean, that’s not him?”

I nodded in Kaden’s direction. “This is Kaden, my roommate. Kaden, this is my friend Dawn.”

By now, the other guy was grinning broadly. Deep dimples appeared on his cheeks. He turned to Kaden. “Dude, is it possible that you could have been mean to these ladies?”

Kaden shrugged his shoulders and popped the cap off a beer. He shoved it across the kitchen counter to his friend and opened another, which he lifted to his lips. Then he wiped his hand across his mouth and looked me up and down. He frowned and turned, heading for the couch. He didn’t even look at Dawn. *Oh, great.*

Otherwise inclined, his friend reached out to shake hands with Dawn and then with me. “I’m Spencer,” he said. “Nice to meet you.”

“Hi,” I replied. “I’m Allie.”

“Heard about you,” he said, glancing briefly in Kaden’s direction. He gave his head a little shake, and his grin widened even more. “And you’re Dawn, the wrestling fan and pro football player.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to make a bad impression.” Her voice had gone almost meek, and I couldn’t help laughing.

“Oh, you didn’t. Trust me.” Spencer winked, and for the first time I noticed his brilliant blue eyes. Black hair, blue eyes. What a mix.

While those two were talking, I remembered the real reason why we’d ventured out of my room. If I wanted to have a good night’s sleep, I needed to set up my sofa bed.

“Hey,” I said, lightly kicking the couch behind my roomie. Kaden looked over his shoulder at me, frowning. “Do you happen to have a drill?”

“What do you want a drill for?” he asked, curious but still scowling.

I wanted to say “none of your business,” but changed my mind at the last second. After all, I needed a favor from him. “Somehow, there aren’t enough holes in the wooden frame of my sofa bed,” I said, putting on the friendliest tone I could muster. “I have to drill some new holes.”

Kaden nodded briefly and turned away. “I don’t have a drill.”

It took a second before I understood what he’d said. “So why were you asking why I needed one?”

“I just wanted to know if you really need one, or if you’re just too dumb to read the instructions,” he said, shrugging. Then he picked up the remote from the coffee table and switched on the TV.

I felt a flood of insults rising but dammed them up. “So you mean, you have a drill but don’t want to lend it to me?”

He didn’t even bother looking up from the TV. “You got it.”

Dawn and Spencer had stopped talking and were staring at me.

“Don’t be an ass, bro,” Spencer said finally.

“Yeah. Don’t be an ass, *bro*,” agreed Dawn. Normally, I would have laughed. But I was practically boiling over with anger. One look at Kaden’s clenched lips told me that he, too, found the situation anything but funny.

He gave me another one of those unbearably mistrustful looks. “You’re on thin ice,” he muttered and rose so suddenly that I drew back and banged my calves on the coffee table. My eyes opened wide as I began to stumble; I flailed my arms wildly to keep my balance. But Kaden had already grabbed me under the arms.

I felt his chest against mine, felt his heart beating.

He blinked and the moment was gone.

Just as suddenly, he let go of me and stormed out of the living room.

I managed to catch my breath, hoping Dawn and Spencer hadn’t noticed. When I turned toward them, they were both looking in the direction of a loud clatter in the hallway.

Kaden appeared at the door. "Here," he barked, holding up a dark green tool case. "Give it back the way you got it, or else."

"You could just give us a hand for a second, instead of being such an asshole," suggested Dawn with a sweet smile. She could be a little devil if she wanted to.

I liked this side of her, but damn, if she didn't start being nicer to Kaden, I'd have to strangle her. I hated his rude attitude as much as she did, and wished I could've tossed one nasty retort at him after the next. He'd have to be given a reality check one of these days. But however unbearable I found him, I still had to spend the coming months in close proximity with him. So I preferred not to get him riled up if I didn't have to.

"I can do it myself," I insisted and moved to take the tool case off Kaden's hands.

"I'll help," Spencer said, leaping to his feet. "Where's the offending item?"

I ignored Kaden's angry glare and followed Spencer to my room. At least *someone* was willing to help. The door was open, but before he entered, he cast a questioning glance over his shoulder. I nodded.

"Oh wow! Things have changed since Ethan moved out."

Spencer took in the perfumed candles and strand of lights, glanced behind the door and noticed the chest of drawers and shelves, on which I'd already placed some of my things.

"It smells like someone ate tons of vanilla ice cream and then threw up in the middle of the room." Kaden was right behind me.

I turned.

His nose wrinkled in disgust, Kaden surveyed the room, then pushed past me and squatted in front of the sofa bed sections.

"Some holes are missing," I explained. "We already tried turning the pieces around but that didn't work either. So I thought we'd have to drill some holes over there," I said, putting down the tool kit and pointing over Kaden's shoulder to the faulty section. "I think it would fit together then. But there's still a piece that's too long."

"Maybe we could saw it off," Dawn suggested.

I shook my head. "I don't think it would work. That wooden piece would just split and break. This thing has to hold me up all night. I won't be able to do anything on that bed, as it is!"

Kaden looked up at me from below. Under his thick lashes his twinkled. “Now that would be too bad.”

I rolled my eyes. Spencer chuckled, and I sent him a withering look as well.

“I don’t want to be blamed if Allie’s afraid to do certain things on her bed,” Spencer said with a sigh, placing a hand dramatically on his chest. “We’d better do something about it, man.”

For the first time ever, I saw Kaden White grin. An actual non-sarcastic grin. It was nice—really honest. He didn’t just smile with his mouth; his caramel eyes crinkled up mischievously. “You’re right, we don’t want to be blamed for that.”

With these words, he pulled the toolbox toward him, opened the clasps and reached for the drill.

“My God, that wiped me out,” I groaned, letting myself sink into the living room couch. Dawn plopped down as well, leaning her head on my shoulder.

“Me too. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to move again.” She lifted her head slightly and let it fall again. “See?”

“Well, that’s too bad,” Spencer said, sprawled out on the other side of the u-shaped couch. “I thought I heard something about Kaden inviting a few people over later.”

“Oh.” Now I started to worry about what that meant for me. What exactly did “a few” people mean? Would I have to hole up in my room? Back in Lincoln “inviting a few people over” was code for throwing a party.

“Don’t worry. I don’t think he’s planning an orgy.” Spencer winked.

“Actually, I’m so tired I could just hit the sack,” I said, in all seriousness. “How about you?”

“Oh, I’d jump right in,” answered Spencer with a grin.

Dawn and I looked at him, eyebrows raised.

He lifted his hands in apology. “Sorry, but I wouldn’t miss an opportunity like that.”

I rolled my eyes, grinning back at him.

Dawn yawned loudly. “I’m afraid I have to get going. I wanted to call my dad tonight.”

“No problem; should I drive you home?”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s only a ten-minute walk from here. Clean up and settle in.” She sat up and stretched her arms over her head. “Oh, man—

my muscles are already sore.”

“I know what you mean.” Moaning, I rubbed my aching shoulders. “Good thing we have tomorrow off. Otherwise I’d be walking into class like a robot.”

Dawn laughed, and together we walked out to the hallway. I gave her a big hug at the door. “Thank you. You saved me. I could never have managed all that on my own.”

“Oh yeah, you would’ve. You’re a strong, independent woman,” Dawn insisted—and I had to smile again. “Text me about Monday,” she added, “Then we can grab a coffee before class.”

Dawn was also majoring in English, but she’d picked out other electives from mine. I was already looking forward to our joint lectures. At least I wouldn’t have to roam that huge campus alone the whole time.

“Of course, I’ll call. And my offer remains: If your roommate gets on your nerves, just come over here.”

“I will,” Dawn said. Before she disappeared into the stairwell, she called out from the hallway, aiming at the living room: “See ya, guys!”

I heard someone mumble; it had to be Spencer, couldn’t be Kaden. Dawn threw me another “don’t let it get you down” look, then closed the door behind her, and I was alone.

I went back into my room, pulled my makeup items together and headed for the bath. For the first time, I inspected the bathroom. It was extremely bright, probably because of the tiles and the little window just over the toilet. As I turned to lock the door behind me, I stopped in my tracks.

What the hell?

I opened the door and peered into the living room. Spencer was alone on the couch, playing with something that looked like the latest Playstation.

“Kaden?” I called out. No answer.

“I think he’s in his room,” Spencer said, without looking up. He nodded toward the one closed door in the apartment.

I hesitated, but then crossed the living room and tapped at the door. No answer. I knocked again. I waited another moment, but when no answer came I pushed down the door handle.

“Hey, is there seriously no lock on the bathroom door?” I spoke into the room.

Before I could make out a single detail, Kaden was standing in front of me, blocking my view.

“It’s one thing to force me to put together your shitty furniture,” he growled. “But bursting into my room while I’m working is going too far.”

Irritated, I frowned up at him. His eyes were burning darkly.

“Sorry, I just wanted to ... ”

“I got it already. It’s impossible to ignore you.” He rubbed his forehead.

“Listen, my limit for today has been reached.”

“*Your* limit?” I asked in disbelief.

I’d spent the entire day putting furniture together and setting up my room. I was exhausted and just wanted to take a shower—behind a locked bathroom door, without the fear of Kaden busting in on me and dumping his nastiness on my head.

I put my hands on my hips. “Get real!” I chided him. “First of all, I never made you put my furniture together. You drilled three holes in the wooden frame: big deal. Dawn and I did everything else! And secondly I just wanted to ask you for the key to the bathroom, Kaden. You tell me not to bother you with female troubles, but your mood swings are worse than a woman with PMS!”

Kaden didn’t even bat an eyelid. “I don’t have mood swings, dear. I’m always a pain in the ass.” He grabbed me by the shoulders. His firm grip made the skin tingle under my shirt, and I cursed myself for feeling that way. Then Kaden pushed me from the threshold of his room.

“Now fuck off.”

And he slammed the door in my face.

Chapter 3

In the end, the shower wasn't relaxing at all. I wish I could've taken a bath, but since there was no lock on the door, and Kaden was so unpredictable, I didn't have the nerve to risk it. Instead I showered at record speed and then snuck into my room.

I leaned back on the cool wooden door and took my first deep breath since my arrival in Woodhill.

Calmness washed over me, and I opened my eyes.

It looked just as I'd always dreamed it would. Draped over the newly assembled sofa was my fleecy throw, together with pillows of various shapes and sizes. The string of lights hung over the desk and along the shelves, where all my stuff was neatly placed. Pens and notebooks were organized in their containers and boxes on the desk. On the windowsill, my face smiled out next to Dawn's from within the white frame; to its right sat a matching white alarm clock. My curtains were parted just a crack, letting in the last bit of daylight.

As it took it all in, I couldn't help myself.

A sob escaped my lips.

Immediately I pressed my hand to my mouth and hoped no one had heard. Tears burned in my eyes, and I wrapped my arms around my knees.

I'd made it. Here I was, in Woodhill—more than 1,500 miles between me and my parents. I'd done more for myself in this one week than in my entire life, and now everything seemed so overwhelming that I couldn't hold back anymore. Warm tears ran down my face.

I was utterly overcome. For three long years I'd dreamed of this moment—dreamed of creating a space where I could be me.

Slowly, I lifted my head and surveyed my room again. From now on, I was in charge. Never again would anyone try to determine my life. From now on, I would write my own story. In my new home.

Beneath the tears, a smile spread across my face.

I had no idea how many “a few people” had turned out to be. But they were loud. I had no intention of letting that ruin my evening. I dressed comfortably

in a spaghetti-strap top with lace—part of my favorite pajama set—and a pair of soft, gray cotton jersey shorts. As far as I was concerned, Kaden could party every night. I was just glad I didn't have to sleep in the hostel anymore.

I pulled out the sofa bed and turned it into my cozy, pillow paradise.

Now I could catch up with the TV episodes I'd missed over the past few days. I was a series junkie and binge-watched everything I could get my hands on—or whatever I could find on Netflix.

This evening it was the superheroes' turn. *Supergirl*. I turned on my laptop, and set it up on my bed. Then I dug into the last unpacked box of stuff, looking for my favorite headphones—they were huge but comfortable. Ready for the evening's entertainment, I snuggled under the blanket and watched the world get saved.

Who knows how many episodes I had gone through, but at some point I nodded off. No wonder, I'd been on my feet all day.

Headphones still on, I was awakened by a muffled bang. A beam of light crossed my face, and I blinked sleepily. Someone had pushed open my door and knocked it into the shelf behind it.

"Sorry," said whoever it was, shutting the door again.

Disoriented, I pulled off the headphones.

"Kaden, man! There's a knockout broad in my room!" I heard the voice calling straight across the apartment. The guy was slurring his speech. Suddenly my door opened again. I drew the blanket up to my chin and stared at the guy who was now standing in the middle of the room, grinning at me. He looked like a surfer boy.

"Hi, I'm Ethan. This used to be my room, and it used to be a girl-free zone. Until I met my girlfriend, I mean. That's exactly where my bed was, that's where Monica and I used to—"

"Baby," came a cautious voice from behind him, "I don't think she cares what we used to do in this room. Leave the poor girl alone." A young woman appeared in the doorway. She grabbed Ethan by the arm, pulled him out of the room, and gave him a gentle shove toward the living room.

Then she turned back to me. She was wearing a lot of makeup, there were colorful streaks in her hair. "Sorry. I'm Monica, and that was Ethan. We just wanted to say hello."

"Um ... hello." I rubbed my eyes. Good God, how late was it anyway?

“Hello,” repeated Monica, staring at the glowing stars above my desk. “Hey, it’s really cute in here.”

“Thanks.” I didn’t know what else to say.

“And you’re a girl?” Monica blurted out, astonished.

I stared at her confused.

“Yes, I think so,” I said, letting the blanket slip down a few inches. Monica couldn’t miss it. She squinted and regarded my lacey top. “Oh, yes, clearly.” A grin spread across her face. “Wow, Kaden must think you’re okay if he let you stay here.”

“Hm,” I grunted, swinging my legs over the sofa. “I’m not sure about that. He said he needed the money and his other candidates had bailed.”

“Take my word for it, he must think you’re okay. Normally he throws women out of here. Before Ethan moved in, Kaden had a girl living here, and like an idiot he couldn’t keep his hands off her. She fell in love with him, and he ...” She made a gesture like tearing her heart from her chest. “After she—who-will-not-be-named-under-any-circumstances moved out, there was an absolute ban on ladies. In the end it got out of control. I think she even mixed hair removal cream into his shower gel. Can you picture Kaden without any hair on his legs and arms!”

I let out a huff.

Laughing, Monica shrugged and turned to call someone else in the living room. Then she looked back at me. “If you want, come on out and join us. We don’t bite.”

Hesitant, I looked down at myself. I was in my pajamas, no makeup—not exactly ready for a party. Especially since I hadn’t gone out without makeup since my eleventh birthday. My mother had always insisted on the importance of putting on your face before going out. The notion of leaving this room without makeup was absurd.

“At least most of us don’t bite,” Monica continued. “With Kaden you never know.” She jerked her head toward the living room. “Come on. The beer’s on me.”

It was my turn to grin. Her uncomplicated nature was just as contagious as Dawn’s. “Give me a second. I have to change.”

She raised an eyebrow and let her gaze fall on my cleavage for a meaningful moment. “Yeah, if you hadn’t suggested it, I would have! We don’t want Ethan’s eyes to pop out.” She laughed aloud at her own joke,

which made my smile even bigger. Then she stepped out and closed the door behind her.

I got up and rummaged in my dresser for a pair of pants that were comfortable and not too tight. I picked out a pair of stretch jeans, left on my lacy top and threw a button-down sweater over it.

Then I glanced in the small mirror standing on my desk. My eyes looked tired. For a moment I considered at least putting on some concealer, but no. What would it say about me if I did?

That you're still the superficial bitch you always were, who always takes everything for granted, a hateful voice echoed in my head. I silenced it.

Instead I looked at my new hairstyle again. I ran my fingers through my hair, went to the door and counted to three. If anyone acted stupid, I would just go back to bed. With a determined smile I stepped out of my room.

The apartment was in such chaos that I couldn't even take it all in at first. There was a crowd in the kitchen, and the balcony was also packed with people smoking and talking loudly. Music droned from some kind of device on the kitchen counter. Red Solo cups, glasses, and bottles of various alcoholic beverages littered every surface. No idea how I'd managed, but I'd slept through the noise.

Automatically I scanned the room for Kaden. I spotted his brown, styled hair sticking up behind the blonde head of a girl who was perched on his lap. She whispered something in his ear, her hair pouring down over his chest. It didn't seem like her attentions were making him too happy.

"Hey, there you are!" called Monica, grabbing my hand.

Surprised, I let her lead me into the kitchen. "Want a beer?"

"No, thanks," I said. Noticing her disappointment, I added, "Beer isn't my thing."

"Ah. Let's see what we have here. I think Spencer brought some of his dad's expensive wine."

"Wine would be great," I said.

I thanked her and sipped the wine. On the fly I could name the type, even guess the vintage, thanks to my dad. For the past few years, I'd started to feel like my father was only proud of me when I was talking about a rare vintage with his business friends. Even though, strictly speaking, Dad was breaking the law, since I wasn't twenty-one yet. Nevertheless, I'd developed an extensive knowledge of wine.

“Allie, you’re still awake!”

I turned toward Spencer’s voice. He was sitting on one of the high stools at the bar and waving me over.

“Yeah, I guess so,” I mumbled into my glass. I looked at Monica; she laughed, grabbed my hand and pulled me over to Spencer. She immediately began to report on Ethan’s impressive foray into my room, and Spencer spat out his water, he was laughing so hard.

“So, Allie, what brought you to Woodhill?” asked Monica finally, after we’d rescued Spencer from choking.

I leaned against the bar.

“I just wanted to see something else.” That was my standard answer. I had rehearsed it, and the shrug that went with it, to perfection.

“Same for me,” added Monica, lifting her beer bottle toward me. We toasted and I took another sip of wine. I was thawing out. It wasn’t bad at all—I was a normal girl at a normal party talking to normal people. No one here knew me. I could make a new impression. Maybe it had been really worth it to get out of bed.

“I’m only here because I wasn’t accepted in Portland,” sighed Spencer.

Monica wanted to punch him, but he ducked and grinned.

“Woodhill would not have been my first choice, but I won’t say more,” he added, throwing her a bone.

“I’m outraged!” Monica looked hurt. “We have so much to offer here! The scenery is beautiful and there are great sightseeing attractions. There’s the cabaret, the Museum of Art and Archeology, the city center and the fantastic campus with the statue of Shakespeare ... ”

Woodhill’s attractions seemed to be a favorite topic of Monica’s, so Spencer and I took pains to nod enthusiastically.

“I really like it here,” I said. “The landscape was one of the reasons why I picked Woodhill. I’ve gotten so much fresh air since I arrived that my body must be completely detoxified.”

Monica smiled blissfully. “I think everyone coming from a big city feels that way.”

Ethan came up from behind and wrapped his arm around her. “Is she giving that speech again about why Woodhill is the best city to study in?”

“She’s trying to win over Allie.” Spencer nodded toward me. “Although she already lives here.”

“Hey! You’re the girl from my room,” Ethan said, turning to me. “I mean, of course it’s not my room. As of now it’s your empire, with everything that means.”

I had to smile at how he clung to his girlfriend in order to stand up straight. “Thanks for the shelf and desk, Ethan.”

“Thanks for taking all that stuff. You saved us the trouble of moving it,” he replied, digging his face into Monica’s neck. She broke out into giggles.

An adorable couple.

My gaze wandered on its own past the two of them, toward the couch.

I froze.

Kaden’s dark eyes were fixed directly on me.

That girl wasn’t on his lap anymore, but sitting next to him. He had put his arm over her shoulder and she was murmuring something in his ear. Now I knew why she looked so familiar—she was the girl who was leaving just before I’d come in to view the apartment.

I thought about Kaden’s rules. To stare at him while he was getting it on with someone would be pretty high on the list of things that were absolutely no-go. So I looked away and focused on Monica.

“I like your colorful streaks,” I said to her. “I don’t think I would have dared.”

“Sometimes I honestly wish I were a little less bold,” she replied, with a resigned look. “I never think things over enough when it comes to change. I’m too impulsive and can’t decide—so for example I don’t pick out one hair color but take all of the ones I like at the moment.”

“I like it. The biggest change I made was this one.” I indicated my short hair.

Monica frowned. “So how did you look before?”

“My hair was honey blonde,” I answered. “And went down over my chest.”

Her eyes widened. “But you don’t look like a blondie.”

“Oh, I was. I looked kind of like ...” My eyes wandered through the room until they rested on Kaden’s companion. “Like her, but a bit darker.”

Monica turned to look. “You looked like Sawyer?” She blurted out in surprise—and loudly.

The girl next to Kaden whirled around and stared at Monica. Then she narrowed her eyes to slits and stood.

“Oh no,” mumbled Monica, suddenly looking somewhat smaller.

As Sawyer walked toward us, I took the chance to study her up close. She was very pretty and had a great figure, with curves in all the right places and a neckline that would make any woman jealous.

"I heard my name mentioned," Sawyer said as a greeting. She looked at Monica, smiling stiffly.

Kaden, who had also risen and in two strides had caught up with Sawyer, seemed to sense the tension in the air. He threw an arm around Sawyer's waist and pulled her close. But the gesture didn't have the intended effect. The opposite, in fact. Instead of relaxing, Sawyer shook herself free with a jerk and folded her arms at her chests.

"Is there something you'd like to tell me, Monica?"

"No ... Allie just ... " Monica turned toward me, helpless.

"I was just saying, that until recently I had very similar—"

Sawyer turned to me and glared. "I wasn't talking to you."

Her voice was ice cold, and I blinked, confused.

Kaden leaned his head, and his lips brushed Sawyer's ear as he murmured: "Everything's okay, Sawyer. Don't make a scene." But even this attempt to calm her down failed.

"Leave me alone. They were talking about me," hissed Sawyer, edging away from Kaden. Then she turned toward Monica. "It's not the first time she's bad-mouthed me."

"That's old news, Sawyer," Spencer now chimed in.

"Shut up, Spencer," she snapped. She looked as if she were going to reveal her claws at any moment and throw herself on one of us. I raised my hands in a calming gesture.

"I only said that I had a similar hairstyle to yours. You have gorgeous hair, honestly. And I don't know the history between you two, but we didn't say anything bad about you. Really."

Wow, the wine had loosened me up. The words had just shot out of me.

"Tell that to someone who believes you. The next time you want to complain about me, say it to my face instead of lying. That's pretty low."

"Oh, come on," hissed Monica, but Sawyer interrupted her.

"If you talk about me again, I can't promise I'll be nice." She moved toward Monica, threateningly.

At that moment my protective instincts took hold. I liked Monica and didn't want to see this girl kick her down for no reason.

“Listen,” I began. “This isn’t the right place to discuss something like this.”

A strange silence had settled in the room. The other guests were watching, curious. Someone had even turned down the music.

I cleared my throat. “Probably we’ve all had a bit too much to drink—at least the wine has really set in. I don’t think that this is the kind of conversation that should take place under the influence. Better to be sober, right? On neutral ground. Without spectators.” I tried to smile.

“I think it would be better if you went home now.”

Kaden’s cold voice caught Sawyer by surprise.

“Are you kidding me?” she cried out, confused, and moved toward Kaden. She pointed first to me and then to Monica. “Your shitty friends are attacking me in your presence, and you throw me out? You’re the biggest ass.”

Kaden opened his mouth to respond, but before he could say a word, I let loose again.

“Just because your feelings are hurt doesn’t mean you have to insult everyone else. There was nothing wrong until you came over and stirred it up. And that’s not cool.”

Sawyer turned so red that I thought she was about to punch me in the face. But just then Kaden grabbed her around the waist and pulled her out of the living room into the hallway, closing the door behind them.

Someone turned up the music again, and the party kept going as if nothing had happened.

Monica linked arms with me and leaned her head on my shoulder. “Sorry, Allie,” she sighed. “I didn’t want that to happen.”

I patted her hand. “Don’t worry. I can handle a little drama. Besides, it’s part of the college experience.”

We could hear bits of conversation drifting from the hallway, and Monica winced as Kaden’s voice grew louder.

“He’s going to be so mad at me,” she said, worried.

Spencer shook his head. “You know how Sawyer can be. I think her ego has never recovered from when Ethan ... ”

Monica tore her arm away from me and covered her ears with her hands.

Spencer shook his head, grinning. He explained: “Sawyer fooled around with Ethan at a first semester party. After he got together with Monica,

Sawyer was pretty mad. Guess she wanted more.”

I nodded. If Sawyer hadn’t just behaved like a total idiot, I might have felt sorry for her.

I flinched as the apartment door slammed. Kaden came stomping back into the living room. Our eyes met, and a chill ran down my spine.

He looked angry. Really angry. I found myself thinking about his stupid rules and cursed myself out for getting involved.

“I’m tired,” I said to those nearby and bid them good night. I made my way to my room and, relieved, sank down with my back to the door.

Great. It was my first party at Woodshill, and thanks to my blabbering, the host had to throw his girlfriend out of the apartment.

I was a walking fiasco.

Chapter 4

So much for sleeping in. I awoke with an unpleasant feeling. It must be damned early. My eyelids barely opened. I grumbled and pulled the blanket over my head.

Then I froze as something rustled in my room. Slowly, I slid the blanket down a bit and squinted against the sunlight shining on my bed.

Kaden was sitting there. To be precise, he'd made himself at home in my chair, his feet up on the desk. He looked at me unmoved, as if it was the most normal thing in the world to watch me sleep.

"Good morning, sunshine." His voice dripped with irony.

Only a few hours ago he'd broken up a party and certainly he'd slept even less than I had. How could he be sitting here looking so fit?

"Coffee," I groaned in my pillow. "No coffee, Allie doesn't talk."

His look of amusement surprised me. I'd never seen this expression on his face. After last night I had expected almost anything, but not this.

"Who would've thought you weren't a morning person."

"I might have told you that if you'd done a normal interview with me," I muttered. I sat up, struggling to keep the blanket over my breasts.

"There's coffee in the kitchen. I left some for you."

I blinked at him. Was this a dream, or why was he being so nice? Something didn't make sense.

I straightened my top, got out of bed and looked around for my sweater.

"Here," Kaden threw the gray bundle at me. "Now start waking up."

"Why?" I muttered. Before leaving the room, I turned to him again. He had folded his arms behind his head and was looking me up and down.

"We're doing something today." There was an undertone in his dark voice that I couldn't quite interpret.

I walked to the kitchen, shaking my head. The apartment had already been straightened up. There was zero evidence of last night's chaos. Instead, the smell of cleaning products mingled with the heavenly aroma of freshly brewed coffee.

I reached for the biggest mug I could find and filled it. With the cup in my hand I went back to my room, where I poured a generous portion of creamer

into my coffee. A minty scent filled the air.

“You just poured mint-flavored creamer in your coffee,” Kaden said, making a face. He leaned forward and took the bottle from my hand. “Ugh.”

“You have no idea,” I replied and took a big gulp. I sighed with pleasure. “It tastes like a peppermint patty. Want to try?”

He grimaced as he read the label on the bottle. “No, thanks.”

I shrugged. “It’s another thing I would’ve told you if you’d given me the chance.”

“Do you have any other habits I should know about as an afterthought?” As he studied my face, he dropped his feet to the ground, and leaned forward.

Now that I was pretty much awake, I noticed how pleasant Kaden smelled. His spicy shower gel was a good match to the minty-vanilla candle fragrance in my room. How nice.

His hair was still damp and uncombed, and I felt a strange urge to run my fingers through it.

“Aside from the fact that you have a weird sense of smell and taste.” He nodded first to the candles, then to my coffee.

I thought for a moment and then leaned against the desk next to him. “I like Taylor Swift; I know most of her songs by heart and love to sing them in the shower. I have a thing for TV series of all kinds. Since I arrived in Woodshill, I’ve been surviving on fast food. I wasn’t allowed to eat that stuff at home. Oh, and I’d really love to have a cat. But don’t worry,” I added, since Kaden had already opened his mouth in protest. “Of course I won’t get one as long as I’m living with roommates. What else? Oh, if I watch a sad movie I start to cry, usually without noticing it myself. Probably because I’m just super empathic.”

Stop. Kaden was staring at me with his lips slightly parted, and I could see his thoughts moving like clockwork.

“Am I going on too long?” I asked, contrite. Hopefully he wasn’t overwhelmed with all my quirks and wondering how he could get rid of me as fast as possible.

“No, it’s okay.” Kaden ran both hands over his face.

“How did the party end up?” I asked, just to change the subject.

Now he leaned back again and folded his arms in front of his chest. My eyes wandered to his many tattoos. They were beautiful, not clumsy looking like so many others I’d seen.

“After your performance, the mood kind of cooled.”

“Oh no,” I cried, looking up from his tattoos. “I’m so sorry.” I put down my coffee and ran a hand through my hair. “Really, I didn’t mean to hurt your girlfriend’s feelings. I just didn’t like the way she spoke to Monica.”

I held my breath as Kaden let his eyes travel over my body. Then he shook his head a bit, raising his chin to look me in the eye again. “She isn’t my girlfriend. And I didn’t like it either.”

“That’s why I’m sorry. I just had such a long week and lost control, and then there was the wine, and ... ” I paused and blinked. “Huh?”

“I didn’t like the way she spoke to Monica, either,” he said. For a moment he seemed lost in thought, then folded his arms behind his head. “To tell the truth, I didn’t like anything that came out of her mouth. It was more what she did with her mouth.”

I gulped my coffee.

“Yuck, Kaden!”

He grinned. A sly, self-assured grin. I wished I could just pour my coffee over his head. “What? Since we’re roommates now we can talk about this stuff openly and honestly, right? That’s what I always did with Ethan.”

I grimaced. “No thanks. No need. Would you excuse me now? I’ve got to go brush my teeth,” I said, putting down my coffee and getting up to leave. But I didn’t get far.

Kaden had grabbed me by the wrist and turned me around. In a sweeping move he’d trapped me between his legs. I stumbled and had to support myself with the other hand on his shoulder to avoid falling into his lap. I felt his hard muscles under his thin cotton shirt. *Mmm.*

“Monica is the only woman I’d call a friend.”

His grip around my wrist was gentle. I could have freed myself at any moment. But I didn’t want to, not at all.

“So you didn’t violate any rules,” he whispered, letting go.

Confused, I stayed put and frowned down at Kaden. “So I did everything right?”

Kaden raised one eyebrow. “That’s not how I’d put it, actually.”

“Actually,” I mimicked, grinning broadly at him.

“Don’t get too cocky, Allison.”

The grin froze on my face.

“How do you know my name’s Allison?” I demanded.

It was as if that other moment between us had never been. Kaden had rolled a bit backward on my desk chair and was giving me this nasty, mean

look I'd come to know so well. "A good guess? There aren't that many possibilities with a name like Allie."

"Ah." I turned away from him. "I really have to go wash up," I said, and dashed out.

Sighing, I leaned over the sink and supported myself with both hands on the cool surface. *Everything's fine*. It didn't take magic for him to conjure Allie into Allison. And that wasn't even my first name, just my middle name. Everything was okay. No need to worry.

Just as I shoved the toothbrush into my mouth, I heard a knock. And of course Kaden opened the door without waiting for me to say, "Come in."

I should have screamed. *Why isn't there a lock?* What if I'd been on the toilet? But instead I tried to appear as undisturbed as possible, and said only: "Hmm?"

"Do you have hiking shoes?" he asked.

I shook my head and brushed my teeth a bit more vehemently than necessary.

"That's not going to do you any good," muttered Kaden.

I spit out the toothpaste and rinsed my mouth well before asking, "You want to go on a hike with me?"

My words were muffled, as I dried my face with a hand towel.

"You said something about how you came here because of the scenery. I thought I could show you a few spots."

Looking at Kaden, I raised one eyebrow. "Why?"

The fact that he could change so much overnight was utterly confusing to me.

Kaden just shrugged. "You don't have to come. If you want, you can also sit around here and cry."

Oh. My. God. Had he heard my little nervous breakdown last night?

He raised his eyebrows. "The walls are thin."

"I was just—" I started, but Kaden interrupted.

"I don't give a shit why you were bawling. Rule one," he admonished me, as I pressed my lips together. Of course. "But if you're in the mood to see a bit of Woodhill and you're seriously into nature, come with me. I'm going out today."

I swung around to face him as he followed me back to my bedroom. "You got me. But please leave me alone while I get dressed."

His eyes twinkled. "I could help you."

“Rule number three, Kaden,” I admonished, and even surprised myself at how well I managed to imitate his tone. Hopefully it would sink in with him, how ridiculous that whole thing was.

“No, I mean I could help you pick out what to wear,” he replied, without picking up on my joke. His brows knit, he walked over to my shelf and inspected my shoes. “You really don’t have any hiking shoes, do you?”

“Nope. I’ve only been in Woodshill a few days.”

He lifted up a pair of my heels. “But you have a hell of a lot of these.”

“You can’t have enough pumps.”

“I’m sure they look incredibly sexy, but I doubt you could walk for long in them.” He put the shoes back in their place and grabbed a pair of sneakers. They were old things that I only wore when I went to a Pilates class. “These will have to do.”

He set them on the floor in front of me and left the room. “Get a move on. I wanted to leave half an hour ago.”

He didn’t see me roll my eyes. On one hand it was nice of him to want to take me along, but on the other hand his domineering style was driving me crazy.

Still, I was secretly pleased to see something of the mountains that I’d only viewed from a distance or on the Internet. I put on a pair of jeans and a blouse. Then I tied the laces of my sneakers in tight loops and grabbed my purse.

When I entered the living room, Kaden was leaning against the kitchen counter. Seeing me, he frowned so darkly that I could hardly see his eyes. “Are you kidding me?” he asked, in disbelief.

“What?” I looked down at myself—not bad, if you asked me.

“Your top won’t work at all. It’s going to fall apart the minute you come near a branch. Come here,” he said and went into his room.

Taken aback, I followed him to the doorway.

He was standing in front of his dresser, rummaging around one of the upper drawers. As he reached, his sweatshirt slipped up so high that I could see a bit of his skin. A very nice sight. Especially when I let my eyes wander down below the waistband of his boxer shorts. My roomie had a very nice ...

“Here,” he said and threw a gray bundle at me. Oh, God: Had he noticed me staring at his butt? “Put this on.”

I put my bag on Kaden's desk and unfolded a thick hoodie with pockets you could easily sink your hands into. On the front was the masked face of Deadpool, which made me smile. Apparently, I wasn't the only superhero fan in this apartment. "Thanks."

I pulled my blouse over my head. Of course I was wearing a camisole under it, but Kaden's eyes widened a bit, and I turned around. As I slipped into his sweater I took the chance to inhale at the collar. It smelled like Kaden. I grabbed my bag from his desk and turned to face him.

"Why on earth would you want to take a purse on a hike?" he asked, jerking his head toward my bag.

"Because I'm sure I'll need money. And of course my phone. And lip gloss, tissues, and ... "

Kaden grimaced. "Maybe I should leave you here."

Had this guy had never been around a female of our species? Unnerved, I fished my cell phone out of the bag, but paused as I heard him say my name.

"Allie."

It was the first time he'd called me by the name I'd given him when we met.

I raised my eyes from my bag and looked at him.

"Hiking is about leaving everything behind and freeing your mind. You won't need a cell phone or your wallet, let alone all that other shit."

I gave a loud sigh and set my bag back on his desk, lifting my empty hands in the air. "Happy?"

Kaden gave me a crooked smile. "Very."

OMG.

What was I getting myself into?

Chapter 5

I stopped in my tracks in the middle of the parking lot.

“Are you coming, or what?” Kaden called out, annoyed, as he unlocked his Jeep.

That’s right. His Jeep. This guy owned a huge, brand spanking new, steel gray Jeep Wrangler.

As Kaden started it up, the motor roared so loudly that I flinched.

I ran around to the passenger seat and was barely inside when Kaden drove off and turned onto the main street.

“There are CDs in the glove compartment,” he said.

I didn’t need any encouragement in that department, and I was amazed at what I found there. There were some groups I didn’t recognize, but I also found a few of my absolute favorites.

It almost felt like a test: Could I find the right soundtrack for our road trip? I continued rummaging through his collection until I found a few burned CDs at the bottom of the pile.

“What’s this K-Mix?” I asked grinning, and held up a disc whose cover was decorated with hearts.

I regretted it immediately. For a split second there was a bitter look on Kaden’s face. But just as fast, his emotion disappeared and I was looking at a hard, impenetrable mask.

“Take it out and give it to me,” he said, strangely calm.

I swallowed hard and did as he asked, though I didn’t feel so good about it. In the blink of an eye he’d cracked and broken the CD with one hand. Then he threw the fragments on the backseat.

I guessed a former girlfriend had given him this heart-covered CD.

“Now that you’ve let your anger out, we can listen to this one,” I offered after a concerned pause. I held out my favorite album by Thirty Seconds to Mars.

He took it from me without looking and shoved it into the narrow slit in the CD player. I hit play on one of my favorite songs.

As the tune came on, I felt Kaden’s eyes on me again. “I took you for a Taylor Swift fan right away, but you don’t look like someone who still listens

to Thirty Seconds to Mars.”

For a moment I returned his intense stare before I turned my head and looked out the window again. The landscape was too beautiful to miss. The weather was perfect: Sunlight streamed between the peaks of the nearby mountains and bathed everything in bright light. “Someone like you should know that prejudices are to be enjoyed at your own risk.”

He emitted a sound not unlike a grunt. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I am pretty sure that people sometimes don’t see you as you are. People tend to draw hasty conclusions.”

“Including you, right?” asked Kaden. Now I had to look at him again.

One arm lay casually on the edge of the open window; his eyes were fixed on the road ahead. With his baseball cap on, he looked like a different person.

“What do you mean?” I asked, interested. I’d always judged people by their appearance before. This kind of superficial behavior was the norm in my parents’ circles. But since I’d arrived in Woodshill, I’d been trying to kick this habit.

“You took one look at my tattoos and right away wrote me off as a bad boy,” he reminded me, and turned his baseball cap around so the visor was in back.

“Whatever,” I answered. “I didn’t do that because of your tattoos, but because you have such a strong presence,” I explained.

The corner of Kaden’s mouth twitched. “I have what kind of presence?”

“Come on, Kaden.” I raised one eyebrow snidely and turned to look out the window again. Jared Leto was singing about the truth running free, and as usual his voice gave me goose bumps. The music got under my skin.

“No, really. What do you mean?”

I sighed. “I’m not going to smear anyone with honey if they don’t need it.”

Now he laughed. It was a deep laugh, and mingled with the music.

We spent the rest of the trip in amicable silence. It was nice to see more of Woodshill. At some point the road became less even, and thick trees lined our way. Kaden stopped in a parking place whose sign revealed that several hiking trails ended here.

Kaden had put on his sunglasses. He held a plastic bottle in his right hand. Great. Apparently he was allowed to bring things along.

I hopped out of the car and buried my hands into the pockets of the sweater.

I looked around and ran to check out the signs on the wooden hut, to get some orientation. I probably wouldn't need this, since I was with an experienced guide, but it couldn't hurt to look.

"Should we take this route?" I asked and pointed to a blue line that was one of the easier trails. I turned toward Kaden, but was already on his way.

"Hey!" I shouted after him.

He'd started out on a trail and was a few yards ahead. I looked back at the map and then back to him. "Where are you going? We have to decide which trail to take!"

Kaden ignored my question. "Less talking, more walking," was his response.

Of course it was asking too much to choose a beginners' trail where I could introduce myself to mountain hiking and get in shape. No, Kaden had to go full steam ahead on a path with an estimated 100 percent gradient. I was already having problems keeping up with him—though there weren't even fifty yards between us. By the time I made it, I had already slipped a few times. I really would need good hiking boots if I wanted to do this more often.

"Which route are we taking now?" I held my hand up to block the blinding sun from my eyes.

"Now? We're staying on the black trail," he answered. He wasn't out of breath at all. Of course not.

The sun and the steep slope made me sweat, and with each step I regretted more and more that I'd always rejected cardio training.

"The black route wasn't the easy one, was it?" I asked as I tried to keep up. Goodness, the guy must have motors in his hiking boots.

"The blue route is for seniors." There was something disturbing in his tone. "Now stop blabbing and get a move on, Bubbles."

Bubbles? I ignored the stupidest nickname of all time, and stopped. "This is the hardest route, isn't it?"

Kaden turned around to face me, but kept on walking—backward. I kind of hoped he'd trip over a stone and roll back down the mountain. That was the only thing that came to mind when I saw his mean grin. "Less talking, more walking," he said again, turning back to face uphill.

My prayers were not heard.

I had no idea how long we were hiking.

At some point Kaden had left the marked trail. When I looked at him questioningly, he just said, "Trust me, it'll be worth it."

Trust me. Not funny.

I would never do anything with him again. Never. Again.

He led me over the nastiest roots and thickest undergrowth. I fell twice, and he didn't offer to help.

"You're almost there," came Kaden's voice from about two years above.

He'd been saying this off and on for the last couple of hours. And I didn't believe him this time, either. I was so upset that the only thing that kept me going was the idea of pushing him off a cliff once we reached the top.

I shifted my weight and pulled myself up on a massive boulder. When I made it, I gasped for breath. For God's sake: This was it. Covered in sweat, I sat on the rock and was about to lean back to stretch my painful muscles when Kaden grabbed me under the arms and lifted me to my feet again. I wobbled for a second before he turned me around and guided me a few steps farther.

And then, breathing suddenly became unimportant.

I grabbed Kaden's arm, because I suddenly felt so incredibly small.

Below us lay the world.

No image on the Internet could have captured this view. We were so high up on the mountain that we could look down on the huge treetops.

I took a deep breath and felt only one thing: clarity.

Up here the only sound was the light rustling of branches, the chirping of crickets and birds. It was so ... peaceful.

At this moment I could not only imagine the freedom that I'd been longing for—I felt like I had achieved it, like it was filling me. The energy of life tingled through my body; I didn't even feel my muscles ache anymore. A slight breeze tickled the ends of my hair. I was breathless.

"You're not going to start sniffing again, are you?" Kaden asked with a hint of disgust.

I couldn't answer. I had no words. Even my fantasy of pushing Kaden off the mountain had melted away. Instead, I released his arm and wiped my eyes with the sleeve of the sweater. It took a few seconds before my voice returned. "The sun is just blinding me."

"It's okay," he said. He settled down on the rock behind me.

Carefully, I did the same, leaning back on my stretched out arms.

“The first time I came up here, I was just as blown away.”

“Did you get sun in your eyes, too?” I joked.

Kaden snorted. “In case you forgot, I’m a man.”

“Oh, really?”

“You mean you didn’t figure that out yet?” Kaden’s voice was so close to my ear that I could feel the warmth of his breath. Startled, I opened my eyes as he added, “Do you need proof?”

His sonorous voice triggered my goose bumps again; it had nothing to do with feeling cold. I swallowed hard. He was so close now that I could see every wrinkle around his eyes and the turn of his lips as he smiled.

“Is that what you always do up here? Give girls proof?” I asked and looked away. Damn Kaden, with his damn presence and his damn confusing comments.

“I’ve only ever been here with Ethan and Spencer. This was just your entrance exam,” he explained, sinking back on his elbows. He tipped his head back and turned his face toward the sun.

“And?” I asked, wrapping my arms around my knees.

He raised his chin a little. “And what?”

“Did I pass the test?”

Kaden’s expression was impenetrable. “I don’t know yet.”

We sat in silence for a while, and I let the beautiful view over the valley sink into me. I was proud of myself. Not just because I’d made it up the mountain, but in general. Because I’d made it to where I’d wanted to be for so long. This outing represented everything that had happened since I left home.

“Thank you,” I murmured. My eyes were burning again, but this time I could blink the tears back in time.

Chapter 6

The night before my first college class, I was so nervous that normally I would not have gotten any sleep—but I'd just climbed a mountain. My deep sleep must have been thanks to the exercise and fresh air.

But the excitement returned when I opened my eyes that morning, and when Dawn and I sat together in our first literature class, we were euphoric with anticipation.

But reality hit quickly, bringing us back to earth.

We were sitting in the middle of a huge, overfilled lecture hall. I could barely follow what the professor was saying because the noise level was so high.

"How are things with the asshole?" Dawn whispered. Over coffee that morning I'd already told her about the party on Saturday night and had to submit to her interrogation. Apparently this was the next question on her list.

"He's grumpy, but I think we'll manage," I said after a pause. "Yesterday he took me on a hike."

"Is that a code word for something perverse?" asked Dawn, her eyes bright.

I tried to suppress a laugh, but a gurgle escaped.

A girl sitting in front of us turned and glared at me.

I covered my mouth with my hand. "No," I muttered. "We really went on a hike."

"Why?"

"I wanted to see the landscape, and he loves to hike," I said, shrugging.

Dawn giggled. "Oh, that I believe—that Kaden really likes *hiking*." Now the girl in front of us was throwing us a furious look.

"Shhh, Dawn," I scolded her with mock seriousness.

Before our afternoon lectures—Dawn was taking creative writing, and I was taking a class on Film and TV—we headed for the dining hall.

After waiting in the long line, Dawn took a portion of mac 'n' cheese, and I chose the tortellini with vegetables.

“I wouldn’t take that if I were you,” someone whispered right behind me, just as I was about to order the dish.

I jerked back and nearly dropped my tray.

“Ah, the strange roommate,” Dawn said.

Only now did I turn to look at Kaden. He wrinkled his nose and ran a hand over his short hair.

“Why not?” I asked.

“The filling is awful. Sometimes there’s gristle in it.”

I nodded and pointed to the next dish. This time, too, Kaden shook his head and made a strangling noise.

“What’s wrong with the fried vegetables?” I asked. Now his eyes lit up, and I ordered, with a shrug.

As the lady handed me my plate, Kaden grabbed it away and put it on his own tray. “That’s because you didn’t leave any coffee for me today,” he said and headed to the cashier.

My mouth hung open in indignation.

That jerk! I turned back to the lady but she was already helping the next student in line.

“We can share,” Dawn said, indicating the yellow mush on her plate. I sighed and agreed because I didn’t feel like waiting in line all over again.

Kaden would get his due when I saw him at home later.

Dawn and I sat at a table with some other freshmen we’d met during orientation. We ate and shared impressions of our lecturers and classes so far, and we talked about where we were living. It turned out a few of us had toured the same apartments when looking for digs.

“The first thing one guy told me was that he wouldn’t fool around with me if I moved in,” said a boy who said his name was Scott.

“Would you have wanted to?” I asked.

“Oh, 100 percent, yes!” he moaned, rolling his eyes. “He was a real dreamboat, I’m telling you. Tattoos, muscles and a *very* erotic voice ... I would’ve moved in just to hear him read me a bedtime story.”

We burst into laughter.

“Allie knows about that fooling around rule all too well,” Dawn teased.

Now it was my turn to moan and roll my eyes. But unlike Scott, I was annoyed.

“Wait. Are you talking about the same guy?” asked the girl diagonally across from me, sitting up straight.

“Oh, you must mean Kaden White,” another girl said, dreamily. I choked on a noodle. “He’s at the top of my list.”

“Which list?” asked Dawn, leaning in.

“My ‘if-I-could-have-any-man-in-the-world’ list,” she sighed.

Dawn and I exchanged amused glances.

“Then you should become best friends with Allie, she lives with him.”

The girl let out a squeal, and Scott sighed wistfully. He rested his chin on his hand. “Hallelujah, sweetie.”

“Can you introduce us?” asked the girl, eagerly.

“How do you even know him? I mean, I’ve only been here for a couple of days, but I’ve obviously missed something,” I said, amused. “I think I’ve hired the wrong informants.”

“Kaden is one of the dreamboats. Like Spencer Cosgrove,” explained another girl to my left.

“Spencer?” Dawn laughed aloud, but stopped when someone threw her a punishing glare.

“Yeah, there are a few dreamboats here,” Scott opined.

Which kicked off a discussion on who was the hottest guy on campus. Kaden was high on some people’s lists. I was glad when someone changed the subject, and we wandered off onto other themes. I really didn’t want to take someone back to the apartment with me or give up Kaden’s cell phone number to some freshman.

Although ...

I looked at the girl with the dreamy expression.

And grinned.

Later, on my way to my last lecture of the day, my cell phone buzzed in my bag. I pulled it out while walking.

What the hell were you thinking? was the message on my smartphone screen. I smiled to myself.

That’s what you get for stealing my veggies, you ass.

I’d slipped Kaden’s cell number to the dreamy girl after lunch, winking.

My phone vibrated again.

You're never getting another drop of coffee. I'm locking the machine in my room.

I snorted and stood still while I typed.

Up yours.

That would be a violation of rule three, and you know it, Bubbles.

I huffed in frustration and stuffed the phone back in my bag. What an asshole! And what the hell was behind that idiotic nickname he kept calling me? *Bubbles*. Because I babbled too much? Seriously?

As I entered the building for my last lecture of the day, I decided to ban all thoughts of Kaden from my head. I found my classroom on the first floor and entered.

Many students were already there. I edged my way through the crowd.

"Hey fresh meat!" a guy yelled at me from the side.

I pretended to ignore him. But I'd barely gotten past him when he leaned back in his chair and gave me a slap on the ass.

A piercing pain shot through my temples. Unwanted memories flashed in front of my inner eye. I felt like I was boiling, but I wanted to keep moving. No scene. Still, when I'd left Lincoln I'd promised myself never again to take that kind of thing lying down. I turned on my heels and targeted the guy with a furious stare.

"Don't you ever touch me again. Do you understand?" I made an effort to keep my voice calm, but only half succeeded.

The guy raised his hands in the air, in a calming gesture and said with a snide grin. "Calm down, it's just a joke."

"No, it's harassment. If you think that's funny, you have a pretty shitty sense of humor," I said through my teeth.

"Chill out, man," he grumbled, and the guy sitting next to him grunted in agreement.

"No, *man*, I will not chill out. If women want you to touch them, they will let you know. Believe me, we can make it quite obvious," I hissed. "But if someone walks by without even noticing you, that's not an invitation to grope them."

At this point the guy was glowing red. I couldn't tell if it was from anger or shame.

“Keep your hands to yourself, Ryan,” rang out a familiar voice. “Unless you want to get to know mine. And believe me, I don’t think you want that.”

Kaden sat across from us. He had folded his arms behind his head; his legs were stretched out and crossed under the table. His eyes flashed with amusement when he saw my surprised expression, but his jaw remained clenched. He gave a barely noticeable nod in my direction and then reached into his pants pocket.

As the lecturer began to introduce himself, I heard my phone vibrate in my bag. I fished it out discreetly and unlocked the screen to read the message.

You have passed.

Chapter 7

In the weeks that followed, my life settled into a routine, and Fall crept up on us. I went to class, hung out with Dawn and other classmates, and gradually became more comfortable. By now I could even tell the tasty dishes from the inedible ones at the dining hall—if you consider that progress.

I rarely saw Kaden, mainly because of my full schedule. I spent a lot of time in the library and made an effort to memorize the material from the start. My profs didn't waste any time when it came to pop quizzes and major exams. I'd already joined several study groups, and sometimes we worked together in the library until late in the night. By the time I'd get home, my roommate would either be holed up in his bedroom or sitting in the low-lit living room, engrossed in his PlayStation.

This particular night, my friends and I wanted to visit a nightclub for the first time.

I was just about to apply eyeliner to my second lid when the doorbell rang.

"It's for me!" I called out, in case Kaden had any intention of moving his butt.

As I dashed out of my room, I saw him fumbling around in the kitchen. Frowning, I turned and peered through the spyhole in the door. "It's actually not for me," I said, opening the door for Spencer.

"Hi Allie," he said, and gave me a hug.

"Hi Spencer." I checked him out. "Looks like you have big plans today."

He wagged his eyebrows at me. "Oh yes. Didn't Kaden tell you that there's a party tonight at Hillhouse?" he asked, walking with me into the living room. I glanced toward the kitchen and shook my head.

"No, but I'm going with some of my friends."

"We could go together, if you like," he suggested. Obviously he wasn't aware that Kaden was avoiding me.

"I don't think that's—"

"Good idea," Kaden interrupted me and came toward us. "We can also braid each other's hair and watch Disney movies together."

"Sarcasm doesn't suit you, Kaden." I clenched my teeth.

“And that outfit doesn’t suit you,” he retorted, handing Spencer a soda. Then he took his phone from his pants pocket and, frowning, began typing on the screen.

I looked down at myself. My dress was blue and almost knee-length. I had only chosen it because of its pretty neckline, which was somewhat daring without being indecent.

“Well, if a connoisseur like you says that, I’ll have to change right away.” I adjusted the top and looked at Spencer with my eyebrows raised. “Or what do you think?”

Spencer shook his head slowly. “I think you look hot.”

“Really?” I turned around for him. “So I shouldn’t change?”

“No, definitely not.” He took a swig of his soda while eyeing me once again, from head to toe.

I mouthed the word “thank you” and threw him a broad grin, which he returned without hesitation.

I heard a snort coming from the direction of the couch. But before I could get into another war of words with my roommate, I was saved by the doorbell.

In the end, we did go together with the guys.

At Hillhouse they were loose when it came to age restrictions. Their eyes might graze our fake IDs, or maybe they’d wave us in and stamp our wrists, no questions asked. Once inside, Dawn and I searched for our classmates while Spencer and Kaden went looking for Monica and company.

Once Scott spied us, he gestured for us to join him. I greeted him with the kiss on each cheek, which he always demanded from us. Then we hugged Grace, Cody, and Madison, classmates with whom we often spent breaks between classes. They made room for Dawn and me at their standing table.

“You ladies look hot,” Scott purred. “Why didn’t you bring your companions along?”

“We just came here together,” Dawn said with a shrug, poking me in the ribs. “And besides, Mr. White isn’t particularly nice to our little one here.”

“Our little one?” I repeated, looking down at Dawn.

Despite her extra half-inch, I was more than a head taller.

“Yes, you’re my little chick. Whatever your size,” Dawn said, with a grin. “I protect my chicks. I take care of them, build them up and help them until they can fly on their own.”

“Chickens rarely fly. That’s a mean metaphor,” I replied, laughing.

Dawn and I made our way through the crowds to the bar. Amen for the generous “over 21” stamp I got at the door. I could get used to this ordering-at-the-bar thing.

I handed Dawn her drink, and we returned together to our table.

A little later, I had another drink. After a while, Scott grabbed my hand and led me and Dawn out to the dance floor. We shimmied with abandon. It was great not to have to worry about what others thought of me. I felt exuberant down to my toes. At least until I turned and saw Kaden.

To be exact, Kaden and a girl, around whose body he had wrapped his well-formed arms. She moved with him, pressing her body into his.

I gulped.

“We can do that, too,” suggested Scott, dancing around me. He put his arm around my waist and pulled me close. I closed my eyes and let myself enjoy the game. Because I knew that Scott wasn’t interested in me, or any woman, for that matter, I unleashed the dance goddess within. I raised my arms in the air and swung my hips, then turned toward him and put my hand on his shoulder. Dawn danced toward Scott from behind, and we laughed as we moved together as one. As I swung around in the other direction, my hair fell across my eyes. I flicked it away from my sweaty face.

Kaden’s stare caught me unprepared. He was only a few yards away and was watching my every move. He hardly noticed the girl he was with anymore, even when she possessively threw her arms around his shoulders.

Instead, he tilted his head toward me, and grinned. He didn’t look away for a single instant.

Suddenly I imagined that he was the one dancing with me, that it was his hand on my waist, steering me.

“Bingo,” I heard Scott murmur in my ear.

I turned to grin at him and Dawn.

“Have I ever told you guys how much I love you?” I asked, wrapping my arms around both of them.

Dawn laughed and returned my embrace. “Yes, but I can’t hear it often enough.”

Over the course of the evening I noticed that Dawn hadn’t been exaggerating: She had no tolerance for alcohol. After only two drinks she was already

praying to the porcelain god, and I had to hold back her hair while she puked.

While we were waiting for our taxi, I sat Dawn in a chair then headed to the bar to get her a glass of water.

“Make that two, and for me a tequila,” I heard a soft voice tickle my ear. Kaden’s breath grazed my neck and made me shiver. Normally my alarm bells started to ring as soon as a man came this close, but with Kaden my body seemed to follow another set of rules.

I resisted temptation and turned to him with a skeptical look. “You’ve been watching me.”

Kaden came closer and leaned his hands on the bar, on either side of me. I backed away and felt the edge of the bar against my back. He came closer and closer until his lips touched my ear. I shivered again. “Maybe.”

“You’re drunk,” I said.

Kaden drew back a bit and frowned. “That could be.”

“What’s up with you?” I asked him.

“You are up with me,” he said, tilting his head. “You don’t make any sense to me.”

“Then you know how it feels,” I retorted.

“You’re always whining and spreading your perfume around the apartment,” he continued.

“Shut up, Kaden. This isn’t like you.”

“Why can’t you just be a guy, Bubbles?” He kept me trapped between his arms as he bent a bit closer. My pulse quickened. All my limbs tingled as if they had awakened from a deep sleep.

“Sorry, but we can’t do anything about that now, can we? These things here just grew,” I said, pointing to my chest.

Kaden followed my hands with his eyes and stared down at me. Then he raised his eyes again, slowly, as if he wanted to be sure that he didn’t miss an inch of my skin. He stared at my lips a bit too long, before looking at my eyes again. I held my breath.

Kaden blinked several times. And then, as if he seemed to realize how close he was to me, he stepped back and lifted his hands from the bar, running them through his hair. He uttered a frustrated groan.

Just then the bartender set Dawn’s glass of water down in front of me. As I tried to squeeze past Kaden, he held my arm in his grip. His thumbs stroked my skin and my arm broke out in goose bumps. “Where are you going?”

“I have to take care of Dawn, then I’m heading home. You have a nice evening with her,” I said, jerking my chin toward the girl with whom he’d been dancing, and who was now staring daggers at me from across the room. “Look, she’s pining for you already.”

He drew me a bit closer. I felt his breath on my temple as he murmured: “And what is it that you pine for, Allie?”

I shook my head. “For my bed, Kaden. My bed.”

With these words I left him standing there, and headed for Dawn.

A racket outside my room startled me awake. My heart pounded. Then I heard cursing from the hallway.

I sighed with relief. It was Kaden, who had finally come home at the fine hour of 3:30 a. m.

More clattering; then something hit the floor with a massive thud. Kaden swore at the top of his voice.

Suddenly there was only silence. That was more unsettling than the string of explicatives I’d just heard. After a few minutes, the silence began to worry me, and I got out of bed. I went to the door and opened it a crack.

“What’s going on?” I hurried over, my arms crossed over my chest.

Kaden lay on his stomach, stretched out in the hallway. Now I saw where the rattling had come from: While trying to remove his shoes, he must have knocked into the jackets and fallen, ripping out a few coat hooks on the way.

He let out a muffled groan.

I sighed and knelt down beside him so I could remove his boots from his feet. No sooner had I managed that, than he began to kick.

“Leave me,” he muttered. He tried to stand but only managed to prop himself up with his back against the wall. His head sagged to the side, his lips were parted, and his eyes were closed.

“You can’t sleep in the hallway,” I said.

He wrinkled his nose and tried to shoo me away with his hand.

Sighing, I shook my head.

“Come on, Kaden,” I murmured, leaning down to wrap an arm around his waist and put his hand on my shoulder, so he could support himself.

“Leave me alone.” This time his voice was loud and clear.

“Get a grip and let me help, for God’s sake!”

Stubborn, I got him standing. I barely managed to maneuver him through the living room. With every second step he banged into another piece of

furniture. It almost seemed like he was doing it on purpose.

Finally in his room, I helped him spread out his blanket. I was becoming an old pro at this. I'd done the same thing for Dawn a couple of hours before. Then I went in search of aspirin and a bottle of water.

As I reentered the room, Kaden was wrestling with his belt. His shirt and socks were strewn on the floor. I put the water on the nightstand, just as he fell backward onto the bed. Wearing only tight boxer shorts. I looked away.

"Here, take these," I urged, holding the pills out to him. He shoved them in his mouth and swallowed them dry. The sight of this made me queasy. I handed him the water bottle. "Now drink at least down to here," I indicated the topmost groove.

"You realize I've been drunk before, right?" Kaden said with a crooked grin, placing the bottle to his lips.

"Can I leave you alone now?" I asked.

Kaden set the bottle down on his nightstand. A sly grin played on his lips. With his tousled hair and laugh lines around his eyes, he looked irresistible. I wanted to turn away, but couldn't take my eyes off him.

He must have done some weight training. Oh yes, I was pretty sure of that. Such defined muscles didn't come from hiking. I stared at his naked torso, the pattern on his biceps, his belly, and the narrow path of hair that disappeared under the band of his underwear. Damn. What a body.

"You're checking me out," Kaden observed, sitting up. He looked pleased with himself, almost excited.

"What?" Caught in the act, I tore my eyes away and shook my head vigorously. "No I'm not. I'm just trying to make sure you're still breathing."

"You turn red when you lie. Did you know that?"

I covered my cheeks and moved away from his bed, so I could get back to my room as fast as possible. "Whatever. Go to sleep."

"You know it's true!" he called out, laughing. Self-satisfied, he crossed his arms behind his head. Narcissistic asshole.

"Good night, Kaden."

I turned my back to him and headed for the door.

"Allie?"

I paused and turned back to look at him. His grin had disappeared.

"I lied," he said. The words came hesitantly, as if his tongue were heavy. His voice was deeper than usual.

"What do you mean?" I asked as I turned out the living room light.

“That dress,” murmured Kaden. “It looked amazing on you.”

Grinning, I made my way down the hallway and closed my door behind me.

Chapter 8

The next morning I awoke to a tickling sensation on my neck. I blinked sleepily, but I was so beat from the night before that I could barely open my eyes. I decided to turn over and pretend it wasn't there.

A deep laugh broke my reverie.

I groaned, grabbed a pillow and threw it blindly toward the laugh. "Get out of here!"

"I come in peace, bearing coffee."

My ears pricked up, and I struggled into a sitting position. A mug hovered in front of my nose. I looked past its brim directly into the eyes of an astonishingly fit Kaden. Only the paleness of his face betrayed a possible hangover.

"To what do I owe this coffee in bed, Mr. White?" I teased, wrapping my hands around the warm mug. As I lifted it to my lips, a familiar scent reached my nose. My eyes widened. "You even put creamer in!"

Kaden shrugged and collapsed into my desk chair. "I figured I owed you something after last night."

"No problem," I answered in all sincerity. I'd only done what any friend would have.

"I mean it. Thanks."

"Are you turning into a softie, or what?" I asked frowning. "Or is there some kind of catch? A new rule? Do I have to read the fine print?"

"You're blabbing again." Kaden shook his head. His expression was serious, but his sparkling eyes betrayed his amusement.

I took a huge gulp of my coffee and sighed with pleasure. "How do you not have a huge hangover?"

"My head is pounding a bit, but I think the aspirin is starting to kick in." He rubbed his forehead. "Actually, I usually take another medicine for hangovers."

"And that would be?" I asked.

Kaden gave me a crooked grin. "Fresh air."

I saw playfulness in his eyes and shook my head. "No way. I got blisters last time." I rolled my eyes. "I need to get the right shoes if we're going back

to the mountains.”

Kaden pointed to my dresser. “Done. I already took care of that.”

I followed his gesture and stared. After checking quickly that I was wearing presentable PJ bottoms, I got out of bed and went to my dresser to see a pair of shoes sitting next to it.

Hiking shoes.

Stunned, I turned to him. “Did you buy these for me?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “No. Monica didn’t want them anymore. Ethan used to make her go with him, but nowadays neither of them gets out much. I thought they might fit you.”

“That’s so nice.” His thoughtfulness surprised me, and I found myself wondering if “being nice” was somehow breaking one of his rules.

“Nice is such an awful word.” He seemed uncomfortable. “Now get a move on. I want to go out!” He threw me the same sweater that I’d worn the last time.

I sighed as he left the room. And at the same time I couldn’t help smiling.

The weather was much colder this time, and I shivered as we made our way uphill.

“A little slower,” I panted, my hands on my hips. The stitches in my sides were nothing to laugh about.

“If we go any slower we won’t be up there until sunset, and then the view stinks,” Kaden shouted back over his shoulder, unmoved. He was ahead of me by about ten yards and made no effort to wait. The guy had no mercy.

This time he was taking me up a different route. I couldn’t believe how well he knew his way—there were no well-trodden paths here, but he could find his way even without GPS. As if he had a sixth sense for this particular region.

I paused. There was a sound in the distance. It wasn’t loud, but it sounded like a bubbling brook or something similar.

“Come on!” Kaden had stopped walking and was tapping his foot. A motivational trainer would have nothing on him.

Which made me wonder. “Hey, what are you studying, anyway?” I asked between jagged breaths, once I’d caught up with him.

“Majoring in journalism. Minor in graphic design.”

“That sounds exciting. What kind of job do you want?”

“No idea.” He sounded thoughtful. “My first choice would be covering the film industry, but I know how hard it is to get a foot in the door. Especially now, when print media is struggling. That’s why I’m taking lots of different courses to keep my options open.”

Wow. He’d never said so much at once.

“What about you?” he asked, looking back at me over his shoulder.

“I want to be a teacher.”

“What grade?” he probed, as he held back a branch that crossed our path so I could pass. He followed.

“High school.”

I felt Kaden’s eyes on me but kept on walking.

“That’s a pretty short answer coming from you, Bubbles,” he said sarcastically.

I shrugged. There wasn’t much to say about it. My parents considered my dream of becoming a teacher absurd. But I’d already made up my mind.

“Were you one of those girls who was bullied in school and now wants to change other people’s lives?” asked Kaden.

I stopped in my tracks. My heart pounded. “No.”

“Then maybe you were the star of your high school and captain of the cheerleader squad, and now you want to give back what you got,” he guessed again.

I felt ill. I really didn’t want to think about my school years, about who I had been. I remained silent.

Kaden interpreted this as encouragement from me, and kept on guessing.

“Or maybe you were one of those girls who did everything possible to get attention? Alcohol from older friends, wild parties, men and so on?”

“Shut up!” I hissed, clenching my fists. I spun around and glared at Kaden, my eyes narrowed into angry slits.

Bull’s-eye. He had guessed correctly. And the surprised look on his face told me he knew it.

“Allie.”

“No.”

He ventured a step toward me as I crossed my trembling arms over my chest. “I’m sorry if I crossed the line.”

I sniffed.

He grew serious and looked me in the eyes. “I really do want to know what makes you want to teach.”

I swallowed hard and looked away. I hadn't shared the real reason with anyone yet. And I didn't really want anyone to know. Particularly not Kaden.

"Okay, then I'll start," Kaden said abruptly. "If my father had his way, I would be getting a degree in economics and business so I could work in his company eventually, like my older brother Alex." He shook his head and shoved his cap backward on his head. "He doesn't care that I want to do the exact opposite. I've always had a passion for film and design. My mom pointed me toward journalism."

This time I held the branches back so Kaden could pass under them.

"What did your dad say about it?" I asked after a pause.

Kaden dug his hands into his pockets. "He wasn't too delighted. Told me I should pick a subject that would bring payback in the future. When I moved here, he cut me off from all support."

"What?" I blurted out.

Kaden just raised his shoulders.

"Just because your dreams don't match his doesn't mean he should leave you in the lurch. I mean, you're his son!"

"I can manage without him." Kaden avoided my glance; he just reached up and fiddled with his cap.

"What an ass," I sniffed, but regretted my outburst immediately. "Oh, I didn't mean to say that. I only wanted ..."

"It's okay." He gave me a crooked grin and his caramel-brown eyes twinkled in the sun. "I like it when you talk that way."

My cheeks grew warm as he looked at me. Crazy how many emotions could flow through one body within such a short time.

"I ... I want to change the lives of young people." The words came out of their own accord; they just tumbled out of me. I'd never told anyone about it before. "Naive, I know. But school years are the toughest time in life for so many. Aside from the fact that I also really like teaching, I want to be someone they can come to if they need to talk. I want to show them what's really important in life. I want to ..." I hesitated. The rushing sound I'd heard earlier had grown louder, and I continued heading toward its source.

"What do you want to do?" asked Kaden, close behind me. He didn't sound judgmental or bored, like my parents always were when I tried talking with them about my dreams.

"I don't only want to teach them what's in the lesson plan. There are so many values that aren't part of the curriculum and that get lost along the way.

So many teenagers have no one who cares, no one they can trust. I want to be that someone for them, someone they can come to if they need guidance. I just want to have a positive effect on these kids. To give them something that they might not be getting at home. And help them get back on the right track if they need it.”

Kaden had moved to walk next to me. He glanced at me sidelong, and my whole face felt red-hot. But the more I said, the better I felt. It did me good to share these thoughts.

“I like your plans,” Kaden said after a pause. “It’s hard to find teachers who put their heart into their work, who think seriously about their students.” He threw me another glance. “I think you’ll be a great teacher.”

“Do you really mean it?” I blurted out.

Kaden shrugged and grinned. “You know how to talk without stopping; I think that’s a good prerequisite. Most teachers love to hear themselves talk.”

I made a face at him and promptly stumbled on a root. Kaden grabbed my arm and supported me. Once my footing was sure, he let me go.

“Besides, then you’ll have the honor of playing the lead actress in lots of wet dreams.” He raised his eyebrows.

“Kaden!” I cried.

“With your legs, it wouldn’t be long before the drooling, pre-pubescent fuckers crowd into the front row.”

“Sounds like you know this from personal experience.” I couldn’t hold back my own grin any longer.

“Oh, I was harmless in high school.”

He frowned.

“But not anymore,” I ventured.

Kaden noticed my questioning glance. “No, not anymore,” he said, with a sly grin. “Harmlessness is overrated. It’s no fun.”

I shook my head. “Then it’s true, what they say about you.”

“What do they say about me?” he asked, suddenly turning to his right. The sound of water noise was even louder now, and he had to raise his voice.

I remembered the stories about Kaden that had made the rounds on campus, and decided not to answer his question in too much detail.

“They say you’re a heartbreaker,” I said, panting as I tried to pull myself up by a rock.

“Women always know what they’re getting into with me. But in the end, men are always the bad guy,” he said.

I rolled my eyes at him. “So I shouldn’t be surprised if you fall flat on your face. Fooling around without any commitments—it can’t last.” I yelled as I slipped and lost my hold on the rock.

A firm grip around my upper arm prevented me from falling. Kaden pulled me up to him, then released my arm again and looked at me, concerned.

I sighed. “You shouldn’t look at it that way. Girls start to like you, and they think about you. It’s normal. When I like someone I do the same.”

Kaden tilted his head. “So that’s why you put me to bed last night.”

“I put you to bed,” I answered, “because you couldn’t have slept under a pile of jackets in the hall. And you were keeping me up with all that noise.” I wanted to avoid Kaden’s intense gaze, but he didn’t give me a choice. Instead, he came so close to me that his forehead almost touched mine. And whispered, “You brought me to bed because you like me.”

“No.” I blurted. My voice was supposed to sound cool and unemotional. Thanks to Mom, I could usually manage that at the drop of a hat. Why not now?

“So what if you do like me? It’s your nature to be caring, you said it yourself. And I would bet you’re most annoyed by the things that are beyond changing.”

I swallowed hard. “What does that mean? There’s no hope for you? That you’re a broken soul?”

Not speaking, he let his eyes wander across my face. For an instant they paused at my lips before returning to look in my eyes. “Believe me, Bubbles. You don’t want to know,” he finally said.

Kaden had no idea how well I understood him at this moment. I really did. Every word he said could apply to my life. It was almost like he was talking about me, not about himself.

“You’re not broken, Kaden. Maybe just a little bent. That’s not irreparable,” I murmured. By now the sound of rushing water was so loud that I wasn’t sure he’d even heard me. We stood for a few moments just looking at each other, until Kaden shook his head and turned.

He took off his cap and ran a hand through his hair. Then he took one step to the side so I could see ahead.

My mouth hung open.

Now I saw what that noise was. Kaden had brought me to a huge waterfall.

“Oh my God.” I whispered.

Water rushed through a gap in the stony face of the mountain, flowing down between a tangle of trees and bushes. Rays of sunlight ricocheted off the powerful jet of water as it tumbled down the cliff wall to a lake below.

“Come on,” Kaden said, gesturing with his chin toward the lake.

I didn’t want to turn my gaze from the scene, but my guide was already on his way down. I followed him along a narrow path, which led past moss-covered stones to the waterfall.

Somehow we arrived at the shore of the lake. I had to hunch my shoulders and block the mist with my hand in order to see the waterfall from here.

A movement to my right made me stop short.

One second later I was staring at Kaden’s naked back.

“W-w-what are you doing?” I stammered, as he flung off his boots and started fumbling at his belt. I couldn’t tear my eyes off the finely drawn feather on the left side of his waist.

“What does it look like I’m doing, Bubbles?” he answered, his eyes fixed on the water. He turned around and winked at me before taking a running leap into the water.

I held my breath until he resurfaced, shaking his wet hair from his forehead and letting out a whoop.

“You’re crazy! Isn’t it freezing?” I called, using my hands as a megaphone.

“Try for yourself,” he called back.

I could barely understand him. The rushing waterfall was loud as thunder.

You had to hand it to Kaden: He didn’t care what anyone thought about him. What society expected didn’t matter. If he wanted to jump half-naked into a lake on a fall day, then he did so without hesitation. In that sense I admired him. He emanated vitality and freedom. Kaden unchained himself from everything. He was true to himself. I wanted to be like that.

So I threw caution to the wind, pulling his sweatshirt over my head and tugging off my pants.

I glanced down at myself and was relieved to see that I’d worn presentable underwear. Matching, even. A bikini would have revealed just as much, I told myself.

I dipped my toes in the water—and squeaked. It was damn cold.

Of course Kaden had to turn around just at that moment. I stepped back a bit and hopped a few times in place, getting up the nerve.

“Don’t be a wuss,” he called out, encouraging. I decided to rethink my admiration for him.

I squeezed my eyes shut and jumped.

With a loud whoop I plunged into the water. Cold enveloped me, and the rushing sound disappeared. I made a few powerful strokes under the water, and as I broke the surface I turned up near the place where the waterfall hit. Here the spray was thicker, and the tumbling water shimmered over me in rainbow colors.

“Got you.”

Out of nowhere Kaden popped up behind me and encircled my waist with his strong arms. I gasped for air as a shiver—this time not from the cold—spread throughout my body.

Then Kaden lifted me up and tossed me a good three yards from him.

I hit the surface and sank below for a second. All the air escaped my lungs, mostly from shock. Furious, I struggled to stay afloat.

“You asshole!” I cried, panting.

“What?” Kaden was treading water, acting as if nothing had happened.

I pounced on him and pushed him under with both my arms. I could tell he hadn’t counted on that kind of counterattack. It was only after he was under water that he realized what had happened and shook me off. He grabbed me by the hips, lifted me up and threw me over his shoulder.

“Let me go right now!” I shrieked and struggled like a madwoman.

Kaden snorted. “Dream on.”

I pounded my fists on his back but that didn’t bother him. Instead, he began to swim, his one arm wrapped around me. We reached the waterfall.

It was only thanks to Kaden’s firm grip that I’d made it to the other side of the waterfall. He softened his hold on me, and as he let me slide over his shoulder and set me on my feet, I felt the entire length of his body against mine. I hardly noticed that my feet were on solid ground again. Despite the frigid air, I felt heat coursing through my veins.

Kaden gazed down at me with his dark eyes, their caramel color looking more like a rich bronze. Drops of water clung to his lips, to his skin. I don’t know how, but my hands had made their way to his chest, just as his had found my hips.

My nipples hardened, a tingling sensation spread from my stomach to between my legs.

This tension between us. I couldn't blame it just on the fact that we were nearly naked. It came from another place, somewhere much deeper inside. And that scared me.

I couldn't bear the closeness a second longer. I was afraid I would do something I'd regret.

I swallowed hard, and let my hands drop. "Rule three," I said hoarsely, and drew back.

Kaden blinked several times before his eyes cleared again.

Now I felt self-conscious standing there in my underwear. It was way too intimate. I submerged under the water, so that only my head bobbed above the surface.

"It's beautiful," I said, trying to sound relaxed. I fished for a theme that would undo the tension between us. "Do you come here often?"

We were floating in a small cove just behind the waterfall. The rushing sound was softer, and I could even hear the light echo of my own voice.

"Yes, almost every day in the summer. I discovered the caves last year."

My breathing was still jagged. I had to calm down.

"How did you find out about it in the first place?" I swam into the cove a bit. The more distance between Kaden and me, the better I felt. "I mean, how do you find caves behind waterfalls?" As usual, I was blabbing away.

I was pretty sure I'd heard a resigned sigh coming from Kaden's direction and expected him to ignore my questions. But he started to tell me how he and Spencer and Ethan had come here often together. At first they stuck to a route on the map tacked to the wooden hut, but then they met too many tourists on the trails. At some point they started to make their own paths.

I didn't look at him, but concentrated on his voice as I listened.

And that's how the next hours passed—I asked him about Woodhill and his family, and he answered. The longer we talked, the less tension in my body.

I found out that Kaden's mother lived in Portland, about an hour's drive away. His parents were divorced, and he had an older brother who was more like their father, and with whom he didn't get along.

I was surprised how much he revealed. I hung on his every word, and didn't even notice that my teeth were chattering.

We decided to return to the shore.

Kaden pulled off his boxer shorts without hesitation. Startled, I averted my eyes and dug around for my cell phone in the sweater pocket. My need for nudity had been met for today.

Lost in thought, I unlocked my screen and stared.

My mother's name stared back at me.

She'd tried to reach me twice. *WTF?*

In a panic, I erased the message and shoved the phone back into the sweater pocket. I didn't want to know why she was calling me. It had probably taken her the entire month since I'd left Lincoln to figure out that I wasn't coming home.

Kaden observed me without saying a word. Silently we made our way back.

The whole time I furrowed my brow and stamped harder on the path than needed, pushing branches aside. Seeing my mother's name had triggered an unspeakable rage. I wanted to rid myself of it at any price.

"I never thought I'd hear myself say this," Kaden said at some point when his Jeep was visible in the distance, "but I don't like it when you're so quiet. Somehow it's not right. It's like pizza without cheese. Or anchovies in your case."

My hands were shaking in the pockets of his sweater. One call from my mother, and I was that weak, defenseless, little girl again. Dammit. "I thought that's what you wanted."

He stopped walking. "What's wrong?"

I kept on going. I just wanted to crawl into bed and distract myself with Jessica Jones or Daredevil. "Nothing."

"If you don't tell me right now what's up, Allison, then you can walk home."

I whirled around and gaped at him in disbelief.

"Don't look at me like that. I will leave your ass right here, and then you can figure out how to get back." His eyes flashed. "It's because we went skinny dipping, right? Come on, you know I wouldn't have started anything, even if—"

"Get off it!" I yelled, and my cheeks grow hot. "My God, you're so full of yourself, it makes me sick! First of all we weren't skinny dipping; in case you didn't notice, I was wearing underwear."

“Oh, I noticed. Believe me.” The corner of Kaden’s mouth twitched. I rolled my eyes and turned away from him.

“What about the ‘second of all’?” he egged me on, and caught up with me in two strides.

“There is no ‘second of all.’” Who would’ve thought that this beautiful day would end on such a downer.

“Good.” Kaden stomped past me and charged over to his car. He got in and started the motor.

Was this some kind of joke? He wouldn’t just leave me behind! I was cold and wet. What if there were wild animals here, looking for prey? I didn’t want it all to end with me as a decaying corpse in the wilderness.

Kaden swerved over and stopped next to me. The window rolled down part way. “Either you tell me why you look like you just found out your favorite band broke up, or I’m going. Your decision.”

I felt like kicking his damned car. “What does it matter to you?” I hissed. “Wasn’t it you who said I should keep my female troubles to myself? I’m just sticking to your stupid rules!”

“Whatever,” Kaden said, as he stepped on the gas pedal, revving the motor.

He was really driving off without me.

I clenched my hands so tightly that some of my knuckles cracked. “My mom called!” I cried.

The Jeep came to a grinding halt, kicking up a cloud of dust. He reversed and drove back.

“See? That wasn’t so hard to do.” I had expected Kaden to dig and demand an explanation. But he didn’t. Instead, he just gave me a wink and bent toward the passenger door, opening it. “Get in.”

It took me a moment to calm down. The rest of the ride, I stared out the window and let him pick the music. He played something I didn’t know yet, but it fit my mood.

The music took hold of my anger, and the loud drumming drove the rage right out of my body. At some point I finally relaxed and let my shoulders drop.

I would not let that woman rob me of my freedom.

In my mind’s eye, I replayed our trip. The whole day had been so beautiful, and Kaden was to thank for that. I turned to look at him. And without thinking, I had to smile.

Chapter 9

Over the days that followed, I tried to suppress the knowledge that my mom had called. I dove into my essays and studies. Especially since next week we'd have our first exams in literature.

Smoke was practically coming out of my ears. And given the countless books and notes strewn on the coffee table and floor, it was no wonder my inner alarm was going off.

Dawn heaved a deep sigh. She stretched out her legs under the table and leaned back on her arms. "I don't think I can cram anything more into this head of mine. It's full. No room on the hard drive," she said and closed her eyes for a moment.

"Me, too." I raised my knees, leaned my head against the seat of the couch and stared at up the living room ceiling.

"Maybe we should call it a day?"

As if to back me up, the apartment doorbell rang. I struggled to my feet, walked to the hallway and looked through the peephole. I startled: Monica and Ethan were cramming their grinning faces in front of the tiny window.

"Hey, you two," I said, opening the door.

"Allie!" Monica threw her arms around me. Before letting go, she took a deep whiff of my hair. "I'm telling you, Kaden is exaggerating! She doesn't smell bad at all."

I drew back with a gasp. "He says I stink?"

Ethan nodded with mock seriousness. Then he bent over me and took his own deep breath. "But it's not true, in case that's comforting."

Resigned, I shook my head.

"Spencer and Kaden will be here shortly. We wanted to spend a nice evening as couch potatoes." Monica stood on tiptoes and looked past my shoulder to Dawn, who waved from the floor in front of the sofa. "You are both cordially invited."

"Oh," I hesitated. I was pretty sure that Kaden would have withdrawn this invitation on the spot if he had been in the apartment.

"Hey, I see my hiking boots!" She pointed to the shoes, planted alongside Kaden's in front of the wardrobe. "Are they doing the trick?"

“Yes, thanks again,” I said with a smile.

Monica squeezed my arm and walked into the living room to introduce herself to Dawn.

I began collecting my stuff.

Since our hike Kaden and I had kept out of each other’s way, and I preferred to retreat before he got back. But just as Dawn was bringing the last loose-leaf binder into my room, Spencer and Kaden arrived in the hall, carrying large, flat boxes.

“Hey, Allie,” Spencer said, when he spied me in the living room.

“Hey, Spencer. How’s it going?”

“Can’t complain. I’ve passed all my exams so far, and there are two left to go. Keep your fingers crossed!” He and Kaden greeted Monica and Ethan, then dropped off the boxes on the kitchen counter.

“Good luck!” I said and hustled off to my room.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Kaden called after me.

I stopped and looked back over my shoulder at him. He was just about to grab plates and napkins from the closet.

“Dawn is here to study with me,” I explained. “We didn’t want to disturb you.”

He frowned and opened the first box. “That’s too bad. We bought pizza for you.”

I opened my mouth and closed it again. Was this a peace offering from him? My mouth started to water, as the scent of pizza began to fill the apartment. “Really?”

Kaden shoved the first pizza on a plate and handed it over the counter to Spencer, who set it down on the table in front of Monica and Ethan.

More relaxed, I went into the kitchen just as Kaden opened the next box. “Ah, here we go. Pepperoni and anchovies. By far the most disgusting pizza they had on the menu. I thought it was just the right thing for you and your warped sense of taste.”

I couldn’t believe my eyes. Suddenly I felt a strange emptiness in my belly. Kaden scooped out a piece of the pizza and slid it onto a plate, which he held out to me expectantly.

And then the most embarrassing thing happened.

I started to sob.

“Not again,” groaned Kaden setting down the plate with a clang on the countertop. “I was joking about the anchovies. Rule one, dammit!”

For a moment I stared at him, frozen. Then I turned on my heel and fled to my room, shutting the door so I could let the tears flow.

“Allie,” Dawn called out and leapt off the bed. “What happened?”

I remained standing with my head against the door, trying to catch my breath.

“Kaden brought pizza,” I said in a trembling voice.

Dawn blinked at me, perplexed. “That asshole. What was he thinking?”

I laughed and wiped the corners of my eyes. Then I sank into my sofa bed with a sigh. “That’s not what I mean.”

“So what is it? I want to hate him but at the moment it’s not easy,” Dawn said, leaning against the wall. “Cause I can smell the pizza, and it’s making me hungry.”

I looked up, as the burning in my eyes began to fade. “We never ordered pizza at home.”

Dawn’s eyes grew round. “What?”

“We never ate fast food. My mother was so obsessed with detox and dieting, that she counted calories constantly. She didn’t want me to gain weight and made up a nutrition plan for me every week, including a strict exercise program.” I shrugged. “The only pizza I ever ate was in Rome during a family vacation.”

Actually, that was only part of why I was upset. I was still unsettled over my mother’s attempt to phone me. When Kaden had held out the pizza to me just now, I heard her voice in my ear again, warning me about calories and accusing me of letting myself go. I hated that she was still so present in my life.

Dawn’s eyes told me she was trying to grasp this.

“Allie, you can’t be serious!” she erupted in anger.

I took a deep breath. “You don’t know Sharon Harper, Dawn. She is a dictator. Even now she’d like to be controlling my entire life. My college courses, my friends, my eating habits.”

Dawn shook her head in disbelief and walked over to me. “Allie Harper,” she began, dead serious. “We’re going out there right now and you’re going to scarf down this pizza. If you have to moan before you enjoy, that’s fine. If you have to cry, super!” She bent down toward me and looked me in the eyes. “You are free, Allie. You’re in charge. Got it?”

Tears rose in my eyes again. I blinked them away and swallowed down the lump in my throat. “Okay.”

“Great! Now let’s go,” Dawn said, opening the door and leaving the room without checking to see if I followed.

“This is Allie’s first take-out pizza!” announced Dawn.

I rolled my eyes. Good, now everyone knew.

I ventured into the living room, and was relieved to find that the others didn’t seem to notice me. Either they didn’t know I’d fled the room, or they were tactful enough not to speak.

“Go for it, people,” Spencer said, his mouth already full.

I sat next to Dawn on the floor and took the napkin that she held out. Grateful, I smiled up at her. Music was playing in the background. I took the slice of pizza that Kaden had selected for me and fought for a moment with the dangling threads of cheese. I felt Dawn’s eyes on me as I took the first bite.

I chewed carefully. It was delicious. The combination of sauce, cheese, pepperoni, and anchovies. Yes, anchovies. I took another bite and moaned with pleasure.

Dawn laughed, and even Kaden let out a chuckle.

“I think you chose well,” Spencer said. Kaden just shrugged his shoulders and took another bite.

“I can’t imagine life without pizza anymore,” I sighed after a while, and everyone laughed.

“You have seriously never had a pizza before? I mean, that’s kind of weird,” Ethan wondered aloud. Monica gave him a light punch in the arm.

“None of us is really normal, Ethan,” she said. “Just look at us. I’m fascinated by fingernails.”

“I’m obsessed with red hair,” Spencer said, his mouth full. Dawn stiffened next to me. “I’m serious, if a woman has red hair, she’s ten times hotter in my eyes.”

I laughed.

“You’ve lost it, man.” Shaking his head, Kaden leaned back and wiped his mouth with a napkin.

“What? Monica is right. None of us is really normal,” Spencer retorted. “You have relationship problems, for some reason Allie never ordered pizza, Monica loves nails, and Dawn ... has red hair.” Spencer blinked several times.

Everyone snorted with laughter except for Dawn, who was blushing.

“I don’t have relationship problems,” Kaden said. “It’s my choice to avoid a relationship.”

“Yeah, and look what you miss,” Monica chuckled, pointing to herself. “Exhibit A.”

Kaden just rolled his eyes.

“You’re an ass, but you know what? I still love you!” She jumped up and hugged him. He grimaced as she kissed his cheek and tried half-heartedly to disentangle himself from her.

I wasn’t the only one who saw him smile.

The following week I spent a lot of time with Kaden and his friends. Dawn always came over the moment her roommate was entertaining a man—which happened quite a lot—and we tried out all the delivery services in the area.

Living with Kaden was getting easier. He even started letting me use his TV when he wasn’t there. And when he was there, he didn’t kick me off the couch, but let me stay and watch series with him.

This afternoon we watched a superhero flick. In the morning I had finished my last literature exam, and to celebrate we ordered a huge box of sushi.

The doorbell rang, and I jumped.

“Are you expecting someone?” Kaden asked.

I shook my head and got up, since he was still eating. I went to the door and peered through the peephole.

No. No way. I caught my breath.

It was my mother.

Chapter 10

It felt like ice-cold claws had encircled my neck.

My knees were weak.

My heart stopped.

I couldn't breathe.

I jerked away from the door and pressed my back against the wall.

"Bubbles?" Kaden called out and leaned toward the left on the couch, so he could see me from the living room.

With wide eyes, I stared at him and shook my head vigorously.

"What's the matter?" he asked, his voice growing louder.

I looked down at myself. In this condition, there was no way I could open the door.

Kaden was instantly at my side, looking at me with a frown and then taking a look through the peephole.

The bell rang again, three times in quick succession.

"Is that ... " He raised both brows.

"My mother," I whispered and hoped he understood.

"Crystal!" Her voice penetrated the closed door, muffled. An energetic knocking followed.

This time my heart was still. Kaden would have to call an ambulance to revive me.

"Crystal Allison Harper! I know you're here. I located your cell phone signal!"

With trembling fingers I tried to smooth my shirt. Kaden stepped forward and grabbed me by the shoulders. His eyes darkened as he studied my face intensively. He couldn't have any idea what was going on here, but his gaze told me he understood I needed help.

"Go change your clothes, take your time," he said, thinking on his feet. "I'll make her a cup of coffee or something."

I couldn't speak, only nod. I kept on nodding. And nodding.

"And you should do that in your room, Allie," he said calmly and shoved me out of the hallway.

My legs were heavy as lead, as I went into my room and closed the door.

I looked at the room with Mom's eyes and felt sick. She would hate it, I was sure of that. And she wouldn't hesitate to say it, either.

Furious, I tore off my jogging pants and slipped into a pair of jeans. I'd barely moved in here. I was just getting used to it. How could she ambush me like this?

I heard voices in the hall but didn't understand what was being said. As if in a trance, I put took a rose-colored blouse from my dresser, which I'd last worn in Lincoln. But then I paused.

No.

I wouldn't dress up for her.

I glanced in the mirror. And now a strange calm descended on me.

I'd feel better if I could be myself, and I didn't want to give her the satisfaction of turning me back into the girl I used to be, just by showing up. I stuffed the blouse back into the drawer and kept on my Woodhill shirt.

Now I just had to get my pulse under control. Sooner or later I would have to see her again. Now or in two months—what was the difference?

My palms were sweaty as I opened the door and entered the living room. Mom was sitting with her back to me on the stool at our kitchen counter. Kaden was saying something to her but I was too nervous to understand a single word.

"Hello, Mother," I croaked.

As if in slow motion, she turned around. I held my breath.

On that face, so unnaturally rigid after many visits to the plastic surgeon, was an expression of pure horror.

"Heavens, Crystal. Just look at you." She sounded bewildered, as if she were seeing something extremely disgusting.

"What do you mean?" I looked down at myself, surprised.

"What did you do with your hair?" She continued, sliding off the stool. She rubbed her hands on her suit and stepped toward me, squinting. She took me by the chin and turned my head in both directions, then pulled on my streaked hair, sniffing. It took a lot of effort for me not to push her hand away.

"Now, really. I expected more of you."

"I'm happy to see you, too, Mother," I said, forcing out a smile.

She clicked her tongue and walked past me to the sofa.

I followed, keeping some distance. "To what do I owe the honor?" I asked.

She crossed her legs and set her Chanel flap bag on the couch beside her. She sniffed again as she surveyed the living room. Then she stroked her finely blown-out hair. “You didn’t respond to my call. Your father and I were worried.”

I laughed. It sounded more like a bark. “Oh, really?”

“Don’t be childish, Crystal.”

Every time she used that name, I flinched.

“We believe that your trip to this ... this *town* has been long enough. It’s time to stop this ridiculous rebellion.”

My mind went blank. Did she honestly think I was planning to move back to Lincoln?

Kaden placed a cup of coffee in front of my mother on the living room table. His jaw looked tense, as if he were holding back from getting involved in our conversation.

“Look at you.” Her little finger extended, she took the cup without thanking Kaden, inspecting it first before she dare take a sip. “You are letting yourself go. How many pounds have you gained since you moved in here?”

I swallowed hard and suffered in silence as she let her icy glare travel over my body. And then she spied the sushi plate on the table.

“No wonder, with this junk you’re eating.”

Kaden made an indefinable sound. Mom looked at him with raised eyebrows, and I knew she was about to let her next attack fly. This time with Kaden as target. I interrupted.

“Did you come here to judge my life, or do you have any news?”

“Your father and I are expecting you home before Thanksgiving. Surely it’s not too much to ask, for our own daughter to take part in our annual benefit gala.”

It took all the strength I could muster not to snort with contempt. “I will not give up my studies just because you think that this isn’t the right path for me, Mother.”

She pursed her perfectly painted lips and tilted her head. “Eventually you’ll have to stop with this childish rebellion, Crystal. You have a legacy to be concerned about—like it or not.”

“I don’t know how often I need to repeat this, but I’m studying to become a teacher,” I declared.

“Oh, child. And I don’t know how often I need to repeat this, but you’ll have no future with that,” she said sharply, shaking her head. “You should be

glad we're paying your tuition."

My fingernails dug into my palm, so tightly was I clenching my fists. "That's the least you could do, after everything you made me do for you!" I hissed, not giving a damn that Kaden was standing right there and heard it all. I didn't care. I wanted her to disappear.

"The least?" She scoffed, holding a manicured hand in front of her mouth. "You are so naïve, playing the victim when you know very well that—"

"Be quiet," I said, my voice trembling.

"My own daughter isn't going to bar me from speaking my mind!" Again, she smoothed her hands over her hair. "Believe me, Crystal. We have made the right decision. And now I'm going to do you another favor. Just look at this place. You are living with a *freak*!" She threw Kaden a contemptuous look. "I just want the best for you."

"You can insult me as much as you like, Mother. But leave my roommate out of it."

She smiled arrogantly. "How cute. You jump in bed with a tattooed thug and think you can just do whatever you want now. Listen, I didn't fly all the way here just to—"

She didn't get any further. Kaden stood in front of me, his arms crossed in front of his chest. "I think it would be better if you left now."

My mother stared up at him. The smile didn't leave her lips, not even when Kaden took another step toward her. She rose gracefully and reached for her bag.

"Sooner or later you'll be back home, Crystal. When everything goes down the drain, you'll come crying to us and beg to be let in. Just don't be surprised if your father and I aren't prepared to catch you when you fall."

She surveyed me one last time, then disappeared into the hallway. A few seconds later I heard the front door clink shut, but that didn't really register.

I felt numb.

My mother's words rang in my head, even as I left the living room to hide in my room. I wished I could cry, but the tears didn't come. Instead I felt this all-too-familiar emptiness inside.

I didn't hear Kaden enter my room. His face was in front of mine. I lifted my head. Everything around me was blurred. I felt cold.

"Go," I croaked.

"Hey," he said softly.

My mouth was dry and I had to run my tongue over my lips a few times to moisten them. “I’d rather be alone now,” I whispered. I still felt pressure in my chest. My breathing was hard.

He frowned. “I’m not leaving you alone in this state.”

“Just go, Kaden.”

“No.”

“I told you to go,” I hissed, trying to turn away from him. He gripped my wrists.

“Kaden!” I warned him.

“I’ll leave this room when I’m sure you won’t hurt yourself.”

I raised my eyebrows. “I won’t hurt myself.”

“Nice. I’ll leave this room when I’m sure that you’ve forgotten every word that that ... *woman* said.”

I was pretty sure he would’ve picked another word to describe her but had used this neutral term out of respect for me.

“And when you don’t look like a whipped puppy anymore.” Kaden stroked my hands with his thumbs.

“I do not look like a whipped puppy,” I murmured.

He edged closer and frowned. “Yes you do, Allie.”

“At the most like a cat.”

“Huh?”

“I mean I would rather look like a whipped kitty. I am more of a cat person.”

I noticed how Kaden’s presence made me relax.

“Cats are sly,” Kaden thought aloud. “I think they don’t allow themselves to be whipped.”

I laughed weakly.

“So you’re doing better already,” he said, pleased. He grew serious again and held me tighter by the wrists. “Nothing she said is true. You know that, right?”

His voice was soft but nevertheless urgent.

I shrugged.

“But she’s right!” I didn’t want to have this conversation.

“Bullshit.” Kaden’s voice grew louder. “Everything she said was complete bullshit—what could you possibly agree with?”

“I ... I’ve gained weight!” I escaped his grasp and covered my face with my hands. Kaden’s fingers now rested on my thighs.

“Okay, that might be true.”

I peered through my parted fingers. “Thanks a lot.”

“What? It’s just the truth.” He shot me a crooked grin. “I can see your curves now. It’s hot, Bubbles.”

He pinched me in my side, and I hit him. He shrank back, laughing. Once more he leaned forward and inspected me closely. Then he nodded. “Now I can leave you.”

With these words he stood and walked out of my room.

I swallowed hard. Kaden had meant well, but I needed more than a few encouraging words to fill this emptiness that my mother’s visit had left inside me.

And I knew of only one cure for that.

Chapter 11

I licked the salt on my wrist, tipped my chin up, downed the shot of tequila, then bit into a lemon slice. *Snakebite*.

I couldn't say how many times I'd repeated this ritual tonight. I could hold my liquor, and it usually took a while before it showed any effect. But now the walls were spinning. And I felt fabulous.

"How does she do it?" Scott asked, looking across me to Dawn. I was sitting between them at the bar in Hillhouse.

"No idea. Her liver must be made of steel," my friend responded. *A liver of steel*. I snorted. I must have gotten it from my mother. After all, she had a heart of steel.

I paused. If I could still think that clearly, I definitely needed another shot. I leaned over the bar and waved my hand. Within seconds the next glass was in front of me, and I raised it in thanks to the bartender. Thank God for their lax attention to age.

"I want to dance," I called out to Dawn and Scott after I'd tossed down the shot. I dragged them to the dance floor and began to move to the music. I was drunk and surrounded by friends. I'd feel better soon. At least so I told myself.

After a while, Scott went off with a guy who seemed familiar, someone who was taking a course with me. Dawn and I joined a bunch of students, dancing with abandon. It was already after midnight when they asked us if we wanted to join them at a house party with other friends. We quickly agreed.

Dawn had taken it a bit easier this night and did her best to make sure I got safely to our goal.

Students were staggering around with red Solo cups in their hands in front of the entrance, and a sweetish smell floated in the air, hinting that not only cigarettes were being smoked.

Our new friends introduced us to the host and then disappeared amid the swirling crowd. Music thundered from the speakers, so I dragged Dawn toward the makeshift dance floor at the other end of the room. I had to keep on dancing.

“I’ve never seen you here before,” a guy addressed me as we got closer. Right away, his friend started chatting with Dawn.

“I’m a freshman,” I said, smiling, and moved to the music.

“Want a drink?”

I looked at him. He had beautiful green eyes and sandy hair, just a tad too long. As if he could read my mind, he shook his bangs off his forehead.

I grinned. “Sure.” I said with a shrug, following him to a table crowded with bottles of beer and other mysterious liquors.

“What’s your name?” asked the guy, handing me a cup filled with red liquid. I sniffed it and wrinkled my nose. Actually, I didn’t like sweet mixed drinks. But I’d make an exception today.

“I’m Allie. And you?”

“Brix.” He knocked his cup against mine. “Cheers to being a freshman.”

We chatted a while, until he introduced me to a few more people. I laughed aloud at the jokes that Brix’s friends made, and I soon noticed that a pleasant warmth had spread through my body. No idea what was in this drink, but it seemed to have an effect. And as long as I could keep that emptiness at bay, it was okay with me.

Brix and I went off to dance. He moved his hands up and down my body. It wasn’t strange or frightening. It felt good to let go.

I didn’t know how we reached that point, but I started dancing on a table with another girl, one of Brix’s friends. She took my hand and we swayed together to the music.

From the corner of my eye I saw Dawn talking on her phone near the entrance. She didn’t notice me waving her over to us.

I closed my eyes and concentrated on the music. This was exactly what I needed today. I needed to be here, not in my room, where my mother’s words still hung over me like a poisonous cloud.

When I reopened my eyes, I saw a familiar face below me in the crowd. With his set jaw and sparkling eyes, his tousled hair and three-day beard, he looked damn fine—but also incredibly dangerous.

“Roommate!” I squealed and leapt from the table, which was a pretty major feat in my high heels. I landed right in his arms.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

I chuckled. “Dancing.”

“Yeah, I saw that.” Kaden removed my arm from his neck. His tense expression brought me down from my high.

I heard a few people laugh. I turned to them and Brix was grinning broadly at me. I waved back.

“Didn’t know you had a boyfriend, Allie,” Brix said.

“What?” I almost laughed. “Kaden isn’t my boyfriend.” My tongue suddenly felt heavy, and I could barely stand. “He’s just my roommate. And he has rules. ‘Cause it’s the only way that living together can work.”

“Rules?” repeated Brix, amused, taking a sip from a beer bottle.

“Rule one: Don’t bother me with girly stuff,” I mimicked Kaden’s deep voice. The others laughed again. “Rule two—Hey!”

Kaden had grabbed my arm. “Cut the shit.”

“Cut your own shit.” In my drunken state I was no competition for Kaden.

“I’m sorry I called you,” I heard a small voice next to Kaden. “I was worried about her.”

“Don’t talk about me as if I weren’t here, Dawn,” I hissed and tore my arm away from Kaden. “You asked him to come?”

With a guilty look, Dawn bit her lower lip. *Great.*

“We should go home,” Kaden whispered. I could feel eyes on us from all around, but Kaden didn’t care. “You had a long day.”

I glared at him. “That’s why I’m here.”

“Dude, I think you should let her decide for herself,” Brix intervened. “If she wants to stay here, let her.”

“Keep out of it, buddy,” Kaden spoke firmly.

Brix raised his hands and took a step back. *What a loser.*

“You’re not going to push me around.” I turned my back to Kaden and headed for the bar. But before I could lift one of the bottles, I was grabbed by the hips and pulled back against a hard chest.

“You’re coming home with me. Now.” Kaden’s eyes were blazing in anger.

“Or else what?” I demanded. I raised my hands and put them on his chest. When I touched him, he exhaled. Then he grabbed me by the hands. His grip was gentle.

“Don’t do it,” he murmured.

“What shouldn’t I do?” I asked in all innocence.

“Allie.”

Chills ran down my spine. I loved it when he said my name. If his voice alone could trigger this response in me ... what else could he do with me?

“I can’t go home, Kaden.”

“We don’t have to go home, if you don’t want to. But what I see going on here,” he gestured toward the table on which I’d just been dancing like a fool, “is not right.”

“How do you presume to know what’s right and wrong for me?” I demanded. By now my good mood had evaporated. Instead, a thick knot had grown in my stomach.

Kaden tipped his head and gave me a crooked smile. “Because I know you. I know how you really are, Bubbles. And the girl who just danced on the table? That’s not you.”

The knot moved up into my throat. “You don’t know me at all.” My voice broke. I sounded as weak as I felt.

“Unfortunately,” he retorted and rubbed his forehead in frustration. He took a deep breath and held out his arm to me. “Now I’d feel very connected with you if you’d cut the shit. Come with me now, or I will haul you out of here. Your choice.”

“Good. My decision,” I said, turning around to grab a random bottle of wine that I’d just spotted.

Kaden growled and made good on his threat without another word. He lifted me as effortlessly as he’d done at the waterfall. I let out a shrill scream and pounded his back, but he just clapped his free hand on my butt.

“Kaden, I swear, when we’re home I’m going to tear you to pieces!”

He laughed, and I felt its rumble pass through his body and into mine. “Let out your claws. I can hardly wait.”

The alcohol that I’d consumed at the party took its full effect on the way home. It took me several tries to get out of the Jeep, and when I’d managed it, I twisted on my high heels and nearly fell—which I found so funny that I couldn’t stop giggling.

“My God, you’re unbearable when you’re drunk,” muttered Kaden, throwing an arm around my waist.

“At least I’m only unbearable when I’m drunk.”

Kaden threw me an angry look, but I saw the hint of a smile. “Can you manage the stairs?”

I gave a haughty laugh and removed my shoes. “Good one.”

Easier said than done. I didn’t even get up the first three steps before I lost my balance and slumped to the side. With all my strength, I clung to the railing, but everything was spinning. Kaden gave an annoyed snort and held

out his arm so I could catch myself. In his other hand he held my shoes. I thought it was cute how he helped me up the stairs with this somewhat remorseful expression on his face.

Once inside the apartment, he pointed me toward the bathroom and even brought me my pajamas. Very thoughtful, I found.

While I washed my face, I held on to the rim of the sink so as not to tip over.

The cold water brought me out of the fog a bit. And suddenly I saw everything much more clearly than I'd wanted to.

My mom had found me. She wanted me to return. And worst of all: She still didn't respect my wishes. She even had the nerve to demand my gratitude for the money in my own savings account. After all that had happened.

I swallowed hard and tried to shut down my thoughts. It didn't work. My eyes were burning, but I kept on splashing cold water on my face until I had washed all the tears away. Then I brushed my teeth and slowly peeled off my dress. Once my pajamas were on, I sat on the toilet seat and buried my face in my hands.

Everything was spinning, and I heard Mom's voice repeating in my ears.

I couldn't leave this room until I was under control. Otherwise Kaden would see me, and there was no way I wanted him to know how messed up I really was.

As if he'd read my mind, he opened the door. I stayed where I was. Maybe he just wanted to brush his teeth.

"Bedtime, you boozer." Only Kaden could manage being thoughtful one moment, and rude the next.

I staggered out of the bathroom and closed the door behind me. The trip to my room seemed endless. When I finally made it, I dropped onto my sofa bed and buried my face in one of the pillows.

Don't worry.

It was nothing serious.

You can't throw it all away over such a petty thing, Crystal.

Think of your father.

What I wanted to do was hit something hard, to get rid of my anger. This afternoon, when my mother saw and spoke to me, it felt like she still had absolute power over me and my life. But she didn't! I wasn't their prisoner anymore. I had to repeat this to myself over and over again.

My door opened.

"Here."

I lifted my head. He held out his outstretched hand. Groaning, I reached for the two aspirin on his palm and took the glass of water in his other hand.

After popping the pills, I wanted to set the glass on the windowsill, but Kaden shook his head. "Drink up," he ordered.

I cursed at him, but did what he said.

"That's a good girl," he praised me with a self-satisfied grin.

"Can you leave me alone now?"

Instead of answering, Kaden plopped down on my desk chair, crossed his arms behind his head, and eyed me with suspicion.

"Good, then you can watch me sleep," I said as if I couldn't care less. I turned to my side and looked at him.

"Do you want to talk?" he asked abruptly, frowning.

"Rule one," I spouted back at him.

"I make the rules. If I ask, then I also want an answer."

I sighed. "I don't want to talk, Kaden."

He nodded, but kept his eyes on me. "Should I go?"

I thought about it. Then I shook my head. "No."

His face softened. "What was that all about? At the party, I mean."

I looked at him, and his eyes were warm. Not demanding, just offering. I didn't know if it was the alcohol working on me, or if it was Kaden, but I suddenly felt the need to tell him a few things. Not everything, but at least a part of what had made me do what I'd done this night. I sighed. "I wanted to shut off my thoughts."

"It looked as if you're an old hand at that." He didn't sound curious, but I heard his underlying question.

"I used to drink a lot, to silence my head. I stole liquor from my parents. I had friends hook me up. I guess tonight was a kind of relapse," I said, shrugging.

"Sounds as if it was loud up there pretty often," said Kaden, nodding toward my forehead.

I smiled. "There's pure chaos in my head."

He returned my smile.

"Tell me something," I said. "Anything. So I don't go nuts."

"What do you want to hear?" he asked and rubbed the back of his head.

“Your tattoos.” I pointed to his crossed arms. “I’d like to know what they mean. Especially the written parts. I’ve always wanted to know about that.”

There it was again, that crooked grin. “Slide over a bit,” he murmured and sat down beside me on the bed.

“Where should I begin?” he asked, as if the situation we were in was completely normal.

I needed a moment to collect my thoughts; then I pointed under his left arm. “With this one.”

Kaden slid closer to me and lifted his left arm to reveal the tattoo in cursive script. “I had this one done when I was sixteen. I drove all the way up to Vancouver to get it done, since no one around here can ink a minor.”

With great power comes great responsibility.

“Spider-Man?” I asked grinning.

Kaden blinked at me, surprised.

“My mom lost it when she saw the tat. I was grounded for at least a month.”

He rubbed his finger over the words.

“Which one’s next?”

“The rings,” I said, and ran my finger over the topmost pattern encircling his biceps. For the first time I noticed that there were a few very finely drawn points and lines above it. As I traced the pattern, Kaden seemed to hold his breath.

“I was between eighteen and nineteen when I had that one made.” He rubbed his thumb over the spot. “I was in a difficult phase. But I got over it. Every ring stands for a month that I survived.”

“Why are they different widths?”

He swallowed hard and avoided my gaze. “The first are wider because I was in the most pain. At some point things eased up, so the circles are thinner.”

“The top one above the rings looks like a kind of code,” I murmured.

“Damn.” Kaden gave a half smile. “I didn’t think you’d notice.”

My eyes grew round. “Please don’t tell me it’s the name of your ex, Kaden.”

“Would that be so bad?”

“You poor boy,” I said and patted his arm. “And this reminds you of her every day?”

He shook his head. “I’m not that crazy.”

“No?” I teased, which made him cuff my knee through the blanket. I screeched but Kaden didn’t react.

“It says ‘Rachel’ in Morse code.”

“I hope you didn’t break Rachel’s heart,” I said, looking at the points.

“Yes, I did. With every single tattoo. My mom doesn’t like them.”

“Wait—you got your mom’s named tattooed onto you?” I asked, in surprised.

“What of it?”

I held my hands to my heart.

He made a face. “What’s next?”

I wanted to save the multi-lined text on his other forearm for last. “The feather on your back.”

“You little spy.”

“How can I help it if you drag me to a waterfall and strip in front of me?”

I’d ever seen Kaden smile so much. This whole situation was surreal—I was probably just hallucinating. Or drunk. Definitely drunk.

“I told you about my dad,” he began, and I nodded. Of course, I remembered what he said about this awful man. Kaden looked away and slid back on the bed until he could rest his back on the wall. “The feather is my newest tattoo. This might sound ridiculous ... but it stands for freedom. It took me a long time until I managed to split from my father. But ever since I did it, I’ve finally felt free. The feather is there so I never forget.”

At that moment that lightning struck.

“You have no idea just how well I can imagine that. I wish I had a feather somewhere on my body,” I murmured.

He looked down at me and smiled. “After having the honor of meeting your mother, I believe it.”

I stiffened. I didn’t want to think about my mother. Not now. I pointed to the last tattoo. “What does this writing mean?”

Kaden twisted his body and showed me the inner side of his arm. I squinted.

*It's time to forget about the past
To wash away what happened last
Hide behind an empty face
Don't ask too much, just say
'Cause this is just a game*

I held my breath. It couldn't be true. Kaden couldn't have these exact words on his arm.

"Oh my God," I exclaimed in disbelief.

It was the second stanza of *A Beautiful Lie* by Thirty Seconds to Mars. The lyrics of my favorite song were tattooed on Kaden's arm.

I blinked several times, but the black letters remained.

"I think we have more in common than you think, Bubbles." Kaden lowered his arm and slid down a bit so we were lying next to one another. I turned on my side. My heart was pounding wildly.

I looked up. His caramel-colored eyes were gleaming.

"I should go," he murmured.

"You should."

Neither of us made any attempt to get up. Instead, we looked at each other until my eyelids became heavy. Enveloped by Kaden's spicy fragrance and the warmth of his body, and with his stories in my ear, I fell asleep.

Chapter 12

Bright light pierced through the curtains and blinded me. I blinked and stretched lazily until I felt something heavy on my stomach. I turned my head and held my breath.

Kaden.

Kaden White was in my bed.

And he had an arm draped over me.

Judging by the pounding in my head, last night hadn't been a dream. Nor a hallucination or delusion. Smiling, I observed my roommate and decided to make this moment last as long as possible.

Then I felt his fingers on my naked belly. And froze. I didn't dare move when Kaden stroked my skin again. A shiver spread over my entire body. I felt the urge to press myself against him, to wrap my arms around him, to bury my nose in his chest so that I could breathe in his smell.

This wasn't good.

I gingerly removed his hand from my belly and sat up. Then I crawled as quietly I could to the end of the bed and swung my feet over the edge.

On tiptoes I snuck out of my room into the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee. Then I went to the bathroom to brush my teeth. As I washed the last traces of the night before from my face, I decided to make scrambled eggs and pancakes for breakfast. My stomach might be queasy, but I knew from experience that a good breakfast was one of the best cures for a hangover.

I had just taken the eggs out of the fridge when I heard my bedroom door open. With the carton in my hand I turned toward Kaden. I didn't know what to expect, but ...

In a few steps he'd crossed the living room and closed his bedroom door behind him. I pursed my lips and stared at the closed door. Something banged. As if he had thrown a shoe against the wall.

He'd probably thought last night was awful. First my mother showed up, then he had to cancel his own plans for the evening and bring me home in my inebriated state. And then, the intimate moments in my room ... That was definitely too much for him.

But it was too much for me, too. I was hoping we'd have closed the gap between us by now. Maybe we weren't really friends yet. But we had at least worked out how to live together like two normal people.

Another bang.

I guess I was wrong about that.

Sighing, I finished my breakfast and dragged myself back to my room. The entire bed still smelled of Kaden. I lit my candles and opened the window. Less than a minute later I heard him in the kitchen.

Great.

Back to square one.

That afternoon I went to see Dawn, to apologize. Luckily her roommate wasn't home.

"Hey," I said, as Dawn opened the door.

She looked at me just as guiltily, but she had no reason to feel that way. I was the one who'd screwed up last night.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie," I blurted out and raised my hands. "I didn't want to leave you in the lurch. I don't know what I ... "

I didn't get any further. Dawn threw her arms around me and hugged me hard. "Kaden told me that your mom just showed up on your doorstep."

I stiffened. "Oh, did he?"

"Only after I called to ask him to pick us up. He didn't give me any details, so don't look so pissed off," she said and dragged me into her room. "I was just worried about you. You had so much to drink, and then those weird guys were all over you."

"It's okay. You were just being a good friend. And I on the other hand was an idiot." I sighed. "Dawn, I'm sorry. I should have talked with you or someone else, instead of losing it like that."

She nodded. "Don't worry about it. Everyone has something that weighs on them that they don't like to talk about. For me it's my ex." She shuddered. "So no worries. I just hope Kaden wasn't too nasty."

My expression must have changed radically, because Dawn sat down immediately and stared at me, eyes wide.

"Wait a minute. You didn't ...?"

"No!" I cried, indignant. "He ... he just brought me to bed. And then stomped off to his room in the morning, as if I'd tried to rape him."

Dawn laughed. “I don’t believe a word. The bro with 100 rules for proper cohabitation brought you *to bed*?” She made imaginary quote marks in the air.

I nodded and told her what happened. Frowning, Dawn pulled her hair out of her face.

“Will you tell me about your mom?” Dawn finally asked, her voice soft.

I swallowed hard and shook my head. “Actually, I just want to forget this encounter.”

“I’m good at that, believe me,” Dawn sighed. “My ex tried to call me many times.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Watch out that he doesn’t show up at the door,” I joked. The color drained so fast from Dawn’s face that my smile disappeared. “It was just a dumb joke!”

She clapped her hands. “I think we should indulge in a repression beauty program, with homemade facials and a trip to the movies. What do you say?”

I agreed.

The more time passed, the better I felt. It did me a lot of good to spend time with Dawn. It was like balm for my soul, and I felt like everything was going to be all right.

When I came home that night, Kaden wasn’t there. Nor the next morning. He hadn’t texted me, hadn’t left a note on the fridge, saying where he was. I figured that he must have hooked up with someone and spent the night with her. I practically wanted to slap myself over the sting that these thoughts spread through my body.

Still, the apartment felt empty without Kaden.

Chapter 13

Kaden had been gone for two days. But in the morning I had seen him from a distance on his way to a seminar on campus.

“Did you see? The grades from the lit exam are in,” said Grace, who sat next to me in the Film and TV class. “I barely passed.” She wiped her forehead and grinned at us. Everyone took out their cell phones and logged into the university network.

Dawn shouted and hopped up and down beside me. “Thank God. I made it!”

I stared at my phone screen as the site loaded. Madison, sitting next to Grace, slumped down with relief. “Me, too.”

Scott groaned. “Failed.”

“Oh no, Scott.” Dawn patted his arm. “Don’t worry about it. You have two more chances.”

He stretched out his arms and laid his head on them. “Damn.”

I swallowed hard as I saw that the site had finished loading. I scrolled down.

Literature—fail.

A wave of disappointment overcame me, and I felt nauseated.

But then I felt the expectant glances of my classmates on me.

“And you, Allie?” Dawn ventured.

I cleared my throat and took a deep breath. I didn’t want to show how disappointed I was.

“I’m afraid we’re going to have to study together, Scott,” I said with a crooked grin.

Scott held out his hand for a high five.

“You’ve passed all the rest,” Grace said, encouragingly. “Right?”

I nodded. I had passed all the other exams.

Okay, the grades weren’t the best, but that was the case for many of my classmates, too.

“You see?” Dawn elbowed me in the side. “Then we’ll work on it together. You guys will make it.”

I nodded and forced out a smile.

The rest of the day, I brooded. I could hardly concentrate in my other classes, because two words were louder in my head than any others.

You failed.

If I couldn't make it through the first semester, how could I finish my degree? I kept thinking about my mother. She would be thrilled about my failure. Not only because she could hit me over the head with a satisfied, "I told you so." But mainly because she wanted me back in Lincoln by Thanksgiving at the latest.

I closed the apartment door and took off my shoes. As expected, Kaden wasn't home.

Morose, I went into the kitchen and took the ice cream from the freezer. I stuck the scoop into the hard mass and dug out a large portion.

You're letting yourself go, I heard the voice of my mother inside my head. I swallowed hard and slammed the ice cream container onto the counter.

It wasn't just that my mother had found me ... No. Now I was slipping into old behavior patterns. The emptiness inside me was back, and I didn't know how to fill it. Only with Kaden did I feel like myself. But he hadn't even looked my way for days.

A big lump formed in my throat.

Maybe Mom was right.

Maybe I'd made a huge mistake by moving. I could've had a good job with Dad's company. He had contacts all over the world—maybe I could have lived abroad for a while. Instead, here I was in a shared apartment with a guy who hated me, and I'd failed a major exam, no less.

Was that the freedom for which I'd left home and moved to Woodhill?

Cut out this ridiculous rebellion.

As if hobbled, I walked toward my room and stood in the doorway.

The string lights, the throw blanket, the candles ... I was just a stupid kid who'd just done what was forbidden for so long, without thinking about the consequences.

I let out a whimper, which grew into a growl. I entered the room with determination.

It had been a crazy idea. A failed experiment. Some things just couldn't be escaped, no matter how hard you tried. If Mom wanted me to accept her fucking legacy, I had no choice. And probably I wouldn't be able to become

a teacher anyway, since I'd already failed an exam and my parents would be cutting off their financial support. What then?

My cheeks burning, I tore my suitcase out from behind the dresser and started shoveling my belongings into it. First my books and the perfume bottles from the shelf. Then I tore open the dresser drawers. Some of my clothes poured out on the floor. I cursed. The heat in me was building.

"What are you doing?"

I didn't stop. Who cared if Kaden found it appropriate to talk with me again?

"What does it look like?" I shot back, without looking at him.

"You look like a madwoman tearing her room apart."

I turned to glare at him.

"I'm packing."

"What for?"

"I'm going home." I managed to squeeze out the words, though I could hardly call Lincoln, Nebraska home. Not after I'd learned what it felt like to be happy somewhere.

"Why?" he probed, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

I had to pull myself together, not to yell at him. "Is this the Inquisition?"

He lifted his shoulders, and a smile twitched on his lips.

A fuse burned through in my brain. "I don't know why you have to show up now of all times, when you've done everything in the past few days to avoid me."

Now he grinned.

"Oh, admit it. You missed me."

Snorting, I turned back around and threw more of my stuff into the suitcase. Finding his sweater in my dresser, I threw it at him. To my surprise, he caught it. Now I was so mad that couldn't do anything but stare into the empty drawer, panting.

"Does your mother have you deeper in her claws?" Kaden came closer. "You don't have to do what she wants, Allie. No idea what she did to you, but now you can do and be what you want."

I turned and paused for a second. "You might have this luxury. Not me."

"Why not?" He looked serious.

"Can't you just leave me alone?" I asked.

"No."

“Good, let me put it another way: Please leave me alone and find a girl who can deal with your shit! I don’t have the time or desire to deal with your mood swings.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Mood swings? Look who’s talking!”

I wanted to stamp my feet.

“I don’t really care what you think of me, Bubbles,” he said. His arrogant grin and the way he inspected me with his eyes made me mad.

“Don’t call me that,” I growled.

“Shall I call you Crystal instead?”

A bolt of lightning struck me, and I froze.

You’re beautiful, Crystal.

My lower lip began to tremble, I raised my arms and pushed them against Kaden’s chest. He staggered back, but quickly recovered. “Leave. Me. Alone.”

Kaden didn’t even consider it. Instead, he made the mistake of coming closer. I drew back.

“I know you’re used to keeping people away. But I’ll say it again: If I ask what’s up, I want an answer.”

His gaze was fixed on my face.

“I don’t care what you want,” I hissed. “It’s not about you, okay?”

He raised a skeptical eyebrow.

“Yeah, well, maybe a little. First my mother shows up, and you are so attentive that I have to ask myself if it’s really *you*, and that night you bring me to bed and tell me all these personal things until my head is buzzing.” I took a deep breath and shook my head. “That was just too much, Kaden. It’s not that I *wanted* to break your stupid rules. It just happened! That’s no reason for you to ignore me for days. For God’s sake, I’ve been worried about you!”

He opened his mouth but I wasn’t done yet.

“And then there’s my mom, your disappearance, my failed lit exam, and I get the feeling that everything is going downhill. All I wanted was freedom. And now I feel just as locked up as I did a few months back. I can’t breathe anymore, everything’s turning to shit, not to mention that I’ve gained weight and—”

“Allie,” Kaden said, reaching for my shoulders.

“No!” I cried, raising my chin. “You can’t just show up, make fun of me, order me to tell you about my problems, when all you want ... ”

I didn’t get any further.

Kaden leaned forward and pressed his lips to mine.

I froze. Words were still ready to pour out of me, but suddenly there was only Kaden, covering my cheeks with his warm, rough hands and pushing me against the dresser with his body. His hips ground against mine, and his lips barred any further word from me.

He stroked my cheeks with his thumbs and then I felt his tongue on my lips. Not insistent, but cautious. Like a question that needed answering.

I wrapped my arms around Kaden’s shoulders and gave him the answer he’d been waiting for. A low sound came from his throat. His hands traveled down to my waist. Of their own accord, my legs wrapped around him as he lifted me up and sat me on the dresser. He put one hand on my back and pulled me toward the edge.

His tongue slowly stroked my lower lip. I sighed into his mouth as he gently sucked my lip between his teeth; I ran my hands down his back to his narrow hips. His body felt just like I’d imagined it would.

Panting, he broke away from me. My eyes were still closed.

The guys I’d kissed before didn’t know what they were doing—that I now understood. I’d never been kissed *this* way. So wild and so gentle, at the same time.

Dazed, I blinked.

“I should do this from now on, if you don’t stop talking.” Kaden gave me one of his crooked smiles.

I no longer had the strength to punch him, though that’s what I wanted to do. Instead, I leaned my head forward, resting it on his chest.

Kaden dug his hand into my hair. “How about you unpack, and I order pizza?”

I murmured in assent, but didn’t budge.

Suddenly Kaden’s hands were around my ribs. He lifted me from the dresser and put me down on two feet. But my legs wobbled like Jell-O.

“Unpack,” he commanded, and went to the door. He turned around again to me, his gaze gliding from my flushed cheeks down my entire body. He shook his head and whispered, “Damn.”

How right he was.

“I hereby give you permission to cry,” Kaden said solemnly as I entered the living room. The pizza was already on the coffee table.

I grinned in spite of myself. “How nice of you. But I don’t think it’s necessary.”

“No?” He pointed to the pizza. “Are you sure?”

I looked at him. “Where were you the last few days?” I whispered.

Kaden leaned back on the sofa. “With Spencer.”

“How come?”

“The pizza’s getting cold.” He avoided looking at me, and reached for a napkin.

“How come?” I asked again and sat down on the opposite side of the sofa.

Kaden groaned. “Can’t we just leave it at that?”

“No.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You’re pretty sassy for someone who just got the best kiss of her life.”

“And you’re pretty full of yourself for an average kisser,” I shot back.

Kaden squinted at me, then stood up. “What did you just say?”

Before he could get any dumb ideas, I grabbed a slice of pizza from the table and bit into it. “I think you’re a mediocre kisser.”

Snorting, he sank back into the middle of the sofa. “I don’t believe you.”

I just shrugged and grinned with my mouth full. To be honest, I had felt Kaden’s kiss in every nook and cranny of my body. But I wasn’t about to let him know that.

We ate our pizza in silence.

“So, why did you want to leave?” Kaden asked after a while.

I stared at the wood grain of the table so I wouldn’t have to look at him. “Do we have to talk about it?”

“Yes. That’s the price of the pizza,” he said.

Now my ears pricked up. “So I don’t have to help pay for this if I tell you what’s up?”

“Exactly.” Kaden fixed his eyes on me.

“I failed my lit exam,” I admitted.

“If my escape instinct kicked in each time I failed an exam, I’d be halfway around the world by now,” he said, his mouth full of pizza.

I sniffed.

“Most people don’t pass Professor Falcony’s exam the first time around,” he continued, lifting his shoulders. “I didn’t either until the second try. So that’s not a legitimate reason to disappear without a trace.”

I pulled a long thread of cheese from my pizza slice and shoved it in my mouth.

“Would you have left without saying goodbye? Without letting me know?” His voice had become soft.

“I thought that ... After Saturday night, you avoided me. I thought you wouldn’t want to have me around here anymore.”

“Why do you always expect the worst? I’m not such an asshole, either.” He didn’t sound reproachful, just surprised.

I raised my eyebrows.

“Okay, I can be an asshole. But ... ” He paused and shook his head. Then he leaned back and rubbed his face.

“But what?” I frowned. “You stormed out of my room as if I’d tried to rape you.”

“You could never rape me, Bubbles.” He shook his head and grinned. “Anything you do to me would be fine.”

“You can’t say things like that and then insist on your stupid rules!” I exclaimed, frowning.

“I can do what I like. If I want to be suggestive, then I do it. If I want to go hiking with you, I do it. And if I want to kiss you,” he leaned in with one hand on either side of me, “then I will do that, too, dammit. They’re *my* rules.”

His nose was now only a few millimeters away from mine. I held my breath, but didn’t move back.

“And I decide who can kiss me, Kaden.” My voice was a bit throaty, but firm. “You can’t act like a cave man, using sexual favors to shut me up. That’s not how it works.”

For a split second, surprise flashed in his eyes. “I didn’t want to shut you up.”

“Yeah, right.”

He frowned. “I only wanted you to calm down. Your hysteria was freaking me out.”

I had to smile.

Kaden noticed it, relieved. Then his eyes wandered from my mouth back to my eyes. “Talk to me.”

“We are talking,” I retorted. My cheeks were growing hot, he was that close to me.

“Tell me what put that strong, positive-thinking young woman into such a panic. Come on, you like to talk. What’s stopping you now?”

My throat was dry as the desert. To avoid talking, I tried to take another bite of my pizza. But before I could, Kaden plucked it out of my hand and put it back on my plate.

“Allie.”

A shiver electrified my body. I couldn’t avoid his urgent gaze.

“What do you care?” I asked, barely audible.

Kaden tilted his head. “Don’t read too much into it. I just want to know what’s up with you.”

His insistent look told me loud and clear that I shouldn’t even bother trying to hide myself from him again, in whatever way I might’ve done.

“If it helps you to talk,” he murmured. “We’re kind of friends, aren’t we?”

I shrugged. “Kind of.”

“Okay! So friends talk to each other about stuff like this.”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I couldn’t tell Kaden the real reason for my fear. I’d been silent for so long ... It was as if I wasn’t able to tell the truth anymore.

My tongue felt heavy and my chest tight. I’d never told anyone before. Only mom knew the truth. And she’d forbade me from breathing a word about it. The longer I’d suppressed the truth, the higher the wall around my heart grew. Nothing and no one could penetrate it. And that included Kaden.

“I can’t,” I pushed out the words. “I’m sorry. I just can’t.”

Kaden sighed. He grabbed me firmly by my upper arms, and when he leaned back on the sofa, I had no choice but to move with him. My head landed on his shoulder, my body lay stretched out against his. I stiffened as I felt his grip around my hips, but then his other hand stroked my arm, up to my shoulder and down again, and I realized that he only wanted to hold me. I stopped fighting myself, and the tears came. All the words I couldn’t say ran silently from the corners of my eyes and fell on Kaden’s shirt, one tear after the next, until a huge wet spot appeared.

Kaden just held me tight. He didn’t say a word about my state, didn’t crack any jokes about me, didn’t pressure me to tell him more.

He was just there for me. And that was more than I'd ever expected from him.

Chapter 14

I studied like mad for the make-up exam. Scott, Dawn, and I met every evening to cram, though Dawn was already studying for the next test.

Tonight, Kaden had even let us study in the living room, though Spencer, Monica and Ethan had come over.

I'd already spotted Spencer staring at Dawn more than once. When I nudged her to call this to her attention, she wrinkled her nose and blushed.

"So what are you all doing for Thanksgiving?" asked Spencer.

"We're already arguing again about which family we should visit first," Monica sighed.

I stared at my notebook. The letters danced in front of my eyes. I'd managed to avoid this unfortunate subject the whole week. I didn't feel like explaining my awful family situation to my friends.

"I'm not sure yet. My mom will probably be with her new boyfriend. I think she's meeting his kids," I heard Kaden say.

"What are you doing for Thanksgiving?" Dawn asked, and I stiffened. I tore my eyes away from Kaden and looked back down at my notebook.

"I don't know yet." That was the truth. Under no circumstances did I want to go to my parents' benefit gala.

Scott sighed. "OK, so *I'm* meeting up with Micah."

He's already told us about his new flame—in great detail. But we'd never met him face to face.

"For your information: We'll spend the evening all over each other," Scott declared. Dawn and I lost it.

"Please spare us the details," laughed Dawn.

"Why? Just because you're having a dry spell I can't brag about my sexual adventures? Don't be selfish!" His wry sarcasm was so over the top that I had to laugh even louder.

"I'm not having a dry spell," Dawn growled, her face expressionless and shoulders stiff.

"Just in case, I'm happy to help," Spencer proposed.

I shot him a warning look. Dawn just shook her head and groaned.

By the time evening rolled around, smoke was coming out of my ears, and my friends also looked like they could use a break. Kaden and company had already put on their jackets and were getting ready to head for Hillhouse. The rest of us rashly decided to join them, even though we had our exam the next day. Just one drink, we agreed, to reward ourselves for a long day of studying. I'd reached the point where my brain was unlikely to absorb more information anyway—and what I really needed was fresh air and a distraction.

When we got to the club, we grabbed a table. Kaden and I ended up next to each other on the bench. Next to Kaden sat Monica and Ethan, and across from us were Spencer, Scott and Dawn. Blue light bathed the room; the air smelled of alcohol and the artificial mist that floated over the dance floor.

We ordered a pitcher of beer and toasted to ourselves. It was a nice change of pace to talk about something other than school. Instead, Monica told us how she'd met everyone else. She and Ethan had met in a class on applied thermodynamics—Monica, who actually was majoring in art history, had ended up in this class by accident—and they fell head over heels in love at first sight. That was two years ago already. Ethan had lived with Kaden since his first semester, and was already friends with Spencer. They'd met a few years back in Portland.

"Kaden was in his Goth phase at the time. I mean, he even wore eyeliner," recalled Spencer with an amused twinkle in his eyes.

"I did not." Kaden's tone left no doubt that this was a phase he didn't like to remember.

"No, your eyes were naturally lined in black," Spencer sniffed, leaning back.

"And you had no hair back then," Kaden reminded him. "What was that again? A bet you lost?"

Spencer snorted. "At least I didn't get tattoos that would remind me every day of my life as a lovesick teenager."

I could feel the atmosphere changing from one moment to the next.

"What did you say?" asked Kaden. His voice sounded like the calm before the storm—soft but dangerous.

Spencer raised his hands in surrender. "Sorry, man."

My eyes darted from Spencer to Kaden and back.

"Did you really have the name of your ex tattooed, or why are you so upset?" Scott asked, leaning in. He seemed to be the only one of us who

hadn't noticed the shifting mood.

Kaden rose so suddenly that he jarred the table. He edged past me without speaking.

"Did you have to, Spencer?" I heard Monica ask. I was watching Kaden heading past the dance floor, probably toward the bar.

"I thought he was over it," Ethan said.

"Dare I ask what this is all about?" Dawn probed.

Monica started to answer her, but I couldn't concentrate on the conversation anymore. All I wanted to do was go to Kaden. Not only because he had been there for me over the last week, but because ... well, I just had the feeling he needed me now.

I excused myself and got up. Ignoring Dawn's questioning glance, I walked in the same direction I'd seen Kaden go.

I spotted him on a barstool. He was drumming his fingers on the counter and was staring at the whiskey glass in front of him. He moved his knee to the beat of the song playing in the background. I approached him and stopped by his side, at the bar. He stiffened.

"Not now, Bubbles," he growled and turned away.

I could understand him so well. When the subject of Thanksgiving had come up earlier, there was nothing I wanted more than to disappear into my room. I knew how he was feeling—and I also didn't want to push him to talk about something if he didn't want to.

I put my hand on his arm. He swung around to face me, his narrowed eyes throwing sparks. "I said—"

"Dance with me," I said in a firm, composed tone.

He drew his eyebrows together and looked at me with suspicion. "What?"

"Dance with me," I repeated, tugging his arm.

Kaden's eyes grew wide. He seemed too surprised to resist. He slipped off the barstool and let me lead him to the middle of the dance floor.

I closed my eyes and let the music in. It was loud and vibrated through my body. I started to move. As soon as I felt the beat, I opened my eyes again. Kaden was frozen in place, staring down at me. I stood on tiptoe until my mouth reached his ear.

"Stop worrying," I whispered. "Dance."

I ran my hand through my hair and then rested my fingers on Kaden's shoulder. His lips were parted, his eyelids half closed. Suddenly I felt

something touch my hip, and in a second Kaden had pressed my entire body against his. For a moment I lost my breath. Kaden's grip was firm, his expression unreadable.

My heart beat faster, and my hand drifted over his stomach to his chest and higher. Kaden drew in his breath as my fingers grazed the crook of his neck. His gloomy expression was gone.

We danced and danced. We turned off our thoughts, forgot everything around us, and let ourselves go. I didn't know how long we were moving together to the rhythm of the music, but at some point I felt weightless. Only the touch of Kaden's hands kept my feet on the ground. His movements slowed until we were almost standing still.

"I want to go home," he whispered into my ear.

I looked up at him. His face was glistening with sweat and his expression veiled, but he didn't seem as tense as before.

"Okay. If you need some time to yourself, I'll rejoin the others," I said, trying to be relaxed. But a certain gruffness in my voice betrayed how I felt. "They're probably worried."

"I don't think I made myself clear." Kaden pulled me close again. He bent his head down until his hair touched my forehead. "We're going home now. You and me. Together."

I caught my breath and nodded as if in a trance. It felt as if Kaden emitted a magical force that I was powerless to resist. There was no more distance between us—and I didn't mean only physical distance.

Without another word, he took me by the hand and led me out of the club. Even when we got outside he didn't let go, but pulled me all the way home—which wasn't far. He mounted the stairs in record speed and opened the door with such force that it banged against the wall.

"Kaden!" I shouted, starting at the noise.

Suddenly I felt my back against the wall; Kaden took my face in his hands. Before I could gasp for air, he kissed me.

For a second I was frozen, then I returned his kiss with fire. I dug my fingers into his shoulder, stroked his neck with my other hand. He moaned.

At that moment nothing existed for me except Kaden.

His fingers pushed up under my shirt. Then he pressed his hips against mine. And what I felt there ripped me out of my feverish dream state.

Hallelujah.

I placed my hands on his chest and pushed him back. Panting, he looked down at me. His eyes were shining.

“What are we doing?” I whispered, shaken.

Kaden reached over me and leaned with his arm against the wall. His other hand was still supporting my back. It seemed like he didn’t want to let go.

“I thought you wanted to distract me,” he said, his voice rough.

His words felt like a bucket of ice-cold water in my face.

“No.” I wriggled free and slipped past him into the living room.

“What do you mean, no?” Kaden asked, right behind me. He tried to hold me but I tore my arm away.

“No!” I shouted and turned around.

Kaden looked confused. He blinked several times. “But you were the one who asked me to dance!”

Stunned, I shook my head. “But I didn’t want to get you in bed! I wanted to distract you.”

“Oh, really?” he demanded. He stepped toward me.

I backed away. I knew I would lose all self-control if he touched me again as he had.

“Kaden,” I said in an anxious quiet tone.

He raised an eyebrow and took another step toward me. “Allie.”

I shook my head and held him back with a hand on his chest.

“It’s not going to happen. Not this way, under these conditions.”

Kaden stared at my hand, which still lay over his pounding heart, as if he had only just understood the situation we were in and what we had almost done.

I decided the best thing for me to do was go to my room. But before I could step back, he placed his hand over mine and pressed it against his chest. He lowered his head, and for a moment I was afraid he’d kiss me again. But he didn’t. Instead, he placed his forehead against mine and closed his eyes. We stayed in this position, and I felt his heartbeat return to normal.

“I’m going to sleep now,” I murmured.

Kaden stepped back and released my hand. He looked at me with an expression I couldn’t quite define—sad and wistful at the same time.

In the end, this had all been meant as a distraction for him. It was oh-so-familiar to me. Three years ago I’d done the exact same thing night after night. It meant nothing.

“Good night, Allie.” Kaden’s voice sounded throaty.

“Good night, Kaden.”

Chapter 15

My pen scratched on the paper as I feverishly wrote my last answer. Just as Professor Falcony's timer chimed, I put my pen down.

This time I wouldn't fail. I was 100 percent sure. I turned around to Scott, who was sitting two rows back. He was shuffling his pages into order. When he saw my searching look, he gave me a thumbs-up. I sighed with relief. We'd both made it.

We drove downtown to meet Dawn at an Italian restaurant that supposedly served the best pasta in town. I could already see her red hair when we turned onto the street. Luckily, I found a parking spot close to the restaurant.

Dawn saw us getting out of the car. She raised an arm high and started to wave. She looked jittery.

"How'd it go?" she asked right away, hugging us both.

"Well, I think. At least we could both answer all the questions," Scott said. He shrugged, but I knew how relieved he was. Same for me.

"I knew you'd make it!" Smiling brilliantly, Dawn turned and pushed open the door to the bistro. The scent of fresh pizza and pasta overcame me, I couldn't wait to order.

After we'd sat down and looked at the menu, we talked about the exam. Dawn wanted to know every little detail, but Scott and I were exhausted. When the waiter returned and took our order, Scott turned the conversation in another direction: "I think we should go out partying before all the exams from now on," he said and tore off a piece of the bread that the waiter had brought with our drinks. "I've hardly ever slept so well as I did last night."

I murmured in assent and took a sip of water. "Same here."

"To be honest, I'm surprised you got any sleep at all last night." Dawn peered at me over the edge of her glass, and then raised an eyebrow, which disappeared under her bangs.

"What do you mean?"

Scott and Dawn exchanged a glance.

"Yeah, well, you practically threw yourself at Kaden when he disappeared on us yesterday," Dawn began.

“And then we watched your dance performance,” Scott leaned in a bit over the table.

“Sweetie, you can’t fool us. You didn’t see what we saw,” he added.

I pursed my lips and considered just how much I could—or wanted to—tell my friends.

After last night I hadn’t seen Kaden again. When I left the apartment this morning to do some last minute studying with Scott, Kaden was still asleep. Honestly, I was kind of glad about that—and then I managed to push the entire previous night out of my thoughts ... until now.

“Nothing—”

“If you say ‘nothing happened’ then I’m gonna shove your face right into your pasta,” Dawn threatened, her spoon held high, though our food hadn’t even arrived.

Again, I looked from one to the other. Then I sighed and leaned back with arms crossed. “We just danced.”

“Oh yeah, how?” Scott waggled his brows so much that I was almost afraid they’d fall off and crawl toward me like caterpillars.

“So?” Elbows on the table, Dawn stared me down. “Do we have to worry about interrupting you in the middle of something every time we come over?”

“Listen, people, that’s not how it was,” I insisted.

“Then tell us what really happened—come on!” Scott said, his tone playful.

Did I have to? “I just wanted to distract him, okay? Spencer’s stupid comment hurt him, so I went over and danced with him just to take his mind off it.” I paused, seeking the right words. “But he kind of took it the wrong way.”

I ended up telling them that Kaden kissed me, which wasn’t a lie, but made the whole thing seem a little less serious than it had really been. No sooner did I finish telling my story, than the waiter served our pasta, and I smiled up at him. After he’d gone, Scott and Dawn stared at me in disbelief.

“So now what?” Dawn egged me on.

“Hm?” I mumbled with my mouth full.

“What happens next for you two!?” Scott chimed in.

I sighed and set down my fork. “I’m not planning to start anything with Kaden. The situation is out of control.”

Now the images from last night reappeared. How Kaden had pressed me against the wall and literally taken my breath away.

But last night hadn't meant anything—I had to repeat it to myself over and over. I was not Kaden's plaything, a toy he could have fun with whenever he wanted, and that he could just as easily ignore. I didn't want to be that for anyone, ever again—I'd made up my mind long ago.

But last night as I lay awake, agitated and confused and only able to think about his hands on my body, something had become clear. No matter how hard I fought against it, I felt more than a physical attraction to Kaden. I *liked* him. And I thought I understood him. But after last night I didn't know how I could face him again. He knew what I thought of his come-on, but what would that mean for us?

I stared at my plate and shoveled more pasta into my mouth. This is what it was like to enjoy food without regret. No wonder I'd gained more weight. Thanks for the reminder, *Mom*.

"Let's leave it at that for today, Scott," Dawn suggested. Then she leaned across the table and patted my arm. "I know how hard it is for you to talk about stuff like this. And I think you deserve a round of applause for dealing with us."

I stared at her, unsure of what to say.

"Right," Scott said. "But at some point I want all the hot details, Allie. You can't hold back something like that from me. That goes against our rules of friendship."

I almost choked on my noodles. "There's a rule that says I have to tell you about my love life?"

"Of course! After all, I tell you both everything about me and Micah."

"Yes, without us even asking, my dear," Dawn said, patting Scott's shoulder. I nodded vigorously.

Scott lamented: "Oh, children. You have a lot to learn."

I looked down at my plate to avoid eye contact with Dawn. Otherwise we'd probably both have burst out laughing.

"I have to pack," Dawn said after dabbing her mouth with her napkin.

"What for?" I blurted out, and then realized how stupid that sounded. Of course. Today was the last day of classes before Thanksgiving break. Dawn would head home to her father this weekend.

"Actually, I'm not up for spending my vacation with Dad. Nate's family will be there, and if he comes, then I can't guarantee what will happen. The

whole thing could end in a bloodbath.”

I bit my lower lip. My exams had preoccupied me so much that I didn’t know the latest between Dawn and her ex.

“I’m not sure your father understands that you don’t want to see Nate,” I said, concerned.

Dawn glanced at me. “I’ll survive it somehow,” she said after a pause. “At least I have other family I can visit.”

Her comment hit me like a slap.

Realizing what she’d said, Dawn looked at me, eyes wide: “Oh God, Allie, I didn’t mean it that way.”

“It’s okay.” I put on a mechanical smile, surprising myself that I could still do so at the push of a button. Some things you never unlearn.

“I really didn’t mean it like that. You told me about your mom’s shitty behavior, and you said you didn’t know if you wanted to go back home, and so I just thought that you—”

“Really. No worries,” I raised my hands in a gesture of peace.

“It’s totally cool not to go home for Thanksgiving, Allie. I prefer to spend my time off with Micah,” Scott sighed.

I swallowed hard, but kept on smiling. Dawn would go home even though she didn’t want to, but she’d be glad to see her dad and not have to be alone. Scott wouldn’t be with his family because he’d rather be with his boyfriend on the holiday. That was the difference between us. I would be sitting alone in my apartment, staring at the dented wall against which my roommate had pressed me in a frenzy, and reveling in passionate memories. I’d probably eat ice cream and watch a movie. Or cry. Or maybe all of the above.

Feeling a bit queasy, I said goodbye to my friends. I reassured Dawn that I was fine, but we both knew that wasn’t true. To be honest, I felt crappy. I’d come down from the post-exam high and was back to obsessing about my mother.

Would I ever be free of her and able to do what I’d always wanted to do, without feeling sick?

I should savor this feeling of freedom and be glad that for the first time I could spend Thanksgiving thousands of miles away from my parents. No obligations. No pressure.

But I couldn’t convince myself. My longing for freedom was struggling against my guilt. And my fear of being alone.

Jared Leto distracted me with his own cries of pain. I'd turned up my car stereo, almost full blast.

Without thinking about where I was heading, I found myself at the edge of town. I hadn't taken this route alone yet, but something in my subconscious mind seemed to have led me here—where I could feel freedom with my whole body.

A trail of dust followed my car as I drove to the deserted parking area at the foot of Mount Wilson. I wondered if I should hike all the way to the top. Yes. Yes, I should. Without giving it much thought, I decided to take my phone along.

I walked to the first fork, the route Kaden and I had taken last time. Though I wasn't wearing my hiking shoes, my leather boots seemed to do the trick. I dug my feet hard into the muddy earth.

Maybe this would help me get rid of my anger. And the pain that raged deep inside me when I thought about Thanksgiving break.

No idea how long I walked. At some point, after I'd taken many turns and couldn't make out a trodden path anymore, I took a break. The air had become cool.

Rested, I kept going. The waterfall must be somewhere to my right, it just had to be.

By the time I took my next break half an hour later, it was already pretty dark under the trees. Were those the eyes of animals reflecting back to me from the tangled brush? The fog was thickening.

I looked around, discouraged. My goal had been to hike up to the top of the mountain, to reclaim that feeling of freedom. I wanted to shout my frustration to the world, where no one would hear me. But now here I was, up to my ankles in mud.

Now, which direction had I come from? There was no way to tell. Nothing but leaves. Tree trunks. Thick brush. Everything looked the same in every direction.

The exercise was pointless.

My own tracks weren't even visible. Now I thought of Kaden's advice.

Less talking, more walking.

I let loose a scream, and it felt so good to release the pent-up energy, that I did it again.

It was all his fault!

I pulled my cell phone out of my pants pocket. Cursing myself for doing it, I scrolled through my contacts looking for Kaden's number. If anyone knew how I could get out of here, he would. My lips pressed together, I held the phone to my ear and heard it ring.

The answering machine came on. I tried again, but he still didn't pick up. Terrific.

Good. Since Kaden wouldn't be able to help me out of this mess, I opened the map app. But there was no connection to the Internet. Of course.

Frustrated, I stuffed the phone back in my pocket and kept going. At some point I would find my way out of here.

I started to hum. The noises around me were getting weirder. I hummed louder.

After a while, I couldn't keep up the calm exterior. My pulse was racing, my breath fast and irregular. I was cold. I was covered in mud. And I was scared.

I was also on the verge of a nervous breakdown when my phone began to vibrate against my thigh. I pulled it out of my pocket so fast that I nearly dropped it.

"It's about time!" I cried into the phone.

"What's up?" asked Kaden.

"I'm lost," I said much too fast. It felt like an eternity since I'd heard a human voice. "I was feeling shitty, I wanted to go home, and then ... somehow I ended up at the mountain and wanted to take the same path that we always take, and now I don't know where I am, everything looks the same, and I don't know where my car is. It's getting darker, and there are wild animals, Kaden, I don't want them to think that I'm their dinner—"

"Allie," he interrupted me. "Take a deep breath."

"Sorry," I murmured, and inhaled.

"Where did you go?" asked Kaden.

"First I followed the main trail," I started again, this time slower. "And then I reached the fork where you always turn. The one that leads to our lookout platform."

I squeezed my eyes shut. Did I just say "our lookout platform"? Up to now I'd only thought it, not said it. Thank goodness Kaden didn't react.

"I needed about a year to figure out how to go off trail. We were usually in a group of three, and we marked our turns with paint." His grim expression was palpable. "Actually, you deserve to spend a night outside."

My legs wobbled. And I dropped to my knees. How could he say that! This was a matter of life and death! Asshole.

"I shouldn't have called you. I'll see if I can reach Spencer," I blurted out.

On the other end of the line, I heard a door slam. "I'm already sitting in the car, Bubbles. Stay where you are."

He hung up. I leaned against a tree trunk. I had to calm down.

Kaden took a while.

The sun had almost set by the time I heard a soft whistling. I turned to listen.

I heard the tune again. If that were a bird, then it must be familiar with contemporary rock. Because he was trilling a tune that was one of my absolute favorites, and whose text somehow had ended up tattooed on the underarm of my apartment mate. I stepped forward.

"Here I am!" I cried out toward the source of the tune. "Over here!"

Kaden emerged from between two trees and ducked under its thick branches. No, it wasn't just my imagination. I fought off the urge to throw my arms around him.

"Thank God," the words tumbled from my lips.

Kaden looked me up and down. Grinning, he untied the sweater from his waist and held it out to me. It was the one with the Deadpool mask that he'd lent me a few times before.

"Thanks," I said, trembling.

"You dumbass," Kaden said, shaking his head. He turned the brim of his baseball cap to the back, without taking his eyes off me.

I grumbled and buried my chin in the folds of the sweater. "Please just bring me home safe."

His eyes danced with amusement. "You walked in circles, Allie. Just at least give me the chance to teach you something."

"I did what?" I cried, stunned.

Now Kaden let out one of his deep, rough laughs. "You wanted to go to the overlook, but you didn't go uphill; you just stayed on the same level the whole time. It's not my fault that you're lazy."

I groaned in frustration. My sense of direction was bad, okay. But even I couldn't be that clueless. Could I?

"Come on." He turned around and looked back at me over his shoulder, jerking his chin in the direction we had to go.

“Please tell me you’re going to take me to my car,” I groaned and ran to catch up with him.

“Less talking, more walking,” he retorted and moved on ahead.

Instead of bringing me back to my car, Kaden was forcing me to take the uphill route that I’d wanted to find.

At some point I recognized the rocks over which Kaden had hoisted me the last couple of times. We barely talked, but I wasn’t up to that anyway. I tried hard not to notice my own panting.

We’d reached the last rocky ledge. At the top, I put my hands on my thighs and forced myself to breathe calmly and not keel over on the spot.

Kaden had stepped out to the edge of the ledge and stretched out his arms as if to fly. “That’s where we were.” He turned around and gave a sly grin. “*Our* overlook.”

I made a face but didn’t answer back. The view was beautiful, exactly as I remembered it.

I stepped toward Kaden, but before my toes could reach the edge of the ledge he took my shoulder and pulled me back a bit.

“I don’t trust you. You’ll end up falling off, or doing some other crazy thing.”

“Why would I?” I looked up at him. His expression was serious.

“The last time you flipped out, you wanted to pack all your things and move out,” he reminded me.

“And that’s why you think I would jump off a cliff?” I asked, surprised.

He shrugged. “That time you went into hysterics because of your exam. Since you took that exam again today, I’m ready for anything. You can be unpredictable.”

From up here the world seemed to stretch out forever. The heavens above us shone an intense midnight blue. Sitting down, I inhaled the fresh air and concentrated on how I was feeling, right here and now.

That was the key.

I’d come here to recapture this feeling. Thanks to that one moment when I forgot the world and felt nothing but freedom. Without thinking, I smiled. The longer I let this moment exist the less tense I felt. My negative thoughts faded one after the other, and even the knot in my stomach began to loosen.

“The exam was great,” I said after a while, without taking my eyes off the view. Though night had fallen, the lake was glittering down in the valley. I

was sure I'd soon see the evening's first star reflected in its surface.

"So you're not going to throw yourself off this cliff? Or pack your stuff in a rage?" Kaden sat beside me. He leaned back on his arms and crossed his outstretched legs.

I shook my head, and my smile faded. "Thanksgiving's around the corner. Scott, Dawn, and you ... You all have plans. But I ... " I stopped and cleared my throat. "I don't want to be the poor thing who spends the holidays all alone, just because I'm too proud to go home. Not that I could call it home. After all, you've met my mother."

Kaden huffed. "Believe me, I couldn't forget someone like that so fast."

I let out a joyless laugh. "And even if I were to fly to Lincoln—what good would that do? Mom wouldn't pay any attention to me anyway. She'll be too busy playing the perfect hostess at her stupid gala. Dad will be involved in important conversations, and as usual he won't have time for me—except to introduce me to one of his business partners ... " I blinked several times to get those images out of my mind. I didn't want to think about the past. But I also knew that holding it in would make it harder for me to deal with it once and for all. I kept on losing this fight.

"You're thinking too much, Bubbles," said Kaden, and I looked at him. He was gazing at the sky. "You're always obsessing over what others might be thinking, without ever thinking about what *you* want. Sometimes it's really important to do what's best for you."

I sighed. "Believe me, I'd love to be like you."

He raised an eyebrow.

"You don't give a damn what others think. Hardly anything seems to shake you up."

"You shake me up," said Kaden without missing a beat. He didn't seem to regret blurting this out. His gaze was fixed on me.

"The way the thing about Thanksgiving shakes me up?" I asked, confused.

Kaden considered my words, then shook his head. "No. You don't scare me quite that much, Bubbles."

A warmth spread through my entire body.

But I couldn't stop thinking about Thanksgiving. "Do you think I'm making a mistake by not going to Lincoln?"

He chuckled and looked back over the valley. "Didn't you hear me? Think about *yourself* for a change. Think about what *you* want. Not about

your mother, not about your friends. The question is: What do you want to do over the holidays? Is there something you always wanted to do? Or do you just want just hang out and contaminate the apartment with your nasty glitter bombs? You can to whatever you want. It's your life, Allie."

I repeated his words in my mind, and internalized them.

After a while, I cleared my throat. "Don't laugh, okay?"

"I can't guarantee anything," he answered, and I saw how the corners of his mouth were already beginning to twitch.

I rolled my eyes. At least he was honest. I shifted into a cross-legged position.

"I've always wanted a really traditional Thanksgiving dinner. Homemade turkey and pies, lots of side dishes and a huge table that you decorate and set together. And then this kitschy ritual where you mention all the things you're thankful for."

Kaden frowned. "What does your family eat, then?"

"We have caterers who deliver the meal. Snacks to tide us over until the gala starts," I explained. "Plenty of wine, of course. Wine helps my dad get lots of contracting partners to relax. It makes it easier to get deals done. And at the gala itself there's a three-course menu, usually soup, then lamb or some other meat and ... " Kaden's look of bewilderment was growing. I paused. "What?"

"Are you saying you've never been to a traditional Thanksgiving dinner?"

I shook my head.

Kaden winced. "That's the saddest thing I've ever heard."

Before I could say a word, he'd picked up his cell phone. He held the receiver to his ear, and a few seconds later his face brightened.

"Hey, Mom. No, everything's okay. Yes, it went well," he said with a grin, raising his cap only to set it down on his head again. "Listen, the reason I'm calling ... I know we already have a full house with Chad's kids at Thanksgiving." He frowned and waved his hand, although his mother couldn't see him. "No! I'm not backing out! I wanted to ask if it would be okay if I brought a friend with me."

Now I was on my feet, wanting to tear the phone from Kaden's hand. He turned away from me.

"I knew you'd say that. Thanks, Mom. See you Tuesday."

He hung up. "She said the more the merrier." He flashed his lopsided grin.

"Are you nuts?" I cried, angry. "How is that going to come across?"

His smile faded. "What do you mean, how will it come across?"

"You're taking me to your mom's not only on a holiday, but exactly on that day when she's meeting the children of her new boyfriend?" My voice had grown shrill.

Kaden's eyebrows shot up. "Who cares?"

"It's ... it's ... " I was at a loss for words. I looked at Kaden pleadingly.

"Bubbles," murmured Kaden, taking me by the shoulders and forcing me to face him. "We're friends, aren't we?"

I held my breath and returned his gaze.

"Something like that," I said.

"You see?" he said. His voice sounded gruff. "You'll get your kitschy Thanksgiving with all the trimmings, and my mom and I won't be outnumbered at the table. So everyone gets what they want."

Finally I nodded.

"Okay."

Chapter 16

“No way.” Kaden shook his head. His cap slipped a bit. “That is not going in my car.”

“Come on.” I gave him a hopeful glance, to which he raised an eyebrow.

“No.”

“We had an agreement, Kaden.”

He buckled his seatbelt and squinted at me. I leaned in a bit and tried an irresistible smile. I would obviously have to employ all my charms.

“I’ve always appreciated your good taste in music,” he grumbled and held out his hand.

I whooped and handed him my stack of Taylor Swift CDs. Kaden rolled his eyes and took them from me so I could climb into the Jeep.

Soon I would meet Kaden’s mother. I wanted music that would lift my mood. No depressing alternative-rock; just tunes I could sing along with, to distract from my nervous anxiety. Taylor Swift was perfect.

The first notes of “Fearless” came on and I hummed along. As for Kaden, he made an exaggerated scowl, as if the music was pure torture.

“I don’t know why I’m putting up with that shit,” he grumbled, glancing in his side mirror before turning on to Main Street.

“I know why,” I retorted, drumming my fingers on the inside of the car door as we left our apartment building behind us.

He’d agreed to bear with my music, and in return I was sitting in his car.

When Kaden and I had returned from our hike five days ago, I was almost freaked out with excitement. It’s true that Kaden had always insisted it was no big deal and his mother would be delighted to meet me—he wasn’t able to calm me down that way. Instead, my brain switched from the “depressed” mode to the “about to panic” mode, and I started looking through my entire closet for outfits that would be presentable for a traditional Thanksgiving dinner. Eventually my room looked like a battlefield, and instead of helping me, Kaden—finding me buried in clothes and with rattled nerves—just laughed. Which made me burst into tears and say that under no circumstances would I go with him to visit his mother.

Kaden grumbled at my dismay, but then offered me a deal: First, I could choose the soundtrack for the ride.

Second, he would help me pack.

The latter task was as fun as it sounded. Because Kaden was much better organized than me. Within an hour we'd packed not only my bag, but his as well.

And now here we were on the highway on the way to Portland. From the corner of my eye, I noticed how Kaden was moving his fingers to the beat, too. I could hardly suppress a giggle. For an instant he looked at me, frowning, before turning his eyes back to the road.

"Why are you laughing like a fool?"

I rolled my eyes. As if the music didn't appeal to him at all, the way it did to me. "I think you like it as much as I do."

He sniffed. "The lyrics are bad, the sound disgusts me, and if I have to listen to a song where she complains about high school or one of her former boyfriends, I'm probably gonna puke."

That made me laugh even more.

"All right," I sighed after a while and opened the glove compartment. Rummaging through the CDs, I found one from Bon Iver that I loved, especially if I were in a somewhat quieter mood.

Kaden seemed to appreciate it.

"You're looking forward to seeing your mom, aren't you?" I ventured.

And even if he just shrugged, his smile was answer enough.

I felt a gentle touch on my shoulder. I ignored it. My dream was just too perfect. The hand disappeared. Then it came back, stroked first my thigh, then rested on my hip ...

I jerked awake, my head grazing the ceiling of the car. I gasped. Vaguely, I realized that my seatbelt was no longer fastened. Turning to look next to me, I saw—Kaden's bewildered face.

It was just Kaden. Just him.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

"We made it," he said, looking at me somewhat warily. But he didn't ask for any explanations. And I was grateful for that.

Looking out my window, I saw a small, white house with a welcoming, wraparound porch. There was a bench under the kitchen window, countless

flower pots, and a gabled roof. A cozy atmosphere surrounded the whole place.

“You grew up here?” I asked in awe and opened the passenger door so I could step out. Kaden did the same and already was standing next to me as I lifted my bag.

“Partly. My parents divorced just after I turned eleven.” He crossed his arms behind his head and looked up at his mother’s house, wearing a crooked smile that didn’t seem all too happy. “After that I had to shuttle between her house here and my dad’s house at the other end of town.”

I could see he was trying hard to hide his feelings. And as usual, Kaden was pretty bad at that.

I heard a loud creak, and his face brightened. Now a real smile animated the lines around his eyes.

“It’s a tragic story with lots of crying; not really right for this holiday, don’t you think, Kaden?” a woman’s voice called, and I turned in its direction.

Kaden’s mother had opened the dark blue door and was standing on the porch. Right away I could see how much the two looked alike. She had the same hair, the same eyes and even the laugh lines—Kaden had inherited them from her. She was beautiful.

Kaden bounded up the porch stairs and wrapped his arms around her. He was at least one and a half heads taller than she was, and lifted her up for a second, which made her laugh in surprise. When he put her down, she cupped Kaden’s face in her hands.

“You need to shave! With this beard you look like a real man, and I’m not ready for that,” she said with a broad smile, so much like Kaden’s.

“Come on, I haven’t changed that much since last time, Mom,” Kaden said, earning a mock punch on the shoulder. She then looked past him and saw me.

“Come on up, Allie. I don’t bite,” she called out and waved me toward her.

Still lost in thought, I was frozen in place for a few seconds before I joined the two on the porch. Kaden’s mom looked me up and down and reached out to embrace me. A moment later, she placed her hands on my shoulders and held me back a bit, for another look.

My anxiety returned full-force, and my heart began to pound like crazy. I tried not to show it and looked back at her with a smile.

“I’m Rachel. Pleased to meet you,” she announced. And I was surprised that she sounded like she meant it.

“I’m Allie,” I answered, mustering another smile. “And the pleasure is all mine. Thanks for ... taking me in.” Okay, that sounded sad. As if I were a lost puppy.

“Nonsense!” Rachel waved a hand for me to follow her inside. “Thanks to you we won’t be in the minority tomorrow night, so I’m grateful for your company. Come on, I’ll show you the house.” She looked back over her shoulder to Kaden. “And since you already know your way around here, you can bring in the luggage while I take Allie on the tour.”

Kaden saluted her like a soldier. I could see him rolling his eyes and trying not to grin.

I followed Rachel into the house and looked around. It was just as charming from the inside.

“This is the living room, over there’s the kitchen. All pretty manageable,” Rachel said as she headed for the stairs. The light wood creaked underfoot as we reached the second floor. We passed a few framed photos on the wall, pictures of Rachel with her sons. For the first time, I caught a glimpse of Kaden’s brother. There was an undeniable resemblance, but he had a paler complexion than Kaden’s and dark blond hair, to Kaden’s brown. I looked more closely. Kaden had been such a cute little boy, with his round face and chubby cheeks. His laughing expression was just as cheerful then as today. I smiled.

When Rachel noticed that I’d stopped mid-staircase, she turned and came back down to look at the photo with me.

“He was just knee-high to a grasshopper back then,” she sighed.

“I think he’s grown up nicely,” I quipped, for lack of anything better to say.

Now Rachel looked at me, a bright smile stealing over her face. “Yeah, right? He’s become a real man.”

“You know I can hear you, right?” came Kaden’s voice from downstairs. And then I heard him drop our bags to the floor.

Rachel ignored her son and shook her head.

I laughed and followed her upstairs. We passed by a room that I figured was hers. She opened the second door at the end of the narrow hallway.

“This’ll be your room,” she said, after we’d entered.

It must have been Kaden's bedroom. There were still a few traces of his teen years: blue walls with bits of old posters stuck to them and an old game console. Rachel obviously had gone to a lot of trouble to get the room ready for me. There was a vase of fresh flowers on the nightstand. She'd even put a couple of candies on the pillow.

I nearly broke into tears. Luckily I was able to control it this time.

"Thanks so much, Rachel," I said. I'd wanted to give this warm-hearted, open woman much more than a mere "thank you," but we'd only met a few minutes ago, and I didn't know what was appropriate. So I just smiled and hoped it was enough for now.

"Kaden's friends are always welcome here," she answered, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "And you are friends, of course."

Grasping the subliminal question, I raised my hands in a reassuring gesture. "We're just friends."

Just at that moment the image of our first kiss replayed in my head, followed by our escapade last week. My cheeks flushed, and I swallowed. This kind of thing wouldn't happen again. I'd made up my mind. It would be better to nip this flame in the bud before it could rage out of control. Because of our shared home, but even more so our new friendship, were too important to me—I couldn't risk losing them.

"It's been a long time since he brought a girl home. I'd be really surprised if you weren't someone very special to him." Rachel sounded cheerful and relaxed, but her eyes revealed that she was trying to size me up. "Just don't hurt him."

I opened my mouth to protest but then remembered Kaden's reaction to the hearts scribbled across the CD. So I just nodded. "I don't think I could, but I can assure you it's the furthest thing from my mind."

She looked at me again, paused, and put her hand on my arm. "I think we're going to get along well, Allie."

Then she swept out of the room and left me standing there.

Kaden and his mother were too damned alike.

Chapter 17

No sooner had Rachel gone than Kaden brought my bag up and put it down next to the bed.

“Thanks,” I said. And then I could only stare at his arms. He’d taken off his sweater, and his plain T-shirt revealed his tattoos, just as I liked it. Since he’d told me what they meant, I found them even more exciting.

Damn Kaden with his damn sexy arms.

“Sure.”

I tore my eyes away and smiled at him. “Your mom is great.”

Kaden rolled his eyes and sat down on his bed.

I turned to face him and saw that he was already smiling again. The awful truth dawned on me: No sooner was Kaden back at home with his mom, than he became almost tame.

“What are you thinking?” he asked right away, sensing a change in me.

“About how happy it makes you to be here,” I answered in all honesty.

Just a few days earlier I had doubted it was a good idea to go with Kaden to Portland. Now that I was here, I couldn’t imagine a more beautiful place to be.

We spent a wonderful day together. Kaden finished the house tour while Rachel cooked. Eventually we joined her, but since Kaden’s mother hated giving up control in the kitchen, we just handed her the tools she asked for, and tried to stay out of her way.

After downing an endless supply of mac ‘n’ cheese, we cleaned up. It was almost like being at home in Woodshill. I thought I could feel Rachel’s eyes on me, but didn’t pay any mind.

“Feel like taking a walk?” Kaden whispered as we dried the dishes.

“Are there mountains here that you want to chase me up? ‘Cause hiking shoes weren’t on the list of stuff to bring,” I teased.

He leaned back against the sink, his hands on the counter behind him. “I thought I’d show you a few spots where I used to hang out. We could get a coffee or something.”

Or something. I smiled. The Portland-Kaden was enchanting.

“Why not.”

He gave me a sidelong glance. “Why are you grinning like that?”

I pressed my lips together. But I still couldn’t suppress my smile.

He took his jacket from the closet and held the door open.

“Later, Mom!” he called back over his shoulder. And then we stepped out into the cool autumn air.

Portland in the fall was gorgeous and quite different from the other cities I’d visited so far.

Kaden had grown up in a nice, cozy neighborhood. Everything looked well-kept, and as we walked toward the main road we saw several families, their small children zipping around on bikes. I watched them until they turned the corner, glad to have an excuse not to look at Kaden.

I was ashamed. Not only because I would’ve been sitting alone in Woodshill if I hadn’t come here. To be honest, it was mostly because I couldn’t fight the tingling sensation that his nearness always triggered. The more I got to know him, the less firm my conviction seemed that we’d never be more than just friends.

“Did you always live here?” I asked as we left the neighborhood.

“Mom bought the house after the divorce. It was totally run down when we saw it for the first time, and I couldn’t imagine living here,” he answered.

“Really? It doesn’t seem that way at all.”

“We tried to do a lot ourselves, to save a little money. I wasn’t much help at that time.” Kaden shrugged. We were walking so close that I could feel him against my arm, and I increased the distance between us.

Kaden stopped walking. “Oh come on,” he growled, grabbing me by the arm and pulling me back against him in a powerful motion. “What’s with you?”

“Nothing,” I blurted out.

His brow was furrowed. He looked down into my eyes. “You’re totally tense. I want to know why, so I can do something to help.”

I cleared my throat and tried hard not to gaze at his mouth again. “You could keep a little space between us, Kaden.”

Now he looked confused. It took a few seconds before he understood me. He let go as if he’d been burned. “I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable near me.”

It was just the opposite. I felt way too good when I was near him. But I could hardly tell him that.

“That’s not it, Kaden. I’m just a bit ... self-conscious because of your mother.”

He paused. “So that’s why you’re so tense? Because you’re worrying about what my mom might think?”

I nodded. It was the perfect excuse, and I embraced it with open arms.

“And here I thought I was smelling sweaty or something,” Kaden mused.

I leaned forward and sniffed at him. “No, false alarm. But I’d tell your friends the opposite if they asked.” I gave him a shove. “Monica once told me you complained that I smelled bad.”

Kaden snorted. “And you do.”

I raised a brow.

“I’m just being honest. We’ve already talked about your distorted sense of taste. You should be grateful that I’m so honest with you. Whenever we’re in the same room it smells like a candy factory exploded.”

He dodged another shove from me, and started walking again. When I made no attempt to follow, he turned to me and jogged backward. “I wanted to show you the shop where I used to work. So stop sulking and start walking!”

We were back to normal, and I was glad about it.

“You worked here?” I leaned my head back and observed the battered sign with the words *Bold Records* painted on it in dark green. The paint was already peeling off at the edges, and the façade had seen better days, too. Still, I was curious how it looked inside. I’d never been in a record shop before.

Kaden nodded and held the door open for me; our arrival was announced with a ring. Inside, soft rock music played, and I looked around in amazement. What seemed like endless shelves, all overflowing with vinyl records, filled every millimeter of space; light bulbs dangled down from the ceiling between lengths of white fabric, casting their glow on the CD stands in the middle of the shop.

“This is amazing,” I murmured and went straight to the first shelf. I didn’t own a record player, but records had always held a certain fascination for me. As I moved down the aisle, I ran a finger along the backs of the albums. I stopped to look at one or another of them up close before sliding it back onto the shelf. When I came to the end of the first row, I turned to Kaden, who had

followed me at a distance, and beamed at him. He grinned back and gestured with his chin to go on.

In the back of the shop, a few steps led down to an area with comfortable furnishings. Here, too, the walls were covered with album covers. A patterned rug lay on the dark wood floorboards, and a leather chair and a sofa were arranged between a couple of boxes filled with CDs and records. CD players and headphones lay on large flat tables. Along the right-hand side of the room was a kitchenette with a coffee maker. A man stood in front of an open refrigerator and grabbed a Coke, while teens hung out on the sofas and nodded in time with the music. I'd never seen anything like it.

Kaden walked past me to the coffee maker. He took two mugs from the shelf, filled them, and handed me one.

"No creamer, unfortunately. And the coffee isn't the best either, but ... " He left his sentence unfinished and shrugged.

"I love it here," I reassured him. "Really, Kaden. I'd like to buy all my favorite tracks on vinyl right now. And I don't even have a record player."

"When I worked here, I felt the same way. But I had to save money for my car at the time. In addition, CDs take up less space. But someday when I have a bigger apartment, or maybe even a house, I'll set up a huge music room." He blew on his coffee and took a sip.

For a moment we just grinned at each other. Then Kaden pointed with his cup toward the last free leather chair, located in the middle of the room.

Kaden offered me the seat but I declined, instead getting comfortable on the broad backrest. Kaden sat down but slid over toward the side so we could face each other. He told me how, as a fourteen year old, he had spent nearly every afternoon here and eventually started to recommend music to customers. The owner, Trudy, had always chided him over it, but she also saw that he not only had good taste but also knew what he was talking about. By the time she asked him if he'd like a temp job, he already knew the store as well as the owner and agreed. Okay, at first he could only take deliveries and unpack the new releases, but even now his eyes sparkled when he remembered those days.

After I'd finished my coffee, we went back up into the shop and looked at records. We found lots that we both wanted, but also some that Kaden sniffed at. I let him lead me to a listening station, where he put huge, black headphones on my head that instantly swallowed all the sounds around me. From a basket that stood between the listening stations he randomly picked

out CDs and put them in the player, one after the other. If I liked what I heard, I would give it a thumbs-up. If not, the corners of my mouth turned down. By now, Kaden knew my taste pretty well. One album made my heart pound, because the songs—though old and forgotten—seemed so familiar. Beaming, I glanced up at Kaden. A satisfied smile spread across his lips.

After a while, I closed my eyes and thought back to the last time I'd heard *Ocean Avenue* by Yellowcard. Music had helped me through so many hard days. Some songs were associated with a specific emotion, and I only needed to hear a few of the first notes to bring that feeling flooding back, no matter where I was. With this song, it was like it had a magic ability to heal me, each and every time.

"I love this song," I said, and Kaden winced—his hand shot out and he held it over my mouth. I guess I'd been a bit loud—several people had turned to look our way. After the last notes faded away, I removed the headphones and shook out my hair.

"After this morning's trip I wanted to be sure that your taste is still intact."

"You only had to put up with two songs by Taylor, so don't even."

I put down my headphones and moved on to an aisle I hadn't yet explored.

Kaden walked along the left side, looking through the shelves, while I rummaged through the ones on the right. Whenever either of us found a record we liked, we'd show each other. The new cover of Fall Out Boy had a face on it, and when Kaden held the record up to look at it, he unknowingly held it so that it looked like his body belonged to the head on the cover. I giggled and pulled out my phone to capture the image. When I showed it to him, he insisted on taking a similar photo of me. It didn't take long before he—with a triumphant grin—found the *Ocean Avenue* record whose cover featured the face of a girl against the background of the sea and a sunset. Kaden wanted to take the photo, but I insisted that he stand next to me so we could take a selfie. This wasn't easy, since I couldn't see what I was doing, and by now I was laughing so hard that I dropped the record and then the phone. But after several tries we managed, and in the end of our impromptu photo session I had not only a cool photo but also a bellyache from laughing.

By the time we walked back to his mom's house that evening, it was already dark. Kaden had given me one of the nicest days I'd ever had.

Against my own expectations, I realized that spending the holiday here was making me happy.

Actually, very.

Chapter 18

The day had been great, but not the night. I wanted to flee from this strange bed and look for Kaden. I just couldn't stop thinking. As soon as my eyes closed, I saw him in front of me; his smile, or the way he ran his fingers through his hair when he was pondering something. And his kisses. I had to stop these thoughts. Today had been so nice and was further proof that our friendship actually worked.

Still, my entire body tingled, also in places that had absolutely nothing to do with friendship. With a groan of frustration, I turned on my side and pulled the blanket over my head, as if to deny my improper thoughts or even my body. It didn't work. Sleep was impossible. I just tossed and turned in Kaden's childhood bed. At some point I even caught myself sniffing at his pillow to see if it smelled like him.

We'd come that far. It was pathetic.

In the morning, the aftereffects were visible in the form of deep rings under my eyes. Grabbing the towel that Rachel had left for me, I headed for the bathroom hoping a shower would wake me. Yellowcard was still running through my head; I hummed while lathering the shampoo. I was just putting shower gel in my hand when the bathroom door opened.

"Good morning."

It was more shocking than the cold water.

"Get out, Kaden!" I hissed. Luckily the shower curtain wasn't see-through.

Kaden laughed. "You didn't lock it. That's practically an invitation."

Dammit, he was right. I was so used to not having a lock on the bathroom door by now, I'd forgotten to lock this door. "You're out of your mind, Kaden. Leave!" Now my right eye was burning from the shampoo, and I cursed out loud.

"Don't let me disturb you."

Kaden turned on the faucet in the sink and began brushing his teeth.

My refreshing morning shower had taken on a hectic undertone. First I tried to get the soap out of my eye; then soaped myself up in record time,

glancing every few seconds at the shower curtain, hoping he couldn't see through it.

"I had a lot of fun yesterday," Kaden mumbled, toothbrush still in his mouth.

"Me too. But I'd still like to shower in peace. I thought we were clear on stuff like that," I griped.

"Don't make such a big deal out of it, Bubbles." He laughed.

That arrogant, little ...

"Kaden? Are you in there?" came Rachel's voice from the hall.

"Oh my God," I whispered, my hands flying up to my face. My silent prayer: Please don't let Rachel come in here, too.

"Yeah, I'm here." Kaden seemed unfazed.

"Does Allie prefer coffee or tea? Or maybe just orange juice?"

I bit my lower lip.

"I think Allie would love a cup of coffee." The water was running again and Kaden spit out the toothpaste. "But you can ask her yourself, Mom. She's in the shower."

"Kaden!" I hissed.

He laughed again. "Don't worry, I'm leaving."

And in a few seconds he was out of there.

I was going to kill him.

After drying myself off, I slipped into my jeans and a plain shirt and toweled my hair dry. Back in my room, I tucked my nightgown back into my little overnight bag, made the bed, and grabbed my phone before heading downstairs.

"Good morning, Rachel," I said, entering the kitchen. "Can I help?" I was trying hard not to reveal how embarrassing the bathroom situation had been.

Thank goodness Rachel didn't go there; she just pointed me toward a chair. "No, please: Just join us!"

Kaden was already at the table. Sliding past him, I boxed him hard on the arm, hoping to knock the ugly grin from his face.

"You know what that was for," I growled and took the seat opposite him. His grin hadn't budged a fraction of an inch. I rolled my eyes and looked instead at the breakfast Rachel had set out: scrambled eggs and fruit salad, bagels, bread and various spreads. She'd arranged it with such care. If Rachel went this far for breakfast, what would tomorrow's Thanksgiving dinner be like? I could hardly wait.

“I’m sorry, but it was worth it,” joked Kaden, and I looked back at him. He had leaned back with his arms behind his head, and his eyes were sparkling in amusement.

“Right. Haha. So funny, I forgot to laugh.” My voice was dripping with sarcasm, even though I was about to give in and smile back. But I didn’t want him to have the satisfaction, so instead I pulled my cell phone from my purse to check if Dawn had called. I unlocked the screen and turned to stone.

Seven missed calls. None were from Dawn.

It was my mother.

Hesitating for a second, I erased the list of calls. I couldn’t care less about her drama and threats—I was spending Thanksgiving here, in Portland. Not in Lincoln.

Just then, as if she knew the phone was in my hand, Mom rang again. With an apologetic glance at Kaden, I got up to leave the kitchen. Once in the hallway, I answered.

“What do you want?” I barked into the receiver.

A sobbing came through the line. Uh oh. Mom hardly ever cried. My fingers tightened around the phone, my legs were turning to jelly.

“Mom?” I probed.

Again a stifled whimper.

“Mom, what’s going on?” I now begged. My heart seemed to stand still; I leaned against the wall. “Mom?”

Kaden came out into the hall. My widened eyes returned his questioning look.

“It’s your father,” Mom stammered. “Y-y-your father had an accident.”

My knees would buckle any second now. Suddenly it felt like I was looking at myself from the outside, slumped against the wall, pale, phone pressed to my ear.

“What happened?” My voice was failing. “Is he okay?”

“We just got out of the hospital. You have to come home right away. It doesn’t look good.”

The phone slipped from my hand; I broke out into a cold sweat and sank to the floor.

Dad was hurt.

Mom’s words rang in my year. *An accident. It doesn’t look good. You have to come home.*

Now everything was clear. I grabbed my phone and struggled to my feet. Kaden said something, but his words were lost on me.

“I have to go,” were the words that came from my mouth as I searched on my phone for flights from Portland International Airport to Lincoln Airport. While doing so, I climbed the stairs to Kaden’s room and, for a moment, leaned against the doorframe; then I grabbed my bag and slung it over my shoulder, still looking at the phone. My pain felt distant. But my hands shook so much that I couldn’t read the display, no matter how hard I tried. A groan escaped me.

Kaden’s warm hand closed around my trembling fingers. I looked up at him, wide-eyed. But instead of sobbing as usual, this time I didn’t shed even one tear.

“What’s the matter, Bubbles?”

His thumbs ran smooth, soothing circles over the backs of my hands. But the adrenaline coursing through my body wouldn’t let me stand still. I shifted my weight from one leg to the other.

“You have to tell me what’s going on, Allie. Otherwise, I can’t help you.” Kaden’s deep voice was gentle. As if he were talking to a terrified animal. Maybe that’s how I looked.

“My dad,” I blurted out.

“Allie.” Kaden cupped his hands around my cheeks and tipped my head gently backward so our eyes could meet. “What happened?”

“Accident.” It was hard to speak. “My dad had an accident. I have to go ... I have to get to Lincoln. Now.”

Kaden released me. He grabbed my heavy bag, took my hand and led me down the stairs into the kitchen. He said something to his mother; my thoughts and my pounding pulse drowned out all other sounds around me. A moment later he was back at my side, taking the phone from my hand. Rachel put an arm around my shoulder and urged me toward the door.

One step at a time.

My head felt empty. Rachel assured me that everything would be okay, and I nodded mechanically. Now we were standing by Kaden’s Jeep. Somehow my brown boots had gotten onto my feet. Kaden opened the passenger door; I turned again to Rachel, trying to put on a grateful smile—it didn’t work. I must have looked like Joker from Batman. Creepy and crazy.

“Thank you so much for the invitation, Rachel,” I managed to say. “I’m sorry I have to leave so soon.”

She said I'd always be welcome and gave me another hug before helping me into the car.

Kaden buckled my seatbelt like a child; my hands were useless. He hit the gas and pushed the speed limit till we were out of town. After giving me a few minutes to catch my breath, he told me he'd booked a ticket for a flight that left in about forty-five minutes. All I had to do was open the app on my phone and go straight to the terminal.

Everything flowed past me like fog. All I knew was that, unlike me, Kaden seemed to have the situation under control. But there was no room for shame or any other feeling. Only for worry about my dad. I couldn't even recall our last conversation, however hard I tried.

"Stop thinking," Kaden admonished me.

He didn't have to see me to know what was going on in my head. His eyes were focused on the road.

At the airport, Kaden pulled into a parking spot at an angle. While I was opening my door, he grabbed my bag from the trunk. Then he took me by the arm and guided me to the terminal. Out of breath, we reached the check-in line.

"Arms up," he demanded.

"What?"

"Lift your arms," he repeated.

He was holding his light gray sweater in his hand.

Kaden slipped it over my head and my outstretched arms; now his familiar scent was enveloping me, and with it came a sense of security.

"Thanks," I murmured, as Kaden put the strap of my bag over my shoulder. "Thanks." And because it felt somehow lacking, I repeated myself a few more times.

"Everything'll be okay," Kaden interrupted. He combed his fingers through my hair, which had to be a mess by now. He paused at the back of my head before bending down and pressing his lips against my forehead. Eyes closed, I let the moment sink in. A sense of peace settled over me and I held my breath. The moment passed way too quickly.

"Now get out of here," he murmured, nodding toward the check-in counter.

After one more look into Kaden's dark eyes, I turned and ran.

Chapter 19

Of course there were no direct flights to Lincoln, Nebraska. With a short layover in Denver, it would take about five hours to get there. Sleeping was out of the question, as was sitting still. I would have liked to have burned my pent-up energy somehow, preferably by crying, because I knew I'd feel more peaceful and my thoughts would be clearer afterward. But my body had grown unfamiliar in the last couple of hours. It just didn't work. I couldn't even down the water that the flight attendant handed out. My throat was burning, I felt nauseated, and the only thing that helped even a little bit was the smell of Kaden, which surrounded me like a familiar cocoon. I buried my face up to my nose in the soft sweater and pulled the sleeves over my fingertips to hide my trembling.

Once out of the plane, I wanted to run. But there were too many people streaming toward the exit. On the street, I started looking for a taxi.

The driver understood the urgency. Traffic was heavy around the airport, but after a few minutes the jam eased up and he stepped on the gas, heading for the affluent area where my parents lived.

When the driver reached our wide street with its stately homes and stopped, I was on the verge of puking. After throwing money into his lap, I jumped out of the car, took my bag from the trunk, and ran up to our driveway.

I rang the bell and banged on the massive door before I opened it and stepped inside. My eyes scanned the foyer frantically.

Right away, I heard someone approaching and murmuring something unintelligible in an annoyed tone.

"Crystal?" Dad asked, surprised.

I couldn't believe my eyes. Panting, I stared at him.

His hair had gone almost completely gray; his hairline had receded even farther. He was wearing a tailored, gray suit complemented by the usual white shirt and dark tie.

I threw my arms around him and buried my face in his chest. And finally the tears came.

"You're okay," I sobbed.

Dad patted my back awkwardly. “Why shouldn’t I be?” he asked.

It’d been so long since I’d heard his voice. He almost sounded like a stranger.

“What about your accident?” I asked, stepping back and looking for any injuries. I’d thought he’d be lying unconscious in a hospital bed, with a bruised face and bandaged arms. In fact, he looked intact.

“Oh, that,” answered Dad with a frown. “I tore a ligament on the squash court.”

Words failed me.

“You know that Edmund and I sometimes play too hard.”

“But Mom—” I broke off and swallowed hard. “Mom called me and said you were in an accident,” I choked. “She made it sound really bad.”

Dad barked out a laugh and then shook his head. He heaved a sigh, then took my bag from my shoulder. “You must’ve misunderstood her.”

I was stunned. No time to answer back: My father cut that short by stepping aside.

“Just come in,” he urged me.

As we walked through the foyer, I noticed he was limping a bit. He set my bag down on the marble floor and headed toward the parlor without looking back. It took great effort for me not to lose my cool.

On one hand, it was a relief to see that Dad was okay.

On the other hand, I wanted to kill my mother.

But she was nowhere to be seen.

Dad plopped down on the white leather sofa and looked at me expectantly. I collapsed in the armchair next to him, taking a moment to collect myself.

Nothing had changed here. The luxurious decor seemed much more decadent to me now, compared to Woodshill or even Rachel’s home in Portland.

Dad picked up a carafe of water from the table.

“Want some?” he asked. I nodded.

Calmer now, I felt how dry my throat was. I pulled my legs up under me on the chair, then took the full glass and put it to my lips, gulping down the cool water.

“Where’s Mom?” I asked, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. If Dad found my haircut or lack of manners surprising, he didn’t let on.

“You know her. Probably getting ready for tomorrow night,” Dad answered.

Which meant she was at the beauty salon or meeting friends for coffee. Good for her. Because if she were to come through the double-winged door right now, there was no telling what I’d do.

“So you only came because you thought I was on my deathbed?” asked my father, taking a sip of water and putting the glass back down on the table.

“Mom cried on the phone,” I said, avoiding his question.

Dad raised both eyebrows. “She’d do anything to get you to the gala.”

I just snorted in response. To be honest, there was nothing to say. “But your leg is okay, right?” I finally asked.

“It’s good to know that my daughter cares about me and comes right away if she thinks something happened to me,” he said with a pinched smile.

“Don’t be that way, Dad. Of course I care, and you know it,” I shot back.

“Really?” he asked, leaning back.

I sighed. Now he was making a dig about my having left home. “Wanting to be on my own doesn’t mean I don’t care.”

Even if it might be better to care a bit less. Less pain that way.

Dad’s expression didn’t soften. “It would have been nice if you’d gotten in touch once in a while. Voluntarily,” he added, when he saw my mouth open.

“And what about you? Have you forgotten how to use a telephone?” I counted to five before speaking again in a more forgiving tone. “Anyway, what’s the use of calling if all I hear is accusations about making the wrong decision for my career? You and Mom were never okay with my moving. Hearing that over and over again doesn’t help.”

“Of course, I wanted you to do something sensible with your life, Crystal,” he said, and I winced.

By now I was used to being called Allie, and it was strange to hear this other name—one that didn’t fit me anymore. Like this house. His words stung me. That’s how it always was when he talked down to me. As if his way were the only right way, the only way to get ahead in life.

Trying to keep my cool, I hadn’t yet formed an answer when I heard the front door open. Mom’s high heels clacked across the marble floor. Then she appeared in the doorway.

As always, everything about her was perfect, from hairstyle to pedicure. Her perfection was broken only for a fraction of a second, when her fake

smile wavered at the sight of me sitting next to Dad.

“Crystal!” She pretended to be surprised. “I didn’t expect to see you until tomorrow.”

Now I lost my composure and jumped up. “But you were sure I’d come.”

She sighed. “Of course I was hoping you would. But I’m not going to spoil my evening just because your childish pride keeps you away on Thanksgiving.”

I raised my eyebrows and looked at Dad, who was just picking up his cell phone from the table. Then he stood, nodded apologetically and disappeared into his study. I uttered a joyless laugh. Wasn’t it always like this? Mom and I would fight, Dad would disappear. He avoided any quarrel that did not directly involve him, and as a businessman he always had a ready excuse.

“I can’t believe you outright lied to me,” I hissed, addressing my mother. Actually, I didn’t want her to notice how furious she made me. That would only get her going. “Why’d you do it?”

Mom’s frozen smile grew even wider. “I want nothing more than to spend Thanksgiving with my daughter. Is that too much to ask?”

The nerve!

“You don’t think I’d go to your fucking gala now, do you?”

Mom gasped. “Don’t you dare speak to me like you grew up in the gutter, Crystal. This is beneath your dignity. It’s not how you were raised.”

I snorted. “Beneath my dignity ...” I murmured. “You’re out of your mind if you think that your plan worked, Mom.” I noticed with some satisfaction how she backed away from me. “I’m only here because you hooked me with a nasty trick. Not because I want to play happy family with you on Thanksgiving and dance around in front of your friends like a doll. The only thing I’m thankful for this Thanksgiving is that I don’t have to live here anymore.”

These were my last words. I ran into the foyer, grabbed my bag, and left, slamming the door behind me, hoping it made the walls shake.

Chapter 20

The *Bellverton* was the most expensive hotel I knew, and I booked the most luxurious room available. Mom would probably never notice the money missing from her account, but it still felt good to put the credit card into the reader. A friendly porter brought me upstairs, and I thanked him with a nod and an oversized tip. Throwing Mom's money out the window was my way of getting revenge for what she'd done to me today. And I wanted to enjoy that to the hilt.

I dragged myself over to the bed and let myself sink into it. Lost in thought, I stroked the soft white down comforter and breathed in the fragrance of freshly washed linen. Little candies lay on the pillow. Just like at Rachel's. My fingers closed around my cell phone. I had to call Kaden. I owed him that much. But I felt so stupid. After all, Mom's tricks were nothing new. I should've known she'd pull something to get me to the gala. How awful that Kaden now had to experience this up close. I was ashamed that he'd seen me in this embarrassing condition and that I'd ruined the day for him and his mom, for no good reason.

Taking a deep breath, I called his number. My throat was tight, my mouth dry.

He picked up on the first ring.

"Allie." He sounded relieved.

I closed my eyes, feeling ridiculous. "Hey."

"How are you?" he asked, clearing his throat. "How's your father?"

"Everything's okay," I said, nearly swallowing my words. "Mom lied."

Silence on the other end of the line. Then: "She what?"

"He got a minor injury playing squash. That's all," I went on. My voice was dull. I rubbed my eyes. Why did they have to start burning now, of all times? "He tore his ligament, but otherwise he's fine. He was surprised to see me."

"That crafty piece of shit!" Kaden blurted out; I could picture his jaw tightening, his brows knit into a frown.

I smiled; his words didn't bother me. That was Kaden—if he wanted to insult my mother, he did it. He was the best person in the world to talk to

right now.

“It’s okay,” I tried to reassure him anyway.

“No,” he growled. “Nothing is okay, there’s nothing about this that’s okay.”

He was getting louder and I could hear Rachel asking him something. He answered: “No, her mom basically lied to get her to come to some crappy celebration. It’s okay for me to tell my mom, right?”

I shrugged even though he couldn’t see me. Rachel had been so caring—of course she should know what was going on.

Rachel said something else unintelligible; then there was silence. Kaden must’ve gone in another room. “So how do you feel?” he finally asked.

To be honest, I didn’t know exactly how I was doing. On one hand, I was relieved that dad was okay. On the other hand, I just wanted to cry. I’d spent half the day worrying to death. To top it off, my rage at my mother was blazing.

“I don’t know,” I whispered, laying down on my back and pinching my nostrils to keep from crying. Kaden had seen too many of my tears; I didn’t want to be a burden on him. Not after he’d been there for me.

“Can I do anything?” he murmured.

“If only I hadn’t fallen for her trick, and had stayed with you.” I swallowed my tears. “I hope I haven’t ruined your day.”

Now Kaden groaned. “Only you would think of that.”

“What do you mean?”

“You get an awful call from your mother, nearly have a nervous breakdown, catch the next flight because you think something happened to your father, you find out that he’s fine and that your mom was fucking with you—and then you apologize to me for possibly ruining my day. You’ve lost it, Bubbles.”

“Thanks a lot,” I growled. But I felt better. Kaden was on my side. Even without knowing the details about my past or about my family, he stood up for me. Just because.

“Where are you now?”

“I booked a room in the most expensive hotel I could find,” I announced, and ran my hand over the fine white sheets. “To get back at Mom. It was the only thing I could think of.”

“Well done.”

“I’m a genius.”

“You are.”

Again I had to smile. “You agreed with me!”

“I’m making exceptions today.” Could it be that I heard Kaden grinning?

There was a long silence. I heard his calm, strong breathing.

“I wish you were here,” the words slipped out of me.

The sound of his breathing stopped abruptly, and I frowned. I’d broken so many of Kaden’s rules in the last few days; I couldn’t count my transgressions on both hands any more.

“I have to go.” Now he sounded absent, and I couldn’t blame him. I hadn’t meant to cross the line, and now he was pulling back.

“Say hi to your mom for me,” I said, putting on a cheerful voice before hanging up and turning off my phone to prevent my doing anything else dumb.

And for the next few hours I indulged in self-pity, losing myself in tears.

After crying my eyes dry and then falling asleep for who knows how long, I did feel better. Tears cleanse the soul—wasn’t that an old saying? At least it was true for me.

Now it was time for a bath. I had sweat a lot during the trip.

Oh well, no scented candles. But the lights could be dimmed until they practically twinkled.

I slipped into the tub. The warmth did me good, and I submerged. But my thoughts kept coming back.

Though I wasn’t even twenty-one yet, it was now clear to me that the time had come to ditch my parents. To them, outward appearances always took precedence, even if it meant sacrificing the welfare of their only child. This was also true for tomorrow’s celebration. I had to find a way to deal with these kinds of situations without getting too upset. For years, my efforts to work things out with my parents had failed. There was no point in going on like this. Not everyone was destined to have a healthy, intact family, to have a sense of belonging. It’d been hard for me to accept this, but it was time to acknowledge that I didn’t feel at home with my parents. Their values didn’t speak to me, and it looked like mine didn’t speak to them, either.

Dad was always aloof. He wasn’t interested in my life because it didn’t match his expectations. And Mom ... Mom was in a class of her own. There was no future for us. Not after what she’d done today and especially back then.

By the time I stepped out of the tub, the water had cooled and my body felt heavy. The warmth had dissolved my tension and helped me calm down. Wrapping myself in the fluffy hotel robe, I towel-dried my hair. It was when I turned to go into the bedroom that I heard a knock on the door.

Confused, I glanced at the room service menu. I'd wanted to order something but hadn't gotten around to it yet.

Another knock, this time louder.

I didn't need a peephole to know who was behind the door. *Mom*. Ten horses couldn't drag me back to my parents' house; there was no way I'd go to the gala. Mom could do what she wanted—locate my cell phone, block the credit card—no matter what she did, I'd be back in my real home, back in Woodshill, tomorrow.

I stomped to the door and tore it open. "I—"

Mid-sentence, I froze, mouth open.

Standing at the door of my hotel room was Kaden. With one arm he leaned against the doorframe; the other hand was buried in his pants pocket. He was wearing what he'd had on this morning. It felt like weeks since then. The travel bag we'd packed together was slung over his shoulder.

A big smile spread across his face as he saw my stunned expression.

My nerves short-circuited. Before I knew it, I'd leapt toward Kaden, flung my arms around his shoulders and buried my face in his neck. He returned my embrace, wrapping his arms around me. I pressed myself against him as tightly as possible, until there was no space between us. Everything else that had happened this day had become unimportant. All that mattered was Kaden. *Us*.

"Are you okay?" he asked, releasing his hold.

He was cautious and gentle, and I couldn't explain what was happening to my body. A burning desire arose in me and all my feelings seemed to break out unfiltered. I shuddered.

Kaden looked at me with an intense, worried expression. "Can I do anything for you?"

I nodded and let my eyes wander over his face to his lips.

"What do you need, Allie?"

I hesitated for a fraction of a second before placing my hands on his cheeks.

"You."

That was all I said before pressing my lips hard against his.

Chapter 21

Kaden muffled something along the lines of shock or surprise. I placed one hand on the back of his head, the other in the crook of his neck. Then I stroked his tongue with mine.

When he groaned, my whole body answered.

My God, I wanted Kaden. More than anyone ever before.

Together we stumbled into the room. Kaden shut the door behind us. For a moment he loosened his lips from mine to look at me. His eyes were darker than ever, and I could see in them only passion and pure desire. My heart was pounding so hard that my whole body shook. Suddenly Kaden was holding my head in his hands, kissing me until I was dizzy.

I wanted to feel Kaden, to explore his skin and kiss every single one of his tattoos. But he was wearing too much for that. Way too much. My hand traced down his back to the edge of his shirt; within a few seconds I'd pulled it over his head and tossed it aside. Now I kissed his chest, which made him sigh; I leaned back and let my eyes feast on his body.

He was as well-built as I remembered. And this time I could gaze at him without feeling ashamed. And touch him. His muscles tensed as my hands traced his upper body, first hesitantly, then more determined. I lingered on his stomach, wondering whether I should keep on going. Why not?

"Oh God, Allie," Kaden blurted out, running his fingers through my hair. He gently tipped my head back and started to kiss me again. His tongue danced slowly and also roughly with mine, sending such tingling through my body that my knees threatened to buckle. It seemed like Kaden felt the same; he put his hands around my waist and guided me with staggering steps toward the bed. Our kiss continued until he dropped backward and took me down with him. Now I sat straddling him, not even caring that I was naked under my bathrobe.

Kaden looked up at me through half-closed lids before his hands found their way under the soft robe and reached my skin. He stroked my thighs, back and forth, and a pleasant shudder ran through my whole body. I leaned forward, supporting myself with one arm next to his head, and bent over him. I kissed his stubbly cheeks, traced his jaw down to his neck, and remained

there until Kaden let out a groan that seemed to come from deep inside his chest.

“You’re killing me,” he gasped, then ran his hands up my body, under the knot of the bathrobe tie, just under my breasts. There he paused, stroking me with his fingers.

I bit gently into his neck and began to move my hips. I could feel his excitement. The fabric of his jeans rubbed against my skin and I wanted them off. My hand moved down, but before I reached his belt, he whirled me around and pressed my back against the mattress.

Kaden’s face was close to mine; I could feel his breath on my lips. He smelled of mint and of Kaden, and I wanted more.

“Allie ... this isn’t why I came here.”

I silenced him with my mouth, kissing him until I couldn’t breathe, digging my fingers into his shoulders and pulling him down to me as hard as I could.

Again Kaden drew away from me and said, panting: “I’m not sleeping with you. Not like this.”

Now all I could do was emit a frustrated groan.

Kaden gave me a crooked grin. “It’s great to know you want me, but I don’t think that now ... is the right time. With what you just went through, you’re not totally ... able to decide.”

Though my body hated him for it, Kaden was right. I loosened my grip on his shoulders and stroked his back.

Kaden closed his eyes, and held his breath. “If you keep this up, I might reconsider,” he murmured and buried his face on my shoulder. His stubbly chin scratched my naked skin—a feeling that made me mad with desire. He kissed me right there and I felt his teeth. I sighed. Kaden knew what he was doing.

When I stopped stroking his back Kaden lifted his head to look at me. His gaze was mysterious but attentive; his eyes darted over my face. Lying between his arms, I felt encompassed. Whatever happened around us, this was a safe place. I turned to look at my favorite tattoo, tracing the lyrics with my finger until his muscles tightened under my touch.

“I love your tattoos,” I murmured, turning to look at the circles on his other arm. “Not because I have a fetish for guys with tattoos, but because their meaning is so powerful.” When I saw the Morse code, I had to smile. Now that I’d met Rachel I could understand the tattoo so much better.

“I like how you always stare at it, and every time I catch you, you blush.”

His mouth twitched. My finger followed the outline of his lips. His eyes darkened, but then Kaden rolled off and lay down next to me. He leaned his head on his hand and looked at me. His eyes kept on returning to the belt of my bathrobe.

“Could you maybe put something on? I’m having a hard time concentrating.”

I rolled on my side so we were facing each other. “Are you sure you want to turn me down?”

His jaw muscles tightened. “Allie.”

“Kaden.”

For a moment he said nothing; he was working on an answer. Then he uttered a sound that was half laugh, half groan. “I didn’t reject you, Bubbles. I just said I won’t sleep with you.”

A second later he had rolled back on top of me. With one hand he opened the bathrobe, and I held my breath as he gazed at me with fiery eyes.

“That doesn’t rule out other things.”

Kaden kissed my mouth, my throat and then glided downward with his lips. He paused at my breasts, pushing the robe a little farther apart, until they lay bare in front of him. He looked at me, a question in his eyes, but I could only bite my lips. That was enough of an answer for Kaden, and he lowered his head, depositing kisses all over my torso. I arched my back and swore I could feel his smile on my skin before he encircled one of my nipples with his lips. I groaned. His left hand drifted down my body until he was at my hips. His touch was the perfect blend of powerful dominance and unbearable gentleness. I longed for release. I longed for *him*, though I knew it was probably the worst time to throw our rules overboard. But I wouldn’t destroy the beautiful moment by thinking too much about what it meant. It felt way too good for that.

“If you keep this up I’ll jump on you, like it or not,” I panted.

Kaden caressed my breast with his tongue before looking at me through his thick, black lashes. “It’s not about liking it or not liking it.”

“Which means?” I asked, breathless.

His lips moved against my skin. The tingling inside my belly was getting intense. “It means my self-control has its limits.”

I hoped that meant he’d finish what we started. As if reading my mind, he let his hand wander over my hipbones and inward. But instead of touching

me where I wanted it the most, he took his fingers down over my thigh to my knee. Then he drifted back to the inside of my thigh and pushed it gently open. His breath caressed my breasts. My own breathing was choppy, and when Kaden stroked the sensitive skin between my legs, my moans echoed off the walls.

“Do you want me to beg you?” I groaned and took his face between my hands so he would see me.

His eyes expressed pure desire. Obviously he was having to pull himself together to keep from taking everything he wanted.

“That would be nice for a change, wouldn’t it?” he whispered, and again I felt the rough stubble of his beard, this time against my breasts.

“Less talking, more ... ” I forgot what I’d wanted to say when his hand found the right place. My breath was shaking, and I clutched his arm.

“More what?” he growled.

“More ... of that,” I gasped, as he circled his thumb over my most sensitive spot.

I was about to explode. Kaden put his mouth on one of my nipples and sucked on it. I pressed myself against him and as he groaned in agreement I felt it in my whole body. His thumb was moving faster, and I threw my head back. Stars were bursting around me. As the sensations rolled over me in waves, Kaden kissed me passionately, thus catching the hoarse cry that emerged from my throat.

Breathless, I sank back into the pillow. My body was limp, my limbs heavy. Kaden pulled his hand back and straightened my bathrobe. I watched him through half-closed eyes as he tied the belt into a bow. Then he lay down beside me.

“Rules only half broken,” I whispered and turned to face him. “How’s that for a compromise?” Now a powerful sleepiness overtook me; my eyelids fluttered closed. It was as if all the adrenaline had been flushed out of my body.

“The second-best deal I’ve ever made,” he agreed, in a soft voice.

I didn’t get to ask him what he meant by that. My breath was already slowing down. With his hand on my hair, I fell asleep.

A knock awoke me. I sat up in bed and rubbed my eyes. Judging from the reddish rays filtering in through the window, the sun was setting. Dinnertime.

The door to our room was ajar and Kaden was wheeling in a cart with food after tipping the hotel staff. He'd thrown on his shirt but his hair was so disheveled that he couldn't have been up for long.

Kaden brought the cart into the room and closed the door. I stretched out, sighing. My arms and legs still felt heavy; each movement was in slow motion. But I felt fantastic. It had to be because of Kaden's presence. I no longer felt incomplete, and even my rage at my mother had faded. Instead, an exciting, tingling sensation coursed through my body.

Kaden took the lids off the various dishes and platters and sniffed the food. My stomach began to growl. With an amused twinkle in his eyes, Kaden faced me. When our eyes met I had to think of everything his mouth and fingers had been doing with me just a few hours ago. I felt hot and a throbbing sensation spread between my legs. I averted my eyes. The danger of my losing control and jumping on Kaden was too great.

"No." He walked around the bed and knelt on the mattress, which sank under his weight. Then he put two fingers under my chin and lifted it. "Let it go."

"What?" I croaked.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about." He leaned forward and placed his forehead against mine. "Don't withdraw from me."

I closed my eyes. Kaden stayed where he was, and after a moment I swallowed hard and nodded. I stopped trying to put up my inner walls again and instead enjoyed the moment of closeness. Leaning forward, I brushed my lips on his. Kaden sighed and stroked my cheek with his thumb.

"Could you please put something on now? All I can think of is your naked body under this thing," he whispered, tugging at the belt of my bathrobe.

I nodded, smiling, and slipped out of bed. Kaden's gaze burned on my back, and took all my will power not to turn back toward him. I picked out a pair of leggings, an oversized sweater and underwear from my travel bag and disappeared into the bathroom. I let the bathrobe fall from my shoulders. My skin was sensitive, and I still felt Kaden's lips on my breasts. I buried my face in my hands.

It wasn't as if I regretted anything. The opposite was true. I just felt anxious about my own desire for him. If he hadn't drawn a line I would've gone all the way. That's how much I wanted him.

That wasn't good at all.

I got dressed and ran my fingers a few times through my disheveled hair before getting up the courage to leave the bathroom again.

Kaden had placed the dishes from the cart on the round table by the window and was pouring wine in our glasses. When he saw me, he lifted the bottle high. "I thought it would be nervey of us to put this on your mom's bill."

I smiled. "That sounds marvelous."

"I'm glad you like my plan. Come." He nodded toward the empty chair at the table, and I crossed the room in a few steps to sit across from him.

Amused, I looked at the feast awaiting us. There was fried meat, rice, a selection of stewed vegetables and even cheesecake with blueberry topping.

"Your stomach was talking in your sleep, so I decided to call room service," Kaden explained, raising his glass of wine.

I did the same. His expression was mysterious. True, he was grinning, but there was also something melancholy, pensive, in his eyes.

"Why did you come here, Kaden?" The question had burst out. But I also didn't want to destroy the moment.

Kaden's expression didn't change; he kept looking at me. "You needed me. So I came. That's what friends are for, right?"

Of course. I lowered my eyes and looked at the food. I couldn't avoid thinking about everything we'd shared in the short time we'd known each other. For sure we were more than just friends. Kaden had to know this, too. But ...

"Allie," he interrupted my thoughts and leaned over the table. "We have so much other stuff to deal with. That has to come first, don't you think?"

He was right. Of course he was right. So I nodded and forced a smile. Kaden beamed back at me and raised his glass again. "I think we should toast to ... freedom."

We clinked our wine glasses together. "I'm always game for some freedom."

We drank and then set in on the food. I ate myself silly, until I couldn't think about anything except the fullness in my belly. After drinking the last drops of wine, we called room service to remove the cart.

"I'll never be hungry again," I murmured, cradling my round tummy.

Kaden got up and walked over to the French windows that opened out to a balcony. He unlatched the door and stepped out, only to return a second later and grab one of the oversized blankets from the bed. He looked at me over his shoulder and with his chin beckoned me to follow.

By now it had grown dark and cooled off quite a bit. I wrapped my arms around my body and looked at our surroundings. The view wasn't so special—just houses, streets and an industrial zone in the distance.

"I understand why you don't like it here that much," said Kaden after a few minutes.

He spread the blanket on the small bench at the balustrade, and sat down.

"I used to love Lincoln, or at least the suburb where we lived. But the older I got ... the worse things got for me here. And the unhappier I felt." I sat next to him and pulled up my knees. Kaden draped the rest of the blanket over my shoulders and I smiled at him. "Maybe I would have liked this place if my childhood had been different. Or if I'd gotten along better with my parents. I don't know."

"I can't imagine how that must have been for you, Bubbles," he murmured. "You don't fit here." He hesitated and swallowed a few times. The silence was tense, and I had the feeling that he was about to share something. "But I do know how it feels to be misunderstood. What it does to you when you don't feel connected with your family at all."

"Are you talking about your father?" I ventured. At the same time, I relaxed a bit: Listening to Kaden would be a lot easier for me than talking about my own problems.

Kaden nodded, his gaze fixed on a distant point. "He always got along better with my brother. After the divorce, Alex spent more time with him, and I spent more time with our mom. You've seen it—I couldn't imagine a better home. Dad on the other hand is a typical businessman ... Always thinking about a profit and pretty cold, emotionally. He and your parents would probably get along great. Everything is about the company. All he ever wanted was to turn Alex and me into perfect businessmen. At first it seemed like he was obsessed with both of us following in his footsteps. After the divorce it got worse, which made me withdraw from him even more. And at some point our family had split up without my realizing it." He breathed out. "I just didn't have anything to say to my father. And then when I found out the real reason for the divorce ... "

He stopped. Since our arms were touching, I could feel how his muscles tensed as he curled his hands into fists. For a few minutes he didn't speak. I waited.

"He had an affair," Kaden blurted out. "He left Mom for his secretary. I nearly hit him when he told us."

“But that’s not you,” I whispered.

He shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair. “If Alex hadn’t held me back, I might have even done worse than that.”

I couldn’t help myself—I placed my hand on his knee. He looked at me with such pain and sadness in his eyes.

“Only Mom and ... and my ex kept me from becoming bitter,” Kaden said.

He’d never mentioned his ex before.

“Which didn’t totally work,” I joked, and Kaden forced a smile that didn’t fool me for a second.

“Before Kendra left me, I was kind of nice,” he said with a smirk.

“She meant a lot to you?” I asked and ignored the dull throb in my chest.

Kaden frowned. “I was sixteen when we met so I wouldn’t call it a great love. But she was my first girlfriend. When we split up it felt like I was going to fall into a deep abyss. Especially because it didn’t end well ... It got pretty ugly.”

I took my hand from his leg and traced the tattoo rings on his upper arm with my fingers, one after the other.

“The first ones are wider because the pain was worst. Eventually the pain let up and the rings got narrower,” I murmured, thinking back to the night he’d told me about the meaning of his tattoos.

Kaden placed his hand over mine. I wanted to look up at him, but couldn’t. There was so much to take in. This opening up to each other and sharing things from our past kind of scared me. I pulled my hand away and leaned back. “Thanks for telling me about this.” I looked out at the sky, which was now a mix of purple and dark blue.

“You’re the first person I ever told.”

“But Spencer’s dropped comments about it,” I said, confused.

“Because he knew me back when Kendra and I were together,” Kaden whispered. “But I never told anyone else.”

Now I did have to look at him. “Thanks.”

“Stop thanking me, Bubbles.”

“Okay. But still, thanks.”

“We’re both messed up, aren’t we?”

“I can only agree, Mr. White.”

A pleasant stillness enveloped us. We were both lost in thought.

“I think you should go to this gala tomorrow,” Kaden said after a while, and pulled the blanket up around our shoulders.

I thought I hadn’t heard right. “What? You’ve got to be kidding. No way.”

“I’m sure your mom isn’t expecting to see you. And definitely not with me.”

“I have no ... Oh.” The penny had dropped, and I stared at Kaden. Panic welled up in me. “But you have to go back home! We both have to go back; what about Rachel, and Chad’s kids? And anyway—I have nothing to wear. Mom would go nuts if I showed up in everyday clothes.”

Kaden leaned forward and stopped my words with his dark gaze. He looked into my eyes and sought permission, which I gave. Then he bridged the last inches between us and planted his lips firmly on mine. The kiss was slow and intimate, and I felt it to the tips of my toes. Kaden groaned and the sound vibrated through my whole body.

He pulled back a bit and kissed my mouth and cheeks, before returning to my lips, sucking them gently between his teeth and nibbling on them.

When Kaden pressed his lips one last time against my forehead and leaned back, my panic was gone.

“I think you should go to the gala with me, to show your mom that she can’t beat us down. You won’t let her push you around, Bubbles. You are your own person and make your own decisions—that’s what we’d show her.”

When Kaden said “we,” my heart skipped a beat. I looked at him, dazed.

“You’re right,” I murmured.

“I’m always right,” he answered.

“You’re pretty full of yourself, Kaden.”

“Why should I be modest when we both know how great I am?” he asked, rising to his feet. He stretched his arms up over his head.

I followed him inside. We’d been on the balcony for quite a while. The sky was now shrouded in total darkness, and the air was damp and cold. It was time for sleep. That is, if sleep were even possible for me in Kaden’s presence.

Chapter 22

“Will you be ready soon?” his voice came through the door, and I sighed. This was the third time Kaden had asked. It was high time that I left the bathroom.

We’d spent the night together in bed, but were both so exhausted that we fell asleep. It felt pretty natural to wake up together and have breakfast, especially since Kaden made fun of my coffee habits, as usual.

But the atmosphere between us had changed, that was clear. It was hard for me to look at him for more than a few seconds without thinking about what he’d been doing to me yesterday. I caught myself wanting to touch him. I wanted more.

So his suggestion that I show him around Lincoln came at the right time. There wasn’t much happening in the streets. Probably everyone was with their family, busy preparing for Thanksgiving, which meant we could walk around in peace. But we both agreed quickly that we preferred Woodshill.

By late afternoon we were back in the hotel and watched the latest episode of *Game of Thrones* on the gigantic hotel TV screen. Afterward, I started to get ready. It wasn’t easy to make myself up with the few utensils I’d brought along, let alone get my hair in shape. I didn’t even want to think about what my mother would say about my outfit. She used to spend weeks looking for the right dress, or ordered designer clothes that cost more than my year’s rent at Kaden’s. The things I had on now were nice, but came mainly from discounters or cheap online stores.

I took a deep breath. Even though I was afraid of her reaction, my outfit was another symbol of my independence and that’s how mom should see it.

“Allie, I know what you’re wearing—I helped you pack. You don’t need to make a big fuss and drag this out,” came his impatient words from the other side of the door, and I rolled my eyes.

I pulled a few strands of hair from my pinned-up hairdo so it wouldn’t look too severe, and then opened the door.

“You get nervous when the bathroom is locked, don’t you?” I asked, grinning, and walked toward him.

Kaden's eyes were wide and he let his gaze travel over my body. He swallowed a few times and opened his mouth to speak—but nothing came. How unusual for him.

And he looked great, too. He wore a dark, blue-green shirt, brown pants that looked a little bit worn in places—in a good way—and his dark leather boots. I would go anywhere with him dressed like that. There was just one little thing ...

I walked over to him and reached for his shirtsleeves.

"Hey, what are you doing?" asked Kaden as I started to open the buttons. I looked up at him. His eyes sparkled.

"I want people to see it," I said, rolling up the fabric on each arm, to just below the elbow.

"So you do want your mother to have a heart attack after all."

I stroked the lyrics tattooed on his underarm before stepping back to look at my handiwork.

"Now everything is perfect," I announced.

Kaden returned my smile and the tingling sensation in my belly started up again. "That's it."

For five minutes we waited in the taxi at the corner of the street, where I'd asked the driver to stop. I shook my hands because they'd started to shake, but that didn't seem to help.

This whole thing was crazy. I'd make a fool of myself. On the other hand, wasn't that the whole idea? I wanted to make it clear beyond a doubt that I wasn't Mom's marionette any more, and couldn't care less what she or her so-called friends thought of me.

"Are you ready now, or should we make another turn around the block?" asked Kaden, standing by my side, and I shook my head right away.

Now was the time to face these people. And I wasn't alone. Before I could think it over again, I opened the car door and got out. The air was cool but bearable. Thank goodness I'd brought my leather jacket along.

Expensive cars were parked along the street, and guests were strolling along the driveway past the large fountain and pompous sculptures to the spotlighted entrance of our house.

I took a moment to collect myself. As Kaden and I stepped onto the property, I tried hard to avoid the countless familiar faces, heading straight for the entrance. At some point Kaden grabbed my arm and forced me to

slow to his pace. He bent toward me and murmured in my ear: “You’ll make it.”

I hoped he was right.

Once inside, we were welcomed by servants in black suits, who took our jackets and brought them down to the basement, where there was a huge wardrobe for such occasions.

A waiter offered us champagne, and I reached for a glass. Kaden followed suit. As usual, he first took a whiff of the drink and as the bubbles burst in his face, he narrowed his eyes.

“Sometimes you remind me of a cat.”

Kaden’s mouth twitched. “A cat? Can’t think of anything better?”

“There’s nothing better,” I replied, distracted as more people entered the foyer. They bubbled over in greetings, talking all at once, dropping lots of empty phrases that sent one unpleasant shiver after another down my spine.

They were all dressed to the nines—Kaden and I stood out.

“Crystal?” A high voice rang behind me, and I froze, then turned like a robot.

Standing before me was Brianna Mellery, a former high school classmate. She looked like she was dressed for a Hollywood film premiere, not for a benefit gala. Her shoes and shimmery dress must have cost a fortune.

“Brianna,” I said, hoping my smile didn’t seem fake. Once upon a time we’d been good friends, went to lots of parties together. We’d even looked similar, with our blonde hair and short skirts. But now I couldn’t see anything we had in common.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” she gushed, bending to peck a kiss on each cheek. “You look so ... different. So casual. I like it.”

I raised an eyebrow. Yeah, right.

“And you’ve brought someone with you!” she shrilled, looking Kaden up and down, devouring him with her eyes.

He nodded: “I’m Kaden.” When Brianna hesitated to kiss him on the cheeks as well, he added: “Crystal’s boyfriend.”

For a second I must have looked just as confused as Brianna.

“How cute.” Brianna covered her mouth with her hand and let out an affected giggle. “You go off and move to the other end of the world and come back with a man like that. I’ve got to tell Lindsay. I was looking for her anyway—but come find us. We’d love to hear how you’re doing.”

With these words she strutted off.

I stared after her, and when she was out of sight and earshot, I turned to Kaden: “Crystal’s boyfriend?”

He lifted his hands. “Self-defense. I didn’t want her to think of me as fair game. She had claws.”

I couldn’t laugh. “You realize that she’s now spreading the word?”

Kaden grinned. “I don’t have a problem with that.”

“Whatever you say.”

“You do?” he whispered.

I didn’t answer right away, instead looked around the room. Though it was still early, most of the guests had arrived. A few shot indignant glances toward Kaden and me; others tried to hide the fact that they were whispering about us. No surprises there. I knew what conclusions people would draw when they saw us together at this event.

I took a big gulp. “No, I don’t,” I finally answered, though I could have sounded a little more convinced.

Kaden rubbed his hand on my back. But instead of calming me, his touch reminded me of his hands on my naked skin, and I immediately felt hot.

Until I saw my father. And felt cold again. Even in a simple black suit, he broadcast absolute authority. He was standing at one of the bar tables, talking with a man who later wandered off to chat with others. Without hesitation, I took Kaden by the arm and walked toward Dad. He was just lifting his champagne flute to his lips when he spotted us. His eyes widened, but he masked his surprise with a tight smile.

“How nice that you managed to fit this in.” He didn’t look at me, but instead fastened his eyes on Kaden.

“This is my roommate, Kaden,” I said, trying not to let his frown unnerve me. “Kaden, this is my father.”

“Nicholas Harper,” Dad introduced himself and reached out his hand to Kaden. They shook, and sized each other up.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir,” Kaden responded.

“You live with my daughter?”

“Dad! We’re just roommates!” I cried, and felt myself blushing.

“Yes I do, sir. She rents a room in my apartment.” Kaden’s voice was strong, his attitude self-assured but easygoing. If he was feeling intimidated, he didn’t let on.

I'd never imagined being in such a situation. Dad had never been interested before in what I did or who I hung out with. During the week he worked like crazy, and on the weekend I was always out and about. We'd lived together for years and never really got to know each other.

"Nicholas! I've been looking for you everywhere." An older man had stepped beside Dad and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Francis!" Dad exclaimed. "Great that you could make it. Can I offer you a glass of wine? But now I remember—you always preferred scotch, right?"

My father nodded to us again before guiding his business partner toward the bar.

"That wasn't bad at all," Kaden said, leaning his arms on the table in front of us.

"Mh hm," I responded, unable to evaluate this encounter. Yes, Dad had met Kaden—but did he also understand that I hadn't come here as a favor for him and Mom. Quite the opposite? I thought my outfit and Kaden's tattoos would make it pretty clear on their own, but that hadn't worked. Frowning, I put down my champagne glass and rubbed my finger around its edge till it squeaked.

For an hour, the chairs of this year's charitable organization gave their welcoming speeches, but I hardly heard a word. First of all, people from my old life kept on coming over to us, fawning over me and eyeing Kaden with curiosity. And secondly, Kaden was doing everything he could to make this experience bearable. What did make me laugh was how he invented the wildest possible scandals involving some of the guests.

"That guy over there is Alexander McTalman," he said, nodding toward an older man who was unknown to me. He was incredibly tall, wore a plaid suit and was unobtrusively scratching his crotch. "He's a Scottish Lord who's upset that he can't wear a kilt today. You can see, he feels kind of cramped."

"Your imagination is incredible," I said with my mouth full. We'd collected a mountain of snacks on our table, since we were too hungry to wait for the real food.

"That woman over there is Sabrina Miller-Fishbury. She's president of the golf club for underage criminals, and she's having an affair with Lord McTalman." Her hair was combed back so tightly that her face seemed stretched. A kind of natural face-lift that might work for my mother as an

alternative to the massive amounts of Botox she had injected into her. “But Mrs. Miller-Fishbury is stuck in an unhappy marriage with Mr. Fishbury, whose hair growth cream stopped working.”

Kaden was looking at a pretty short guy who had plopped a toupee over the remnants of his real hair. I laughed aloud and covered my mouth, hoping no one had noticed.

“Your turn,” said Kaden with a happy grin.

He was making the best of our situation and didn’t complain once. So I didn’t mind taking part in his silly game. Looking around for my next victim, an invented story was on my lips when—

I saw him.

And my heart stopped.

The way he held himself, his straight, strong profile. His wavy brown hair, with a few gray streaks. I would have recognized Russell Anderson anywhere.

I couldn’t breathe, and started to black out. I grabbed the table to keep from falling.

Our eyes met. For a moment, he looked surprised; then a delighted smile spread across his face.

I felt sick.

He shook the hand of the person he was talking to, then turned and walked toward us.

I might throw up any second.

“Allie?” Kaden asked, but his words didn’t reach me.

He came closer. And then he was standing in front of me. His bitter aftershave penetrated my nostrils, making me nauseated.

“Crystal.”

What I wanted to do was spit in his face, punch and kick him. But as usual I was paralyzed in his presence. He leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek, keeping his mouth close to my ear. “How lovely to see you,” his warm, moist breath made my stomach curdle.

I pressed my lips together. Without reciprocating, I stared straight ahead, hands clenched, trying to avoid his arrogant smile. Or how his eyes wandered greedily over my body, as usual.

“College life has been good for you, I see,” he announced, pleased.

I folded my arms across my chest, as if I could shield myself from his hungry gaze. Kaden took a step closer to me and placed his hand on my back.

“And who do we have here?” Anderson asked, his voice dripping with disapproval.

This tore me out of my trance, and I looked up.

“This is my boyfriend, Kaden White.” I didn’t even know how I managed to get those words out so firmly. Autopilot must have kicked in. “Kaden, this is—”

“Russell Anderson. An old friend of the family,” Anderson interrupted, and nodded to Kaden instead of shaking hands.

Kaden tensed beside me, drawing me a bit closer to give me support, without knowing who this man was let alone what his presence triggered in me.

Just then the loudspeakers crackled with the sound of my mother’s voice. She talked about the organization that would get this year’s donations, and how much this meant to her.

But my eyes were still on Anderson. How could he have the impudence to appear here? To talk to me, touch me? In my parents’ house!

How could they even let him in, after everything he’d done to me?

“And I’m especially pleased,” my mother continued in her cheery speech voice, “that I have the honor of recognizing a remarkable person today. Not only has he supported the foundation through his commitment—he’s also been a friend of the family for a long time.” She paused for effect. “Ladies and gentlemen, please give a hand to this year’s top donor ... you already know him! Russell—where are you hiding?”

My mouth dropped open.

Anderson turned toward me and winked. He let his hand drift across my hip as he whispered, “Nice to see you again, Crystal. Maybe we can free up some time for each other later on.”

Then he turned, straightened his tie, and, smiling brightly, made his way through the throng of guests to join my mother at the podium.

My legs were about to give way; I reached for Kaden’s arm.

“Get me out of here,” I gasped. “Please, get me out of here!”

Kaden shifted gears, put his arm around me and pushed me firmly toward the front door. Anderson’s oily slick voice followed us the whole way. He felt honored, and he would accept the recognition in the name of all those in need ...

My stomach cramped. Once outside, I inhaled the fresh air as if I’d been drowning. Kaden led me across the driveway and away from the property,

ignoring the dismayed looks of other guests.

Once we'd reached the street, he relaxed his hold, and I let myself sink onto the sidewalk. Kaden spoke, but all I could hear was Anderson's voice swirling around in my head. *Crystal*. How he'd whispered my name.

My pulse was racing. This was the last straw.

Kaden's face appeared before mine. He knelt in front of me and touched my knees. I pushed his hands away.

"What did that asshole do to you?" he whispered.

I couldn't speak. He put his big hands around my face, but instead of making me feel safer, this just made me feel afraid. I resisted him.

"Allie, you have to tell me," Kaden insisted. "Did he ... Did he hurt you?" He said the words as if it pained him to pronounce them aloud.

I knew what he was asking, and shook my head no.

"I don't believe you."

I forced myself to look at Kaden. His gaze was pleading, almost panicky.

"He did not go to bed with me," was all I could muster before standing and looking for a taxi. The walls I'd built around my soul back then had now returned. And they stopped me from telling the true story.

It wasn't long before a taxi appeared. Kaden helped me get in and told the driver to wait a moment. He disappeared, returning a few minutes later with our jackets. He put mine over my shoulders and laid his own over my legs. The farther away we were from my parents' house, the easier it was for me to breathe. But I still couldn't bear Kaden's touch. Not now. It was too much, just too much.

Back in the hotel, I disappeared into the bathroom and turned on the shower. I used an entire bottle of shower gel, but no matter how hard I tried, the terrible memories of Russell Anderson wouldn't wash away. Afterward, the whole bathroom was filled with mist. With a trembling hand, I wiped a patch of steam off the mirror and stared at myself.

Pale face. Panic-stricken eyes. The look was oh-so-familiar. For months, I'd stared back at that broken girl in the mirror.

I tried not to hyperventilate.

Running into Russell Anderson was the last thing I'd been expecting today. Our last contact was nearly three years back.

I wrapped myself in the bathrobe, brushed my teeth, and then pulled on my leggings and a wide black T-shirt. As I blow-dried my hair, I realized I had calmed down.

“Allie?” Kaden was standing outside the door.

I took a deep breath. I knew I couldn’t hide myself from him much longer. I forced out a laugh. It sounded fake, so I tried again. This time it sounded better. That’s to the only way I could face Kaden. But would he accept it? How else could I deal with this situation? He should never have seen me in this state.

Carefully, I entered the bedroom. He was sitting on the bed, his head buried in both hands. When he heard me, he looked up. He looked more than merely worried.

I smiled.

“Cut it out,” he demanded.

My smile slipped just a little. “What do you mean?” I went over to my bag and took a bit of time to put my clothes inside.

“Allie, cut the shit.”

I continued to rummage through my bag. “It’s okay, Kaden. I was just overwhelmed.”

He leapt up and strode toward me, grabbing me by the shoulders and whirling me around. I opened my mouth to protest—but then saw how angry he looked.

“You are going to tell me what that was all about. Now.” he said through clenched teeth.

“Let me go.”

“No.”

“Kaden, let go of me now,” I hissed and tried to push him off with both my hands.

“No,” he repeated, and this time his voice was low. “You are not going to shut down now. Not after these last few months, not after I’ve introduced you to my mom, not after last night, and definitely not after tonight.” He pulled me close. “Do you understand me?”

Of course I did. But Kaden had no idea what he was asking of me. It wouldn’t happen, and the sooner he accepted it, the better. Shaking my head, I tried again to free myself from his grasp.

But he just held on tighter.

“My God, what do you want from me?” I cried, pushing with both hands against his chest.

“The truth,” Kaden whispered. “I want to know what this fucker did to you,” his voice grew louder. “What happened between you? Why can’t you

be in the same room with him without losing it? I want to know—”

“Stop,” I interrupted him. My pulse was racing so fast, I felt dizzy.

“No way. I was there when he greeted you. I had to hold myself back from punching him in the face. The way he looked at you was—”

“Shut up,” I pleaded and covered my ears with my hands.

“What did he do to you?” Kaden’s voice was barely a whisper. He held me tight, but now he was running his thumbs over my naked arms. “Tell me, Allie.”

I could feel the walls collapse around me. The memories wouldn’t stay under cover any more, no matter how hard I tried to push them back. They poured over me like a torrent, one after the other, and I sobbed. My knees buckled, but Kaden was there and held me tight. He slid down to the floor with me. Hot tears ran down my cheeks, and I clung to him as the pictures from the past, so long repressed, came back—and with them the feelings of panic, fear, helplessness. The loneliness.

I cried and cried and cried.

Kaden stroked my hair, murmured gentle, soothing words into my ear, and held me so tightly that it felt like he wanted to keep me together with all his strength.

At some point the tears dried up. I lay curled up between Kaden’s legs, my knees drawn up and my head against his chest. His steady breath and strong arms around my trembling body gave me something I’d never known before—a feeling of absolute stability.

And then I started to talk.

“It all started just after I turned sixteen,” I murmured into his shirt, which was damp from my tears. “Anderson was one of Dad’s new business partners and spent a lot of time with us, because my parents got along well with him. He invested millions in our company. And at first I didn’t mind him. He’d helped my father out, my mother was happy, and that was all good for me.”

As if to encourage me, Kaden stroked my back with his hand. I took a deep breath and continued.

“When it first started, I didn’t even notice what he was doing—like how he would touch me when he passed by, how he got closer to me than he should have. I thought I was just imagining it. And at first it was harmless. But then he started getting ... more persistent.”

I swallowed hard.

“It was a creeping kind of ... abuse. When I finally got the courage to tell him to stop, he threatened to cancel all his contracts with my father, which would have bankrupted the family business. I was ... I was afraid that I could destroy my parents’ livelihood.”

Kaden’s hands stopped and I could feel his body tighten. He wanted to speak but I went on.

“So I didn’t fight back. As disgusting as it sounds, I even got used to it. His constant nearness, his slimy compliments. To his hands, which sometimes wandered up my skirt. The glee in his eyes when Mom bought me another new dress. I just lay there and took it.” I managed not to gag. “One night, he and some other friends of my parents were having a few drinks at our place. He snuck into my room.”

Kaden clenched his hands in fists against my back.

“He started kissing me, but I pushed him off,” I blurted out. “I was afraid he’d push for more. He eventually left, but he wasn’t amused. After that his approaches were even more insistent. Like he had an insatiable hunger. He knew my parents had no idea. He knew I couldn’t bear to see my parents lose everything. So he kept coming at me. Eventually I felt like his voice had entered my head, like he was everywhere. I couldn’t escape his touching, his advances.” My eyes started to burn, but I suppressed my tears. “I couldn’t sleep anymore, couldn’t eat. I stayed at school as late as I could, and then I would hang out with friends at the mall or at their houses. Sometimes I’d go to the movies and sit there through the late show. I couldn’t go home anymore. He could be there, waiting for me. After I collapsed from exhaustion one day, my mother forced me to tell her what was going on.”

I paused and took a deep breath. It was hard to talk about this. I’d never trusted anyone in this way before.

“I told her everything. Everything Anderson had done and said to me, and she looked shocked. She asked me if he ... ” I cleared my throat again. “If he’d raped me, and I said no. Then she asked if he’d forced me to do anything else for him. My answer was no here, too. He hadn’t hurt me physically. He just pushed himself onto me in a quiet, disgusting way. He robbed me of my security.”

Kaden seemed to be holding his breath. I lifted my head from his chest to look at him. His lips were pressed together, and his eyes were burning with anger.

“You’ve met my mother. She would never allow anything to ruin Dad’s business or the family’s reputation. She said, well, if he hadn’t raped me, then I shouldn’t worry. From now on she’d buy me new clothes that weren’t so revealing. Then I wouldn’t be tempting him.”

Kaden drew in his breath. “She didn’t.”

I sighed. “Yes. I told her how uncomfortable I felt and that I was afraid of Anderson. Afraid he would creep into my room again, and I wouldn’t be able to hold him off. I wanted to go to the police. But Mom didn’t let me. She said no one would believe me. After all, I didn’t have any bruises. She said I’d look like a liar. A liar who had dragged her whole family into the abyss. She said she’d keep him away from me, and that’s how it was. Until tonight.”

“You let this guy off so he wouldn’t harm your parents,” Kaden said, with a dark expression.

I shrugged. “What choice did I have?”

“For God’s sake, you were only sixteen, Allie,” his voice shaking with anger.

For a moment I just listened to Kaden’s fast heartbeat, building up the courage to continue.

“I still avoided spending any time at home. Especially on weekends. Even Dad noticed my absence, but since he wasn’t supposed to know anything about the whole thing, I withdrew from him.” I laughed bitterly. “And Mom ... at some point I couldn’t look at her face anymore. She’d threatened to sue Anderson, and after that he invested even more money into the company. He paid for our silence.”

Now Kaden winced and pulled me closer.

“I’m so sorry that you had to go through all this,” he murmured into my hair.

“Actually, I thought I’d worked it out. I mean, I dated guys and tried stuff out. But seeing Anderson today and hearing my mother praising him has ripped open the wounds all over again.” I could still see Anderson’s face, his lewd smile. I shuddered. “Mom wanted me to be at the gala tonight. She knew he’d be there. The awardee is selected weeks in advance. She lured me into an open knife.”

Kaden just shook his head.

“I want to leave it all behind me once and for all,” I said with a sigh. Even if a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders now that I’d confided in Kaden, I felt more vulnerable than ever.

“Let’s go home,” I murmured after a pause. “To Woodhill, I mean.”

Because that was home now. There was nothing left to keep me here.

Kaden leaned back from me a bit and brushed my hair from my face. His expression was still dark and heavy. “If that’s what you want, we’ll take the next plane.”

Chapter 23

A radiant Rachel came out to greet us as we drove up her driveway early the next morning. Kaden had asked if we could stop to see his mother. After all, he'd missed the big holiday celebration with her.

Rachel opened my side of the car before we'd even parked, and hugged me without saying a word. She avoided commenting on my puffy face and the dark circles under my eyes, but gave Kaden a meaningful look.

The table in the living room was already set, and I sank into a chair.

"Chad's kids seem to find me pretty cool," Rachel said, pouring coffee for us.

"That sounds good," Kaden said.

"How old are they, anyway?" I asked, while stirring milk into my coffee.

"Thirteen and seventeen." Rachel sat across from me, clutching her own coffee mug. "I was pretty nervous, let me tell you."

It seemed like the most normal thing in the world, sitting here in this house. Having breakfast with Kaden and his mother. They both made me feel like I belonged, which made me feel even worse about ruining their Thanksgiving dinner together.

"Sorry I was such a bother." I just had to get it out, or else I would have burst. "I didn't want that to happen."

Sitting next to me, Kaden rolled his eyes.

"Don't worry. It was an emergency, and Chad was very understanding. I'm glad your father's okay," said Rachel, reaching out from across the table to touch my hand. "Besides, it turned out the food was exactly enough for the four of us. I forgot how much teenagers can eat." She chuckled. "Next time I'll plan it out better."

Maybe she was just being polite, but I was grateful. Kaden stared gloomily into his coffee. He'd been tense since last night; his face hadn't brightened at all. And he'd hardly said a word to me on our return trip. Of course he had to digest what he'd heard. But his withdrawal hurt. Especially since I'd hoped ... no. I didn't finish the thought.

Rachel's gaze wandered between me and Kaden, but she didn't comment on our mood. Instead, she began to tell me about how she met Chad.

After breakfast, Kaden disappeared to pack his belongings while I helped his mom clear the table.

“He was so worried about you, Allie,” Rachel said. “I’ve never seen him this way.”

How should I respond? Two days ago we had both insisted we were only friends. But I couldn’t deny my feelings anymore. I felt more for him. Much more.

“It warms my heart to see him that way,” Rachel continued, smiling. I was about to ask what she meant when I heard Kaden clearing his throat behind me. He was standing at the kitchen door, shoulder bag in hand.

“I’m going to freshen up,” I said and left the two alone. My cheeks felt hot.

In the guest bathroom, I splashed my face with cold water, then pressed my hands against my cheeks, trying to get my emotions under control. I could not take much more of this. No matter what happened between us, I didn’t want to lose Kaden’s friendship.

One, two, three ...

Inhale. Exhale. Breathe. Taking one more deep breath, I returned to the kitchen to say goodbye to Rachel, but stopped short when I heard a low murmur that reached the hallway.

“You’ve misunderstood.” Kaden’s voice sounded cold.

Rachel laughed. “You think I don’t have eyes in my head? I see how you guys are together.”

“Sure, she’s cute. There may be some sparks, but we’re just friends, Mom.”

My heart fell.

“And may I ask why?”

“No, you may not.”

Kaden’s mother cursed. “I’m your mother, Kaden, I can ask whatever I ___”

“She’s got too much baggage, okay?” Kaden whispered. “I can’t deal with it. And I don’t want to deal with it. I can’t be responsible for someone who falls apart so easily.”

“Oh, Kaden. She’s not Kendra, sweetie.”

“Let it go, Mom.”

His words punched me in the gut. I couldn’t muffle my gasp, and their voices fell silent. Quickly I leaned down and slipped on my boots. Kaden

and Rachel came out of the kitchen into the hallway. I looked up and managed a small smile.

Kaden hugged his mother goodbye, and I did the same, thanking her once more before getting into the Jeep like a robot. I waved while Kaden steered the car out of the driveway.

For the entire trip, I pretended to be in a deep sleep.

While Kaden parked the car, I acted as if I were just waking up. We went upstairs in silence, and as he opened the door to our apartment, a feeling of joy spread through me, despite the throbbing pain in my heart. I was so happy to be back home. Here, everything felt right. As if I belonged right here. In this one place.

“Do you want to take a shower? Otherwise I’ll go first,” Kaden said, setting down his bag in the hall. He pulled his shoes off and held out his hand for my jacket. I pretended not to have seen his silent gesture.

“You go first,” I said and walked past him to my room, closing the door behind me and dropping my bag on the floor. A moment later, I heard the sound of the shower running.

I unpacked my things in slow motion, throwing the dirty laundry in the basket and starting to clean up my room, trying to keep busy with anything, simply anything.

The last few days had been an emotional roller coaster, and I had to be grateful to Kaden, and him alone, that I hadn’t fallen apart. He had come to me when I needed him most. He had listened to me and held me. I thought he wanted me to open up, to trust him with my story. I thought he’d felt the same for me as I did for him. I was wrong.

So what was it that turned Kaden off the most? Was it everything that Anderson had done to me? My blind obedience to my mother and never pressing charges? Or was it my breakdown from last night?

It didn’t help to worry about it.

Kaden didn’t want me. That was clear.

It was my own fault. After all, I knew from day one that Kaden wasn’t looking for a relationship. And until a few days ago I was convinced that we had to end whatever was happening between us, before we went too far and lost control. But I shouldn’t have worried—it was never part of Kaden’s plan to go any further.

Still, it felt like cold claws were closing around my heart.

Chapter 24

The remaining vacation days dragged on. Dawn had called to tell me about her own Thanksgiving drama: Her ex had showed up with his new girlfriend. So I wasn't the only one who'd had a terrible break. Today she'd be back in Woodshill, and I couldn't wait to see her again, after spending so much time in bed watching TV series to distract myself.

Kaden and I had been avoiding each other. We didn't even drink our morning coffee together anymore. Each of us prepared our own, which was a real step backward for us. I'd seen him only twice since we got back, and both times he was just leaving the apartment.

This radio silence hurt. On the first night it was hard not to go to him, whether he wanted me or not. I missed him and longed for his presence. My heart physically ached to be near him. But at the same time, it was clear that we were better off going cold turkey. We needed distance.

And I had to get out of this apartment, even for just a few hours. When Dawn wrote that she was back in the dormitory and I could drop by, I dropped everything and headed over there. We could compare notes about our holidays and binge on candy. Nothing sounded better to me right now.

The dorm wasn't dead, but it was still pretty quiet.

I knocked a couple of times on Dawn's door; two seconds later it burst open.

Confused, I froze and blinked.

It wasn't Dawn. It was Sawyer standing there. Kaden's non-girlfriend, the one I'd run up against on my first weekend in Woodshill and never seen anywhere near our place since.

"What are you doing here?" I blurted out.

Sawyer didn't look surprised to see me but just rolled her eyes. "I live here," she said, stepping aside so I could enter. "Unfortunately." She added.

"If you can get her to stop crying, I'll pay you." She pushed past me and closed the door hard behind her.

Stunned, I stared after her. So Sawyer was the weird roommate, the one Dawn was always trying to avoid. Unbelievable.

I shook my head. There would be time to mull this over later. For now, Dawn needed my help.

She lay curled up on the bed, with the blanket pulled up around her.

“Dawn?” I ventured.

“She’s nuts,” came her muffled voice from under the blanket; a corner lifted up, revealing a bit of Dawn’s face. She looked just the way I’d been feeling since Thanksgiving. Not great. “I’m not crying at all.”

I knelt beside the bed and lifted a lock of chestnut hair from her forehead. “Are you just tired?”

She shook her head.

“No. I’m just hiding.”

“From whom?”

“The world.”

I nodded and kicked off my shoes. “Is there room in your cave?”

Right away she shimmied over and lifted the blanket so I could slip inside. With me lying next to her, she pulled the blanket over our heads.

“You’ve got it good here,” I joked.

Dawn’s cheeks were flushed, but she didn’t look like she’d been crying. Just pissed off.

“What happened, Dawn?”

She sighed. “It was a disaster. The idiot brings his new girlfriend along to the dinner at my father’s place. I could have killed him.”

“Once an asshole, always an asshole,” I said.

“That was my worst Thanksgiving ever. Hope yours was better.”

I kind of wanted to tell Dawn everything—even about Russell Anderson and my breakdown. But even though I’d never trusted a girlfriend so much in my life—I couldn’t do it. Not yet. So I stuck to the story about mom’s phone call. And course I told her how Kaden had come to me, and even accompanied me to the gala.

When I finished, Dawn sighed. “This guy is so into you.”

“I wish,” I said, only then realizing how it sounded.

Dawn sat up a bit. “So you have feelings for him?”

I swallowed. “Yes.”

“But that’s great, Allie!”

“I overheard him tell his mother that I have too much baggage,” I blurted out, before she got too happy.

Dawn’s mouth dropped open. “Say what?”

“He told her he didn’t want to get involved with anyone who falls apart so easily.” It hurt to repeat those words aloud.

Dawn slumped back, then pushed the blanket off our faces to get some air.

“What a jerk.”

I snorted. “You can say that again.”

“What a-”

“Dawn!” I interrupted her, laughing, and turned to my side. We grinned at each other.

We spent the rest of the afternoon eating chocolate, gabbing, and sharing secrets from our past. Even though I couldn’t tell Dawn everything yet, and it was probably the same for her, I felt good. These hours had brought us together again. We were on the right path. It was me and Dawn against them all.

“I think we should stop hiding, and go out to conquer the world,” Dawn said at some point.

Now she was on her back, her legs stretched up against the wall. And I was lying on my stomach.

“Conquer the world?” I raised an eyebrow. “You think we’re ready for that?”

“Well, I didn’t mean today. But we could—I don’t know—do something.” She wiggled her toes and for the first time I noticed her socks didn’t match.

Dawn grinned at me. “So, are you in?”

And how.

For the first time since we’d known each other, Dawn and I were the same height—but only because she was wearing the highest heels I’d ever seen in my life, and I had to make do with my flat boots. She had lent me one of her tops with a deep neckline. Since I was bustier than Dawn, it was pretty tight on me. But who cared?

We were fabulous, and the rest of the world—with its devious mothers, dishonest ex-boyfriends, and relationship-challenged Kadens—could suck it.

Today we were going to go out and flout everything. It wasn’t that we were trying to numb ourselves, the way I always used to do. Quite the opposite. Dawn and I wanted to have fun and celebrate.

We arrived at Hillhouse at exactly the right time. The line was short, and after flashing our fake IDs, we were let right in. Groups of people were standing around or dancing, but it wasn't too crowded. We ordered cocktails and even found good seats at a table in the back, where we toasted to each other.

"Let's do Thanksgiving together next year," Dawn suggested.

"That's the best idea you've ever had."

"We're really—shit."

"Huh?"

"Don't turn around," Dawn hissed and stared at me, doe-eyed.

But of course I did.

Monica, Ethan, Spencer, and Kaden had just come in. I wanted to look away and pretend I hadn't seen them, but Monica had already spotted us and was making her way straight to the back.

"Should we leave?" Dawn asked, but I shook my head.

"We live together anyway. So hanging out here won't make a big difference," I mumbled, chewing on the end of my straw.

"Hey you two—how are you? Have a good break?" Monica asked, as she reached our cozy table with the guys in tow.

"We're fantastic," Dawn said, staring at Kaden. He seemed not to notice. For a split second he glanced at my cleavage, then looked away.

"Yes, we're terrific," I agreed with my friend, and we both let loose a giggle.

Ethan eyed the full glasses in front of us on the table. "Is this your second round?"

"No, we just ate a ton of chocolate," Dawn said, proudly.

Spencer sat down unbidden on the stool next to her. Her cheeks flushed.

Monica perched on the stool on the other side of Dawn, and Ethan sat across from her. So Kaden had no choice but to sit next to me. Great. He hesitated as if undecided. I made it easy, getting up without even looking his way.

"I'm going to dance," I announced and disappeared toward the dance floor.

I left the drink on the table. Alcohol wasn't my thing tonight. I just couldn't. Nor could I be in Kaden's presence and act like nothing had happened. Especially now that I'd admitted I felt something for him. Distance was what I needed. Now. But unfortunately that wasn't so easy, if you lived

with someone. And had the same friends. We'd all become pretty close, and there was no way I wanted to mess it up.

Instead of going to dance, I sat on the opposite end of the bar, where the others couldn't see me. I ordered a water and stirred it with my straw, listless. I let two bad songs go by one after the other, and put off a couple of guys who tried to engage me in chitchat.

After a while, Spencer appeared at my side. "Allie?" He leaned against the counter next to my swivel chair.

"Hey," I said, forcing a smile and sipping my water like hard liquor.

"What's up?" he asked. When I didn't answer, he continued: "Come on, Allie. I'm not blind. Kaden's feeling crappy and so are you. Something happened."

"Then go ask him," I hissed, immediately regretting my tone. I shook my head. "I'm sorry. It's not your fault."

He gave me a half-grin. "No worries. Do you want to talk about it?"

I shook my head again.

"Okay," Spencer said. "Then I'll talk. Since you moved in with him, Kaden's changed. I've never seen him so relaxed, and I've known him a long time."

"That has nothing to do with me," I murmured.

"Oh yes it does, and you know it, too," he countered. "It was just a question of time with you two."

"I—"

"No," he interrupted. His gaze was penetrating. "Listen, Allie. Kaden went through a lot of shit and needs more time before he can let someone get close to him. You've come pretty far already. I'm not going to sit by this time and watch him destroy the only thing that makes him happy."

He held out his hand. Confused, I stared at him.

"Either you're coming with me now or I'm telling everyone I know that you cried at the sight of a pizza." I knew Spencer meant it. Not just about the pizza story, but also when he said he wouldn't let Kaden get out of this one.

And to be honest, I also wanted things between me and Kaden to be okay. Only I didn't have the foggiest idea how to fix things.

I pushed the water aside and put my hand in Spencer's; he led me to the dance floor with a meaningful gaze. In the middle of the space he stood still, threw his arm around my waist and pulled me close.

"What the hell?" I pushed my hands against his chest, trying to get away.

“Trust me,” was all he said. He started moving in time with the music. From here the others could see us, for sure.

“Are you serious? You want to make him *jealous*?” I asked, laughing. Spencer’s touch was not demanding but friendly, and I relaxed, letting my hands rest on his waist.

“Ten,” he murmured and pulled me a bit closer.

I didn’t dare look around. “Spencer, this is a joke.”

“Nine,” he continued unmoved and led me into a spin.

Kaden would never react to such a silly alpha-male display. After all, he hadn’t even batted an eye that time Scott and I had danced together.

“Eight.”

Although nothing had happened yet between Kaden and me at that point.

“Seven.”

I was giving up hope. Kaden didn’t want me and would never want me. I’d heard what he said to his mother, and he always told her the truth

“Six.” Spencer smoothed my hair out of my face before he pulled me close again. Man, he was good. He should try this with Dawn—he’d have her eating out of his hand.

“Fi-”

Kaden appeared out of nowhere.

“What the fuck, man?” he growled, grabbing Spencer by the shirt with both hands.

Instead of showing the tiniest bit of concern, Spencer smiled. “Just because you treat her like garbage, Kaden, doesn’t mean the rest of us have to.”

Kaden punched Spencer in the face. He staggered to the floor.

“Kaden!” I cried and held him around the waist from behind.

He was trembling with anger as he shook out his hand and cursed. People nearby looked uneasy. I saw two bouncers approaching from a distance.

“Go,” hissed Spencer, struggling to his feet. His right eye was already starting to swell. He touched it and winced. “Get out of here.”

“Spence,” murmured Kaden, but Spencer lifted a hand to stop him from speaking.

“It’s all good, man. I shouldn’t have taken it so far.” He tried to smile but all he could manage was a pained grimace. Then he repeated for the last time: “Now go.”

Kaden seemed to be awakening from his shock. He grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the emergency exit. I hoped the doormen wouldn't follow us.

A cold wind whipped my face as I followed Kaden past the heavy metal door. He strode across the parking lot and ran his hand through his hair.

"Dammit!"

His voice echoed.

"Kaden," I began, but he whirled around and raised his hand.

"No," he growled.

"Kaden, please."

"Leave me alone, Allie. Just let it go." He turned around and practically ran the last few yards to his Jeep. Ignoring me, he got in and started the engine.

And before I knew it, he had taken off, squealing his tires behind him.

Chapter 25

For a second I considered going back to the bar, but I was too angry. So I walked home. For the first time since I'd overheard Kaden and Rachel in Portland, I wasn't sad. There was no room for any other emotion besides anger. Especially when I saw the Jeep parked outside our building.

That asshole had left me standing in the parking lot and driven straight home. Not to mention stunt he'd pulled at the club.

I raced up the stairs. When I reached the door, my hand was shaking so much that it took me four tries to get the key into the lock and open the door.

Loud music thumped from Kaden's room.

I chucked my shoes into the hallway, trashing Kaden's perfect order.

My hands clenched, I stomped toward his room. Without a moment's hesitation, I shoved open the door with full force. Not even bothering to look at Kaden, I headed for the stereo and started pressing buttons. Nothing happened. With a frustrated cry, I bent down and pulled the plug from the socket. Silence.

I turned to Kaden. "What the fuck are you doing?"

He was sitting on his bed, bent forward, with his arms on his thighs, and something that looked like a bag of frozen vegetables on his right hand.

He said nothing, but stared downward.

"I asked you a question," I said, raising my voice.

"I heard you." There was no emotion in his voice.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

He was silent and kept his gaze downward.

I didn't know what to do with my anger. What I wanted to do was just shake him. His actions tonight hurt more than anything I'd heard him say to his mother. I didn't deserve to be treated like this.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked. "I know that things got a bit too intense between us, okay? And I'm sorry that you got involved in my whole dramatic story. But you wanted me to tell you everything. That's no reason to be mean now. That just ruins everything, Kaden. Everything."

"And what if that's what I want to do?" he whispered.

"Why should you?" I hissed.

Kaden looked at the bag on his hand. "I don't know any other way to be."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard." My voice had become calm without my even trying.

Kaden stood up. He let the bag fall on the floor and took one single, slow step toward me.

"I'm an asshole, Allie," he said, his voice disquietingly soft, his dark eyes unfathomable. "A major asshole, who even punches out his best friend. Get used to it. It's not going to change."

I snorted. "You didn't hit Spencer because you're an asshole. You did it because you couldn't handle seeing me with another guy."

"Yeah."

"You can't handle it because something happened in the past that you never talk about, and ..." I stopped and stared at him. "What did you just say?"

He took another step toward me. "Yeah."

I backed away. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Kaden exhaled slowly. He rubbed his hands a few times over his face, shaking his head. When he let his hands drop, his expression was no longer remote and closed, but gentle.

"Yes, Allie. Yes, seeing you and Spencer like that drove me crazy. Yes, I'm insecure, and all that scares me half to death. Yes, after Kendra I've never let anyone else in, and yes, I hate that you arouse my need to be open, to give myself."

My breath stopped. The blood rushed into my ears as I stared at Kaden with an open mouth.

"You've bowled me over. I never wanted to let anyone get close to me but you managed it anyway. You drive me nuts with your endless talking, and sometimes I'd like to tape your mouth shut." He shoved a hand through his hair. "I'm not a nice guy, and I don't want to get you involved in my shit because I know you have enough problems of your own ... but goddammit, Allie," he blurted out. "I need you."

He placed his hand on my cheek, and I noticed how he was trying to hold back. His thumb stroked my skin, a touch that I felt in my whole body. He took a deep breath. "I am totally crazy about you."

"But you told your mother ..." My voice faltered.

"What else could I have said to her? Even I didn't know what's happening with us," he whispered. "You don't know my mom. She would

never have let go. But to think that I don't want you because of your past ... Allie, that's ridiculous. I admire your courage, your strength, and your confidence in me."

"But you couldn't even look at me," I said, confused.

"Because I was afraid I'd lose control. You have no idea how hard it has been for me not to go to you the last few nights. I wanted you so much." Kaden looked at me now with hunger in his eyes. "And I'm glad to be the one who keeps you together when you fall apart."

"You're joking," I stammered.

"I'm a jerk, and I don't think there's any hope for me. But I'd love to be the jerk who's there for you."

Well, this talk had gone in a different direction from what I expected. I was prepared for a Kaden who was closed and unapproachable, but now he was standing here saying all these things that made my heart beat faster, faster, faster.

"How am I supposed to know you won't wake up tomorrow and feel different? What about your rules?" I said, my voice hoarse.

Kaden leaned down and brushed my cheeks with his lips.

"Fuck the rules, Allie," he whispered. "They were doomed to fail the moment I saw you."

Chapter 26

He didn't kiss me.

Instead, he pressed his lips against my cheek and seemed to wait for my answer. But I'd already lost the ability to think rationally.

My pulse was racing, and I could scarcely breathe; I wanted his touch so much, it almost hurt.

"You're crazy about me?" I whispered, incredulous.

"Pretty crazy. Even though sometimes I have doubts about my sanity. Like when I think about your terrible taste in coffee, or the perfumed candles, or the Taylor Swift CDs—"

I didn't let him continue. Instead I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and kissed him.

Kaden gave a surprised sound and froze for a second, as if he hadn't expected this. Then he placed his hands on my back gently, as if I could break if he pressed too hard—and returned the kiss.

It was a slow, intimate kiss, and a tingling sensation traveled the whole length of my body, from my scalp to my toes.

Cautiously he pushed his tongue into my mouth and touched mine. I sighed. I needed more, much more. It felt like I'd wanted him forever—and now we would complete what we had started so long ago.

I pushed my hands under Kaden's shirt. He froze. His breath was heavy as he said, his lips still on mine, "I don't know if now is—"

"If you complete that sentence I'll hurt you," I murmured back, and ran my fingers down his spine.

He drew a rushing breath and closed his eyes.

"You're always telling me not to think so much. And I can tell you now that thinking is the last thing on my mind."

I kissed his neck and nibbled on his skin until he shuddered.

"I'm crazy about you, too, Kaden," I whispered. "Whatever's in my past, or your past. That doesn't change anything."

I looked up, straight into his hungry eyes. And then his self-control was gone. He pressed me close until I couldn't breathe, and I dug my fingers into

his shoulders. Then he lifted me up as if I were light as a feather, and my legs wrapped themselves around his hips.

His mouth found mine again and our kiss deepened. More intimate. This time he didn't hold back.

He carried me through the room and stopped at the bed. I loosened my legs from around his waist, and Kaden let me slide down until I stood before him. His eyes were blazing with desire. I looked at him. A shiver ran down my spine. He let his hands wander up from my hips, under my shirt. I groaned as his fingers finally touched my naked skin. Kaden raised my shirt, and I lifted my arms so he could pull it over my head. He tossed it behind him and reached for my bra, which he opened with one quick motion. Kaden was still looking into my eyes and hadn't even glanced at my body.

I could see how much he wanted me. And I wanted him like I'd never wanted anyone before.

Trembling, I breathed in as he now let his eyes wander over me. Kaden bowed his head and leaned toward me. His breath swept over my neck, and all my nerve endings were electrified when his lips touched my skin. He kissed me, again and again, sliding his tongue over me.

"You are wonderful," he whispered roughly. "So beautiful."

He slid further down, kissed and nibbled on the sensitive skin of my breasts. When he placed his lips on my nipples, I let my head fall back and closed my eyes. He sucked on me, and I let out a moan like never before.

Kaden's hand ran down my back until he reached my bottom. He grabbed me there while circling his tongue around my nipple.

I buried my hands in Kaden's hair as he bent over me, his lips gliding downward. He stopped at the waist of my jeans, opened the button with skillful fingers and pushed them down to my ankles. I kicked them off.

Kaden looked up at me through his dark, thick eyelashes. His breathing was as fast as mine. Never before in my life had I felt so wanted.

"You're wearing too much," I panted and tugged at his collar. A half-smile spread across his face. He rose, without taking his eyes off me. Then he pulled his shirt over his head in one flowing motion.

My eyes devoured his perfect abs and followed the trail of little hairs that wandered downward from his navel. When I discovered the bulge in his pants, I caught my breath.

"Do you have any idea how often I've thought of you at night?" he whispered. Slowly, unbearably slowly, he reached down, opened his button

and peeled off his jeans. “I’ve wanted you since the moment I first saw you in my apartment, in those damned shorts.”

Unable to speak, I hoped my kiss would say it all. Kaden put his hands on my waist and lifted me up. A second later I was lying on the bed with Kaden on top of me, his arms to either side of my head and his legs between mine. I threw my legs around Kaden’s hips and pushed up against him. Feeling his hard arousal, I trembled.

Kaden took his time—he stroked me, kissed, sucked, and licked every inch of my skin.

“Oh God,” I sighed.

Then he hooked his fingers under the waistband of my panties. I raised my head. Kaden looked up at me with dark caramel eyes.

“Are you sure, Allie?” His voice was deep and raw.

“I’m not a virgin,” I whispered.

“That’s not what I’m asking.” He tugged at the waistband of my panties. Then he sat back, put his hands around my hips and lifted me into his lap. I panted and wrapped my arms around his shoulders. “I want to know if you’re sure about this. Just because it’s not your first time, doesn’t make it less important.”

This was important for Kaden as much as for me. He trusted me. I trusted him. So there was only one possible answer to his question.

I stroked his hair. “Yes,” I whispered. “I’m sure. I want this. And I trust you.”

It was enough for him. In one sweeping motion he laid me back on the bed and pulled my panties off. His fingers stroked my inner thighs, then he pushed them apart, and a second later I felt his warm mouth right at my very center.

Kaden’s tongue swirled lightly around my most sensitive spot, and I gasped. With one hand I clawed at the blanket, with the other I held on to Kaden’s hair, while he took my breath away with his mouth.

“Kaden.” I sighed his name, again and again.

His tongue glided in teasing, circling movements. He grasped my thighs and held me tight. I arched my back, almost desperately, as his kisses became even hotter, even more intense.

And then he stopped. I groaned in frustration and was about to protest when he began to spread a trail of hot kisses from the inside of my thighs to my belly, my breasts, up to my forehead.

“You’re driving me crazy,” I whispered into his lips and felt how his stomach muscles twitched at my touch. I let my hands roam over his skin, exploring his body, and wrapped my legs around his hips.

Kaden let out a deep, guttural cry as I pressed against him and began to move my hips.

“You’re wearing too much.”

Before I could blink, Kaden had rolled off me and pulled off his boxer shorts. My eyes wandered over his naked body, his muscles, his tattoos, farther down ... He reached out to his nightstand to find a condom, and I watched him as he slipped it on.

Then his body was back over mine, and Kaden stroked my cheeks. “We can stop any time,” he murmured. “Any time. Okay?”

I nodded and placed my hands on his shoulders, to pull him back down toward me.

“I have to hear you say it, Allie.” I felt him trembling above me.

“Okay, Kaden,” I whispered and looked at him. “I want you. I want you so badly, it hurts. Please, please come here.”

He shifted his weight and lowered himself onto me. He kissed me passionately and at the same time I felt him at my opening. I spread my legs even farther apart and gasped as he began to push into me.

He paused for a second. “Is it okay?”

I nodded, and because I was afraid this answer might not be enough, I raised one leg over his hip to pull him deeper inside.

“Oh, God,” Kaden groaned next to my ear. “Oh, God, Allie.”

And then he pushed all the way in.

I gasped and dug my fingers into Kaden’s arms. He withdrew from me slightly, only to push back a second later.

My desire spread so hot and quick that it felt as if my whole body was on fire. I wished this could have been my first time, and consoled myself with the fact that at least in one sense it was a first—I’d never opened myself so much to anyone, never given so much of myself.

His motions were still slow and controlled. But I didn’t want him to hold back: I wanted him to let go. So I whispered onto his lips: “I won’t break, Kaden. Take me harder.”

As if he’d been waiting for these words, a groan broke from his chest and he thrust harder, faster. Deeper. I moaned, dragged my fingernails over his back and pressed against him.

“You feel ... unbelievable,” Kaden cried and pressed his mouth against my throat. His hand reached for mine and held it over my head on the mattress. Our fingers tangled together as Kaden penetrated deeper into me.

“Kaden!” I groaned as my orgasm shook my body. Kaden’s hips ground against mine, now without any rhythm or subtlety. Each impact sent another wave rolling through me.

Kaden moaned my name and released his hand from mine to embrace me. He buried his face in my neck and pushed one last time before a shudder ran through his body and his hips began to twitch.

It took a while before my pulse had calmed. I felt Kaden’s heart beating against mine and closed my eyes. I didn’t know how much time had passed. At some point, Kaden rolled off me and lay down alongside me. Leaning on an elbow, he looked into my eyes. Then he leaned over me and kissed me.

“That was ... amazing,” I whispered hoarsely and stroked his chest, his shoulders, his arms.

“And how.” He kissed me again, slow and deep, and promised me so much more than just a physical connection. Now it was all too much; I couldn’t handle the emotions. And then it happened.

I had to cry.

Kaden caressed my face, kissed my tears away, and with his powerful presence drove out my dark memories to make room for new ones.

Chapter 27

When I woke up, the first thing I noticed was Kaden's smell. The second was the fact that Kaden hadn't let go of me the whole night. He lay behind me, his arm over my belly, his face on my shoulder, and our legs were so tangled with each other and the blanket that I couldn't move. I closed my eyes and savored his peaceful, rhythmic breathing against my neck.

Kaden White was a cuddler. Who would've thought?

A flutter spread in my chest, and I smiled into my pillow. This felt so right. And it wasn't just about the sex—which had shaken my world—but mainly about the fact that we'd dropped our defenses. We connected. Kaden knew everything about me and still wanted me. A little voice in my head warned me to be careful, but I ignored it.

"Your thoughts are so loud that I can't sleep anymore," mumbled Kaden behind me. "Cut it out."

I giggled into the pillow.

He pulled me even closer. His fingers covered my ribs, and he pressed his lips behind my ear. I trembled.

"I have a weakness for your laugh," he sighed as he buried his nose in my hair. "To be frank, I have a weakness for pretty much everything about you."

I laughed again. "Same here. You're pretty tolerable yourself."

In one second he had me on my back and was straddling me.

"I'm pretty tolerable?" He raised an eyebrow. His eyes sparked playfully.

I shook my head. "On a scale of one to ten you're a solid seven."

"Seven?" he repeated in shock.

I had to laugh out loud at his dumbfounded expression.

"Oh, Bubbles. That was a mistake," he growled, grabbing my hands and holding them up over my head. Then he placed his face right in front of mine. I stopped laughing and looked at him. He rubbed his nose against mine and let his lips wander over my face, resting against my neck. His stubble scratched my skin, driving me crazy in a good way, and my body reacted. Now it was Kaden who was laughing.

"So let's turn the seven into a ten," he growled.

And that's how we spent the next few hours.

Kaden and I were inseparable the entire day, from our morning in bed to our shared shower, getting the entire bathroom wet, and then our cozy afternoon on the couch, watching the latest episodes of our favorite series.

Now I was leaning on Kaden, wearing one of his T-shirts. His chin rested on my head, and once in a while, I would tip my head back against his shoulder to look into his shining eyes.

Oh man. It had really happened.

The doorbell interrupted my reverie. It must be our food. Kaden jumped up, grabbed his wallet from the table and went to the door.

I heard him open it. But instead of the usual exchange ("Hello" ... "That'll be such-and-such dollars" ... "Here's something extra for you" ... "Enjoy"), there was silence. I stretched out across the back of the couch, but could only see Kaden leaning against the doorframe.

"Hey," he said. "You want to come in?"

"Do I want to come in?" a voice huffed.

Alarmed, I sat up straight. It was Dawn. And she sounded pretty angry. "You stupid jerk! This is for Allie. And for Spencer's black eye."

Kaden gasped in surprise as Dawn suddenly groaned in pain. I was on my feet and dove toward the door.

What I saw made my mouth hang open.

Kaden was holding his chin and staring at Dawn, who was shifting her weight and clutching one hand with the other. Tears spilled from her eyes.

"Dawn?" I asked in shock, and she looked past Kaden at me.

"You have got to be kidding me," she said, staring at my naked legs and Kaden's T-shirt. Then she looked me in the eyes. "*You've* got to be kidding me."

"It's complicated?" I sighed, looking at Kaden's reddened chin from close up. He was still staring at Dawn, stunned.

"You hit me," he said, as if it had just registered.

"And probably broke my hand at the same time," my friend blurted out, examining her fist. It was already swollen and the first two knuckles were red. I grimaced. That had to hurt.

"She hit me," Kaden repeated, looking at me. If I hadn't been worried about Dawn, I would have laughed at his shocked expression. "I think she

hurt herself more than she hurt you,” I said, going over to Dawn. With an arm over her shoulder, I drew her into the apartment. “Let’s put some ice on that.”

“I was just so angry, because he’d treated you like shit and then you didn’t call, and I thought ... forget it. Anyway he deserved it,” she hissed and at the same time grimaced in pain. A tear dropped from the corner of her eye. Dawn wiped it away with her good hand.

I dashed to the fridge and grabbed a bag of frozen tortellini, wrapped a dishtowel around it, and went back to Dawn, who was standing—confused—in the middle of our living room, as if she didn’t dare to sit down.

She looked me up and down. “Are you okay?” she whispered. Typical. She’d probably broken her fingers, but she was asking how I felt.

“Fabulous,” I said and noticed how this blissful smile was stealing over my face, kind of inappropriate at the moment. But I couldn’t stop it. Damned hormones.

“So he was nice to you after the two of you disappeared yesterday?” she probed.

“Yes. Very nice. He always claims to be an asshole, but in reality—”

“I can hear you—I’m right here,” Kaden snapped.

I ignored him and put the cool towel carefully on Dawn’s hand. She winced.

“You should go to the hospital,” I murmured.

“Let me see,” Kaden said, coming over. He took Dawn’s hand and examined it tenderly.

“That looks pretty nasty.” He raised his head and looked at me. “You’re right, she needs an X-ray.”

The three of us made our way to the hospital. In the emergency room, we filled out the forms for Dawn. The waiting room was packed, and it was hard for me to sit around like this. We waited and waited and watched—as her fingers kept swelling like balloons until she couldn’t move her forefinger and middle finger at all.

“It’s going to be okay,” I repeated for what seemed like the hundredth time.

Dawn and Kaden looked at each other across me.

“She’s just saying that to keep herself calm,” whispered Kaden too loudly.

“Yes, and she’s saying it because she feels guilty.” Dawn nodded in agreement. “After all, it was thanks to your fight with each other that I hit you. Well, that was at least sixty percent of the reason.”

“And the other forty percent was for Spencer?”

She nodded. “Someone had to avenge his swollen face.”

“That’s so honorable of you,” I said and grabbed her intact hand. We intertwined our fingers. Dawn was the best girlfriend I’d ever had. And even if I wanted to shake her for having hurt herself for my sake, we both knew very well that I would have done the same for her.

“If your ex crosses my path, I’ll give him what for, too,” I promised her.

She grimaced. “That would be great, but let Kaden show you first how it’s done. Otherwise you’ll end up like me.”

“Ms. Edwards?” a nurse called from across the room. “Please come into treatment room three.”

Dawn and I both stood.

“You don’t have to come with me,” Dawn said with a glance at Kaden.

“Cut it out. Of course I’m coming with you,” I said, and then turned to Kaden, considering whether to kiss him goodbye. But he made the decision for me. He grabbed my hand and murmured—his lips on mine—“I’ll wait here for you.” Then he kissed me, swift but firm. My face glowed as I followed Dawn out of the waiting room.

In the hallway, she dug the fingers of her healthy hand into my arm. “He kissed you.”

“And that’s not the only thing he’s done with me,” I whispered in her ear.

Dawn turned bright red, then laughed out loud.

The X-rays showed that no bones were broken. Her pointer was just bruised, and that would heal quickly. But her middle finger was in worse shape: A small fracture had formed in the bone, causing pain and swelling. She’d have to wear a splint for two weeks, take painkillers, and avoid using her fingers until her follow-up appointment in three weeks.

When we left the treatment room, Dawn placed her head on my shoulder. “Please don’t tell Spencer about this. That would be embarrassing.”

“My lips are sealed,” I promised her with a laugh, and even gave the gesture that went along with the saying. But Dawn wasn’t looking at me anymore. Instead she stared into the waiting room at Spencer, sitting there next to Kaden. Kaden said something, Spencer laughed and patted him on the back. His right eye looked bad: blue and purple and nearly swollen shut.

Why was he here? Had Kaden called him?

As if he'd read my mind, Kaden looked up. He began to smile but stopped when he saw the bandage on Dawn's hand.

We went over to them. Dawn was shifting her weight from one foot to the other. I'd never seen her embarrassed.

"The way the two of us look," she murmured, raising up her bandaged arm. "Like a gang of thugs."

Spencer grinned. With his swollen eye he did look pretty scary. "An unsuccessful gang of thugs. And Allie is our boss or something like that. She's the only one who's come away unscathed."

"Spencer," growled Kaden.

"Of course I could help out with that and give you a few black and blue marks, so you could feel like you belong. What do you think?"

Kaden's fist went into his arm.

"Oh, come on, dude! Do you have to?" Spencer groaned and rubbed the spot.

"Yes," we chimed in together.

Then we all burst out laughing.

Chapter 28

My eyelids kept drooping shut. I was bored to death. Our instructor was anything but motivated and just read aloud some random historical facts from a packaged presentation. Film and TV was normally one of my favorite classes, but today it was monotonous beyond compare.

Kaden, sitting a few rows behind me, seemed to feel the same. Whenever I stole a glance at him, he was playing with his cell phone or gazing at the ceiling of the stuffy classroom. I tried not to be caught staring at him, but it wasn't easy. Especially since I knew how it felt to have his muscular arms wrapped around my naked body.

When I left the room after class, Kaden was right behind me. He reached for my hand and entwined his fingers with mine. He had done this a lot in the last few days. He touched me whenever he had a chance, no matter who was close enough to see us.

I liked it. A lot.

"I want you. Now," he whispered, as we walked together outside. He brushed his lips against mine.

We had arrived in the parking lot. Students were streaming past us on their way to lunch.

"Come here," murmured Kaden, pushing me right into his Jeep. Then he kissed me full on.

"Kaden," I said, struggling to speak. "We're in public."

He mumbled into my mouth. "You should be glad you got out of that classroom alive."

I smiled and pushed him back. His eyes were dark, and he could hardly control his heavy breathing. Over the last few days I'd learned a lot about him, especially that he was always ready for anything.

"Want to go on a hike?" I whispered.

He grumbled.

"I have to work on an essay later, but I would love to go to the mountain," I suggested, surprising myself a little with how seductive my voice sounded. "And there are other things we can do after that."

Kaden didn't need to be told twice. In the blink of an eye he had off-loaded me to the passenger seat and started up the engine. But in the end we didn't manage to bring this plan to fruition. We didn't go for a hike. We didn't even leave the Jeep. Instead we parked at the edge of the mountain, the only car visible for miles. I'd planned to give him a quick kiss, but somehow I ended up straddling his lap.

I clung to his shoulders as he plunged his hand up my sweatshirt and under the shirt beneath it.

"I thought we wanted to hike," I sighed as we kissed.

"You wanted to hike," he corrected me and moved his hips until his erection pressed against my pants. I pushed into him. "I just wanted you."

I looked into his warm eyes.

"You have me," I whispered, stroking his stubbly cheeks. "You have every last bit of me."

"Come here," he whispered, his voice gruff.

"I'm already here."

"That's not what I mean." Kaden ran his hands over my waist and farther down, until he reached the edge of my pants. The elastic band made them great for hiking—and easy for Kaden to pull off.

I fiddled with Kaden's belt and gave a triumphant cry when it came free, followed by his pants and boxers, pushed down as low as necessary. Breathless, Kaden laughed and reached down to help me. Then he kissed me again, with hunger and passion.

"Come here," he murmured again. How he'd managed to pull on a condom I didn't know—or care. I groaned as he pulled me onto his lap and then entered me.

For a moment we looked at each other, panting. Then Kaden held my waist. I lifted my pelvis, then sank back down. Again and again and again. Kaden helped me find our rhythm, although I could tell how hard it was for him to let me be in charge.

Our eyes locked as we moved together, each setting the other's body on fire. We rocked faster, with more desperation, and our gasping filled the car.

Kaden groaned my name. And then he touched the spot that drove me crazy. I came soon afterward, calling his name, and Kaden followed suit. Exhausted, I collapsed against him and smiled into the crook of his neck.

"I like that much better," murmured Kaden.

Disentangling myself, I looked at him, eyebrows raised.

“Making you smile instead of cry, I mean.” He frowned as if he couldn’t quite believe he’d just said what he’d said.

Now with my forehead against his, I smiled even wider.

Chapter 29

We decided not to go hiking and went home instead. By now it was late afternoon.

On the way there, I leaned my head against Kaden's shoulder and held his hand, which rested on my thigh.

By now, there was only a small, dark yellow mark on his hand as a reminder of the incident at Hillhouse, and I caressed it with my thumb.

When we reached home it was raining cats and dogs. Dashing along the short path to the front door was enough to soak me through. Kaden laughed as he heard me cursing. Rain didn't bother him at all.

I hadn't even opened the front door all the way, but Kaden was already inside. He grabbed my hand and pulled me after him up the stairs. I laughed, remembering how he'd already done something similar before.

"Are you planning to make another dent in the wall?"

He turned to me and grinned. Then and there he grabbed me around the waist and lifted me up, though we hadn't reached our floor yet. He kissed me wildly, sending an electric tingling through my entire body.

"I need a shower," murmured Kaden, and carried me the rest of the way up, my legs wrapped around his body.

"Me too." I laughed through our kiss.

"I was hoping you'd say that."

Once upstairs, he set me down and reached again for my hand. Laughing, we turned the corner.

Kaden stopped so suddenly that I ran into him.

He let go of my hand. It dropped limply. It was as if he'd turned to stone.

"Kaden, what—"

"*Get out.*"

Confused, I stepped forward.

Leaning against the wall at our apartment door was a guy wearing a suit and white shirt, a matching jacket flung over one shoulder. His dark blond hair was loosely styled, and he regarded us with an amused smirk that made me instantly uncomfortable.

He looked like the little boy in the photos at Rachel's house.

A lot like Kaden. And then again not.

"I mean it," Kaden said in a threatening tone. "Get out."

Kaden's features froze like a statue, he was that rigid. I was starting to feel scared.

"Nice to see you, too, bro," said Alex. Unlike Kaden, his body seemed relaxed. His gaze wandered from Kaden to me. He smiled. "Who do we have here?"

This inquiry seemed to wake Kaden from his shock. He grimaced, grabbed me by the arm and pulled me with him to the apartment door. His grip was strong and hurt, but I didn't complain. I trusted Kaden, and if he reacted this way there must be a good reason.

He didn't let me go until he'd unlocked the door and pushed me ahead into the hall.

"It's about Dad, Kaden. He wants to sell a part of the company." Alex was still standing in the same position, still leaning casually against the doorframe. He hadn't even raised his voice.

"Why should I care?" Kaden shot back and chucked his jacket toward the coatrack. I bent down to pick it up and hung it on a hook.

"They're the shares he's wanted to transfer to you since your twenty-first birthday. You know he's been trying to get you on board for ages. But if you don't want the shares, he'll sell them."

Kaden tried to slam the door shut without another word, but Alex was quicker. His foot shot forward like lightning, blocking the door from latching. With the flat of his hand, he pushed it back open.

"Just sign the papers, and I'll leave," he pleaded.

Kaden seemed to be weighing the situation; his face was still frozen. His gaze fell on me, and he swallowed hard. He came over and bent down to look me in the eye. "Please wait in your room."

It was the last thing I wanted to do but Kaden reached for my arm again and gripped it tightly. "Please, Allie."

With my lips pressed together, I nodded. Then I kicked off my shoes and went to my room. Throwing a last look over my shoulder, I saw Kaden step aside and nod for his brother to enter. Alex went straight into the living room. With a queasy feeling in my stomach, I closed my door.

If Kaden didn't want me around when he discussed business with his brother, I could respect that. Even if it was hard for me to leave him alone in such a state.

What had happened between them? Kaden had shared some things with me, but I had witnessed two brothers who'd gone through more than just the divorce of their parents. Kaden's face had been burning with hatred. And fear.

But why?

Ten minutes passed, then twenty. I paced in my room, much too agitated to do any studying. After thirty minutes without any sign, I couldn't hold back any longer.

I cracked the door a sliver, and although I couldn't see either of them, I heard every word.

"Shut the fuck up, Alex," Kaden spat out his brother's name.

"You need to get over it. How many years has it been? Two? Three?" Alex continued, unmoved. "It wasn't serious between you two, anyway."

I heard a noise.

"My God, you disgust me." I could hardly understand Kaden, he sounded so furious.

"What do you want from me? I messed up, okay. But I confessed once and don't feel the need to repeat it. Why isn't that enough for you?"

"You confessed? When? I must have missed that," hissed Kaden.

"We made a decision back then that protected our family. You know that as well as I do."

Kaden snorted with contempt.

"And if you weren't so proud, you wouldn't have to live in such a shithole like this. You wouldn't need a roommate to help pay the rent," Alex continued.

"I won't take a penny of that filthy money."

I held my breath. Kaden had said that his father had refused to support him—but he'd never said he didn't want his money.

Now it was Alex who snorted. "Sooner or later your pride will be your downfall, Kaden. Don't destroy your future, just because things didn't work out with a woman."

I heard a muted thud and was sure Kaden had pounded the living room table with his fist. "That had nothing to do with Kendra. Keep her out of it."

"How, then? With the new one?" Alex gave a cold laugh.

"I swear, Alex, if you even get near her I'll—"

"So is that why you moved here? Because no one knows anything?"

Kaden gave a low growl.

“The girl doesn’t know, does she?” Alex probed. “Maybe I should take this chance to enlighten her.”

Something hit the floor with a bang. That was enough: I opened the door and rushed into the living room. Kaden stood with quaking shoulders opposite his brother, who sat on the couch, looking unimpressed.

“I think it would be better if you left,” I said, coldly.

“Oh, how cute.” Alex looked at Kaden with a smirk, then back to me again. A smile spread across his face as he let his eyes wander over my body. A familiar feeling crept over me.

“Get out of our apartment, or I’ll call the police,” I threatened, unable to suppress the quavering in my voice.

Cool and calm, Alex shuffled the papers on the table and stood. I marched to the door and held it wide open, as far as it went. He followed. Just before stepping across the threshold, he turned again toward me.

“Till next time,” he murmured.

I averted my eyes and felt bile rising up my throat.

When he was out, I slammed the door and locked it from the inside. Meanwhile, Kaden was standing stock still, as if frozen in place.

“He’s gone,” I whispered, placing my hand on his shoulder.

He winced and turned to me. He looked so angry that I took a step back. I opened my mouth but no sound came out.

Before I knew what had happened, Kaden had turned on his heel and had disappeared into his room. I shut my eyes as he slammed the door behind him.

Of course he needed a moment to himself. Though it was hard not to go after him and wrap my arms around him, just as he had done when we were in Lincoln. To keep myself busy, I returned to my room and proceeded to straighten up, clean my closet, and sort through my folders. When there was nothing more to do, I sat in the living room and waited. I didn’t want to give the impression that I couldn’t accept his wish to be alone. So I just kept waiting.

I watched one reality show after another, fiddled with my cell phone, and wondered whether I should call Spencer and ask him to come over. I rejected the idea.

When Kaden emerged from his room, he didn’t even look in my direction. Instead he headed straight for the door. I rose and followed him into the hallway.

“Are you okay? Where are you going?”

He slipped on his boots and ignored me, then stuffed his key into his back pocket.

“Kaden, where are you going?” I repeated in a brittle tone.

He whipped around to face me. “I don’t owe you an explanation, Allie.”
And then he left.

And he stayed away. Time seemed to drag. Every hour felt like several days.
It was unbearable.

I nearly called Spencer or even Monica to ask them where he might be. But I rejected the idea just as quickly—there was no way I wanted to be one of those crazy women who wouldn’t give their boyfriend any space. As agitated as Kaden was, I suspected he needed space more than ever. That was clear.

Did I even have a right to ask where he’d gone? We’d never discussed whether we were a couple. I’d never had a talk like that before and didn’t even know if couples did that sort of thing. With the way Kaden and I had been so intimate the last few days, it had felt pretty clear. For me, there was no one but Kaden. I thought he’d felt the same about me.

It didn’t matter anyway whether there was a label to describe what we were for each other. I was worried about him and was on the verge of tears.

When midnight came, I couldn’t hold out any longer. I wrote him a text message. No answer. So I spent the rest of the night on the couch, falling into an uneasy half-sleep and sitting up at the slightest noise.

But Kaden did not come home.

Chapter 30

By the time I dragged myself to class the next morning, Kaden still hadn't shown up. He hadn't answered my message. I was sick with worry. And it hurt that, after all I'd told him about myself, he didn't have the same trust in me. On the other hand, I understood. I knew how hard it was to open up.

Not wanting to trigger wild speculation, I tried to hide my pain and emptiness, telling my friends I had a cold—a credible excuse given the changing weather of the last few days. What happened between Kaden and me was no one's business.

Dawn had already gotten involved in our drama, with not-so-pleasant results. I didn't want her fracturing more fingers on my account.

When the afternoon rolled around, I was so worried that I was afraid to go home, for fear of not finding Kaden there. I put it off, instead wandering across campus and then heading for the library. I even started working on a presentation that was due in a couple of weeks. I didn't go home until the library shut its doors.

My heart tripped when I saw Kaden's Jeep in the parking lot. I took two stairs at a time and tumbled through the door.

And then stopped. The blood drained from my face so fast that I felt dizzy and braced myself against the wall.

A suitcase stood in the middle of the hall. Next to it, a few boxes. Moving boxes, filled with stuff that looked familiar. Like my crocheted throw. The picture frame with the photo of Dawn and me the day I'd moved in.

My heart began to race. I broke out in a cold sweat.

I made my way past the boxes into the apartment. My door was open, and I heard a loud rumbling sound. Kaden appeared in the doorway, another box in his hands. He didn't even look at me as he passed by and set the carton down next to the others in the corridor.

"W-what ... what are you doing?" I managed to croak.

Kaden ignored me and went back into my room. When he emerged holding my lamp, I blocked his path.

“Kaden, what on earth are you doing?” I asked, this time much louder.

Now he looked at me. His eyes were cold and unfeeling, his posture off-putting.

“I’m kicking you out,” he said in a monotone. “Without notice.”

For a moment I didn’t comprehend. He pushed past me with the lamp. I grabbed his arm and forced him to face me.

“What the hell!” My voice trembled. It felt like someone was pulling the rug from under my feet. Any second I might fall.

“We never drew up a lease. When I say you’re going, you go. So take your things and leave.” His indifferent tone stabbed me like a thousand tiny knives. This was not my Kaden. It was a robot, ice cold and unfeeling.

“Why are you doing this?” I whispered, encircling his other arm. He shook me off and set the lamp down. As he turned to go back in my room, I stood in his path.

“Allie,” he growled between clenched teeth. That sounded more like Kaden.

“What did your brother say to make you think you have to get rid of me,” I demanded. And though I was teetering on the verge of a breakdown, my voice was somehow now firm. “What did you discuss?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You can tell me everything, Kaden. Just like you promised to do,” I said, my voice softer now. “Please, don’t shut me out.”

He looked at me. His jaw was tight. A vein was pounding on his temple. “No.”

“I thought this kind of thing was behind us. I thought we trusted each other.”

“You thought wrong.”

I grabbed him by the shoulders. “Are you kidding me, Kaden? Yesterday, you tell me how good it feels to make me happy, and today you’re throwing me out of the apartment for no reason?”

“It was a mistake. The whole thing was a huge mistake.” He whispered, as if trying to convince himself.

“What happened between us was no mistake,” I countered. “What happened between us is the best thing that ever happened to me—and you, too, I thought. Why are you letting someone take that from us?”

He closed his eyes and swallowed hard.

I ran my hands over his shoulders, neck, up to his cheeks. “I’m not Kendra. I will not just disappear, Kaden,” I assured him.

It was the wrong thing to say. Kaden jerked back and grabbed my wrists, tearing my hands away from his face and stepping back.

“What happened with us,” he let the words fall, “was the biggest mistake of my life.”

Something broke in me. I gasped. But Kaden was not finished.

“Stay away from me, Allie. I mean it. I can’t take this shit right now.”

My hands were tingling; I wanted to slap him so badly. But I wouldn’t give in to this desire.

Instead, I felt myself shut down. The pain and the fear became so overwhelming and unbearable that I had two options: I could let it break me. Or I could push everything, every single sensation, into the farthest corner of my heart until there was nothing but a cold center. I could numb myself before the pain did it for me.

“So you want me to leave?” I asked. My voice was calm, no trace of the sadness or anger that was shaking my core.

Kaden nodded once and averted his eyes. “Yes.”

“You want to end our relationship like this? By throwing me out of the apartment?”

“The rules were there from the start, Allie.”

My teeth clenched. “And they were doomed from the start—your words.”

“I say a lot when I want to have my way.”

“Don’t act as if you only said it so I’d let you in,” I hissed. “There would have been more effective ways to do that.”

Kaden breathed out. “Why are you making it so hard for me?”

“Because, goddammit, I’m not one of those girls you can hook up with and toss to the trash heap. I’m the girl who lay in your arms and confided in you about her own painful past. I’m the one who—”

Kaden put a hand on my mouth. “No.”

I pushed it off. “You can’t just call it quits because you’re afraid to share your past. I know how hard it is, Kaden. Believe me. But I did it anyway.”

“And that’s my problem!” he cried, rubbing both hands on his face.

I froze. “What did you say?”

“Allie, please, I can’t. I tried ... it just won’t work.” He swallowed. “I just can’t be together with you. It’s not about you. It’s—”

“Because of Anderson? Because of the thing with my mom?” I whispered.

He shook his head. “There are just some things that ... happened. Things that would destroy you if you learned about them. It can’t work. I can never be with someone like you.”

His words shattered me. I backed away.

Something dark flickered in his eyes. “And sooner or later we would have broken up anyway, believe me. It’s better this way.”

I suppressed my tears. My protective walls stood up at once. Then I looked into Kaden’s eyes with as much contempt as I could muster. Cool and calculated, even though I was falling apart inside.

“I’m not the kind of woman who runs after anyone, Kaden. You should know that by now.” I squared my shoulders. “If you want me to go, I’ll go. But don’t think I’ll ever come back.”

It seemed like an eternity passed before he nodded. “I can live with that.”

So I did it. Turned around and left, though my heart hurt so much that I could hardly move.

Chapter 31

Dawn opened the door and looked at me in surprise. She prepared to speak but then saw the pillow in my hand and the suitcase on the floor next to me. She scrunched her eyebrows with concern and stepped aside to let me in. Sawyer didn't seem to be there, but I didn't care.

Not at all.

Dawn asked no questions. She pulled the suitcase into the room, then took me by the hand, and led me to her bed. She murmured something. I saw her lips moving, but my ears were throbbing with my pulse, my rage, my heartbreak so I couldn't understand her. Dawn left the room.

I sat on her bed, dangling my legs and staring at my socks.

Dawn returned with two cups of steaming tea, which she set on the nightstand. She pulled back the covers and helped me get comfortable. Then she got in next to me, and I lay my head on her lap. With my face against Dawn's leg and my fingers clutching her sweater, I let the tears come.

I cried for hours. Dawn didn't move from the spot. She pulled the blanket over me and stroked my hair, murmuring comforting words as my body shook with violent sobs.

At some point I was too exhausted to do anything but stare at the wall. It felt as if someone had torn every organ from my body.

Everything hurt.

My eyes grew heavy. I fell into a deep sleep.

As the week went on, sleeping turned into the high point of my days. Those were the only hours when I didn't feel the overwhelming pain. Eating and even drinking were hard for me. I left Dawn's bed to use the bathroom, nothing more. I skipped all my classes. It would have killed me to see Kaden there.

Dawn was an angel. She brought notes from our classes and photocopied Scott's notes from the classes she wasn't taking with me. To my relief, Sawyer didn't show up much.

On Saturday, Dawn arrived with Scott in tow. They'd brought pizza. The aroma made my stomach rumble. But when Scott opened the box, I felt tears

at the corners of my eyes. Everything reminded me of Kaden. It was ridiculous and terrible, but I couldn't help it. Even though I'd slept more in the last few days than in the rest of my life put together, I felt drained and empty.

For the first time in my life I was in love. And for the first time in my life, someone had broken my heart. I didn't know how to get over it. Especially since I was also homeless. What would I have done without Dawn?

I was always dependent on others—first my parents, then Kaden, and now her. As much as I'd tried to suppress everything that had happened in the past few days, one message had penetrated: I had to take responsibility for my life. It was time to get back on my feet.

"I need an apartment."

Those were the first words that escaped my lips since I'd appeared at Dawn's door. I stared for a while at the faded carpet and then looked up at my friends. "I need an apartment."

Scott's mouth opened and closed. I guess he hadn't counted on this being the day I'd break my silence. Even Dawn seemed surprised. She put her slice of pizza back on the plate in her lap.

"You can stay here as long as you want. They hardly ever check, and if they do we'll just make it seem like you're my roommate. I mean, Sawyer is almost never here anyway," she kept on going, obviously glad that I'd finally said something.

I felt the corners of my mouth twitch. Only a bit, but both Dawn and Scott had seen it.

"Sweetie?" Scott ventured, but not so cautiously as to make me look ridiculous.

"Huh?"

"Did you want to say something?" he asked.

I thought about it a while. The pain had lessened a bit, but I felt cold and numb. And empty.

"I don't know," I admitted.

"We're here for you," he said softly. "Always. Just so you know."

Dawn nodded until her hair flew around her head.

I took a few deep breaths and stared back at the carpet. A lot had happened in my life. I'd felt alone for years, never able to trust anyone. My

friendships had all been superficial; I kept people at a distance, thanks to my bad experiences.

In Woodshill, everything was different. Even I had become a different person—more myself than ever before. No matter how much Kaden had hurt me, I'd learned from my mistakes and realized now that it was better to talk about problems than to bottle them up. Otherwise they would come out on their own, and with destructive force.

I didn't want to fall apart like this ever again.

So I got out of bed, sat down on the floor with Dawn and Scott and started to talk. It took a huge amount of effort, but I did it.

I told them about my parents and life in the Midwest. About Anderson, though not everything. About the awful confrontation on Thanksgiving. About Kaden's brother. And how from one moment to the next Kaden had changed, though we'd grown so close. As I spoke—stumbling and clumsy—I realized how right it felt to talk to Dawn and Scott. I trusted them.

When I stopped, Dawn crawled across the floor and encircled me in her arms. Scott took my hand and squeezed it.

"Okay. First of all," Dawn began in a firm voice, "I believe everything happens for a reason, Allie. If all that hadn't happened, you wouldn't be sitting here with us. We never would have met. Maybe you never would have found the courage to follow your dreams—maybe you'd never have told your mother that you wanted to be a teacher. You wouldn't have fallen in love."

I returned Dawn's gaze and nodded.

"And secondly," she continued, "it sounds like you're not the only one who has to process stuff from the past. Kaden also seems to be dragging something around."

I chewed on my lip.

"Whatever it is, it's no reason to throw Allie out of the apartment. To be honest, it makes me mad," Scott said, frowning as if the idea were something utterly new to him.

"He told me he can never be with someone like me." I had to clear my throat, because my voice was failing. "I asked him why, to tell me what had happened between him and his brother. But he wouldn't say."

"What's that supposed to mean? With someone like you?" snapped Dawn and sat erect. "I should beat him up again. I still have a good hand. And two feet."

It was a sweet gesture, but I couldn't even smile. Instead, I shrugged.

“The rules were fixed from the start.” I let out an ironic laugh.

Scott shook his head. “That guy is full of shit. Have you heard anything from him?”

I blinked. My cell phone had sat unused for a whole week.

My days had consisted only of sleeping and Dawn’s attempts at distraction.

“No idea.”

After Dawn handed me her charger, and I’d attached my phone to it, a single name appeared: Spencer.

“Of course,” I murmured. Spencer had probably been sent to take care of the rest of my stuff. I locked the phone again and shoved it aside.

“I have no idea what to do now. I mean, I can’t stay here forever, no matter how much I appreciate the offer, Dawn.”

Dawn gave me a crooked grin.

“First of all, let’s go look at apartments. I’m guessing you don’t want to share a place anymore, right, Allie?” Scott looked at me and tapped on his smartphone.

The fact that the two didn’t overwhelm me with pity but instead set about finding practical solutions made it so much easier.

“No,” I announced. “No more roommate ... unless I get to choose my roommate myself. I still have some savings and an account that my parents set up. I can dip into it in an emergency.”

True, I wanted to avoid touching a single cent of that money, but it would be impossible to find a dorm room mid-semester—all rooms were occupied and the waiting list seemed endless.

“Let’s go!” Scott clapped his hands. “You’re in it to win it, Allie.”

I took a deep breath.

Then I stood up.

I was in it to win it.

Chapter 32

I did something that was long overdue. I called my mother.

Or I tried, anyway. But for a solid hour, I hung up each time I dialed her number.

Dawn had made a point of going for a walk so I could speak with my mom in peace, but somehow I just couldn't bring myself to let it ring on the other end. What did I even want to say to her? So much had happened between us, that it wouldn't be enough to say, "Hey, thanks for making my life a living hell these past few years."

Besides, I'd been thinking about Dawn's words for days now. If not for that awful experience with Anderson and my mother's abominable behavior, I never would have moved to Woodshill. And without this new beginning, I never would have made these wonderful friends. I hadn't ever been in love—and never thought it would happen to me. And I wouldn't have learned so much about myself, grown so much. Without all these experiences I would not be who I am now. And I kind of liked myself. In other words, things were going well, in a way.

Taking a deep breath, I pressed redial and raised the phone to my year.

Mom picked up.

"Crystal." As she pronounced my name, a shiver ran down my spine. "I knew you'd call, sooner or later."

I ignored her pointed remark, even though I wanted to jump through the phone and shake her.

"Hello, Mother," I said, trying to sound polite. My pulse was racing. "How are you?"

Take small steps, I reminded myself. Don't put everything on the table all at once.

"How am I supposed to be? You embarrassed me at my own gala! You show up with some random punk, and—"

I barely heard her next words. An unusual calm descended on me. Now I knew I'd make it.

"Mom," I interrupted.

“I’m talking, Crystal. You asked me a question, so you can listen to the answer.”

“I didn’t call for you to beat me up.” I lay on my back and stared at the ceiling.

“To what do I owe the honor, then?”

“You were expecting me to come to the gala, weren’t you?” I waited for her answer.

None came.

“If you were expecting me, as you yourself said in Lincoln, then how could you allow Russell Anderson to be there?”

She sucked in a breath.

“At first I didn’t want to think about it, you know,” I said. “I wanted to be done with this once and for all. But the more I thought about it—how could you do it, Mom?”

Again, silence.

I cleared my throat. “Russell didn’t rape me. But he abused me. He left a scar on my soul. I told you everything; I trusted you. And what do you do? You invite this man into our home and give him an award in front of my eyes.” I lay my arm over my eyes. I wasn’t going to cry. I just wanted closure, wanted to make her see what she had done to me, make her understand once and for all why I’d left home to make a new life. “How could you do this to me, Mom? I’m your daughter. You’re supposed to protect me, but instead you let me run into an open knife.”

Now my mother snorted.

“You think it was easy for me?” she asked in a quavering voice.

“That’s how it seemed, yes,” I admitted.

“You have no idea how hard it was for me to tolerate having that man in my house!” she hissed.

“Then why didn’t you do something about it?”

She was quiet again.

“He donated lots of money, Crystal,” she then whispered. “This year, too, for the charitable organization,” her voice grew louder. “I had no choice. You know how it is in our circles.”

I wanted to laugh. Just then the door opened a crack and Dawn peered inside. Seeing I was on the phone, she started to withdraw. But I waved her back in.

Sitting up, I indicated the spot next to me. Dawn climbed onto the bed, wearing a worried expression.

“I know how it is, Mom. But that doesn’t mean your own daughter couldn’t expect a little more help from you.”

“I kept him away from you, Crystal. I did everything in my power to prevent him—”

“If you had done everything in your power, you’d never have let that pig set foot in our home,” I interrupted her. “You would have done what every normal mother would do—keep me safe and put that creep behind bars. Instead, you forced me to dress more modestly and then accepted the dirty money he gave you to keep quiet. You left me alone with my fear.”

I heard her sharp inhale, but I wasn’t finished yet.

“I don’t want to live in the past anymore, Mom. I moved to Woodshill to start over. Not because I wanted to make life hard for you and Dad. I just wanted to breathe free again. But it won’t work until we’ve cleared the air about this.”

The line was quiet as death.

“I’m trying to forgive you, trying to deal with this Russel stuff, and trying to build a life here. But I can’t do if you keep trying to influence my decisions.”

I squeezed my eyes shut to suppress my tears. Dawn grabbed my hand and held it tight.

“I never wanted to hurt you, Crystal, I just wanted the best for our family,” my mother said, and I knew that this was the only apology I would ever get from her. That was it. But at least I’d said everything that I should’ve said years ago.

“You hurt me, Mom. A lot. And on Thanksgiving you showed me again that my feelings mean nothing to you. You allowed me to attend this event even though you knew he’d be there. Saving face in front of your friends was more important to you than your daughter’s well-being.”

She took another breath as if to speak—but remained silent. Dawn raised her eyebrows at me, and I shrugged. Mom said nothing. And then:

“So I drove you out of our home?”

“I’m not returning to Lincoln any time soon. Woodshill is great.”

“You belong in a big city, Crystal,” she snorted. “Not in a village where everyone drives around in rusty trucks.”

She almost made me laugh.

“I’m not Crystal any more, Mom. I haven’t been for several months now. My friends call me Allie. Maybe you can accept that I am building a life for myself here, a life that can make me happy,” I repeated the words I’d prepared in my head before calling. “I don’t want to shut you out of my life, Mom. That doesn’t help you, or me—but if you can’t accept who I am, there’s no other choice.”

Dawn squeezed my hand so hard that my knuckles cracked.

“I can’t accept the path you’ve chosen. Whatever you think of me, I only want the best for you. And that is, in my opinion, not Woodshill and certainly not a tattooed thug who’ll only lead you astray.”

Her words stung.

“If she’s being mean, just hang up, Allie,” whispered Dawn, pantomiming the action.

“You’re welcome to visit me. Or not. It’s up to you. But I’m not coming back.” I paused. “And now I have to hang up.”

Mom sucked in another breath.

“Take care, Mom. If you want, say hello to Dad for me,” I said in a somewhat forgiving tone.

“Take care, Cr—” She caught herself. “Take care, Allie.”

I hung up and let the phone drop.

“I’m proud of you,” Dawn said, with a big smile.

“Does it sound stupid if I say, ‘me too’?”

Now my friend shook her head, but the smile stayed put. “Not at all.”

And even though I was still shaken, and my pulse was racing, I returned her smile. I’d done it: told my mother what I thought and freed myself from her. Now the ball was in her court. It was up to her to decide whether we had a future.

Chapter 33

Stressful would be an understatement. While back in class full time, I somehow managed to squeeze in one apartment visit after another. But the distraction did me good. Turns out, finding an acceptable apartment in the middle of a semester was easier than at the beginning of the semester. Maybe some students realized they weren't college material. Either way, most of the viewings went okay.

Kaden and I had only one shared class. Film and TV. I'd considered dropping out and taking it next semester. But no. Why should I hide just because he thought he couldn't be with me?

Instead, I just avoided Kaden, and pretended he didn't exist.

Today's classroom assignment was to place films and people in different production categories and periods. We were supposed to come to the front of the room and stick our little notes with names and titles in the correct columns on the whiteboard. I reached for a magnet to put my first note on the board when I felt someone standing behind me. It had to be Kaden. His arm pushed past me and over my shoulder, as he stuck a note on the board.

I froze.

"Can we talk?" Kaden's breath brushed my ear, he was standing so close.

I wanted to turn and go back to my seat, but Kaden held me by the elbow. It was all I could do not to look at him. Instead of lifting my eyes, I stared at his hand on my arm. My pulse was so fast, I was dizzy.

It can't work. I can never be with someone like you; his words rang in my head.

Without looking him in the eyes, I removed his hand from my arm. I returned to my seat and, heart pounding, began to copy the notes from the board. Kaden turned and left the room.

After our last class of the day, Scott and I sat in the campus café waiting for Dawn to get out of class. Both of them wanted to come along to one last apartment viewing today. What would I have done without them?

Lattes in hand, Scott and I navigated our way up the creaky wooden steps of the café. All the window seats upstairs were taken, but we found a little table in the middle of the room.

We hadn't even sat down when Scott asked: "How was Film and TV?"

I sighed. Actually, I wanted to forget about the encounter with Kaden, but somehow Scott had a nose for news. "He actually spoke to me. He asked if we could talk."

"And? Can you?" Scott asked, with raised eyebrows.

"Probably not."

"Maybe he has something important to tell you."

"Like what? That I left my tampons in the bathroom?" I asked a bit too loud; the girls at the next table stopped talking and stared at us, annoyed.

"Allie?"

I turned and saw Monica heading our way, with Spencer and Ethan in tow. By now Spencer's eye had healed.

"Hey," I heard myself say.

"Can we join you?" Monica asked hesitantly.

As if I could say no. I nodded and forced a smile.

"How are you?" Monica asked.

"Good." Three pairs of eyebrows went up. "Okay, I guess," I added, because at least that was kind of true by now.

"Kaden's not doing so great," Monica blurted out.

Ethan groaned. "Baby, I don't think—"

Scott interrupted him. "Good. He doesn't deserve anything better," he said, with a polite smile.

Monica glared at him, irritated.

"Kaden can't let anyone get to him, and you know it, Allie. And if he tries, he panics the next moment and pushes you away again. He's done it with all of us. Right, guys?" She looked at Spencer and Ethan, who were sitting next to her.

Ethan sighed and wanted to reply, but Monica glared at him until he just nodded in agreement. Spencer just folded his arms across his chest. He didn't look too happy.

"Then that boy should see a therapist, like yesterday." Scott was furious.

"It's okay. It's over," I said, putting my hand on his arm. But the words felt like plastic in my mouth. Fake and untrue.

“Allie, we both know that’s bullshit.” Spencer looked up. He frowned and leaned forward, his elbows on the table. “Ever since Alex came over, Kaden has been a basket case.”

Monica gasped. “Alex was here? Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“Because Kaden doesn’t want everyone to know.”

“Well that explains something, man.” Ethan ran his fingers through his hair and then draped one arm across the back of Monica’s chair.

Scott snorted. “I’d like to know what that explains. The big bad brother comes over, then Kaden throws Allie out of the house? Sorry, people, but that doesn’t work for me.”

“We have to tell her,” murmured Monica, with a questioning glance at Spencer.

He shook his head.

“Spencer, she deserves answers,” Ethan agreed with Monica.

“Could you maybe tell me what you’re talking about?” Confused, I looked from one person to the other. And then my eyes fixed on Spencer.

He groaned and looked like he wished he were somewhere else. “Kaden and his brother don’t have the most stable relationship, let’s put it that way.”

“Right. He told me about it. About the divorce and his father and the company. And about Alex.” I remembered every single story Kaden had told me about his family.

“When Kaden was eighteen, his girlfriend left him,” Spencer said.

“Kendra,” I whispered, and nodded.

“What does that have to do with ... Oh.” Scott’s eyes widened. “Did his brother come on to her?”

Spencer snorted. “No. He raped her.”

“What?” I stared in disgust.

“Alex raped Kendra after a party.”

“Oh God,” I said.

Spencer’s jaw tightened, and he struggled to keep talking.

“Kendra left Kaden because he didn’t believe her. He stood by his brother, who denied everything of course. By then Kaden already had little contact with Alex; you know that their parents’ divorce also kind of drove the brothers apart. But Alex was the big brother, and Kaden had always idolized him when he was younger. Kaden couldn’t believe his brother was capable of rape—let alone attacking his girlfriend. Things between Kendra and Kaden ended pretty badly.” Spencer looked down at the table and pushed

around some stray bits of sugar with his finger. “He only found out much later that Kendra had been telling the truth. Kaden’s world fell apart.”

A gasp escaped me, and I grabbed Scott’s arm. He put his hand on mine and squeezed it.

“The incident was hushed up with a lot of money. Otherwise Kaden’s father’s company would have gone down the drain,” Spencer continued. “There’s no way to fix that kind of damage to your reputation.”

I winced. In my mind, I repeated the fragment of conversation that I’d overheard between Alex and Kaden. Everything made more sense now. No wonder Kaden loathed his brother.

“Kaden still blames himself for not believing Kendra right away. And even if he’d never admit it, he’s afraid to hurt and disappoint someone again. I think that’s why he blocks people from getting close to him. He prefers to keep his distance. But you can see for yourself what that’s done to him.”

“But he could’ve talked to me about it,” I sighed, thinking about my own sexual assault and Anderson’s hush money.

Monica sighed. “I think he just didn’t know how. And he was afraid to lose you.”

Her words gave me pause.

“It’s terrible. I mean it. But that doesn’t justify what he did to you, Allie,” Scott insisted.

“People make mistakes,” Monica said without looking at Scott. “I am convinced he regrets it. He’s doing really badly, Allie. He just sits at home and doesn’t talk to anyone but Spencer.”

“Not even me.”

“So what do you do, then?” Ethan asked, irritated.

Spencer shrugged. “Gambling.”

“That’s it?”

He shook his head. “If he doesn’t want to talk, I respect it. I guess he just needs time to digest everything.”

“We have to leave,” Scott reminded me. “Dawn’s getting out of class now.”

“Where are you going?” Monica asked. Her cheery tone sounded forced, but I appreciated her effort to lighten up the mood.

“Apartment visit number seven.”

Monica opened her mouth but Ethan beat her to it: “Are you really looking at apartments?”

“Maybe you should hold off a bit and see what—” Monica managed to begin.

“No,” I interrupted, trying to smile. My heart was being pulled this way and that. “Kaden means a lot to me, but apart from the fact that I can’t have my living situation dependent on someone who is so unreliable with his emotions. I’m done, Monica.”

I stood and tried to take deep, calm breaths.

One, two, three ...

Inhale. Exhale. Breathe.

Everything in me cried out for Kaden. I wanted to see him, to take him in my arms and hear straight from him what his friends had just told me, but that was impossible. There was no way.

“Thank you for telling me.” As I left, I pressed my hand on Spencer’s shoulder and smiled at Ethan and Monica.

Spencer reached up for my hand and squeezed it. “Let me know if you need help with your move. That’s the least I can do.”

“Thanks, Spencer.”

Chapter 34

Apartment seven was a dream.

Luckily, this tour wasn't led by a real estate agent but by the landlady herself. She was a nice, older woman who told us about her grandson the craftsman, who had used his skills to keep the apartment shipshape. Scott asked her about her grandson while Dawn and I had another quick look around.

"This is it," I said. "It feels right."

It reminded me of how I'd felt when I first stood in Kaden's apartment, but this time there was no biting commentary and gloomy expressions.

Part of me wanted nothing more than to reach out to Kaden. But I'd meant it when I said I wouldn't chase after him, and I knew quite well that he'd just mess me up again. Besides, I had a plan. I wanted to get back on the right track, have some security and stability—things that Kaden couldn't give me. As much as I wanted it to be different between us, now I had to think of myself. I wanted to be on my own once and for all. After all, freedom was what I'd been looking for in the first place.

We heard Mrs. Collins laughing and went back to see why. "You're my type, Scott!"

Dawn and I exchanged an amused glance.

"But you're not the one looking for a place to live, are you?" Mrs. Collins asked, looking up at Scott dreamily. Apparently he'd used all his charm to wrap the woman around his little finger.

"No, but I'll want to visit my friend Allie," Scott answered, and turned to smile at me.

"Well, anyone with such charming friends has to be a decent person," she said, addressing me. "If you want it, you can have the apartment." All I could do was stare at her openmouthed.

Scott jumped in.

"What she wants to say is that she'll take it, absolutely, Mrs. Collins!"

I grinned.

A little later we sat down with Mrs. Collins at the kitchen table and looked over the lease. She said she was okay with my subletting the second

room if I wanted to, but that I would bear full responsibility for any damage.

When we parted, I hugged her. It might not have been very professional, but she'd saved the day. And not only that: She gave me my freedom back, with the keys she put into my hand.

Since I didn't want to occupy Dawn's bed any longer than necessary, she and I took the next day to move my stuff into the new place. It was mostly furnished; that took at least one load off my mind.

Scott and Spencer brought over the things I'd left at Kaden's place. I avoided asking them about it, and they were tactful enough not to speak about the elephant in the room. The situation was unpleasant enough.

By the afternoon, we'd set up the bedroom. Even the curtains had been hung, thanks to Spencer and Scott. The only thing we had to reassemble was the sofa bed. I didn't know how they'd managed it, but the dresser had fit into Spencer's car. Monica also dropped in and helped me decorate the rooms. Plus, she brought over a mountain of homemade pancakes. For the first time since Kaden had thrown me out, I felt my appetite returning.

Later, Scott wanted to drink a toast to my new apartment. But we couldn't find any champagne flutes—just coffee mugs with cute little sayings such as “Best Grandma in the World.” They must have been left by Mrs. Collins' grandson after the renovation was finished.

We drank to the reassembled furniture and then got busy putting away my suitcase and the moving boxes. My heart sank when I saw how carelessly Kaden had thrown everything together. The frame with the photo of me and Dawn had a crack in it. Dawn took it from me and handed me the “Best Grandma in the World” mug so I could take a large gulp of bubbly.

That evening, my string lights were hanging above the sofa, and the scented candles were burning in the living room and kitchen. I sat on the fluffy carpet, leaning back against the couch. Dawn had made herself comfortable on the sofa, flanked on one side by Spencer and on the other by Scott, who was busy texting Micah. Monica had left a while ago because she had to study and then meet up with Ethan. But we'd decided to open a second bottle of champagne anyway.

“I'm tired,” Dawn said, yawning.

“I bet. I'm sorry that I kind of took over your space.” I leaned back and looked up at my friend. She brushed my hair from my forehead and grinned.

“It's true, you did kind of spread out. But at least you didn't snore. You get points for that.”

“Really? Thanks.”

“I don’t snore, either,” Spencer offered, and I laughed.

Dawn rolled her eyes. “You don’t get points.”

“Why not? I’m great when I sleep. I don’t snore, and I take up very little space. In fact, I don’t even wear anything.”

“And the fact that you sleep naked is supposed to impress me because ...?” Dawn asked, feigning boredom.

“Oh, Dawn,” Spencer sighed with a sly grin. “If you can’t figure that out, then I don’t know what I’m going to do with you.”

“Well, I owe you a lot, Spence,” I said after a pause. “I mean it. Thanks for everything.” The words came from my heart. It’s not every day you met someone like Spencer. Someone who would do anything for a friend, even take a beating for them. He was loyal, helpful, and, even if he cracked jokes at the expense of others—above all my best girlfriend—he was serious and sensitive when it came down to the wire.

“No problem. I just hope things work out.”

What could I say to that? All I could do was avoid his gaze and nod.

Dawn and I spent the rest of the evening putting together colorful ads for the second room, which we wanted to hang around campus. Scott put the ad online after I told him what I was hoping for in a potential roommate. Spencer offered helpful suggestions like, “Pink unicorns only need apply.” He made me laugh so hard that the champagne came out my nose.

When they parted at the end of the evening and I was alone in my apartment for the first time, I didn’t know whether I wanted to dance or to cry. I felt great because I had found a wonderful home. But at the same time, something inside still ached. So I decided on a mixture of both.

It left me so stirred up that I couldn’t think straight anymore. Emboldened by the booze, I reached for my phone and typed wildly on it, threw it on the sofa, and picked it up again only to place it far out of reach so I couldn’t do anything I’d regret.

But my restraint crumbled.

I jumped up, grabbed it again, and before I could convince myself of anything else, I selected Kaden’s number.

It felt like the best thing to do and also the stupidest thing I’d ever done.

But I had to hear his voice. I missed him so much.

He picked up after the first ring. “Bubbles?”

Oh God. I should have thought that one through better. Tears shot to my eyes, and I felt an urgent need to bawl out Taylor Swift's *I Almost Do* in his ears. Or *Attack*, by Thirty Seconds to Mars. Or anything but let him hear me cry.

"Is everything okay?" Kaden's voice was low, almost a whisper.

Summoning all my courage, I whispered, "Why didn't you tell me? About what happened with Alex?"

He breathed in sharply. For a while he said nothing, and I pressed my face into one of the sofa pillows to keep myself from filling up the silence with my own words—ones that couldn't be taken back later. Even if it was nearly suffocating me. It was his turn.

"Can I come over?" Kaden asked, in a shaky voice.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I murmured into the pillow.

Kaden took another deep breath. "You deserve an explanation, Allie. Please. Let me tell you. In person."

The champagne had done me in, and I might regret this a lot tomorrow. But I wanted to see him so badly, wanted to finally hear his side of the story. So I just said, "Okay."

Less than ten minutes later I heard light knocking on the door. Standing up, I felt a bit dizzy. A few deep breaths later, I went to open the door.

Kaden looked tired. For the first time ever, I saw dark shadows under his caramel-colored eyes—he usually managed to look well-rested, even after a night of partying. He wore a blue baseball cap backward and smelled exactly as I remembered. Spicy. And he was wearing my sweater. Okay, strictly speaking it wasn't my sweater, but it was the one I'd always borrowed when we went hiking. Over the past few weeks I'd tried to repress all memories of our shared time, but now the images poured over me like a waterfall. It took a great effort for me not to fall into his arms and bury my nose in his shoulder.

Instead, I just unlocked the door.

Kaden's feelings seemed to be as jumbled up as mine. His eyes sparked when he saw me. But then he must have remembered why he'd come over, and his gaze darkened.

Stepping to the side, I invited him in with a wave of the hand.

"Welcome to Casa de Harper," I said, imitating his own words of welcome when I had moved in to his place.

Kaden winced, and I regretted the bad joke. He dug his hands into his sweatshirt and followed me into the living room.

"Please sit," I said, pointing to the sofa. "Want something to drink?"

"What have you got?"

"Champagne?" It was more of a question than a statement. "Actually, no. We drank it all. Tap water?"

Kaden's mouth twitched for a second. "Tap water sounds perfect."

I filled one of the cat mugs and placed it in front of Kaden on the coffee table. Then I sat as far from him as possible on the sofa.

"Nice place," Kaden remarked, taking a sip.

"How did you even know the address?" I asked, puzzled. The thought came to me just now.

"Your stuff didn't fit into Spencer's car, so we took the Jeep."

My shoulders tightened. "You drove my furniture here?"

Kaden nodded. "I hope that's okay."

He'd brought my furniture here. I stared at him, confused. My eyes wandered from his eyes to his full lower lip, across his shoulders and arms, and again up to his eyebrows, which were knotted in a frown. Every muscle seemed tense, as if Kaden, too, were struggling to stay put on his end of the sofa.

Even though he'd hurt me, I still wanted him, no question about it. I longed for his touch. My fingers clawed at the pillow on my lap, and my eyes fixed on a candle on the table. I tried to get my pulse under control. Only then did I dare to look at Kaden again.

"So." I cleared my throat. "You had something to say."

His expression took my breath away. It was full of pain and longing, and it intensified all the feelings in me.

"Allie," Kaden whispered, his voice hoarse. He shook his head and swallowed hard. Then he clenched his fists and rose.

Staring at him, I didn't dare move.

He came toward me. Right in front of me he knelt and pushed my knees slightly apart. I held my breath.

"Kaden."

"I just want to talk. That's all." He supported his hands on my sides. His arms touched my thighs. "I just can't concentrate when you're at the other end of the room." He cleared his throat. "Is it okay with you?"

I nodded before my thoughts focused. After all, I'd missed having him around. It felt right to be so close. Strictly speaking, my body was convinced that it was not close enough, but my head insisted that I should pull myself together. These two sides of me didn't seem to be in accord, to say the least. So I stayed in my position and clutched the pillow against my lap like a life belt.

"First I want to apologize for my behavior," he began. "I was wrong to treat you like that, and I regret it. But that day I was sure I'd made the right decision."

"Why? Tell me," I whispered.

Kaden took several deep breaths. "About three years ago I spent a weekend with Spencer at the ocean. You've got to see this place, by the way. Everything is natural, steep mountains rising above the Pacific, foaming waves, beaches more perfect than in any movie, and—"

"Kaden?" I interrupted him. "We aren't talking about Oregon's coast right now."

He shook himself as if to organize his thoughts. "Now I know why you always blabber."

I just looked at him and waited. It took an effort for him to confide in me. He opened his mouth several times, only to slide his tongue over his lips and close it again.

"After I came home," he continued, "I visited Kendra. I hadn't seen her for a week, and I was so glad to be back home, and wanted to ... " He cleared his throat. "I wanted to show her how much I missed her, if you understand what I mean."

I nodded. A queasy feeling spread through my stomach.

"She went crazy, Allie. She pushed me away, hyperventilated and cried. I stopped and asked her what was going on." Now Kaden was speaking fast, his words tumbling out. "I thought she was in one of her phases. We'd been together two years, and I knew her moods. So I thought she was upset that Spencer and I had gone away without her. At least that's what I thought, until ... " He fell silent and lowered his head.

"What?" I whispered.

He looked at me. "Until she broke up with me then and there. Just like that."

Nodding, I encouraged him to continue.

“I knew something wasn’t right. And after being together two years, I felt like she owed me an explanation. When she kept on avoiding me and then didn’t even want to see me, I got angry. I put my hands on her shoulders to get her to turn around.” Kaden’s face contorted in pain. “The moment I touched her, she started to scream. Deafening. Without stopping.” He swallowed hard. “Her parents rushed into the room and demanded to know what kind of party we’d been to, and what I’d done with her there. I didn’t know what they were talking about since I hadn’t seen Kendra for days. I started to argue with her parents, and they threw me out of the house.”

Kaden paused again. We both seemed to be holding our breath. My grasp on the pillow loosened, and I almost reached out for Kaden. But I couldn’t. Not yet.

“What happened?”

“That same day I went to see her best friend. I wanted to find out what happened to Kendra while I was away. Mia didn’t want to talk to me at first, but I insisted and then she told me that she and Kendra were invited to a party by a couple of college guys. Kendra had disappeared at the party and appeared the next morning at Mia’s door, hysterical and frightened. Her tights were gone, and there were bruises on her arms.”

“Oh no,” I murmured.

“I think we both knew what had happened, but neither of us dared to say it out loud. I drove like a madman to the guy who had thrown the party. But he didn’t even know who I was talking about.” Kaden gave a grim laugh. “Then I begged Kendra’s parents to let me see her again. She still hadn’t told them what had happened, and I think they were pretty desperate. So they let me up to see her. I was able to convince Kendra that she could trust me, that we’d get through this together. The whole time, she stared past me at the wall. But I didn’t let up. I had to hear it from her. Even though I hated myself for it, I asked her straight out if someone had raped her.” Kaden cleared his throat. “And then she said ‘yes.’”

I caught my breath, even though I knew the story.

“I asked her if she’d gone to the hospital, and she said no. Then I begged her to tell me who it was. A stranger? Someone she knew? But she just shook her head and kept pulling away from me, as if it were *me* she was afraid of. I’ve never felt so helpless in my life.” Kaden clenched his fists. “Eventually I asked her parents to come in. It took a while but then she told us who it was.”

“Alex,” I whispered, and Kaden cringed. As if waking up from a trance, he lifted his head and looked at me. He nodded.

“It came out suddenly. If the situation hadn’t been so serious, I might’ve thought she was joking.”

I swallowed hard and noticed how dry my throat had become.

“After she said it once, she repeated Alex’s name again and again. I could only stare at her. It was incomprehensible to me, why she was saying this. I didn’t believe her. I *couldn’t* believe her, no matter how desperate she was, no matter how much she claimed to be telling the truth. Kendra always liked to get attention, and I figured that played a role here, too.” He shook his head. “To me it sounded like a bad episode in one of those crime series, when the wrong person is accused at first. Alex was my brother. I would have done anything for him. I went to him that day and he told me, of course, that he wasn’t even at that party. I believed him.” Kaden laughed in anger. His eyes revealed how much these memories hurt, and also how angry he was at himself. “Of course I believed him. And when the accusations grew louder, I took Alex’s side. Kendra’s parents hated me, and so did our circle of friends. They all told me they didn’t want to have anything to do with the brother of a rapist. Everyone except Spencer rejected me. It was simple. Like a bad dream that wouldn’t end. Alex could have any girl he wanted. I was convinced that he would never, ever, force himself on someone, least of all his little brother’s girlfriend. Besides, my Dad told me that Alex had been home that whole night.”

His voice cracked. He sounded so desperate and so hurt that I could not help myself: I reached out to stroke his arm.

“What happened then?” I whispered.

Kaden’s eyes became even darker. “Kendra’s parents wanted to file charges against Alex, but my father made them an offer. I don’t need to tell you that money can buy anything.” For a while he just looked at me.

“My father couldn’t risk bad press. His company was hurting at the time, and any bad headlines would have meant bankruptcy. And I believed him. I was so blind to the truth that I’m pretty sure I would have testified for Alex in court if it went that far. But Kendra’s parents accepted the money and signed a confidentiality agreement.”

I felt ill, knowing how Kendra must have felt about all this.

“Alex insisted to me that it wasn’t him. He swore, looked at me in the eyes and acted as if he had no idea what I was talking about. He just lied to

my face.”

I got up the guts to ask: “How did you find out the truth?”

Kaden pressed his lips together and took a moment to speak. “I overheard a conversation between Dad and Alex. My father asked if he’d at least used protection, or if he was going to be a grandfather.”

My mouth dropped open.

“I lost it and went after Alex. I couldn’t stop punching him. He kept on saying he was sorry and insisted that she had been into him and even wanted it. Then I went straight to Kendra, but she didn’t want to see me. I tried to apologize, to explain, but it took months before she could look at me, let alone talk to me. She forgave me but made it clear that she’d never be able to see me with the same eyes as before. Alex left her in ruins. He destroyed everything, including our friendship.”

“None of this is your fault, Kaden,” I insisted, sliding a little closer to him.

He looked up. His forehead was furrowed, his expression bitter. “I’m not to blame for his mistakes. But I enabled the hush-up. I let the pig get away, because I trusted my brother and father like a naive idiot.”

“But it wasn’t you who lied. It’s understandable to take your family’s side. Nothing wrong with that.” I paused. “Wait a minute ... so why did you throw me out?”

Kaden clenched his teeth.

“Because you thought I was going to blame you for what happened to Kendra?”

“What happened to you, Allie ... ” Kaden began with a heavy voice, “that was also covered up. How could I be with you when I knew damned well that I had done the same thing?”

He raised his hand to stop my attempt to contradict him.

“I have seen how bad these memories are for you, even today. No one deserves that. It’s not right. What happened to you is not right. And I ... I protected a damned rapist!”

“But that doesn’t make you guilty of his crime!” I cried out. “You didn’t even know that he’d done it.”

“I should have questioned his story even more.”

“Kaden—”

“You worked so hard to be free, Allie. How could I do this to you? Every time you’d look at me, you’d see *him*.”

I slid from the sofa right into his lap. His arms stiffened. He was like stone.

“None of that is your fault, Kaden,” I said again, reaching my arms around him and holding him close.

“How can you say that?”

I leaned back to look deep into his eyes. It was important that he understand every word.

“Because I know you. I can’t say how you were in the past, and how I would have felt if Kendra were my friend. But I know the man you have become. And there’s nothing bad about him. The man I know would walk through fire for his friends. He would fly thousands of miles, leaving his family on a holiday, to be with his girlfriend when she needs him. Yes, I know you, Kaden. And I’d never hold you responsible for what happened.”

He closed his eyes. And then wrapped me in his arms and pressed me close. His shoulders were shaking, and he buried his face in my shoulder. Caressing his back, I murmured comforting words against his temple. I held him tightly and tried to drive out the demons of the past, the way he had for me.

Somehow we ended up lying on the floor. Kaden’s arms were still around me, his face pressed against my neck. But he’d stopped shuddering, and his breathing had calmed.

“You’re the best.”

I lifted my head a bit. “Hm?”

“That time in the hotel, when we agreed on a compromise, I told you that it was the second-best deal I’d ever made.”

He pulled away from me and sat up. His face was flushed, but he wasn’t as desperate as before. He seemed almost relieved, as if a huge load had been lifted from his shoulders.

“The best thing I ever did was take you into my apartment, Bubbles.” He brushed a strand of hair from my face.

“And yet you threw me out,” I reminded him, while trying not to sound reproachful. After what he’d just confided in me, how could I be angry at him? To see him suffer—it had almost broken my heart again.

“And that was my biggest mistake.”

“I fully agree, Mr. White.”

“I’m sorry I hurt you so much and destroyed our relationship, Bubbles. I...” He looked at me, determined. “I’m going to fix it. So we’re both on firm

ground again.”

I returned his gaze, but with a little less confidence.

Things had changed. Now I knew that the reason for Kaden’s behavior lay with his past and not with me. Kaden would obviously need time to work this out. And it wouldn’t be easy for either of us. Who knew better than me what kind of strength that process required?

But this was about Kaden—the guy I’d fallen head over heels in love with. If he couldn’t do it alone, then I would dig deep into my reserves to help him. We would make it.

“We’re not totally destroyed, Kaden. Just give me a little time,” I whispered.

Kaden’s smile was worth everything. Simply everything.

“Okay. And in the meantime I’ll do my best to make you smile again.”

Chapter 35

The first morning in my new apartment was great. At least until I realized there was no coffee maker, which checked my mood somewhat.

Kaden had gone back home last night. It seemed right to both of us. On one hand, I wanted him to stay forever. But his recent behavior still hurt. That and our current living situation had definitely drawn a clear line in our relationship. I knew we'd make it, but we both needed time.

The doorbell rang while I was just putting on my makeup. I ran to the door but couldn't see anyone through the peephole, so I opened it up a crack—and squealed.

On the doormat was a coffee maker. And not just any machine. It was Kaden's.

Next to it was a blue box. I opened it and couldn't suppress a joyful cry when I saw all the little bottles of coffee creamer in the most varied flavors, from mint to vanilla to coconut.

I gathered the coffee maker and box in my arms and practically embraced them. Once in the kitchen, I set up the machine and was soon stirring two different creamers into the freshly brewed coffee in one of my brand-new cups. I took a selfie, closing my eyes in pleasure, and sent it with a smiley face to Kaden.

His answer came in less than a minute:

Which flavor?

I smiled and sipped my coffee while typing the answer with one hand.

Coconut and caramel.

Could you be any more disgusting?

The broad grin on my face would probably be stuck there all day.

The second surprise was waiting at my car. Temperatures had dipped below freezing in the last few days, which meant I'd have to scrape frost off the windshield. But no: Someone had done it for me! I pulled my scarf off my face and stared at the car, confused. It took a moment for me to realize it must have been Kaden. And then I saw a square package, wrapped in a crimson bow, sitting on the trunk.

Sitting inside the car, I untied the lopsided ribbon and tore the paper off. The box was full of CDs. Loads of them. I recognized them all from Kaden's car. He told me that he would never lend them to anyone! I held each disc up: some were bands that Kaden had introduced to me and that I now loved; and others were bands we'd both already been fans of for ages.

I swallowed hard. Each CD had a song or two that connected Kaden and me. When I got to the end of the stack, I found a piece of paper where these specific songs were listed. But he'd added a few more titles to the end of the list—so I decided to play them as I drove to class.

It turned out not to be such a good idea. By the time I pulled into the parking lot, I was ready to cry.

The lyrics were so beautiful and moving that I wanted to turn right around and drive to Kaden. Or should I write him? After all, we were ... Well, we hadn't talked about what we were. I should have felt upset and insecure about being in limbo like this, but weirdly enough I'd never felt so calm and confident. Kaden made me feel complete. And the songs he'd added to his list made me believe that he felt the same about me.

Dawn and Scott joined me for lunch, and I told them about Kaden's visit the night before without divulging the details of his story. I also told them about his intention to make up for how he'd treated me.

"Hm," Scott mused, when I was done.

"It seems incredibly romantic and somehow not like Kaden," mused Dawn. She seemed to have problems reconciling the Kaden I was describing with the Kaden she knew.

"He gave me his coffee maker. I found it at my doorstep this morning. And he scraped all the ice off my windshield. And left his CDs on the trunk. Gift wrapped. With a bow," the words bubbled out of me.

Dawn rested her chin in her hand. "So beautiful," she sighed. "Just like in a movie."

“I don’t think you should soften up just yet, Allie,” Scott warned, waving his fork in front of my nose. “If Micah had pulled that kind of shit, he’d have to deliver much more than music and coffee.”

Well, that put a damper on my euphoria. If you put it that way, Kaden’s gestures weren’t really that special any more.

A tickling sensation feathered along my back, just as Dawn said: “Don’t turn around, Allie.”

Two hands lay on my shoulders, and I froze. Leaning back, I looked up—at Kaden’s amused expression.

“I hear you’re blabbering again,” he said with a smile.

“What are you doing here? Don’t you have communication sciences now?” I asked, and realized I must sound like a stalker. Or a controlling girlfriend. Or ex-girlfriend. Or however he saw me now.

Kaden rubbed his neck. “I had an appointment with my tattoo artist.”

“Did you get a new one?”

He nodded, still wearing that crooked, secretive grin.

“Where? And what?” I pushed. As usual, when his tattoos came to my mind, my heart started to race.

“You wish you knew, right?” His eyes flashed in amusement.

“Maybe a portrait of Allie’s face on your left butt cheek?” Scott asked, and Dawn and I burst into laughter.

“No. Though it’s not a bad idea.”

“Don’t encourage him,” I warned Scott.

Kaden chuckled and leaned over me again. “I have to go. Just wanted to drop off some desserts.”

He set a small, steaming bowl down in front of me. The fragrance of chocolate wafted up. Kaden had brought me a warm brownie.

My eyebrows raised, I glanced over at Scott, but he wasn’t looking my way. Instead, he was staring in amazement at the bag Kaden was holding out to him. He took it gingerly, opened it, and peered inside. “You got me a doughnut?” he asked, incredulous.

“Yes. And for Dawn,” Kaden said, pushing a second bag across the table, “a blueberry muffin.”

“I don’t like—”

“I know. It’s chocolate. So, gotta go,” he interrupted her. Then he leaned toward me, and I froze. For a second I thought he’d try to kiss me. But instead

he put his lips to my ear. "I'll never catch enough of your rays, Allie. You're beautiful."

He straightened up, nodded at Scott and Dawn, and left the dining hall.

"Okay, I forgive him," Dawn said, her mouth full of muffin.

Scott stared at his doughnut. "I want to hate him, but I'll never succeed if he keeps bringing me doughnuts."

With my coffee spoon, I cut the brownie in little pieces and then ate one of them. Pointing the spoon at Scott, I said, "Now you know how it is for me."

"So what are we going to do now?" Dawn asked.

"Eat our dessert?" I sighed. Coffee, music, chocolate. You had to give it to Kaden: He knew how to win over a woman—and her friends, too.

"But that doesn't mean you're canceling the roommate search, does it?" Dawn asked. "I mean, we hung up the ads everywhere."

Not only that, but we'd scheduled an open house at the end of the week, for anyone who wanted to see the room.

"The one has nothing to do with the other." Scott poked a finger into his doughnut filling, which was somehow both disgusting and cute at the same time. After licking his finger, he gesticulated wildly. "Just because these two have finally started talking to each other doesn't mean they have to live together again. Maybe the independence will do you both some good."

He was right. The thing with Kaden and me had nothing to do with our living situation. And aside from the fact that I didn't need the extra room for myself, the rent was above my budget. So I'd keep looking for a roommate—no matter how tasty our desserts had been.

The week continued this way: Every morning, a little surprise was waiting on my doormat; the car windows had been scraped; and Kaden brought dessert for me and my friends. Every day, he called to see how I was doing, ask about my day. He kept his promise to make me smile every day.

He never kissed me or touched me intimately, which drove me crazy after day two. I—who had asked for more time—was now dying for his closeness. Even though I knew we shouldn't rush things, each of his gestures was so sweet, that it was hard for me to control my feelings.

Thursday afternoon there was another package waiting outside my door. The box was large and heavy; I grunted as I carried it in and set on my living room table.

Leaving my jacket and scarf in the hall, I opened the package, my fingers tingling. What could Kaden have thought of now?

I wasn't disappointed.

My rushed scrabbling into the box grew slower: I brushed the Styrofoam packing peanuts aside.

Picture frames. All sorts of different colors and sizes, some with bright patterns and made of different material. But it wasn't the frames that held my gaze. It was the photos.

Some of the smaller frames held selfies I'd made with Dawn and pictures of me with Scott and Dawn. One glance was enough to make me laugh.

Then there were three medium-sized frames. The first held a black and white photograph of Kaden, Spencer, and me, taken by Monica.

The second image was of Kaden and me. Whoever took it had snapped the shutter at just the right moment: I was sticking out my tongue and Kaden was laughing. I traced my finger across the picture. Those laugh lines made my heart beat fast.

In the third frame was the photo I'd taken of Kaden and me in Portland. Each of us held up an album cover to make it look like the face on the cover was our own. We'd laughed so hard that day, I remember my stomach hurting. It was one of the best days of my life.

And then I dug out the largest frame from the box. It was huge and heavy on my lap. Turning it over, I caught my breath.

It was me. *When did he snap this?* I sat on the viewing platform looking down into the valley, leaning back on my arms. My hair was wild and windblown; the sky was a mix of red, purple, and orange.

Directly above me was a word in curvy letters.

Freedom.

In one image, Kaden had captured the feeling I had each time we were on the mountain. And I hadn't noticed. He must have known how much it meant to me.

My eyes were burning with tears, but I was smiling. What a beautiful gift. Attentive, thoughtful, fantastic. I stroked the frames and wished I could hang them all up right now.

But first I had to call Kaden. I grabbed my phone and typed in his number.

“Bubbles.” Somehow the idiotic nickname didn’t bother me anymore.

“Thanks for the pictures.” I paused. My voice betrayed my emotions. Captivated. Excited. Happy. “I don’t even know what to say. They’re wonderful.”

“You’re crying,” Kaden said, with what sounded like a grin. “I actually wanted to make you smile. Is this a good sign or a bad sign?”

Now I had to laugh. “One hundred percent good. But you can’t dump all those frames on me and expect me to hang them up all by myself. Well?”

There was noise in the background, and Kaden cursed. “I stood up so fast that I tripped.”

Laughing, I dabbed at the corners of my eyes.

“I injure myself, and all you can do is laugh,” Kaden grumbled, though he was clearly happy about my call. “I’ll be there in ten minutes?”

It sounded like a question, and I nodded back before remembering that he couldn’t see me.

“Sounds good,” I said, my heart full.

When the doorbell rang, it was all I could do not to run to open it. Still, I was breathless when I saw him standing there.

Kaden gave me his crooked smile and lifted up his toolbox. He walked past me into the living room and pivoted to face me. “So,” he began. “Where do you want the photo wall?”

I followed him into the room, unable to focus on the photos. I wanted to pounce on him, drag him into my bedroom, and smother him with kisses.

“Bubbles?” His deep voice brought me back to this world, and I looked up at him, flushed.

“Yeah?”

“You weren’t paying attention.”

“Sorry.”

“How about here?” he asked, waving his hand toward the wall behind the sofa.

“I don’t know,” I hesitated. “Maybe in the bedroom?”

“You don’t want to hang them in the bedroom, so I’m not even going to take them in there,” Kaden said confidently.

“How can you be so sure?”

“I know you,” he murmured, taking a folding yardstick out of his toolbox. He turned and looked at me. “I’d suggest we raise them up higher. Otherwise

if you lean your head back, you'll hit them. What do you think?"

I nodded. It made sense.

"In what order should we hang them?"

Looking at the photos, I tried out a few options in my head. "Kind of random, not in a row."

Kaden nodded. "Why don't you arrange them while I look for the right nails."

Laying the photos on the floor, I shifted them around until I found a cute arrangement.

"What do you think?" I asked Kaden. He stepped behind me and looked over my shoulder. My heartbeat sped up.

"Looks good. Maybe a little more distance between them?" he mused.

"The wall is pretty wide, and we don't want them to look squished together."

"I trust you." I tilted my head back and looked up at him.

For a second he seemed confused, but then smiled, content. Then he got to work. He climbed on the couch and started hammering nails into the wall, while I handed him the frames. After checking with a level to see that the second frame was straight, Kaden asked me to hold the hammer while he took off his sweater. As he pulled it over his head, his shirtsleeve inched up his arm.

"Wait."

The word burst out of my mouth. I stared at Kaden's raised arm. His shoulders tightened, and he tried to lower his arm, but I grabbed him and turned him so I could see the inside of his bicep. It was fresh, black lettering.

Not broken, just bent.

With one finger I traced the lines softly. Kaden winced but didn't move otherwise.

"What is that?" I whispered, raising my eyes to look into his. Kaden seemed almost insecure.

"Your words," he replied just as softly. His eyes were dark and full.

"The words that made me believe in myself again. The words that drove me mad because I couldn't believe someone could see me the way you do." He swallowed hard.

My mind went back to that day at the waterfall. To our conversation and all the hidden signals he'd sent me. To everything we'd confided in each other.

You're not broken, Kaden. Maybe just a little bent.

“You put ... those are my words ... on your skin,” I blurted out, staring again at the looping letters. The skin under the tattoo was still slightly red and puffy.

“Everything about you gets under my skin, Allie.” Kaden got down from the couch and stood facing me. His Adam’s apple moved as he swallowed, and my gaze flew from his eyes to the tattoo, then back to his lips. “I’m really trying to take it slow, Bubbles. But if you keep looking at me like that ... no guarantees.”

I couldn’t stop looking. I didn’t want to. Right now I had only one need—to show Kaden how much I’d missed him.

“Please, Kaden,” I said, my voice heavy.

A sound came from somewhere deep inside him and he pulled me close. His lips were pressed hard against mine, his arms wrapped around me. It almost hurt—but I didn’t stop it. He sighed as my lips opened for him, and my tongue slipped into his mouth. My legs sank but Kaden caught me, and we sank together onto the couch. I clung to him, put everything into my kiss: the moments of pain, of overwhelming loneliness, the joy he’d brought to my life, and all the longing of the past few days and nights. Everything.

Kaden moaned into my neck. My hands explored his body, and it felt like the first time. My heart beat wildly. Our kiss grew softer but no less urgent. Kaden lay me gently on my back, brushing my cheeks, my forehead, my neck with his tender lips.

“I love you.”

I froze beneath him.

“What did you just say?” I whispered.

“I love you,” he murmured. “I love you so much that it almost hurts.”

I ran my fingers through his hair and along his jawline. But as I began to tug at his shirt, he grabbed my hand and held it over my head.

He gazed into my eyes for a long time. A crooked grin appeared on his face. He almost seemed a bit shy. “Wow, Bubbles. It’s the first time I’ve managed to stun you into silence.”

It was like he was trying to lighten the charged atmosphere. After getting my breathing back under control, I quipped, “I didn’t know it hurt to love me.”

His mouth twitched. “If you only knew.”

“What do you mean, it hurts?” I asked, intending to make him smile. But to my surprise Kaden started to search for the right words.

“It’s like my whole body is on fire ... but in a good way. Everything contracts in me and at the same time it explodes, if I see you or smell you or ... I’m really bad at describing this kind of thing.” Now he wore a dangerous grin. He lowered his head and sucked my lower lip between his teeth. “I’m better at this.”

He kissed me again. His weight bore down on me, but I wanted him even closer. I tugged at his shirt.

In a flash he broke free and sat up, lifting me so I was now straddling his lap. The tips of our noses touched, and Kaden’s eyes sparkled up close.

“I’ve got so much planned,” he said.

I tilted my head. “More presents?”

“Of course, Bubbles.”

“Good. I’ve gotten used to having dessert served to me at noon.” I wiggled my eyebrows the way Scott always did.

“I’ve got something very special planned for tomorrow,” Kaden continued, leaning back. He put his hands on my hips and pulled me even closer.

“And that’s why you want to leave now,” I concluded.

“No,” he answered, surprised. “Unless you’re kicking me out.”

I shook my head.

“Good. So, since I planned something big for tomorrow, I’d like to ...” He tugged my shirt down in a gentle movement so that it covered my belly again.

“You want to take it slow.”

Kaden gave a quick nod. And then made a face. “No. I wouldn’t say that’s what I ‘want’ to do, Bubbles. But I want to earn it.” His voice sounded husky and his half-smile looked kind of sad.

“I know you’re sorry, Kaden,” I said, touching his cheek. “And I forgive you. Forgave you already, in fact.”

He nestled his face in my hand. “Then just wait till tomorrow.”

“Brownies again?” I asked.

Kaden shook his head. “Better. Much better.”

Chapter 36

When my alarm went off the next morning I rushed to open the front door. *What could the big surprise be?* But there was nothing waiting for me. Disappointed, I closed it again.

Classes dragged along that morning. It started to snow at noon, and two people who'd planned to look at my extra room canceled because they didn't want to drive in this weather.

"There goes another one," I sighed, holding my phone in the air.

"How many are still coming?" Scott asked, as we entered the lecture hall.

"Probably six." I said. Who knew if any of them would be right for me? I remembered my own introduction to Woodshill and the strange encounters I'd had during my search for a room. This time I was in a much better starting position.

"One of them will work out, for sure. And if not, I'll throw them out on their asses."

As usual, we sat in one of the back rows where there was less danger of being called on by the professor.

Smiling, I took my bag from my shoulder and put it on the seat next to me. "And if you don't do it, Dawn will."

Scott looked at me. "You mean her fingers are back to normal?"

I nodded. "Yeah, that's why she's not here. Today is her last doctor's appointment. She has my extra key, so she can go to my place straight from the appointment."

"Great. I'm already looking forward to the casting call." He rubbed his hands together.

I wasn't sure if I should be happy or anxious. Of course it would be fun to have Scott and Dawn there, and it would be great to get their opinions. But what if none of the applicants came even close to a good fit?

As usual, during class my thoughts turned to Kaden. What could he be planning for me today?

Nothing had happened yet. He hadn't even shown up, not even written or called. But I'd be patient, no matter how hard it was for me.

“You’re so in love, everyone can see it,” Scott whispered in my ear so Professor Falcony wouldn’t hear.

Grinning, I looked down at my notebook.

“You can’t deny it.”

I shrugged. “Why should I? I can’t help it.”

“He’s going all out for you, I’ll give him that.”

“Yesterday he showed me his new tattoo,” I whispered.

“And? I assume it’s not your face on his ass,” Scott lifted his brows, egging me on.

“He tattooed a sentence that ... ” I searched for the right words. “That means a lot to both of us. Something I’d said once, during a special moment.”

Scott whistled softly through his teeth. “This guy knows what he’s doing.”

“I’m telling you,” I whispered back, unable to suppress another smile.

“If the gentleman and the lady in the back would give us the honor of paying attention, I could continue with the next image,” Professor Falcony warned. Half the room turned to look at us. *Oops*.

After class we drove to my place. Though you couldn’t exactly call it driving. It was more like crawling. By now the snow had piled up six fresh inches on top of everything. And it was still snowing. The usual fifteen-minute drive turned into an hour-long affair. But eventually Scott and I got there safely. We were discussing the essay that Professor Falcony had just printed out, when Scott grabbed my arm and stopped.

Following his eyes, I saw a box in front of my apartment door. It was huge, much bigger than the others. I rushed over and examined it from all sides. There was a note attached to the top:

“Don’t open until I get here!” I read aloud.

What was that supposed to mean? Kaden hadn’t said anything about coming over today. How long would I have to wait to find out what was inside?

“Why would he put a gift here and not let you open it?” Scott sounded disappointed.

“No idea,” I murmured. It must have something to do with Kaden’s planned surprise. I tried to lift the box but failed miserably. It was heavy—really heavy.

“You take that side,” Scott said, grabbing his end through the opening in the box.

Together we managed to get the box into my place and pushed it against the wall. Dawn's jacket was already hanging on the coatrack but before I could greet her, she sprang out of the living room.

"Look, you two!" Reaching out her bare hand toward us, she wiggled her fingers. "I'm free!"

"Let's see!" I peered at her joints up close. No more swelling, and her fingers all seemed flexible.

"Back to normal." Her whole face was glowing. Her eyes darted toward the box. She frowned. "What's that?"

"Kaden's latest surprise for Allie," Scott answered.

"It wasn't there when I got here," Dawn said, and her eyes lit up. "Hopefully there's something for us in there!" And then she saw the note. "Oh, man. What a spoilsport. Must be a bunch of sex toys."

"No one needs that many toys," Scott countered. "Anyway, it's super heavy. Just try to lift it."

Dawn got no further than we had. "Holy shit, what's in here?"

Scott and I dragged the box into my bedroom so it wouldn't be in the way when potential renters showed up.

Afterward, Scott was about to collapse onto the couch when he spied the picture frames on the wall above it. He whistled approvingly and stepped closer.

"Wow, those pics are beautiful. Especially that one." He pointed to the largest one, where I was alone at the overlook.

"Are they from Kaden?"

I nodded. "He left them at my door yesterday."

"Okay, I think I'm a bit in love now, too."

"They're gorgeous, aren't they?" Dawn agreed.

We picked up the living room and vacuumed the spare room so it would look more presentable. The whole time, we belted out songs from musicals and danced through the apartment. I hadn't laughed this much in a long time. It felt good. Yes, I was on the right track. Things were back on track.

The first candidate arrived fifteen minutes early. His name was Isaac. He seemed to be studying 200 subjects at the same time and was cute in a nerdy way, with his horn-rimmed glasses and bow tie. Scott fell for him right away and made obscene gestures behind Isaac's back, which made me smile and Dawn blush. It wasn't long before the doorbell rang again. Soon the apartment was filled with people who strode from room to room, asked me

questions, and maybe had already pictured the room fully furnished with their own stuff.

The doorbell rang again; Dawn went to answer it while I fielded everyone's questions about the rent, the deposit, heat, and electricity costs.

"Allie?" Dawn called from the hallway.

"I'll take over," Scott said right away, and started talking about the owner's talented grandson.

Meanwhile, I walked over to Dawn in the hall and stopped in my tracks.

It was Kaden, standing in the doorway, holding a copy of the apartment ad in his hand.

"I heard you've got a room to rent. I want to apply."

My mouth dropped open but no words came out. Instead, I focused on Kaden and let my eyes travel downward. I gasped. Next to him on the doormat was a carrying case with holes in it.

"W—what's that?" My eyes were wide.

"That's today's present." Kaden grinned. "But before you open it, you have to let me in to see the place with the others."

"No." It was the first word that came back to me.

"What do you mean, no?"

"No. We can't move in together. You—we wanted to take it slow, remember?" I stammered, backing off as he lifted the box and walked into my apartment with it. He ignored Dawn and looked only at me.

"What was it some wise woman once said? I think it was 'I want to see the damned room!'" He pushed past me into the living room.

"He's crazy," I murmured, watching him from behind.

"After you," Dawn added, with a meaningful look.

"Is this good or bad?" I asked her, but she just smiled.

"You tell me."

No easy answer came to mind.

"Is anyone here allergic to cats?" Kaden asked. "Then you'd better get outta here."

What the hell?

From across the hall I watched Kaden place the box in the middle of the free bedroom. One of the girls wrinkled her nose and left, letting the door swing closed behind her. Another candidate followed her out.

Kaden knelt on the floor and opened the carrier.

"You're pulling my leg," I managed to say.

“Shhh, you’re upsetting Spidey.” Kaden’s voice had gone soft and deep.
“Spidey?”

“Actually, I named him Spider-Man Junior, but Spidey sounds cuter. Come on, little one.” Kaden rubbed his fingers together and clicked his tongue.

He couldn’t be serious.

“Kaden,” I warned.

“What?” He looked at me, frowning. “You always said you wanted a cat.”

“I ... what?”

“You always told me you wanted a cat. So I thought I’d give you Spidey. Who happens to be asleep right now. Fine, be that way.” Kaden stood and brushed his hands on his jeans. “So show me around, give me the official tour.”

All I did was stare at him. “You can’t be serious,” I said aloud what I was thinking. No filter.

The grin faded from his face. “The apartment where I live right now is empty. I need a change of scenery. A place to start over.”

I shook my head. He really was crazy. But okay, I could play along. “This is the room. It’s unfurnished; you’d have to get your own stuff.”

“No problem. I have furniture.” Kaden shot back, as if he’d memorized a script. We went into the living room together; all the other candidates were hanging out while Scott told the stories behind the photos.

“Here’s the living room,” I recited with a wave of the hand and observed how Kaden took in everything as if he were seeing it for the first time.

“Nice photos,” he said, narrowing his eyes a bit. “I like that one up there a lot.” He pointed to the picture of me, and again all I could do was shake my head.

The other candidates eyed Kaden curiously. He noticed and rubbed the back of his head. Then he sighed and turned to look at each of them.

“Okay, people, let me be honest with you,” he began, walking over to the handful of guys and one woman still hanging out with Scott. He pointed at me. “I know Allie Harper. I shared an apartment with her for the last few months. And it was not easy. She is not a good roommate, despite her cute smiles and the cheap decorations strewn about here.”

“Kaden,” I hissed.

He lifted his hand. “No, I mean it. Allie, you’re not that good as a roommate.”

“What are you talking about?” I put my hands on my hips. God, this was embarrassing. I wanted to tape his mouth shut.

In the background, I noticed Dawn sit on the couch and pull Scott down with her. The candidates stood there, looking uncomfortable.

“So first of all—you cry at every little thing. It’s true,” he turned toward the strangers in the room. “One time she started bawling when I brought her some pizza.”

“That was just—”

“Secondly,” he interrupted me, “she sings in the shower. Out of tune and awful.”

“Stop it, Kaden!” My cheeks were hot, my hands clenched. “I don’t have to take this.”

Did he really think this was the right way to convince me to let him move in?

“Thirdly,” he continued unmoved, “she mixes fragrances that don’t match. Vanilla. Coconut. Mint. Disgusting. So it can smell like a candy factory in here day or night. It’s a recipe for a headache. Worse than a hangover.”

“That’s not so bad,” Bow-tie Isaac interjected, with a shy smile. I answered with a grateful smile of my own.

Kaden stepped toward him and threw sparks. “You’re not moving in under any circumstances. Particularly if you look at her like that. Make your puppy dog eyes somewhere else; shove off, dude.”

“Kaden, you don’t get it!” My pulse was hammering in my ears. “Just because we’ve made up doesn’t mean you can come in here and hijack my search for a housemate.”

“That’s not my intention,” he answered.

I raised my eyebrows and folded my arms.

“Well, actually that is what I want. But only,” he cleared his throat, “because I know we’re a good team. I don’t think you’d be better off with someone else. Besides, we really have made up, and I’ll probably be here more often now—a roommate would get on our nerves.”

I shook my head. “You can’t just throw my plans out the window because they don’t meet your expectations,” I whispered, hoping that the others wouldn’t eavesdrop.

Kaden stepped toward me. It almost looked like he wanted to grab me, but he let his hands drop again. "I know I messed up. Really bad. But please, Allie. Please give me a chance."

I sighed. Who was I fooling?

My eyes met Isaac's gaze; he was looking back and forth from Kaden to me. Then he shook his head, mouthed the word "sorry" toward me and left the apartment. Another guy followed him, and we heard the door close a second time.

"Anyone else thinking of flirting with my girlfriend?" Kaden asked.

I froze. Dawn let out a squeak, and Scott gasped.

"What did you call me?" I stepped toward Kaden.

When he realized what he'd said, he didn't seem so cocky anymore. "Actually I wanted to do this another way. I wasn't expecting so many people. And Spidey was supposed to jump on you with a bow around his neck, and charm you off your feet. And I wanted to ask your forgiveness again and then ask you if you ... Well, what's the point?"

"This is worse than a soap opera. I'm out," groaned the woman, who got up and left.

Of all the candidates only one guy remained. Confused, he looked from Kaden to me to Dawn and Scott and back.

"Well, I have nothing against soap operas," he ventured. When Kaden glared at him, he took a step back.

"Aw, you'll find another apartment. It'll work out," Dawn said, patting him on the shoulder. She nodded to Scott, and the two of them guided the fellow outside.

Leaving me alone with Kaden.

Kaden grinned and seemed pleased with the entire situation. As for me, I was still standing there in disbelief.

"Look who woke up!" Kaden squatted and tapped lightly on the floor. A ball of red wool came bouncing out of the free bedroom. Spidey the kitten took two cautious steps forward and pressed his nose to the floor, but wouldn't cross the threshold to the living room.

"I checked it out with your landlady first, and took the kitty for his shots yesterday." Kaden tried to coax the little fellow into the living room, but he seemed reluctant. Finally Kaden gave up trying and got up. "You can open the box now. Where is it?"

All I could do was point to my bedroom door. Kaden pulled me in after him. While he plopped down in my desk chair as he always used to do, I turned toward the large box, not knowing what else to do. I tore off the packing tape and folded back the lid. My eyebrows shot up. If these were sex toys, then Kaden had sought out the most unusual ones. There were balls and feathers, plastic birds and mice. And lots of ...

"Kitty litter?" I blurted out. "You're giving me kitty litter? That's the special gift?"

"Not just any kitty litter. It has the same fragrance as your awful candles."

Sure enough. The first bag was labeled "vanilla," and the second "coconut." *Oh my God!* I burst out laughing, so hard that tears dripped down my cheeks.

Through the blur I noticed that Kaden had stood and moved close to me. He reached out to touch my waist. I fell silent.

"I wanted to show you the tattoo now, and I did hope the cat would scare off the others ... but I also don't know what I was thinking with all this. To be honest, I learned a while back that it's better not to depend on you when it comes to plans. 'Cause you manage to make me throw all my plans and rules overboard."

My eyes wandered over Kaden's face. His laugh lines, his striking features, his stubble. And his warm eyes and curved lips, which could drive me wild.

"It was terrible with you gone, Bubbles. Everything felt wrong," Kaden said, his voice rough. "I missed your laugh. Your ability to make *me* laugh. The way you make me the man I want to be."

"I missed you, too. But do you honestly think it makes sense to just pick up where we left off?" My hopes were high. But fear was still in my bones. I trusted Kaden, but did he trust me enough?

"There will be dark days," he said, as if reading my mind. "Days when I have to be reminded of how good it can be. But I promise you I'll do everything I can to make the brighter days win out."

Something tickled my leg; taken by surprise, I looked down—and grinned. Spidey was sniffing at my foot. He looked like a ball of disheveled fur, with orange stripes. Kaden bent down to scratch behind his ears. Spidey began to purr.

"So, Bubbles." Kaden looked at me. "What will it be?"

Crouching down to the floor, I reached out a hand to Spidey and let him sniff it. He rubbed against my hand, warming me with his gentle purring. I looked up at Kaden and smiled.

“There will be rules.”

Epilogue

Three weeks later

Frowning at my reflection in the mirror, I tugged at the sleeve of my dress.

Kaden stepped behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. His warm hands pressed my body, and he kissed me behind the ear.

"You're thinking too much again," he murmured. He let his fingers drift downward. I promptly removed them.

"Dawn and Scott will flip out when they see it." I lifted my right arm and Kaden rolled up the sleeve to reveal my new tattoo.

Not broken, just bent.

He laughed and lifted my wrist to his lips. There he planted the first kiss, and worked his way up.

"In my opinion the whole world ought to see it," he whispered against my skin; I caught my breath.

"They're going to think we're crazy, Kaden."

"And they won't be wrong," he said, then nibbled on my neck.

"I got a damned tattoo. Because I am crazy. Because you're crazy—we're both out of our minds to move in together again!" I pulled down my sleeve. "If my parents found out, they'd lose it."

He took a step back and let go of me. "It sounds like you're looking for a reason for us to fail, Bubbles."

"It's the truth."

Kaden lifted one eyebrow. "We lived together before. Why should we care what they think? It's none of their business. It's our business."

Before I could respond, he bent down and kissed me. And I lost all resistance, flinging my arms around his shoulders. He moved his mouth slowly against mine but after a few seconds I pulled myself free. If we didn't stop now, we'd never leave this room.

"You can't just kiss me every time I turn around."

He raised an eyebrow, but his eyes were still closed. "Why not? It works so well."

I wanted to sock him but he pinned my arms back, laughing. Then he pulled me close again and rubbed his face in my hair.

“No regrets, right?”

I couldn't look him in the eyes, he was holding me so close. So I just stroked his back. “I don't regret a thing.”

And I meant it from the bottom of my heart. My heart was also telling me it didn't matter what my parents thought. Not about our apartment. Not about my tattoo. Not about Kaden.

For the first time in my life I was truly happy. Just thinking about it almost brought me to tears.

“Good,” answered Kaden, with an ominous tone, and before I knew it he had hoisted me over his shoulder. I yelled in a most unladylike manner and pounded his back.

“I'm wearing a dress, Kaden! Put me down!” I cried.

“Yeah, well the others have been waiting for us forever. And if you keep on looking for signs of the coming apocalypse of our relationship we'll never make it out of here. So...” He concluded with a slap on my behind. I squealed and took my revenge by pinching his side. He drew in a breath, laughing, and almost banged into the doorframe. He didn't put me down until he had closed the bedroom door behind us. Kaden's smug grin had earned him a serious swat on the rear. But Dawn arrived just then, interrupting my intentions with a warm hug.

“Finally,” she sighed. Then she grabbed my arms and looked into my eyes, as if to check on the state of my soul. “Were you trying to hide from the world again?”

I looked around our decorated living room, saw the fancy garlands and colorful string lights, gifts from Dawn after my move. The table was loaded with tasty snacks. Scott was sitting on the couch laughing about something Micah had whispered in his ear. We'd only just met Micah today, but he already seemed like an old friend.

Spencer was in the kitchen, debating with Monica about how long his homemade pizza should stay in the oven. Ethan was listening in, shaking his head and smiling.

My eyes turned to Kaden, who had just grabbed a skewer with grapes from the table and was inspecting it, when I shot him a grin. With a soft meow, Spidey poked his head out from under the couch. Kaden bent down to scoop up the kitten, who by now was nearly twice as large as our TV remote. Kaden scratched him under the chin and smiled as Spidey started to purr. My

heart felt both heavy and light and a familiar tingling spread from my scalp to the tips of my toes.

“I wasn’t hiding,” I answered, meeting Dawn’s gaze. “Not anymore.”

For so much of my life I had been hiding. Living behind a façade. All that had come to an end after I’d moved to Woodshill. I came here looking for freedom—but I’d found much more. Of course there would be dark days—there were always some of those. But at times like these, when my heart seemed so full, I knew the pain had been worth it. After all, it was through pain that I had learned to find true happiness.

A Chat with Mona



Although she's never been the US, Mona Kasten set Allie and Kaden's story in the wooded mountains of Washington state. It's a reflection of author's own love of nature and new-adult novels. »be« talks to Mona about music, tattoos, and Kaden White.

Would you ever share an apartment with Kaden White? Or which of your characters would you rather live with?

I think Kaden would be too crabby to live with in a shared apartment. Personally, I'm a very happy person, so I think Dawn would be a great roommate—we have the same sense of humor and a love for books:)

Which song on the *Begin Again* playlist should every reader hear?

Banks' songs top the playlist for all of the "Again" books because I listened to them hundreds of times while writing; she's my favorite singer. She's one of those artists who deserve a lot more attention, but at the same time you kind of wish she'd stay unknown so her songs remain special. Still, I'm giving her a plug: Everyone listen to Banks! I don't know how popular her music is in America, but here in Germany not many people are familiar with

her songs. If you have a chance, definitely see her live in concert. I went in March, and it was simply magical. She's a goddess!

Before writing “Begin Again,” you published your own romantic fantasy trilogy. What was different in the process of working on those books versus “Begin Again”?

When writing, I'm mostly concerned with developing the characters, their backgrounds and goals, and setting the long path they have to take to achieve those goals. Especially for characters in my protagonists' age group, quite a lot happens along the way. They take completely new turns in their development, they grow up—or at least try to—and they discover new facets of themselves. That's what fascinates me most about writing romance and fantasy novels, though each genre has its own special emphasis. In my new-adult novels, of course self-discovery and romance play a major (and in my opinion also beautiful) role, while my fantasy stories are characterized by action, magic, and a more complex, invented world. The writing process itself isn't that different between the genres, but I think that my style has developed positively with each new book. And on top of that, I'm really glad that I don't have to publish them myself any more; now I can concentrate more on the writing than on the practicalities.

Why did you—as a German—choose an American setting? Do you dream of visiting the USA yourself?

All the new-adult novels I'd read played out in English-speaking countries. I think the genre simply fits well in that setting, and also we Germans enjoy being transported to another world through reading. And yes, a USA visit is very high on my wish list:)

In your book, Allie and Kaden like to go hiking. How important is the outdoors in your own life?

I am very connected to nature and like to spend a lot of time outside. Nature inspires me and helps me free my mind when I'm stressed out. That's why I like the fact that Allie and Kaden get closer through being in nature.

Tattoos play a role in “Begin Again.” Do you have any?

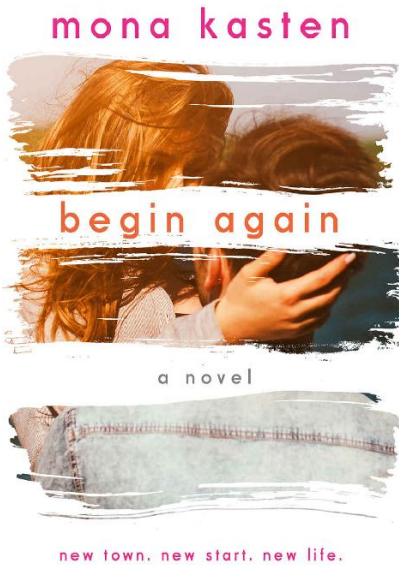
I already have three; two are quotes from books that I love. One quote is from “The Infernal Devices” series by Cassandra Clare and another is from

“Throne of Glass” by Sarah J. Maas. There are so many to choose from. If I could, I’d have my whole body covered with beautiful quotes! My tattoo wish list is pretty long...

Connect with Mona Kasten:



What did you think?



We'd love your opinion! What was your favorite part?

If you liked the story, please support the author by leaving a rating where you purchased this ebook.

Happy reading!



Dir hat das Buch gefallen?

Dann gefallen dir auch diese Bücher:



Alex Everwood

Talk of Shame - Episode 1
What a Rush

Goodbye, high school. Hello, Alpha Chi!

Somerville University. For freshmen Katie Brown, Jill Everson, and Beatrice Fritch, their approach to college-and relationships-couldn't be more different. They kick off freshman year with high hopes, but life doesn't always go as planned. One thing is for sure: no one wants to get caught on the Talk of Shame Instagram feed, the university's unofficial gossip site. One unsavory pic, and your reputation is shot. Unfortunately, that's a lesson learned the hard way...

Katie's earned admission into the private university through her hard work in high school. Her aunt is paying her tuition on one condition: Katie must join a sorority, specifically Kappa Kappa Theta (KKT.) There's just one problem. Katie was kicked out of the "cool clique" in high school. Now she's independent and afraid of losing herself if forced to become a sorority girl. But is she using independence to protect herself from forming relationships? Especially if it's with the gorgeous editor of Somerville University's student newspaper?

Jill chose Somerville for one reason: Alpha Chi Alpha (Chi Alpha), the most beautiful sorority house on campus, boasting the prettiest girls on campus. Jill has always been the southern belle who can "wear her weight well." Her confidence and humorous personality have won her lots of friends-and quite a few hook-ups. But she has yet to have a steady boyfriend. But that'll happen automatically once becoming a Chi Alpha. Right?

And then there's Beatrice. College wouldn't be complete without a frenemy: something that comes easy to the young, coed. A member of Chicago's wealthy elite, she wears only the best labels, drives only the hottest cars, and enrolls at Somerville-the most prestigious private university around. But her

status comes at a price: lasting friendship. Beatrice has learned to manipulate others in order to protect herself, and her childhood friendship with Katie was the first one to suffer. Will Somerville give her the chance to reconcile and find her true self?

Katie, Jill, and Beatrice champion and struggle with the ins-and-outs of Greek Row, a life filled with hook-ups, heartbreak, backstabbing, and cheating. Both in and out of the classroom.

For fans of *Bright Side* by Kim Holden, *Commencement* by J. Courtney Sullivan, and the TV Series *Gossip Girl*.

About the Author

Alex Everwood is the pen name of Christian Liberty Marshall, an Austrian-based writer and musician with degrees from Vanderbilt University and University of Music and Performing Arts Graz. When not performing as a violist, Christian can be found teaching at the Popakademie Baden-Württemberg, writing educational material for children, or translating German literature.

[Direkt im Shop ansehen](#)



Michelle Raven

Hunter's Risk

IN HER DARKEST MOMENT

Being pushed in front of an oncoming subway train is just one of many "accidents" to have happened to weapons expert Karen Lombard in the last few years. Alone and scared she turns to the one man she can trust - and who saved her life once before ...

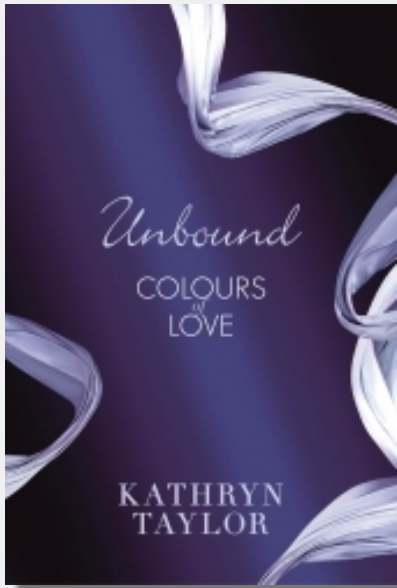
HE IS THE ONLY ONE SHE CAN TURN TO

Four years ago, Clint Hunter led the Special Forces unit that rescued Karen from her kidnapper's clutches. Clint, however, lost one of his men during the mission. He left the Navy SEALs soon after and is now living a life of seclusion on his parents' ranch in Montana, plagued by guilt and sorrow.

HE IS THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN SAVE HER

When Karen shows up at his doorstep and asks for help, Clint is forced to face the demons of his past once and for all. Even if it means risking everything ...

[Direkt im Shop ansehen](#)



Kathryn Taylor

Unbound - Colours of Love

Young Grace has led a sheltered life. Focused. Serious. No men to distract her.

But that's about to change.

After winning a prestigious internship at Huntington Ventures, Grace travels to London for the summer. Enter CEO Jonathan Huntington. He's rich, sexy, and happens to stem from British royalty. Grace tries to keep her head down, to concentrate on her job. However, her alluring boss is far from Prince Charming. Jonathan is a businessman who always gets what he wants. Soon, Grace realizes there's more to life than work, and the Sleeping Beauty within her awakens from her slumber. Against her own better judgement, Grace starts to fall for Jonathan's charm.

Sinking deeper into a world of sinister passion, Grace can't refuse her growing desires. New sensations she didn't know existed. But when Jonathan demands she do the unthinkable to prove her love for him, she realizes just how dangerous her feelings for him are. If she gives into him, there's no going back.

Can Jonathan shake his shadowed past to give Grace what she needs, or is there no really such thing as a knight in shining armor?

If you liked E.L. James' "Fifty Shades of Grey" and Silvia Day's "Crossfire" series, then COLOURS OF LOVE will tickle your desire for a steamy love story.

Even as a little girl, Kathryn Taylor wanted to write. She published her first story at age 11. After a few detours in life, she found her own happily ever after. Taylor's first book, UNBOUND: COLOURS OF LOVE is an international best-selling romance novel, praised by fans and critics alike. The COLOURS OF LOVE series includes four more books: UNCOVERED and UNLEASHED, which follow Grace and Jonathan's story. And SEDUCED and SURRENDERED, which detail new couple, Sophie and Matteo's steamy affair.

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